

2015

## 'Feels like we only go backwards': nostalgia and contemporary retro rock music

Nicholas Russo  
*University of Wollongong*

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**‘FEELS LIKE WE ONLY GO BACKWARDS’**

**NOSTALGIA AND CONTEMPORARY RETRO ROCK MUSIC**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**from**

**University of Wollongong**

**by**

**Nicholas Russo, BA (Hons) LLB**

School of the Arts, English and Media

**2015**

## **CERTIFICATION**

I, Nicholas Russo, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Nicholas Russo

20 April 2015

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## ABSTRACT

The cultural fascination with retro and nostalgia which has characterized popular music and indeed popular culture more broadly in the first decade of the twenty-first century has been particularly evident in the recent trend of new rock music which is highly evocative of 1960s and early 1970s rock music styles. This *contemporary retro rock music* is notable for its exacting use of the conventions of canonical rock music of that period as expressed through the various modes of composition, sound production, performance and visual aesthetics. In addition, while retro trends are not uncommon in popular music, contemporary retro rock music is uniquely positioned temporally such that it also represents the coalescence of an underlying cultural mode in the current youth generation of *vicarious nostalgia* for the 1960s and early 1970s. Unlike a more traditionally understood nostalgic predilection for one's own personally lived past, vicarious nostalgia evinces a yearning for a past outside of lived experience. It is through this cultural phenomenon that temporalities of past and present are forced to coexist such that nostalgia without lived experience is enacted in the present day.

This thesis can be understood as a case study into how contemporary retro rock music functions as its own system of meaning which actively negotiates and homogenizes these conflicting temporalities, and as such, is primarily concerned with the workings of this particular cultural form as a grammar for cultural practice. By examining the music and paratexts of three Australian contemporary retro rock artists – Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield – it will be possible to consider not only how meaning is produced, but also explore the wider implications of the recurring motifs of meaning that are signified and communicated across the modes of contemporary retro rock music practice. Namely then, the notions of authenticity, originality and creativity emerge as some of the underlying functions of a perceived connectivity with the past in contemporary retro rock, critical to its negotiation of past and present temporalities and for practices of vicarious nostalgia as they are undertaken and understood in the twenty-first century.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

*It feels like I only go backwards, baby  
Every part of me says 'go ahead'  
I got my hopes up again (oh no, not again)  
It feels like we only go backwards, darling*

- Tame Impala, 'Feels Like We Only Go Backwards' (2012)

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

As a teenager in the early 2000s I had the idea to form a rock band – but not just any rock band. It would be a rock band that played rock music like it *used to be*. It would be a novel change, so different to the other kinds of boring rock music that I had been hearing on the radio for some time. It would faithfully correspond to the things that made rock music cool in the first place all those years ago – jettisoning a homogenized loudness in favour of the immediacy and creativity that seemed to be so prevalent in 1960s rock.

This brainwave was the culmination of my own personal exploration of the music I had heard in my household growing up – the kind of music that my parents liked, that my older brother was so adamant was in fact *real* music. To my ears, there seemed to be *something* about the music of artists like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, the Doors and the Who that set it apart from what I had previously been enamoured of, not least of all the fact that it made sense to me in the twenty-first century, so many years after the fact.

Nothing really eventuated insofar as actually putting together my own band of that ilk – but it turns out my feelings on this subject were, if not highly original, at the very least on trend. Around this time, someone handed me a copy of an album by some American band they thought I might like. As it turns out, I did like it. I liked it a lot. I think I played that CD (complete with

track list scrawled in black marker on its face) every day for six months. The album was The Strokes' debut *Is This It* (2001). One of the things about this album that captured my attention, as well as with other albums by like-minded bands who seemed to be doing similarly evocative things in the early to mid-2000s – the White Stripes, the Hives and Australian bands like the Vines and Jet – was the manner in which the music called to mind past rock music, especially in its close resemblance to the classic rock music I had grown up with. This evocativeness with the past became increasingly conspicuous as the decade progressed such that the retro trends of what was called the 'garage rock revival' were being further refined not just in the subgenre of garage rock, but in other rock genres as well – most notably those specific to the 1960s and the 1970s such as psychedelic rock and hard rock. In particular, specific correlations were developing between the compositions, recordings and visual representations of these new young artists. Increasingly, it became like finding new old stock for a piece of obsolete technology that you still used every day. It felt fresh and new, but altogether familiar at the same time. It was this musical intersection between an overt fascination with the forms and content of canonical rock music on the one hand, and the evocation of those past influences very clearly through sound and feel in contemporary music practices on the other, which intrigued me then and still interests me to this day.

Another aspect of this intersection of temporalities, and perhaps the most enviable feature of this new 'old' music for me, was that I was able to build a relationship with these artists and albums in contemporaneous 'real time' – not by having to backtrack through history. It almost felt like my generation was being afforded the opportunity to have its real-life taste of 1960s music.

*Almost, but not quite.*

As much as I fancied there to be a synergy between this new old music and the music of the past, that they were almost interchangeable, the reality was that the two were not only very different from each other, but, almost by design, never quite able to match each other on the

same terms. As welcome as this old style of rock music was to me with its dedication to classic rock sounds and ethos, I still felt something was amiss. The more I listened and the more I thought about it, the more the music felt like it was stuck between two worlds. It owed plenty to both the present and the past without necessarily adding anything to either. Because the music was looking backwards so intently to provide a path forward, I felt that neither avenue was truly attainable or close to being realized, and merely left us treading water over a great lake we had never dived into in the first place.

This apparent paradox of nostalgic tendencies which seek to recreate the past in the present has long stayed with me and, if anything, the trend becomes more widely noticeable with each passing year as it permeates across other cultural forms. The shadows and echoes of the 1960s can be seen and heard in so many cultural expressions of both form and content. While it is certainly prevalent in popular music, it is also noticeable in film, in television, in architecture and industrial design, and in clothes, too. Although retro leanings in popular culture are nothing new,<sup>1</sup> the regeneration of rock music from the 1960s and early 1970s in the present day form of what I call *contemporary retro rock* represents the coalescence of an underlying cultural mode in the current generation of vicarious nostalgia. It is in this cultural mode that temporalities are allowed to coexist in a dazed in-between where nostalgia without lived experience is enacted and performed in the present.

This cultural trend, especially as it plays out in contemporary retro rock, speaks to my own predilection for feelings of nostalgia outside of my own lived experience. Further to this, it engages with questions of how these nostalgic tendencies are tied to the cultural and canonical forms of rock music in a contemporary context. As such, this thesis is not so much an analysis of contemporary retro rock music and its paratexts as an end in itself, as it is an attempt at gaining an understanding of “cultural practice” (Kramer, 1990).

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<sup>1</sup> Retro trends in popular culture and in rock music are discussed in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

The primary aim of the current study can therefore be whittled down to a question of how meaning is made through the cultural practice of contemporary retro rock music. *We are thereby concerned with the workings of this particular cultural form, how this form facilitates meaning, and how meaning is likewise used to frame, organize and interpret cultural understanding.* Questions which will be considered throughout the course of the thesis include: What are the sign elements that comprise contemporary retro rock music; how is meaning constructed as between the play of these signs; and also, how is meaning negotiated as between past and present tenses, especially as contemporary retro rock music works to elicit potentially nostalgic responses? What I am attempting to uncover and elucidate through this thesis is the *workings* of contemporary retro rock music as a system of meaning. By mapping contemporary retro rock music in this way I seek to understand it as a grammar for cultural practice.

Being fundamentally concerned with these questions of meaning, it is worth noting what is intended by *meaning* for the purposes of this study. Meaning of course does not exist of itself, but is rather a product of the system that produces it (Wittgenstein, 1968). Since there is no meaning outside of such sign systems, when I refer to meaning, I am rather directing the reader to the way in which meaning is being generated and used within sign systems. Further to this, since the focus will be on how meaning is imbued through the texts and practices of contemporary retro rock music, the scope of the study does not extend to reception studies and the possible varied receptions that contemporary retro rock music might facilitate. I do not of course suggest that the specific meanings elucidated through this thesis are fixed, unchangeable and must of themselves be considered in the manner I have expressed them. Indeed as per the encoding/decoding model offered by Hall (1980) not everyone is going to consistently read cultural texts in the same way. However let me make clear that this study assumes a level of cultural understanding regarding popular music forms and the historical narrative of popular music in the second half of the twentieth-century, and as such, what the study offers is insight into meaning at the production end of contemporary retro rock music, and how these meanings are generated through the structure of signs in its texts and associated practices. To be sure, the

comprehensive study of this aspect of contemporary retro rock music will provide a valuable insight not just into the content of the meanings being derived, but into the underlying structural operation of society and culture. As Hall argues:

The domains of ‘preferred meanings’ have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of ‘how things work for all practical purposes in this culture’, the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions. (1980, p134)

Of course in focusing the study in this way, there will always be some questions left unanswered. In a field of inquiry as rich with cultural implication as retro rock music and its intersections with nostalgia, this area of study lends itself to a number of broader questions outside of the primary scope of this study. Indeed, the natural progression from questions of form and meaning would likely lead us to questions of function such as: What is it about 1960s rock music that drives the content of contemporary retro rock music, and why is this cultural phenomenon happening *now*? While I do engage with these questions from time to time through the course of this thesis, I do again stress that the study is fundamentally concerned with the form of contemporary retro rock music and the mechanics of meaning-making that it is comprised of. The reason for this is two-fold. Firstly, contemporary retro rock music as a system of meaning and cultural practice is intriguing in and of itself, and has been largely ignored, or not dealt with in this scope with great detail, in the extant literature dealing with nostalgia, retro and popular music.<sup>2</sup> And secondly, while I am certainly interested in questions of function as above, I feel that these questions would be better informed by a framework for understanding the mechanics of contemporary retro rock as a cultural practice. In short, before we can know *why*, we must understand *how*.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, while there exists a literature on the broader topic of revivals and revivalism (Brocken, 2003; Froneman, 2014) through which this study could be situated, the primary focus of this study is geared towards considering the form of contemporary retro rock as a unique cultural practice. See Chapter 3 for further discussion on the extant literature in this regard.

## 1.2 STRUCTURE OF THESIS

The thesis is divided into two sections. Section I: Setting the Scene, seeks to contextualize the current study into nostalgia and contemporary retro rock music with reference to the historical, conceptual and methodological bases of the research. In Chapter 2, I ‘set the scene’ for a discussion of contemporary retro rock music by outlining some of the historical and cultural aspects of rock music and rock revivalism trends. I begin by outlining the stylistic and cultural progressions of rock music from its roots in the 1950s through to the first major rock revival of the late 1960s into the 1970s. In providing some background here on what constitutes rock and roll, rock and retro rock, as well as discussing the conditions and properties of this early retro movement in rock music, I seek to provide a framework to introduce some of the core concepts and traits of retro rock revivalism as a musical and cultural practice. As such, we are immediately equipped for the chronological jump forward in the chapter to the 2000s to outline a more recent instance of rock revivalism, namely what has been dubbed the ‘garage rock revival’. This trend demonstrated a recent re-emergence of the thematic origins of what soon developed into contemporary retro rock, which is also introduced at this point in the chapter where I highlight the defining characteristics of contemporary retro rock music and its points of difference from previous rock revivals. Chapter 2 concludes with some background information on the three contemporary retro rock artists whose recorded music, live performances, album covers and talk garnered from interviews form the research content for analysis in later chapters. These artists are Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield.

Chapter 3 engages with the theoretical underpinnings and extant literature regarding nostalgia and its intersections with popular music. With reference to prominent nostalgia theorists such as Davis (1979) and Boym (2001), I map out the notion of nostalgia in the first part of the chapter from its seventeenth century origins as a medical condition dealing with a longing for home in the geographic sense, to its late nineteenth and twentieth century usage as an expression of longing to return to a previously experienced time in one’s life. Further to this evolution of nostalgic meaning, I then discuss a contemporary usage of nostalgia to describe

feelings of longing not just for one's own lived experience, but for unlived experience outside of one's own lifetime. It is here that I introduce and examine the term *vicarious nostalgia* (Goulding, 2002) which encapsulates a nascent variety of nostalgia which is exhibited through the cultural practices of contemporary retro rock music. Of particular interest to this thesis is *how* contemporary retro rock demonstrates the enactment of vicarious nostalgia, and whether vicarious nostalgia manifests in similar ways to more traditional configurations of nostalgia. To this end, the typology offered by Boym (2001) of *restorative* or *reflective nostalgia* will also be introduced in this chapter as a way to characterize the tendencies of particular nostalgic practices found in contemporary retro rock. In the second part of the chapter, the focus shifts to considerations of how nostalgia is understood with relation to rock and other popular music genres in academic literature more broadly. Here I begin by briefly considering approaches to nostalgia as either a marker of lived experience or as an aesthetic code that can be applied to a medium. This is then followed by discussion of a number of other examples of how nostalgia and retro sensibilities are treated in popular music studies.

Chapter 4 sets out the methodological approaches adopted in the current study. The chapter begins by briefly outlining some of the fundamental characteristics and aspirations of qualitative analysis – insight into meaning, value of naturalistic contexts and the interpretative role of the researcher – so as to demonstrate its suitability for exploring the cultural processes of contemporary retro rock music. In acknowledging the role of researcher as interpretive subject I also go on to provide some detail of my own personal background as musician, fan and researcher, flagging the challenges and benefits associated with being an *insider researcher* (Hodkinson, 2005), as well as the importance of a reflexive approach to research and analysis. In the remaining part of the chapter I spend some time discussing the more specific methods undertaken in conducting the research presented in the later substantive chapters. In particular, I highlight the importance of a *multimodal* approach in being able to adequately apportion (and reconstruct) the various working elements of what makes up the conjuncture that is contemporary retro rock music. By utilizing this framework I am able to discuss the different

grammars that make up the cultural text of contemporary retro rock music which is diffuse across representational forms in their own terms, and relate them back to the workings of a broader cultural system. The goal of this chapter, and indeed all the preceding chapters in Section I, is to create a flow of understanding which builds with each chapter and ultimately provides a basis whereby these questions of history, nostalgia and methodology can be developed and refined further with direct reference to the specific examples of the operation of contemporary retro rock music in Section II.

Thus, Section II: “Doing Something That’s Been Done” is focused on demonstrating and understanding the working mechanisms of contemporary retro rock music in generating, reflecting and negotiating meaning through its relationship to 1960s and early 1970s rock music. The four chapters that comprise this section present the findings and analyses derived from my research into four modes of contemporary retro rock – composition and phonographic staging, performance and live staging, visual design (specific to album covers) and scenic talk. Chapter 5 examines how certain techniques of song composition and the phonographic staging of sound (Lacasse, 2000b; 2005) can be utilized to evoke earlier recordings, typically those of canonical rock artists from the 1960s and early 1970s. The chapter is approached from two musical elements which contribute to the production of a contemporary retro rock recording – composition and sound – and I provide some contextual background into the historical and musicological divide between these two elements of music and song. This framework informs the layout of the remainder of the chapter which focuses first on compositional elements of intertextuality and hypertextuality (Lacasse, 2000a) that suggest earlier recordings, before then considering the role of sound in evoking the past in the contemporary retro rock music of Tame Impala. The design of the chapter is also reflective of a continuum of derivativeness/innovativeness, moving from techniques relying on intertextual and hypertextual compositional references, through to more abstract hypertextual referencing, to sound in the phonographic staging of contemporary retro rock recordings. This continuum is mapped out in the conclusion of the chapter with reference to the various examples discussed in order to

illustrate the range of overt to subtle approaches used to evoke the past in contemporary retro rock music.

I conduct a case study of two live gigs by two different artists in Chapter 6 in order to demonstrate how the mode of live performance operates within contemporary retro rock. The first case study consists of a Frowning Clouds performance at a pub venue in Melbourne, while the second is based on a performance by Tame Impala at the Opera Theatre in the Sydney Opera House. Each case study considers not just the music as it is performed in these live settings and how the music differs in the transition from recording to live performance, but also takes into account the physical aspects of performance in effecting meaning. These physical aspects include the physical movement of the performers, gesture, body-language and stage presence, as well as interactions between individual group members and audience members, and even the physical and visual properties of the venues such as layout and lighting. Through these case studies I reveal two different stylistic approaches to live performance which reflect 1960s and early 1970s rock music not only through the rock subgenres favoured by the two artists – garage rock in the instance of the Frowning Clouds, and psychedelic rock for Tame Impala – but also in the adopted means of demonstrating authenticity through live performance. It is in this chapter that I introduce the two underlying authenticity value systems which are commonly and historically utilized in rock music generally, but which are replicated and heavily relied upon in contemporary retro rock music to structure meaning (Keightley, 2001).

Chapter 7 changes tact from the two previous chapters as I move away from modes which consider musical elements to explore how meaning is constructed through the largely visual mode of album covers in contemporary retro rock. While there are a number of paratextual materials which comprise contemporary retro rock, album covers were focused on in this chapter firstly for their reliance on text and image in packaging and representing the physical musical format, and secondly because of the rich canonical reverence reserved for album cover design in rock music heritage discourses. The evolution of 1960s and early 1970s rock album cover design is discussed in the early part of this chapter and is particularly

significant in how the chapter is structured as I utilize the innovativeness of a particular album design, that of the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), as a cultural marker between early 1960s design style and post-*Sgt Pepper* design. In examining the album covers of the Frowning Clouds, Tame Impala and Stonefield, the distinction between pre- and post-*Sgt Pepper* design helps delineate the approaches to representation in contemporary retro rock music as some artists rely more heavily on intertextual references such as those found in photographic portraiture prevalent in pre-*Sgt Peppers* album cover design, for example, while other design aesthetics which align with post-*Sgt Pepper* album cover design are geared more towards the mythological construction of 1960s culture. As such, Barthes' (1972) work on semiology and myth is engaged here to inform our understanding of the ideological play of signs to represent the collective memory in these album covers, as is Baudrillard's (1994) notion of simulacra as another approach in representing a connectivity with a past artist's specific mythological discourse.

For Chapter 8 the focus shifts away from music and images to another mode which informs contemporary retro rock – scenic talk. The talk analysed in this chapter was garnered from semi-structured interviews with a number of participants including our three main contemporary retro rock artists. This chapter stands apart from the previous three because talk in this instance serves a dual role. On the one hand, the subject matter of the talk provides some explicit expression and insight into the views and motivations of participants uncommon to the more strictly textual analysis of the other modes, while on the other hand, talk is also treated here as a discursive textual element in and of itself which similarly communicates and structures meaning in contemporary retro rock as with the other modes. As the talk itself tends to align with two different thematic groups, this duality of ideas informs the structure of the chapter. The first part considers attitudes towards past music and culture of the 1960s as compared with perceptions of contemporary popular music and culture in the present. The second part of the chapter explores perceptions of identity, originality and creativity associated with contemporary retro rock music. Particular attention is paid in both parts to the ways in which scenic talk in

contemporary retro rock music culture utilizes discursive practices to legitimize and reinforce the stature of canonical rock music, or otherwise assert the creative validity of contemporary retro rock music despite its discernible modelling on past rock music.

This thesis may be understood as a case study into how contemporary retro rock music works as its own system of meaning which actively negotiates and homogenizes conflicting temporalities of past and present. While clearly focused on the past structures of canonical rock music, as well as with the construction of myth and the collective memory of that era, contemporary retro rock is forced to exist in the present day, too. Further to this, this almost paradoxical see-sawing between past and present that seems to characterize contemporary retro rock also plays into an unfolding negotiation of how nostalgic practices are undertaken and understood in the twenty-first century. Reynolds considers that:

Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present's own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel. (2011, pp x-xi)

Picking up on this thread, this study of contemporary retro rock music demonstrates a particularly characteristic example of this *retromania*, to use Reynolds' term. By understanding how contemporary retro rock music *works* as its own structure of meaning, or by gaining an insight into how retro and nostalgia function within this burgeoning musical world from the ground up, as it were, I seek to lay the foundations for further discussion and continued research into this broader phenomenon.

## SECTION I: SETTING THE SCENE

*Nostalgia is, after all, one of the great pop emotions. And sometimes that nostalgia can be the bittersweet longing pop feels for its own lost golden age. To put that another way: some of the great artists of our time are making music whose primary emotion is towards other music, earlier music. But then again, isn't there something profoundly wrong about the fact that so much of the greatest music made during the last decade sounds like it could have been made twenty, thirty, even forty years earlier?*

(Reynolds, 2011, p xxiii)

*I know some things have to change  
Oh yeah, I do, yeah, I do  
But don't remind me of home in case it isn't  
quite the same*

- Tame Impala, 'Runway, Houses, Cities, Clouds' (2010)

## 2 A RECENT HISTORY OF RETRO ROCK

*We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave... So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.*

- Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971)

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I seek to provide the necessary context and background to the current popular musical trend of contemporary retro rock. To this end, I will begin by outlining a brief history of the beginnings of rock and roll music in the 1950s through to the 1960s leading to the emergence of one the earliest retro trends in rock music, the ‘rock and roll revival’ which was visible across a number of movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By detailing the evolution of the rock music style from its inception through to its first major expressions of deliberate and widespread reflection on its own past, a number of key themes of retro, nostalgia and revivalism will be introduced in the context of the rock music form and its surrounding cultural impact. This early history will provide a basis from which to spring forward chronologically to examine a more recent example of rock revivalism, namely the ‘garage rock revival’ of the first decade of the 2000s, and how this has developed into the current trend of contemporary retro rock which I will broadly define at this stage as well. Following this, I will introduce the specific contemporary examples of Australian rock bands and performers who will be examined in greater depth in later chapters – Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield. This chapter will thus help to demonstrate the depth of variation found in ‘retro

rock', as well as establish a historical and contemporary context within which to position both the practical and theoretical applications specific to contemporary retro rock music.

Before delving into a brief historical background of retro trends in rock music, I would at the outset like to make clear what I mean by *retro rock* and *history* for our current purposes. 'Retro rock' simply refers to new original rock music which utilizes the form and style of earlier rock music such that it overtly suggests the artists, style and era of its influence. This working definition is not without its complexities, however. It has been argued of course that at least to some extent all new popular music is informed by and created with reference to genre tropes and past influences, which of course might then lead to the supposition that indeed all popular music is in some way 'retro' (Attali, 1985, p109; Toynbee, 2000, p140). However, there is often a marked difference (one that will be revisited many times in this thesis) between new rock music which through genre classification falls within the generic confines of the rock style, and rock music which is explicitly identifiable as 'retro'. While the lines between a derivative and innovative musical work can be blurred, retro rock predominantly features compositions and song structures which are derived from a particular style or trend in rock music which were previously popular or in vogue in a past era. Typically this preference for a past style becomes more noticeable in the context of its existence alongside other dominant contemporary popular music trends. An incongruity can be heard as well, for example, between present day sound palettes, technologies, instruments or recording techniques as compared to retro rock music which typically utilizes older technologies and techniques, or manipulates modern technologies in order to simulate an aged sound. It should be noted at this stage that these are not hard and fast rules or outcomes and that there is room for variation within these criteria for problematic examples. There could perhaps be a composition which utilizes a contemporary song structure but is recorded using old technology in order to sound aged, or conversely an old-style composition recorded using the latest technologies in order to sound contemporary. While not denying that what exactly constitutes a 'retro' rock song can be nebulous (indeed this notion of retro and its application to rock music will be explored in great depth in the coming chapters), I

will for our current purposes of elucidating a brief history of retro rock be relying on this simple definition and its associated characteristics.

With regard to history, I would like to note that although the history of popular music *informs* contemporary retro rock music, history *itself* is not the focus of this thesis. As such, while I will provide a brief overview of the origins of retro rock music and the development of contemporary retro rock within the far wider scope of the history of popular music following the beginnings of rock and roll in the mid-1950s, I will not attempt to detail an all-encompassing linear account of the history of popular music, or indeed cover every retro trend in popular music history. Instead, I will focus on a few significant trends, especially insofar as they are able to aid an understanding of contemporary retro rock music which is of course the subject of this thesis.

And lastly, I also note here that while the notion of *nostalgia* will necessarily be brought up in passing throughout this chapter, I will reserve a full theoretical elucidation of nostalgia for the next chapter.

## **2.2 FROM THE ROCK AND ROLL FIFTIES TO THE SWINGING SIXTIES**

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact birth date of rock and roll as a musical style. The term ‘rock and roll’ itself originates in African-American slang for sexual intercourse, and appeared prominently in rhythm and blues (R&B) music of the 1940s and 1950s where it was used interchangeably to mean lovemaking, partying and dancing (Aquila, 2000, p3). However its actual widespread usage as a term for a style of music did not reach the broader public consciousness until at least the early 1950s when the black R&B style was adapted into what became rock and roll for white audiences. Largely credited with introducing white audiences to R&B music, disc jockey Alan Freed had a commercial success with his rock and roll radio program which began in 1952 and was syndicated nationally soon after. By removing the racial

connotations associated with R&B music by renaming it 'rock and roll', Freed was able to successfully market and familiarize white audiences with this previously segregated music (Ford, 1971, p459). As R&B began to be heard on white radio stations, an industry pattern soon developed whereby popular black R&B compositions were often rerecorded by white pop artists. This allowed record labels to better market the music as 'white' music for white audiences, affording the opportunity to tone down any elements of sexuality and ethnicity found in the original recordings (Aquila, 2000, p7). In doing so, white artists were reinterpreting these songs, or creating their own songs in the R&B style, but with a different approach, such that rock and roll became marked by "the commercial blend of country with rhythm and blues" (Gracyk, 1996, p6). Key among early white proponents of rock and roll was Bill Haley and His Comets. Originally a country and western singer, Bill Haley, more than merely copying black recordings, heavily exaggerated R&B rhythms and incorporated those beats with distinctly white voices performing in the swing choral style (Gillett, 1970, p17). Cemented by the placement of rock and roll songs in Hollywood films (notably the Bill Haley and His Comets recording of 'Rock Around the Clock' (1954) featured in the Hollywood film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955)) and frequent exposure in newspapers and on television, rock and roll by the mid-1950s had most certainly entered the American public consciousness, becoming an integral part of American youth culture (Aquila, 2000, pp8-10).

As the market for rock and roll expanded, so too did the variations within the rock and roll genre catering to different tastes. Aquila (2000) notes that three main rock and roll idioms emerged in approximately the first decade of rock and roll from 1954 to 1963: R&B rock, country rock and pop rock. R&B rock closely matched its R&B roots but was more oriented towards the popular market as rock and roll (Little Richard, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry), country rock (or rockabilly) featured country influences melded with R&B (Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers, Carl Perkins), and pop rock was a more homogenized interpretation of the rock and roll form which often used vocal harmonies and was more in line with popular music of the preceding era (the sickly sweet rock and roll of Frankie Avalon and Fabian, and the doo wop of

Dion and the Belmonts) (pp12-14). Ford (1971) however considers that the death, departure or absence in the late 1950s and early 1960s of a number of key figures in early rock and roll,<sup>3</sup> as well as the overwhelming middle-class reaction to the perceived immorality of brazen rock and roll music, ultimately lead to the decline of harder-edged “southern rock” and the mainstream dominance of wholesome white northern United States pop rock by the early 1960s (p461). Even upon Elvis Presley’s return to the United States in 1960 from military service in Germany, it was clear that popular tastes had shifted; once heralded as the king of rock and roll, Elvis carved out a career for the majority of the 1960s starring in innocuous film musicals.

Gillett (1970) has observed the need to make an important distinction between ‘rock and roll’ and ‘rock’ arising around this time in both stylistic and historical senses. From approximately the early 1960s there were new developments in popular music which owed much to American R&B and rock and roll but were distinguishable from 1950s rock and roll music. Inclusively referred to as ‘rock’,<sup>4</sup> these new, geographically far-reaching developments included Detroit-based black gospel/blues-inspired music known as Motown (Diana Ross and the Supremes, the Temptations),<sup>5</sup> Southern California-based surf music which reflected youth culture surrounding surfing and cars (the Beach Boys, Dick Dale and the Del-Tones), and British R&B and beat music (the Beatles, the Rolling Stones) (Ford, 1971, pp461-463). The popularity of these new trends in rock music gradually swept away the wholesome northern United States pop rock of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and along with it relegated ‘rock and roll’, once its own encompassing term for various strains of music, to a time-stamped style of music popular in the decade preceding 1964 (Gillett, 1970, p1).

Somewhat ironically, the most influential music responsible for the ‘change of the guard’ and dating 1950s rock and roll came from British artists who were in a sense merely selling back to the Americans their own rock and roll and black R&B music. Considered a

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<sup>3</sup> Among them: Little Richard retired from performing to pursue his faith in 1957; Elvis Presley was drafted into the army in 1958; Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and The Big Bopper died in a plane crash in 1959; and Alan Freed was fired from radio in the same year.

<sup>4</sup> A category still used today for the multitude of variations within the rock genre.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Motown’ referring both to the influential Detroit-based record label as well as a common nickname for the city of Detroit.

‘British Invasion’ for the way in which America’s dominance in popular music culture was relenting to British influence, artists such as the Beatles, the Animals, the Kinks and the Rolling Stones were immensely successful and influential in the United States and around the globe. The British Invasion, spearheaded by the Beatles, marked for the first time a wide social appeal in the United States for black music without the stigma of race (Ford, 1971, p463). In effect, rock music, in spite of the mania surrounding the British Invasion artists, was slowly gaining a level of favourable exposure and validity it had never before enjoyed. In contrast to the moral outrage surrounding Elvis Presley in the 1950s, The Beatles were pronounced “the most outstanding composers of 1963” by the *London Times* with their musical ingenuity being compared favourably to Gustave Mahler (Miller, 1999, pp211-212). Indeed by the 1970s, Ford considers rock music “part of the establishment,” played by a range of musicians and no longer belonging to the lower-class (1971, p463).

However while Ford is not altogether incorrect in this assertion, his viewpoint is challenged by the relationship between rock music and youth counter-culture in the later part of the 1960s. Rock music was hugely influential in the cultural turmoil of the 1960s, especially in youth culture. For Denisoff and Levine (1970), rock music was at the centre of the counter-culture. The emphasis on lyrical content in 1960s rock music allowed for an explicit questioning of “basic values and institutions” while the genre’s affiliation with a burgeoning drug culture was “also viewed as a barrier for ... participation in the system” (Denisoff & Levine, 1970, pp40-41). The political difference between rock and roll in the 1950s and the rock music of the 1960s is thus derived from shifting social viewpoints of the changing musical style:

In the 1950s, serious musicians and adults in general denounced rock and roll as *déclassé* in an artistic and moral sense, whereas in the 1960s rock music has been seen as innovative and *classé*, but as politically and intellectually deviant. (Denisoff & Levine, 1970, p41)

And so rock music by the end of the 1960s had changed substantially in its associated political implications from that of its rock and roll roots – a change that was further embellished by the radical departure in style, form and content of the music itself. From British Invasion rock in

1964, rock music quickly developed under the towering influence of (among others) Bob Dylan's introspective folk-rock and the Beatles' increasingly innovative use of the recording studio towards "the advent of psychedelia, blues-based improvisation, and other musical experimentation in the late 1960s" (Marcus, 2004, p11). In retrospect, the enormity of the transformation of rock music in a five year period from 1964 to 1969 could quite easily have, as Marcus suggests, created a real sense of discontinuity from the 1950s, mirroring the social and political upheaval experienced during the 1960s (2004, p11).

### **2.3 THINKING OF *HAPPY(ER) DAYS*: THE FIRST ROCK AND ROLL REVIVAL AND THE EMBELLISHED 1950S RETRO AESTHETIC**

*Jocks! Freaks! ROTC! SDS! Let there be a truce! Bury the hatchet (not in each other)! Remember when we were all little greaseballs together watching the eight-grade girls for pick-ups?*

- Sha Na Na advertisement (1969)  
(Guffey, 2006, p113)

In the 1970s there was a widespread cultural revisiting of the 1950s in popular culture exemplified through nostalgic sentiment for early rock and roll music. While not the first revival staged in popular music of the twentieth century, this revival was the first major movement towards the past in rock music culture. It is significant to the background of this chapter and this study generally as it demonstrates some of the key elements and attitudes which characterize retro revivals with which to compare more recent rock revivalism. In this section I will highlight the different viewpoints taken regarding the 1950s throughout the 1970s with particular emphasis on a number of mainstream and underground trends in popular rock music and how these trends utilized nostalgic sentiment towards the past. Of primary interest are the different ways in which the 1950s revival and a retro aesthetic emerged in the 1970s, and the needs that

these developments helped fulfil. To this end, consideration will be given to how rock and roll was revisited to placate a desire for personal, social and political continuity (through revival festivals and the rediscovery of forgotten artists) on the one hand, but also to reinvent the experience of the past as wholesome and innocent on the other. As I will demonstrate, this resulted in a reconstructed collective memory of the ‘fifties’ in the United States not just as an era, but as a standardized sentiment and a style.

Although the 1950s revival hit its stride in the 1970s, renewed interest in the 1950s is traceable back to the late 1960s. Almost as soon as the impact from the Beatles’ *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and the ensuing summer of love marked the highpoint of psychedelia and experimentation in mainstream rock music, artists at the forefront of change began stripping back their music, turning to their roots and early influences. The ensuing irony of course was that it was the Beatles themselves who led the charge into the past. In 1968 they released their eponymous double-album (commonly referred to as ‘*The White Album*’) which, although a hodgepodge of styles and influences, was instrumentally sparse on the majority of tracks and less polished as a whole – evocative in part of the simplicity which had long been overlooked in recent years of technological advancement and studio experimentation in popular music. This approach carried through to the undertaking of the *Get Back* project in early 1969 in which the Beatles attempted to record an album of stripped back rock and roll songs akin to their formative years, live and without overdubs. By resurrecting an old Lennon-McCartney composition ‘One After 909’ which they had written together as teenagers, and new songs in a similar vein, the Beatles made a concerted effort at rekindling through their shared musical roots the camaraderie that had been missing in the group in recent years. Although in theory the sessions were to culminate with their return to the live stage, the project was abandoned, and retrospectively released as *Let It Be* (1970) just after the dissolution of the Beatles. Somewhat appropriately, the uncompleted masters of this nostalgia project were patched together by legendary pop-rock record producer Phil Spector who rose to prominence as the co-composer

and producer of such singles as the Crystals' 'He's a Rebel' (1962) and the Ronettes' 'Be My Baby' (1963).

In addition to the Beatles, other artists who had previously delved into the excesses of psychedelic art rock were also taking a backwards look at their beginnings and past influences for new inspiration. Among them were the Rolling Stones, whose *Beggars' Banquet* (1968) was a radical about-face towards their blues and R&B roots, and a drastic move away from their previous album, *Their Satanic Majesties Request* (1967b), which was itself an attempt at outdoing the artisan psychedelia of *Sgt Pepper*. Likewise, The Doors' *Morrison Hotel* (1970), saw the band not only revisiting their primary blues influences after the critical and commercial failure of the brass and string-laden *The Soft Parade* (1969), but also return to a stripped-back sound palette – so much so that the album was partly comprised of left over recordings from earlier in their career. However in addition to these examples of established rock groups actively regressing in their developed style in the late 1960s, new artists were building their careers by riding the wave of back-to-basics rock music. In particular, artists like Creedence Clearwater Revival were less psychedelic rock than strict R&B meets Southern swamp rock, while Bob Dylan's former backing group, the Band, gained notoriety harnessing a no-frills country-rock sound meets historical Americana aesthetic.

This retrospective view of rock music in the context of its time as championed by these artists can be regarded as a deliberate reaction to the rapid and dramatic developments in rock music over the preceding years – both in its compositional sophistication and the artifice of contemporary studio recording techniques. But another significant catalyst is the fact that enough time had elapsed so that a properly nostalgic look back to the beginnings of rock music felt plausible and timely in the span of history – not only in the personal history of musicians and audiences, but also in the cultural history of the music itself. By the late 1960s rock music history was comprised of an impressive back catalogue of memories made tangible by an archive of potentially thousands of songs and records. The popular pastime in the 1970s of

looking back to the 1950s and early 1960s was made possible through a potent combination of nostalgia, a wealth of recorded artefacts and enough time having elapsed.

However while the recordings were able to freeze frame a moment in time, the same could not be said for the artists responsible for them. Elvis Presley, for example, had spent the majority of the 1960s in Hollywood making loosely plotted yet wholesome musical films with recordings to match – a far cry from the sexually charged sneering rocker prototype of the 1950s and out of step with a vastly changing cultural landscape (Feeney, 2001). Thus it was necessary for Elvis' career to actively reconnect himself to his past, which he attempted to do via the medium of television with *Elvis*, otherwise more commonly referred to as his '68 Comeback Special'. Musically, Elvis performed a range of hits from his career, with a focus on his R&B and Gospel influences that helped to ground his performance in the 1950s. Aesthetically however, Elvis (dressed in black leather pants and jacket) donned a look that approximated a sense of 1950s bikie culture, rather than his classic look of baggy trousers and over-sized blazers which he donned in the 1950s. Nevertheless, the television special was a tremendous success and helped rejuvenate his fledgling career, as well as sparking interest in the forgotten rock and rollers of the 1950s.

Indeed, just as a leather clad Elvis was seen to make a welcome riposte to rock and roll and live performance, a slew of 'oldies' revival tours by early rock and roll artists such as Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, Little Richard and Bill Haley and His Comets were being marketed to appreciative crowds in Europe and the UK as well as the United States. The first of nostalgia promoter Richard Nader's 1950s rock and roll revival concerts was held at Madison Square Garden in New York in 1969 (becoming a mainstay in the 1970s). These concerts often featured short sets from a collection of early rock and roll artists and were typically frequented by a varied cross-section of audience members from teenagers, to those who were teenagers in the 1950s and even the parents of teenagers – "a combination rarely seen at other rock shows" (Marcus, 2004, p14). In fact, for the first time in rock music, events were being staged that tore down the strict barriers of age-appropriateness in popular music, prefaced on a shared reflection

of a past era arising from the immediate experience of the 1960s. Marcus thereby considers the appeal of the revival in terms of the restaging of 1950s performers as a way to tangibly enact a previously missing continuity between the past and the present, whereby “the Fifties remained a touchstone in an attempt to deny meaning and significance to the countercultural and left-wing influences of the 1960s” (2004, p14). And yet, there remains an underlying irony to the comeback of Elvis and other aging rockers to live performance. As much as they tried to recreate the spontaneity and youthful vigour that characterized their early careers, to freeze themselves in time at the moment before they became culturally irrelevant, they would always be ten years behind. How long could they keep up the ruse? Could they keep playing the adolescent into their sixties?<sup>6</sup> If the rock and roll revival was to truly gain momentum, it would need the support of the next generation, too.

A key event in the birth of rock and roll nostalgia was the Toronto Rock and Roll Revival music festival. Held in September 1969, the festival captured the swelling nostalgic interest in 1950s rock and roll, as well as explicitly highlighting this burgeoning trend as a ‘revival’. Unlike Nader’s nostalgia concerts, the festival featured a mixture of artists old and new, with newer artists such as Alice Cooper and the Doors playing in their individual contemporary styles alongside performances by popular 1950s R&B and rock and roll stars Gene Vincent, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. However one divisive exception was the last-minute addition of John Lennon to the festival. Appearing with the Plastic Ono Band, Lennon’s appearance at the festival was his first live performance since 1966. Enticed by the opportunity to see and play with his idols, Lennon honoured them by covering earlier rock and roll tunes ‘Blue Suede Shoes’, ‘Money (That’s What I Want)’ and ‘Dizzy Miss Lizzy’. However, more than merely honouring his predecessors, Lennon’s performance suggests a far more personal relationship to this material.

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<sup>6</sup> Certainly this has been proven true not only by these artists, but also in recent years where any number of ageing rock icons are still performing (Reynolds, 2011; Bennett, 2008).

In Auslander's (2003) study into performing identity through 1950s rock and roll in the 1970s, he proposes an axis of authenticity in relation to how differing representations of history are utilized in rock music to conform to differing ideologies. Lennon and the Plastic Ono Band represent one polar extremity of the axis with the performance of 1950s rock and roll as a marker of biographical authenticity. Auslander suggests that the rock and roll revival helped rock musicians and enthusiasts reaffirm a sense of personal identity:

The generation of rock musicians who came to prominence in the 1960s and early 1970s began mostly as rock and roll musicians, learning their craft by emulating the sounds they heard on rock and roll records, before contributing to the development of rock music. For them, the rock and roll revival entailed a return to their earliest musical experiences as both listeners and players. (2003, pp167-168)

Revisiting rock and roll then was more than just a matter of reviving the original artists in an attempt to smooth over a broken continuity between eras on a political or social level. Rock and roll music also demonstrated a far more individual connection that was underlying the personal growth and advancement of musicians and audiences in the 1960s. This is particularly evident in the case of John Lennon who, despite his pioneering work in the 1960s with the Beatles, consistently throughout his career made no secret of his love of early rock and roll music and its impact on his life from an early age. Thus his performance of these particular rock and roll songs is closely linked to a sense of personal authenticity – of where he came from, who he was then and who he *still is*.

This can be seen again in his album of cover songs which was largely recorded in 1973 and released simply as *Rock 'n' Roll* (1975). Ploughing through hits from Buddy Holly, Little Richard and Chuck Berry, each song is like a chapter in Lennon's musical biography. This is further underscored by the album cover photograph of a twenty-two year old Lennon in Hamburg, where he and the other Beatles cut their musical teeth in the harsh red light district. Donning a leather jacket in the doorway of a brick building, Lennon's connection with this photograph highlights not only his beginnings in music, but suggests an enduring association with his working-class background. Indeed, whereas the enduring narrative of rock and roll

success is a story of upward mobility, of ‘making it’, “Lennon’s assertion of his rocker past was an act of symbolic downward mobility, as if he were undoing the Beatles’ phenomenal rise to assert solidarity with his former working-class self” (Auslander, 2003, p170).

However this emphasis on personal authenticity was not the only approach associated with the rock and roll revival. Competing with motivations of continuity and authenticity, and almost successfully altering the popular perception of the 1950s, was the reinvention of the rock and roll era as a time of innocence. This approach is best demonstrated musically by Sha Na Na; a 1950s-inspired musical-dance troupe. Whilst clearly pitching a revival of 1950s rock and roll music with their choice of repertoire (their set comprised of popular songs from the 1950s such as ‘At the Hop’ and ‘Get a Job’), the brand of rock and roll espoused by Sha Na Na was less a reminiscence of the 1950s as much as it was a reinvention of the era for new and old ears alike. The band’s campy portrayal of the 1950s featured dancers (in addition to the musicians) who brought a theatrical element to the performance of old time rock and roll, emphasizing 1950s greaser culture adorned with leather jackets, greasy quiff hairstyles and cigarette cartons rolled in t-shirt sleeves. Still relatively unknown, Sha Na Na performed a memorable set at the now iconic Woodstock music festival in August 1969, part of which featured in the documentary film, *Woodstock* (1970). Appearing as the penultimate act right before Jimi Hendrix, no clearer distinction could be made between contemporary rock music and its beginnings in the 1950s. In contrast to the festival’s preference for popular rock music of the late 1960s with a heavy leaning towards psychedelic and free-form groups such as the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane and Santana, Sha Na Na portrayed the days of rock past as innocent, playful and uncomplicated. Awash with short 12-bar blues style hits, doo-wop harmonies, nonsense lyrics and an exuberant sense of fun, Sha Na Na powered through their set at breakneck pace, speeding up mid-tempo rock and roll numbers which worked to emphasize the immediacy of the music and of their performance. Despite their very different approach, Sha Na Na’s performance was well

received, and like oldies revival tours and festivals, signposted a rekindled fascination with both early rock and roll and 1950s culture that was to take root in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike revival concerts and oldies tours, however, Sha Na Na were not emphasizing a sense of authenticity or continuity with the past through their performance. In fact, Auslander (2003) considers Sha Na Na the very opposite to John Lennon on his axis of authenticity. In the first instance, their performance style was anachronistic to the era they were referring to. Their choreographed dances (in themselves not a part of 1950s rock and roll performance culture) had more in common with Busby Berkeley and black soul dancing (Reynolds, 2011, p284). Their biggest inspiration musically was doo-wop, yet their leather-jacketed stage dress was typically styled after ‘greasers’, or more accurately, hoodlums and juvenile delinquents (the term ‘greaser’ was not part of the vocabulary of the 1950s), inconsistent with the formal wear often sported by doo-wop groups at the time (Auslander, 2003, p170). The band (mostly of Jewish and Irish heritage) even adopted personae corresponding “to a stereotypical ‘Italian-Americanity,’” superficially tying in to the typical ethnicity of doo-wop performers, but which had “no basis in lived experience” (Auslander, 2003, p170). Rather than trying to perfectly recreate the look and feel of fifties rock and roll, Sha Na Na were effectively fabricating a stylized version of the 1950s. As Reynolds notes, “with hardly any archival resources to draw on – no videos or readily accessible movies, just a few faded memories and record sleeves” they were “*necessarily* fictionalising the recent past” (2011, p285) [emphasis added]. Indeed, Sha Na Na’s performance would never seriously suggest a realistic reflection of the past, nor did they ever make claims to personal authenticity; the entirety of Sha Na Na’s legacy points to theatricality. Marcus thus sees “the band’s acknowledgement of cultural distance from the 1950s ... in the comic, semi-parodic tone of [their] stage show,” as the key difference between their view of the 1950s and the personal continuity associated with Elvis and Lennon (2004, p14).

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<sup>7</sup> Sha Na Na went on to a successful recording career and in the late 1970s, their own television show.

This ‘cultural distance’ cultivated by Sha Na Na set the agenda for remembering the 1950s in the wider popular culture of the 1970s, with a number of successful plays, films and television shows helping to consolidate a reconstructed social history of the 1950s. The early 1970s stage production of *Grease* and its 1978 later film adaption, for example, helped to further solidify the image of the stylized greaser subculture that existed in an era of camp musicality as portrayed by Sha Na Na. Well before *Grease* even, George Lucas’ nostalgia film *American Graffiti* (1973) had set the filmic template for ‘remembering’ the 1950s. Unsurprisingly, the most critical element in the film is the exhaustive soundtrack of 1950s rock and roll, which provides the backdrop (courtesy of car radios everywhere) to a single night’s events of teenage life, dating rituals and hijinks. However what is most revealing about the nostalgia experience of *American Graffiti* is that it is in fact set in 1962, and not the 1950s. While it arguable that the youth culture of the early 1960s was consistent in many ways with that of the 1950s, what Lucas ultimately creates is a time lapse of the entirety of his experiences of teenage life of the 1950s into a single night in the following decade – thus demonstrating the malleability of nostalgia and the manner in which its essence can be reduced to a melange of pop culture clichés. Similarly evidencing this malleability, but to the opposite effect, the long-running television show *Happy Days* seemed to make the projected nostalgia of the 1950s go on and on, episode after episode. It was almost as if the longer the show ran, the further it was able to stretch out the innocence and static lifestyle of the 1950s. This was achieved even through the continuity of the show itself, which reached well into the 1960s.

The underlying similarity between all the views propagated by these cultural nostalgia pieces is the characterization of the 1950s as a time of simplicity and innocence. Of course, in order to realize this outlook, it was necessary to overlook, or at least reinterpret, the social reality of the era. Leonard and Leonard (2008) contend that:

Up until 1969, quite an opposite cultural memory held sway. When Americans remembered “the Fifties,” they thought of Joe McCarthy witch hunts, of an “age of anxiety,” of the “shook-up generation” diving under their desks during A-Bomb drills, of the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit selling out and Holden Caulfield cracking up, or

Allen Ginsberg '48 and Jack Kerouac '44 too “beat” to fight back. Nothing to get nostalgic about there. (p1)

None of these reflections form significant parts of the worldview of the reimagined fifties. In addition to Leonard & Leonard's list, Marcus (2004) also emphasizes the supersession of the influence of the beat generation with “the prototypical figure of youth culture in the Fifties” now replaced by “the urban, white, male working-class greaser” stereotype, “a process of cultural redefinition that had begun with Sha Na Na” and was in turn epitomized by the Fonz in *Happy Days* (p30). In the case of rock and roll itself, where once this nascent musical form was considered the threatening emblem of youth rebellion and sexuality, in the nostalgia boom of the 1970s it was recast as a tame reminder of the ‘good old days’. As an example, Guffey highlights the use of the song ‘Rock Around the Clock’ in the opening credits of *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) in contrast to its use as the theme for *American Graffiti* and *Happy Days* (2006, p112). Whereas in *Blackboard Jungle*, a drama focusing on gang violence and juvenile delinquency in school, the song has the potency to suggest the danger and recklessness of a savage young generation, its potency in the 1970s had been diluted to a tepid tonic.

This common thread of innocence lost that runs through the rock and roll fifties revival is in many ways connected to the typical nostalgic treatment of the past – that which was once wild and rebellious becomes with the passage of time wholesome and quaint.<sup>8</sup> Certainly in the context of the cultural and political developments of the 1960s and 1970s and by the evolving standards of new rock music in the 1970s, rock and roll of the 1950s probably does draw a comparative innocence. However the widespread rock and roll revival of the 1970s did more than just look back with affection at the 1950s. Perhaps the greatest innovation of this revival was the manner in which it helped define the early incarnation of a retro aesthetic. Taking Sha Na Na as the prototype of rock and roll retro-ism, they embodied the classic hallmark of retro that was central to its popularity in the following decades – a tongue-in-cheek reverence for an era that took the style of the past, and through satire, emptied the style of its substance. The little

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<sup>8</sup> A fuller exposition of the fundamental effects of nostalgia is to follow in Chapter 3.

musical validity Sha Na Na may have had was ultimately lost in the shadow of their image – the very opposite ideal to the central values of the counterculture. Sha Na Na (and the other ensuing players in the nostalgia trend of the 1970s), positioned as the counterculture’s artistic antithesis, were uniquely poised to comment on the radical developments in music and culture of the 1960s. They were jubilant, silly and above all, fun. Undermining the stuffiness of 1960s rock posturing, their popularity suggested rock music had taken itself too seriously (Peterson, 1970, p592). This deflation of rock’s self-importance then can be seen as the biggest ambition of the rock and roll revival as a whole. From John Lennon’s disavowal of the importance of *Sgt Pepper* (Gilmore, 2009), the rising popularity of new roots-based rock artists to the campy satire of rock and roll’s beginnings, the clearest and most unified message coming from mainstream rock was a weariness of the grandeur and spectacle that the 1960s offered. Each in their own ways, all of these backwards-looking trends demonstrated a nostalgia for simpler times.

And yet one trend, however irreverent and ‘fun’, was more mobilized towards facilitating a newly envisaged collective memory of the past. Rather than necessarily trying to facilitate the conditions of the past, or more literally revive it (as with the re-emergence of original artists) to demonstrate continuity with history, the cultural distance cultivated by the likes of Sha Na Na set into motion an almost paradoxical template that becomes central to many of the ensuing retro and nostalgia trends in the following decades. On the one hand, “Sha Na Na’s nostalgia implies a yearning for escape from a corrupted present, a leap back over the schism that divides the Sixties from the Fifties” (Marcus, 2004, p13). But rather than landing on the cold hard surface of the 1950s as originally experienced, it seems that for many a cushioned landing on “a consciously fabricated myth... [that] didn’t reflect how people would have felt at the time” was far more preferable. This transition from realizing a personally lived history to embracing a fabricated memory was necessarily smoothed over by cultivating a sense of distance between the present and the recent past through an easily effected retro sensibility. As Guffey notes, “however mild, it was this element of parody that provided a distancing

mechanism, allowing the recent past to be transformed into collective memory” (2006, p116). Thus through retro, the value of history is revealed as secondary to its fashion.

## **2.4 ‘RETROMANIA’ AND THE GARAGE ROCK REVIVAL IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

*It's 1969 in my head  
I just wanna have no place to go  
Livin' through the sound of the dead*

- The Vines, ‘1969’ (2002)

From the 1970s onwards, the ‘retro’ aesthetic became firmly entrenched in popular music and indeed popular culture more broadly. However the content of ‘retro’ of course is not fixed as particular eras and styles historically have been in vogue at different times. However Reynolds (2010) has posited that rather than a random shift in retro styles, retro trends have in the last few decades of the twentieth century been rather predictable:

Every decade seems to have its retro twin. The syndrome started in the 1970s, with the 1950s rock'n'roll revival, and it continued through the 1980s (obsessed with the 1960s) and the 1990s (ditto the 1970s). True to form, and right on cue, the noughties kicked off with a 1980s electropop renaissance.

Notably, this twenty-year rule of retro also neatly corresponds with the maturation of youth generations. Thus what this pattern suggests is a cyclical nostalgic predilection for revisiting the cultural aspects of the formative years of one’s generation upon reaching adulthood, as was demonstrated in the first rock and roll revival in the 1970s.

But what commentators such as Reynolds (2011) and Guesdon and Le Guern (2014) have gone on to say regarding retro in the twenty-first century is that while this pattern may very well still continue with the ebb and flow of lived memory for each generation, it is not the *only* circumstance determining the content of retro sensibilities. In what Reynolds has dubbed

‘retromania’, he claims the popular culture of the first decade of the twenty-first century has been largely characterized not by innovation, but rather by its reflections of the past:

Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel. (2011, pp x-xi)

Reynolds, as well as Guesdon and Le Guern, recognize retromania in the last decade as diffuse across a number of backward-looking activities, media trends and stylistic approaches within popular music. Among them are: remixes, mashups, the digital approximation of analogue sound recording technologies, reissued and repackaged albums, reunion shows of formerly disbanded artists, classic albums live, an increase in vinyl sales, holograms of deceased performers appearing at live concerts and, pertinent to the current study, “‘new old’ music made by young musicians who draw heavily on the past, often in a clearly signposted and arty way” (Reynolds, 2011, p xiii). While these examples all raise a myriad of unique questions and concerns culturally and philosophically, the thread which ties them together can be summarized by Guesdon and La Guern who consider all examples of retromania to be “inventing and spreading the idea of an irreparably lost ‘golden age of pop’, evident today only through its echoes” (Guesdon & Le Guern, 2014, p71).

Reynolds considers that while retro trends can be tied to nostalgia based on lived experience of the past, “where pop nostalgia gets interesting is in that peculiar nostalgia you can feel for the glory days of ‘living in the now’ that you didn’t ... actually ... *live* through” (2011, p xxix).<sup>9</sup> So unlike the typical pattern of nostalgia and retro trends as informed by the twenty-year rule of generational change for youth audiences, the 2000s demonstrated the broadest potential for a multiplicity of retro trends emerging at once.

One such trend of course relates to the rock music of the 1960s and early 1970s which has provided a particularly strong influence in contemporary rock music of recent times. In discussing which eras and musical styles may be most favoured through retromania, Reynolds

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<sup>9</sup> This formation of nostalgia will be discussed in Chapter 3.

notes that “punk and the rock’n’roll fifties both stir feelings of this kind, but the Swinging Sixties beats all comers when it comes to triggering vicarious nostalgia” (2011, p xxix). Bennett (2009) likewise acknowledges the influence of the rock music of this era as it is rediscovered and adopted by contemporary youth audiences.

One of the clearest instances of this kind of adoration for the 1960s emerging in popular music during the last decade of ‘retromania’ was the garage rock revival. Coinciding with the dawn of the new millennium, the face of popular rock music experienced a dramatic stylistic shift. Following on from widespread industry hype from the likes of trendsetting popular music magazine the *New Musical Express* (NME), New York band, the Strokes, released their debut album *Is This It* (2001) to worldwide critical acclaim. Characterized by a decidedly lo-fi production value (that is, a recording aesthetic resulting in lower than average sound quality), the album featured short, straightforward and immediately catchy compositions within the bounds of traditional rock song structures. This retro aesthetic favoured by the Strokes was seen by critics and commentators as a welcome change of direction in rock music following on from a perceived popular musical abyss of over-commercialisation in the late 1990s.<sup>10</sup> As one British music blogger noted: “The Strokes and their debut album gave the UK's music scene a much needed kick up the arse, mired as we were in nu-metal, R&B and post-Radiohead bedwetting guitar pop” (Craw, 2006). Richard Kingsmill, the iconic music director of Australia’s national youth broadcaster, Triple J, has similarly reflected on the emergence of the Strokes as having “helped tear down the dreadful overproduction of the late '90s rap/rock world” (2010). Kingsmill pointed out that their signature song, ‘Last Nite’, “ironically sounded like the future in its retro ways” (2010). As paradoxical as this might seem, that is precisely what happened as the Strokes were the first in a succession of artists in the last decade to popularize an aesthetic return to classic rock.

Referred to as a ‘garage rock revival’ by the music press (for its similarity in approach to the raw and seemingly amateurish ‘garage rock’ genre originating in America in the mid-

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<sup>10</sup> The question of what constitutes a retro aesthetic will be considered in Section II.

1960s), a number of key artists such as the White Stripes in the United States, the Vines in Australia and the Hives in Sweden emerged as part of this trend. Considering the diverse geographic origins of these artists and their significantly different approaches to rock music, the only real similarity that bound these “saviours of rock” together was their “strong retro feel” and their mastery of “the existing methods for recreating different variations of a compelling rock sound” (Moore, 2010, p195). The whitened blues music of the White Stripes, for example, is in many ways far removed from the visceral garage punk rock of the Hives, and yet there is an underlying retro sensibility, not only in terms of minimal production value and a primitive sound palette, but an immediacy and forthrightness in common with the seminal rock music of the 1960s and 70s (Sanden, 2013, p66). As *Rolling Stone* music journalist Rob Scheffield put it at the time: “In truth none of these bands really has much in common with one another, but they all get lumped together because they show how rock fans across the world are starved for some excitement and adrenaline, punk-rock style” (2002, pp58-59). This sentiment is backed up by Craig Nicholls, the lead singer and guitarist of the Vines who conceded “we’re glad to be part of it, with bands like the Strokes and the White Stripes. I don’t think it’s a movement. It’s just real rock music” (Scheffield, 2002, p60).

This marked return of ‘real rock music’ was the defining characteristic of a number of subsequent retro rock bands from around the world who came to prominence in the early to mid-2000s in both underground and commercial rock music circles. Artists such as Jet and Wolfmother from Australia, the 5.6.7.8’s from Japan, the Libertines from the UK and Black Rebel Motorcycle Club from the US (among many others) acquired international notoriety composing, recording and performing music reminiscent of a range of classic rock influences from the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to Pink Floyd and the Velvet Underground. While some of these groups are no longer active and the ‘garage rock revival’ itself in that particular incarnation may be over, its ethos and a number of its defining characteristics have carried through into contemporary retro rock practices, and help differentiate contemporary retro rock from more traditional forms of revivalism in rock music.

## 2.5 THE PRESENT STATE OF THE PAST IN CONTEMPORARY RETRO ROCK

*I've never seen the arrow of time fly so slow*

- Tame Impala, 'The Bold Arrow of Time'  
(2010)

Contemporary retro rock has emerged in the last decade as a form of retro rock music contextually bound by its ties to the present and to the past. The three main characteristics of contemporary retro rock music as it is understood for the purposes of this study pertain to its *temporal displacement from lived experience*, its *fascination with and use of the conventions of canonical rock music of the 1960s and early 1970s*, especially as expressed through *remarkable similarities to source material and/or period aesthetics* across its various modes of composition, sound production, instrumentation, performance, album cover design and so forth. Before introducing the three contemporary retro rock artists whose music and practices form the content to be analysed in this study, I would like to elaborate on some of these defining traits common to all of them.

Firstly, returning to notions of temporality and lived experience as mentioned earlier, a defining feature of both the garage rock revival and of contemporary retro rock music more broadly, which differentiates these trends from past revivals in rock, is the larger passage of time between the original era and its revival. Unlike the pattern of retro twin decades, the temporal origins of this retro rock trend fall outside the lived experience of the current youth generation of musicians and audiences. Standing apart from the revival of 1950s doo-wop music in the 1970s for example, or the success of the *Happy Days* television show in the same era which were at least in part linked with nostalgic sentiment derived from lived childhood and adolescent experiences, the current rock revival appeals to a nostalgic sentiment in the current generation of listeners and performers where there is no *lived* experience to draw upon (Moore, 2010, p163). The dominance of this retro aesthetic which produces and feeds upon nostalgic sentiment, regardless of its origins, has been such that its ethos has become ingrained in contemporary rock music culture, coinciding with a wider popular culture aesthetic of retro. As

Moore has observed: “Specific trends recycled from different eras will inevitably come and go, but the retro sensibility now appears to be a permanent fixture in popular culture, and youth culture in particular” (2010, p195).

In light of this disconnect from lived experience, contemporary retro rock music is also defined by the contemporary cultural and technological context which aids its typically fastidious resemblances to the music and paratextual material of the 1960s and early 1970s. Contemporary retro rock is one of the most prominent examples of a retro revival that has taken place in the drastically altered media landscape of the twenty-first century. The rise of digital archivalism, or at least its proliferation and widespread visibility courtesy of the Internet through the relative ease and access of .mp3 downloads, streaming audio, YouTube video uploading and so forth, has made for a densely populated cultural library and annotated history of the collective memory of popular music of the twentieth century. Reynolds considers that the abundance of “audio recordings and other types of documentation (photographic, video) not only provide[s] retro with its raw materials, they also create the sensibility, based as it is on obsessive repeat-play of particular artifacts [sic] and focused listening that zooms in on minute stylistic details” (2011, p xxxv). Contemporary retro rock music is notable for this attention to detail where specific aesthetic traits of 1960s rock music recordings, performances and album covers, for example, can be mimicked and adapted in the creation of ‘new old’ music. In particular, advances in recording technology have also facilitated a refined synergy between original source material and contemporary retro rock music. Indeed, as Guesdon & Le Guern note:

From a technological point of view, the growing number of hardware or software solutions allowing the capture and remastering of sound fragments, as well as studio filters digitally recreating the sound of instruments or old amps, facilitates the reproduction of a sound marker calling to mind a specific era or style. (2014, p70)

As such, where earlier revival trends may have faced barriers in attaining period correct recording equipment such as amplifiers, instruments, analogue tape, effects and microphones in

order to effect an 'authentic' recording, there are now affordable and accessible digital recording options available which approximate these conditions and sound elements.

Further to this contemporary technological context, contemporary retro rock music also occurs within a broader context pertaining to the ways in which prevailing attitudes towards rock music of the 1960s and early 1970s have become ingrained in our current cultural heritage. Bennett (2009) sees the discourse of 'heritage rock' as playing a significant role in the ways in which contemporary popular music is produced and consumed, and this certainly aligns with the influence of 1960s and early 1970s rock music in contemporary retro rock music. Facilitated by critical reflection in popular music media such as magazines, television and film, through recreationist performance practices such as 'Classic Albums Live' as well as through music industry practices of re-issuing albums, Bennett argues that there has been a "collective re-classification of rock" by the baby-boomer generation "from the music of their youth to a fundamental aspect of late 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural heritage" (2009, p478). In addition to this sway of 'institutional power' from the baby-boomer generation, Reynolds also suggests that the appeal of this past era for contemporary youth audiences has much to do with its aesthetic appeal to a perceived authenticity of experience:

Ironically, it's the absence of revivalism and nostalgia during the sixties itself that partly accounts for why there have been endless sixties revivals ever since. Part of the period's attraction is its spirit of total immersion in the present. (2011, p xxix)

Indeed, the default viewpoint towards the 1960s in the present day is often presented as not only nostalgic, but positively idealistic. Bennett argues that this is due in part to the "tendency to romanticize the extent of the social and political activism deemed to have characterised the decade," such that the era is retroactively constructed as a 'golden age' of cultural significance and legitimacy, setting the bar by which other generations, including the present youth generation, are measured (2001, pp155-156).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The function of nostalgia and collective memory for the past in evaluating the present is considered in more detail in Chapter 3.

While the primary focus of this thesis is on the mechanics of contemporary retro rock music as a cultural grammar of itself more so than the function of why the 1960s is so heavily focused on in present day popular culture, these broader ideas discussed above no doubt play a role in the formation of the milieu in which contemporary retro rock music is practiced and negotiated, and some further consideration will be given to these ideas as they arise with regard to discourse practices in the scenic talk of contemporary retro rock in Chapter 8. However for our current purposes, I merely seek to acknowledge the defining significance of 1960s and early 1970s rock music in providing the structural and aesthetic framework upon which contemporary retro rock music is based.

It is within this framework that I now introduce the three Australian contemporary retro rock artists who we will return to throughout Section II – Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield. While each of these artists share in common aspects that fall within the bounds of contemporary retro rock as just discussed, each group works within different subgenres and stylistic elements of 1960s and early 1970s rock music in their own music. Tame Impala for example play psychedelic rock music akin to 1960s artists Cream and the Jimi Hendrix Experience with elements of the Beatles and Pink Floyd, while the Frowning Clouds draw their influences largely from American garage rock and British Invasion era rock music of the early to mid-1960s, and Stonefield differ from both of these artists again as their music is modelled more on the blues and hard rock elements of late 1960s and early 1970s rock artists such as Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and the Doors.

Each of these contemporary retro rock groups are at different stages in their careers, but all feature members aged in their teens and twenties with each band forming in the wake of the garage rock revival of the early to mid-2000s. Tame Impala formed in Perth, Western Australia in 2007 and, following in the footsteps of other notable Australian retro rock bands who have found international recognition in the last decade, have already in their short career gained global critical acclaim and commercial success. Their debut album *Innerspeaker* (2010) entered the national album charts in the number four position (Australian Record Industry Association,

2010), while their second album *Lonerism* (2012) was well-received critically and appeared in the top position of many end of year critics' and reader polls of many international music publications, as well as garnering album of the year accolades at the 2013 ARIA Awards and a nomination in the same year at the Grammy Awards for Best Alternative Music Album (Mess+Noise, 2013). With a third album slated for release in 2015, and having already toured extensively locally and overseas, their career thus far suggests that their fame may well surpass previous Australian retro artists the Vines, Jet and Wolfmother who found similar success on the back of the growing retro trend of the last decade.

While not as commercially successful or internationally recognizable as Tame Impala, the two other contemporary retro rock artists featured in this study, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield, are both from Victoria. The Frowning Clouds, named after a Moody Blues lyric, have also toured locally in Australia as well as overseas in Europe. They have released three albums – *Listen Closelier* (2010), *Whereabouts* (2013) and *Legalize Everything* (2014) – as well as a number of singles and EPs which feature their often-straightforward R&B and beat music style recordings which adhere strongly to the sonic markers of early to mid-1960s rock music, an encompassing characteristic of their music. And lastly, Stonefield, who are comprised of four sisters, have been active since 2006. They were notably 'unearthed' in a national 'Unearthed High' competition by the Australian national youth broadcaster *Triple J* in 2010, before being invited to perform at the Glastonbury Festival in England in the same year. They have since released two EPs and most recently their eponymous debut album in 2013.

Without going in to too much detail about how these artists are understood and interpreted in relation to the criteria of contemporary retro rock music introduced above, even just a cursory sampling of the critical writing in the music media pertaining to these artists demonstrates the broad awareness of these fundamental characteristics. So firstly, similar to the frame in which the garage rock revival had been represented in the music media, all of these contemporary retro rock artists are also commonly interpreted with relation to the past music they allude to, the collective memory of the 1960s as a cultural touchstone and the canonical

rock artists associated with that time. This can be seen in an *NME* review of Tame Impala's *Innerspeaker* for example, where the music is firmly situated amongst "the days when men were men, women were girl-groups, and life revolved around expanding your dome via the classic power-trio psychedelic blues rock acts like Cream and the Jimi Hendrix Experience" (Haynes, 2010). Likewise, the recognition of the often overt references to 1960s and early 1970s rock music conventions is also typically alluded to, as with this review of *Stonefield*: "The influence of the likes of Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix and Deep Purple on the four sisters from country Victoria is easy to hear, but adhering so tightly to the conventions of the genre has resulted in something of a mixed bag" (Costello, 2013). The Frowning Clouds too are presented and understood with relation to their influences, but also in this instance the characteristic attention to detail with which contemporary retro rock artists affect a 1960s feel is also focused on:

From damp reverb to matter-of-fact harmonies, the Frowning Clouds nail every detail of vintage '60s rock. It's all here: the splintered solos, wobbly rhythm section, conversational lyrics and song titles built on personal pronouns. That's what happens when a handful of Geelong teens model their band on old Stones records. (Wallen, 2010)

In addition, the underlying temporal feature of contemporary retro rock as to its unusual relationship between past influences and present day enactment is also a recognizable aspect of the music, as shown here in a review of Tame Impala from the popular online music publication *Pitchfork Media* where the music is seen to be grounded in the present despite the fact that the influences clearly originate in the past:

It's difficult to be so plugged-in to a vintage feel without the music seeming time-capsuled, but the band's vibrance [sic] help these songs sound very much alive. Tame Impala aren't taking a purely revisionist approach -- you aren't left with a feeling that their intention was [to] recreate some lost Love demo or a Jimi Hendrix Experience deep cut. (Kelly, 2010)

And yet regardless of what stance is taken by the music media as to the contemporary or past positioning of these contemporary retro rock artists' music, what surfaces as being so imperative to its reception is that the music consistently *evokes* the music of the past. And it is this effect in which the feeling of the past is induced through the medium of present music

which is at the centre of contemporary retro rock music. For the current youth generation of rock enthusiasts who find themselves invested in retro rock music culture – whether as musicians or audiences – the spectre of rock’s past always seems to be looming in the ‘now’. But what is the nature of this relationship with the past that is being sought out in the present through this music? And with no basis in lived experience, how exactly is past-ness being created and communicated by the contemporary youth generation through the medium of contemporary retro rock music? A young music journalist has poignantly observed the absurdity at the heart of this familiarity: “We’re constantly being reminded that if you can remember the ’60s you weren’t there, and this applies most incisively to people born in the 1980s and beyond. Not only do we remember – we can’t forget” (Prescott, 2010).

It is this act of remembering and reliving something for which there is no basis in lived experience, this vicarious nostalgia, which I will turn to in the next chapter.

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has provided a brief historical and cultural context for the study of contemporary retro rock music by elucidating the emergence of rock music from its origins as rock and roll through to its first major retro revival. Further to this, the 1970s rock and roll revival, which was the first widespread rock revival in popular music, demonstrated the varying approaches to retro rock as a way of either reinventing the past, or indeed as a way of drawing personal continuity between the past and the present. This was then contrasted with the garage rock revival of the 2000s, a more recent example of a retro revival trend in contemporary popular music, before then turning to contemporary retro rock music which emerged from the garage rock revival. In addition to framing and exploring some of the defining characteristics of contemporary retro rock music, the chapter concluded with an introduction of the three artists whose music forms the main content for analysis in Section II of this thesis.

### 3 NOSTALGIA AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

*No. Nostalgia, as his Uncle Joshua had said, ain't what it used to be. Which made it pretty complete. Nothing was what it used to be – not even nostalgia.*

- Peter De Vries, *The Tents of Wickedness* (1959)

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In many ways the garage rock revival and ensuing contemporary retro rock music can be seen as a significant manifestation of nostalgic tendencies in youth audiences. As such, it is important to consider where this phenomenon fits in within established perceptions of nostalgia, and how negotiating a past unlived in the present day might challenge the traditional way in which nostalgia is understood. Ordinarily, nostalgia is considered to be a feeling of wistful longing for an earlier time in one's life, and is thus drawn from earlier personal experience. In this way Davis has suggested that "the past which is the object of nostalgia must in some fashion be a personally experienced past rather than one drawn solely, for example, from chronicles, almanacs, history books, memorial tablets, or, for that matter, legend" (1979, p8). By this criterion then, the phenomenon of nostalgia temporally displaced outside of lived experience does not even qualify as nostalgia in this narrow reading. And yet the hallmarks of nostalgic sentiment are evinced throughout contemporary retro rock music – especially in the favouring of an idealized past style in opposition to a negatively viewed ('commercialized' and 'overproduced') present, as well as in the painstaking efforts taken to revert to past methods in the recreation of a past aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> To dismiss outright the role of nostalgia within this process would be to disregard one of the most potentially significant factors of the whole contemporary retro rock phenomenon on a technicality. Instead, consideration should be given to where this

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<sup>12</sup> These practices will be considered at length in Section II of this thesis.

mode of temporally displaced nostalgia might fit in with the changing face of nostalgia – itself having undergone extensive transformation over the course of a number of centuries.

This chapter begins by reflecting on the origins of nostalgia and its evolution from an emotion of longing based on spatial distance to one based on temporal distance. In light of this changing delineation of nostalgia over time, consideration will also be given to this latest formulation of nostalgia, *vicarious nostalgia*, which evinces a longing for a past outside of lived experience. I then turn to an examination of how nostalgia may serve various cultural functions, introducing Boym's (2001) two key nostalgia types, *restorative* and *reflective nostalgia*, which will have a bearing on the kinds of nostalgic tendencies evinced in contemporary retro rock music as explored in the Section II of this thesis. Following this, the focus of the chapter will be on the role of nostalgia in popular music. Firstly I will distinguish between how music can be used either as a trigger for the more traditional form of nostalgia for personally lived experiences, or indeed how the aesthetic codes of music may function to create a *sensibility* of nostalgia in new music. The chapter then concludes with some consideration of how nostalgia has been treated in popular music studies more broadly, and how vicarious nostalgia in contemporary retro rock music might be viewed differently.

### **3.2 THE CHANGING FACE OF NOSTALGIA**

While nostalgia has come to be regarded, especially in the last century, as a social condition, it was first identified as a medical condition. Dating back to 1688, Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer coined the term when seeking to identify soldiers' feelings of longing for their homeland whilst serving abroad as a medical diagnosis (Starobinski, 1966, p84). Similar to previous medical extrapolations on the effects of melancholic love induced by the loss of a lover, this new phenomenon of melancholia induced by separation from one's homeland was likewise extended beyond the realms of a purely emotional state to being characterized as a

mental disorder with physical symptoms of such severity that both body and mind were said to be incapacitated as a result (Starobinski, 1966, p84). The etymology of the word ‘nostalgia’ was thus constructed in such a way as to reflect this portrayal of the phenomenon as a disease. As was the classical form with which most medical diseases had been named up to and during the eighteenth century, Hofer was able to combine the Greek words *nostos* (to return home) and *algia* (pain/ache) to form *nostalgia*.

In hindsight, the translation of a feeling of homesickness into pronounced physical ailments seems an exaggerated notion, especially compared to the modern understanding of nostalgia as a mere feeling of wistfulness for the past; and indeed over time the credibility of nostalgia as a disease waned. By the late nineteenth century, long after debates over the veracity of the medical condition had been played out and disregarded,<sup>13</sup> the term nostalgia had instead become firmly entrenched in its metaphorical application – as an expression of homesickness for the past now lost (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p922). Importantly, this metaphorical transformation had resulted in a significant change in configuration. Whereas nostalgia was originally focused on *spatial* dislocation, it developed into a sensation of *temporal* dislocation, especially formulated through a contrast between negative feelings for a present situation and favourable reminiscences of the past (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p922). Of course notions of ‘home’ and ‘homesickness’ towards a spatial entity could still be applied to nostalgia, but increasingly ‘home’ became less and less a question of one’s original surroundings as much as it was a reference to a particular sensation of belonging – of feeling ‘at home’ – generally situated in the past.

It is no coincidence that nostalgia’s shift towards temporal dislocation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries directly corresponded with changing perceptions of home and time. In addition to the “diminished existential salience of ‘home’ in its concrete locational sense” (Davis, 1979, p6), the arrival of modernisation during this period heralded an

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<sup>13</sup> The circumstances surrounding the origins of nostalgia as a medical condition and its eventual demise in this field in the face of changing scientific discoveries in pathological anatomy and bacteriology are discussed at length in Starobinski (1966).

“increased intensity of people’s longing for the slower rhythms of the past, for continuity, social cohesion and tradition” (Boym, 2001, p16). Time was thus conceived of in modernity as a series of lived fragments, the accelerated pace of change “contributing to the fragmentation of experience” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p924). It is within this climate that a “nostalgia-borne dialectic of the search for continuity amid threats of discontinuity” is said to have emerged (Davis, 1979, p35). Nostalgia is in this way formulated as a reaction to perceived threats to established stability, characteristically invigorated by periods of uncertainty, transition and social upheaval. Considering then the drastic transformation of the usage and understanding of nostalgia in response to changing social circumstances around the turn of the nineteenth century and beyond, it is not only possible to begin to see how fluid a notion as ‘nostalgia’ can be, but also that with continued social and cultural change, the usage of nostalgia could be further extended and revised.

Indeed nostalgia for a time that falls outside of lived experience represents a more recent extension to nostalgic usage. Having gained traction as its own significant cultural mode of nostalgia in the later part of the twentieth century (Chase & Shaw, 1989; Baker & Kennedy, 1994), this proclivity for nostalgia un-lived has become slowly accepted in broader and more relaxed definitions of nostalgia, such as this one posited by Holbrook and Schindler (1991):

*a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood, or even before birth), (p330)*

with the final words “or even before birth” of course highlighting the breadth of nostalgic usage to encompass the recent past. However despite the gradual espousal of this mode of nostalgia un-lived, Davis (1979) was already hinting at this capacity for nostalgia in his earlier treatise on the sociological aspects of nostalgia. He considered, for example, that nostalgia could in time take on “connotations that extend its meaning to *any* sort of positive feeling towards *anything* past, no matter how remote or historical” (Davis, 1979, p8). He even introduced ideas about how nostalgia had come to be derived through manufactured processes instead of through

personal recollection. Using an easily discernible example of manufactured nostalgic sentiment, Davis points to recreations of small-town America at the turn of the previous century in Disneyland and Disney World that suggest “anew, symbolically and by indirection, how much the sources of collective nostalgia are to be found in the present and not the past” (1979, p121). Through this example, Davis shows that firsthand lived experience has increasingly become of less importance in eliciting a nostalgic reaction where the gaps in our personal memory of the past are filled by the myths of the mass media:

That few of us are old enough to have experienced those days at first hand is of little account ... even though we may not have lived then, we feel – because of the movies we have seen, the stories we have read, the radio serials we’ve listened to – “as if we had.” This, incidentally, is a nice ... instance of a created, secondhand reality (a romanticized *version* of a slightly earlier historical reality) practically acquiring the same nostalgic status as something experienced firsthand in our very own lives. (1979, p121)

In this way nostalgia can be manufactured in the present without a factual recourse to a lived past. Indeed it is enough to appeal to our sense of history to evoke a nostalgic reaction, even if we have no actual experience with this history. Davis argues that this works most effectively when the original era is a comparatively recent past. This is largely because the artefacts that survive a more recent past era are still recognizable to us. So unlike the recreation of a, say, medieval past which would be altogether dissimilar from our present world, the recreation of a more recent past is granted “a certain subjective credibility by virtue of the reminiscences we have heard from parents and grandparents, the popular songs of the period that are still sung,” as well as through other pieces of documentary evidence like photos and mementos which survive today and are “visually and evocatively recognizable” in the present (Davis, 1979, pp122-123). When applying this idea to the contemporary recreation of rock music from decades past, much of the same reasoning applies. The 1960s as an era, for example, is a relatively recent past with its markers and artefacts (instruments, recordings, album covers, etc.) still familiar to us today and relatively easily attainable, so much so that it would not be inconceivable to project our nostalgia back that far with the aid of a mediated archival history to fill any gaps in our memory.

So as with the dramatic societal shifts experienced around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century that led to the changing focus of nostalgia from a question of spatial dislocation to one of temporal displacement, this newest form of nostalgia can again be related to changing social and cultural conditions. To this end, Davis has posited that the “changing topography of nostalgia” is closely related to a heightened increase in the role of the mass media which resulted in the subsequent blurring of the lines between *collective* and *private* memory (1979, p125). For Davis, the distinction between *collective* and *private* nostalgia is one based upon the nature of the symbolic object that inspires nostalgic sentiment. Collective nostalgia is the condition where “symbolic objects are of a highly public, widely shared, and familiar character,” and when presented in the proper conditions, “can trigger wave upon wave of nostalgic feeling in millions of persons at the same time” (Davis, 1979, pp112-3). Private nostalgia on the other hand “refers to those symbolic images and allusions from the past that by virtue of their source in a particular person’s biography tend to be more idiosyncratic, individuated, and particularistic in their reference” (Davis, 1979, p123). Where nostalgia was once largely based upon private experience – specific interactions with people, places and events etc. – Davis suggests that there is now a higher influence of media creations of nostalgia in addition to those personally experienced interactions. That is, the mass media plays more of a role in our “mental lives” now than it could possibly have done in the “pre-mass communications era” (Davis, 1979, p127). Therefore the kind of nostalgia we experience now is becoming increasingly rooted in the collective rather than the personal. So instead of merely being nostalgic for specific personal remembrances shared only by the individual and perhaps a few others, it is evermore possible now to experience a collective nostalgia for old TV shows and records, for example – the feelings derived from these objects are likely to be shared by many others.

While this is not to say that a personal memory cannot be attached to a commonly available past object of nostalgia, Davis *is* suggesting that there exists a symbolic cultural shift away from the personal and private to the communal and public. Significantly for Guffey (2006)

however, this emerging dominance of the communal over the personal in nostalgic content does not alter the potency of either as she considers that nostalgia, “whether private or collective, bears one point in common: it is always characterized by a certain seriousness” (p20). Nostalgia then, once thought to be a purely personal feeling, can now also be meaningfully shared by the collective, and as such can be shaped and defined en masse without recourse to individual experience.

This shift in nostalgic perception and its capacity to be manipulated is taken to its limits with merchandising and marketing strategies that seek to inculcate nostalgia. Appadurai (1996) points to the way in which such strategies have the effect of implanting a sense of longing within consumers for things which they had never really missed because they had never had them in the first place. For example, gift-order catalogues in the United States that manufacture nostalgia for bygone lifestyles, landscapes and scenes appeal not so much to the sentiment of consumers who have genuinely lost these things, but rather, work to teach “consumers to miss things they have never lost” (Appadurai, 1996, pp76-77). What this amounts to is a type of ready-made nostalgia that can be derived without the hard work of acquiring memories or experience from which to draw one’s own nostalgia from. So “rather than expecting the consumer to supply memories while the merchandiser supplies the lubricant of nostalgia, now the viewer need only bring the faculty of nostalgia to an image that will supply the memory of a loss he or she has never suffered” (Appadurai, 1996, p78). This “nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory” has been coined *ersatz nostalgia* by Appadurai, and is interchangeably referred to as ‘armchair nostalgia’ and ‘imagined nostalgia’ (1996, pp77-78).

While *ersatz nostalgia* in Appadurai’s formulation does mirror some aspects of how youth producers and audiences may nostalgically create and perceive contemporary retro rock music in terms of the absence of lived experience, it also suggests a level of disengagement with the *collective historical memory*. In this sense *ersatz nostalgia* does not best reflect contemporary retro rock music as a nostalgic practice. Being largely driven by the artefacts of the past era in question *as well* as its perceived connection to the popular conceptions of the past

(whether experienced or not) as understood in the present, contemporary retro rock music is in many ways heavily reliant upon an understanding of the past that appeals to *collective memory*. For Wolfe, Miller and O'Donnell (1999), collective memory can be understood as the remembrances "held in common by a consensus in a group or society, not just by those who may have first-hand experience of the events memorised" (p271). And since the concept of the past in contemporary retro rock music is by necessity reliant upon highly mediated representations of our collective memory of the past, it is ultimately these mediated representations of the 1960s, especially as informed by contemporary heritage discourses, which are likely to evoke that collective memory (Bennett, 2009). This is especially the case with relation to the dominant mythologies surrounding the popular music of the 1960s which help characterize the era as the 'psychedelic sixties' for example – a perception that is borne out "as a public memory shaped not only by the generation that was college-age back then but also by members of other living social groups, such as current college students (Wolfe et al., 1999, p260). As Wolfe, Miller and O'Donnell demonstrate in their study into the enduring popularity of Cream's 'Sunshine of Your Love', this iconic psychedelic rock recording evidences a "lasting capacity to trigger... a shared experience of the collective memory of that time in members of younger social groups" (1992, pp272-273). Similarly then, contemporary retro rock music which draws on iconic recordings and "the signs that constitute the public memory of that time," can be seen to utilize an analogous capacity to trigger similar appeals to a mediated collective memory (Wolfe et al., 1999, p260).<sup>14</sup>

In light of this function of the popular collective memory in contemporary rock music, especially when coupled with its close resemblances to the source material of the 1960s and early 1970s, the most fitting nostalgia type evinced here is that of *vicarious nostalgia*. Goulding (2002) thus considers vicarious nostalgia as that which "deals with nostalgia for a period outside of the individual's living memory" (p542). However more than just this singular characteristic, Goulding also notes that vicarious nostalgia functions in much the same way as more traditional

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<sup>14</sup> As argued in Section II of this thesis.

manifestations of nostalgia insofar as “nostalgia requires a stimulus, or the presence of artefacts, images, or narratives which have a positive association with a particular period” (2002, p542). Indeed, vicarious nostalgic practices in contemporary retro rock music strictly conform to these requirements as the music is unavoidably grounded in the source material of the 1960s and early 1970s, not to mention the discourses and narratives through which the era is understood in the present. Further to this, both Goulding’s (2002) formulation of vicarious nostalgia and its manifestation in contemporary retro rock music through the popular collective memory and source materials from the past are consistent with the observations of other nostalgia theorists regarding the broadening reach of nostalgia as it pertains to unlived experience. Hollbrook and Schindler (1993) argue for example, “that one could identify nostalgically with people, places, or things from a bygone era that one has experienced only through books, films or other narratives” (p103), while Baker and Kennedy (1994) likewise suggest that “one can feel nostalgic or attach a symbolic meaning to an object when, in fact, the person has never experienced the event which the object represents” (p171).

While vicarious nostalgia has received some elucidation in recent decades, especially in academic study pertaining to advertising, it does still remain relatively underexplored as a cultural practice. But even these preliminary studies into vicarious nostalgia in advertising have already gleaned some very useful parallels with its potential enactment through contemporary retro rock music practices. Merchant (2013) for example observes the manner in which vicarious nostalgia can be utilized “to build, detail, and reinforce the heritage” of brands through advertising (p2620). By extension, it is also possible to envision a similar approach being adopted in contemporary retro rock music insofar as it may work to reinforce dominant canonical and heritage rock discourses. In addition to this, what the present study also seeks to investigate is the underlying question of how the “different textures of temporality” that are likely encountered here might be effectively negotiated and understood in the present day (Appadurai, 1996, p78).

### 3.3 THE USES OF NOSTALGIA

*Just because it is now, baby  
Doesn't mean it should be*

- Stonefield, 'Through the Clover' (2010)

Since nostalgia has clearly undergone significant changes in its form and meaning in response to ever-accelerating changes in industry, society and media since the late nineteenth century, what will also need to be verified through the explorations in later chapters is whether some of the fundamental functions and qualities of nostalgia have also changed. Davis has suggested that, “for ever greater numbers of persons in the mass society the *objects* of nostalgia’s exercise have changed, but not the exercise itself” (1979, p130). Although Davis is referring specifically to the way in which media content and representations have increasingly changed the form of the objects to which nostalgic sentiment applies, this statement may indeed correspond to a more general observation about contemporary formulations of nostalgia; namely that even if the things that we are nostalgic for and the manner in which we are nostalgic for them are subject to change, the *sensation* of nostalgia is not necessarily negated by these changes and thus retains similar social and cultural functions. In order to later make an assessment as to whether this is in fact the case, it will be necessary at this point to identify and understand exactly what the established attributes of nostalgia are.

One of the key characteristics of nostalgia is its tendency to be more pronounced during periods of uncertainty (Wilson, 2005, p34). As such, one of its major functions is that it works to bring about a sense of continuity with the past in the face of discontinuity (Davis, 1979, p35). Davis notes that “nostalgia thrives on transition, on the subjective discontinuities that engender our yearning for continuity” (1979, p49). This can be both a personal sense of discontinuity in the present – such as during transitional phases in life from adolescence to adulthood or from working to retirement – as well as in a collective sense during uncertain social climates brought about by any number of social upheavals, political, economic or cultural. Even a “future-

oriented theory of nostalgia” has been posited by Nawas and Platt (1965) where nostalgia is derived from a concern for (or denial of) the future rather than as a reaction to present conditions. The presence of nostalgia then, even where the legitimacy of its sources is questionable, remains in actuality a very useful tool for understanding present conditions and future concerns. Davis asserts that “what occasions us to feel nostalgia must also reside in the present, regardless of how much the ensuing nostalgic experience may draw its sustenance from our memory of the past” (1979, p9). Nostalgia in this way acts as a barometer for present day grievances, forcing us to question what attitudes towards present conditions might motivate the presence of nostalgia. This will inform the investigation into the proclivity for nostalgic sentiment in contemporary retro rock music in later chapters with a view to better understanding the conditions and perceptions that have led to its proliferation.

However while nostalgia is often seen to provide a sense of continuity with the past, and therefore a mediating influence in smoothing over feelings of concern and uncertainty towards the present and future, Boym draws attention to the sensation of nostalgia itself as being a painful one. She contends that despite its many transitions, from medical condition to social condition, from spatial dislocation to temporal displacement, from private memory to collective memory, from its basis in experience to its vicarious form, nostalgia still retains at a fundamental level the *algia* element from its original naming. That is to say, rather than a pain derived from a physical separation from one’s original surroundings as in its original supposition, nostalgia is now primarily an “ache of temporal distance and displacement” (Boym, 2001, p44). For Boym, the original medical diagnosis goes to the heart of how powerful an emotion nostalgia can be in its influence upon the way we perceive and reflect upon the passing of time. Arguably then, the onset of nostalgia and its implicit sense of loss can be for some so consuming that it can be likened to an indefinable ache or pain, and it is through this frame that we might best understand vicarious nostalgic sentiment. Certainly, the sense of loss which often accompanies nostalgia is observable in Chapter 8 where contemporary retro rock artists offer through their scenic talk some consideration for their motivations as musicians.

From Boym's own brief observations on the effects of ersatz nostalgia, it is evident that she deems nostalgia outside of lived experience to be just as painful as, and potentially much more dangerous than traditional nostalgic modes. This is due in no small part to the way in which ersatz nostalgia creates contrived temporal losses which can be so easily and predictably aroused without recourse to an experiential basis. In this regard Boym notes ersatz nostalgia, especially as promoted by the entertainment industry, "makes everything time-sensitive and exploits that temporal deficit by giving a cure that is also a poison," an observation that can likewise be applied to vicarious nostalgia (Boym, 2001, p38).

If we adopt Boym's imagery of nostalgia as a type of ailment, then it would also be necessary to investigate the methods used to 'cure' the condition. To this end Boym herself has devised two predominant nostalgia types using the etymology of the word. The first is *restorative nostalgia* derived from *nostos* – to return home. The tendency with this type is to proactively treat the pain of nostalgic longing by reconstructing the past. It usually involves some elements of ritualizing past customs, serving to provide an authoritative tradition to which continuity with the past can be ascribed (Boym, 2001, p42). In this sense, some contemporary retro rock music practices can be seen as attempts to allay a sense of loss by restoring the conditions of the past such as the adoption of a specific sound palette or the recreation of the design aesthetic of 1960s album cover art.<sup>15</sup> These practices work to mark the bounds of tradition through an authenticity value system within which new music can be made. Restorative nostalgia thus conquers and reformats lost time in the present by establishing a strict and conservative model for nostalgia – "a comforting collective script for individual longing" (Boym, 2001, p42).

The second type identified by Boym is *reflective nostalgia*. Derived from *algia* (pain), the focus here is on the ache of longing (Boym, 2001, p41). So in contrast to restorative nostalgia which attempts to cure nostalgic longing by recreating the circumstances of the past, reflective nostalgia on the other hand is the brand of medicine favoured by the masochist who

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<sup>15</sup> Both of which are examined in Section II.

savours the pain of longing. Rather than repairing the shattered windowpane of the past to recover “what is perceived to be an absolute truth”, the reflective nostalgic will dwell on the broken fragments of time past, “perpetually deferring homecoming itself” (Boym, 2001, p49). And unlike the restorative nostalgic who attempts to create continuity between the past and the present, the reflective nostalgic does not feel this need to reconcile, but thrives on a sense of distance between the then and now, inviting the opportunity for comparison between the two to guide and clarify their nostalgia (Boym, 2001, p50).

While it might be easiest to identify contemporary retro rock music as restorative nostalgic process, in a sense this goal is never strictly attainable. Contemporary retro rock music, lest it become a series of cover versions of past music, involves the creation of *new* old music that necessarily engages with present day conditions, and as such inadvertently crosses over to the domain of reflective nostalgia. Even where it may be argued that it is merely the ‘essence’ of the past that is trying to be recreated, then this is also bound to fail for a number of reasons, not least of which is the problem of restorative practices becoming too focused on the stipulations and restraints of custom and tradition. A palpable concern resulting from this process is the inhibition of the supposedly unhindered artistic expression of the 1960s rock music trying to be recreated. Indeed, whereas “the formal properties of rock-and-roll songs developed in response to concrete historical conditions rather than to a pre-established aesthetic agenda” (Lipsitz, 1990, p116), the obstinate adherence to a formalized tradition and slave-like devotion to a past aesthetic by restorative rock nostalgics in many ways thwarts the validity of the ‘return home’.

Perhaps it is these imbedded defects in the restorative process that makes the music an inherently reflective exercise. Part of the appeal, in fact, might come from the futility of restoration. If retro rock is doomed to fail at ever completely restoring the true essence of the past because time can never truly be regained or relived, then it could be that it ultimately serves to highlight a perpetually deferred return home and therefore satisfies the reflective nostalgia type. Interestingly, retro music which is too closely aligned with its inspirations is often

negatively perceived in critical discourses “in which “shaping influences into something new and exciting” is good, while too much dedication is a “retread” or “unimaginative”” (Harvey, 2010). And this parallels Boym’s observation that it is “the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus question the wholeness and continuity of the restored tradition” that actually “drives restorative nostalgia ... not the sentiment of distance and longing” (2001, pp44-45). Yet it is from this anxiety that their reflective nostalgia is given its voice.

### **3.4 MUSIC AS MEMORATIVE SIGN – MUSIC AS AESTHETIC CODE**

While the functions of nostalgia discussed above will be returned to in the later delineation of how these motivations figure in contemporary retro rock music, what must also be considered is the way in which the specific relationship between nostalgia and music has previously been treated. I will therefore in this section examine how nostalgia is evoked in other genres and how other researchers have explored nostalgia in relation to music so as to position the current study within an established body of work. The first focus will be on how retro and nostalgic music can either trigger nostalgia for lived experience or utilize aesthetic codes to create a sensibility of nostalgia even without basis in lived experience as with vicarious nostalgia. This will then lead into an overview of other studies into the relationship between nostalgia and popular music.

Music has been intertwined with nostalgia since the time of its medical formulation where certain types of music were seen to be able to provoke the affliction. For example the singing of traditional Swiss melodies was said to have been banned altogether in the eighteenth century by officers in the Swiss Army for fear that it might “revive [the] sad recollections of their native land” and stir a bout of nostalgia (Starobinski, 1966, p90). In accounting for this curious side-effect of music in his *Dictionary of Music*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau conceived of an

extra musical dimension where “the music does not ... act precisely as music, but as a memorative sign” (Rousseau in Starobinski, 1966, p92). Certainly this is the case in firsthand nostalgia where the music itself is a fragment of the past that can be vivified in the present, sparking any number of memories and along with them a feeling of nostalgia. This explains why music in its original context can be completely isolated from nostalgic sentiment while twenty years later it might come to epitomize nostalgia. To illustrate this, Davis provides the example of “tinny victrola-squelched jazz band sounds of the twenties, which for a long time signified the tawdry and dissolute, [but] since World War II have come more and more to serve ... as the signature of nostalgia” (1979, p88). But this is just one in a multitude of musical examples in popular culture where particular types of music develop into “memorative sign” with the passing of time. Taylor’s (2009) study of the ‘oldies circuit’, for example, in which doo-wop groups from the 1950s perform to American audiences (the demographic of which is largely made up of baby-boomers), evidences this nostalgic transformation where the performance of past music in the present results in “a complicated mixture of nostalgia for times past and a lost youth” (p95).

While nostalgia of this type (especially in its appeal to lost youth) is often considered to be most prevalent in older generations (Davis, 1979, p71), it is also important to realize that youth generations also experience bouts of nostalgia reflecting the tastes of their childhood and adolescence in young adulthood. As discussed in the previous chapter, this nostalgic tendency in youth generations has been gaining momentum since the early 1970s with the revival of fifties “greaser culture” and along with it a renewed interest in ‘golden oldies’ music (Moore, 2010, p163). One could also point to the continuation of this tendency in music over time with the adoption of “the look, names and instruments” of “pre-*Sgt Pepper*” rock music in late 1970s new-wave rock music, (Covach, 2003, p174) and the ‘G-funk’ trend in 1990s hip hop which featured “beats and riffs sampled from 1970s funk music” (Moore, 2010, p164). In what has proved to be a recurring pattern, Reynolds (2010) and Schuftan (2009) have identified the first decade of the new millennium as rife with a 1980s revival – especially with the musical styles

of synth-pop and post-punk that came to prominence during that time. This has led to Reynolds' observation that every decade seems to have its "retro twin".

However as previously noted in Chapter 2, the contemporary retro rock trend does not fit in with this 'retro twin' pattern. Whereas the synth and electro pop revival of the last decade is grounded in childhood memories of 1980s popular music, there is no comparable memory basis for the 1960s in contemporary retro rock. And yet both trends elicit a type of nostalgic reaction. An important difference then between these two revivals is that retro rock for the 1960s is far more reliant upon an "aesthetic code" of nostalgia (Davis, 1979, p82), rather than explicit *memorative signs* of firsthand nostalgia. To use an example from another artistic discipline, films employ an aesthetic code of nostalgia such as the use of black and white or the contrasting sepia-tone colour scheme as seen in *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005) and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) respectively. In these films a sense of age is created without necessarily drawing on lived experience of the time that is being portrayed – in its place we have been conditioned to know that black and white signals the past. Film, music and other artistic objects are therefore not just artefacts of past memory, but are also in themselves "a distinctive aesthetic modality in [their] own right, a kind of code or patterning of symbolic elements, which ... serve[s] as a substitute for the feeling or mood it aims to arouse" (Davis, 1979, p73). In this sense a painter is able to combine certain elements of design, colour and content to deliberately induce nostalgic sentiment in the same way a musician might utilize a certain scale or chord structure in a composition which is known to have nostalgic implications for its audience. In such instances the use of this "culturally crystallized" and "symbolically transmuted" aesthetic makes nostalgia "as much a device of art as an effect of its existence" (Davis, 1979, p74).

Further extending this idea where a composer is able to deliberately evoke nostalgia through the formal structures of music, then it would also be possible for musicians to evoke nostalgic sentiment through other musical elements such as sound composition – that is, particular combinations of instruments and production techniques. This process will of course

be considered at length in the upcoming chapter on composition and sound in contemporary retro rock recordings. For our current purposes though it is sufficient to merely recognize the different manner in which traditional nostalgic emotion based on experience is evoked through music as distinct from the role of aesthetic codes in music which evoke nostalgia without specific recourse to personal history or experience.

### **3.5 INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES**

In this remaining part of the chapter the aim is to better ground the current research by positioning it in relation to other studies where popular music intersects with vicarious nostalgic practices. Focusing on a range of examples which are centred on different genres and geographical circumstances – bhangra remix music, northern soul, rave music in the San Francisco Bay area and hauntology in electronic music – they each provide insight into how to view the role of aesthetic codes and other cultural influences in the expression of nostalgia through music.

Maira's (2002; 2005) conceptualization of nostalgically based bhangra remix music within second-generation Indian-American youth culture demonstrates a culturally constructed example of vicarious nostalgia. Formed around the dislocation of space and time brought about by being forced to share two conflicting cultures in a diasporic community, Indian-American youth are able to form a hybrid bhangra remix music by blending traditional bhangra music with contemporary hip hop influences. Maira (2002) views this as an attempt to reconcile a cultural history which they have not experienced firsthand but feel obligated to maintain, with the demands of being a young adult engaging with a dominant cultural heritage. Although the study is predominantly a subcultural examination of hybrid race identity in diasporic communities,

this particular formulation of nostalgia and its subsequent expression in music gleans an interesting perspective into the study of nostalgia in contemporary retro rock music.

Maira sees the production of nostalgia in Indian-American youth culture as “predicated on *absence*, a cultural anchor that is both missing and missed, and on the assumption of an earlier time of cultural wholeness that is now at risk of fragmentation, if not dissolution” (2005, pp202-3). It is this fear of fragmentation and the perceived absence of an assumed stability through cultural wholeness which is the impetus that drives nostalgic practices of recreation in both bhangra remix music and contemporary retro rock music, and yet both rely on constructions of absence to inform their nostalgic sentiment and recreations. For second-generation Indian-American youths, their nostalgic vision of their heritage is framed by “the selective importing of culture from the sub-continent ... driven by the frozen furrows of memory and the politics of nostalgia, with immigrants harking back to the India they left a few decades ago, or to a mythical land of spirituality, ‘good values,’ and unchanging traditions” (Maira, 2005, p202). This skewed cultural memory inherited from their immigrant parents thus forms an inaccurate picture and already deeply nostalgic snapshot of the past to which is applied another layer of nostalgia by the second-generation of Indian-Americans who have no direct experience with India and its history with which to reference these cultural memories. Maira’s study thus raises questions as to the validity of notions of authenticity and the manner in which they are constructed which can similarly be asked with regard to the mediated cultural history of rock music and the 1960s (already steeped in nostalgia) that is further propagated by restorative nostalgic practices in new music.

An additional parallel between bhangra remix music and contemporary retro rock music, however, can be drawn between the role of older generations – often parents and grandparents – who play an important role in instilling cultural and aesthetic values through the ‘traditional’ music of their generation. Bennett (2010) notes for example this potential influence in the current youth generation who are drawn to the rock music of the late 1960s and early 1970s:

Those who spent their youth as hippies, punks, ravers, and so on now have children – and in many cases – grandchildren of their own. As such, instances of musical taste being handed down from parents to children is increasingly common. (p262)

And certainly this exposure to established musical taste helps inform the ongoing popular collective memory which in turn informs contemporary retro rock music. A likely point of difference however between bhangra remix music and retro rock music is the way in which both of these musical styles treat the problems implicit with trying to introduce a past aesthetic value in the present day. While certainly an ongoing negotiation, bhangra remix music does seem to strike a balance between opposing musical and cultural influences of the present and past by *openly* creating a hybrid music that seeks to satisfy both of these pressures. Contemporary retro rock music, while also necessarily needing to balance conflicting temporalities of past and present, typically does so through a more implicit set of sign practices not always comfortably embraced by its stakeholders, especially in relation to underlying authenticity values pervasive in the music.<sup>16</sup>

A similar temporal discomfort is in fact characteristic of the contemporary northern soul music scene, which evinces a strong resistance to the present which leads to the construction of authenticity and exclusivity that help to define the scene. A club scene originating in the North and Midlands of Britain which centres on an exclusive canon of rare American soul records from the 1960s and 70s, northern soul focuses in particular on the largely forgotten and initially unsuccessful music within this genre and period. This unfashionable fascination with the music of a bygone era exists in direct opposition to popular commercial dance and club music not only because of its non-commercial focus, but also because it is defined exclusively by a closed past style with no aspirations towards expansion or innovation. Although northern soul is markedly different from contemporary retro rock due primarily to its deliberate lack of commercial appeal and restricted focus on the playing of old records instead of the recording and performance of new music, there are some parallels and precedents which align with the nostalgic motivations of contemporary retro rock.

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<sup>16</sup> As investigated in Section II, and especially as it is examined specific to scenic talk in Chapter 8.

To this end, Hollows and Milestone's (1998) study of northern soul provides a useful delineation of how value and history can be constructed through the re-contextualisation of a past music style. The most obvious way northern soul does this is by accruing value in something that was not only originally valueless but also unfashionable by contemporary standards. Superficially, commodity value is formed in the northern soul scene around increasingly rare soul records which were largely unpopular upon their initial release (guaranteeing short runs of pressings that heighten their rarity and exclusivity in the present day). However what is of much greater significance is the way in which corresponding value principles of musical history and tradition are created through the rarity and exclusivity of these original records (Hollows & Milestone, 1998, p85). According to Hollows and Milestone, the northern soul scene's huge investment in music which was "not only unpopular in the present but was often condemned to oblivion at the time it was produced" (1998, p93) has much to do with the creation of a value regime of authenticity based on "history rather than novelty" (1998, p93). It is through the deep respect and veneration afforded to the music and culture of African-American artists (especially those who did not achieve financial success), that northern soul is able to vicariously tap into "the wider claims about the importance of history in black musics" (Hollows & Milestone, 1998, p92).

In a similar fashion, contemporary retro rock music which utilizes the stylistic template of earlier rock music also implicitly engages with discourses of history and authenticity associated with this era of music. Just as there is a marked fervency over a particular type of soul music and the records which encompass this music tradition in northern soul, a parallel ardency is found in rock music with regard to the recordings that form the rock music canon. In this regard there has been significant scholarly attention paid to the formation of the rock canon and its associated values in rock music (Bannister, 2006; Jones, 2008; Von Appen & Doehring, 2010). Of particular significance to contemporary retro rock is the way in which the rock canon promotes values of timelessness, continuity and stability (Laurin, 2009, pp283-284). Of course while there are significant differences in the ways in which value is defined in relation to

authenticity and commercial success as between northern soul and contemporary retro rock, especially considering the commercial successes of many canonical and 'heritage rock' artists, northern soul still provides a valuable precedent in understanding the manner in which new nostalgic scenes are shaped by the formation and reliance upon an authoritative canon and heritage discourses.

Indeed, the example of northern soul reveals just how strong these canonical values can be in the formation of identity within nostalgic music scenes. A key finding in Hollows and Milestone's (1998) study of northern soul as a geographical phenomenon is the influence the music has in fabricating an imagined kinship between the original places of production of American soul music and its revived home in England's north as developed through the adoption and veneration of the music in this new context. While on the one hand northern soul falls in line with a tradition of the British working-class romanticizing American culture as an escape (similar to the espousal of black rhythm and blues music in the 1960s), "the value of the records used within northern soul is not only their "Americanness" but more specifically an identification with black urban America" (Hollows & Milestone, 1998, pp91-92). In particular, the way in which soul music describes the dilemmas and struggles of city living for black Americans is adopted by white northerners for the purposes of a fantastical reinterpretation and embellishment of the northern regional landscape (Hollows & Milestone, 1998, pp92-93). However, while Hollows and Milestone affirm that this "relationship to black America is "imagined"", they also emphasize that "this does not diminish its power and significance within the northern [soul] scene" (1998, p92). In the same way then that northern soul demonstrates a dramatic imagined influence created through the adoption of past recorded music and its accompanying history and tradition, a similar construction may be observable in contemporary retro rock music practices. Although rather than a sense of affinity through space (as with northern soul), contemporary retro rock music is more concerned with an imagined sense of longing in time. Accordingly, while Hollows and Milestone have expounded a convincing

‘geography of northern soul’, the focus of this study rests with *temporal* rather geographical dislocation.

While a relatively sizable temporal dislocation of a period of decades is fundamental to the two previous examples, Wu’s (2010) study of memory and nostalgia in the San Francisco Bay Area rave scene examines the effects of a socially altered past over a comparatively short passage of time. Focusing on people who began attending raves in the late 1990s and early 2000s following the purported ‘death’ of the rave scene in the mid to late 1990s, Wu frames their nostalgia as “a slippery memory ... based on both the authenticity of lived experience, and upon a collectively imagined ... past” (2010, p65). However despite the shorter period of temporal dislocation to that of contemporary retro rock music, the extent to which “nostalgia became embedded in the cultural vocabulary that young people used to perceive their experiences and how it had changed over time, regardless of “historical accuracy” demonstrates the force which these narratives of memory have in shaping perceptions of the past (Wu, 2010, p75).

Although the respondents in Wu’s study missed the ‘peak’ of rave culture in the San Francisco Bay Area, they held many beliefs that would be attributable to those with the authority of lived rave experience prior to the late-1990s. For example, nostalgic notions of the pre-commercialized rave scene existing as a cohesive whole and of responsible drug users who attended for the ‘right reasons’ (Wu, 2010, p67). This ‘authentic’ nostalgia for an idealized past (admittedly one in which they had not taken part in) was often found to exist simultaneously and contradictorily to their own lived experience of rave culture (Wu, 2010, p66). Significantly, Wu establishes a pattern in which respondents would “wax nostalgic” about the recent past in the same manner as they would “in reference to an arbitrarily demarcated generational past” (such as the 1970s counter-cultural generation) (2010, p66). In effect, the respondents were utilizing an already established narrative of memory and nostalgia “reminiscent of ... pop-cultural slogans of the past” like “punk is dead” – “a commonsense vernacular that people use

to describe youth cultures in relation to late modern society” (Wu, 2010, p64).<sup>17</sup> Wu thus sees the adoption of nostalgic discourses as “an interpretive tool to give coherence to an increasingly incoherent cultural experience,” working to provide a sense of stability in the “dying” rave music scene which had come under the perceived threat of dissolution (2010, p68). This finding again evidences the conditions in which nostalgia most commonly arises – that is, in times of social upheaval and dissatisfaction with the present – and how nostalgic continuity is achieved through socially constructed memory.

Another aspect of Wu’s examination of memory in the San Francisco Bay Area rave scene relevant to the current study is the way in which nostalgia (having already become programmed into rave discourses), had begun to be used to “market and mobilize the rave scene into the future” (Wu, 2010, p75). In the early 2000s, promoters attempted to tap into the dissatisfaction with present rave culture and the abundant nostalgia for the glory days of the San Francisco Bay Area rave scene by marketing future raves as a return to the past – a way to “bring back the vibe” and enact a form of cultural restoration for the future (Wu, 2010, p72). Remarkably, the era which was supposedly being re-enacted was usually only as little as three years gone and yet there was still evidence of an “ersatz version of the past ... being marketed” which reworked the past to fit in with present day realities (Wu, 2010, p73). This included the marketing of dancing ‘sexy sirens’ as well a strict zero-tolerance drug policy which were in fact more commonly features of the club scene (not the rave scene) of the mid to late 1990s (Wu, 2010, p73). Indeed if ersatz nostalgia can be so potently applied within a music scene after only such a short passage of time so as to completely contradict the memory of lived experience, it would only be reasonable to suspect that over a much longer period of time, recourse to the past through vicarious nostalgic tendencies could have an even greater impact on the potential for reimagining a history unlived by the present youth generation in contemporary retro rock music.

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<sup>17</sup> While Wu only mentions in passing the way in which the temporal distinction between the recent lived past and the distant unlived past is flattened when the authority of an already established socially constructed memory is applied to a present day situation, it is an issue of particular significance to the present study and will be expanded upon in later chapters.

Whereas these nostalgic tendencies in the San Francisco Bay Area rave scene attempt to preserve rave culture through recreating *a lost past*, a variation of this theme in popular music studies is evidenced by another type of nostalgic influence in electronic music called hauntology which attempts to recreate *a lost future*. ‘Hauntology’ is borrowed from *Spectres of Marx*, in which Derrida (1994) argues that the lost promise of revolution following the collapse of the Soviet Union still lingers in a ghost-like fashion in the present, and is applied in the field of popular music to describe the ghost of the past in new music (Doe, 2006). However unlike the restorative nostalgic in retro music aiming to recapture a lost past, hauntology is geared towards the mourning of a lost future music. This parallels Reynolds’ (2007) *neostalgia* – an unrequited feeling for the lost promise of the future that did not happen, especially as imagined through science-fiction where notions of a utopian world and affordable space technology, for example, seemed imminent but of course never eventuated. Hauntology and neostalgia in this way characterize a backwards-looking influence that seeks not so much to recreate the past, but to recreate a past anticipation for a future that never happened.

Hauntology in popular music remains a nascent concept which has to this point has really only been discussed most frequently in online music blogs. It is chiefly spoken of with regard to electronic music that “employs samples and dub reggae techniques that reanimate styles and sounds” (Doe, 2006) in order to evoke “a strain of electronic musical ‘futurism’ that was most notable in the 70s” (Doe, 2006). While this clearly differs considerably from contemporary retro rock music, there is some shared ground between hauntology and the nostalgic processes of contemporary revival music. In particular, both vicarious nostalgia in contemporary retro rock and hauntology in electronic music employ “certain strategies of disinternment [sic] ... of styles, sounds, even techniques and modes of production now abandoned, forgotten or erased by history” (Doe, 2006). As such both these styles must look to the past so that they may find their voice in the present. However these means of adopting an old aesthetic serve differently formulated ends. Rather than just hoping to relive the past, or instil a past value in the present as is the case with restorative nostalgia, musical hauntology

goes one step further in that it seeks to recreate the “figurative form of a glimpse of a future that never was, a visionary dream that was envisioned once but which slipped out of collective memory” (Doe, 2006). So rather than being grounded in the pursuit for something that no longer is, hauntology deals with the pursuit of something that in fact never was or indeed never will be – a ghost of what might have been. Intrinsic to this pursuit is a kind of grief – not only in having missed out on this imagined future, but also in having to come to terms with finding oneself in a future that is somehow ‘wrong’ according to the criteria of a particular aesthetic past. In some ways, hauntology’s fascination with alternate futures arising from history does reflect some of the motivations of restorative nostalgia which can be considered a corrective process of the present, bringing the present in line with the past in order to create a sense of continuity.

However while these examples of popular music studies which focus on the importance of nostalgic sentiment to certain popular music types do of course reflect some similar concerns found in contemporary retro rock music as well as provide some insightful analysis upon which to build on, contemporary retro rock music itself remains relatively unexplored. Bennett (2008) highlights this lack of consideration in noting the way in which popular music styles “being consumed beyond the specific temporal context of its making and heard by “new” audiences has seldom been a concern in popular music studies” (p262). However this lack is further accentuated in the current study of how new youth audiences not only interpret past rock music of the 1960s and 1970s, but how they interpret *new* music which enacts vicarious nostalgia for this past music and era. Thus where Bennett seeks to understand “the ways in which new audiences make sense of old rock texts given their temporal distance from the cultural context that was deemed so important to an appreciation of the significance of rock in the late 1960s and early 1970s,” this study is also motivated by making sense of this same temporal distance as it unfolds in the present (2008, p262). While the focus here of course is on how the cultural practice of contemporary retro rock music negotiates this distance in the creation of new retro music, it is hoped that this negotiation will illuminate an understanding of this cultural phenomenon.

### **3.6 CONCLUSION**

Nostalgia has evolved as a personal emotion and as a cultural practice. From its initial focus on space and place to that of time, nostalgia is fundamentally about the longing for the things out of reach to us. The more recent variation, vicarious nostalgia, makes that distance even greater with its reach extending beyond even our personally lived experience to a past before our own. The scholarship surrounding vicarious nostalgia is still in its infancy; however it seems likely that while the circumstances of vicarious nostalgia may be a recent development, the functions of nostalgia are still relevant. In particular, the restorative and reflective types of nostalgia are still engaged in vicarious nostalgia even if the source of nostalgia is removed from personal memory. Further to this, vicarious nostalgic sentiment can certainly be manipulated through the use of aesthetic codes of nostalgia as well as influenced by the role of collective memory in remembering the past. While other studies into nostalgia and popular music consider how vicarious nostalgia unfolds with relation to particular music styles and geographic circumstances, they also reveal that there is much left to explore, especially with regard to contemporary retro rock music as a specific grammar of retro music. In the next chapter, I will discuss the methodological aspects of this study in attempting to understand this grammar of contemporary retro rock music.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

*While there are those who may think that musical sound is not a primary locus of cultural meaning in popular music or that sound “transcends” culture, it is my belief that the sounds are critically important to the construction of meanings. It is this musical construction of meaning, in conjunction with visual imagery, the use of the body in performance, and the discourse that was created ... that I explore...*

(Fast, 2001, p10)

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will outline and address the methodological aspects of my research. I will begin by discussing the qualitative approach taken in examining this area and the appropriateness of this methodological standpoint in teasing out the underlying insights and systems of meaning-making offered by contemporary retro rock music. At this point I will also be highlighting the subjective nature of my position as *insider researcher* – the dual role of researcher and fan/practitioner. I consider the implications of this twin identity as it has informed my approach to research both in the field and during the analytical stages of the dissertation – whilst further introducing the reflexivity required to undertake this study under these circumstances. I conclude by elucidating the multimodal process of going about my research, both in terms of questions of method as well as introducing the theoretical underpinnings relating to the various modes of research undertaken.

## 4.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology applied to this study can be broadly defined as qualitative. For Jensen, qualitative research across a variety of disciplines has three common denominators – a focus on meaning, the value of naturalistic contexts, and the role of researchers as interpretive subjects (2012, p266). While the manner in which these three elements are used and facilitated by different qualitative research projects can vary dramatically, it is these same three denominators which form the methodological underpinnings of the current study, and which I will use to frame the methodological approach I have utilized here.

Meaning is perhaps the fundamental essence of qualitative research, either “as an object of study” or “as an explanatory concept” (Jensen, 2012, p266). Meaning itself is perpetually present in cultural qualitative analysis – from the perspective of individuals and cultural groups who ‘make sense’ of themselves, their everyday lives, rituals, practices, agency and action, right through to the role of researcher who seeks to detect and interpret both meaning itself and the manner in which meaning is applied within the wider cultural milieu. Ultimately then, this study seeks to examine how meaning is created, formed and learned in and through the popular form of contemporary retro rock music and its paratextual materials and practices, especially as this meaning intersects within a framework of nostalgic emotion. In this way the role of meaning in this study is not only the fundamental object of the study, *the how* of contemporary retro rock, but it also serves as the basis for continued study into meaning as an explanatory concept, *the why*.<sup>18</sup>

The significance of *meaning* in the current study suggests a clear compatibility between the research topic and underlying notions of qualitative research. This is because qualitative research accommodates insight into the “nature of things,” and their “essence and ambience,” more so than to the “counts and measures” suggested by quantitative research (Berg, 2001, pp2-

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<sup>18</sup> As already mentioned in Chapter 1, the current study primarily contends with questions of *how*. However, there will be further scope to discuss *the why* not only in concluding the findings of the current study, but also hopefully in future study into the cultural resonance of contemporary retro rock.

3). What Berg implies here is the proficiency of qualitative research in allowing us to explore the decidedly more abstract qualities of a cultural phenomenon – emotion, quality and feeling chief among them. Qualitative research is positioned to comprehend the goals of art and culture – insight, understanding and empathy. Thus in considering the interrelationship of nostalgia and music, we must consider that they are at least in part closely related through emotions, which are typically expressed and generated within in the context of contemporary retro rock music and practices. Qualitative methods such as interview and semiotic analysis are clearly suited to gaining insight into the production and expression of meaning in this context. It is these tools within the qualitative arsenal which bring us closer to the goal of gaining meaning. In addition to recognizing the appearance and recurrence of a symbol, or of a discursive practice, qualitative analysis seeks to derive an understanding of these phenomena within their natural context. This approach conforms to the idea of *verstehen*, where the aim is to gain “an understanding of the meaning that people ascribe to their social situation and activities” (Jankowski & Wester, 1991, p44). Qualitative analysis provides a way of delving into the structural and cultural values of products, emotions, symbols and behaviours that inform a life-world, and investigating the meanings that are assigned to these cultural aspects.

Another aspect of qualitative research which works to validate the exploration into how and why meaning is given in the way it is, is the desire to observe the creation of meaning within its naturalistic contexts. This notion is a classic underpinning of anthropological research, but has also been widely adopted and adapted for use in broader qualitative research practices. In essence however, “the naturalistic attitude primarily entails an ambition of considering those contexts in which particular communicative phenomena may be encountered and examined” (Jensen, 2012, p266). Insofar as the current research project observes this underlying aim of qualitative research, this ‘naturalistic attitude’ was a consideration throughout the various stages of gathering and collating data. I note here also, from an epistemological point of view, that I do not imply an adherence to determining a discoverable ‘natural’ reality, since what is natural is but a construction of sign elements. Rather, the term ‘naturalism’ is used

here as indicative of the methodological considerations given to gathering and interpreting evidence. Since the current study is heavily based in textual analysis of various modes of contemporary retro rock, the notion of naturalism was in many ways contingent on the idea of reactive and non-reactive texts, say, as between musical texts as ‘found’ texts and interview data as a ‘active’ texts. I will further expand on this idea of naturalism later in this chapter, looking at the issues of method surrounding these kinds of evidence, as well as commenting on the reflexive nature of the researcher engaged in the field.

The other underlying aspect of qualitative research that informed this study into contemporary retro rock music from a methodological standpoint is the role of the researcher as interpretive subject. Indeed all forms of research are conducted by humans as interpretive subjects, but “what distinguishes qualitative studies is the pervasive nature of interpretation throughout the research process” (Jensen, 2012, p266). Qualitative methodology is uniquely poised by way of its fundamental emphasis on the interpretive to provide meaningful insights at nearly every stage of the research process, which go on to inform the direction of a project. The current study has certainly made use of this ongoing interpretive feature of qualitative methodology, and while I will discuss specific methods more fully later in the chapter, it is worth noting that, without necessarily utilizing the exact methods of grounded theory, the attitude of its interpretive approach provides a useful frame and attitude in conducting analysis. As grounded theory necessitates the act of “data collection and analysis simultaneously in a process that uses comparative methods,” it underscores the role of interpretation as an ongoing process (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011, p292). It routinely emphasizes the interpretive and analytical function of the researcher in collecting, categorizing and examining data throughout the research project, which creates a distinct overlap between the field of research being studied and the study itself. As a result, the researcher becomes firmly located *within* the inquiry, at odds with the notion of researcher as the external observer. This ambiguity of the location of the researcher in relation to the field corresponds to my own experiences in the current study,

presenting a spate of questions regarding my own subjectivity and its effect on the objective validity of the research.

#### **4.2.1 Objectivity, Subjectivity and Reflexivity**

The central role of interpretation in qualitative research generally, and within this study more specifically, raises by its very nature questions as to the objective validity of research undertaken within this framework. Certainly qualitative research does not strictly impart the same kind of reliability and predictability fostered through the scientific method. In the current study, the snapshot provided into contemporary retro rock through my own research is not necessarily predictive of the future. Nor is it intended to be. The value of this qualitative study is found instead in the level of insight, depth and detail extracted through interpreting the phenomenon at hand and acknowledging the role of researcher as interpretive subject. Indeed, rather than denying my own subjectivity and attempting to elevate myself to the ideal of objective researcher, I have found that embracing my subjectivity has been beneficial to the processes and outcomes of qualitative research. This view correlates with the constructivist approach to qualitative research. For Charmaz and Bryant (2011), speaking with regard to the constructivist theoretical position informing grounded theory, objectivity is not the aim, nor is it necessarily desirable. With particular reference to its foundations in symbolic interactionism, the constructivist perspective holds that meaning is not inherent in objects but is constructed in part through imbuing objects with meaning. Thus in keeping with this perspective, “constructivists assume that conducting and writing research flows from views and values,” and that “these endeavors are not neutral activities. In this view, research products are not objective reports. Instead, researchers interpret findings” (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011, p293).

With this basis for the interpretive role of researcher stemming from their own subjectivity, I must also address my own dual identity here as both researcher and music practitioner. I do this in the interests of transparency, but also as an opportunity to highlight the

value of my position as insider researcher and its impact on the research process. With a background as a music enthusiast, record collector, DJ and musician (especially in performing rock music), coming in to this research project I was already aware of some of the ideas and values pervasive in contemporary retro rock. Alongside this colloquial level of insight was my academic background in media and cultural studies. However rather than necessarily being a hindrance in the field, or contradicting with my identity as a music enthusiast, my academic background was in some ways a complimentary facet to my overall identity. I found that in a similar way to how Hodkinson (2005) discovered a compatibility between the values of the goth subculture, education and academia in his own career as insider researcher – initially in superficial qualities of look, dress, age, gender and class, but also more importantly in a shared or at least accepted educational aspirations, outlook and background with many participants – there is also an alignment here of values between retro rock music fandom and academic study (p136).

Just as a broad and detailed knowledge about music, musicians, music history and catalogues of music is important for inclusion in a number of other kinds of music cultures, it is particularly the case in contemporary retro rock where the music itself relies on a working knowledge of past music and musicians and the stylistic differences between them. Frith (1992) considers that involvement in popular music generally:

...rests on a substantial body of knowledge and an active sense of choice – musicians and audiences alike have a clear understanding of genre rules and histories, can hear and place sounds in terms of influence and source, have no hesitation about making and justifying judgements of musical meaning and value. (p174)

These same kinds of knowledge and values are even more pronounced in contemporary retro rock since the very criteria of retro is to look back, and its contemporary manifestation is, as this study will reveal, heavily concerned with referencing the histories and values of older music. In relation to the interests, skills and resources of academics investigating the same field, there is certainly room for overlap between these aspects and those utilized by contemporary retro rock stakeholders. In Frith's view, "...many fans of pop music who are not academics are certainly

intellectuals ... involved in the same sort of fantasizing that academics or a particular sort of intellectual are also involved in,” such that there does not exist “a clear binary division between fans and academics” (1992, p183). Jenkins (2006) reinforces this notion of the emerging crossover between the pleasures and interests of academics and fans in popular culture generally – what he terms ‘aca/fans’. Once where there was a boundary between the two identities, he reflects that “now, we couldn’t keep fans at bay even if we wanted to, and the fans who have crossed over have proven their value many times over” (Jenkins, 2006, p4). Thus in my own experience as insider researcher, reinforcing this kind of working-knowledge to the depth of analysis and study involved in the academic pursuit of understanding this music and music culture acted to strengthen my position of being ‘in the know’. I found this to be true not only of my status in the field, but in my own subjective experience as a fan and practitioner. From my perspective, I was still able to participate as music enthusiast and musician as well as academic researcher. Just as Hodkinson had done in a relatable set of circumstances, developing a “widened” and “focused” viewpoint into the goth subculture “without compromising [his] level of involvement,” I too feel as though I have incorporated both sides of my experience into a mutually beneficial overlapping identity; to quote Hodkinson, “I made the transition from insider to insider researcher” (2005, p136).

As insider researcher, there are a number of benefits, but also impediments associated with this researcher identity. As mentioned above, demonstrating cultural capital, knowledgeability and a long-serving personal interest in the field, especially backed by a combination of personal experience and academic credentials, was a significant benefit to accessing participants and conducting interviews. A number of interview requests were granted by participants at least partly because of the demonstration of my interest and knowledgeability in rock music generally and the interview subject in particular. For some interviewees, my initial hunches regarding the potential role of nostalgia as an underlying motivation and possible outcome of contemporary retro rock was an important factor as well. In the interviews themselves, I felt that my keen interest and insight into this aspect of the music was something

that was largely met with positive responses from most subjects. I was often able to build a rapport and in turn a relaxed atmosphere conducive to open conversation. Another factor was my role as performer in a mildly successful band, which helped open doors in some instances. Of course this 'insider status' was not always applicable in every instance. For example, while I have some ties to the music industry in the Sydney region of Australia, my familiarity in this scene was not always evident or applicable to other scenes elsewhere. Even so, I feel as though my experience with the norms of the industry were useful in helping to effectively communicate with others in the field.

A consideration regarding my position as insider researcher, which also needs to be addressed here, is the way in which insider experience can be used as its own resource. The obvious advantage of the insider experience in conducting research is that it provides a useful frame of reference. Through this frame of reference, the insider researcher can guide the initial questions of the research and the continued direction the research project takes from a position of greater depth and insight than an outside researcher would likely be capable of. In addition, it also offers "a significant extra pool of material with which to compare and contrast what they see and hear during the research process" (Hodkinson, 2005, p143). However while this can be a valuable vantage point from which to view and interpret the research being undertaken, there is an element of risk involved insofar as the validity and objectivity of the research is concerned. In particular, the views and passions of the researcher as fan need to be kept in check. As Hills offers by way of reminder:

The scholar-fan must still conform to the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject, being careful not to present too much of their enthusiasm while tailoring their accounts of fan interest and investment to the norms of 'confessional' (but not overly confessional) academic writing. (2002, pp11-12).

This balance between insider knowledge/fan interest and scholarly analytical insight was encountered many times throughout the research process. A repeated concern I had, by way of example, was with various authenticity claims, which is both an integral and divisive aspect in contemporary retro rock music culture. At times it was difficult to monitor whether I was

applying my own authenticity value claims in analysing my own research, or drawing conclusions through the evidence alone. Being too close to the subject of research, there is a danger that the opinions and views of the researcher will too heavily inform the research outcomes, or relax the analytical rigour of the research process.

But rather than discount the value of the insider researcher's own experience, the solution lies in managing the difference between utilizing personal experiences and relying upon it. Hodkinson considers that "ensuring that one's position of social proximity is beneficial rather than problematic requires an ongoing reflexive and reactive approach to the ways one is positioned and the potential implications of these throughout the research process" (2005, p146). As such, I have many times tried to take a step back from my research and analysis to maintain a distance from my own opinions and the conclusions that can be drawn from the data and evidence. Even in writing this very chapter, it has so far already been necessary for me to take reflexive pauses, such as when discussing the notion of a 'naturalistic' context. Referring to the 'natural' in this sense is at once a clear indicative expression to denote an untampered research environment, or research methods which utilize non-reactive data, but is at the same time fraught with epistemological baggage regarding the play of signs in constructing the notion of the 'natural', a fundamental view of the world which is returned to again and again throughout this dissertation. Crucial in the process of articulating my findings has been my own reflexive vigilance, in addition to being open to the viewpoints offered by outsiders, as well as other insiders in the field, in providing a level of balance and objectivity outside of my own efforts.

And yet I do not claim that my efforts in this regard have necessarily absolved me from the tyranny of influence of the very conditions which shape who I am as an insider, a researcher, or indeed as an insider researcher. The kinds of machinations found at the semiotic level of contemporary retro rock are very effectively implemented in my own taste-making decisions. Thus when I found myself to be making my own authenticity claims with relation to particular texts being analysed, I needed to question these same claims in the way I question those

presented in the study. Indeed as Alvesson and Skoldberg suggest, reflexivity is about paying attention to all aspects of the research context “without letting any one of them dominate” (2000, p246). Throughout this dissertation then, I have attempted to remain transparent as to my subjectivity by being forthright in instances of reflexive insight. My reflexive approach will not simply be working ‘behind the scenes’, but will be actively addressed and reflected upon as part of the research content as it arises.

### 4.3 RESEARCH METHODS

Interpreting and analysing contemporary retro rock music requires us to first consider what is being analysed – what do we mean when we talk about contemporary retro rock music? Is it the official sound recording released by a record label? Is it when a musician (or group of musicians) performs on stage in front of an audience? Is it a musician recording a demo in his or her bedroom? Does it matter when or where the music is consumed or how and where it is produced? Does it matter how the music is circulated, distributed and presented? Does it include the cultural texts and practices which are linked to the music? We could ask these kinds of questions ad infinitum; suffice it to say that contemporary retro rock music is not *exclusively* about music, nor is music the only constitutive text found in contemporary retro rock. Middleton considers that the popular music ‘text’ extends to “the channels of dissemination, the institutions and social settings, the collective behavioural patterns of musicians and fans, the associated visual styles, the surrounding media discourses ... [as] part of a *multiple text* – an interactive network of semantic and evaluative operations” (2000, p8). While contemporary retro rock certainly hinges on music as its central product, the recorded music product only forms part of the picture. It is produced, consumed and interpreted through varying practices, disseminated in different formats and accessed at different cultural sites and social junctures. To limit contemporary retro rock, or indeed popular music more broadly, to just its musical component, to the act of composing, recording and performing music, is to disregard the full

capacity of its expression and influence. Indeed, “pop’s mode of existence (dizzying chains of replication and intertextual relations; ubiquitous dissemination; production processes and reception contexts characterized by multi-media messages) does indeed render ideas of the bounded, originary text and of its single *auteur* outmoded” (Middleton, 2000, p8).

So in devising a method to understand the subject matter of the study, it is only fair that the method suit the expansive potential of contemporary retro rock. It is for this reason that a multimodal method has been adopted. Kress defines a mode as “a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning” (2010, p79). Modes include communicative representations such as music, images, speech and so forth. Contemporary retro rock is made up of many of these modes found across its music, album cover art, live performance and the talk surrounding it. All of these modes can be used to make meaning, but all of them do so in distinct ways. For Kress and Van Leeuwen, “...media become modes once their principles of semiosis begin to be conceived of in more abstract ways (as ‘grammars’ of some kind)” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p22). The advantage then of multimodality is that it recognizes that there are various forms of meaning making found across a given social/communicative style or cultural grouping, and that these forms, or modes, play a very significant role in meaning making in each instance and when considered together.

The method used in the current study mirrors the way in which a multimodal social semiotics framework approaches meaning making from three perspectives, as elucidated by Kress (2010). The central perspective is one of *semiosis*, that is, the consideration of “the active making of signs in social (inter)actions” as a whole (Kress, 2010, p54). But in realizing this overarching perspective, it is necessary to consider the individual modes that make up this broader position. Thus from the perspective of a *specific mode*, it is possible to take into consideration the particular frameworks, grammars and social and historical viewpoints of that mode. So for example, in considering album cover art as a particular mode of contemporary retro rock, it is necessary to examine this mode as distinct in form and style from recorded music. While both modes are engaged in the making of meaning through signs, they do so in

entirely different ways (a point which will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters). The grammars used to describe these two modes are simply not compatible with each other in descriptive terms, thereby necessitating an examination of each mode in their appropriate terms, before being able in turn consider them in relation to each other – a burgeoning process that will escalate as more analysis is undertaken from chapter to chapter.

However just because of this practical incompatibility in analytical terms, they need not be considered in isolation from each other. As is offered from the perspective of *multimodality*, we are able to deal “with issues common to all modes and to the relations between modes” (Kress, 2010, p61). As different as the visual mode of album covers is from the mode of recorded music, it is still reasonable to consider their shared relationship as interrelated components within a broader contemporary retro rock framework. Likewise, in live music performance, there are elements of the visual and the aural that coexist and which need to be examined and understood together in context. As these examples demonstrate, the various perspectives of multimodality “are difficult to keep apart; yet, for certain descriptive and analytical purposes it is useful and at times necessary to do so” (Kress, 2010, p61).

The practicality of this ‘divide and conquer’ delineation of contemporary retro rock for the purposes of this study also extends to the way in which the scope of the study has been determined. Once I had defined the initial object of analysis, that is, to consider the role of nostalgia in contemporary retro rock music, it was then necessary to gather sufficient data to help develop the theoretical categories for analysis. As previously stated, the potential scope of contemporary retro rock is difficult to delimit or restrict to specific texts and samples. However I found it productive to capitalize on the opportunities available to me by focusing on the kinds of data I was able to access as insider researcher. It was apparent very early on in the research process that the music itself was centrally important to contemporary retro rock, but there was also no denying that there were other sites and texts that would serve the emerging categories and goals of the research. Furthermore, in understanding the *how* of meaning making in contemporary retro rock, it was also logical to question whether the kinds of meanings

generated through one particular mode were mirrored in, or conflicting with, the other modes of representation. Thus the mode of music was considered not only in its compositional and recorded form, but also in a live setting where it is performed directly to an audience, and of course conveyed *visually*. This visual component of contemporary retro rock also extends to how recorded music is packaged, specifically through album cover art, which as a mode unto itself carries with it a whole other grammar of semiotic language unlike that of sound. Finally, the other significant mode that is considered in the study is one which moves away from the texts more closely related to the more tangible aspects of contemporary retro rock music, to the way in which the talk surrounding contemporary retro rock music (in this instance gathered in interviews with musicians) is framed through discourse. While I elaborate on this method later in this chapter, and again in the specific chapter on talk, I do note for the moment that this aspect of the study offers an insight that reflects and contextualizes the textual analysis of the previous modes, hinting at the uses and intentions of contemporary retro rock by its stakeholders as well as how the talk itself becomes a form of meaning making.

In choosing the specific texts and samples to be analysed, I took an approach that combined purposive sampling reflecting my status as insider researcher, convenience sampling which reflected the practicalities of access and availability of subjects, as well as theoretical sampling to bolster emerging theoretical categories in line with an approach inspired by grounded theory. I ultimately chose three artists from which to draw texts and interview data from: Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield. The choice of these three case studies was guided not necessarily by a criterion of success or widespread popularity (although in some cases this is evident), but in their suitability to examine the research question and their fortuitous geographical bases being in Australia. In studying contemporary retro rock, it was of course necessary to use samples that align with this leaning in contemporary popular music and all of these artists exhibit fundamental characteristics of this style. In this sense there was an element of purposive sampling here which utilized my own “special knowledge and expertise” of the field to ascertain their compatibility in this regard (Berg, 2001, p32).

However whereas I had done preliminary research with Tame Impala and the Frowning Clouds as samples, the third choice of sample, Stonefield, was a product of theoretical sampling and the search for saturation of developing categories of analysis. From these samples, a number of their specific texts were used to form the data encompassed in the different modes of contemporary retro rock. Inspired by the aims of grounded theory as previously stated, the choice of how many samples and texts to use was guided by the pursuit of developing analytic categories discovered in the samples across the various modes, building enough data to saturate the theoretical categories. While both were clearly exemplars of contemporary retro rock, what had been emerging between the samples of Tame Impala and the Frowning Clouds was that there were significant contrasts between the different genre articulations of each artist within a contemporary retro rock framework (psychedelic and garage, for example). The theoretical category of ‘authenticity’ which had emerged was prevalent in both samples, but in different ways. At this point, I turned to Stonefield as another avenue to consider the way in which authenticity is constructed in contemporary retro rock from a differing musical viewpoint. Stonefield were also immensely useful here in helping to “define variation” within contemporary retro rock as well as “establish the boundaries of a theoretical category” (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011, p292).

Having amassed an appropriate pool of retro rock sources that also served to satisfy the need for a wide enough variation within contemporary retro rock styles, I was able to undertake a multimodal analysis across four modes – recorded music, live music performance, album cover art and talk. While the theoretical basis and method of each of these modes is revisited as part of their respective chapters later on, at this point I will introduce and describe some of the fundamental ideas and practices used in discussing each mode.

#### 4.3.1 Composition, Sound and Music

In seeking to understand the way in which meaning is created in contemporary retro rock music, it was important to begin with the music itself. However even from this self-evident beginning, it became quickly necessary to identify a framework for understanding what the different aspects of the music were and how these could be effectively understood and discussed. On the one hand contemporary retro rock music is comprised of compositional elements like song structures, chord patterns, melodies and so forth, while on the other hand this music was identifiable by other qualities of the music not easily translatable as notes on the staff. Contemporary retro rock, in addition to the formal qualities of the music, is also importantly comprised of the way it *sounds*. The tonal qualities of a guitar, the inflection of a vocal delivery, as well as any technologically-altered sound process used to modify sound, play a large role in affecting the cultural and nostalgic outcome of the music. Distinguishing between composition and sound has its origins in the Western music tradition, and the theoretical and analytical role of this divide between composition and sound has evolved in twentieth and twenty-first century popular music traditions, especially as it relates to the onset of recorded music technologies. The history of this distinction is treated more extensively in Chapter 5 which deals with these musical elements of contemporary retro rock and informs the analytical distinction needed to help discuss these elements of the music in this dissertation.

To that end, the approach adopted to analyse the first sub-mode of music composition in this thesis relies largely on the comparative analysis of compositional elements between song examples from original or source compositions and contemporary retro rock compositions as marked out by using musical notation. This comparative approach is interpreted through the lens of intertextuality and hypertextuality as expanded upon for musical analysis by Lacasse (2000a) from Genette's (1997a) application of these ideas in literature. By comparing the similarities and differences between these compositional examples, it becomes clearly demonstrable as to how much and in what way contemporary rock compositions utilize identifiable melodies and rhythms from the 1960s and 1970s to create a contemporary retro rock

composition that aligns with a particular style, a particular song or a particular artist. These examples are selected and presented in a varying scale of overtness aligning more directly as intertextual references, to abstractness aligning with hypertextual references, in order to demonstrate the variety of approaches adopted within contemporary retro rock compositions in effecting relative nostalgic outcomes.

The second sub-mode of sound was necessarily treated distinctly from composition because of the grammatical differences between the two sub-modes. While composition can be expressed through standard notation, sound is a more elusive element of the music, which requires a different grammar for effective analysis. In order to explain not only what the sounds were constitutive of, but also the way in which sounds are able to evoke emotional and nostalgic perception, I adopted the phonographic staging model. Adapted by Lacasse (2000b; 2005) from Moylan (2002), the phonographic staging model utilizes four main categories of sound perception (loudness, space, time and timbre) to interpret the way in which sound is performed, treated or otherwise manipulated to affect the listener. Thus the process of listening to contemporary retro rock music and discerning the various sound elements that are heard in the music is facilitated by the phonographic staging model to firstly identify the *what* of the music – that is, the kinds of categories of sound perception used to create and alter sound elements – and secondly to help ascribe these sound elements with affective roles for the listener. The phonographic staging model can in this way be used to identify what Lacasse refers to as the *evocative potential* of certain sound elements (2005). So rather than merely outlining what the sounds are, there is also scope to consider the ways in which sound is staged in the music to evoke an associative response in the listener.

While these two sub-modes of the music follow different paths for the purposes of analysis, this is of course not to say that the music is strictly divisible between them. Popular music compositions are rarely heard in isolation from their sound elements, and vice versa. The sound and composition of recorded music are typically heard together as one cohesive statement and there is indeed plenty of room for overlap between a composition and its sound elements.

Consider for example the introductory guitar riff of ‘Solitude Is Bliss’ by Tame Impala (2010). What gives the riff its distinctiveness is not just the chords being played, but also the phasing effect applied to the guitar performing them. The rise and fall in frequencies provided by the phase effect add an extra compositional dimension to the song such that if it were not used, the song would be almost unidentifiable from its recorded and performed form. Importantly, while I have used the distinction between composition and sound to help delineate the workings of contemporary retro rock music, the music should be and ultimately is taken as a whole such that the interplay between composition and sound informs each other and the finished musical work.

There does however remain a question of what a ‘finished musical work’ is for the purposes of this study which I have not addressed as yet. In doing so, I note that music is played and conceived in many formal and informal spaces and is not strictly definable by either sound recordings or live performances. While there were issues of access to other sites of music creation such as rehearsals and studio performances, I have been able to focus on two particular kinds of musical works that were not only relatively accessible, but also central to contemporary retro rock – specifically, sound recordings in the first instance and live music performance in the second. Sound recordings were chosen as texts for analysis for a number of reasons. They are effectively the central musical product of contemporary retro rock (Gracyk, 1996; Auslander, 1998). They are the calculated, preserved and repeatable musical statement of the artist. The importance of sound recordings is especially significant in contemporary retro rock since the music is largely defined by its relationship to past music as heard in original music products from the 1960s and 1970s. Further, in order to analyse the nostalgic evocations of the music itself through the sub-modes of composition and sound, the recordings offer the clearest texts for analysis in that regard.

This does not belie the significance of live music performance in contemporary retro rock, however sound recordings do typically provide the content of live music performance in contemporary retro rock, and therefore offers a framework with which to understand the manner of music production in a live context. The differences between live music and sound recordings

is considered in greater detail at the beginning of Chapter 6, but for our current purposes it is worth noting how these differences were utilized from a methodological standpoint. Building on my initial research into the sound recordings of the contemporary retro rock artists where I analysed and familiarized myself with these texts, attending their live music performances offered an opportunity to compare the kinds of sound elements being utilized in these two very different contexts and the differences in the representations of the compositions. By considering the ways in which contemporary retro rock artists remain faithful to, or differentiate themselves from, their recorded sound aesthetic, it became possible to assess how sound aesthetics are altered in the face of the relatively more unpredictable live music setting. In turn, the choices made by the artists in how to approach the musical elements of sound production in live contexts offer another insight into the values and meaning-making practices found in contemporary retro rock.

#### **4.3.2 Performance Analysis**

However more than just the way the music sounded in live performance, attending these gigs was an important way to gain a different kind of insight into contemporary retro rock that sound recordings alone could not offer. Unlike sound recordings, live music performance is an interactive *event*. It is comprised of both the artist and the audience interacting in a chosen venue such that the visual and physical elements of the music performance come into play in generating meaning and experience just as much as the musical aspects. In this way, live performance can therefore be understood as its own mode of contemporary retro rock.

In gathering data to consider the role of live music performance in contemporary retro rock, I attended gigs in person to observe the events and gather data. Considering my own role as insider researcher and my personal experience in attending rock and retro rock performances for nearly a decade before beginning my postgraduate studies, I had informally been collecting pieces of data and insights into contemporary retro rock performance for quite some time.

However I felt it necessary to attend a few shows which I would examine in greater detail, rather than cherry pick data from a large number of performances. This would offer a holistic view into the many aspects of a single performance which could then be contrasted and compared to another single performance from another artist source. In particular, the comparison would highlight the differences between varying rock subgenres found in contemporary retro rock, different venue locations and different audiences, whilst also demonstrating shared or underlying characteristics between them. The two performances I used as primary data were Tame Impala performing as part of the Vivid Festival at the Sydney Opera House and the Frowning Clouds performing at a pub venue – the Esplanade Hotel in St Kilda, Melbourne. The significance of these two performances was that they each reflected the popularity and music of each of the bands at the time, both in terms of the size of the venues, as well as the way the setting of each gig informed their musical preferences. The comparison of the two gigs provided the framework to make different points about each of the artists, their music and performance styles that contrasted to interesting effect and helped to paint a broader picture of the varying potentialities for contemporary retro rock.

In presenting this data, the approach to live music events adopted is drawn from Auslander's 'manifesto' on performance analysis and popular music (2004). As Auslander highlights, and as is also considered in greater detail in Chapter 6, there has been an under-representation as well as an associated devaluing of music performances in the broader field of performance studies (Auslander, 2004, p1). In a similar manner to the way in which musicology has historically privileged the musical form (composition/score) over the intricacies of the performance product (sound/recording/performance), there also exists a bias regarding the importance of a popular music recording over the live performance of popular music. Thus, Auslander has sought to emphasize "ways of discussing what popular musicians do *as performers* – the meanings they create through their performances and the means they use to create them" (2004, p3). As such, the means of expression reflecting the physicality of live music performance – the particulars of physical movement, gesture, body-language and stage

presence of the performers – are given as much weight in this chapter as the strictly musical aspects of live performance. In this spirit I also consider the role of gig-specific socio-cultural and genre conventions relating to the participation and behaviour of the audience (between themselves and the performers), the properties of the venues as well as other means of expression conveyed through other visual elements such as lighting and instruments.

### **4.3.3 Semiology and Album Covers**

Following from the combination of aural and visual information offered in analysing live performance, the mode of album cover art relates primarily to text and images. There does exist of course a great number of paratextual materials dealing with text and images in contemporary retro rock in addition to album covers such as gig posters, photography, band portraiture, websites, music videos and social media.<sup>19</sup> However album covers were chosen for analysis over these other materials for a number of reasons. Firstly, while acknowledging that all of these paratexts are significant to contemporary popular music, it was necessary to delimit the field of study for the practical purposes of brevity where it is better to focus in greater depth on a small group of images to communicate the role of text and image in framing contemporary retro rock music rather than briefly consider a great number of materials without much analytical depth. Album covers are significant in relation to contemporary retro rock music because they are closely linked to the recordings. This relationship has been a part of popular music since the introduction of album cover art to accompany LP records, with its peak in artistic relevance and exploration coinciding with the era of influence of contemporary retro rock, namely the 1960s. Album covers were of further interest because of the questions being raised by popular music commentators (McCourt, 2005; Reynolds, 2011) regarding the significance of digital formats and listening technologies on the role of album cover art and the associated consequences of their introduction in the music industry. In this climate, and because

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<sup>19</sup> I note that these ‘paratexts’ as I refer to them, could also be dubbed ‘peritexts’ as per Genette’s (1997b) usage.

of the importance demonstrated in contemporary retro rock practices of looking back, album covers also offer an insight into the intersections between this industry trend away from physical formats and the centrality of visual expression through album covers in contemporary retro rock. As such I feel that analysing album covers as the key visual paratext of contemporary retro rock is most sufficient to make the case for the visual workings of nostalgia. In attempting to interpret and understand how text and images relate to contemporary retro rock, my approach was to undertake a semiotic analysis of album covers, with specific reference to the way in which contemporary retro rock album covers utilize signs mirroring those found in 1960s and early 1970s rock album cover art. Indeed, it was these striking similarities in style which helped define this object of analysis and which seemed to follow the manner of intertextual and hypertextual references found in contemporary retro rock recordings. In choosing which album covers to analyse, I again drew upon the texts associated with the artists Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield. For the analysis itself, I approached each album cover beginning with a description of their denotative value before seeking to determine the connotations associated with the identified signs. In assessing these connotations and their ideological implications within contemporary retro rock, Barthes' (1972) concept of mythology and Baudrillard's notions of simulacra and hyperreality provide useful theoretical positions for interpreting the ideological function of these signs, and are considered in greater detail in this upcoming chapter.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth noting here that while there are problematic contradictions in Barthes' own views on semiology as between earlier and later writings, particularly with regard to *mythologies* which relies on the structuralist view that signs can have a fixed denotative meaning, I rely on the notion of myth in this instance as a particularly insightful tool in highlighting the ideological construction of the past, the 'psychedelic sixties' for example, as it informs contemporary retro rock music images, and not to undermine Barthes' own later

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<sup>20</sup> Although Barthes' notion of myth could potentially be expanded upon to encompass contemporary retro rock beyond the visual component of album covers, within the current scope of the thesis I use it as a specific tool to explore this visual enactment of nostalgia.

views on the fixity of signs (1977). ‘Mythology’ in this instance is used for a specific purpose, or as Hall (1993) puts it, “that which cuts into the infinite semiosis of Language” (p263), to elucidate the manner in which meaning is naturalized in rock music culture and subsequently utilized to assert authenticity values in contemporary retro rock texts. Indeed, contemporary retro rock largely appeals to poststructuralist and postmodern tendencies, that is, that the fixity of meaning itself is constantly deferred such that meaning is replaced by the play of signs, a view which I do ultimately accede to.

#### **4.3.4 Interviews and Talk**

While interview text is considered in the last substantive chapter of this thesis, semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted at different stages of my research in much the same ongoing, iterative process utilized across the other modes of contemporary retro rock. Although interviews differ in form from the other kinds of texts and modes being explored, they were not undertaken merely as a point of difference. While I had initially thought interviews would serve to provide an insight into creators’ attitudes and values – the *why* of contemporary retro rock – as a way to counterpoint and verify the kinds of textual analysis already discussed, the data was in fact more usefully geared towards informing the question of *how* retro rock is constructed and made sense of through the structures of talk which surround the musical products and practices. In this sense, interview talk, while reactive in nature, still shares a common meaning-making role as is found across other modes of contemporary retro rock. Because of this, talk generated through interviews thus offers a form of data that at once stands alongside the other kinds of data in the study, comparable in its meaning-making potential, but also simultaneously stands apart from the other modes in that the interviews are not garnered in the same fashion as these other kinds of texts which are found in the field. Interviews are directed more as a probing response drawn from the participants unlike the other texts which fall within the bounds of ‘found’ texts.

This dual nature of the interview data necessitates consideration into its implications with respect to its place in the current study. Because of the reactive nature of interviews in generating research content, there exists the ever present methodological question of the validity of qualitative interviewing as the mainline into a personal reality which I will address here. While a more naïve realist portrayal of the qualitative interview suggests a direct ‘naturalist’ insight into the subjective views of the interviewee, this kind of directness can be countered by a sceptical view as to the truthfulness of interview material offered by the constructionist approach (Silverman, 2013, p238). This scepticism derives from seeing interviews as a representational form of the interviewee’s actual experience, removed from the reality of the experience being explored.

The subject is more than can be contained in a text, and a text is only a reproduction of what the subject has told us. What the subject tells us is itself something that has been shaped by prior cultural understandings. Most important, language, which is our window into the subject’s world (and our world), plays tricks. It displaces the very thing it is supposed to represent, so that what is always given is a trace of other things, not the thing – lived experience – itself. (Denzin, 1991, p68)

Thus an interviewee’s account is really just that – an account, a narrative constituted of experience and personal subjectivity, doused with cultural conditioning and aired through language constructs. From this point the qualitative interview then undergoes further processes at the stages of coding, editing and interpretation, further drawing the interview text away from the notion of an ideal text. Representation then is not just occurring at the level of the interviewee’s account, but throughout the entirety of the process, “from the moment of “primary experience” to the reading of researchers’ textual presentation of findings, including the level of attending to the experience, telling it to the researcher, transcribing and analyzing what is told, and the reading” (Miller & Glassner, 2011, p134). In this sense, seeking an undiluted ‘reality’ through interview is a futile pursuit.

But having made mention of these difficulties, I contend that the interview text remains of value, not despite these difficulties, but explicitly *because* of them. Lest we mourn the loss of an (unattainable) ideal truth behind the interviewee’s account of their experience, we gain

something else which is effectively just as valuable, if not far more useful in the scope of our current studies; that is, a text which offers the means to evaluate the cultural and ideological constructs which help define contemporary retro rock as it is structured and constructed through the way it is represented in talk. Because the current project is ultimately about how meaning is facilitated through these constructions, this kind of data is most useful. Indeed, it follows the constructionist approach which, “by abandoning the attempt to treat respondents’ accounts as potentially ‘true’ pictures of ‘reality’, we open up for analysis the culturally rich methods through which interviewers and interviewees, in concert, generate plausible accounts of the world” (Silverman, 2013, p238). So rather than being concerned that “interviewees sometimes respond to interviewers through the use of familiar narrative constructs, rather than providing meaningful insights into their subjective view,” the fact of their use of narrative constructs can still provide a great insight into the way in which contemporary retro rock is understood and represented (Miller & Glassner, 2011, p133).

Thus, whether elicited or not, the talk resultant from the interview process is part of contemporary retro rock, it is *scenic talk*. The interviews provide numerous examples of the kinds of talk associated with framing structural constraints of authenticity in contemporary retro rock, and delimiting the boundaries of acceptable practices, behaviours and values. As such, where a narrative construct, such as the ascription of an ‘us versus them’ position within a particular social context, can be recognized, this reveals to us the operative mechanics of contemporary retro rock talk. As will be investigated and explained throughout the course of the remaining chapters, contemporary retro rock generates, transfers and transforms meaning through the interplay of signs across its many modes. The talk used to express and discuss contemporary retro rock is effectively another mode of contemporary retro rock. The interview data is rich with talk patterns, representations of values and ideological underpinnings that can be identified and analysed in similar ways to the other modes in the wider study.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Indeed the richness of the talk surrounding contemporary retro rock could provide plentiful material for its own dissertation, extending beyond the participants from the three case studies to audience studies.

And yet, while the findings with regard to talk and other texts can be mutually supportive of similar findings across the different modes as the multimodal analysis model encourages, I am still mindful of the different process by which interviews take place in the production of texts for analysis. Holstein and Gubrium (2011) propose the model of the *active interview* which is a useful way to discuss the inherent roles of both interviewer and interviewee in constructing the interview as a text. In particular, the active interview model suggests that meaning is not merely teased out by the interviewer from the interviewee, but that it is actively produced and constructed by the interviewee through the process of the interview (Gray, 2003, p95). With this in mind, Holstein and Gubrium suggest that researchers should be aware not only of *what* (the substantive content of the interview) is being said, but *how* it is being said (the narrative process of expressing the substantive content): “The *whats* always reflect the circumstances and practices conditioning the interview” (2011, p151). This awareness extends not only to the reporting of results, but also to the research process. To this end, I will be spending some time at the beginning of Chapter 8 highlighting further details as to the specific method and approach adopted in the open-ended interviews undertaken and how these decisions have impacted on the outcomes of the interviews.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

This project was undertaken from a perspective informed by qualitative methodological underpinnings. As I have already mentioned, there are epistemological concerns surrounding the reliability and validity of qualitative inquiry, especially as compared to a more strictly scientific approach. However the great strength of qualitative research is found in its usefulness and high value in terms of depth of insight, empathy and understanding. Since the study is ultimately an

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However, while audience studies are certainly interesting, they extend beyond the scope of the current field of study for the thesis which is geared towards the texts and paratexts of contemporary retro rock and contemporary retro rock musicians themselves.

exercise in uncovering the forms of meaning-making within contemporary retro rock, its qualitative approach is more than warranted.

Another important element which informs the study is the notion of interpretation and the subjective role of the researcher. Coming from a background as ‘insider researcher’, I felt as though I was in a unique position to research the subject area which was certainly beneficial at times, but which also saw me needing to question my own subjectivity and the validity of my interpretations. With this in mind, I have attempted to maintain a reflexive distance in the process of researching, interpreting and writing throughout the various stages of the project – the issues surrounding this being considered and brought to the fore as they arise in the coming chapters.

I have relied on a multimodal approach in addressing the various elements of the contemporary retro rock ‘text’ because of its diffuse nature across a variety of facets and forms that contribute to the whole. Represented not just in musical texts, it is strewn across different modes that use their own kinds of grammars of expression. In examining and interpreting these modes, a multimodal approach allowed each to be considered with reference to their own specific forms and contexts and ultimately in relation to each other as part of the greater whole. While I have begun discussing the specific theories and methods utilized with relation to each mode already in this chapter, I will be returning to these and elaborating further upon them in relation to the findings developed in the upcoming chapters.

## SECTION II: “DOING SOMETHING THAT’S BEEN DONE”

*Doing something that’s been done*

*Doing something that’s been done*

*Don’t worry, I assure you that it’s all just for  
fun*

*Doing something that’s been done*

- The Frowning Clouds, ‘Shoe Suede Blues’  
(2013)

## 5 'THE SONG REMAINS THE SAME': COMPOSITION AND SOUND IN CONTEMPORARY RETRO ROCK RECORDINGS

*...to reproduce is nothing, and imitating supposes a more complex operation, the completion of which raises imitation above mere reproduction: it becomes a new production – that of another text in the same style, of another message in the same code.*

(Genette, 1997a, p84)

*The song remains the same*

- Led Zeppelin, 'The Song Remains the Same' (1973)

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on elements of recorded contemporary retro rock music. Within the context of the modern music industry, the recorded version of a musical work often serves as the definitive performance, being the most pervasive example available to the widest audience. It is common for a sound recording to also serve as the basis of material for live performance, as well as inspiring the paratextual material which may accompany the sound recording. In addition, both artists and producers typically wield a great degree of control through the processes of composing and performing for recordings, giving them an opportunity to invest a great deal of time, money and effort into meticulously constructing a finished sound product, facilitated by the ever-evolving sophistication and ease of recording technology. The recorded sound product thus forms the initial point of reference through which to begin an investigation into the workings and meanings of contemporary retro rock music.

In order to effectively analyse these retro rock sound products, this chapter will regard recorded music as a combination of two fundamental aspects that contribute to a finished recorded musical work: the musical composition and the phonographic staging of that composition.<sup>22</sup> As we will examine in the next part, this distinction between the two can be seen as an artificial separation, and I do not seek to favour the reading that recorded musical compositions are to be understood merely as the simple addition of these two halves. Rather, I believe that the overlap between these elements is complex such that they ultimately need to be understood together. I seek to make clear that recorded music is not just comprised of its musical composition, nor just of the recorded performance of musicians in the studio, and it is important to consider recorded music as a whole to establish the overall effect of a piece of recorded music. However I will be persisting with this division as part of the structure of analysis in this chapter for two reasons. The first is that as an analytical tool, this apportionment creates two manageable streams for analysis of retro rock recordings. But more significantly, the perception of this division between composition and sound production is enacted in retro rock music such that different ideological outcomes of authenticity are ascribed to their use or appropriation. To this end, I will ultimately seek to illustrate these modes of authenticity as they pertain to composition and sound through charting a linear axis, or continuum, of authenticity in contemporary retro rock music.

The chapter will start by considering the analytical distinction between composition and sound, before going on to examine specific sound recordings derived from the catalogues of the three contemporary retro rock artists which form the focus of this study – Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield. Following from the division between composition and sound, we will then consider how particular compositional practices centred on intertextuality and hypertextuality are utilized in contemporary retro rock to create an association between those

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<sup>22</sup> While this bipartite view of the elements of recorded music best serves my objectives in this chapter of understanding and dissecting contemporary retro rock music recordings, I note that Lacasse (2015) suggests a tripartite model which also considers the role of performance practice as an additional category in music as both recorded and performed. I have chosen to focus on these performative parameters in Chapter 6.

recordings and their original points of reference. And just as much as a retro song might be compositionally suggestive of the past, the ‘sound’ of a recorded song also plays an increasingly significant part in suggesting the period of reference for these contemporary retro compositions. With this in mind, the second aspect of contemporary retro rock recordings to be examined in this chapter focuses on the role of phonographic staging in sonically suggesting the past. Based on the phonographic staging model initially derived from the work of Moylan (2002) and further developed through its application to the popular music voice by Lacasse (2000b; 2005), I will be using the parameters of sound manipulation suggested by the model – loudness, space, time and timbre – to help describe the ways in Tame Impala’s recordings are able to affect meaning through sound, especially in evoking the ‘psychedelic sixties’.

Again, these musical texts should be understood as a whole, and as I will discuss at the conclusion of this chapter, all of these processes are informed by each other such that there is no definitive linear approach to sound recording in contemporary retro rock. For example, the phonographic staging of a song may inform a composition just as much as the composition of a song might suggest the phonographic staging. Ultimately, there is no specific or ‘correct’ way in which nostalgia is evoked through contemporary retro rock music, but rather a varying scale of ‘agreement’ that can be achieved musically through these elements. To this end, the chapter concludes by introducing a continuum of derivativeness for contemporary retro rock recordings based on the findings of this chapter.

## **5.2 THE COMPOSITION AND SOUND DIVIDE**

On the face of it, the distinction between ‘music’ and the ‘sound’ of the music may seem inconsequential to most listeners. However this distinction is a longstanding part of the Western music tradition – derived from and correlating with the conceptual binary between composition and performance. Simply put, the compositional element of music consists of the

selection of musical notes which are structured and arranged in a particular sequence, while the tone, texture and timbre of the music are arrived at through manner of performance and choice of instrument. The dichotomy represented by these two elements has arisen over the course of centuries and is directly related to the development of musical notation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular, the hierarchical distinction between composition, “conceived of as an analytic activity,” and performance, “an activity based in skill, expression, and shock,” became evident:

Despite the public enthusiasm for the virtuoso performer, it was the score that constituted the “immortal” and more valued artistic statement ... In more extreme forms of this discursive polarity, the actual physical sound of the music, as produced by musical instruments, is considered to be little more than an unfortunate though necessary medium for the presentation of the “pure” structure of the music manifest in the score. (Théberge, 1997, pp188-189)

This conceptual division between composition and performance, though practical for composers of the time (to exert ownership over a piece of music in lieu of the invention of recording technology), has lasted into the modern era where its effects are still evident as to the values of ‘music’ and ‘sound’. However this is hardly a natural distinction, and is not borne across all cultures. In parts of Africa such as East Africa, for example, there is no specific word for ‘music’ but rather an all-encompassing word meaning ‘drum’ which labels the integration of rhythm, music, dance and ritual – viewed together as an inseparable whole (Théberge, 1997, p188). In this environment there is no hierarchy to which the individual elements are arranged or understood. Indeed, attempting to separate them in order to make the music as a whole communicable using formal Western music discourses has proven especially difficult (Grupe, 2005). What this contrasting example reveals is that perceiving music and sound as isolated from one another can leave either of these elements under-represented and undervalued.

Although the compositional element had traditionally been the most revered aspect of music making in the West, a number of advancements and trends in the last century have shifted some of the value back towards the sound element. Historically, the main downfall of performance and sound was their transience; a performance lived only in the moment, while a

scored composition could last for all eternity. However with the introduction of recording technology and mass-reproduction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a performance no longer remained fleeting, but could be preserved and heard over and over again by millions. This had the effect of substantially altering the music business, as well as increasing the awareness of sound in music. Firstly, whereas publishing of original compositions represented one of the most lucrative aspects of the industry in which the consumption of the music was in the hands of the consumer,<sup>23</sup> the introduction of sound reproduction led to the rise of the individual identity of the performer, who offered definitive interpretations to particular compositions – performances which could be replicated en masse for broadcast and ownership (Théberge, 1997, p191). Secondly, with the pioneering of electric sound recording in the 1920s and 1930s also came the continued development and familiarity of unique and individualized styles (or ‘sounds’) which utilized these developments – in particular the distinct vocal tone provided by microphones and the audio-visual medium of sound pictures (Théberge, 1997, pp191-192). As the century progressed, so did the quality, availability and proliferation of sound devices,<sup>24</sup> exponentially increasing the awareness of the sound of recorded music and discernment of its quality by consumers.

However in addition to ‘sound’ being associated with the quality of *reproduction*, listeners were beginning to differentiate between different styles of *production*. Extending to more than just differences discernible between varying musical styles, the distinct approaches of engineers and producers to the recording process had in effect “created a new aesthetic of “sound”” (Théberge, 1997, p192). From the 1950s onwards, the notion of sound became increasingly tied to individuals and entities in control of producing music just as much as it had been related to the performers of music. For example particular jazz labels such as Blue Note and Riverside were known for cultivating a particular sonic aesthetic. Even when the same artist would perform on different labels, a palpable difference in the sound of their performances was

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<sup>23</sup> Literally, since consumers performed the score themselves.

<sup>24</sup> By the 1950s, recorded music was primarily available on convenient and high-quality microgroove vinyl which boasted the best sound reproduction available up to that time.

evident on the recordings made at competing studios. The virtuoso double bassist, composer and bandleader Charles Mingus famously refused to record with iconic Blue Note producer Rudy Van Gelder, claiming that he changes performers' sound (Priestley, 1984). Likewise in pop music, by the 1960s producers were identified for creating their own particular sound. Phil Spector, for example, had such a unique aesthetic that it was even given its own name – the 'wall of sound', while in the case of television band the Monkees (who famously did not perform the music on much of their early albums), music supervisor Don Kirshner was responsible for coordinating a unified sound for the 'band' despite the use of a variety of different composers and performers. In other instances 'sound' became identifiable with a geographic location such as with the 'Nashville Sound', the 'Detroit Sound' and 'Merseybeat'.

With this increasingly heightened awareness of sound aesthetics, it has become more and more difficult to separate the *sound* of recorded music from the music itself. That is to say, in the era of recorded music, the sound of the music is an integrated and defining part of the music as a whole. The invention of musical reproduction has therefore compelled a paradigm shift in the way that popular music, its composition and performance, are understood:

...the reproduction now functions as the original, the live performance is measured against the recording, and technical equipment is seen not as an external aid to reproduction but as a characteristic of the musical original, employed as part of the artistic conception. (Wicke, 1982, p236)

Whereas the composition/performance binary dominated perceptions of Western music for centuries (legitimizing the role of the composer over the skill of the performer), the immortality of modern music lies now not with the composition, but with the product which is captured on record. The music recording, with all its inherent aesthetic subtleties of production and recorded performance is now the reference which is saved for posterity – not so much the score of the music. The act of live performance, which was once merely seen as a reading of a composition as transcribed through musical score, now must live up to the definitive recording of the music.<sup>25</sup> To provide but one example to illustrate the lengths to which the obsession with

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<sup>25</sup> This will be explored in more detail in the later chapter on live performance.

authenticity goes in live music and how much influence the sound of the original mass-produced recording has on live performance of an old composition, Théberge details the efforts taken by the Rolling Stones' backing musicians to utilize the right digital technology in order to recreate their early hits (1997, p196). In this instance, a keyboardist explains how in order to recreate the sound of a Mellotron – an analogue keyboard which uses magnetic tape loops to simulate the sound of acoustic instruments – he has to painstakingly search for the precise digital sound replication. The absurd proportions of sound reproduction are realized here in what Théberge considers a form of “second-order simulation” – a digital copy of an analogue copy of an acoustic sound (1997, p196).

As this example illustrates, the shift towards the authority of recorded sound has resulted in a greater emphasis on the role of technology in the creation (and recreation) of music – an element now so important that it rivals the traditional notions of what defines musical composition. Théberge notes that:

...musical production has become closely allied to a form of *consumer* practice, where the process of selecting the “right” pre-fabricated sounds and effects for a given musical context has become as important as “making” music in the first place. Musicians are not simply consumers of new technologies, rather their entire approach to music-making has been transformed so that consumption – the exercise of taste and choice – has become implicated in their musical practices at the most fundamental level. (1997, p200)

While Théberge is discussing the role of pre-fabricated sounds inherent in certain digital technologies such as synthesizers in music making, it is not difficult to see how this notion might extend to the choices musicians and producers make in using particular instruments, recording techniques and performance styles to create a desired sound to affect specific outcomes. The practice of replicating sound styles was already occurring with ever increasing accuracy in the era before digital technologies. For example, the Nashville Sound, which was created through the combined input of a group of producers, engineers and session musicians localized in Nashville, came to be so familiar and ingrained as a sonic aesthetic that by the mid-1970s it could be replicated virtually anywhere (Théberge, 1997, p194).

However when the idea of temporality is added to this process – that is, utilizing particular sounds evocative of certain past eras and placing them in a modern context as with contemporary retro rock music – the suggestive potential of a well-known sound aesthetic can be surprisingly effective. Théberge reflects that the listener of a pop song which includes sound samples from the past and present is “immediately struck by a feeling of a fluctuating multiple temporality; a difference in the perceived relationship between past and present; the nature of one’s own subject position as a listener; and the apparent dispersal of the unified subject, or persona, of the composer/songwriter embodied in the work itself” (1997, p206). Likewise, this play between temporalities, between perceptions of past and present, not only in its sound, but in its composition and performance, is what ultimately makes contemporary retro rock such a rich source for considering this interplay.

### **5.3 COMPOSITION**

In investigating what compositional elements render a composition more or less retro or capable of inspiring vicarious nostalgia, there are a number of approaches to composition in contemporary retro rock music which are discernibly patent in their similarity to 1960s rock compositions, while others are more elusive in their relationship to past music. This spectrum from the overt to the subtle align with a move from the intertextual to the hypertextual, embellishing with Lacasse’s (2000a) expansion to popular music of Genette’s (1997a) theory of intertextuality and hypertextuality in literature. So rather than taking on the cumbersome task of considering entire recorded bodies of work by a number of contemporary retro rock artists to the point of repetition, the approach taken here is to begin with examples of overt intertextual compositional practices and gradually moving towards considering instances of hypertextuality which result in a far more understated outcome. Through this range of examples, a broader sense of the kinds of approaches will be garnered to provide a sense of scope for the breadth of contemporary retro rock music practices.

Intertextuality in composition is demonstrated by this first example of Stonefield's composition for 'Black Water Rising' (2011), where the familiarity with earlier music is made conspicuous through the use of two prominent riffs which are melodically similar to those of well-known classic rock recordings. In the first instance, let us consider the pre-chorus riff from 'Black Water Rising' (Figure 1). The guitar and bass hit an E note in unison with the drums, accenting the first two eighth beats in the bar. This powerful and arresting accented phrase bears an uncanny resemblance to the opening bars of the first track on Led Zeppelin's eponymous debut album, 'Good Times Bad Times' (1969) (Figure 2) where the E notes are also performed in the same manner. In fact so close are these two pieces of music that the first bar is almost identical save for a bend on guitar from A to B which sets them apart. This even extends to the high-hat quavers in the first bar which measure the time between the next recurring accented notes.

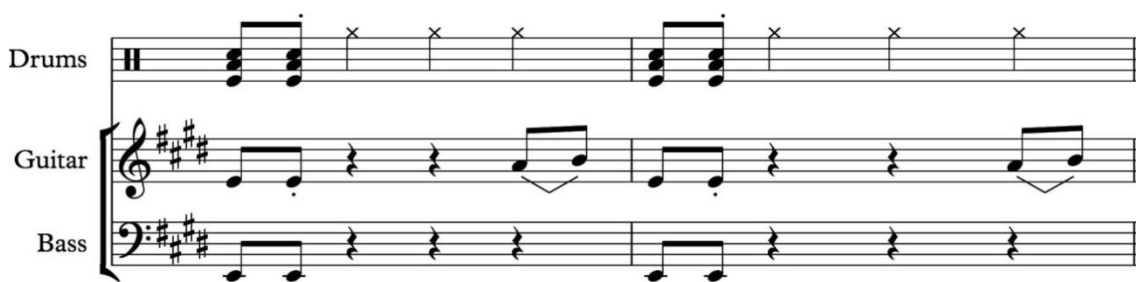


Figure 1: Pre-chorus riff – 'Black Water Rising' by Stonefield (2011)



Figure 2: Introductory bars of 'Good Times Bad Times' by Led Zeppelin (1969)

This riff is featured not just in the introduction to the song, but very prominently by Stonefield throughout 'Black Water Rising'. From a compositional perspective, it serves the purpose of bridging the verses with the choruses in a way which helps to accentuate the contrasting fullness of the verses and choruses. However far more significantly, the use of this

riff in ‘Black Water Rising’ directly ties the song and the group to Led Zeppelin. Indeed, while this sparse riff is only heard at the very beginning of ‘Good Times Bad Times’ in this exact form as notated above, (although it is the accented eighths in E which also serve as a refrain for the verses where all instruments go on to expand upon the riff’s earlier simplicity), this riff is of particular significance to Led Zeppelin’s music and heralds their uniqueness within the rock canon. The boldness of the stark accented eighths was a landmark introduction to the group – holding the distinction of being the first heard recorded notes offered by the group, from the first track of their first album – whilst being further representative of the group as their first single release. In many ways, ‘Good Times Bad Times’ is the defining song of Led Zeppelin’s early career, and for some this distinctive two-note hit “was the sound of a new world being born, and the louder sound of an old world being destroyed” (Hamilton, 2014). As such, Stonefield have adopted a well-known riff, rich with history and evocativeness to Led Zeppelin in their own recording, such that there is a very explicit compositional relationship between ‘Black Water Rising’ and ‘Good Times Bad Times’.

This is an example of one the clearest and most direct approaches in recorded popular music of establishing an intertextual relationship between a new musical composition and an older composition – namely ‘quotation’. For Lacasse (2000a), quotation in popular music is considered a process of taking an excerpt from a previous musical text and repeating it within a new musical text. While similar to quotation in written texts, it can be used with greater liberties in a musical context. In a musical/compositional sense, quotation is the reusing, rephrasing or ‘borrowing’ of a melody, guitar riff or indeed any compositional phrase of a song. In ‘Black Water Rising’, the E eighth notes are shown above to be identical to those in ‘Good Times Bad Times’, and are in this sense very much the same as quotation in the written form. However a compositional quotation can also be interpreted more abstractly. Whereas Lacasse (2000a) focuses on instances of intertextuality that intersect with *recorded* music (more so than from a purely compositional perspective), there are approaches to quotation in popular music which are less an *exact* copy, such as the common practice with jazz musicians, for example, of copying or

‘quoting’ a melody from another song during a solo (p38). This type of quotation is allosonic – that is, drawn from an abstract source such as another melody or tune – where the phrase can be used or performed broadly in a totally separate context, by a different instrument, in a different key and so on. This contrasts with an autosonic quotation such as in the musical practice of sampling where the quotation is, rather than being recreated or interpolated in a different context, is taken from one physical recording and directly inserted into another. Thus, allosonic quotation need not be an *exact* ‘copy’ of the earlier phrase like with autosonic quotation or as in the written form. Instead, it can be interpreted more broadly.



Figure 3: Guitar line heard in verses of ‘Black Water Rising’ by Stonefield (2011)



Figure 4: Guitar line heard in the coda of ‘Out on the Tiles’ by Led Zeppelin (1970)

This more abstract form of quotation is also demonstrated in Stonefield’s ‘Black Water Rising’ by the verse guitar riff. A simple vamp is performed on guitar which alternates between E-E-E-G and E-E-E-D (Figure 3). While the riff is in itself quite straightforward, it holds a great deal in common with the guitar line heard in the coda to ‘Out on the Tiles’ by Led Zeppelin (Figure 4) from their third album, *III* (1970). In the Led Zeppelin recording, this riff is not played strictly the same each time it is repeated, but is essentially based on the vamp as notated in Figure 4, lasting for nearly one minute and thirty seconds at the end of the recording until fade out. The essential difference between these two riffs is highlighted below, where Led Zeppelin’s guitarist, Jimmy Page, plays the E as sixteenth notes in the first part of each phrase, while Stonefield’s Hannah Findlay rests where Page plays the third sixteenth. The other difference of course is the notes played at the end of the phrase where Page ends on E-A-A-G and Findlay ends again on E-E-E-D. However, while the notes are not the same, at this point the phrasing of

those notes are comparable, and are still musically similar in that the last three notes in the ‘Out on the Tiles’ riff (A-A-G) are a fourth higher, in the same key.

Thus, while not strictly a direct copy, Stonefield’s verse riff is closely related to that from the coda of ‘Out on the Tiles’ such that it can be seen as an allosonic quotation where the phrase is interpreted slightly more abstractly than in the previous example. However despite this abstractness, the differences between the guitar lines of both songs are still negligible. The quotation is still made clear through enough structural similarities to warrant a well-defined intertextual relationship between them. And indeed, this is especially the case in ‘Black Water Rising’ where Stonefield feature this riff directly leading in to the pre-chorus riff (Figure 1). With two very clear Led Zeppelin quotations being used one after the other to form a significant part of the composition, there is little question as to where inspiration is being drawn in this particular composition.

Stonefield are not of course the only retro rock artist to utilize quotation to form the basis of their own compositions. The practice can be demonstrated for example in a composition by Tame Impala called ‘Island Walking’. Released as a bonus track with the iTunes edition of *Innerspeaker* (2010), ‘Island Walking’ bears a strong compositional similarity to the Jimi Hendrix Experience’s ‘Manic Depression’ (1967a). However, rather than the more explicit instance quotation in ‘Black Water Rising’, Tame Impala adapt the verse melody from ‘Manic Depression’ to the main guitar riff of ‘Island Walking’ with a different vocal melody sung over it. The essential compositional differences as demonstrated in Figures 5 and 6 are the lowering of the melody by a tone in ‘Island Walking’ and the addition of another note in the second bar.

In addition, ‘Island Walking’ replicates another unique aspect of ‘Manic Depression’ – its 9/8 time signature. Typically, time signatures are a feature of popular music which garner little attention since the vast majority of western popular music recordings, and rock recordings in particular, are composed in 4/4 time. It is difficult to consider the use of 9/8 in a contemporary retro rock song as a form of quotation. Case in point is Stonefield’s ‘Black Water

Rising’ which, while sharing a 4/4 time signature with the Led Zeppelin recordings it quotes from, does not of itself stand out as quotation insofar as 4/4 remains the default time signature of the genre. However, while 4/4 time is rarely given much attention as an element of rock composition, unusual time signatures by virtue of their uniqueness in the rock music genre can bear a direct relationship to particular compositions. So where ‘Manic Depression’ offers a prominent example of the seldom heard 9/8 time signature, its use in ‘Island Walking’, even more so than its melodic quotation, helps to strengthen the intertextual relationship between the two compositions. This is further reinforced in ‘Island Walking’ with the adoption of a similar drum pattern to ‘Manic Depression’ (save for the tom fill at the end of every bar), which highlights the swinging rhythm of the 9/8 time signature.

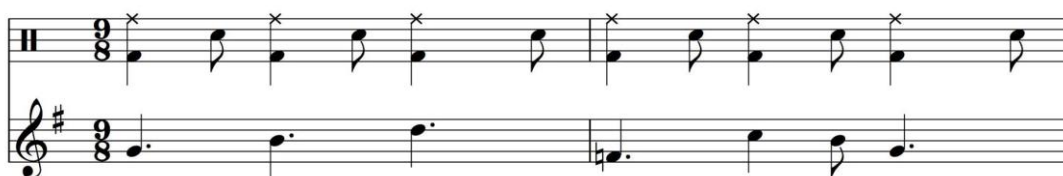


Figure 5: ‘Island Walking’ by Tame Impala (2010)



Figure 6: ‘Manic Depression’ by the Jimi Hendrix Experience (1967a)

In these instances of considerably overt compositional similarities to specific rock recordings, what identifies them as being so blatant is their prominent use of intertextuality. While not all listeners may be adept at pinpointing the specific reference being adopted in the compositions of these contemporary retro rock songs, it is safe to say that in these instances there is little which obscures elements of the new compositions from those of the old. Further to this, where the quotations are drawn from canonical rock songs and artists, such as with the above examples, the likelihood of identifying the instances of intertextuality is greatly increased. The next set of *hypertextual* approaches is a step removed from these instances of

direct intertextuality and represents more of a middle-ground of derivativeness in contemporary retro rock music. Hypertextuality differs mainly in that it demonstrates a marked change from the practice of including a *specific* element of a previous text in another text, to a more focused attempt at creating a new text *from* a previous one (Lacasse, 2000a, p37). While there is certainly room for overlap between what constitutes intertextuality and hypertextuality (especially in examples where quotation is interpreted more abstractly), the key to hypertextual practice is a move toward ‘transformation’ or ‘imitation’ of a previous text (‘hypotext’) as a whole in the creation of a new text (‘hypertext’) as opposed to a mere copy of excerpts.

Before continuing, it is worth noting the trappings that result from this definition of hypertextuality, and how it can be resolved. Genette was very mindful of the way in which hypertextuality could be understood to inherently connect all texts such that it would be possible to “trace in just about any work the local, fugitive, and partial echoes of any other work, be it anterior or ulterior” (1997a, p9). In terms of the study of popular music, it could then be said that any new song was effectively a hypertext to the entirety of music preceding it. While for Moore, this “‘presence within a text of other texts’ is a recognition that music is self-similar,” the repercussions of this would be far-reaching in the study of all popular music (2012, p272). This far-reaching reading of hypertextuality would subsume all texts, and in Genette’s words, render their study “somewhat unmanageable” (1997a, p9). However as both Genette and Lacasse suggest, there are indeed hypertexts that are more clearly related to their hypotexts than others, “or more visibly, massively, and explicitly so than others” (Genette, 1997a, p9). Lacasse refers to this as ‘agreement’, whereby a clear link between a hypertext and its hypotext is usually forged. Agreement can be located specifically within the musical text or within a paratextual element, such as an album title, cover art and so on. ‘Agreement’ in this way serves a fundamental role in helping to centre any nostalgic reading of a contemporary retro rock text by helping to focus what would be the preferred reading of the various elements making up retro rock texts.

Agreement is perhaps best expressed musically within a contemporary retro rock text through the hypertextual practice of pastiche.<sup>26</sup> As part of this practice, “an author of a pastiche identifies and assimilates a particular set of stylistic features in order to create an entirely new text displaying the stylistic configuration in question” (Lacasse, 2000a, pp43-44). Pastiche is therefore markedly different from intertextual quotation, since there is no specific hypotext from which the new text is drawn, but rather, a mimicking of an abstract feature – style. A style becomes identifiable where a number of texts share similar aesthetic properties. Thus the style of 1960s psychedelic or garage rock music comes about when a number of different recordings from that era have enough in common with each other to create “a common generic corpus” (Lacasse, 2000a, p44). In this way, a hypertext in the mode of pastiche “has not one hypotext, but many hypotexts” (Lacasse, 2000a, p44).

The Frowning Clouds in particular are quite skilled at suggesting early-1960s British and garage rock in their compositions, generally without recourse to intertextual quotation in the music. Instead, they are able to create a new text which is informed by a variety of texts that often reflect the stylistic qualities of early-1960s rock broadly, but can also evoke a specific artist without explicit quotation of that artist. Where Lacasse suggests that through pastiche:

It is possible, for example, to imagine a band that would record a new song in the style of (say) The Beatles with such success that some listeners who were not very familiar with The Beatles’ *oeuvre* believed that they were actually listening to a new Beatles song, (2000a, p44)

the Frowning Clouds represent this kind of band, save only for their preference for the style of the Rolling Stones over that of the Beatles. The compositional style of the Frowning Clouds is one which utilizes a number of tropes across a number of recordings, many of which are typical of, but not necessarily specific to individual recordings from, the Rolling Stones’ early catalogue of music. Essentially the essence of pastiche here is not centred on any one compositional element, but is a layering of these ideas to form “a texture of *imitations*”

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<sup>26</sup> While pastiche can be associated with the imitation of a specific artist, usually to humorous effect, I am adopting Genette’s model which notably refers “to the imitation of a style without any satirical intent” (1997a, p25).

(Genette, 1997a, p80). Thus one compositional element on its own, such as the use of blues riffs and 12-bar blues structures ('Lovin' You' (2009), 'Sorry Business' (2009), 'I've Got You' (2010), 'I've Got a Bone For You' (2010)), is not necessarily of itself specifically evocative of the Rolling Stones (although the blues was a major part of the Rolling Stones' compositions). But when these blues structures are coupled with the distinctive instrumentation heard on Rolling Stones recordings of this early period such as slide guitar and harmonica, for example, the level of 'agreement' increases ('Snake Charmer' (2010), 'Lovin' You', 'Please Yourself' (2010), 'Time Wastin' Woman' (2009)). Adding a third element, such as a Bo Diddley beat to accent the rhythm of 'Snake Charmer' (like that used in the Rolling Stones' recordings of 'Mona (I Need You Baby)' (1964) and 'Please Go Home' (1967a)), increases the scale of agreement again, and so on.

However more than agreement being a simple question of the addition of elements resulting in a progressively more evocative recording, pastiche can also reinforce or take away from the level of agreement in ways that are again more subtle with relation to hypotexts. In diluting one element from a single hypotext by changing its musical context or construction, for example, a contemporary retro rock artist may create a pastiche which evidences agreement, but in a way markedly more abstract for the listener. This occurs in the Frowning Clouds' 'Human Being, Human Doing, Human Going' (2013), the introduction of which reverses the chords that form the main riff of 'Louie, Louie' popularized by the Kingsmen (1963). But more than merely reversing the chords as a kind of abstract intertextual reference, the Frowning Clouds perform the chords at an extremely slow tempo before gradually increasing the tempo and rhythmically altering them in the verses of the song such that the relationship between the Frowning Clouds and the Kingsmen is effectively lost, save for the remnants of a vague chordal similarity. When this is coupled with other factors of agreement such as the song's vocal arrangement (calling to mind that of the Beatles' earlier recordings), to the casual listener, the driving riff of the song would likely be evocative of the *kinds* of riffs heard in early 1960s garage rock music, but not explicitly so.

In this way, pastiche as a compositional style of contemporary retro rock music can be an effective way of composing new rock music with a 1960s feel without recourse to direct intertextual references. Of course, depending on how pastiche is used by contemporary retro rock artists in conjunction with other elements of a recording, this subtlety may vary. Thus where an artist chooses to pair the hypertextual use of pastiche with quotation, a recording will likely be more explicitly evocative than without the intertextual references. While we have here focused on the Frowning Clouds, compositional pastiche is a shared characteristic of contemporary retro rock music as represented in the music of Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield. Even where they all differ as to the finer points of style and rock sub-genre, it is their exploitation of the generalized qualities of their respective sub-genres of 1960s and early 1970s rock music which aids in their music's evocativeness. Another tool at the disposal of contemporary retro rock artists which couples with, and may indeed be used to emphasize compositional pastiche, is that of the sound of their recordings.

## **5.4 SOUND**

One of the key elements differentiating retro leanings in contemporary rock music from past retro rock trends is the heightened capability for meticulous recreation of past music sounds. While there is much to be said of intertextual and hypertextual compositional elements in the music, perhaps the most distinctive aesthetic feature of contemporary retro rock music is the pronounced sense of age derived from the *sound* of the music itself. It is therefore important to highlight by way of example the difference between retro songs that rely largely (and sometimes only) on the compositional aspect of the original music it imitates as opposed to contemporary retro rock songs that are both compositionally and sonically geared towards emulating the past. Oftentimes in previous retro trends, whereas a retro song typically relies mostly on its composition to suggest the past, the sonic aspect of the sound recording is ignored in so much as the contemporaneous default technologies and sound palettes of the day are

utilized. This is evident in such 1960s throwbacks of the 1980s such as The Romantics' 'What I Like About You' (1980) and Peter Gabriel's take on Stax style soul, 'Sledgehammer' (1986), for example. Most attentive audiences familiar with 1960s popular music tropes would be able to recognize some of the distinct compositional markers found in these recordings – handclaps and a repetitive four-chord garage rock song structure in the former, and the derivative brass arrangements and female soul singer backing vocals in the latter. However what is lacking in these songs is a relative matching of the style of music with the equivalent sound palette associated with the 1960s styles being referenced. Both recordings in this way favour an over-produced sound sensibility associated with the time of their production rather than utilizing the available technology to recreate the sounds of the 1960s. This is especially the case with 'Sledgehammer' which features the original Stax label brass section musicians, who play in their unique style but remain virtually unrecognizable within the modern soundscape of the recording.

In a similar fashion, Britpop music of the 1990s was renowned for its retro sensibility but was sonically in keeping with the contemporary sound production of its time. Britpop drew heavily on 1960s guitar pop – utilizing lyrical melodies and structural musical elements reminiscent of artists such as the Beatles and the Kinks. This can be heard frequently in the music of Oasis, a seminal Britpop rock band, especially insofar as their compositions were concerned. Sonically however, Oasis' music typically features the effects and high-end sound production available in the 1990s. One review of their 1994 debut album *Definitely Maybe* describes for example their layering of "two or three distorted guitars piled on top of each other" as out of step with the "Kinky music-hall" style they are employing in such tracks as 'Digsy's Dinner' (Starostin, 2002).

Keeping in mind the mismatch between composition and sound found in many earlier retro rock movements, the recent proliferation of contemporary retro rock music that emphasizes 'authentic' retro sounds represents a major advancement in retro sensibilities in

music and its inherent ability to evoke the past.<sup>27</sup> This is not to discount the importance of the compositional element found in contemporary retro rock music, but merely to highlight the progressive nature of the current trend. Indeed, in the reverse circumstance where retro sound palettes are applied to an *inappropriately* styled composition, this would create a similar disconnect. It is therefore very important to consider both composition *and* sound in examining this new music.

#### 5.4.1 The Phonographic Staging Model

The following analysis of the sound elements of the recordings of Tame Impala draws on the concept of phonographic staging. This idea of ‘staging’ sound implies an element of performance and production – of *enhancing* a sound. For example, Lacasse (2000b) considers *vocal* staging as “any deliberate practice whose aim is to enhance a vocal sound, alter its timbre, or present it in a given spatial and/or temporal configuration with the help of any mechanical or electrical process, presumably in order to produce some effect on potential or actual listeners” (p4). Phonographic staging then is the deliberate practice of enhancing recorded sound to achieve a desired effect. In the context of recording and producing music, all performed sound that contributes to a finished recording is ultimately staged in the sense that it undergoes at least some level of processing from its physical actuality to its digital or analogue transference to a recorded medium. Some sounds undergo very little adjustment, while other sound elements are heavily treated and manipulated to create a desired effect.

Phonographic staging utilizes four main categories of sound perception derived from the work of Moylan (2002) and Lacasse (2005): loudness, space, time and timbre, as summarized in Table 1.

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<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that there were no earlier retro artists able to closely mimic the sound palettes of past music. A notable example would be the Stray Cats who attempted to recreate the sound of 1950s rockabilly.

**Table 1: Categories of sound perception**

**Loudness:** There are two kinds of loudness for the purpose of this model. There is firstly the loudness derived from intensity of the performance such as the variance in intensity with which a drummer strikes a cymbal or the difference between a shout and a whisper. The second kind of loudness is labelled sound level and takes into consideration the relative volume of a sound element within the recorded mix. This could result in a whisper that appears more prominently in the volume spectrum than the other instruments that are played with greater performance intensity.

**Space:** The feeling of space in a sound recording is usually generated along the stereo spectrum from left to right. A sound may be located in a unique position in that spectrum, or otherwise may appear more diffuse across a wider range of the spectrum. Sound may also appear distant in the sense that it has a greater sense of depth. This can be achieved through volume and timbral adjustments to a sound. Another way that space is created in a recording is through the suggestion of an environment in which the sound is being made. This is often created through the use of reverberation – with different environments such as a bathroom or a hall being suggested by the prominence of a reverb effect.

**Time:** The time category covers a variety of popular sound effects and editing techniques that take place during the temporal evolution of a recording. Most common are repetition effects such as echo and delay as well as simultaneity effects such overdubbing, double tracking and the overlapping of sounds.

**Timbre:** Timbre is the tonal quality of a sound which helps distinguish one sound, or instrument, from another. Apart from the natural timbre of particular instruments, this category considers timbral alterations such as equalization and phasing which change the tone of a recorded sound, such as the ‘wah wah’ effect that acts as a filter for particular frequencies.

This classification system was not intended by Lacasse as a definitive breakdown of the elements of recorded sound. Rather, he makes the point that these various elements often intertwine during the course of a recorded piece of music, which makes their individual effect difficult to ascertain – especially when multiple effects are used simultaneously (Lacasse, 2005, p2). The real purpose of these categories then is to provide a system to help describe the various sounds heard in any given recording in order to determine their evocative potential. In Lacasse’s studies into vocal and phonographic staging, his aim “rather than describing the ways in which different sound effects *produced* in the studio,” is “to account for these effects mostly from the point of view of the listener: how do these effects alter the ways in which we *perceive* recorded sound sources” (2005, p2). And in line with Lacasse’s conclusion that “it seems quite clear that vocal staging can, along with other music parameters, orientate the listening process, potentially giving rise to a number of extramusical significations” (2000b, p234), it is my contention that the phonographic staging of retro sounds in contemporary retro rock recordings demonstrates an evocative potential for nostalgia.

This contention that the phonographic staging of retro rock music demonstrates evocative potential for nostalgic feelings differs somewhat from the scope of Lacasse’s studies. Lacasse was more specifically directed towards demonstrating the enhancement of feeling and tone suggested by the music and lyrics of particular rock songs; for example, that a distortion effect metaphorically implies aggression. Nostalgic feelings are often less obvious or easily adaptable to the usual gamut of emotions. However the phonographic staging model is adaptable to a range of effects and potentialities. Zagorski-Thomas (2008) has developed the idea of media based staging, which extends the phonographic staging model “a step further to include perceptions of time and place that are associative rather than perceptual: how the aural ‘footprint’ of particular forms of mediation associated with audio reproduction media have been used to generate meaning within the production process”. In this way, Zagorski-Thomas has introduced the associative effect generated by the use of certain phonographic staging elements, such as the crackle of a record to suggest age in a recording. This approach is useful in looking

at retro rock music, since much of the associated nostalgic feeling is not borne of lived experience with the past, but is rather derived from the connectivity and similarity between sound elements of the past appearing in contemporary texts. The phonographic staging model therefore provides the possibility to consider the evocative potential of nostalgic sounds both emotionally and associatively.

#### **5.4.2 The Phonographic Staging of Sound in the Contemporary Retro Rock Recordings of Tame Impala**

As we saw earlier, the hypertextual compositional practices of contemporary retro rock music, (as demonstrated with reference to the Frowning Clouds' music) can result in a pastiche that mimics early-mid-1960s rock form and content, typically without reference to specific hypotexts. Another significant hypertextual feature which marries with these appropriately stylized compositions is the phonographic staging of those compositions in the recorded text. Indeed, where a composition is both compositionally and sonically geared towards achieving a stylistic outcome, then the agreement between the range of hypotexts required for a hypertextual pastiche of that style is further heightened. In this part I seek to demonstrate a lineage between hypertextual pastiche and the evocative potential as achieved through the phonographic staging of the recordings of Tame Impala.

The recorded music of Tame Impala exhibits a range of sound manipulations that touch on all four of the main categories of sound perception, working together to form an accumulative impression over a body of work. As such, rather than investigate a single recorded track where one or two sound types might feature prominently, I will identify the various sound manipulations as they occur with respect to the phonographic staging of different sound sources (guitars, vocals and drums), referencing their use in a number of recordings, mostly from Tame Impala's first album, *Innerspeaker* (2010). This will afford the opportunity to highlight particular instances where an effect may be featured more prominently (such as with the

multitude of guitar and vocal effects which can vary drastically across a number of recordings), as well as characterize the overall sound of particular instruments across the body of recordings (such as the drum sound which varies only slightly between recordings).

The phonographic staging of Tame Impala's rock music is largely characterized by an approach to sound which emphasizes the tropes of 1960s psychedelic rock music, named for its association with psychedelic drug use – LSD in particular. Psychedelic rock conveys “a musical equivalent of hallucinogenic experience” by effecting disorienting musical sensations such as blurriness, overlap and time dilatation across the different types of sound perceptions of loudness, space, time and timbre, which seek to mirror the irregular physical and mental sensations of psychedelic drug use (Whiteley, 1990, p38). This is particularly effective in the music of Tame Impala since so many different types of sound manipulations occur so frequently (and often simultaneously) over the majority of their recordings – creating a sensory overload itself reminiscent of psychedelic experience as represented in 1960s psychedelic rock music. Among the instruments heard in Tame Impala's recordings which tend to feature the greatest amount of sound manipulation towards these psychedelic effects are vocals and electric guitars.

The phonographic staging of the vocals in the music of Tame Impala is most often affected through the perceptions of space and time via reverb and delay effects. These effects work to alter the time relay of the original sound source, resulting in the elongation and repetition of a sound. Reverb in particular has a spatial component in that it attempts to recreate the effect of sound occurring in an enclosed space where sound continues to resound even after the original sound has finished sounding, such as in an echo chamber or a bathroom. The delay effect (sometimes termed as ‘echo’) on the other hand is largely a time based effect with a more defined duplication of a sound, repeated at a slight time delay from the original sound. Although these effects have been used widely in the recording and performance of rock music since their invention, they are particularly characteristic of psychedelic music. Since “virtually all psychedelia in popular music experiments with time”, delay and reverb effects find a useful home within the music of Tame Impala as they help signal a hallmark of the ‘psychedelic

sixties' experience (Reising, 2009, p526). The recordings 'Alter Ego' (2010) and 'Expectation' (2010) both feature vocals which utilize the effects of reverb and delay simultaneously, where the artificial repetition, expansion and elongation of vocal phrases have a curious effect on how the listener experiences time. Whereas music is experienced through the linear structure of time, moving from one sound event (such as a note or chord) to the next over a period of time, the heavy use of delay creates a sensation of repetition that blurs the fixity of the present, and the continuity of a performance from past to future. In the vocal breakdown in 'Expectation', for example, syllables of lyrics already sung continue from their original utterance and replay over into the next lyric or syllable – a pattern that is repeated for as long as it takes the delay effect to decay to silence. It is this sensation of overlap and the breaking down of time boundaries which is said to simulate the effect of psychedelic drugs in altering the perception of time and duration.

Reising (2009) notes that among other sensory effects, psychedelics can produce what is called 'time dilation' – the sense that time has expanded or contracted, blurred into the past or the future, or even stopped entirely – and that psychedelic rock music can be particularly evocative of this experience. The use of reverb expands the effect of delay by widening the sonic image of the vocals – that is, extending the length of vocal phrases and adding a sense of space or roominess. In 'It's Not Meant To Be' (2010), the use of reverb is a hallmark of the phonographic staging of the vocals. However towards the end of the song where double-tracked vocals singing the lyrics *He didn't have a hope in hell/Now I'll never see him* are heard, the combination of the reverb and double-tracked vocals evoke a sense of the vocal manipulation heard in classic psychedelic music like that created by artificial double-tracking (ADT) and other experiments with recording technology that were used so prominently in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>28</sup>

Reverb and delay are also used in the phonographic staging of guitars in the recordings of Tame Impala, but I would like to address two other important timbral effects that feature heavily in the perception of the guitars – fuzz distortion and modulation effects. Guitar sounds

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<sup>28</sup> I will further consider the use of affecting automatic double-tracking below.

affected by distortion feature a boost in volume accompanied by a dirty, bleary and muffled sound, altering the timbral quality of the electric guitar from smooth-sounding to a rougher sonic texture. Tame Impala prominently utilize a distortion type which is closely linked to Jimi Hendrix and psychedelic rock music of the 1960s – fuzz distortion (Whiteley, 1992, pp121-3). Fuzz creates an abrasive and even chaotic sound, said to “easily evoke anger and aggression” as heard in 1960s garage music, and which quickly became a signifier of the “psychedelic experience” (Johnson & Stax, 2006, pp416, 419). These connotations are technically derived from the manner in which the fuzz effect adds complex harmonic overtones (the distinct frequencies heard in a resonant sound vibration) to a signal, creating a fuller and more complex sound by incorporating and enhancing the inherent harmonic (and even dissonant) subtleties of the guitar sound. The fuzz guitar tone features prominently on ‘Desire Be, Desire Go’ (2010) where two guitars that feature the thickened fuzz distortion sound can be heard – particularly on the verse riff, as well on the tracks ‘The Bold Arrow of Time’ (2010) and ‘Lucidity’ (2010). The perception of these guitar sounds, altered as they are by fuzz distortion, work not only to reinforce the sonic metaphors of hallucinogenic experience, but are also likely to trigger associations with the guitar sounds found in psychedelic rock recordings representative of the ‘psychedelic sixties’.

The other important sound manipulation in the phonographic staging of electric guitars and synthesizers in Tame Impala’s music is modulation. Modulation effects typically alter some or all of the sound properties of volume, timing and timbre. There are quite a number of different sounds and effects that can be achieved through modulation, such as vibrato, phase shifting and flange, and it is these effects which Tame Impala use to help musically represent hallucinogenic sensations. The phasing effect for example can mimic the naturally occurring small variations in pitch made by musicians when holding onto a single note for an extended period, otherwise known as vibrato. However by grossly increasing the depth of pitch variation, this effect can be exaggerated to the point where a sound signal is altogether overwhelmed by the wavering sensation, as is heard on the rhythmic accents in the bridge section of ‘Music To

Walk Home By' (2012), and especially throughout 'Be Above It' (2012). As a general rule, the more heavy-handedly the modulation effect is applied, the less likely an instrument will be characterized by the acoustic timbral properties which help listeners identify what the instrument is. Modulation thus further emphasizes the psychedelic allegories of sound where seemingly normal elements are imbued with a greater power, depth and meaning. This is demonstrated by the use of phase shifting in 'Solitude Is Bliss' (2010). The song's main guitar riff, which appears prominently in the intro and chorus, is treated with the modulation effect of phase shifting. This effect is the result of the combined sound of two identical recordings that would go in and out of time with each other such that certain frequencies would be progressively be cancelled and reintroduced, affecting a sweeping rise and fall in the frequency spectrum (Cunningham, 1998, p115). This creates a sense of movement in the guitar which shifts back and forth between varying degrees of fullness and depth, transforming the guitar into a spatial entity even though it is not moving along the stereo spectrum, elevating the stature of the guitar sound to ethereal heights through which a sense of sonic disorientation is evoked.

Modulation effects are also able to channel our collective memory of the 'psychedelic sixties' by evoking innovative studio technology of the 1960s which are heard on a number of classic psychedelic rock recordings. The flange and phase shifting effects are for example comparable to the experimental studio techniques of tape flanging and ADT which categorizes some of the canonical psychedelic rock recordings of the 1960s including The Beatles' 'Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds' (1967), Small Faces' 'Itchycoo Park' (1967) and Jimi Hendrix's 'Bold As Love' (1967b). The flange sound on these recordings creates a 'swooshing' sound which results from two identical signals falling in and out of sync with each other, similar to the sound of a speeding rocket or jet plane passing overhead (Bode, 1984, p734). The coda for Tame Impala's 'Expectation' is a prominent example of flange, where a guitar which is heavily saturated by this effect repetitively plays out for nearly 90 seconds – repeatedly striking home an evocation ad infinitum of psychedelic interludes akin to those heard in 'Itchycoo Park'.

A similar effect to flanging could also be achieved through ADT, an innovation specifically formulated for The Beatles by their engineer Ken Townsend in order to avoid having to manually double track vocals (Julien, 1999, p361). Whereas manual double-tracking is the process of rerecording the same musical phrase in order to thicken the overall sound, ADT expands and widens a sound image almost as if it had been performed twice simultaneously. However because the sound is in slight phase with a copy of itself, the end result sounds more artificial. By widening the phase of the second performance, panning it to one side of the stereo spectrum or even wildly oscillating its speed, an automatically double-tracked sound can take on a number of otherworldly spatial and timing characteristics similar to modern day phase shifting. Through the phonographic staging of these similar sounds in Tame Impala's recordings, they are able to not only replicate the psychedelic tropes of these iconic 1960s recordings, but utilize sound elements which characterize the studio technology of that era. Such experimentations with phase shifting on the guitars in 'It's Not Meant To Be' and 'Why Won't You Make Up Your Mind?' (2010), combined with recurrent stereo panning from left to right, demonstrate the evocative potential of these sounds in two ways. They express both the similarly thickened spatial sensation of ADT prevalent in psychedelic rock music, as well as trigger associations in the collective memory of the recording innovations attributed to psychedelic rock music of the 1960s.

Another way in which the phonographic staging of Tame Impala's recordings helps orientate the listening process towards evoking collective memory of the 1960s is through sonically rendering, through overload and compression, the 'warmth' of analogue tape. Simply put, the processes of analogue and digital recording capture sound differently and result in different sound products. Analogue sound is characterized as 'warm' because of the soft distortion generated by recording to tape, while digitally recorded sound captures sounds without a distortion effect inherent in the process (Barlindhaug, 2007, p78). The manner in which the drums in particular are phonographically staged in Tame Impala's music contributes to the sonic sensation of warmth associated with 1960s music. This is achieved through the

transformation of the timbre of the drums through heavy compression which leads to a distorted drum sound. The level of compression and thereby distortion can vary from recording to recording, however the distortion typically sounds more pronounced the louder the drums are played or dynamically positioned in the mix, resulting in a lo-fi effect where the drums lose some of their tonal resonance in favour of a clipped and harsher sound. This drum sound is characteristic to most Tame Impala recordings; however the 'The Bold Arrow of Time' demonstrates the effectiveness of this drum sound especially when coupled with the characteristically warm overtones of fuzz distortion heard frequently on the guitars. Curiously, while this distortion effect gives the drums a 'warmer' sound which signals 1960s style production, the sound of the drums overall are quite distinct from the drum sound typically heard in 1960s rock music. They sound louder and deeper in Tame Impala's recordings and lack the same muffled presence and sense of space in the mix associated with 1960s style production – suggesting that they do in fact have more in common with contemporary production and mixing styles. This plays out curiously with regard to the manner in which the evocation of analogue recording helps to position Tame Impala's music within a pre-existing sympathy towards analogue production. Although these recordings utilize the benefits associated with digital recording, Barlindhaug notes that it was "the soft distorted and compact sound of analog recording" of "the sixties and seventies" that had defined how a recording should sound," and while "today most musicians and music producers ... use digital recording," they still "prefer the sound of analog recording technology" (2007, p78). This extramusical signification of analogue warmth associated with music recording history, when coupled with other sonic appeals to collective memory found in Tame Impala's music, acts to strengthen the evocative potential of sound already prevalent in the music.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION: A CONTINUUM OF DERIVATIVENESS FOR CONTEMPORARY RETRO ROCK RECORDINGS

Based on the above discussion of the different approaches taken in both composition and phonographic staging of contemporary retro rock, I would like to suggest a continuum of derivativeness for contemporary retro rock music recordings reflecting these different techniques (Table 2). This continuum is modelled after Auslander's (2003) in his analysis of the performance of authenticity in 1970s retro rock. Instead of authenticity being the marker of the continuum, however, the poles are instead 'derivative' on the left and 'innovative' on the right. This is because, as will be elaborated on through the remainder of the thesis, authenticity values in contemporary retro rock music can be constructed in different ways and are not of themselves dependent on the level of derivativeness of a contemporary retro rock recording.

**Table 2: Continuum of derivativeness for contemporary retro rock recordings**

DERIVATIVE	INNOVATIVE
Overly similar	Too different
Copying	Unrelated (no longer retro)
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <span>&lt;INTERTEXTUALITY&gt;</span> <span>&lt;HYPERTEXTUALITY&gt;</span> </div>	
<b>Quotation</b> 'Black Water Rising' <b>Abstract quotation</b> 'Island Walking' <i>Stonefield</i>	<b>Compositional pastiche</b> <b>Abstract compositional pastiche</b> <i>The Frowning Clouds</i> <i>Tame Impala</i>
	<b>Sonic pastiche</b>

While one would assume that derivativeness is at least part of what contemporary retro rock seeks to accomplish, there are potential drawbacks to this outcome. For Genette, "to imitate a text directly is ... impossible *because it is too easy, hence insignificant*" (1997a, p84). Said another way, to too closely imitate a specific text is impermissibly unsatisfying because it

is *just* a copy. In retro rock, while similarities between hypotexts and hypertexts are warranted and indeed welcome, being *too* similar and *too* derivative can align a retro rock recording with a mere copy. While Lacasse notes that “copying might possibly assume an aesthetic value, as when a cover band playing in pubs tries to be as faithful as possible to the original recording of the song being covered,” the same cannot be said of recordings that seek to copy a recorded hypotext (2000a, p45). The problem lies in a lack of aesthetic interest in something that recreates the original verbatim, especially in the context of the rock canon where the original has taken on a significant air of historicity and aesthetic value. Thus in the instances where Stonefield and Tame Impala rely on quotation of a hypotext, they skew ever closer to this pole of derivativeness, with ‘Black Water Rising’ finding itself closer to this pole than ‘Island Walking’ since the form of quotation is more direct than the slightly more abstract approach taken by Tame Impala.

The recordings of the Frowning Clouds, while still derivative, are more nuanced in that they are positioned between compositional and sonic pastiche. These recordings succeed in not needing to quote or ‘copy’ their hypotexts directly, but still faithfully and most accurately suggest 1960s rock music with their attention to compositional and sonic pastiche. In effect, the Frowning Clouds’ music comes closest to sounding and feeling as though it were music that literally came from the 1960s as it neither leans too closely to a direct copy, nor does it stray too far from the stylistic qualities of music from the period. Of the three artists, their music is the most likely to be confused as temporally belonging to the oeuvre of that era.

I suggest that Tame Impala are further along to the right of the continuum and are of these three artists the most closely equated with ‘innovativeness’ as it pertains to contemporary retro rock music. They exhibit a strong tendency towards sonic pastiche in their use of an array of suggestive sound enhancements which correspond to 1960s psychedelic rock, but are slightly less bound to the practice of compositional pastiche as the Frowning Clouds are. This is largely because psychedelic rock, which is Tame Impala’s hypotextual reference point, features a wider diversity in compositional style than garage/early 1960s rock music which is the favoured mode

of the Frowning Clouds. Psychedelic rock, typically comprised of compound forms and a wider corpus of creativity, becomes increasingly difficult to directly replicate without resorting to quotation (as in 'Island Walking'). Another key factor however is that psychedelic rock is often equated with notions of authenticity and difference from what preceded it in breaking away from the norm in popular music. So in keeping with that spirit of creativity and originality, Tame Impala are actually able to replicate this 'spirit' by representing those goals through their new and less explicitly derivative compositions. They create hypertexts that are sonically suggestive of psychedelic rock, thereby creating 'agreement' with the era, but then utilize the ethos of 1960s psychedelic rock by making 'new' songs that are largely abstracted from specific hypotexts.<sup>29</sup>

However, were Tame Impala to compose songs that move too far outside of this psychedelic rock context, or lose the goodwill of agreement created by their sonic pastiche of psychedelic rock through phonographic staging, they would potentially stray too closely to the right end of the continuum. At this pole, originality extends too far away from the precepts of retro in that the elements which render a recording suitably identifiable as 'retro' are lost – thereby moving the music onto an altogether different spectrum of values. In the following chapter, I will further expand on the how derivativeness is constructed, especially with relation to the different representations of authenticity in contemporary retro rock live performance settings.

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<sup>29</sup> This ethos will be more fully elaborated in the following chapter where authenticity value systems pertaining to the different extrapolations of 1960s rock styles are introduced with relation to live performance of contemporary retro rock music.

## 6 DEAD OR ALIVE: PERFORMING CONTEMPORARY RETRO ROCK

*What's that man movin' 'cross the stage?  
It looks a lot like the one used by Jimmy Page  
It's like a relic from a different age  
Could be, ooh-ee*

- Wings, 'Rock Show' (1975)

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Just as contemporary retro rock compositions and sound recordings evince a spectrum of derivativeness from earlier rock music through the potential choices and techniques of composition and phonographic staging, so too are there a range of choices available to artists through the performance and live staging of this music which can reinforce or alter these associations. The context of live performance in particular provides a platform for contemporary retro rock artists to enact authenticity values which can be systematized in very different ways, as demonstrated by the approaches taken by the Frowning Clouds and Tame Impala.

While we will be considering live music in similar ways to recorded music, it is important to note from the outset that live music inherently necessitates a wider approach in terms of how we treat the live music performance as a text. Live performance of course is more than just about the music. Other aspects which contribute to this mode of contemporary retro rock music include the venue of performance, the physical presence of both performers and audience, as well as a variety of visual cues which all contribute to a thorough reading of live music performance. In many ways, this chapter is largely concerned with how retro rock compositions, which are often enhanced by recording techniques and phonographic staging in the recorded example, are able to demonstrate similar evocations in a live environment through physical performance without recourse to the luxuries of the studio setting. How does the setting and presentation of live performance add to or detract from the sense of vicarious nostalgia

facilitated through phonographic staging? And what do musicians and audiences rely upon in this very different setting to create and experience the markers of authenticity found in retro rock recordings?

Firstly in this chapter I will consider how live music differs from recorded music – what is lost in the transition from studio to stage, and what advantages the medium of live performance might bring in terms of utilizing different visual and physical elements to enhance the evocative potential of the music. Delving into the reasons behind the distinction between these two musical practices will also help define the terms of analysis of live music in this chapter as distinct from those used in the previous chapter. Following this, I will then move to examining two case studies of live contemporary retro rock performance in order to demonstrate the varied approaches taken by artists who focus on different 1960s rock genre types across two very different types of venues. These include a performance by garage-rock band The Frowning Clouds at a pub style venue and a performance by Tame Impala as part of an arts festival at the Sydney Opera House.

## **6.2 DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN LIVE AND RECORDED MUSIC**

In elucidating how live music differs from recorded music, it should be noted that the categories of live and recorded music have only arisen as part of musical terminology in the last century. Indeed, before the twentieth century there was no need for a distinction – all music was live music since all music was necessarily performed in the absence of sound reproduction technology. As such, the onset of this technology has changed the conception of what music is. Since the production of sound recordings are geared towards a particular kind of music performance focused on creating a single and often definitive *sound* product, we often think of music in abstract terms – as a readymade transient object.

The primary distinction between the practices of live and recorded music then is that live music typically incorporates a visual component of performance while the other relies almost entirely upon the aural qualities of the music.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, pre-twentieth century, music was almost always an “audio-visually integrated” activity. Continuing advances and widespread adoption in sound reproduction technology have increasingly emphasized the aural experience of music, resulting in the neglect of music as a partly visual experience (Thompson, Graham & Russo, 2005, p203). This has continued right up to the present day where the increasing dominance of digital music formats such as .mp3 have all but removed the last remaining visual and physical sensations of music bound with tangible reproduction formats such as records and CDs – and along with them the need for album art.

This analysis of live performance therefore considers a range of visual elements within the totality of live music performance that are not necessary to or normally associated with recorded music. Drawing on Auslander’s (2004) approach to performance in popular music, much of this chapter considers the ways in which meaning is made through elements of performance in addition to elements of sound and music. These performance elements include the body language of the performers and audience through such means of expression as dancing and gesture, any interaction between these two central participatory groups as well as the use of musical instruments. Further to this, and in keeping with Auslander’s model of popular music performance, I also consider the contextual role of gig-specific socio-cultural and genre conventions relating to the participation and behaviour of the audience (between themselves and the performers), the properties of the venues and other visual elements such as lighting and stage presentation (2004, pp10-11).

These additional elements of live performance no doubt create a wholly different experience to that of a purely aural encounter with recorded music. Indeed, part of the attraction of live performance is the translation of the intangibility of music into a participatory experience

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<sup>30</sup> This is not to discount the fact that recorded music is often accompanied by a range of corresponding visual stimuli such as record sleeves. I will be considering this ancillary item in the Chapter 7, but for our current purposes we will be relying on the largely aural qualities of recorded music.

that unfolds before your eyes. Live performance therefore serves three functions for the audience that cannot be achieved by listening to recorded music alone – it arouses visual pleasure (such as through a display of the band’s movements), authenticates musical competence, and provides a sense of aura (being in the actual presence of the band) (Goodwin, 1988, p45). It is through the physical and visual nature of music performance that music is transformed from an infinitely reproducible recording to a once-in-a-lifetime only experience.

However, just because live performance affords an accompanying visual spectacle to the aural experience of music, this does not discount the centrality of music to the experience of live performance. It does however alter our perception of music in comparison to recorded music where there is a marked difference between the types of sounds and aural experiences that are likely to be achieved by these formats. So while the visual component of live music is the primary difference between live and recorded music, the other important distinction between these formats is that they in many ways produce different sounds and indeed a different sound experience.

This is largely a product of the environment and nature of the event itself. In the first instance, live music is a performance of the moment. Music is progressing in real time – you cannot rewind a live performance, nor can you skip ahead to the next track – it is happening in the *now*. In this sense live music can potentially be viewed as a more authentic experience in that it is less guarded or controlled.<sup>31</sup> There is a danger that things might go wrong and an accompanying pressure to get things right on the part of the performer. In addition, live music sound is notoriously difficult to perfect. It is not necessarily a ‘high fidelity’ endeavour as can be achieved in the recording studio, but it *is* generally much louder than normal listening levels. The major difference then between recorded and live music with regard to their audio aspects is the level of control exercisable by the performers and even the audience. Where the recording environment affords a greater deal of control and less margin error, live performance tends to

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<sup>31</sup> While this question of perceived authenticity will be taken up in the remainder of the chapter with reference to the live case studies, for further detailed analysis on this point see Sanden, 2013.

be, for better or worse, ‘of the moment’. Similarly with the audience, the terms of listening to the product of recorded music are generally dictated by the listener – whether it be via a portable listening device, car radio or otherwise, the listener can change the volume, skip forward shuffle and so on – however in the live music experience, that control is relinquished. This is not necessarily a negative aspect of live performance as compared to recorded sound. In fact, audiences may seek out live music experiences precisely because it is *not* a recording, but an event. For performers, the live music performance offers an opportunity to engage with an audience, to escape the sterility of a studio recording.

Of particular interest then in this chapter is the ways in which contemporary retro rock artists engage with the dominant perception of recordings as the primary musical work over performance in popular, and certainly in rock music as Gracyk (1996) contends (pp74-75). As we will soon see, some performers embrace the performative characteristics of live performance, while others devalue and minimize them. This choice of how to approach live performance, especially within the bounds of contemporary retro rock, provides us with an important insight into how contemporary retro rock music frames authenticity through the emphasis of different values in relation to these challenges.

### **6.3 RAUCOUS RAWNESS AND RETRO ROCK – THE FROWNING CLOUDS AT THE ESPLANADE HOTEL – 19 NOVEMBER 2011**

*Although the musical product yields its greatest source of income in recorded and written form, its authenticity, or validity, is very much dependent upon the music's being on view in the live performance. In this context the musical product is being produced and consumed in the same moment; there is an inextricable association between the musician and his music.*

(White, 1987, p187)

As with their recordings, the Frowning Clouds in a live context are clearly informed by 1960s garage rock music. However what the live performance offers in addition to their recorded music, is an opportunity to demonstrate and expand upon some of the values that are emphasized through these recordings. In seeking to examine the Frowning Clouds' approach to live performance, their gig at the Esplanade Hotel in St Kilda, a suburb of Melbourne, demonstrates a close affiliation with their early 1960s rock style, emphasizing the garage rock ethos which guides their compositions and recordings.

The venue itself, colloquially referred to as the 'Espy', has a long standing association with live rock and roll music in the Australian music scene, and is notable for being Australia's longest-running live music venue (Newstead, 2014). However while historically and culturally significant, the Espy itself remains the quintessential Australian pub music venue, cultivating a laid back and relaxed atmosphere where music is the primary source of entertainment and the sale and consumption of alcohol accompanies the music experience. Indeed, the Frowning Clouds themselves performed on one of the venue's more intimate stages in the Front Bar, named for its proximity to not only the entrance to the building, but also to the main bar. It is within this context that the Frowning Clouds are able to demonstrate not only their affiliation with early 1960s rock music – its relative simplicity and perceived primitiveness – but also put

across to the audience some of the defining characteristics of what this brand of rock music can represent tangibly and viscerally.

From a sonic perspective, the Frowning Clouds' live sound is an apt reflection of the phonographic staging heard in their recordings, which have an aesthetic of sound carefully situated around the limitations of 1960s recording technology. While it is difficult to recreate some of the markers of 1960s recorded music which the Frowning Clouds use on their album *Listen Closelier* (2010) in a live context, such as having a single channel (mono), they are still able to represent the ethos of their recorded sound in their live performance merely by being as raw and to the point in their live sound as possible.

The Frowning Clouds sustain this directness and rawness in their live performance virtually from the moment they set foot on stage – even before the performance has begun as they undergo their 'line check'. As is common for small-scale pub music environments, there is no elaborate sound check earlier in the day prior to the event as would be the case with large-scale gigs. Instead the Frowning Clouds merely run through a quick test of their instruments in plain view of the audience, where the sound engineer cursorily tends to the volumes and levels of the instruments and microphones. Typically in these instances, the sound engineer will manage the mix of instruments in the first couple of songs to find an appropriate balance of the sound components. In contrast to a theatre performance, or even the performance of a more fastidious rock group, this relaxed approach to live sound production contributes to the 'rough and ready' quality of the Frowning Clouds. Indeed, from a practical point of view, a line check is quite suitable to the line-up of instruments at play in the Frowning Clouds' performance. The five-piece group consists of three guitarists, one bassist and one drummer – a standard variation of a rock quintet – without any additional instruments outside the traditional scope of a live rock band. From the sound engineer's point of view, live sound production for the Frowning Clouds would err on the simpler side of things. The only request from the band came from guitarist Nicholas Van Bakel, who asked the sound engineer to apply reverb to the three microphone channels on stage for the two lead vocalists and the bass player's backing vocals.

This simplicity in their sound production marries with their lack of additional or extraneous effects outside of the standard sounds created with their guitars and amplifiers. Aside from one guitarist, Zak Olsen, who used a reverb pedal, there were no other effects pedals in use by the band. Plugging a guitar directly into an amplifier creates what is called a 'dry' sound. In effect, this term is denotative of the contrast between a 'wet' sound, that is, an instrument which has been affected by other manipulations as opposed to not having any effects. Thus a dry sound has much in common with earlier eras of popular music where there were few available sonic effects available outside of the amplifier itself. This is particularly evident in early rock and roll music where amplifiers were still relatively new and complimentary technology either did not exist, or was not freely available outside of the recording studio, at least not in any portable form. When this dryness is coupled with the Frowning Clouds' use of all three guitars set to the bridge position (activating the pickup located closest to the bridge of the guitar which results in a markedly more trebly tone), the resulting sound is markedly twangy, thin and piercing, mirroring the guitar sounds used in British Invasion and garage rock. Thus where the Frowning Clouds limit the range of guitar pedal effects and add a specific tonal choice in a live setting, they are in a sense extracting a similarly basic sound to the kind of music which forms their influences, in line with their retro rock sensibilities.

In addition to bringing their approach to live sound in line with earlier artists, the lack of guitar effects also helps to set the Frowning Clouds apart in a live context in contrast to mainstream rock and popular music through its appeal to authenticity and difference. By overtly doing away with the kinds of implements and modern luxuries that typify many other forms of contemporary popular music, the Frowning Clouds practice a conspicuous form of authenticity which values musicianship and directness over manipulation and artifice. The fact of playing an electric guitar without effects not only sets the Frowning Clouds sonically apart from most other contemporary popular music forms including most subgenres of rock music, but it also works to draw attention to what is being played. In a popular music climate that is saturated with

different styles and coupled with ever more affordable and easily adopted high end production sensibilities, the choice to do away with much of the available sound manipulation and technological artifice creates a stark contrast between these other more contemporary types of music, forcing emphasis on what is being played over what kind of effect has been chosen to represent the music sonically. Musicianship (good or bad) is laid comparatively bare – there is no hiding behind an elaborate sound effect. Where there is less mediation of the actual live performance sonically, the perception of the music is based on transparency, honesty and ultimately, a kind of authenticity which champions these characteristics.

Accompanying this framework of honesty and transparency with the absence of technological luxuries is another complimentary aspect of the Frowning Clouds' performance which is further exemplified by the sonic choices made by the band in presenting their music – that of demonstrating mastering skilfulness of old processes. This is shown in two ways by the Frowning Clouds. By not choosing to use gain, volume or even tuner pedals, the guitarists in the Frowning Clouds are effectively creating extra work for themselves – but also showing their mastery of these basic musicians' skills which have been phased out in live performance by assisting technology. In the instance of not using a booster or gain pedal for guitar solos, the guitarists often have to control volume either in their attack on the strings, using the volume knobs on their guitars, or, as David 'Daff' Gravolin was seen doing during the performance, actually bending down to change the volume and gain on his amplifier for solos. This last act in particular, is truly taking the long way round; it is a form of conspicuous effort. Similarly during their line check, as well as after virtually every song, the guitarists were tuning their guitars by ear. A professional development in live music performance has been the luxury of not having to tune your guitar by ear on stage between songs. Tuner pedals actually afford the chance to inconspicuously tune your guitar whilst muting the sound of the strings as they are being tuned. By not using tuner pedals, the guitarists in the Frowning Clouds are able to demonstrate a further marker of authenticity associated with their talent as musicians. In making the audience witness and hear the amplified and largely tuneless sound of guitars being tuned, they

demonstrate firstly that they are able to exercise the skill of relative hearing, that is, being able to tune their instruments by ear. In addition to this trait of a ‘musician’s musician’, the fact of overtly tuning your guitar reminds the audience that they do not use guitar tuner pedals and are therefore doing it ‘old school’. It is as if to suggest to the audience that guitar tuners did not exist in the seminal period of rock music which they reference in their own compositions, so why would they need them? Although I have learnt from my own experience as a performer that not having a tuner pedal can be seen as amateurish, I feel as though the Frowning Clouds are happy to risk this sense of amateurishness because it not only demonstrates their adherence to past conditions, but also displays their subcultural capital and authenticity values.

While this analysis demonstrates clear choices on the part of the band to create a particular sound and performance aesthetic with careful consideration of what technologies to use, or indeed, what *not* to use, the majority of these choices actually have the dual effect which is simultaneously compatible with the very opposite conclusion – the impression that they are not particularly concerned very much with their sound or enhancing it to exacting standards. To an extent, this is borne out in the performance itself which does feel intuitive and even shambolic more so than planned and polished. Thus the Frowning Clouds are able to put in place specific and considered limitations in their live performance and sound in order to create this outcome. This duality underscores perhaps the underlying principle in the Frowning Clouds’ live performance aesthetic (and a key paradox of contemporary retro rock music) – a calculated effortlessness. These choices divulge a desire to be perceived as having a raw sound to accompany the historical garage rock aesthetic originating in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, in line with their recorded output, the Frowning Clouds’ live sound, while seeming rough and ready, is hardly accidental. It takes effort to sound effortless.

The impression of rawness, of a rough-and-ready approach to the music affected by the Frowning Clouds’ sound also extends to the physical traits of their performance. Indeed, perhaps the most striking impression left by their performance is the physicality of their stage presentation. The band members all exhibit a sense of rhythm and movement in their

performance that is in line with the very beat driven music they play. In particular, all the guitarists in the group bob up and down to the rhythm of the songs they perform – most of which are set to a fast-paced rock and roll tempo. The impression left by their constant movement in time with the music is firstly that they are affected by the beat, that the rhythm of the music is central to the performance and that they are locked in to this rhythm. In turn, this unrelenting rhythmic movement suggests the sheer enjoyment of the performers as they play. And whilst they are having fun, they are seen to be ‘in the moment’. Rather than giving the impression of controlling their behaviour or affecting their movements, the physicality of their performance comes across as unscripted, unconscious and seemingly naturally coupled to the musical content. Thus the physicality of the performance suggests an authenticity in not only the music itself, but in the physical responses of the band to the music they themselves are playing. However within this perceivably authentic physical performance, the Frowning Clouds do betray some elements of affectation which suggest an awareness of their on-stage personas and visual style. These come mainly in relation to specific postures identifiable with influential 1960s rock bands. Bassist Jake Robertson for example adopts a playing position with his guitar which mimics the distinctive ‘upright’ bass playing style of Bill Wyman of the Rolling Stones as seen in Figure 7. This stance is distinctly different to the guitar positions of the other members of the group, highlighting the uniqueness of this position within the group and also serving to draw attention to this affectation for the astute audience member versed in the Rolling Stones’ stage presentation.



Figure 7: Jake Robertson of the Frowning Clouds (left) holds his bass guitar in a tilted upright position, similar to the signature playing position of Bill Wyman of the Rolling Stones (right).

Another instance of this kind of referential affectation is demonstrated by the vocalist/guitarist Zak Olsen where for one song he puts down his guitar to concentrate exclusively on singing. For this portion of the performance, Olsen adopts the role and clichés of a lead singer, freed from the constraints of playing guitar and stationarily singing in front of a microphone mounted on a stand. He is able to move freely about the stage in a wider space which allows him to swing his microphone from its lead in a circular motion. This was a habit of Roger Daltrey of the Who, who used this technique in live performances as a visual point of interest while the other members of the band performed instrumental segments. While the Frowning Clouds' songs allow for only brief instrumental breaks without vocals, Olsen takes advantage of the musical break from this particular song to add the Roger Daltrey-style swinging-microphone display. For the audience, this act can be read simply as an expression of physical enjoyment on the part of Olsen, of unexpected behaviour adding to a rough-and-ready expression of the garage rock style. But a dual purpose of this, which can again be read by the astute rock music fan, is the conspicuous display of the awareness of classic rock music posturing. Thus these kinds of movements and postures are at once part of a performance that

can be viewed exclusively as loose, fun and impulsive, but can also take on a dual meaning which helps to position the Frowning Clouds within a specific framework of musicians and traditions of 1960s rock music.

While there may have been some signs of affectedness, the overall impression given by the band was a convincing display of visceral behaviour and performance, and quite significantly, this enjoyment was apparently infectious. Earlier in the band's set, the response was more focused on standing and viewing the band, but as the set progressed, the response of much of the audience became increasingly physical, with the Frowning Clouds' audience interacting on a number of levels with not only each other, but with the Frowning Clouds themselves – either predominantly through physical response to the music, or indeed physically interacting with the band members. Using Fonarow's (2006) 'zones of participation' as a guide, the Frowning Clouds' performance at the Espy similarly represents these zones of participation within the confines of a relatively smaller performance/audience space in a pub environment, rather than a 'purpose built' venue. Whereas Fonarow talks at great lengths about the differences between the close, middle-distant, and farthest zones in a music venue, termed zones one, two and three, respectively, I will be primarily considering zone one here, firstly because the majority of the audience viewing the Frowning Clouds were in this zone, as there were a number of visual obstructions in the venue further away from the stage, and also because I am interested here in the physical participation of the audience with the gig, which is characteristic to zone one.

The Frowning Clouds' audience numbered in the dozens, with a makeup skewed towards a male majority over female attendees. Males were heavily represented throughout zone one, however the most noticeable were those who chose to participate at the gig positioned in front of the stage. While Fonarow notes that the most committed and music-focused audience members tend to congregate at the very front of the stage, within this pub atmosphere, the audience members situated here were oftentimes also focused on physical behaviour such as clapping and dancing as well as intimate physical contact with other audience members, such as

shoving and hugging (2006, p92). It was this space that was ultimately the most physical area of the gig where not only the audience were most active, but where the band members were able to bring their physicality into the crowd space. This band-audience interaction consisted largely of high-fives both between and during songs where some members of the audience would hold their open palm up to the performer – most commonly Zak Olsen. However in addition to this interactive gesture, Olsen also at times pointed to audience members who were vying for attention, while later in the set, Jake Robertson even kicked his leg out to the audience before connecting with a high-five afterwards. This behaviour on the part of the band matched the intensity of the crowd, especially as the set progressed – as more audience members jumped up and down and danced and sought to interact with them. Indeed by the end of the set, the front of zone one was by far the most aggressive and physical part of the audience space – with more in common with the traditional roll of ‘the pit’ in rock concerts which is usually situated in the middle of zone one. For this performance, the Frowning Clouds encouraged the more raucous and physical behaviour of certain participants with their own physical presence on stage and audience interactions, and drew these more physical participants to the front of the stage.

Immediately behind the front then, was where a less raucous but still physical behaviour took place – namely dancing. In this portion of zone one, there were far more female participants than at the front of stage, engaging in physical behaviour in line with jumping, dancing and swaying. A common dance style in this space was ‘the twist’, which is of course synonymous with early rock and roll in the 1950s and into the 1960s. Certainly a far less common dance style in the modern era not readily associated with contemporary rock music, the participation in this dance practice in this particular part of zone one represents the banding together of an audience type who demonstrate an interest in retro rock music less situated on the music itself or the presentation of performance, but who take advantage of the visceral nature of this particular brand of beat music. For Fonarow:

In the embodied practices of zone one fans there emerges a metaphysic of physicality, the body as a means to perception. Zone one entails the hypertrophic exertion of the

body to drummed rhythms by participants as an expression of one's connection with the music; bodily movement is the conduit of musical appreciation. (2006, p104)

This is particularly relevant in the case of this type of contemporary retro rock music where there is an emphasis on authenticity through immediacy and visceral experience.

Contrasting with this spectator position however is the outer part of zone one and the beginnings of zone two where there is less focus on physical participation in the gig environment and with other audience members and a heightened focus on the music and the musical performance. It is in this space where elements such as the presentation of live sound, the music itself and the posturing of the band members are likely to come under further scrutiny and examination by the audience in this zone. The experience of physicality is more likely replaced by a contemplative experience where finer details of the performance have greater scope to be analysed and inform a different kind of experience of the event.

Another form of interaction evinced by the Frowning Clouds' Espy performance comes from their verbal interactions with the audience. Through this process of interaction, the Frowning Clouds reach not only the participants in zone one, but all participants, including those in zone two. The Frowning Clouds are able to continue their impression of rawness which seems to cut through to all elements of their performance, where before they announce their first song 'Baby, Baby, Baby', Nicholas Van Bakel unceremoniously pronounces: "This song's called: 'Fuck 'the Man' With a Double-ended Dildo'", and with perfect comic timing, the bassist Jake Robertson, adds: "And it's a love song". On the face of it, the mock title and accompanying non sequitur set the scene for a fun evening. Certainly the dirty joke goes over well with the crowd. But perhaps the joke is more telling in that it is aimed at deflating any sense of pomposity, self-righteousness or pretentiousness regarding their music or themselves. Fitting in with the fun-loving, rough and ready approach displayed through the physicality of the gig and the rawness of the music, the levity demonstrated in this joke certainly sets the scene for the performance.

But in addition to this function, the joke is also a telling indicator of how the band uses their banter to demonstrate a form of cultural capital associated with 1960s culture and rock music in particular. While on the surface the joke is in the profanity of the title and the added line by Jake Robertson, there is a subtext to the mock title as well. ‘The Man’ mentioned here is derived from a slang term for the government, or authority in general. Although in usage before, it has become synonymous with the counter-culture of the 1960s, commonly expressed along the lines of the sentiment ‘Don’t let the Man get you down’, or ‘Stick it to the Man’. It is this last expression which is being referenced in the mock title given to “Baby, Baby, Baby” by Van Bakel. At the outset of their gig, the Frowning Clouds are thus able to not only create an atmosphere of levity, but at the same time subtly reference the time frame from which their music is based. These kinds of references are littered throughout their performance. Later, Robertson introduces a song by announcing: “This song is called ‘Bad Vibes’. It’s written because we hate Mike Love.” Much like ‘the Man’ is a subtle reference to the popular slang to the 1960s, and thus drawing the audience’s attention to its usage in this live context, the title ‘Bad Vibes’ is an expression largely associated with the psychedelic experience which in turn connotes the 1960s. Further to this reading, another reference made explicit in this comment is that to the Beach Boys’ song ‘Good Vibrations’, which is hit home by the accompanying snide remark about their lead singer, Mike Love. While the reference is framed as a joke, it is still able to demonstrate the interests of the band and frames their own music within the same scope as an iconic 1960s rock artist.

Another later remark, again by Robertson, does however deviate from these other references to the 1960s in that it betrays a hint of an underlying concern that is fundamental to contemporary retro rock. After one song, Robertson candidly remarks: “Sorry, we looked and sounded like the Hives there.” Instead of referencing 1960s slang and rock music as in previous pieces of banter, in this instance the Hives are the subject of the comment. The Hives of course have more in common with the Frowning Clouds through their association with contemporary retro rock as one of the more successful bands performing a brand of retro rock in the ‘rock

revival’ of the early 2000s.<sup>32</sup> Robertson’s comment, again whilst spouted as a joke, also reveals a truth about concerns over the perception of the group as original and authentic. Certainly while the Frowning Clouds are very openly inspired and influenced by 1960s rock music, it is another thing to be closely affecting the retro rock style of a more contemporary retro rock artist. Whereas the Frowning Clouds make an art of distilling the essence of 1960s rock music into their own music and performances, Robertson’s remark highlights the ambiguities of making a copy of a copy, as it were.

#### **6.4 PERFORMING THE RECORDING – TAME IMPALA AT THE SYDNEY OPERA THEATRE – 1 JUNE 2010**

*...studio reproduction has reversed the conceptual expectation of ‘realism’ as it applies to ‘recorded’ and ‘live music’. That is to say that whereas initially the ‘recording’ was expected to be a faithful representation of the original ‘live’ performance, now it is the ‘recording’ of the studio performance which is deemed to be the ‘original’ and the live performance is merely a substandard albeit visually complete copy.*

(White, 1987, p4)

In contrast to the Frowning Clouds’ small-scale performance, we now turn to a performance by Tame Impala in a very different venue and context. Tame Impala were chosen to perform as part of the third annual Sydney Vivid Festival. Based in and around the Sydney Opera House, the festival program typically focuses on music and the arts and in its short history has already attracted some influential artists who have taken on the role of ‘curator’ of the event. Having previously been curated by Brian Eno, Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson, the 2011 edition of the festival was helmed by Steve Pavlovic – founder of Modular Records and

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<sup>32</sup> As discussed previously in Chapter 2.

the first Australian to curate the festival. Vivid line ups in the past have tended to promote artists ranging from the esoteric and relatively obscure to those with indie credibility but mainstream potential, however on this occasion Pavlovic demonstrated “a shift towards younger audiences and club culture” focusing musically on hip hop, indie rock and pop (Lesnie, 2011). So within this context Tame Impala did not stand out as unusual on a bill that featured musical acts ranging from the Cure to Sonny Rollins.

But what this performance does highlight is the versatility of Tame Impala as a rock band who have the kind of credibility and identity that allows them to perform in both traditional popular music venues as well as in perhaps the most prestigious classical music venue in Australia. Certainly their inclusion in this festival line up can be explained at least in part by Tame Impala being aided by their professional relationship with Pavlovic who has played a significant part in the band’s success – scouting the band early in their career and signing them to his own Modular Records label – and thus may be seen to have had a vested interest in promoting them through the festival based on their established business relationship. Further to this, Pavlovic as curator of the festival, was given the opportunity to utilize not only the performance space of the Opera House, but also its associated cultural prestige as a venue of high art to promote the kinds of popular music he sees as fitting for these surrounds. Pavlovic has been able to bring mainstream music into a space that is typically utilized for high culture art forms such as opera and ballet – illustrating and legitimizing the status of popular music in the contemporary cultural landscape. Fittingly, while Tame Impala clearly fall within the rock genre more broadly, their music and live performance also demonstrates an approach closely aligned to ‘art rock’.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, this performance at the Sydney Opera Theatre (located inside the Sydney Opera House’s famous sails, parallel to the main concert hall) is a more obvious pairing of pop culture and high art since their music in a way already reflects this hybridization.

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<sup>33</sup> A sub-genre of rock music which developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. While its roots were in psychedelic rock, art rock aspires the generic form of rock music towards the cultural heights and pretensions of the opera and symphony (Weinstein, 1983, p3; Baugh, 1993, pp25-26). It characteristically highlights virtuoso performance and features extended compositions and instrumental solos.

The artistic legitimacy of the performance space itself is deeply ingrained in the history of the venue, but also in the physical layout of the space. In contrast with the layout of most pub and indie music venues, the Opera Theatre features traditional semi-circular allocated seating, replete with balcony and box seat viewing. Thus where most indie music venues are set out in such a way as to allow the audience the freedom to position themselves (usually standing) within the various zones of participation, the theatre layout forces audience members an allocated, direct and unobstructed view of the stage. In this setting, the space is very clearly demarcated such that the performance is the focus, and the audience must observe/participate in a prescribed manner. That is to say, the audience has no effective choice but to sit in their seat and watch. Whereas an audience member in a pub venue can choose to dance in front of the stage, stand and watch the band further away, or sit down in the back of the venue, these choices are not encouraged in this theatre setting. As such, it becomes much more difficult to ascertain, or indeed display, the level of enjoyment experienced by audience members in the previous case study. There are no *zones* of participation, but merely a single zone of conformity which applies to the entirety of the venue.

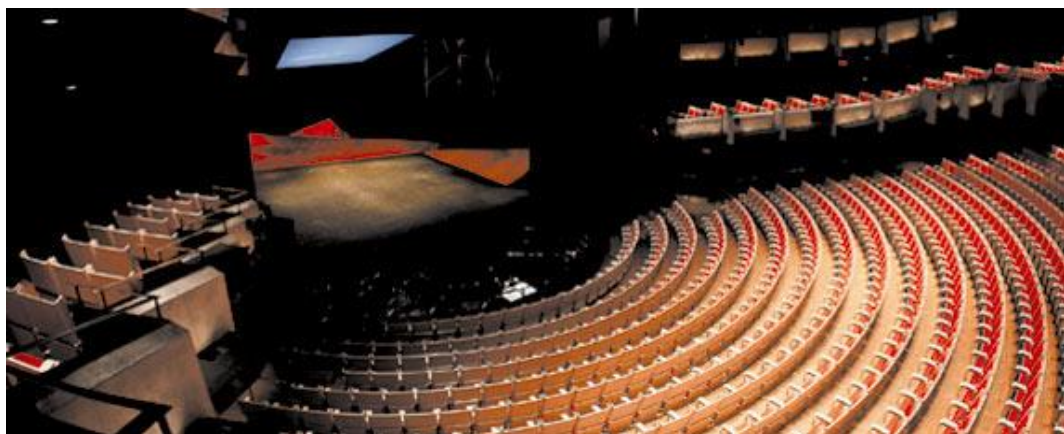


Figure 8: Sydney Opera Theatre

In emphasizing the artistic reverence of the performance through its layout, the Opera Theatre as a venue also obfuscates the traditional practices of rock concerts. In particular, within the imposing atmosphere of the venue itself, audience members were generally more controlled and reserved than would usually be expected at most rock concerts. There generally appeared to

be less yelling and screaming during the concert. This was very notable especially in the early stages of the concert where audience members were perhaps reflecting established perceptions of the Sydney Opera House as a site of high-culture, where audiences are often expected to react modestly to the performing arts in these kinds of environments. This also carried through to the physical movement of the audience which featured far less dancing and general movement than might normally be expected, no doubt also hindered by the seating plan which precludes dancing. The differences between the Opera Theatre and a pub venue like the Espy were also made apparent by the differing levels of ease with which an audience member can retrieve drinks. The layout of the theatre, and implied reverence for the performance, discouraged audience members from wandering out of the concert hall to purchase refreshments (although some still braved disrupting rows of people in order to do so).



Figure 9: Audience members seated during Tame Impala's performance

Whereas the Frowning Clouds cultivate a live sound which emphasizes rawness and simplicity in suggesting 1960s rock music and culture, Tame Impala not only carefully choreograph their live sound, but also accentuate their intentional crafting of their sound to position themselves within a different authenticity value system associated with 1960s and early 1970s psychedelic and progressive rock. Rather than appealing to the raw intensity and the visceral nature of rock music, Tame Impala instead choose to accentuate the cerebral side of these rock subgenres through an appeal to the advances in recording technology which defined many of the quintessential recordings within those styles in this earlier period.

In essence, Tame Impala were able to create a very well-balanced representation of their recorded sound during the performance. This is due in part to the venue. The Opera Theatre offers a space in which Tame Impala's attention to detail in sound production is complimented and matched by the favourable acoustics of the venue. In contrast to the average pub or indie music venue, this venue allowed for an acoustic clarity far greater than what might normally be offered elsewhere. But more than this, Tame Impala's live performance evinces a remarkable degree of control over virtually all elements of their live performance.

Perhaps the most obvious representation of this is Tame Impala's control over their instruments and the sounds they produce. While the instruments themselves have their own 'clean' or untreated sounds associated with them, these sounds were rarely heard during the performance. Virtually all of the instruments were heavily treated and channelled through various effects units during the concert. Each of the guitarists (including the bassist) used effects pedals to manipulate the sound of their instruments. These work by manipulating the initial signal from the guitar as it is plugged in to a series of effects pedals which are configured in a particular order, or 'chain', to create a preferred sound when used in conjunction with each other. A line out is taken from the last pedal in the chain and this is fed into the amplifier from which the resultant sound is projected.



Figure 10: Kevin Parker's pedal board

To give an impression of the amount of manipulation Tame Impala's music is treated with in live performance, lead singer/guitarist Kevin Parker's pedal board (Figure 10) reveals an exceptionally complicated approach to sound manipulation. His pedal board consists of a total of eighteen pedals as detailed in the following table:

**Table 3: Kevin Parker's pedal board configuration**

Row	Pedals (left to right)
<b>Top</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TC Electronic PolyTune</li> <li>• Boss TU-3 Tuner Pedal</li> <li>• Boss AB-2 2-Way Selector</li> <li>• Electro Harmonix Holy Grail Reverb Pedal</li> <li>• Electro Harmonix Holy Grail Nano Reverb Pedal</li> <li>• Boss BD-2 Blues driver</li> <li>• Dunlop DVP1 Volume Pedal</li> <li>• Boss VE-20 Vocal Performer</li> <li>• Boss FS-5U Footswitch</li> </ul>
<b>Middle</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dunlop Cry Baby Wah Pedal</li> <li>• Dunlop MXR Carbon Copy</li> </ul>

	<p>Analog Delay Pedal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dunlop MXR Dyna Comp Compression Pedal</li> <li>• Boss BD-2 Blues driver</li> </ul>
<b>Bottom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DOD FX25 Envelope Filter Pedal (or possibly an FX60 Stereo Chorus Pedal)</li> <li>• Electro Harmonix Small Stone Phaser Pedal</li> <li>• Dunlop Fuzz Face Fuzz Pedal</li> <li>• Diamond Vibrato Pedal</li> <li>• Moog MoogerFooger MF-105 MuRF</li> </ul>

*(Kevin's Current Pedal Board Setup, n.d.)*

These effects range from common rock music sounds such as distortion through to more unfamiliar processors such as modulation. While it is difficult to account for the exact interplay between all of these effects in creating Parker's live guitar sound from the position of spectator, there are some very clear examples of particular effects that are heard frequently through the performance which go a long way to establishing the tonal qualities of his guitar sound. These effects not only help to link the sound of the live performance with their recordings, but in turn also establish a connection between Tame Impala's sound and that of canonical rock musicians and their recordings. Among the most discernible effects heard during the performance were the Electro Harmonix Small Stone Phaser and the Dunlop Fuzz Face, as well as various reverb and delay units.



Figure 11: Dunlop Fuzz Face

Perhaps the key distortion unit in Parker's setup is the Dunlop Fuzz Face. This pedal is modelled on the Dallas-Arbiter Fuzz Face pedal which was introduced in the 1960s and used by Jimi Hendrix, David Gilmour (of Pink Floyd) and Pete Townshend (of the Who). As such, the sonic qualities of the pedal are strongly linked to the guitar sound of many iconic 1960s rock music recordings. Even though Parker likely uses a modern day re-issue of this pedal, these re-issues still maintain a high degree of accuracy in recreating the sound of the original pedals. In fact, the faithfulness to the original design and the role of the pedal in music history figures heavily in the marketing of the pedal which uses phrases such as: "Built to the exact specifications of the Original Dallas-Arbiter Fuzz Face," "ruggedly constructed to the original vintage specs," and "the classic fuzz box used by legendary rockers of the 60's and 70's" (Dunlop Manufacturing, 2011).

Parker's Fuzz Face tone could be heard prominently during the live performance of a number of songs at the Opera Theatre. In particular on 'Desire Be, Desire Go' and 'Half Full Glass of Wine', this signature fuzz tone almost forms part of the song's composition – that is to say, rather than merely accentuating the main riffs of each of these songs, the fuzz tone becomes virtually as identifiable as the notes that are played. The use of the Fuzz Face would significantly help a listener position the guitar's overall tone within a classic psychedelic rock

framework since this type of tone is so recognizable as part of the psychedelic rock sound palette as heard on a number of famous canonical rock recordings by the likes of Jimi Hendrix and other classic rock guitarists of the 1960s and 70s.



Figure 12: Electro-Harmonix Small Stone Phase Shifter

Phase shifting is a modulation effect which creates sweeping rises and falls in the frequency spectrum. This is achieved by splitting a sound signal into two paths – one path is untouched while the other alters the phase of the original signal as it passes through a filter which amplifies all frequencies of the path to the same volume. When these two paths are heard in tandem, conflicting frequencies are cancelled out, resulting in a sense of movement in sound which shifts back and forth between varying degrees of fullness and depth. The Electro-Harmonix Phase Shifter has a distinctive sound in that it creates an unusual sweep of the frequency spectrum using asymmetrical spacing patterns.

Phasing is particularly evocative of a number of different studio effects that were pioneered in the 1960s and used on a number of classic psychedelic rock recordings.<sup>34</sup> The first phaser pedal, the Shin-Ei Univibe, was used by guitarists Jimi Hendrix and David Gilmour of

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<sup>34</sup> As outlined in Chapter 5.

Pink Floyd, but was actually an unsuccessful attempt at recreating the effect of a Leslie speaker (which was too large and cumbersome to be easily transportable) in a small effects unit (McAlack, 2011). However while it was ineffectual at accurately imitating the sound of a Leslie, it did create an interesting swirling sound which evoked studio effects such as tape flanging and automatic double tracking. These studio effects were borne out of experimentation with the common recording format of analogue tape, and were therefore characteristic of *recorded* rock music; it was far too complicated to accurately and consistently recreate analogue tape effects in live performance until the phaser pedal gained wider use. Thus, Tame Impala are able to make great use of phase-shifted guitar sounds during their performance which help to mimic not only the sound of their recordings but also flag these iconic 1960s recordings as well in a live context. On the songs ‘It’s Not Meant To Be’ and ‘Solitude Is Bliss’ in particular, the frequency sweep of the Small Stone Phase Shifter characterizes the main riffs of these songs. Doubtlessly without this effect in use, these songs would be significantly less identifiable from their recorded counterparts and also far less evocative of classic psychedelic rock overall.

Parker also used a number of delay and reverb units in his pedal configuration in a manner consistent with the way these effects are used in Tame Impala’s recordings as discussed in Chapter 5. The delay effect was prominently heard during various parts of Tame Impala’s performance in keeping with their recorded music; however it was most noticeable as a key feature of instrumental jams during their performance. Its use in these seemingly unscripted portions of the performance, such as the musical breakdown of ‘Half Full Glass of Wine’ for example, had the effect of maximizing the psychedelic associations of the music as the song seemed to be diverging off track and out of time. But from this ‘chaos’, the exactness of control over the delay effect was demonstrated when the delay was halted abruptly as the band returned on cue to the familiar musical form of the song’s main riff. This contrast between the psychedelic trope of “the disorienting experience of psychedelic time by virtue of the gradual, spontaneous, and often paralogical unwinding” of the breakdown, and the finesse with which

the delay effect was applied to it, highlights the role of technology and the precision with which it is applied in this live setting (Reising, 2009, p526).

In addition to the great many guitar effects used by Tame Impala, vocal effects were also used on Parker's lead vocals throughout the performance. Reverb, echo and delay were the most identifiable effects heard on his voice. Similar to how they would enhance a guitar sound, reverb and echo also help to widen the image of Parker's voice, or in other words, extending the length of vocal phrases and adding a sense of space or roominess. These effects evoke a sense of the vocal manipulation heard in classic psychedelic music like that created by automatic double-tracking and other experiments with recording technology that were used so prominently in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Because these effects are typically studio-based and almost exclusively heard in recorded music as opposed to live rock music, using them so prominently in this live context demonstrates two things. Firstly, how important these effects are to the aesthetic of these songs, and secondly, the lengths to which Tame Impala will go in order to emulate studio conditions in a live rendering of their music. Parker's voice during the performance was closely comparable to the sound of his voice as heard on the band's recordings. This in itself is quite an achievement since it is notoriously difficult to achieve such a polished sound in the relatively unpredictable conditions of the live soundstage as compared to the controlled environment of the recording studio. While it would not have been readily apparent to the audience whether the vocal effects were being controlled by Parker or by a sound engineer, the inclusion of the Boss VE-20 Vocal Performer on his pedal board suggests that Parker may have been running his vocal microphone into this pedal so that he could control the sound of his voice as it would have been heard through the PA. Typically, effects such as reverb are commonplace in a live sound engineer's repertoire as they are used to enhance the natural qualities of a singer's voice in a live setting. However Parker's personally controlled use of reverb and time-based vocal effects was far more conspicuous – so much so that they added an ethereal quality to his voice, more so than augmenting the natural characteristics of his voice.

Further to all the effects and manipulation devices used by Parker for his voice and guitar, there were still even more devices which he relied upon to alter the sound of his voice, his instrument and possibly the other instruments on stage – a mixing console and a laptop computer. These were located on a table at his immediate right and were available to him throughout the performance. He often toggled the settings of these items in between songs, and sometimes even during songs. It was difficult to ascertain what exactly Parker was using these items for, but well within the capabilities of such hardware would be controls over volume, equalization and virtually any number of other effects through laptop plug-ins.

In addition to this heightened level of control, what was so striking about Tame Impala's live sound during this performance was just how much it had in common with their recorded sound. The painstaking use of the various effects processing units resulted in a close emulation of the production values that initially helped characterize the band as psychedelic and retro. What becomes clear after seeing this performance at the Opera Theatre is just how important the *sound* of the songs are to any interpretation or performance of these songs – and indeed any perception of these songs as being evocative of the past.

The irony here of course is that the emphasis placed on these studio-like sounds to evoke the past in a live setting in practical terms actually detracts from the potential of these concerts to emphasize the visceral nature of live rock music in the way that The Frowning Clouds effect a sense of rawness and immediacy. This is the key difference between Tame Impala and the artists whose music they evoke. While their sound suggests the *recorded* sound of 1960s and 70s music – their live sound is very different from the live sound of these artists. Live music during this earlier period presented many limitations due to the shortcomings of the available technology. Whereas the sonic markers that helped to define that past era could be captured and laboured over in the studio, they could not be very easily replicated in a live music setting. A famous example of this is the Beatles' self-imposed retirement from live performance

in the mid-1960s.<sup>35</sup> Amongst other concerns, one of the problems they faced was the inability to duplicate the complexity of their recent studio recordings on the stage. Of course there were some pedals (such as fuzz units and wah-wahs) which were beginning to find use in the live arena from the mid-late sixties and onwards, but in comparative terms, there was nothing like the technology available to bands now in approximating a studio sound.<sup>36</sup> Generally speaking, a band could perform their recorded works live, but usually in a stripped-back, less sonically dense and exacting fashion.

Arguably, an important part of the appeal of the rock revivalism trend of the early 2000s had been the return to this perceivably authentic and unmediated live performance ethos – a trend which the Frowning Clouds’ live performance style continues with (Scheffield, 2002). Tame Impala on the other hand are quite removed from this performance aesthetic and authenticity value system. Theirs in fact is almost the exact opposite – where a heightened sense of control over the sound of the music appears to be of more importance than the act of performing itself. This notion is supported by Parker’s preference for using a laptop and mixing console, which allows him a far greater level of control over the sound of the band than might ordinarily be afforded a rock performer in a live setting. Typically, the overall dynamics and mix of sound during a live performance is controlled by a live engineer who ‘mixes’ from a mixing console strategically located within the theatre (usually amongst the audience). In addition, the sheer amount of effects used might also suggest a further removal from the essence of live rock music. Occasionally during the performance, Parker bypassed most or all of his guitar effects so that his guitar could be heard in a ‘dry’ (unaffected by effects units) state – often usually only to check the guitar between songs rather than as part of a performance. The stark difference between what the electric guitar sounded like in its unaffected state as opposed

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<sup>35</sup> For further detailed analysis of these circumstances as they applied to the Beatles and classical pianist Glenn Gould, see Sanden (2003).

<sup>36</sup> One could point to pioneering bands like Pink Floyd who continually augmented their live sound in the late 1960s and into the 1970s with the increasing availability of expensive music technologies as the exception to this statement – but these technologies were certainly not commonplace for the majority of rock bands.

to the rest of the time when it was ‘wet’ (affected by many pedals and effects) was very pronounced. This indicated not only just how much the altered sound of the guitar contributes to the band’s overall sound, but also how much stands in between his actual physical performance on the guitar and the heavily mediated sound that is eventually heard from it.

Ultimately, in transforming their live performance to a closely rendered replication of their studio sound, Tame Impala are utilizing the technology of the present day to fulfil an impossible ambition held by some psychedelic-rock artists of the 1960s – to remain faithful to the music borne of the recording studio; to render the live experience more closely to the map provided by the recorded song.

Further to the importance of sound in Tame Impala’s performance at the Opera Theatre, the adherence to the ideals of recorded sound is mirrored in the visual presentation of the performance. While their stage lighting was more or less consistent with industry standards for a venue of this size, the main visual stimulus of the performance was a psychedelic backdrop projection of a moving ‘oscilloscope’ image. This visual effect was the most interesting and unique aspect of Tame Impala’s visuals for the show. The backdrop consisted of a projection of an oscilloscope reading – a screen which plots signal voltages as a moving line. The oscilloscope instrument was located on Parker’s desk along with the mixing console and laptop computer. The oscilloscope appeared to be connected to the instruments of the band (or at the very least Parker’s guitar). This resulted in a constantly shifting signal pattern that was in synchronicity with the music – displayed by way of the venue’s projector on a screen at the rear of the stage.



Figure 13: Tame Impala performing with the oscilloscope backdrop

Rear screen projections are commonly used to augment live music in the present day, but emerged as a feature of live music performances in large venues such as stadiums and auditoriums in the 1970s with pioneering art rock groups such as Pink Floyd. However this particular visual effect is relatively unique in that it is directly reliant upon the music as it is played, highlighting the visual nature of Tame Impala's music. Further to this, oscilloscope images carry a cultural heritage as a popular symbol in the 1950s and 1960s of science and science fiction – as in the famous opening sequence to the television show *The Outer Limits*.

For all the lighting effects at play during Tame Impala's performance, the visual clarity of the band and stage components were at times significantly impaired by a slight dimness. As one photo blogger has commented: "They tend to like their darkness, as most psychedelic bands do these days" (Shanley, 2011). This seems almost paradoxical considering just how many lighting effects were in use, but is probably due to a combination of the amount of smoke and the coloured filters of light that bathed the stage obscuring a clear view of the performers.

However it is this dimness that adds another curious dimension to the performance, and further embellishes the band's focus on the clarity of their sound and music. The oscilloscope backdrop and obscuring lighting ultimately served to draw attention away from the band members themselves whilst the music was being played. The effect was a near depersonalisation of the performers. It was as though they were intentionally redirecting part of the audience's focus, usually reserved for concentrating on the band's movements, back towards concentrating on the music. This was exemplified midway during the concert when the entire band turned away from the audience altogether as Parker began improvising a sound collage between songs. The point of the solo (which was largely made up of unusual bleeps and highly effected guitar noodling) was not so much to create a musical experience, but rather a visual one by way of admiring the images provided by the oscilloscope display. Lasting over two minutes, this segment was marked down in the band's set list as "oscilloscope solo" – further emphasizing the role of technology over the performer.

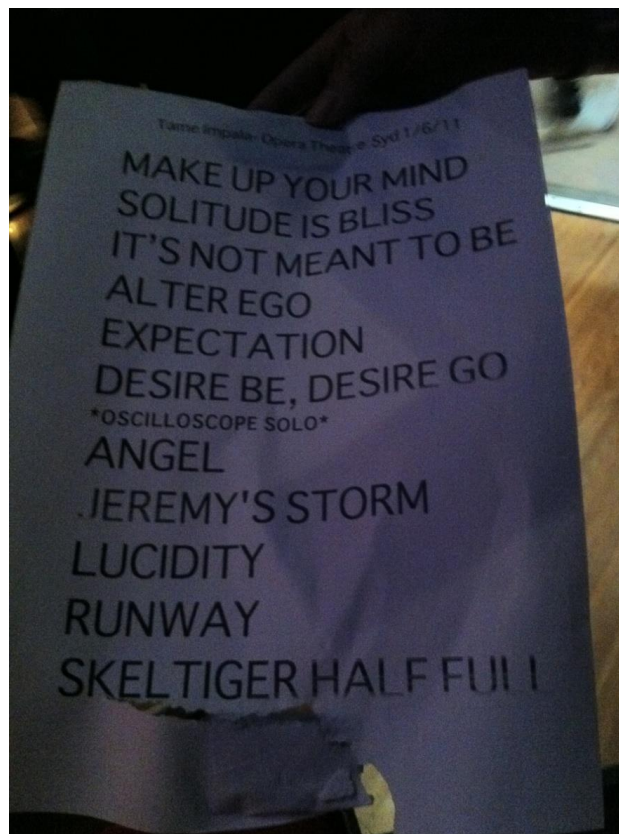


Figure 14: The evening's set list – featuring the oscilloscope solo

Returning to Goodwin's (1988) three main functions of live performances for music audiences, (arousal of visual pleasure, authentication of musical competence and provision of a sense of aura), Tame Impala's performance undoubtedly served these functions. However Tame Impala's focus on the visual elements – which in turn encouraged the audience to focus on the music – undermined the full effect of the traditional live rock concert experience. Whereas Goodwin considers the live music event “the only truly original aura available in mass-produced pop,” Tame Impala downplay their own physical contribution to this aura in reverence to the music itself (1988, p45).

Accordingly, the visual elements of Tame Impala's performance ultimately worked hand in hand with the overarching sonic characteristics of their live show. Far from an emphasis on the performer and individual showmanship, Tame Impala instead created a spectacle in reverence of their recordings and the associated importance of sound in expressing a connection to the past – not as it was lived – but as it was recorded.

## **6.5 CONCLUSION**

With these two very different approaches to the live performance of contemporary retro rock music, each of the artists held competing priorities and values. On the one hand, the Frowning Clouds favoured a performance aesthetic which affected a visceral, immediate and ‘raw’ quality. Tame Impala on the other hand countered this approach by downplaying the ‘liveness’ of their performance and focused instead on the sonic qualities of the music in close approximation of their recordings. Although demonstrating conflicting values, in each instance a kind of authenticity was expressed through the elements of live performance – the physical performance style, the venue space, attention to sound quality, technology, and the visual presentation/interactivity of the band and audience – as summarized in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Representations of authenticity in live performance of contemporary retro rock**

<b>PERFORMANCE MARKER</b>	<b>THE FROWNING CLOUDS</b>	<b>TAME IMPALA</b>
<b>Rock subgenre</b>	Garage rock	Psychedelic/art rock
<b>Venue</b>	Pub	Concert theatre
<b>Technology</b>	Hidden/not used	Visible/highlighted
<b>Sound quality</b>	Raw and ‘live’	Controlled and ‘recorded’
<b>Approach to audience</b>	Populist, direct, interactive	Elitist, absent, minimal
<b>Physical performance style</b>	Active, loose, beat-heavy	Subtle, discreet
<b>Visual stimuli</b>	None outside of essential music equipment and standard lighting	Projected oscilloscope imagery controlled by sound input, bright coloured lighting
<b>Authenticity value system</b>	Romantic	Modernist

Interestingly, these approaches closely reflect a binary of authenticity values commonly found in rock music culture. Keightley (2001), who has termed these distinct systems as romantic and modernist, aligns these values in rock music with the conceptual movements of the eighteenth century and nineteenth century “where Romanticism believed in an organic, and even traditional, connection between the artist, the material means of expression and the audience, Modernism encouraged shock effects and radical experimentation...” (pp135-136). Thus for the Frowning Clouds who demonstrate Romantic authenticity values, their performance is marked by a deliberate limitation of sound choices, technology and sound effects processing in favour of physical and verbal engagement with the audience as well as overt physical posturing with reference to classic rock artists. Through these markers they more forcefully assert a sense of direct *continuity* with the conditions and personalities of 1960s rock music. By way of contrast, Tame Impala demonstrate modernist authenticity values through their reliance on and experimentation with technology to mediate the sound of their musical performance; their stage presence was understated in favour of visual stimuli such as the

oscilloscope projection and stage lighting which detracted from the physical presence of the band and emphasized the inherent value of their own recordings.

While it may seem difficult to reconcile such oppositional authenticity values within the broader genre of contemporary retro rock, these disagreements have always been central to rock and popular music cultures; in many ways, it is these oppositional differences which define popular music culture. Keightley notes that “these distinctions are deployed to divide cultural spaces that are otherwise homogenous,” as exemplified by the two rock artists Oasis and Blur who are said to demonstrate romantic and modernist authenticity values respectively within the single loosely defined subgenre of Britpop (2001, pp137-138). By reading each artist within an authenticity value system relevant to their stylistic choices, audiences and fans of both bands may claim that their favourite band is truly authentic, especially in opposition to the value system of the other. However such a contention on either side of the argument belies the fact of the role of artifice in both examples.

Returning to the Frowning Clouds and Tame Impala, both artists demonstrate a level of artifice in that the specific genus of contemporary retro rock – early 1960s garage rock in the former instance, and late 1960s/early 1970s psychedelic/art rock in the latter – plays a key role in determining what kind of authenticity ought to be applied, and in what way to apply it effectively. Even where the Frowning Clouds utilize performance markers that suggest spontaneity and rawness in line with the garage rock ethos, in order to accomplish these markers they must be calculated and perfected, which in turn betrays the impression of an ‘instinctive’ performance. Likewise Tame Impala who at once epitomize the modernist style of art rock through their reverence for the recorded product, seek to follow the modernist ambitions of experimentation and differentiation which historically and culturally defines that genre, by the contradictory practice of strictly assimilating past elements in their own *new* music. It is these paradoxes of authenticity, creativity and derivativeness in contemporary retro rock music which we will continually return to in the following chapters.

## 7 SEEING IS RELIVING: CONTEMPORARY RETRO ROCK ALBUM COVERS

*When the real is no longer what it was,  
nostalgia assumes its full meaning.*

(Baudrillard, 1994, p6)

*I'm looking through you, where did you go?  
I thought I knew you, what did I know?  
You don't look different, but you have changed.  
I'm looking through you, you're not the same.*

- The Beatles, 'I'm Looking Through You'  
(1965)

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

While I have focused largely on contemporary retro rock music both recorded and performed, in this chapter I will shift focus to a visual mode of contemporary retro rock music not directly characterized by the production and performance of the music.<sup>37</sup> Specifically, I seek to demonstrate how album covers inform and strengthen the nostalgic capacity of retro rock music through the use of visual signs that reinforce the collective memory of 1960s and early 1970s rock music.

In order to illustrate how meaning is created through this play of signs I will be drawing on semiological theory. Semiology offers a useful framework for the analysis of visual images which, more than merely reducing images to the individual sign components, examines *how* images make meaning (Rose, 2012, p105). In particular I will be utilizing the semiological

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<sup>37</sup> I should make clear that while these non-musical elements do not of themselves constitute the practice of listening to retro rock music, their presence alongside the music renders them essential to the experience of consuming music. Indeed, to disregard them would be to examine only one aspect of a multi-faceted, polysemic phenomenon. At the level of consumption, the packaging and visual representations/enactment of the music is so tightly bound to their musical source that any attempt to separate them is to sustain a false division between them. In here doing so, I do not wish to denigrate the inextricable link between retro rock music and its non-musical representation, but am instead seeking to isolate these visual elements so as to better consider them as their own system of meaning.

theory of Derrida (1982) and Barthes (1972). Although there are fundamental conflicts between Derrida and Barthes' respective theoretical positions, especially as between Barthes' early and later writings, both theorists are each useful in the analysis of the various visual representations of contemporary retro rock through album covers. For example, while Barthes' conception of *myth* relies on the structuralist view that signs can have a fixed denotative meaning, the notion of myth itself is particularly useful in highlighting the ideological construction of the 'psychedelic 60s' as it is perceived in the collective memory through the relationship between rock music of the era and its visual representation on iconic album covers. While ultimately this chapter defers to the Derridean position on the instability of meaning, it also acknowledges Barthes' semiological method for the construction of myth as a useful tool in understanding the meanings derived in retro rock album cover art.

I will begin by considering the generic styles of album covers in rock music of the 1960s. An important distinction will be drawn between two styles of album cover, chronologically differentiated by the release of The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Following this I will consider how the stylistic differences before and after this iconic album have been adapted and referenced on contemporary retro rock album covers by artists choosing to use the signs associated with each era in ways which reinforce the nostalgic content of their music. Turning again to Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds, Stonefield and some associated examples, I will be analysing a selection of their contemporary retro rock album covers with respect to album covers from a number of popular rock artists from the 1960s and early 1970s. In doing so, I will demonstrate the role of pre- and post-*Sgt Pepper* semiotics styles in contemporary retro rock visual imagery.

## 7.2 ALBUM COVER DESIGN AND THE 1960S

Before the adoption of sound reproduction technology, the primary visual component of music was derived from the physicality of real time performance. Outside of what Walters terms “graphic collateral” (printed posters, flyers, programmes and sheet music), visually-integrated stimulus consisted mostly of “the performer’s person, the instruments in use, the stage or space in which the music [was] made, or from a synaesthetic representation of the sounds being made” (2010, p22). However with the popularization of recording technology, and in particular, the record format, the potential for a corresponding visual component has been exploited to the point where “some of the most powerful music images of the rock era are perpetuated through its ephemera” as much as, if not more than, through its in-person performance (Walters, 2010, p18).

Album covers have traditionally been the most prominent paratextual material found in recorded popular music. Originally conceived of as a protective sleeve for the record format, album covers by the 1960s had come to serve dual functions as both a protective cover and representational visual accompaniment to the sound recording. Initially however, album cover art was seen to “reflect the conventions of other media forms” in that they advertised the recordings contained within in much the same way as a headline grabs the attention of a newspaper reader (Inglis, 2001, p84). Album covers in this form often featured bold lettering identifying the recording artist, informative listings of track titles on both front and back covers as well as a write-up on the back cover in order to further entice potential listeners. But over time the role of the album cover developed into that of an important *accompaniment* to recorded music and the experience of listening to music through its relationship to, and enhancement of, audio content. While this added dimension of cover art was evident throughout the 1950s, in Alleyne’s view “the rock era cultural explosions of the 1960s and beyond inevitably altered perspectives, transforming the passive functionality of the cover into a vibrantly organic extension of the music it enveloped” (2001, p162).

In the literature considering popular music album cover design, much is made of the role of the Beatles in this transformative period (Jones & Sorger, 1999; Inglis, 2001; Osborne, 2013). This is certainly due to their innovations in popular music composition and recording, but similar innovations were being heralded through their album cover designs. The Beatles' catalogue of album covers exemplifies the range of innovation and transformation in album cover design during the 1960s – beginning very humbly with in-house label design on their first album *Please Please Me* (1963) in a style typical of the late 1950s and early 1960s, to highly extravagant and original sleeve designs in their later career marked by the highly influential *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). *Sgt Pepper* itself has become synonymous with musical experimentation and the increasing artistic freedom and control of recording artists such that the distinction between pre- and post-*Sgt Pepper* is often used to frame the cultural and industrial climate before and after its release (Covach, 2003; Fikentscher, 2003; Shennan & Wells, 2014). Musically and artistically, *Sgt Pepper* represents a breakthrough for popular music where the album itself was vividly conceived of as a complete work of art unto itself (MacFarlane, 2008). This notion is suggested by the music on the album, with its thematic reprise and lack of banding between individual tracks on the vinyl so that listeners are encouraged to listen to the album as a whole. However, more than just the music on *Sgt Pepper* is the thematic continuity reflected in the album cover design. This is evident in terms of the album cover content which conveys the album's underlying precept whereby the Beatles themselves are disassociated from their own identity, taking on the roles of Sgt Pepper and his Lonely Hearts Club Band. A further visual clue to this deliberate disassociation from their past is offered on the album cover where they are flanked by wax figures of themselves dressed as they appeared in their earlier career, highlighting this distinction between 'the Beatles' as an entity, and the personas they themselves were adopting for the album. In addition to the cover visuals, the overall package design of the album furthers the musical and thematic continuity of the album by including the song lyrics on its cover, inviting full engrossment with the lyrical content of the music, as well as incorporating the inner record sleeve as part of the overall cover design, even including an additional cardboard cut-out sheet (Inglis, 2001, p84).



Figure 15: The Beatles – *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967)

These innovations in album cover design have had a great impact on the perception of the role of album covers in popular music. From the inclusion of lyrics to aid in the listener's involvement with the recording to carefully selected artwork designed to complement and engage with the recording on a visual level, these accompaniments help render album covers not as "a superfluous thing to be discarded during the act of listening, but an integral component of the listening which assists and expands the musical experience" (Inglis, 2001, p84). Even where there had been a marked downturn in the popularity of the vinyl format for which album covers were originally designed to house in previous decades, "the music industry [still] maintains a dedication to the LP (if only through the notion of "albums") and, consequently, to the presentation and production of album covers" (Jones & Sorger, 1999, p83). In an increasingly digitalized contemporary market, however, album cover art is perhaps counted as one of the few remaining vestiges of control that artists and/or record companies are able to maintain over the

music album product before it goes into the hands of the consumer. McCourt (2005) hits on the simultaneous advantage and disadvantage of digital file formats such as .mp3 where it at once “heightens our sense of “ownership,” as well as our desire to sample, collect, and trade music in new ways,” but also fuels “the desire for immediacy, in which the ability to sort and regroup files effortlessly transforms the listening experience,” ultimately leading to a contemporary condition whereby “fluidity becomes more prized than history; speed itself becomes a fetish” (p250). This is particularly relevant to the role of the album cover, since when “recordings shed their mass and/or physicality, their visual and tactile aspects also are reduced,” resulting in a climate where the very notion of ‘albums’ and the relevance of album covers are threatened (McCourt, 2005, p249).

Despite concerns over the dematerialization of music, the use of album covers as a visual accompaniment to recorded music remains a standard inclusion in the majority of popular music recordings.<sup>38</sup> But taking into account both the historical usages of album covers, especially as they were popularly defined in the 1960s, and contemporary concerns over the relevance of the album format and album cover art, retro rock album covers, more than merely fulfilling this convention of the recorded music format, are inevitably referencing and speaking to these concerns. Album covers in contemporary retro rock music thus serve multiple functions. In the first instance, they help contextualize the nostalgic aims of the music product by appropriating or referencing the visual traditions of popular music recordings to help shape the meaning of the sound recording itself and position it within an historical lineage or textual context to which the contemporary retro rock music is typically derived. Contemporary retro rock, like other music genres, relies on a kind of visual language where certain images and signs help contextualize the music and direct the audience to read the musical text within an identifiable historical and/or nostalgic discourse. To this end, Negus argues that “different genres of music have become associated with and signify different images, which in turn connote particular attitudes, values and beliefs ... (and) visual images denote particular sounds

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<sup>38</sup> In addition to other paratexts such as music videos becoming more frequently available.

(Negus in Jones & Sorger, 1999, p84). Significantly for retro rock music inspired by the 1960s, the adoption of the sign modes of pre- or post- *Sgt Pepper* album cover design are telling in the way they direct listeners to the kinds of nostalgic themes, values and attitudes associated with those particular types of retro rock music. Thus, retro rock album covers are able to explicitly adopt signs and sign systems that create meaning not in and of themselves, but through a process of deferred meaning drawn from other textual locations where a signifier has previously appeared, as explored by the Derridean concept of *différance* (Derrida, 1982).<sup>39</sup>

In addition, retro rock album art also allows artists to highlight and represent a visuality and physicality of the medium itself which typically harkens back to the vinyl record format, implicitly commenting on contemporary digital music culture. Indeed, retro rock here is necessarily self-conscious in how it is visually represented. Retro, far from being an accidental outcome, is instead intentionally oppositional to other kinds of contemporary popular music.

### **7.3 PRE-SGT PEPPER DESIGN**

In referencing LP album cover designs of pre-*Sgt Pepper* 1960s rock albums, contemporary retro rock artists are able not only to visually promote a sense of nostalgia through the recreation of the design of these LP album covers, but also provide a contextual and chronological reference for their retro rock music. This is because pre-*Sgt Pepper* album covers are recognizable for certain design tropes that allude not only to the musical style of the recording, but also to specific trends in album cover design from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s which largely functioned to attract the potential customer's attention through product advertisement. These design tropes are comprised of both text signs (track listings, technical and biographical information) as well as illustrations (most commonly, artist portraits). While there is no specific checklist of signs that *must* be included as part of an *essential* visual vocabulary of

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<sup>39</sup> *Différance* refers to the non-fixity of meaning such that meaning is constantly being changed and supplanted through the play of signifiers (Barker, 2000, p74).

pre-*Sgt Pepper* album cover design, there are certainly a number of sign elements that are commonly seen in album covers up to the mid-1960s which form part of the layout of some contemporary retro rock album covers that wilfully seek to be associated with this period.

### 7.3.1 Text Signs



Figure 16: The Frowning Clouds – *Listen Closesier* (2010)

In the Frowning Clouds' album cover for *Listen Closesier* (2010) (Figure 16), there are a number of signs that mirror the cover design of rock and pop LPs of the early 1960s. Along the top of the album cover image is a white strip with the word 'mono' featured in bold. Typically, the word 'mono' signifies that the music on the album is monaural, that is, sonically presented in one channel. This denotative function of the mono sign is practical for *Listen Closesier* as it is in fact a monaural recording (rather than the contemporary industry standard two-channel stereophonic). However, the explicit 'mono' labelling on the album cover also

serves a connotative purpose. More than merely indicating the aural presentation of the album's music, the 'mono' sign also carries with it connotations about the values and beliefs found in the music of the Frowning Clouds as it is a direct reference to the form of sound reproduction used in the 1960s and the labelling on album covers of either mono or stereo for the benefit of the consumer. Not only does it suggest that the musical text is tied to an historical period, but it situates the recording, even before it is listened to, apart from other types of contemporary music through its overt divergence from the contemporary industry standard.

Apart from the associative meaning derived from the word 'mono' itself, consideration should also be given to the way in which the word is presented since the choices surrounding the presentation of the word signals a further connection to the early 1960s and the popular music of that time. The font and boldness of 'mono' on the *Listen Closelier* cover closely resembles the 'mono' found on EMI/Parlophone releases of the early to mid-1960s. However, more specific than the identification of this design with a particular label is the identification of this design with a particular artist – the Beatles – synonymous with the label, and whose album covers remain amongst the most recognizable in popular music. Indeed the Beatles' albums have become synonymous with the history of the 1960s itself, such that major cultural, political and social events can be framed with reference to the release of particular albums (Inglis, 2001; MacDonald, 2005; King, 2013). In this instance of the Frowning Clouds' album, *Listen Closelier*, the similarity with which the word 'mono' is rendered points not only to the Beatles' early catalogue but also to the early 1960s as a specific era. This is particularly fitting since the retro rock music of the Frowning Clouds is evocative of rhythm and blues rock music from the early to mid-1960s which the Beatles were prime exponents of.



Figure 17: The Beatles – *Please Please Me* (1963)

The association with the Beatles is further corroborated by a similarity in overall design to the Beatles’ first album, *Please Please Me* (1963) (above). While the content of the band portrait on *Listen Closelier* is not particularly similar to that of the Beatles on the cover of *Please Please Me*, the form of the lettering on the Frowning Clouds’ album appears to be modelled on that of this Beatles album. Moreover, the choice of *Please Please Me* as the model for the Frowning Clouds’ album cover is additionally significant when considering that these covers both represent each band’s first foray into the album format. In Inglis’ view, *Please Please Me* epitomizes ‘the personality cover’ and “locates the group precisely and predictably within the conventions of the British popular music industry in the early 1960s” (Inglis, 2001, p85). The correlation here between the pivotal historical context of this album for rock music in addition to its visual depiction of the Beatles’ naiveté in their early years, as it is duplicated on the Frowning Clouds’ first album cover, suggests the preferred meaning of the album cover bound up as it is with a sense of knowingness and self-reflexivity on the part of the Frowning Clouds themselves.



Figure 18: Thee Wylde Oscars – *Right, Yeah* (2010)

This self-reflexivity is not just evident on the Frowning Clouds' *Listen Closelier* cover, but can also be seen in other pre-*Sgt Pepper* album cover designs in contemporary retro rock. In the very same month as *Listen Closelier* was released on the Off the Hip Records label in Melbourne, Australia, another Melbourne contemporary retro rock band, Thee Wylde Oscars, signed with the label and also released their debut album, *Right, Yeah* (2010). Remarkably, the cover (Figure 18) also features direct links to *Please Please Me* and other album cover designs of the early 1960s. In addition to the shared “large typography blazing the group’s name”, *Right, Yeah* also features a nearly identical advertising statement to that of *Please Please Me* (Osborne, 2013, p169). Whereas the statement on *Please Please Me* reads as “Please Please Me with Love Me Do and 12 other songs”, *Right, Yeah* reads “Right, Yeah with I Got A Feeling and 11 other hits”, written in the same font. As Osborne notes with regard to the Beatles’ *Please Please Me*, “hit singles are central to both the LP and the sleeve’s construction: the record takes its name from their biggest hit to date and this title is highlighted on the cover” (2013, p169). However the supposed centrality of hit singles to the sleeve construction of *Right, Yeah* is not

really relevant here. Thee Wylde Oscars, rather than having already released singles through which their appearance on the album would be a sales point, are instead adopting the form of *Please Please Me*'s sleeve construction for the purposes of its associative potential with the Beatles and early 1960s rock music. The value of the advertising statement is therefore derived from this connotative meaning, rather than for any explicit denotative purpose.

This pattern of connotative sign value over denotative function can also be seen elsewhere on *Right, Yeah*. Located in the white strip across the top of the album cover are two pieces of text – to the left, the album title and artist are listed, while to the right is the bold 'stereo' sign (as opposed to the 'mono' sign in Figure 17). These two pieces of text again refer to the layout of the *Please Please Me* album cover but are otherwise of themselves unnecessary when included on contemporary CD releases. This is because the information provided by these pieces of text, located where they are across the top of the album cover, largely pertains to the vinyl album format. Firstly, positioning the writing at top left was once useful in helping to identify the album while flipping through records as they were displayed in record stores – one in front of the other in custom shelves and crates – without having to pull the album out of order. This feature can be seen consistently with early 1960s albums released on the EMI and Columbia record labels – the Beatles' UK and US labels, respectively. Secondly, the placement of the 'stereo' sign at top right served the practical purpose of informing customers of which pressing the album was (again without having to remove the album from the shelf or crate), since both mono and stereo formats were available simultaneously such that it was necessary to know what format the music was in so as to be compatible with the correct hi-fi equipment. Indicating that a recording is in stereo is very untypical in the contemporary age of music releases, such that the stereo labelling on *Right, Yeah* better serves a connotative function in the context of its similarity to *Please Please Me* and its associative potential for the 1960s vinyl format.

### 7.3.2 Photographic Portraiture

It is not just text signs which are able to serve a connotative function on retro rock album covers. Pre-*Sgt Pepper* style cover photographs, typically featuring band portraits, also help to provide a specific chronological context for this period of musical influence on retro rock albums. This is especially the case in the pre-*Sgt Pepper* era since it was only in the late 1950s and early 1960s, “when rock ‘n’ roll developed into a somewhat softer style – the pre-Beatles era of the teen idol – *that a consistent design aesthetic became apparent*” [emphasis added] (Osborne, 2013, p168). For Osborne, it was the widespread use of colour artist portraits on LP covers in this period which helped develop and “foster image-based music consumption” (2013, p168). Thus in examples of contemporary retro rock that seek to evoke pre-*Sgt Pepper* rock music, the prominence of artist portraits as the central images on album covers can be seen. Continuing with the instances of the cover art featured on the debut albums of the Frowning Clouds and Thee Wylde Oscars, both covers indeed privilege band portraits as the main subject-matter. However, more than merely utilizing images of the band (a practice common across a variety of album covers in popular music from the 1950s to the present day), these particular portraits used on these contemporary retro rock albums reference iconic cover portraits from pre-*Sgt Pepper* British rock albums.



Figure 19: The Beatles – *Rubber Soul* (1965)

Whereas the layout and font of the text seen on the *Listen Closelier* and *Right, Yeah* album covers both mirror the Beatles' *Please Please Me*, the portrait photographs on these retro rock albums do not explicitly duplicate the photograph of the Beatles found on that particular cover, but rather demonstrate aesthetic ties to a wider selection of influential 1960s rock music covers. In the case of *Right, Yeah* the portrait photograph of Thee Wylde Oscars contains elements of the photographs on the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* (1965) (Figure 19) and the Who's debut album, *The Who Sings My Generation* (1966) (Figure 20). With both *Right, Yeah* and *Rubber Soul*, the respective band portraits are photographed from a similarly low vantage point, with the subjects facing downwards, huddled around the square frame of the picture. While the composition of the band portrait on *The Who Sings My Generation* is arranged differently to that seen on *Right, Yeah*, it also taken from a low camera angle. However what *Right, Yeah* uniquely shares with *The Who Sings My Generation* is a background prominently featuring a tower structure. While the Who are standing before London's iconic Big Ben, Thee Wylde Oscars

pose in front of a church steeple which similarly appears to lean off kilter as it follows the high vanishing point created by the low angle of the photograph.



Figure 20: The Who – *The Who Sings My Generation* (1966)

The portrait of the Frowning Clouds on *Listen Closelier* likewise has a parallel in its similarity to earlier cover art images – in this case, for the Rolling Stones' 45rpm single sleeve 'Paint It Black/Stupid Girl' (1966b) (Figure 21). While not an exact replica, there is a compositional and aesthetic similarity in the appearance of the Frowning Clouds as compared to the Rolling Stones. The Frowning Clouds, like the Rolling Stones, are shown in their respective portraits amidst a foliated location facing the camera, each with one band member sitting on the ground. Even more striking however is the resemblance between the styles of clothes worn. Unlike the Beatles who in their early years wore matching suits (as seen on the album cover for *Please Please Me*), the Rolling Stones did not wear matching clothes, as can be seen on the cover of 'Paint It Black' where they are dressed in a suitably eclectic mix of 1960s fashions (McMillian, 2013). The Frowning Clouds are similarly adorned in a variety of 1960s style

menswear items including a suit jacket, skivvies and shirts buttoned to the neck. This is in keeping not only with the lack of uniformity in clothes which was a hallmark of the Rolling Stones' attire in direct contrast to the Beatles during their early careers, but also a reflection of the way 1960s fashions are strategically used in retro dress practices where "there is not a single Sixties style that is being followed slavishly but a range of options and styles that are retrospectively associated with the time" (Jenß, 2004, p389).



Figure 21: The Rolling Stones – ‘Paint It Black/Stupid Girl’ (1966)

Fashions consistent with those seen on the cover of *Listen Closelier* are also sported by the Frowning Clouds on their earlier EP release, *Lovin' You/Time Wastin' Woman/Sorry Business* (2009) (Figure 22). Both the clothes and hairstyles of the Frowning Clouds here bear a resemblance to the early to mid-1960s fashions of the Rolling Stones. The suit and tie seen at the right foreground of the band portrait on *Lovin' You* harkens to the British mod-style of the 1960s as well as the typically suited dress style of the Rolling Stones during that period. Also, the hairstyles sported by the Frowning Clouds on both their covers resemble the medium-length,

brushed forward hairstyle that was popularized in the 1960s by both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.



Figure 22: The Frowning Clouds - *Lovin' You/Time Wastin' Woman/Sorry Business* (2009)

What becomes apparent in viewing these cover portraits of the Frowning Clouds is the importance of the band's suitably retro fashions and appearance in further reinforcing the cultivated visual aesthetic and connectedness with the pre-*Sgt Pepper* era. What makes this aspect of their cover portraiture so effective is the credibility of their retro appearance through a clear attention to detail. For Jenß, the “dedicated absorption of the feel of the period through its surviving traces is essential for the production of a “credible” retro appearance,” which is in keeping with the credo of the Frowning Clouds not only in terms of their music production sensibilities, but in their personal preference towards 1960s rock music culture (2004, p390).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> The preferences are further demonstrated in the group's talk which is examined in Chapter 8.



Figure 23: The Rolling Stones – *The Rolling Stones* (1964)

Quite fittingly, the use of retro fashions by the Frowning Clouds as seen on the covers of *Listen Closelier* and *Lovin' You*, which are modelled in part on the Rolling Stones' appearance on their record sleeves, reflects the importance of visual ephemera in retro cultures. According to Jenß, "engagement with the visual and material culture of the 1960s," including record covers and other original artifacts [sic], is an important source of knowledge for enthusiasts of Sixties retro fashion culture (2004, p389). Similarly, this same engagement with the visual culture of the 1960s is demonstrated on the part of the Frowning Clouds with regard to their personal aesthetic, but is also a clear influence in the design of their album covers, and what they are wearing when featured on them. By applying to their own album covers this knowledge of the 1960s acquired through album covers from that era, the Frowning Clouds are able to establish reference points to historically located visual ephemera, such that meaning cannot be fully elucidated in the album cover itself, but is deliberately deferred through the play of signs from the now into the past. It is this process which underpins the associative potential

of the signs found on these album covers to reinforce a connection with the era already found in their music.



Figure 24: The Rolling Stones – *The Rolling Stones No. 2* (1965)

The *Lovin' You* band portrait also demonstrates a lighting technique which lends to it a compositional and aesthetic similarity to a number of influential pre-*Sgt Pepper* British albums. The lighting in all of these cover photographs comes from a single direction to the extreme left or right of the group, creating a deep shadow on the opposite side. This half-lit lighting effect was famously used in Robert Freeman's iconic portrait photograph of the Beatles on the cover of *With the Beatles* (1963), but also features on three early Rolling Stones albums, *The Rolling Stones* (1964) (Figure 23), *The Rolling Stones No. 2* (1965) (Figure 24) and *Aftermath* (1966a) (Figure 25) (Osborne, 2013, p169). Subsequently, these chiaroscuro album covers have a strong association with the visual culture of pre-*Sgt Pepper* rock music of the 1960s, a visual style that informs *Lovin' You*, and which strengthens the connotative relationship to the 1960s already fostered by the music.



Figure 25: The Rolling Stones – *Aftermath* (1966a)

These iconic covers are also considered notable for spearheading innovations in the design of album covers in the 1960s, helping to establish “a new paradigm for sleeve design”, especially with regard to the reduction in the amount of typography being used in cover design (Osborne, 2013, p169-170). Featuring a lack of text aimed at explicitly marketing the bands and their music as product, these albums were deemed “anti-commercial” and “reflective of the purist musical stance” (Osborne, 2013 p169). This appeal to anti-commercialism is of course a defining characteristic of authenticity as it is formed within the cultural context of rock music (Keightley, 2001). However in addition to this, Osborne refers to the innovation of the cover of the Rolling Stones’ first album, typography pared back to the point where not even the group name is featured, as a way of marketing the album as “a record for insiders, for those already acquainted with the band’s image” (2013, p169). In this way Osborne highlights the underlying irony in rock music authenticity whereby authenticity can be derived in opposition to popular, or commercial music, while at the same time the industry actively harnesses this perception of authenticity in order to create a marketable product. This example demonstrates Auslander’s

(1998) contention that authenticity in rock music is “not an expression of essence,” but ultimately “a result of industrial practice: the music industry specifically sets out to endow its products with the necessary signs of authenticity” (p6). Contemporary retro rock album covers which imitate the conventions of 1960s album covers are in effect replicating the kind of authenticity structures already extant in rock music culture.

Further to this, though, by tapping into the iconography of these 1960s album covers, contemporary retro rock artists are able to utilize their associative potential, and adapt them for their own purposes. For example, through their modern usage of these same types of images, the Frowning Clouds, especially on *Lovin’ You*, are not only marketing to insiders in the first level form of authenticity as posited by Osborne, but are also positioning their derivative band image as a “demonstration of knowledge and connoisseurship as part of their (sub)cultural capital” – that of the band as well as their audience (Jenß, 2004, p390). The Frowning Clouds thus, through the appropriation of the language of pre-*Sgt Pepper* sleeve design including their use of chiaroscuro portrait photography, appeal to audiences who can read this visual language in order to derive a shared affinity with the Rolling Stones and British rock music of the early to mid-1960s. Similar to the use of pre-*Sgt Pepper* typography then, these photographic illustrations can at once serve a simple denotative function, depicting the musicians who create the music on the album, while also providing a platform for a significant connotative function through which a past era can be referenced, as well as flagging to the initiated the potential for shared connoisseurship of classic rock visual culture.

However the Frowning Clouds, as well as Thee Wylde Oscars to a certain extent, are creating a thickened denotative effect with the blending of typography and these arresting photographic band portraits. On the one hand the albums are in the commercial ‘magazine style’ of the early 1960s such as that of *Please Please Me*, with its largely generic typographical in-house record label design, but they also feature photographic illustrations that are more in keeping with the transformative movement of album cover designs leading up to the innovations of the *Sgt Pepper* album cover. In effect, Thee Wylde Oscars and the Frowning Clouds have

blended visual approaches which are characteristic of a wider period of time, rather than of any particular moment in the 1960s. Just as they are able to combine various sound elements to create recordings that are in total evocative of a period of musical output of several years, their album covers are also able to blend two stylistically oppositional elements into singular visual images that work to establish a feeling for a time period as a whole – the early to the mid-1960s inclusively.

Retro rock album covers in the pre-*Sgt Pepper* style are thus able to achieve two objectives in line with the nostalgic connotations of the recorded music. Firstly, they facilitate a deferral of meaning taken from the contemporary retro rock product back to an historical point of reference, while simultaneously fulfilling functional needs. Denotatively they provide base informational meaning; however a fuller meaning is only ascertained through the connotative value of these covers, where specific textual and photographic signs are deliberately used to defer meaning back to the visual culture of the 1960s. The second objective, a by-product of this attention to the connotative power of these signs, is the bolstering of a sense of authenticity and legitimacy for artists such as the Frowning Clouds. Just as in other visual displays of retro culture such as retro fashion, “this quest for authenticity through reproduction is a central preoccupation of members of this scene, and essential for their individual and collective identification with the look of the past” (Jenß, 2004, p390). For Jenß where “such dedicated absorption of the feel of the period through its surviving traces is essential for the production of a “credible” retro appearance,” the Frowning Clouds are able to fully demonstrate this absorption by matching their enthusiasm for replicating the recording conditions and sound outcomes of the early 1960s with the considered reproduction of visual sign elements of the 1960s on their album sleeves (2004, p390). These two elements work hand in hand to establish a mutually complimentary retro context that works to assert their credibility through a conspicuous display of their subcultural capital.

## 7.4 POST-SGT PEPPER DESIGN

In large part, the success of the Frowning Clouds and similar retro rock artists in cohesively resembling iconic album covers of the pre-Sgt Pepper 1960s is due to the built-in uniformity found across a range of popular music album covers in the early 1960s. This uniformity was derived from the widespread lack of artistic control of recording artists with regard to their sleeve designs where in-house label design was the norm. While often derivative and uninspired, however, it is this very predictability that has marked pre-*Sgt Pepper* album cover designs with a distinctive language of signs that make them particularly identifiable with the early 1960s. This language of signs, though primarily functional and lacking in the artistic vivacity that was soon to be realized post-*Sgt Pepper*, can therefore be tapped into by artists such as the Frowning Clouds to so easily aid in the nostalgic framing of their music through cover design.

As such, whereas the pre-*Sgt Pepper* design style in contemporary retro rock album covers demonstrates and takes advantage of the uniformity of signs to render and contextualize the music product as nostalgic, post-*Sgt Pepper* album cover design, in lieu of those specific signs found in the earlier part of the 1960s, instead relies more broadly on connotations derived from collective memory and mythologies surrounding the later part of the 1960s as it is represented visually. Indeed, post-*Sgt Pepper* album cover design is characterized by a lack of record company marketing insignia, descriptive information, and track listings. Instead these elements are often relegated to the inside of a gatefold album cover or indeed on the inner sleeve, allowing for a design visually focused on complimenting the tone, narrative or message of the music, such that the album cover and the music itself form a complete package where both the cover and music are consumed simultaneously. Even the more obvious informative denotations – such as the name of artist and album title – are often excluded entirely, or if included are incorporated into the artwork itself, as demonstrated by the examples of Cream's *Disraeli Gears* (1967) and the Moody Blues' *In Search of the Lost Chord* (1968) (Figures 26 and 27, respectively).

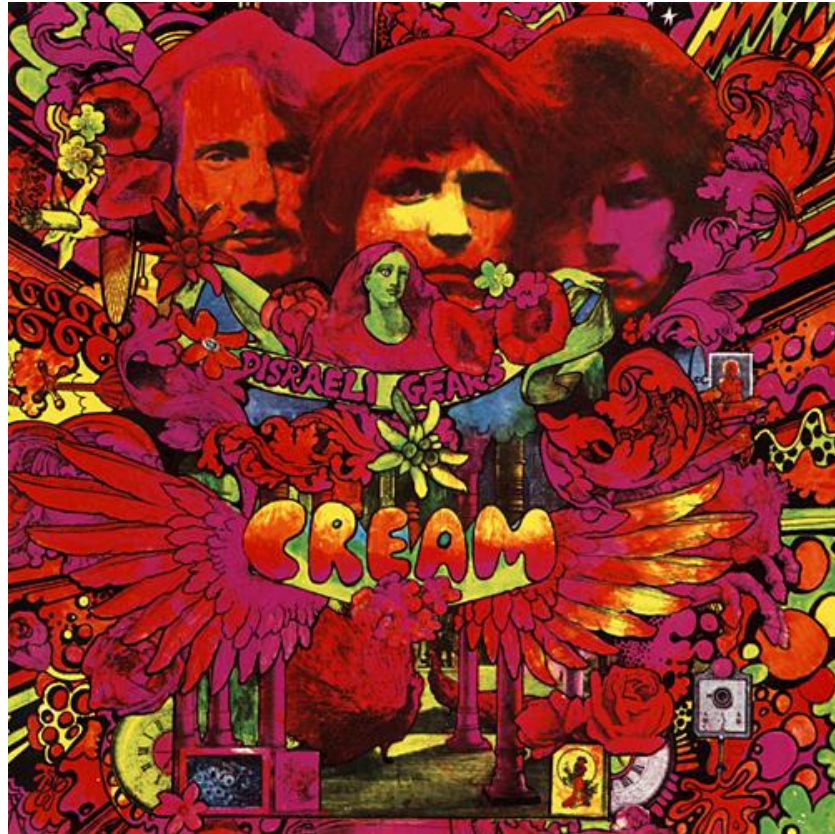


Figure 26: Cream – *Disraeli gears* (1967)



Figure 27: The Moody Blues – *In Search of the Lost Chord* (1968)

Thus in the late 1960s into the 1970s the form of the album cover for rock music, and in particular psychedelic and art rock, portrayed images heavy with connotative meaning rather than descriptive meaning. An exceedingly popular and influential design for Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) (Figure 28), for example, epitomizes the success of post-*Sgt Pepper* cover design, demonstrating the visual power of connotative meaning where the album's themes are succinctly expressed through the cover and packaging. The scope of the album itself covers birth, life and death and questions forces of greed, interpersonal dominion and ultimately the sanity of the human endeavour (Tillekens, 2005). Remarkably the staggeringly simple prism with light refracted through it, accompanied by images of an electrocardiogram of a heart beat and the great pyramids, manages to speak to summarize these ideas. A beam of light turning into a rainbow and ultimately back to a beam of light on the back cover suggests life, birth and death, the pyramids metaphorically represent power and greed, while the heartbeat itself provides a visual mirror to the opening and closing sound of a heartbeat heard on the album.

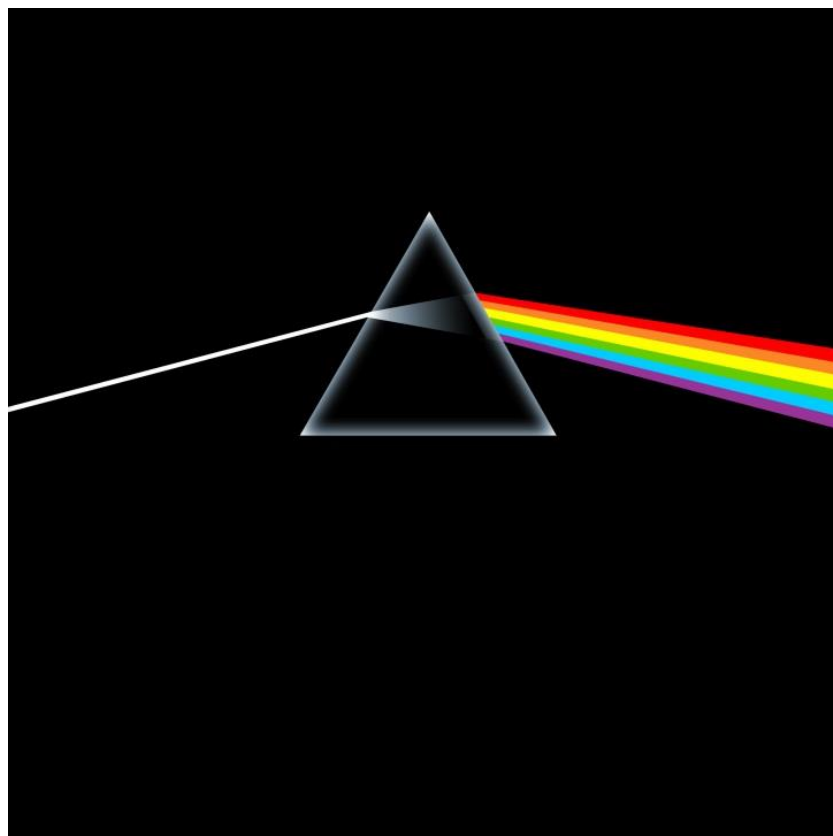


Figure 28: Pink Floyd – *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973)

While post-*Sgt Pepper* often features recurring markers, such as those corresponding to psychedelic imagery for example, the design style is less constricted as that of the pre-*Sgt Pepper* mode. References therefore become more esoteric, illustrative content more commonly specific to particular album covers, artists, modes, or more broadly derivative of collective memory and culturally dominant perceptions of the past.

This post-*Sgt Pepper* style is clearly used on Tame Impala's debut album, *Innerspeaker* (2011) (Figure 29). At first glance, the cover stands apart from pre-*Sgt Pepper* design where there is a restraint in the amount of text signs, a distinct absence of record label insignia on the front cover design, and greater emphasis on the cover image. Descriptive information is limited to the artist name in the top left hand corner, with the album title in the top right hand corner, in small discreet lettering. What stands out instead in this cover design is the startling visual of a forested and mountainous landscape which features a rippling effect that focuses our vision towards the centre of the cover, as though heading down an ethereal tunnel towards a vanishing point. While the image of the landscape itself is not explicitly evocative of the 1960s or rock music, it is the rippling effect which serves two roles in expressing a retrospective framework for interpreting the album's nostalgic capacity. In the first instance, the effected cover illustration provides a link to collective memory and the enduring cultural mythology surrounding the 1960s through its suggestion of psychedelia and hallucinogenic experience, while it also works to provide a thematic unity of the album with the cover design reminiscent of post-*Sgt Pepper* album cover design.

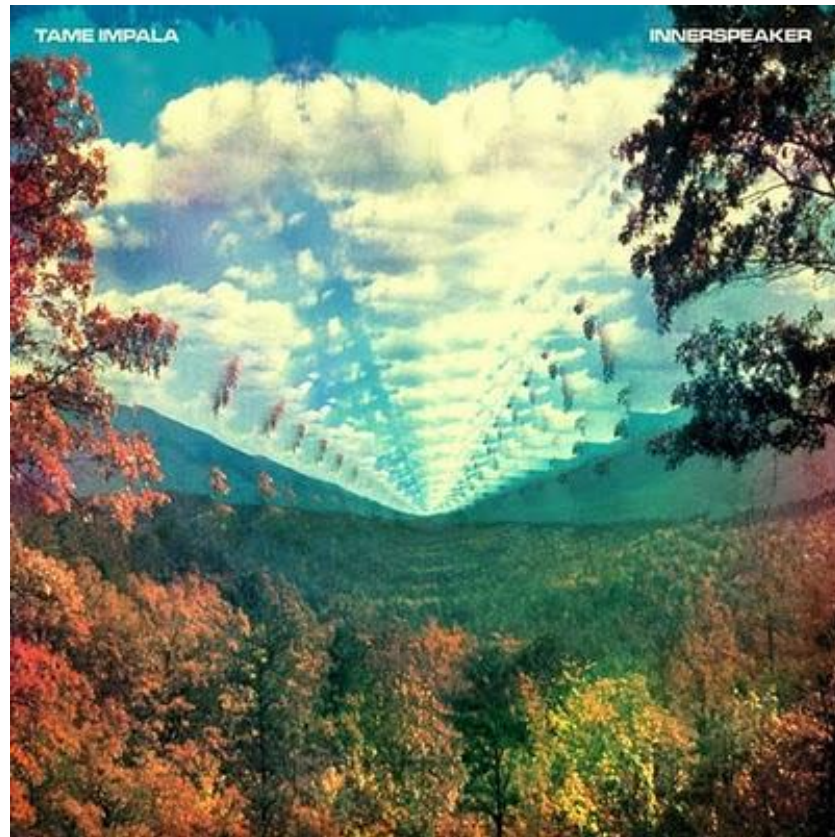


Figure 29: Tame Impala – *Innerspeaker* (2011)

In the instance of *Innerspeaker*, the visual representation of hallucinogenic experience evokes the popular mythology surrounding the late 1960s. The rippling effect itself works because it adds an otherworldly essence to the landscape, which is further enhanced by the all-too-vivid colours in the image – a sensation that is associated with hallucinogenic drugs, LSD in particular. Psychedelic rock, as its name suggests, is closely associated with altered mental states brought on by hallucinogens. In the same way that psychedelic rock conveys “a musical equivalent of hallucinogenic experience” by effecting disorienting musical sensations to mirror the irregular physical and mental sensations of psychedelic drug use, a similar reflection is found in the artwork which accompanies that kind of music (Whiteley, 1990, p38). In particular, the rippling effect seen on Tame Impala’s album suggests the visual and spatial equivalent of prominent sound effects heard on the album such as delay and echo. As already discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the heavy use of delay creates a sensation of repetition that blurs the fixity of

the present which is representative of the physical and mental sensations of blurriness and time dilatation related to psychedelic drugs.

It is this same appeal to psychedelic experience which also serves to compliment and solidify the thematic meaning of the album's music – introversion. Reducing an album image to the core of the musical message of an album is a desirable task in post-*Sgt Pepper* album cover design. For Leif Podhajsky, the album cover artist of *Innerspeaker*, a successful album design is “a direct translation of the music itself, something that can capture the entire essence of the album in one image” (Hughes Jones, 2013). Taking the title of the album, ‘Innerspeaker’, at face value, it alone connotes the private, personal and internal nature of the album. It suggests that rather than being an external experience, the album takes place within – an experience of the mind. This is represented visually by the cover image which focuses our gaze to a singular point, metaphorically channelling out our surroundings and heightening singular attention. This introverted experience is borne out not just by the album's musical and visual association with LSD and psychedelics, where perception is commonly privatized and internalized within (as associated with LSD) but also through lyrical themes explored on the album. The first single from *Innerspeaker*, ‘Solitude Is Bliss’ (2010), for example, advocates the dismissal of the perception and company of others in favour of this internal experience:

*I've got body that my mind can leave  
Nothing else matters, I don't care what I miss  
Company's okay, solitude is bliss  
There's a party in my head and no one is invited  
And you will never come close to how I feel*

Without an existing collective memory and cultural mythology surrounding the connection between rock music of the late 1960s and drug culture, the visual power of the cover image on *Innerspeaker* would be less effective in directing a nostalgic reading of the text. Even where there is a reluctance to specifically play on these connotations, they still inform the reading of the image. Where Hughes Jones sees the album cover art for Tame Impala's *Innerspeaker* and *Lonerism* (2012) “depicting kaleidoscopic universes where colours melt and

explode with a distinctly psychedelic feel,” the artist disagrees with this reading, emphasizing instead the “surreal and otherworldly elements rather than those old-school hippie ideas” (2013). The manner in which this process works, where an arbitrary image can be loaded with such ideological implications for historical memory, in this instance, the defining of the 1960s as the ‘psychedelic sixties’, is illustrated by Barthes (1972) in *Mythology*. At the semiological level, myths are formed when the denotative quality of a sign (its *meaning*, using Barthes’ terminology) is appropriated by an associated connotation (or *concept*). In a similar way to how a signifier and signified together form the essential components of a sign in De Saussure’s rendering, a myth is formed by the pairing of a sign’s form with an ideological concept. In myth, it is the concept which interacts with the form of a sign to actively alter its meaning and give it a new reality full of ideological implications. The effect of this process can be such that history itself can be reformulated to adhere with a dominant ideological reading of the past, since “through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth” (Barthes, 1972, p119). The function of myth works because the form of a sign is both readable with its literal meaning and the new meaning given to it by an ideological concept. As Barthes contends:

...the signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language-object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness. This alternation is, so to speak, gathered up in the concept, which uses it like an ambiguous signifier, at once intellective and imaginary, arbitrary and natural. (1972, p123)

Mythologies are so powerful because the concepts that underlie them do in fact seem so natural. For Meinhof and Van Leeuwen: “Connotations become naturalized to such an extent that they take over and replace any appeal to an external referent, such as a historical moment” (2000, p63). Significantly then, it is in the mind of the viewer where the conceptual meaning of myth is instigated, for in mythology “the mode of presence of the form is spatial. The concept, on the contrary, appears in global fashion, it is a kind of nebula, the condensation, more or less hazy, of a certain knowledge. ... Its mode of presence is memorial” (Barthes, 1972, p122). This works particularly well in the case of the *Innerspeaker* album cover as it is paired with recordings that

also appeals to memorial concepts of nostalgia and a history of the 1960s *through* popular music itself. The active ingredient in any myth is the ideological concept, “the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered” (Barthes, 1972, p118). The design of the album cover then takes into account and builds upon the very myth it perpetuates.

As much as myth is by its very nature a concocted reflection of historical reality, it is at least partly rooted in an historical reality – that of ideological construction. For Barthes: “What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality” (1972, p142). With *Innerspeaker*, it is this naturalization of an ideological reality through myth which underpins its nostalgic connotations.

The album cover art featured on Stonefield’s releases, while still ostensibly in the post-*Sgt Pepper* style, takes a different approach to that of drawing on a mythologized past or a collective memory of the 1960s as with *Innerspeaker*. Instead, Stonefield focuses on the specific symbology and mythological discourse represented through the distinctive visual style associated with Led Zeppelin album covers in the 1970s including illustrations, typography and band logos/symbols. These first two elements can be seen in the cover design for Stonefield’s *Black Water Rising* (2011) (Figure 30). The cover design as a whole is reminiscent of the unique *mélange* of medieval, mystical and baroque styles cultivated by Led Zeppelin both lyrically and visually in the 1970s (Fast, 2001). In particular, the design of *Black Water Rising* is suggestive of artwork from Led Zeppelin’s most popular and iconic album, *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The album is officially untitled; however it is most commonly referred to as ‘Led Zeppelin IV’.

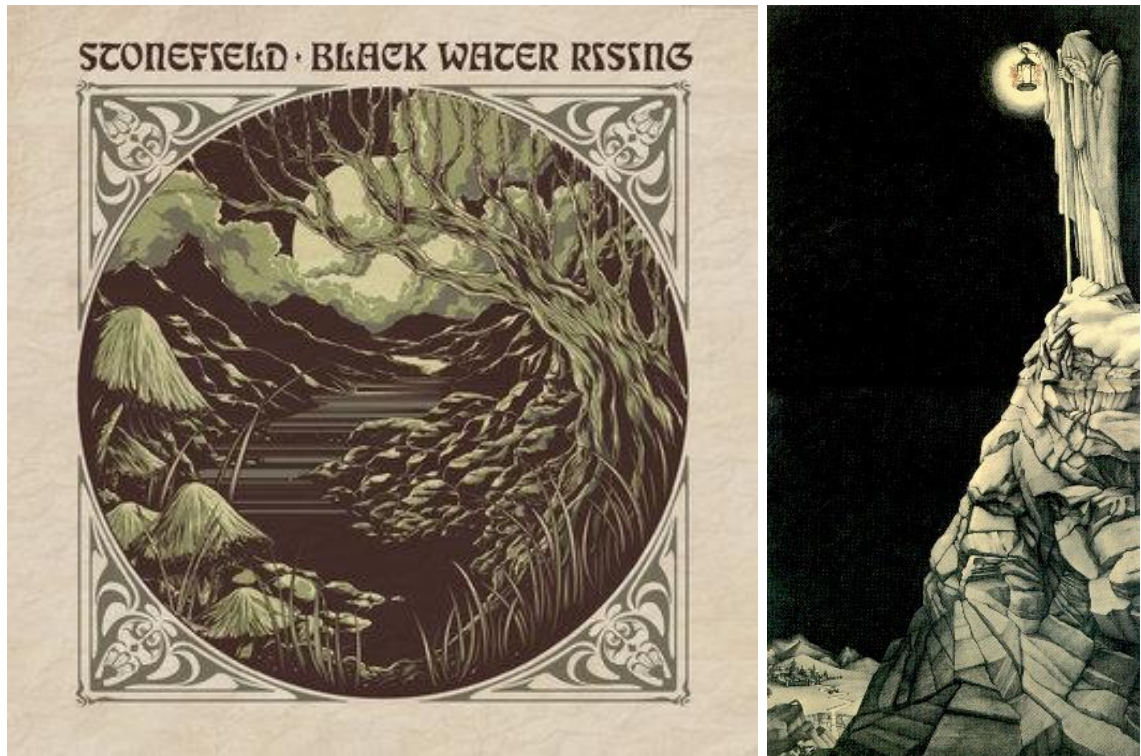


Figure 30 (at left): Stonefield – *Black Water Rising* (2011), and Figure 31 (at right): Inside gatefold cover detail from Led Zeppelin - *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971)

The rendering of the night-time river and nature scene utilizes a muted colour scheme and a similar approach to line as seen with the illustration of ‘the ‘hermit’ on the mountain (derived from the tarot card character) on the inside gatefold cover of *Led Zeppelin IV* (Figure 31). In addition, the typography used is in a similar vein to the baroque style font used on the inner sleeve of *Led Zeppelin IV* which features the lyrics to Led Zeppelin’s signature recording ‘Stairway to Heaven’ (Figure 32), while a comparable font is also visible on Led Zeppelin’s record label, ‘Swan Song’ (Figure 33).

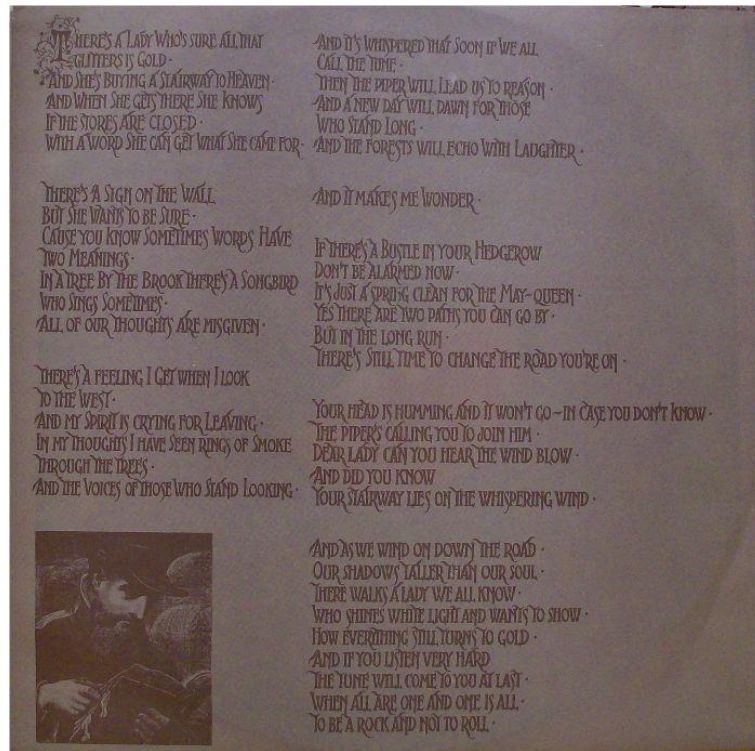


Figure 32: Inner sleeve detail: Led Zeppelin - *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971)



Figure 33: Record label detail: Led Zeppelin – *Physical Graffiti* (1975)

This use of derivative illustration and borrowed typography also plays prominently in other examples of Stonefield's cover art. Again for their debut album, *Stonefield* (2013) (Figure 34), a landscape is featured, this time a desert scene, while the font is that commonly used as part of the Led Zeppelin brand. On this occasion, the inspiration is less from *Led Zeppelin IV*, and more from Led Zeppelin's following album, *Houses of the Holy* (1973) (Figure 35), which features another eerie stony mountain scene. But regardless of which specific album the images align with, the hallmarks of Led Zeppelin's design aesthetic are again being used to frame Stonefield's own contemporary music.



Figure 34: Stonefield – *Stonefield* (2013)

The content of the 'Stonefield' identity is their own, but it is so deeply embedded in existing referents to Led Zeppelin that it clearly attempts to take on the distinctive mythology associated with the group. This is particularly the case with the utilization of the unique and recognizable Led Zeppelin font that is nearly always associated with Led Zeppelin, having

featured first on *Houses of the Holy* but also since then on compilation albums and all manner of band merchandizing.

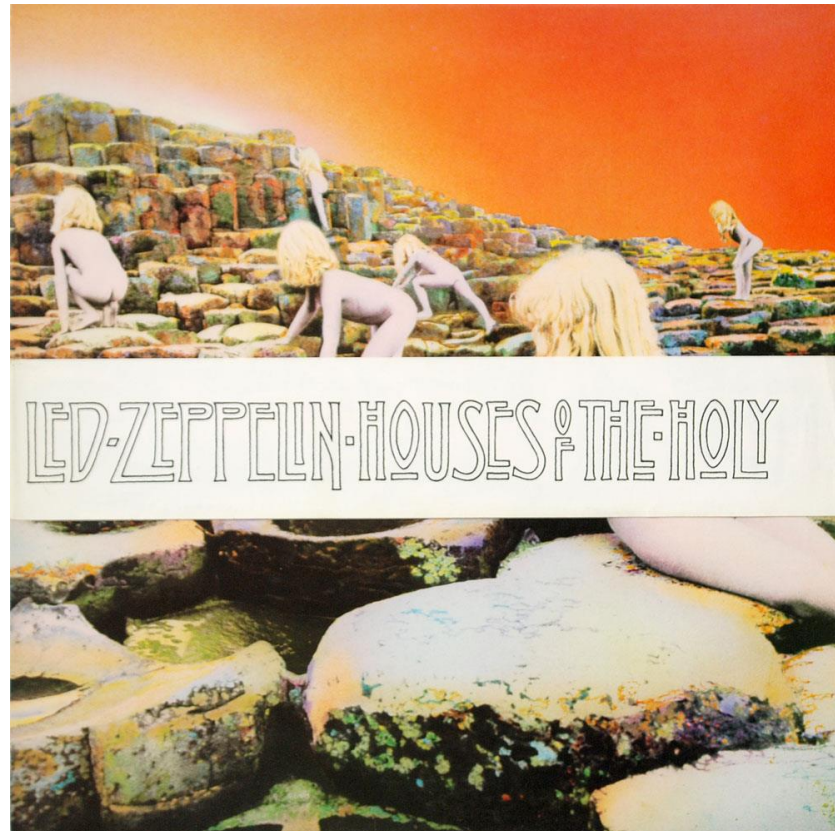


Figure 35: Led Zeppelin – *Houses of the Holy* (1973)  
(white paper ribbon label included on initial release in the US and UK)

In some ways the visual approach evinced here is similar to that adopted by the Frowning Clouds who utilize the tropes of pre-*Sgt Pepper* design to reference early 1960s British Invasion rock music. However in lieu of those industrial tropes in the post-*Sgt Pepper* style, Stonefield's references are demonstrably narrower in scope with reference to Led Zeppelin. This reliance on Led Zeppelin's visual style instead suggests that Stonefield seek to evoke the visual mystique of Led Zeppelin more so than appealing to a 'collective memory' or the broader design styles of that era.

Rather than making reference to an alleged historical moment in the vein of *Innerspeaker* then, Stonefield seek to fashion an identity with reference to an already

established visual discourse. Indeed, Fast (2001) considers that the mythology surrounding Led Zeppelin was:

...created not through a coherent narrative but through symbol, image, and attitude that either have an immediate mythical significance or cause a mythological discourse to be generated by the press, by the band members themselves, or by the fan community. (p52)

Stonefield then are effectively pointing not to history, but to a history of signifiers – to a hyperreality. Through Stonefield's more explicit visual derivativeness (especially as compared with the approach adopted by Tame Impala), they illustrate the superficiality of 'history' in rock music in line with Baudrillard's (1994) simulacra. For Baudrillard, a simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but a reality in its own right that has no need to base itself upon truthful referential markers. Indeed, Led Zeppelin's visual mythology is ultimately a construction of signs, through which "fans locate the mythological in all kinds of iconography and discourse that surround the band..." (Fast, 2001, p52). Stonefield in turn replicate this construction in their own cover design, fulfilling "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p1).

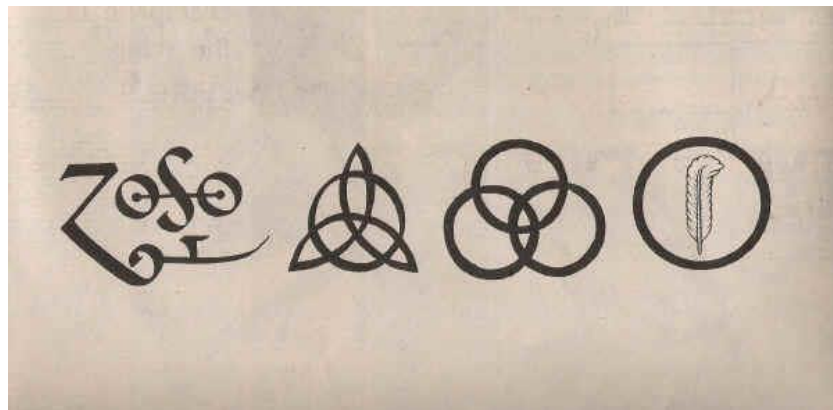


Figure 36: Inner sleeve detail: Led Zeppelin - *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971)

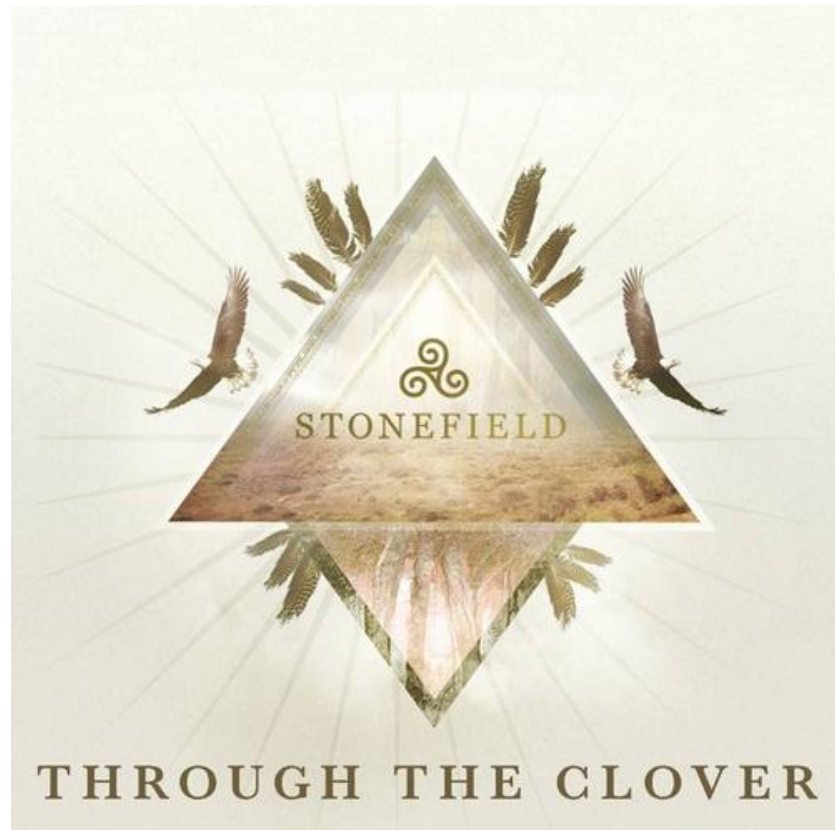
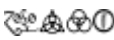


Figure 37: Stonefield – *Through the Clover* (2010)

Another clear example of this can be seen with regard to the ‘four symbols’ of  (Figure 36), which are purportedly meant to stand for the members of Led Zeppelin and:

tends to immortalize them and draw them into a sacred and mysterious realm (since we have little idea where their symbols come from or what they mean), one that appears to be ancient (since we imagine that symbols such as this are not invented in the present but are “timeless”) and exclusive (since they seem to be part of something that we are not and about which we have little information). (Fast, 2001, p71)

These sign constructions are mimicked by Stonefield who similarly adopt an abstract old world ‘rune’ triple-spiral symbol which can be seen at the centre of their *Through the Clover* (2010) EP cover (Figure 37). Stonefield’s symbol is almost a cross-pollination of the two middle symbols of Led Zeppelin’s. Necessarily, it is not an exact delineation of Led Zeppelin’s symbols, however, Stonefield’s rune design is just as ‘real’.

## 7.6 CONCLUSION

The album covers of the Frowning Clouds, Tame Impala and Stonefield represent three different approaches to contemporary retro rock album cover design. Significantly for all of these approaches, while they result in a similar outcome, that is, facilitating and bolstering a nostalgic reading not only of the album covers themselves, but of the music they contain, the approaches also tend to be suited to not only the style of retro rock music they are involved with, but also the ethos surrounding that style.

For the Frowning Clouds there is a strong reliance in their covers on the typographical and photographic portrait tropes of pre-*Sgt Pepper* design. In their attention to detail in recreating this very structured language of signs, the Frowning Clouds are able to demonstrate their knowledge and subcultural capital. This of course ties in to the meticulous nature of their music which appeals to romantic authenticity values and nostalgic continuity with the past. For Tame Impala, whose music is more derivative of post-*Sgt Pepper* psychedelic rock music, their *Innerspeaker* album cover works to represent the prevailing attitude associated with this era towards fidelity of sound and the album format as the totality of a work of art. Further to this, the cover relies on the mythology of the 1960s as the 'psychedelic sixties' in order to link what is a strongly evocative cover image, without recourse to the strong sign systems found in pre-*Sgt Pepper* albums, with a style that is less textually defined.

This is different again from Stonefield, who in their explicit visual similarity with the symbolically represented mythology of Led Zeppelin, work to narrow their visual evocativeness to a specific mythology. By highlighting their relationship to the Led Zeppelin mythology, Stonefield also demonstrate the fundamental nature of sign systems, especially as they represent 'history' or 'reality'. Indeed Baudrillard refers to history itself as a myth in hyperreality. He asserts that "the great trauma" in the age of hyperreality is the "decline of strong referentials," and along with it, a sense that "history has retreated" (1994, p43). As a result of this devaluation of history in the age of simulation, Baudrillard points to a tendency to latch upon the markers of

a recent past history in an attempt to invigorate the present loss of referentials. Anything from “the panoply of events, ideologies, retro fashions” of the past can be evoked in the present “no longer so much because people believe in them or still place some hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when *at least* there was a history” (1994, p44).

In the next chapter this contention will be explored with relation to the scenic talk of contemporary retro rock music stakeholders who address the role of the past in their own contemporary music practices.

## 8 TALKIN' 'BOUT SOMEONE ELSE'S GENERATION

*He pulled the mirrors off his Cadillac  
Because he doesn't like it looking like he looks  
back*

- Tame Impala, 'Elephant' (2012)

*Why don't you all fade away?  
And don't try to dig what we all say  
I'm not trying to cause a big sensation  
I'm just talkin' 'bout my generation*

- The Who, 'My Generation' (1965)

### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

For the most part, this study into nostalgia and retro rock music has revolved around the texts of retro rock music. While these texts – recordings, performances and album covers – are essential elements in retro rock music culture, their meaning is not exclusively fixed through just these texts. Just as important as the content of the texts of contemporary retro rock, or any cultural text for that matter, is how they are read, understood and talked about (Hall, 1980). With this in mind, this chapter seeks to move away from an approach which mainly considers retro rock *music texts* in order to consider the function of the talk surrounding contemporary retro rock music.

Significant to this chapter then is the *way* in which talk is constructed, and how the talk itself becomes a way of interpreting the values and practices associated with contemporary retro rock. While not taking a strictly linguistic approach, I will be informed by discourse analysis in order to highlight the operation of talk in constructing and expressing value systems as well as demonstrating the role of music as it relates to nostalgic emotion. As previous chapters have demonstrated, nostalgia associated with contemporary retro rock music is not definitively

influenced by any one characteristic or element, but is reinforced by the sum of its multiple articulations. In the same way that album covers can facilitate an aspect of nostalgic interpretation which strengthens the connotations of the music for example, the talk surrounding retro rock also contributes to the way in which contemporary retro rock is communicated and understood.

The talk to be analysed in this chapter consists of transcripts taken from interviews conducted with four different sources. Three of these sources consist of participants from the three contemporary retro rock artists already mentioned throughout this thesis, Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield. The fourth interview participant, Michael Manzini, who in addition to being a 1960s rock music fan, is also a musician and producer with a strong contemporary retro rock sensibility. After a brief discussion of the contexts and method of interview, the bulk of chapter will be structured around two recurring themes evident in the interviews – attitudes towards past music (1960s and early 1970s rock in particular) and present day popular music, as well as concerns over being identified or perceived as a ‘retro’ artist.

## **8.2 INTERVIEW METHOD**

Building on the discussion of interview method raised in Chapter 4, I now seek to provide some more specific contextual detail regarding the method and approach adopted in undertaking interviews. The first step in setting up the interviews with the artists involved contacting the representatives of the groups – their managers, specifically. From initial email contact with these representatives, I made it clear what research project I was undertaking and the desire for their involvement in the project as interviewees. However in addition to my role as researcher, I found it useful on occasion to build a rapport by demonstrating my dual identity as insider researcher. This took the form of referencing other industry businesses, individuals or artists and the like. Thus from early on in the interview process, I felt as though I was

identifiable as someone with an acute interest in the artists' music at the various levels of fan, musician and academic – each of which played a role in informing different aspects of the interview process.

The three artist interviews that largely comprise the content for analysis in the upcoming talk chapter were each held in three different locations in different circumstances. For the interviews with Frowning Clouds and Kevin Parker from Tame Impala, I was also playing on the same bill as these performers in my own group. So on these two occasions I was certainly more explicitly identifiable in the dual role of insider researcher. These interviews were held on the day of the respective performance event. For the Frowning Clouds, the interview was held in the beer garden of a pub venue, while the interview with Kevin Parker was held backstage at a larger University auditorium venue. On the other occasion interviewing Stonefield, while they were made aware of my role as insider researcher, I was perhaps more identifiable as academic researcher outside of the context of a performance event. This interview took place at a café local to the group. The varying locations and circumstances of each interview, in addition to how I presented myself during the interviews (as insider, researcher, or as insider researcher) no doubt played a role in the outcomes in each of the interviews undertaken, and will be addressed where relevant.

Other factors of note are the preparation required for the interviews, as well as the approach taken in conducting interviews. I prepared a set of questions revolving around general topic areas which I had identified as being relevant to my research into contemporary retro rock texts, as well as specific to these particular artists. However rather than necessarily asking these questions in a strict order, I found that my approach to the interviews was more conversational and open-ended. In this sense the interviews could be described as semi-structured, giving much leeway to the interviewees to expand on ideas that resonated with them, or let them speak at tangents if the flow of the interview went in that direction. It was often in these extended passages of conversation that unguarded and poignant comments were being made that would not have necessarily been forthcoming directly from the questions I had prepared. However this

is not to suggest that other parts of the interview were not fruitful. In fact, insofar as more direct questions tended to draw more specific and/or concise answers, even these offered insights into the kinds of talk practices and narratives used by interviews in demonstrating what Miller and Glassner call “culturally embedded normative explanations” (2011, p144). Since constructionist interviewing in the social sciences is so often characterized by a regard for “their subjects of study as individuals who are and have been socially and culturally shaped,” it is the talk which demonstrates the process of expressing these cultural ideas and practices which is ultimately more valuable (Gray, 2003, p94). The form of expression, rather than the content of discussion, tells us more about the world of individual respondents, a world which has been shaped by the wider shared cultural milieu.

### **8.3 “IT WAS BEST OFF THE FIRST TIME AROUND”: MYTHOLOGIZING THE PAST/DISSATISFACTION WITH THE PRESENT**

A key theme found in the talk surrounding retro rock music is the expression of value judgements favouring past music as ‘better’ or ‘best’ in comparison with present day popular music. This theme is expressed through a number of different linguistic approaches which have the effect of naturalizing these value judgements. This perception of the 1960s fundamentally informs contemporary retro rock music since it is used to form the basis for what constitutes authentic music and cultural practices for invested stakeholders. It in turn also provides a framework against which to measure the value of contemporary popular music which is again reinforced by the language used to explain and describe it.

#### **8.3.1 ‘I Like That Old Time Rock and Roll’: Why 1960s Rock Is Better**

Typically for those involved with retro rock music, there is a strong awareness of, and investment in, music from the past. As such, values surrounding musical texts and artists from

this time can play an important role in how the past and present are perceived with relation to each other. These views and values in turn help situate meaning in the present day for contemporary retro rock music, which inevitably owes something to both the present and the past. A number of techniques and positions are provided through the talk surrounding 1960s music. For the Frowning Clouds, these strong convictions held by group members as to the importance of the 1960s for popular music are expressed through a number of discourses and phrases found in their talk, as evidenced by this exchange amongst members of the band:

Nicholas Van Bakel: It's obviously better. Everyone that knows... Any musician that's like, really acclaimed and has done good stuff always cites the sixties as the pinnacle of creativity.

Ben Maton: Like, the best band in the history of music is from the sixties - the Beatles. Music hasn't gotten better since then. And the second biggest band is the Rolling Stones.

NVB: Michael Jackson was bigger than the Beatles...

BM: But he's not better.

Brenton Leary: He's not a band.

NVB: Oh, he's sold more albums...

Zak Olsen: He might have sold more, but I don't think he's *bigger*.

Nicholas Van Bakel's initial claim demonstrates the level of esteem with which this era of music is lauded. The manner of expression found in his statement helps to create a sense of superiority and definitiveness in his claim. In particular, the use of the word 'obviously' is used to situate his view, and directly informs his following statement. 'Obviously' implies unambiguity, as though the quality of 1960s music is self-evident. Coupled with 'obviously', Van Bakel bolsters his claim by referring to 'everyone that knows', and certainly, if the superiority of 1960s is so 'obvious' and self-evident to all, then indeed a reference to 'everyone' would be validated. However he pauses and settles instead on another group to back up his claim – this time, 'any musician that's like, really acclaimed and has done good stuff'. This short pause and change in approach to his claim demonstrates an acknowledgment that there are wider tastes beyond his own, and those of his bandmates. With this pause, a subtle glimpse is given into the possibility of an 'us' and 'them' divide – those who are in the know, or

understand what it is to be ‘better’ (us) as opposed to others who do not have the requisite knowledge to know what is better (them). Thus, he turns instead to acclaimed musicians who he presumes to share his view. Notably, even in seeking the validity provided by musicians who would ostensibly know more about music in general, he qualifies the kinds of musicians who would cite 1960s music as ‘better’ – namely, those who are ‘really acclaimed’ and have ‘done good stuff’. On the one hand, Van Bakel’s statement is initially rooted in unmistakability, virtually a statement of fact (‘obviously’), while on the other, he augments this claim with a qualification surrounding the suitability and knowledge of those able to make the distinction between what is good and bad. This, in a way, undermines the decisiveness of the initial claim, for if the formidability of 1960s rock music is so plainly obvious, then why must only those with the requisite knowledge be able to verify it; would it not be apparent to all?

A common validation technique found in the interviews used to reinforce the claim of 1960s rock music’s superiority is by reference to artists from that era. This can take the form of reference to a particular artist or artists, or by referring to the sheer volume of canonical bands that originated from that time period. For example, Amy Findlay from Stonefield claims “All the legendary bands were... [from the] late sixties or seventies.” Significantly, the artists who are used to exemplify the greatness of the 1960s are bands who are usually qualified as being culturally or musically influential and successful. In this case, they are ‘legendary’, and this theme of canonical validity is picked up by others. Ben Maton, who adds to Van Bakel’s claim regarding the 1960s as ‘the pinnacle of creativity’ by citing the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, also relies on their dominant position within the rock music canon. While these two particular groups are arguably very recognizable and historically significant in rock music circles, Ben Maton goes a step further in that he ranks them within relation to each other. Whereas he could have just simply offered the Beatles and the Rolling Stones as examples, his comment evidences a finely tuned hierarchical structure of what is better and best, not just in rock music, but in ‘the history of music’. He underscores the point that, not only did the 1960s have great bands, but two of those bands are the best and second best bands of all time. What makes the Beatles and

Rolling Stones first and second best is clearly a subjective construct, but the fact of their ranking against each other is used almost as an appeal to an objective order. Similar to the way in which Van Bakel's rephrasing of his comment about 'everyone' almost undermines the implied unmistakability of 'obviously', Maton's claim as to what is best also becomes questionable with continued talk from Van Bakel who mentions another influential artist in popular music, Michael Jackson. This comment from Van Bakel comes across as unguarded, especially considering that moments ago he claimed the supremacy of 1960s music. The comment is quickly met with stern opposition from other band members, and reveals another qualification of what it means to be the best – this time centring on the issue of sales success. While Van Bakel rationalizes his statement of Michael Jackson's being 'bigger' with specific reference to greater album sales than the Beatles, this is countered by the others in the group in line with the traditional construction of authenticity in rock music as being opposition to the perceived frivolity and commercialization of pop music (Keightley, 2001). Maton dismisses the notion of being 'bigger' by claiming in return that Michael Jackson is not 'better'. This distinction recalls the 'us and them' divide which is implied in the language used previously by Van Bakel. Both Maton and Zak Olsen are forced to acknowledge the popularity of Michael Jackson in a commercial sense, however they both counter this with the preposition 'but', which at once accepts what precedes it as well as simultaneously undermining its validity through this criteria of commercial success and popularity. Album sales are in this way deemed an ineffective measure of what is 'best'. The implication here being that since album sales are a purely commercial measure, open to popularity and market forces, or to the open slather of 'everyone', as Van Bakel put it, they are not necessarily sanctioned by those qualified to make that assessment in the view of the Frowning Clouds. Just as Van Bakel turns to those in the know, the 'acclaimed' who have 'done good stuff', the members of the Frowning Clouds position themselves as the tastemakers in this exchange. It is as though in the absence of an external source of authenticity, they take it upon themselves to uphold the requisite authenticity values associated with 1960s rock music.

Another recurring perception of 1960s rock music evidenced by the talk in interviews was its authenticity by way of its primitiveness and naturalness. While along the lines of its self-evident supremacy over other music demonstrated in the earlier exchange, this perception does not require an external validation by tastemakers, since the claim itself is phrased within a discourse of naturalism and primitivism:

NVB: I reckon the sixties is [sic] better because that was like the first, like that was like the instinct...

And again:

NVB: ...I think primitive stuff is the best, like, how I was saying, like, the sixties was just like, their primitive instinct to make that sort of music.

BL: Yeah, it was just human instinct...

The loaded terms ‘instinct’ and ‘primitive’ are richly evocative of the natural world and appeal to an almost evolutionary inevitability – a kind of musical natural selection. By characterizing 1960s rock music as mere primitivism the effect is to reduce the music to a by-product of the natural world, divorcing it from its historical context and the social, cultural, and technological conditions from which it was borne.

This musical ‘natural selection’ accounts not only for the production of rock music in the 1960s, but is also used to validate its contemporary relevance. To this end Van Bakel claims:

Yeah, you're already born with those songs in you. Everyone was born with that tribal rhythm...

Again appealing to a naturalist discourse, a music which emerged through a range of urban, cultural and technological facets is reduced to a ‘tribal rhythm’ inherited by us all at birth. Now while Van Bakel makes this claim through an explicitly naturalist discourse, a similar belief is alluded to by other stakeholders, but in a less descriptive manner. Amy Findlay, speaking on behalf of her bandmates (and sisters) in Stonefield, also touches on the notion of a natural order,

an inevitability of 1960s rock music. Despite acknowledging the influence of their parents during their upbringing in helping to form their musical preference for 1960s rock music, she contends that:

I think we would have found it eventually anyway. Because we love that kind of music. Because once we would have heard it we would have...

Here she underscores the inevitability of 1960s rock music's dominance over other forms and eras of music through its 'eventual' and unavoidable discovery. In this sense, Amy Findlay uses a similar claim to that of Van Bakel where 1960s rock is 'obviously' better. This is also coupled with a position that reflects the appeal to our 'human instinct' as demonstrated by the Frowning Clouds' talk, where Amy contends that regardless of when or how they came to discover the music, it would have always appealed to them. These two approaches are united here to reveal a fatalism in Amy's comments that demonstrates a prevailing and defining notion at the core of what 1960s rock music can represent to contemporary retro rock stakeholders.

These views on 1960s music expressed through fatalist and naturalist discourses also play heavily into a third characterization of the era as 'authentic'. There are a few different ways in which authenticity claims are made through the talk in relation to the 1960s and its rock music and artists in particular. The primary approach taken by retro rock stakeholders in this regard is by claiming the originality of 1960s archetypes.

NVB: That sort of music was just like the first thing they made kind of, like it was best off the first time around - they shouldn't have changed it. Like, the classics or whatever, like, I dunno, like how people say, like they don't make cars like they used to or whatever - it's the same with music.

As with earlier comments, Van Bakel begins by again alluding to a naturalist discourse. This is especially implied by the use of the word 'first', which suggests the claim that 1960s rock music resulted from only an initial attempt, or at least an early attempt not subject to latter changes. And as before, this has the effect of minimizing the history and advancements preceding rock music in the 1960s. However in doing so in this instance, it heightens the claimed authenticity

of the 1960s by amplifying the scale of innovation of this period from the very little preceding it to grand proportions within a relatively specific time frame. To this end, this view is further underscored by Van Bakel with the use the word ‘classics’. More than just being ‘standard’ or ‘typical’, the idea of something being ‘classic’, especially in the current context, is better understood to mean timeless, lasting and enduring. Van Bakel’s choice of words here not only helps to bolster the authenticity claims associated with 1960s rock music, but also demonstrates an underlying theme found in the Frowning Clouds’ music practice whereby they seek to preserve the tradition of 1960s rock music through honouring the processes, performance style, sounds and visual style of the era’s original artists.

Van Bakel’s choice of words supports this approach – especially as he adds a caveat regarding the impact of disturbing that ‘first thing’. Specifically he claims ‘they shouldn’t have changed it’, and through this tampering with the original product its authenticity may be reduced or diluted. It is as though there were some magic in the process of 1960s rock music’s original creation which must be guarded and protected in order to maintain its claims to authenticity. Interestingly, an ‘us and them’ dichotomy is again suggested with Van Bakel’s mention of ‘they’. While ‘they’ are not clearly defined, Van Bakel alludes to those who would somehow seek to alter or adjust the original, or do something different, inherently implying a role defined in opposition to that adopted by himself and the Frowning Clouds.

This divide is also emphasized in talk by retro rock stakeholders through comments that seek to diminish the importance of what came after the 1960s. While the significance of popular music history before the 1960s rock is minimized through a kind of passive neglect, a stronger, more active position is taken with regard to music following the 1960s. Because 1960s rock music is classed so highly, what comes after is actively detracted in comparison.

Interviewer: So '65 was like the pinnacle of rock and roll... and everything else has been...

NVB: Yeah, then they couldn't beat it so they just started making other stuff...

Van Bakel again refers to the undefined ‘they’, but implies the primacy of 1960s rock music due

to a lack of ability to compete with what had come before. Essentially, how can anyone improve on perfection? Much like ‘they don’t make cars like they used to’, Van Bakel suggests the quality of post-1960s rock music simply does not match up, thereby forcing a change to ‘other stuff’.

For Michael Manzini, a rock music fan and musician/producer with a strong retro rock style active in Sydney and regional New South Wales scenes, a similar outcome is reached – this time by drawing on the limitations of the genre.

Rock music, you can only go so far. I think they went all the way in the sixties... Since the seventies, song writing has been increasingly derivative.

While not a simply self-evident or naturalist approach to the dominance of 1960s rock music, his comment about 1960s artists having gone ‘all the way in the sixties’ does fall in line with the notion of 1960s rock music as being the ‘first’ and the original. Its authenticity is achieved through claiming it as the original and therefore as the most authentic. In a way, Manzini’s wording closes the canon of rock music by effectively suggesting that it had all been done in the 1960s. If rock music is perceived in this way as finite, then it becomes easier to elevate the significance of the 1960s as the initial burst of popularity and creativity marks its high point, resulting in the formation of what is considered authentic and the correct expression of what rock music is supposed to be and can achieve. Therefore, as Manzini claims, the rock music of the 1970s can only reuse or retool what has come before and as such is perceived as ‘derivative’. However more than just being ‘derivative’, the use of the word ‘increasingly’ insinuates a time component in valuing rock music from beyond the 1960s. The further into the future from the ‘original’ source a piece of rock music is temporally positioned, the more derivative it becomes. Thus, while 1970s rock may have only been somewhat derivative, it is implied then that 80s rock would be even more so and so on. Using this logic, how derivative might contemporary rock music be?

### **8.3.2 ‘Today’s Music Ain’t Got The Same Soul’: Why the Present Just Isn’t As Good**

The flip side of the perception that 1960s rock is ‘better’ or ‘best’ is that the present does not compare favourably to the past. Having claimed the resilience and pre-eminence of 1960s rock music from the 1960s, the bar is set so high that in effect nothing else can really compete. This is a hallmark of nostalgic sentiment, and the talk of retro rock stakeholders reflects this dissatisfaction with the present – principally in terms of popular music, but also more modestly with regard to society and culture more generally. The common process found in the talk was the establishing of values as they relate to what is good, better or best in 1960s rock music, especially with relation to the key attributes discussed previously, and then sizing up modern concerns against those credentials.

Following from the prevailing view amongst retro rock stakeholders that 1960s rock music was original, unique and innovative, contemporary popular music is viewed as derivative, boring and monotonous. Manzini, for example, expresses this view that during the 1960s “there were more ideas back then. Everything sounded less samey.” In describing the era as having ‘more ideas’ he implicitly ascribes the 1960s as having garnered a variety of new and original concepts, thus implying that in the present day popular music is unoriginal and indistinctive. This view is also shared by Hannah Findlay from Stonefield:

We’re not the type of people that listen to Top 40. I guess some of it might be okay, but a lot of it all sounds the same and is very computerized.

The first reason given here as to why Top 40 music is not favoured by Stonefield, its potential for sounding largely all ‘the same’, emphasizes their preference for originality, uniqueness and inventiveness which as discussed previously, is a fundamental view held with relation to 1960s rock music. Leaving aside the irony of a contemporary retro rock band criticizing music for sounding ‘the same’, what Hannah Finlay expresses here is perhaps an underlying motivation in what makes retro rock music in the contemporary age an appealing choice. If indeed Top 40 music is perceived as ‘samey’, then the move backwards towards an earlier form of music

which is easily contrasted with contemporary popular music could be considered a relatively novel change. In this way the move towards retro rock music is effectively couched (almost counter-intuitively) as a step forward in originality and breaking the binds of commercial popular culture.

In keeping with this act of distancing their retro rock music from Top 40 popular music, Hannah Findlay also raises a stigma associated with technology. She specifically refers to contemporary Top 40 music as being ‘computerized’. As is the common process in asserting the lessened value of contemporary music, this term contrasts with the notion of primitiveness and naturalist discourses used in talking about and assessing the value of 1960s rock music. Rather than merely describing the music as being too technologically dependent, the choice to refer to it as ‘computerized’ acts to diminish the human element in generic popular music and renders it artificial. This in turn helps to reassert the creativity, uniqueness and naturalism of 1960s rock.

For Manzini, technology is not used as a barrier to prescribing value to contemporary music since he instead sees the problem being a failure to match the perceived wealth of talent found in 1960s music in other important areas: “While technology has gotten better, song writing and musicianship have gone down.” The way in which this comment is phrased suggests that contemporary music, given the full advantage of better recording technology, is lacking at a fundamental level as compared to the peak of music creativity and talent in the 1960s. The Frowning Clouds, too, also undermine any potential value in contemporary music through their comparative allusions to the established standard of 1960s music:

BL: A Beatles song, people listen to it now and go: ‘I don’t care when that was made, that’s still a really good song’. I mean, you get a nineties compilation – the hits of that year – no one listens to any of those songs anymore!

Here Brenton Leary follows the pattern directly. He chooses a reference point from the 1960s, appeals to its status as ‘classic’, and then stacks this up against an unfavourable example. The way in which Leary makes this claim about the superiority of the Beatles over music from the 1990s allows his claim to be reinforced in a number of ways. Firstly, the notion of longevity and

the passage of time afford an almost mathematical proof to his claim. Clearly by referring to an artist still popular after fifty years is far superior to music from only twenty years ago that may or may not even be popular now. His choice of words and examples also puts 1960s rock on the upper hand since he is able to name a specific artist, the Beatles (still presumably “the best band in the history of music”), while the ‘nineties compilation’ reflects a lack of integrity – not even worthy of naming an artist. The fact that he refers to a compilation rather than a particular song, artist or album also seems to undermine any possible credibility of 1990s popular music. Rather than suggesting a canonical rock album from the 1990s like Nirvana’s *Nevermind* (1991) or Radiohead’s *OK Computer* (1997) Leary instead uses a compilation album as his example. Typically understood to be a collection of popular singles, compilations are usually made to capitalize on the individual successes of those singles and are definable in opposition to the notion of a singular work by an ‘author’, and as such are typically not included in the canon of classic rock music albums (Von Appen & Doebling, 2006). Thus a ‘nineties compilation’ is a crass commercial entity, especially when compared with an artist like the Beatles who have gained notoriety for their revolutionizing treatment of the rock album as a work of art.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, Leary also implies that there has been a dip in the quality of song writing between the Beatles and more modern music. Whereas the Beatles are proven as enduring songwriters, music from the 1990s does not hold up over time. This claim has much in common with the earlier comment from Van Bakel who used the ‘they don’t make them like they used to’ cliché to explain the difference between old and new music. Van Bakel also more explicitly emphasizes the short lifespan of contemporary music alluded to by Leary, asserting it has a use-by-date:

...it will date like, they'll listen to it for like three months and it'll be old. Everything's temporary...

‘Old’ of course in this sense is used as a negative in comparison to something which is enduring

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<sup>42</sup>See Chapter 7 for a discussion of their most famous work in this regard – *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967).

and ‘classic’, such as the Beatles’ music. This criticism of modern popular music raised by Van Bakel also subtly references the commercial aspect which is used in opposition to the authenticity of 1960s rock.

What emerges here in the talk of retro rock stakeholders in considering contemporary popular music is a connection between the quality of song writing and also the motivation for writing these kinds of songs. Amy Findlay specifically raises this connection:

With Top 40 stuff, some of it is just so transparent, you can tell that it's been written by someone else and it's been written to make money. It's just obvious. Like there's no passion in it or anything it's just: ‘Alright, let's make some money!’

Commercialism, as with the case of referring to the commercial success of Michael Jackson, is met with hostility and counters the notions of authenticity with which rock music is invested. Findlay uses two descriptive terms which bookend the divide between commercialism and authenticity. On the one hand she refers to commercially motivated contemporary popular music as ‘transparent’, with its antithesis being ‘passion’. Transparency speaks to the perception of a lack of substance, of weightiness or importance in contemporary popular music – a perception also shared by Manzini who says: “ I don’t like modern music because there’s not much in it.” The construction of this dichotomy is such that if something is motivated by the prospect of financial success, then it clearly cannot be authentic or valid in the way the 1960s rock is perceived. By considering contemporary popular music to be without ‘passion’, Amy Findlay matches the views of her sister, Hannah, who considers it ‘computerized’, and by extension, lacking in true emotion. Thus this manner in which contemporary music is described here ultimately serves to reaffirm one of the core traits and discourses used in describing the authenticity of 1960s rock music – primitiveness and naturalism.

## **8.4 “IS THIS THE ROLLING STONES AS WELL?”: ORIGINALITY AND THE PROBLEM WITH BEING ‘RETRO’**

The second theme which emerges in conversation with contemporary retro rock stakeholders is concern over the balance of originality and relevance in the present day when involved in or associated with an identifiably retro musical style. While there is a tendency for contemporary retro rock musicians to favour 1960s rock music and utilize its associative potential as the basis of their own music practices, there is often a turmoil evidenced in the talk of these stakeholders on the issue of being identified by these motivations. The talk demonstrates a variety of different responses by artists on this issue, all of which utilize different approaches in accounting for their musical style and taste with relation to the perception of their own music as being retro – from denial of agency in retro music practice, to the assertion of personal identity despite or indeed because of retro leanings. However what underlies all of these approaches is the concern over questions of authenticity and creativity where the threat of being considered unoriginal must be denied or mitigated.

### **8.4.1 “We’d Rather Sound Like...”: Qualified Retro**

While there was no lack of interest in discussing these motivations, Kevin Parker from Tame Impala structures his account of his process and motivations in ways that work to mitigate any explicit or deliberate agency in being retro. The first approach is one where the connotative implications of the music are removed from the artistic process. In this way Parker attempts to objectify sound elements and separate them from their cultural implications:

Interviewer: Your music is very reminiscent of the psychedelic sounds of the 1960s – is there a conscious effort to recreate those sounds?

KP: There is, to get the kind of juicy aspect, like um, but I don't consciously feel as though I'm trying to reproduce, or trying to get something so much as I actually like the actual physical sound, um, and the way that it sounds.

Putting to Parker the idea of deliberately attempting to reproduce particular sound elements from the past in his own music, he was able to diffuse this assertion through the use of language which seeks to dilute the directness of the question. In one sense, he agrees with the assertion in the question that there is a conscious motivation in his process, thereby acknowledging the use of these sounds and he does not attempt to escape their affiliation with the past. However in accepting this proposition, he seeks to clarify his role in relation to it, especially with regard to his own motivations for the use of these kinds of sounds through a preference for the sound itself. Parker attempts, through the use of the expressions 'the juicy aspect' and 'the actual physical sound', to neutralize the loaded definition of 'sound' in this context – being its synonymousness with a different era – and reduce it to a purer state of physicality, divorced from its cultural associations. By acknowledging the thrust of the question in the first instance whilst clarifying what those sounds mean to him, he is able to reposition himself away from the interpretative and connotative elements of psychedelic sounds that would inform a reading of his music.

And while he seeks to diffuse the cultural context of these sounds, Parker also adopts a second approach in seeking to distance himself from any deliberate process of reproduction. He does this by relying on notions of consciousness and subconsciousness in explaining the similarity between his music and 1960s rock music. As he does not 'consciously feel', as in the above statement, then it follows that there is not a deliberateness in his process or musical output, that such an outcome is an act of his subconsciousness. In elaborating, Parker contends:

I'm quite conscious of vibes of sounds and whether it's a, like a time thing, like an era or chronological or whatever, thing... I really like, you know, the stuff we're doing at the moment isn't so directly just getting bits and piece from the sixties and seventies and stuff like that. But um, I don't know it's really hard to explain, because I don't know. Yeah, I think that subconsciously the vibe of what we know of the sixties and seventies has a lot more of a, it's more linked to the kind of songs we're writing...

Parker here seems to be tossing up different accounts of what role he himself plays in his music practice, but appears to settle on the notion that influences from the 1960s and 1970s are at play at a subconsciousness level. By suggesting a subconscious process, Parker's account of his

creative process is positioned in such a way as to disavow any deliberate intention behind how the music sounds, relegating the similarities to earlier rock music as the product of his subconsciousness. Curiously, this outcome occurs even where he asserts that he is 'quite conscious of vibes of sounds' and the temporal implications of those sounds; however he is reluctant to suggest that he is responsible for the way that his music is construed by audiences. In a way, the assertion that he is in fact 'conscious' of the relationship between sound and particular times and eras would suggest that he is deliberate in his music choice. This is also backed by his contention that his newer music is less directly associated with the past, suggesting that at one time there was, at least in part, a process of reproducing particular aspects or components of earlier music.

However this becomes further muddled with Parker's continuing exploration into the process of his music's creation. Moving from matters of consciousness, he then likens the use of sound by turning to the technical form of music composition and its relation to emotion. He implies that rather than a subconscious relationship between past music and his current music, there is actually a catalogue of musical elements with associated emotional responses, contending therefore that his compositions and phonographic staging of sound are indeed constructed deliberately with relation to this catalogue:

Melodies and scales and chords and stuff have certain qualities, and you know, a minor key is a sad key, and a major is happy, and that's the basic vibe of how melody is. And so if you're recording a song that's sad, you're not going to have these bright instruments. You just want the sound to fit the melodies and stuff, and when the song you're writing, if it feels joyous in your head, for instance, and you're really stoned or blazed or whatever, then those kind of melodies are the melodies you're going to come up with because you're in that mindset. And when you want a sound to fit the melodies then you go to the sound that, like, reminds you of that, or suits it. So that's I guess how we end up sounding like Cream [laughter].

Similar to his initial attempt to divorce particular sounds from their cultural associations, his example of the emotional associations of major and minor keys also goes towards attempting to portray sound elements as mere technical musical tools with which you can compose a piece with a desired emotional outcome. While this is to some extent a function of music and sound

(that is, using music and sound elements as tools for emotional purposes), he downplays the cultural collective memory that particular melodies and sounds are associated with and that he himself is aware of, implying that they belong to a naturalized state of sonic and musical outcomes. In this scenario, he claims to utilize the sounds which complement the emotional figurativeness of melodies, with the example given of expressing the 'joyousness' of being 'stoned' or 'blazed'. However the choice to use sonic tropes from psychedelic rock music of the 1960s has much to do with culturally developed emotional responses to certain sounds. This is even borne out in Parker's continued explanation where he admits to utilizing a sound that "reminds you" or "suits" a particular emotion. Thus this narrative of his song writing process is worded to emphasize a natural or implicit meaning with which these sounds are naturally endowed, but downplays a culturally developed collective understanding of those sounds as they relate to psychedelic music and artists like Cream within that period. He does in fact conclude his account by in effect revealing the significance of choosing to utilize the sound palette of a group like Cream for its associative meanings – they act to 'remind' people of a particular 'mindset' through their cultural association to psychedelic music of the 1960s. Parker's laughter at this point can be interpreted as being reflective of this disclosure, for it in a sense undoes some of his earlier reasoning. In addition, after becoming exposed, laughter helps to lighten or devalue the statement, as well as release tension.

Another way in which Parker distances himself and his creative process from any overt intention to create retro rock is through his handling of what he may perceive as defining criteria for those who make retro rock – a personal interest or appreciation of the past, and a view of the past as superior. Unlike the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield who through their talk promote pervasive mythologies surrounding the importance of the 1960s as well as flaunt their appreciation for this era, Parker seeks to debunk them by casting aspersions as to their reliability, and deny his personal interest in history:

But I never read a book on the sixties, or like, I've never studied sixties culture or anything like that. To my knowledge it's like a lot of the history of the sixties is all false

[laughter]. Some people talk about peace and love and then other people say it was the worst thing and stuff like that.

The way in which this statement is phrased works in two ways to dissociate Parker from being characterized as retro. Firstly, he is able to deny being personally interested in the 1960s and thus motivated by the past in his music making, whilst secondly, he is able to debunk popular conceptions of the 1960s, thus in turn devaluing its position as superior and the prevailing view of the era as innovative. While the end result is another attempt to isolate the music from its cultural associations in the present day, this time by seeking to actively destabilize that which is often considered self-evident by retro rock music stakeholders, he draws this criticism from a self-proclaimed lack of knowledge. By explicitly disavowing having taken any active role in acquiring knowledge about the 1960s, he thus demonstrates a lack of interest in the subject and therefore, disarming any potential deliberateness in the retro outcome of his music. To this end, he further contends:

I'm not a very historically minded person. All I care about is the sound and what it means to me and other people around me.

This again is a disavowal of personal motivation which seeks to remove the musical connotations of composition and sound from their historical and cultural associations. In addition to this however, the claim to a personal value system over outside influences is similar to the way in which people identified as belonging to subcultural groups might resist categorization.

In Widdicombe's (1998) research into the manner in which individuals accept or deny subcultural category membership through talk, a similar approach is often adopted by speakers believed to belong to punk or gothic subcultural groups who reject their subcultural identity/affiliation as imputed by their interviewers. Rather than identifying with the subculture, these speakers who have been identified by interviewers because of their dress and appearance, instead choose to reflect on motivations of "personal choice" over "a desire to affiliate" with the subculture. While retro rock music does not strictly form a subcultural group in the same way as

punks (since retro rock music can be so varied in style and authenticity values, for example), Parker's account shares a similar approach. Clarifying his motives as a deeply personal preference for sound itself and its meaning within himself and his immediate circle is used as a way of denying categorical membership of being a retro rock musician.

While these approaches adopted by Parker in his talk act as a (not always successful) cumulative disavowal of the motives associated with retro rock, other retro rock artists also seek to qualify their role with relation to the retro rock label. The Frowning Clouds for example, who are self-proclaimed ardent fans of 1960s rock music, while happy to accept these influences, still seek to maintain their own self-image.

BL: If you like put on a Rolling Stones song and then put on our song, you're not gonna go: 'Is this the Rolling Stones as well?' like, obviously...

Interestingly, Leary uses 'obviously' in a way similar to Van Bakel in an earlier comment regarding the self-evident supremacy of 1960s music. However in this instance, 'obviously' is used to bolster dissimilarity between the recordings of those who they admire and themselves. It is interesting that for a band so invested in the sound and style of particular 1960s music artists, that they are wary to be considered an exact replica or overly similar. On one hand, this can be interpreted as a deliberate dissociation from the Rolling Stones due to the inherent negative connotations of being unoriginal; however, further comment from Van Bakel reveals a more subtle objective in their music practice:

Rather than sound like the Stones, we'd rather sound like... Like people would be like: 'Woah, shit, these guys must be so into the Stones,' like, just have a bit of their mystique rub off on our overall image or sound or whatever, just because we've absorbed it so much...

This comment highlights the delicate relationship evidenced by contemporary retro rock musicians who are so heavily invested in a past music style where there is a real affection for the subject matter upon which they base their music. Van Bakel does not negate the influence of the Rolling Stones as Leary appears to do, but instead welcomes the comparison, and indeed

*strives* for the comparison. For Van Bakel the connection between the Frowning Clouds' own music and that of the Stones is a compliment, but what he finds flattering is not so much the direct claim that it is identical to the Rolling Stones, but rather that it evidences their appreciation of the Rolling Stones. His desired response from a listener is not phrased 'these guys sound exactly like the Rolling Stones', but is phrased more significantly as 'these guys must be *so into* the Stones'. Key then for the Frowning Clouds is not to be recognized merely for being very similar to the 1960s style, but appreciated because of their clear interest, affection and attention to detail in re-representing that music. Van Bakel wants the mystique of the Rolling Stones to rub off on themselves, but be recognized more for the effort taken in absorbing their influences. Leary's comment to differentiate themselves from the Rolling Stones' work can be interpreted in this light as a way to maintain their allegiance to their influences and the supremacy of the 1960s. Because of their devotion to the Rolling Stones and other 1960s artists, they reject the notion that they sound just like them (how can they improve on perfection?), but interpret their approach to their own music as a way to honour the 1960s without surpassing it.

#### **8.4.2 "There's a Fine Line Between Sounding Like a Cover Band and Sounding Like an Original Band": Striking a Balance**

However, even with a band like the Frowning Clouds who clearly welcome the appreciation of their influences into their music, there is still a broader concern about self-identity and self-worth outside of being merely 'retro'. What these concerns reveal, is a recognized balance which is required in order to be retro but original in contemporary music. The Frowning Clouds allude to it in general terms:

NVB: For the last two years or something we were like, yeah, we just want to be like ... the same as the sixties, but lately we've been like wanting to, having more of a desire to put our own twist on things and stuff.

BL: We're branching out...

NVB: Not necessarily branch out but just like, make it our... Like, put our own stamp on it, like, still sound like that but like, yeah...

What this exchange hits on is a common concern in the perception of retro rock music of being *too* derivative. Even for a band like the Frowning Clouds who are so focused on replicating many aspects of 1960s rock, Van Bakel hints at an aspect of the music that they are at once trying to recreate, but will never find through merely recreating – that is, originality and personal identity. Stonefield demonstrate an explicit awareness of the dangers of being perceived as too overtly retro without appropriately balanced, redeeming, artistic or modern day relevance.

In discussing their favoured approach to sound production, what it means for their music and how it will in turn be perceived by audiences, Amy Findlay considers:

We like that whole vintage-y sound, but at the same time we don't want to sound like we're just trying to rip off on bands from the seventies, so we want it to sound modern as well and have that whole sort of big tough modern sound.

Amy Findlay thus highlights a critical concern at the heart of contemporary retro rock music – what it is to be creative and authentic. The wording of this concern, being called out on ‘just trying to rip off on bands from the seventies’, emphasizes the perceived lack of creativity involved in processes of copying or replicating something that has gone before. This is achieved by the word ‘just’, as though ‘ripping off’ is the *only* thing they were attempting to do. However Stonefield would rather claim that they are not only inspired by the 1970s, but are also actively involved in a process of creativity, in creating something new as well. ‘Just’ removes this intent and reduces their music to a mere copy, devoid of personality and inventiveness, of newness and relevance. So instead, they would like to have their music incorporate modern sound elements. This is described as a ‘big tough modern sound’. Aside from ‘modern’ which frames the contemporary relevance of their chosen sound, the words ‘big’ and ‘tough’ are useful in helping to characterize the perceived differences between old and new music. ‘Big’ and ‘tough’ lend the claim for their music’s modern day currency an assertive presence. Rather than being

meek, old or stale, the choice of having a modern sound for their retro rock music gives it vitality and freshness.

This concern over being too derivative is also shared by Manzini who criticizes those who do not observe the correct balance in retro rock:

Because there were so many defining bands in the sixties, people just tend to lean on them more so than creating their own ideas. It's their own fault. There are countless melodic combinations that anyone can use. They shouldn't be using melodies from the music they're trying to take shit from. They're just taking things too far.

Here Manzini is not opposed so much to the act of borrowing or appropriating elements of 1960s rock music, but is instead more concerned about tipping the balance such that a retro rock music product becomes too clearly derivative. The idea of 'taking things too far' does in fact suggest that there is a limit to what is acceptable and palatable in contemporary retro rock. To this end, Manzini actually suggests a formula of three criteria that need to be considered:

There's like, performance, song and recording. There's [sic] three things basically. If one of those things is like something else, then that's okay. Then two – *meh*. If three, then that's just fucked.

Clearly in this formulation, the transgression of three elements being too similar is the definite tipping point of 'taking things too far', however Manzini also suggests in addition to any formula for balancing retro practices with elements of originality, an artist requires a working musical knowledge and sophistication in order to achieve this balance. If, for example, contemporary retro rock musicians have a better understanding of melodic combinations and sensitivity in how they use them, then they would not be guilty of taking things too far, but would instead be demonstrating their mastery of the form. Interestingly, the example he gives to demonstrate this is from a canonical rock artist – David Bowie. He declares: "Even Bowie used to rip things off but no one could tell because he could do it well." In this instance Manzini is able to subvert the negative connotations associated with 'ripping off', that is, being unoriginal and plagiarist – the very thing Stonefield and other contemporary retro rock artists are wary of – and turn it into a skilful process. It is suggested that since Bowie was able to take established

influences and use them so stealthily that they were not immediately recognizable, then his form of ‘ripping off’ is not only acceptable, but masterful.

The importance of this balance is alluded to by Amy Findlay also where she highlights the precarious difference between taking influences from the past but still being original versus being too closely aligned with the past and subsequently unoriginal in contemporary retro rock.

There's a fine line between sounding like a cover band and sounding like an original band and I think it's important to take modern influences as well.

Here she points out not only the strict dichotomy between being fake and being original by referring to two very different types of band arrangements – the covers band and the originals band – but also how subtle the difference can be between each pole. Covers bands are by definition the opposite of being original in that they perform other artists’ music and are thus within music circles considered inauthentic and a largely commercial entity – a perception associated with inauthenticity and therefore the antithesis of the perceived uniqueness and inventiveness of 1960s rock music. Oddly enough, Amy Findlay suggests that the correct measure to take to avoid falling into this category is to take modern influences in order to grant contemporary retro rock an air of originality such that it can comfortably exist in the present.

On the opposite side of the balance, taking too much from modern music can result in the music being insufficiently retro.

BL: If you try and come up with something completely out of the blue now, people won’t be able to relate to it ... If you sit down and write a song and go: ‘Right I’m going to try and do something completely new’, you’re not going to be thinking, like writing it sort of from yourself, going: ‘I feel like this.’ You’re going to be going: ‘Alright no one’s ever done that, I’m going to break it down.’ And it’s just become really, like, pre-programmed, packaged ... like, people are going to go: ‘You sat down and tried to do that as something new,’ and it isn’t really, like, real, almost, sort of thing.

Leary’s comment about being *too* new and unique reveals the potential concern of betraying some of the defining elements of contemporary retro rock, and indeed original 1960s rock music – in particular ‘realness’, which comes back to the notion of authenticity. If a contemporary

retro rock artist strives to attempt something that has not come before, firstly, they are straying too far from the accepted constraints of the music, but more importantly, they are betraying the emotive substance which is believed to underpin the music. Leary mentions that ideas of feeling and emotion will be neglected in favour of a purely technical approach, and in doing so, the music will lean too closely to antithetically constructed views on contemporary popular music of commercialism ('packaged') and artificiality ('pre-programmed'). Importantly, Leary asserts that, much like the transparency that Amy Findlay suggests is common to commercially-motivated contemporary Top 40 music, this process of innovation for innovation's sake will be clear to listeners, that they can see through the façade of the process – that the artist 'sat down and tried to do something new' rather than make something 'real'.

So what should a contemporary retro rock artist be striving for? Leary suggests a model with which to aim for:

BL: Some people sort of, I don't know, there are some groups who sound like a nostalgic group but nothing like them at the same time, but you just know it sounds sixties or something but is still nothing like that... It's sort of like something we sort of want to do. People will hear it and know it's not sounding like anything from today, but...

NVB: Yeah it'd be like, woah, this is like, like, sounds real old school, but it's from our time so they're even more excited about it.

This is in many ways the ideal of the balance required – a musical product which is at once 'old school', but at the same time, from 'our time'. But can such a balance be struck, especially when it calls for such a paradox?

## 8.5 CONCLUSION

A common thread which ties together the contradictions of contemporary retro rock music, especially as elucidated through the talk of contemporary retro rock artists, is that of creativity. What is it to be creative, and what is the *right* way to be creative? Whether adopting a

stance that adheres to romantic or modernist authenticity values, contemporary retro rock artists are deeply engaged with these questions. In the first part of this chapter, the devotion and appreciation of past music and the subsequent devaluing of present day popular music demonstrates a longing, a vicarious nostalgia, for the standards of creativity and innovation which the 1960s is largely perceived as having established. On the other hand in the second part of this chapter, the act of mitigating personal agency in being involved in something that is often considered unoriginal is a way to protect the standards of creativity and innovation which are being strived for – even if this seems counterintuitive through the process of replicating elements of that past music which embody those ideas.

Indeed, this fundamental paradox of contemporary retro rock seems inescapable, and it is perhaps this paradox which drives those that create and enjoy it. Contemporary retro rock music by its nature must be negotiated with the realities of the present day, and it is this which forever holds it at arm's length from achieving the kind of originality and authenticity it strives to bring to the present.

NVB: I don't think it'll ever happen, like, 'cause everything's all been done before, like it can't have the same impact as it did back then.

ZO: It's not like all music is going to become the sixties again...

David 'Daff' Gravolin: It's not going to be Frowning Cloud-Mania again.

## 9 CODA

*Nothing that has happened so far has been  
anything we could control*

- Tame Impala, 'Nothing That Has Happened So Far Has Been Anything We Could Control' (2012)

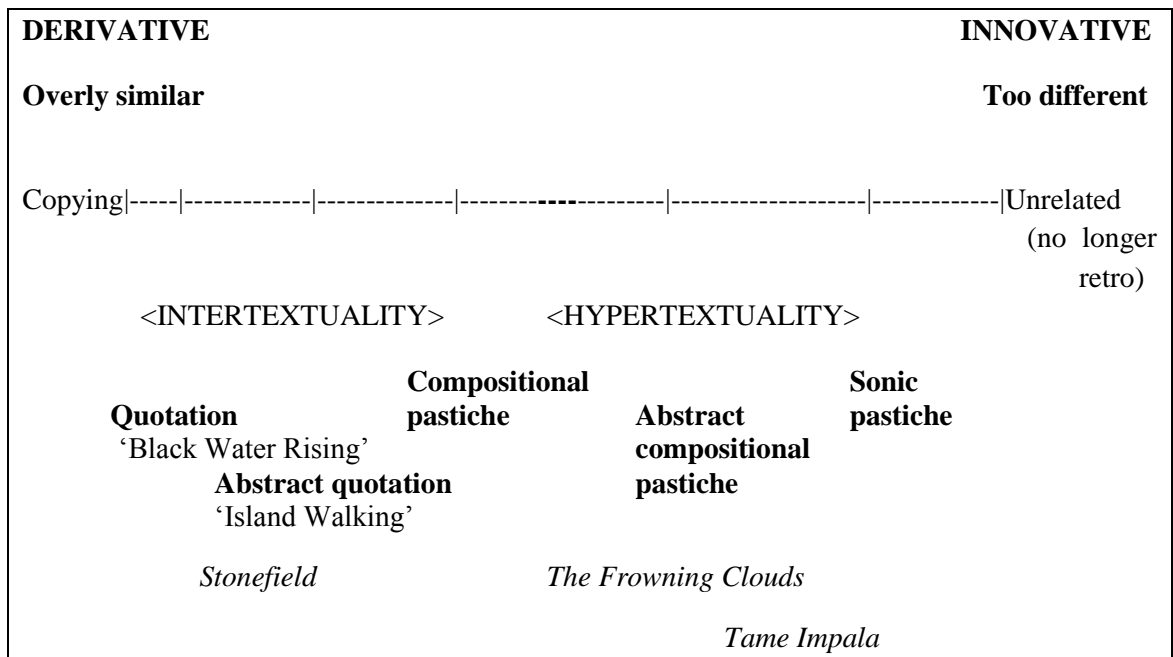
### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

Through the course of this thesis I have been exploring the workings of contemporary retro rock across its various sites of production. Being a multi-dimensional conjuncture, it was necessary to examine in depth the various elements of composition and recording, live performance, album cover art and scenic talk which constitute contemporary retro rock in order to reveal the specific mechanisms by which this cultural trend operates in producing, communicating and transforming meaning. The primary focus underpinning this exploration has therefore been in seeking to answer the question of *how* the work of meaning making is produced. As such, part of this concluding chapter will be devoted to summarizing these findings as they pertain to the specific modes discussed in each of the substantive chapters, as well as considering their operation together as a whole. In addition to this, another aim I have here is to further explore the wider implications of the recurring motifs of meaning which are signified and communicated across the modes of contemporary retro rock. Namely then, the notions of authenticity, originality and creativity emerge as the underlying functions of a perceived connectivity with the past in contemporary retro rock.

## 9.2 SUMMARY

In the first substantive chapter analysing various compositions and sound recordings by the selected case study artists Tame Impala, the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield, a number of approaches were presented as to the ways in which contemporary retro rock suggests connectivity with past works and artists. From the overt replication of specific musical phrases in a composition through to the utilization of more abstract signifiers such as similar sound aesthetics in the phonographic staging of recordings, contemporary retro rock is able to draw on a range of intertextual and hypertextual references, as well as the evocative potential of particular sound elements, to achieve this. By demonstrating the degrees of differentiation between the original sources (the 1960s rock hypotexts) and the use of different aspects from these hypotexts in the construction of hypertexts (the newly constructed contemporary retro rock song), I was able to order these approaches to referencing within a spectrum of derivativeness (see Table 2 reproduced below). On one side of the spectrum, direct replication of specific compositional phrases found in original 1960s rock texts, for example, represent the smallest level of differentiation, and is therefore closely aligned to the creation of a *copy*. As such, this form of referencing is associated with unoriginality. Moving towards the other side of the spectrum aligning with originality are examples and practices which demonstrate greater differentiation from hypotexts. Practices such as creating a sonic pastiche and/or abstract compositional pastiche are less derivative as they move away from referencing specific source material such as identifiable song compositions and instead adopt abstract influences which are not as easily or specifically identifiable with regard to a hypotext. Thus where artists such as Stonefield utilize intertextuality in song composition, another contemporary retro rock artist like Tame Impala, while still creating music identifiable as ‘retro’, offers a more nuanced and abstract handling of the genre through their favouring of evocative sound choices.

**Table 2: Continuum of derivativeness for contemporary retro rock recordings**



What this spectrum suggests is that there are a range of factors in composition and phonographic staging of sound which contribute to the overtness or subtlety of contemporary retro rock’s associative relationship to past examples. Further to this, the different combinations of these factors inform the differing values of meaning as to the perceived originality and authenticity achieved through a composition, or attributed to a contemporary retro rock artist. As such, I assert that while a contemporary retro rock artist may, through their individual compositions or across a body of recorded work, alternately lean towards originality or unoriginality, authenticity or inauthenticity, along this continuum, it is a sense of balance between these polar opposites that would satisfy the broadest cross-section of the ideals of contemporary retro rock. Much in the way that Amy Findlay adores “that whole vintage-y sound” whilst also seeking “to sound modern as well”, the aim here effectively is that the music be clearly recognizable within the generic constraints of canonical rock music compositions and/or sound palettes, but also offer a sense of originality, of novelty and newness, to substantiate claims to creativity and authenticity.

In the next chapter which considered the performative aspects of contemporary retro rock in live music settings, while similar issues pertaining to authenticity and meaning-making

arose, I found there to be less a sense of balance being sought through live performance with regard to achieving a connection to the past whilst also demonstrating originality, and more of a commitment to the representation of authenticity. The two case studies revealed two different approaches to performance and authenticity which conformed with three underlying factors specific to each of the artists – the Frowning Clouds and Tame Impala. Firstly, their approaches reflected the value systems of their respective favoured sub-genres of 1960s/1970s rock (garage rock and psychedelic/art rock, respectively), secondly, to the cultural traditions of the venues of their performance, and thirdly, to the kinds of intertextual and hypertextual referencing methods found in their music compositions and recordings. Thus the approach adopted by the Frowning Clouds in their performance at a pub venue can be characterized by a sense of immediacy and ‘rawness’. This was constituted of deliberate limitations of sound choices and sound effects processing, engagement with the audience (both physically and verbally) as well as particular affectations and references to classic rock artists. So while the performance had the superficial impression of looseness and spontaneity, these kinds of performance markers revealed an ultimately very considered approach to representation on the live stage – what I have previously referred to as ‘calculated effortlessness’.

Tame Impala on the other hand took a different approach in their performance at the Sydney Opera Theatre. Rather than drawing attention to the event itself being a *live* performance of musicians, the emphasis was instead on the sonic qualities of the music and presenting the music as a mirror of the band’s recordings. Whereas the Frowning Clouds favoured limited sound manipulation outside of the tonal qualities of their amplifiers and instruments, Tame Impala relied on the use of numerous effects pedals and interfaces to create a musical performance that reflected as clearly as possible their recordings. Further to this, even their stage presence was understated, their movements themselves quite muted. These elements of their performance had the effect of distancing the group members from the act of performance itself, and from the audience in particular. The lack of a visual role of performance and movement was instead filled by way of visual stimuli such as stage lighting and the

oscilloscope projection – in sync with the music, again as though to emphasize the importance of the qualities of the music itself, and in turn, the role of the recording as the primary mode of contemporary retro rock. By venerating the fixity of sounds and the recorded performance in this way, Tame Impala were able to tap into a wider trend and characteristic of rock music culture – the significance of the ‘album’ to the rock music canon (Von Appen & Doebling, 2006; Bennett, 2009). Similar to the emerging trend in which heritage artists and cover bands perform concerts which are dedicated to replicating the album recording (Bennett, 2008; Reynolds, 2011), the kind of approach adopted by Tame Impala in venerating their own recording and its evocative sound palette represents the contemporary retro rock equivalent of this practice.

**Table 4: Representations of authenticity in live performance of contemporary retro rock**

<b>PERFORMANCE MARKER</b>	<b>THE FROWNING CLOUDS</b>	<b>TAME IMPALA</b>
<b>Rock subgenre</b>	Garage rock	Psychedelic/art rock
<b>Venue</b>	Pub	Concert theatre
<b>Technology</b>	Hidden/not used	Visible/highlighted
<b>Sound quality</b>	Raw and ‘live’	Controlled and ‘recorded’
<b>Approach to audience</b>	Populist, direct, interactive	Elitist, absent, minimal
<b>Physical performance style</b>	Active, loose, beat-heavy	Subtle, discreet
<b>Visual stimuli</b>	None outside of essential music equipment and standard lighting	Projected oscilloscope imagery controlled by sound input, bright coloured lighting
<b>Authenticity value system</b>	Romantic	Modernist

Thus while the Frowning Clouds and Tame Impala utilize the opportunity of live performance to emphasize different values and practices of classic rock music in two almost contradictory ways, they are both undertaking approaches which actively demonstrate authenticity (see above reproduction of Table 4). The authenticity garnered by the Frowning Clouds is situated with regard to values of spontaneity and simplicity reflecting the garage rock

subgenre of the 1960s and the affectations of performance personae of that era. Tame Impala espouse authenticity, however, by downplaying their own role as performers in favour of presenting a sonically accurate rendition of their music as heard in their recordings which stresses the value of their recorded music, its sonic evocativeness to the past, and the cultural significance of these recordings as the central musical product in rock music. What this suggests, then, is that authenticity is not strictly fixed across all types of contemporary retro rock. Rather, authenticity can be constructed differently in contemporary retro rock with varying qualifiers of authenticity utilized to serve the particular kind of authenticity values relevant to the style and approach taken to contemporary retro rock.

The third substantive chapter moved away from considering how music is recorded and performed and instead turned to a more strictly visual mode of contemporary retro rock – album covers. This kind of paratextual material, while distinct from forms of music and performance as discussed in previous chapters, was chosen for analysis because of its central role in relation to representing both music and artist, especially within the cultural history of rock music. As detailed at the beginning of the chapter, creative innovations in LP album cover design flourished in the 1960s, especially within the rock music genre. A number of ‘classic rock’ album covers feature now-iconic imagery, especially with regard to a number of canonical rock albums. Building on the discernible veneration given to the definitiveness of sound recordings as was demonstrated in relation to Tame Impala’s live performance, the ways in which these ‘classic’ album covers and their associated imagery are utilized in contemporary retro rock music further highlights the significance placed on these formative works. Using *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) as a cultural marker, I employed a distinction between pre- and post-*Sgt Pepper* to highlight the functional and aesthetic differences in rock album cover design and the manner in which these aesthetic sign systems can be used to signify particular meanings. For example, the text signs featured in pre-*Sgt Pepper* album covers were used by the Frowning Clouds not only to draw parallels between early 1960s the use of technical information featured on iconic albums, but also to denote the aesthetic and technical choices in

their own recordings to trigger specific connotations as to musical and technological authenticity.

Contemporary retro rock album covers also serve as a platform for representing a shared affinity with the visual identities of 1960s rock artists in a similar way. This can be achieved either literally through the use of intertextually evocative portraiture of the artists, or indeed by insinuating characteristics of the group or music which the album cover houses through the play of symbolic imagery. Where photographic portraits of the artists are used (more commonly in pre-*Sgt Pepper* than in post-*Sgt Pepper* album covers), the arsenal of visual similarities either in portrait composition, clothing styles and cover layout work to further evoke connectivity between contemporary retro rock artists and their 1960s antecedents. In addition, they offer a conspicuous use of intertextual references demonstrating the cultural capital of the artists, as well as a potential site upon which their audience can demonstrate their own cultural capital through being able to decode these visual references and their intended meanings. A similar process is undertaken in examples of contemporary retro rock album covers which utilize post-*Sgt Pepper* design elements, but with typically more abstract imagery. The cover art for Tame Impala's *Innerspeaker* album appeals to collective memory in a very different way to that utilized in the imagery on the cover art for the Frowning Clouds' releases. Rather than specific intertextual references, *Innerspeaker* evokes a collective memory of the mythic qualities of 1960s – specifically the characterization of the 'psychedelic sixties'. As previously explained, *Innerspeaker* relies on popular conceptions of 1960s drug culture and its associated imagery to signify particular meanings for the music of Tame Impala in line with those found in the music and imagery associated with similar 1960s artists. However while such contemporary retro rock album covers use this kind of imagery to supply meanings for contemporary retro rock music, this process of meaning making also serves to perpetuate the naturalization of mythologies surrounding the collective memory of the 1960s, and 1960s rock music culture in particular.

Indeed, what also makes these myths seem so natural, especially as they are perpetuated through post-*Sgt Pepper* contemporary retro rock album cover imagery, is the reappropriation and inter-mingling of easily discernible imagery and symbolism of classic rock album cover design. Stonefield's album cover art for example was shown to feature a number of instances whereby the iconic imagery featured on Led Zeppelin album covers is revisited and reimagined in a dialogic process of myth-making and myth-perpetuation. Adopting Baudrillard's (1994) notions of simulacra and hyperreality, I showed that through their cover art, Stonefield seek to use the iconography of Led Zeppelin's imagery with the effect of at once acknowledging and reinforcing the mythological discourse surrounding Led Zeppelin, while also reimagining themselves installed as a part of it.

Album cover art demonstrates a tendency of contemporary retro rock to assert the role of myth while manipulating the collective memory for its own ends of meaning-making and validation. On the one hand contemporary retro rock is deeply concerned with the acknowledgment and continued veneration of the originality and innovativeness of the 1960s rock music canon. By utilizing this symbolism, contemporary retro rock pays tribute to the past and perpetuates 1960s rock mythology. On the other hand, through adopting, adapting and supplanting the mythic structure of the past in order to legitimize and elevate contemporary retro rock in relation to that historicity, it must tamper with that myth. Just as Barthes' conception of myth allows for simultaneous levels of meaning, from purely literal signification through to the level of connotation actively forming a reimagined historicity at the level of myth, contemporary retro rock too works at the level of communicating meaning by offering a simultaneity of meanings which at once service the perceived fixity of historical myth surrounding the rock canon, whilst wedging itself within that myth.

The final substantive chapter again changed tact in considering the role of another mode of contemporary retro rock; in this instance the focus was on the kinds of meanings being articulated through the scenic talk of contemporary retro rock. In addition to investigating *what* meanings were being expressed through talk, the chapter also explored questions of *how*

meaning is communicated through discursive practices in talk. What emerged in the open-ended interviews were two main notions underlying the participants' talk, and the chapter was thematically arranged to explore these two ideas. In the first part, attitudes towards past (the 1960s in particular) music and culture are contrasted with perceptions of present day culture and popular music, while in the second part the subject matter focused on talk dealing with the negotiation of a 'retro' identity as it relates to creativity and authenticity in contemporary retro rock. As revealed in the first part, the main contention by participants was that 1960s and early 1970s rock music was the pinnacle of rock culturally, artistically and creatively, and also the height of musical authenticity within the genre. These value claims offered by the participants were validated by a number of discursive practices appealing to naturalism and authenticity which ultimately seek to perpetuate and naturalize the mythological conception of 1960s rock. These prevailing views regarding rock music and rock artists of the past were also framed with relation to a number of reservations regarding the present state of popular music. In particular, participants characterized contemporary popular music as being largely computerized and formulaic as compared to the authenticity offered by 1960s rock. A further marker of authenticity (and lack thereof in contemporary pop music) was also borne of the contrast offered by participants between the apparent timelessness of classic rock music as opposed to the perceived transience and blatant commerciality found in contemporary Top 40 pop music, which were again expressed through a naturalist discourse.

The second part of the chapter explored themes of retro identity, originality and creativity in contemporary retro rock talk. As revealed in this part, particularly with reference to Kevin Parker of Tame Impala's talk regarding these issues, there are tensions at play for contemporary retro rock artists with the use of the label of 'retro' or the assertion of nostalgic tendencies informing one's music practices. The concern arises from the ways in which such labels or assumptions threaten the assertion of originality, creativity and personal authenticity for contemporary retro rock artists. As demonstrated in the talk of Kevin Parker, a way to counter these kinds of labels and assertions is through the rejection of the identity or affiliation.

He uses for example different tactics from disavowal of knowledge of the past, lack of conscious choice in the creation of the music and a utilitarian interest in the technical aspects of 1960s rock music and not its associated meanings/history. Importantly, this is not specific to Kevin Parker who operates mainly in the psychedelic rock style, as the same reluctance is likewise demonstrated in the talk of the Frowning Clouds, who similarly resisted the intimation that they sound exactly like, or very similar to, the Rolling Stones.

What this chapter demonstrates is the respective importance of two ideals – the veneration of 1960s rock, especially in contrast to perceptions of present day popular music on the one hand, and the desire to be recognized for participating in a creative (or at least not overly derivative) practice on the other – and the challenges in effectively negotiating the tensions between them.

### **9.3 A CONTINUUM OF CONTEMPORARY RETRO ROCK**

Now that we have revisited the findings of the substantive chapters, I would like to comment on the ways in which the various modes of expression in contemporary retro rock tend to address very similar frameworks of meaning-making, especially as they pertain to notions of authenticity and originality. Returning to the earlier continuum of derivativeness for contemporary retro rock recordings (Table 2), I would now like to propose a new continuum which builds on those findings and offers a broader picture of the spectrum of contemporary retro rock.

**Table 5: Continuum of derivativeness/innovativeness in contemporary retro rock music**

	← Continuum of contemporary retro rock →				
	Derivative				Innovative
	Exact copy (tribute act/cover band)	Pastiche			Inventive- ness (no longer a ‘retro’ artist)
Authenticity value system		Romantic authenticity values		Modernist authenticity values	
Nostalgic tendencies		Restorative nostalgia		Reflective nostalgia	
Composition and phonographic staging techniques	Intertextual references (typically through composition)		Abstract references (typically through sound performance)		
		Hypertextuality			
Approach to technology		Limited and hidden		Abundant and conspicuous	
Sound quality in the studio and on stage		Raw, natural and ‘live’		Produced and ‘recorded’	
Album cover design		Pre- <i>Sgt Pepper</i> Photographic portraits Text slogans Technical information	Appropriation of 1960s rock artists’ visual imagery/ symbology	Post- <i>Sgt Pepper</i> Newly designed abstract imagery relying on collective memory/ mythology of the 1960s	
Scenic talk		Venerate 1960s/1970s rock canon (especially in relation to present day popular music)		Subtle acknowledge- ment of past influences	
Retro rock subgenres		Garage rock		Psychedelic/ art rock	
		Hard rock/Stadium rock			
Contemporary retro rock artists		The Frowning Clouds	Tame Impala		
		Stonefield			

The continuum is bookended by the polar opposites of unoriginality on the left and originality on the right. The reason for derivative/innovative being used as the outer markers of the continuum is because of the importance of these ideas in defining the scale of 'retro' in contemporary retro rock. As suggested by the continuum of derivativeness in contemporary retro rock recordings (Table 2), if a contemporary retro rock composition is too similar to a past composition, to the point where it is merely a copy of the original, then it becomes indistinguishable as a *new* composition. On the opposite end of the continuum, if a musical work does not retain enough markers of earlier source material (either through specific sound elements, form or style), it becomes a markedly more 'innovative' work such that it ceases to be discernibly understood and interpreted as retro, and therefore falling outside the bounds of contemporary retro rock. In between a copy and a markedly new original work, I have placed the category of pastiche. Most instances of contemporary retro rock can typically be referred to as pastiche since it by its nature must rely on the appropriation of the stylistic qualities of 1960s and early 1970s rock music. However within this continuum, two distinct approaches to contemporary retro rock emerge. Towards the left, but not at the point of complete unoriginality, lies an approach which conforms to romantic authenticity values and to restorative nostalgic tendencies. Towards the right end of the continuum, but again, not at the extreme of originality, lies an approach characterized by modernist authenticity values and reflective nostalgic tendencies.

Appeals to authenticity recur throughout the analysis of contemporary retro rock in this thesis. From the explicit evocation of canonical rock artists in contemporary retro rock compositions, recordings, live performance and album covers, through to specific choices surrounding technology and approaches to representation of cultural capital and creative identity in scenic talk, much of the process of contemporary retro rock works towards establishing and demonstrating authentic approaches to music-making. However I have deliberately left out the binary of authenticity/inauthenticity as opposites in the above continuum. This is because, while there are approaches that may be adopted in contemporary retro rock which could be considered

inauthentic, the very notion of authenticity in contemporary retro rock is configured differently specific to the *kind* of contemporary retro rock aimed for. Contemporary retro rock effectively reiterates and relies on the same ideals of authenticity expounded through different subgenres and trends of 1960s rock music – even to the point of appealing to the differing conceptions of authenticity specific to these particular rock subgenres. As in Chapter 6 which compared the different approaches to live performance adopted by the Frowning Clouds and Tame Impala, where both groups adopted very different aesthetics and choices pertaining to sound, technology, audience interaction and so forth, authenticity was still being demonstrated through these choices, but authenticity by different criterion. As such, I have included these two kinds of authenticity value systems present in contemporary retro rock, and in rock music more generally.

Romantic authenticity values are positioned towards the left of the continuum because they are typically ascribed to ideas of tradition and continuity with the past. Romantic authenticity in contemporary retro rock is concerned therefore with practices which emphasize connectivity with the past and the rejection of those which alter or evolve these aspects of the past. Since the focus of romantic authenticity is focused on 1960s and early 1970s rock, there are a number of elements from this era which carry through to contemporary retro rock. For example, the approach to technology in this idiom would seek to prioritize the limited sound palette and recording technologies from this past era as a way of demonstrating adherence to a “core or essential rock sound” a less-mediated form of expression, and a sense of “liveness” (Keightley, 2001, p137). The signification of these values was demonstrated, along with sincerity and directness towards the audience, in the Frowning Clouds’ approach to live performance as discussed in Chapter 6. Further to this, contemporary retro rock artists who rely on romantic authenticity values tend to define 1960s rock and their own musical endeavours in opposition to modern leanings. This was clearly demonstrated by the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield in Chapter 8 where value claims were made with regard to contemporary popular

music and the Top 40 which were seen to be overly-commercial and inauthentic, especially when compared to the perceived ethos of 1960s rock and individual canonical rock artists.

Modernist authenticity values tend to move away from the ideas and practices associated with derivativeness, and as such, correspond to the right side of the contemporary retro rock continuum. Contemporary retro rock music aligning with modernist authenticity values therefore feature traits that are decidedly more oblique and abstract in referencing the rock music of the 1960s and early 1970s. In terms of composition and recording, for example, there is a greater emphasis on the evocative potential of phonographic staging which embraces sound technology, rather than limiting or narrowing the use of sound technologies, as is consistent with romantic authenticity values. As seen in chapters 5 and 6, Tame Impala are less likely to use compositional intertextual referencing in their music as they are to evoke iconic artists and music of the 1960s and early 1970s through the abundant and explicit use of processes less specific to any particular hypotext such as phonographic staging and the manipulation of their instruments' sonic qualities. Likewise, as Tame Impala follow the paradigm of post-*Sgt Pepper* album cover design in the instance of *Innerspeaker*, the process of establishing a direct correlation between album cover images (as seen with pre-*Sgt Pepper* inspired contemporary retro rock album covers) is eschewed in favour of non-specific imagery which brings into play the semiotic characteristics of 1960s rock mythology.

The most difficult aspect of modernist authenticity values as they have developed in rock music culture more broadly, and as applied to contemporary retro rock, is the importance of musical progression and the role of the artist as creator. The quagmire of contemporary retro rock music which utilizes modernist authenticity values, either as a value system to follow, or indeed to promulgate through its various modes of expression, is the very defining characteristics and genre restraints associated with *being* retro. On the one hand modernist authenticity values favour experimentation and progressiveness, but if on the other hand those same values are applied too rigorously, then the genre constraints of contemporary retro rock are breached. What in effect must be achieved here is a balance between these two conflicting

directives. This negotiation is enacted not only in the specific choices encountered in the process of making the music, but also in the scenic talk of contemporary retro rock. As seen in Chapter 8, various discursive approaches are taken to maintain an impression of authorship, originality and personal creativity within contemporary retro rock. From the assumption of coincidence and unconscious influence to the downplaying of historical and canonical relevance of 1960s rock in the present day, there are definitely processes of negotiation which must be entered into in order to balance the competing interests found in contemporary retro rock.

At this juncture, I would like to highlight that while the tendency in contemporary retro rock is for certain practices and outcomes to largely conform to the two differing authenticity ideals in the continuum, I do not suggest that contemporary retro rock artists must always necessarily conform to romantic authenticity on one side, or modernist authenticity on the other. Indeed contemporary retro rock is far more nuanced and there is always scope to move back and forth along the continuum in specific instances. Recalling the examples offered in Chapter 5 as to compositional and phonographic staging techniques for example, there were instances where artists who might ordinarily fall towards one side of the continuum utilized techniques consistent with the other side. Tame Impala, who typically align with modernist authenticity values and towards the ‘innovative’ pole, featured a riff composition in their track ‘Island Walking’ which was but a key change away from a direct quotation of the Jimi Hendrix Experience’s ‘Manic Depression’, and which therefore demonstrated a form of intertextual referencing – a practice more closely aligned with the ‘derivative’ pole of the continuum. The place of hypertextuality in the continuum is quite instrumental in this regard as it is a way of utilizing abstract or non-specific referents of the various styles and tropes of 1960s rock without necessarily being specific to any one artist or hypotext. I have placed hypertextuality in the continuum between the two poles of derivativeness and inventiveness because of its potential use with or without intertextual references. For example, while a contemporary retro rock composition may rely on a specific intertextual trait such as a guitar riff, chord progression or song structure from a specific hypotext, there is also the scope to phonographically stage the

recording with relation to a broad range of hypotexts which correlate to a rock style, such that a single recording may feature a hypertextual use of sound, with specific intertextual references. Alternatively, a contemporary retro rock recording may utilize hypertextual sound elements as its only source of connectivity with past rock music in an otherwise new composition.

Far from an exacting musical form, contemporary retro rock music and its practices are realized through a blending of various elements across its various modes. Sometimes the articulations of the various modes lend each other a sense of agreement, reinforcing similar ideas and meanings, while at other times the modes may be less supportive, or even contradictory in the meanings expressed. By the very nature of contemporary retro rock's existence as a retro, or past focused art which is formulated and constructed in the present day, these kinds of inconsistencies are not only likely, but inevitable. Thus even contemporary retro rock music and musicians who align with romantic authenticity values, despite outwardly seeming to be a perfect fit with concurrent interests in continuity and tradition, must still negotiate between conflicting attributes of faithfulness to the tradition of iconic rock whilst still maintaining relevance in a wider contemporary popular music culture which often favours change. This conflict was not lost on members of the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield, who, while asserting in their scenic talk and through their music a number of the attributes of romantic authenticity values, still evince trepidation surrounding the perception of being *too* derivative. This was revealed in Chapter 8 where members of both groups demonstrated a desire to be perceived as striking a balance between their passions for canonical rock music and their desire to be seen to be offering something new. Indeed, contemporary retro rock is fundamentally enacted through the push and pull of a number of tensions in the music and in the kinds of meanings being derived through its various modes of expression.

Turning to the nostalgic inclinations of contemporary retro rock within the continuum, the typologies offered by Boym (2001; 2007) that were introduced earlier in Chapter 3, restorative and reflective nostalgia, also correspond with the two authenticity value systems that tend to be adopted in contemporary retro rock. Restorative nostalgia with its emphasis on

tradition and maintaining continuity with the conditions and values of the past inclines towards romantic authenticity values, while reflective nostalgia which embraces the temporal discontinuity of looking back at the past from its position in the present has more in common with the expression of modernist authenticity values in contemporary retro rock. Of these two pairings, restorative nostalgia with romantic authenticity values is the most fitting and the most consistently represented in contemporary retro rock. Just as restorative nostalgia favours the importance of origins and roots, so too are these ideals striven for through an adherence to romantic authenticity values. This is because contemporary retro rock music which conforms to the left side of the continuum tends to generate meaning through close adherence to the specificities of the rock canon – particularly noticeable with the Frowning Clouds whose music corresponds with early 1960s rock styles such as garage rock, and with Stonefield whose music corresponds with late 1960s and 1970s hard rock. This was shown across intertextual and hypertextual referencing techniques found in the music itself, as well as in album cover design, and even through scenic talk. Just as Boym suggests that “restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth,” members of the Frowning Clouds demonstrated this through exhibiting discursive practices which sought to protect and reinforce the canonical status of 1960s rock, especially in opposition to the commerciality of pop music (Michael Jackson not being ‘bigger’ than the Beatles) and the contemporary direction of popular music generally (2007, p13).

Notwithstanding the problematic nature of restorative nostalgia’s claim to an ‘absolute truth’, the shared values between romantic authenticity in contemporary retro rock and restorative nostalgia render a typically unified outlook and approach which often correlates meaning and expression in this idiom. The intersection between reflective nostalgia and modernist authenticity values in contemporary retro rock can however be more nuanced and complex. This is because, as Boym puts it: “Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing ... and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity” (2001, p xviii). The underlying contradiction of course in contemporary retro rock centres on issues of conflicting temporalities and how one goes about accessing the past in present day conditions.

While restorative nostalgia seeks to minimize the gap between past and present by bridging the traditions of the past with a present day enactment geared towards continuity, reflective nostalgic tendencies typically work to draw attention to the gap itself. This outcome is particularly conspicuous in contemporary retro rock relying on modernist authenticity values where experimentation and progress are central goals. Where modernist tendencies in contemporary retro rock seek to push the limit of innovativeness in line with the aspirations of progressive rock, the method of working towards this modernist value is still rooted within the tropes and genre frameworks as configured and fixed by the canon of 1960s and early 1970s psychedelic and progressive rock. So while Tame Impala, who closely align with modernist authenticity values and reflective nostalgia, utilize approaches across the various modes of contemporary retro rock which are typically more nuanced and abstract than those adopted by the Frowning Clouds and Stonefield, they still necessarily fall within the contemporary retro rock continuum. This balance is not an easy one to achieve or maintain. For Boym, restorative nostalgia represents “an ethical and creative challenge,” and likewise its enactment in contemporary retro rock can be exigent (Boym, 2007, p13). To fall outside the continuum beyond the pole of innovativeness (and beyond the pale of the confines of contemporary retro rock) would be to negate the nostalgic and relinquish the connectivity with the past through the various elements and processes of meaning-making in favour of another aesthetic structure.

#### **9.4 A FUTURE FOR RETRO ROCK BEYOND THE PALE?**

Contemporary retro rock music, through its various practices of replication and representation, its nostalgic outlooks, and through the kinds of authenticity value systems it relies on and continues to foster, suggests a sense of fixity within the constraints of the rock music canon and the broader constraints of the genre. While I have indicated that there is scope to play with the parameters of contemporary retro rock music, to experiment and mix methods of representation and expression as offered in the continuum above, the tendency is for these

parameters to be articulated in correlation with their corresponding authenticity value system and nostalgic approaches. The cultural conventions and aesthetic rules of rock music, especially as defined by the rock canon, are still effective in setting the boundaries of contemporary retro rock.

However this is not to say that contemporary retro rock will always *necessarily* continue to be framed by these conventions and aesthetics. The synchronic nature of this study has afforded the opportunity to understand the interactive workings of contemporary retro rock across its various modes of expression as a simultaneous process. So while I have defined the palette of contemporary retro rock and explored its relational dynamics of meaning-making, any cultural aesthetic or system of meaning is always fluid and unfolding. As such, future directions for study concerning contemporary retro rock might do well to take a diachronic perspective on how retro rock patterns may change over a period. The current study has shown that approaches to contemporary retro rock which align to restorative nostalgic tendencies and romantic authenticity values tend to bolster the fixity of the rock canon, framing this contemporary music in accordance with 1960s and early 1970s rock music. One hypothesis for potential change in this idiom might be with regard to a gradual movement over time along the continuum from left to right, from derivativeness towards a contemporary retro rock form of innovativeness. The adherence to the conditions of historicity could play such a role as to influence a contemporary retro rock artist to follow a similar trajectory of aesthetic and technological change as found in 1960s music history. Just as the Beatles, whose career developed over the period of a decade, evolved to encompass a variety of stylistic changes over time reflective of advances in recording technology and a changing cultural dynamic of the period, contemporary retro rock artists could likewise mirror these advancements. While this kind of scenario would likely necessitate a shifting of values and nostalgic outlook, the bounds of the continuum would theoretically support such a move.

And yet the continuum in its current form, as constructed with reference to the present findings, does not facilitate any change beyond its scope. However I would posit that if there is

an opportunity for innovation and development in modernist terms outside of retro and reflective nostalgia, that is, outside of the continuum of contemporary retro rock, such a move would necessarily have its basis in the kinds of contemporary retro rock forms that utilize modernist authenticity values. Tame Impala are far more equipped than say the Frowning Clouds to progress so far to the right of the continuum as to leave it behind. Even as between *Innerspeaker* (2010) to the follow-up album, *Lonerism* (2012), while the latter retains many similar stylistic traits of 1960s psychedelic rock as evinced on the former, the pull of modernist authenticity seems to be steering the music ever so slightly more independently outside of nostalgic tendencies within the contemporary retro rock continuum and towards the ideal of innovation which falls outside of the continuum.

\* \* \* \* \*

Future hypotheses aside, the findings of this study do evince the bounds of fixity of contemporary retro rock music within the continuum. This sense of fixity is achieved through the conformity with past elements, or at least a representation of connectivity to those past elements. In an era in which archivalism and access to the data reserves of the collective memory bank are made so affordable and available to a degree of detail and vastness never previously thought possible, contemporary retro rock music demonstrates the potential offered by these conditions to engage nostalgic tendencies outside of lived experience. Indeed, it is this access to, and abundance of, cultural artefacts and the collective memory which forms the raw material of experience un-lived that in turn informs the exacting processes of enactment in contemporary retro rock music culture. Further, the primary tools which contemporary retro rock music must rely on in order to generate meaning fixed on the past are therefore by necessity either the material similarities with the artefacts it is based on, the mythological conception of that era and its music, or a combination of both of these.

What contemporary retro rock music offers through these tools is a workable example of vicarious nostalgia crafted through these reference points of history and culture and given a

platform to be realized in the present. Of course, what makes contemporary retro rock different from other kinds of music, and which sparked my interest initially, is that it deals in a form of nostalgia unlike the nostalgia I know for my own lifetime. It is this curious sensation of a longing at once inculcated and fulfilled, which gives the impression of being built into the music itself. While the very act of listening to contemporary retro rock is, in a sense, a form of temporal disconnect – a negotiation between past ideals and present day pragmatisms – it is this very disconnect that offers a space where vicarious nostalgia might be realized. Maybe it is within this space where one might come closest to experiencing and living the myth of 1960s rock in the tangible present.

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Nirvana 1991, *Nevermind*, DGC.

Oasis 1994, *Definitely Maybe*, Creation.

Pink Floyd 1973, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, Harvest.

Radiohead 1997, *OK Computer*, Parlophone.

The Rolling Stones 1964, *The Rolling Stones*, Decca.

The Rolling Stones 1965, *The Rolling Stones No. 2*, Decca.

The Rolling Stones 1966a, *Aftermath*, Decca.

The Rolling Stones 1966b, 'Paint It Black/Stupid Girl', London.

The Rolling Stones 1967, *Between the Buttons*, Decca.

The Rolling Stones 1967b, *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, Decca.

The Rolling Stones 1968, *Beggar's Banquet*, Decca.

The Romantics 1980, *The Romantics*, Nemperor.

The Ronettes 1963, 'Be My Baby/'Tedesco and Pitman', Philles.

Small Faces 1967, 'Itchycoo Park/I'm Only Dreaming', Immediate.

Stonefield 2010, *Through the Clover*, Shock.

Stonefield 2011, 'Black Water Rising/Yes Master', Warner Music.

Stonefield 2013, *Stonefield*, Wunderkind.

The Strokes 2001, *Is This It*, RCA.

Tame Impala 2010, *Innerspeaker*, Modular.

Tame Impala 2012, *Lonerism*, Modular.

Thee Wylde Oscars 2010, *Right, Yeah*, Off the Hip.

The Vines 2002, *Highly Evolved*, Capitol.

The Who 1965, 'My Generation/Shout and Shimmy', Brunswick.

The Who 1966, *The Who Sings My Generation*, Decca.

Wings 1975, *Venus and Mars*, Capitol.