

**MASS ROMANTICS:
GRAPPLING WITH GENRE IN 2000s INDIE ROCK**

by

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ABSTRACT

In the early 2000s, popular music's indie rock genre reached unprecedented levels of commercial success: on the sales and singles charts, in television ads and programs, on music and pop-culture websites, at sold-out music festivals. This thesis builds on the work of Wendy Fonarow, whose assessment of indie rock's fundamental tension between "Puritanism" and "Romanticism" offers a starting point from which to address the genre's cultural ascendancy and evolution in the early twenty-first century. Inspired in no small part by the age of digital consumption, the balance between indie rock Puritanism and Romanticism shifted in the early twenty-first century in favour of Romanticism. This shift in genre culture helps illuminate how indie rock managed to infiltrate popular culture so thoroughly in the 2000s, but it also challenges indie rock's traditional boundaries. Through a general overview of these developments and two detailed case studies—one on Kelly Clarkson's indie-sounding pop hit "Since U Been Gone," the other on indie rock's surprising embrace of Bruce Springsteen as an influence—this project assesses the changing state of indie rock in the digital age and the implications raised by the weakening of its antagonism towards mainstream culture.

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And now: here it is.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1. Indie is dead; long live indie

In early 2010, the bimonthly American music and cultural magazine *Paste* published what would prove to be one of its final print editions before transitioning to an online-only outlet. Fittingly, the cover story dealt with death—not of print or publishing, but of indie rock, the genre that arguably formed the core of the magazine’s music coverage. The piece, written by the magazine’s assistant editor Rachael Maddux, was a play on *Time* magazine’s famous 1966 cover story written by John T. Elson, which asked, “Is God Dead?” *Paste* recreated that issue’s iconic black-and-red cover, instead asking the question, “Is Indie Dead?” Maddux’s argument was both aesthetic and cultural. She argued that, as a musical genre, indie rock had gone soft in sound: “How did indie go from the scalding, thrashing fury of bands like Minor Threat and Black Flag,” she asked, “to toy pianos, ukuleles, and polite handclaps?” She also argued that indie, as a broader culture, had lost its oppositional core, leaving it struggling for definition. As in Elson’s original article, Maddux quoted nineteenth-century theologian Søren Kierkegaard to describe indie’s new complacency: “The day when Christianity and the world become friends, Christianity is done away with.”¹

Maddux was correct in noting that indie has long been associated with oppositional attitudes. The origin of the term’s modern use in music culture dates back to Great Britain in the early 1980s, and was informed by the ethos and culture

¹ Rachael Maddux, “Is Indie Dead?” *Paste Magazine*, February 2010.

of punk music. Its initial function was to describe the rise of a network of labels and bands utilizing a do-it-yourself (or “DIY”) approach to production and distribution of recordings to operate separately from the established major label recording companies. This independence was a source of pride and identity for these bands and their fanbases and, together with the emergence of the comparable “college rock” movement in the United States, indie rock took the shape of a music genre: a set of codified conventions of sound, style, sensibility, and musical practice. As defined by Matthew Bannister, indie rock is “a postpunk subgenre of independent or alternative rock featuring mainly white, male groups playing electric guitars, bass and drums,” with key artistic influences including 1960s groups the Byrds (for its jangly, melodic pop structures) and the Velvet Underground (for its embrace of noise and discord).² Indie rock’s broader genre culture, which notably evolved in reaction to the alternative music boom that followed Nirvana’s 1991 album *Nevermind*, is based on a discourse that anthropologist Wendy Fonarow defines as “arguments over membership.”³ Its listeners judge recordings, distribution, musical practices and forms, and relationships between audiences and musics based on the authenticity of their “indie” status in a hierarchy of subcultural capital. In identifying what she feels is the crux of those arguments, Fonarow describes a debate between two competing-yet-complementary impulses that she calls “Puritanism” (indie rock's distrust of

² Matthew Bannister, “Loaded: Indie Guitar Rock, Canonism, White Masculinities,” *Popular Music* 25 (2006): 77.

³ Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 28.

authority, its simplicity and its anti-corporatism) and “Romanticism” (its celebration of emotion and passion, its interest in artistic movements of the past).⁴

Fonarow’s framing is compelling, both taken on its own terms and when coloured by other scholarship of indie rock and my own personal experiences as a listener and participant within indie rock culture. Fonarow’s Romanticism-Puritanism tension helps explain why it is that indie rock is so exclusionary in setting its boundaries (distrustful of authority, skeptical of complexity and what it considers to be “inauthentic” production) and yet so celebratory and passionate within them (its championing of emotional authenticity, its deep-seated nostalgia). It also provides a starting point for addressing indie rock’s cultural ascendancy and evolution as genre in the early twenty-first century. In the early 2000s the sounds and sensibilities of the indie rock music genre had never been so easy to find: on the *Billboard* charts, in commercials, on television programs, on music and pop-culture websites, at sold-out music festivals. In some ways, this trend is not unique: Dick Hebdige, for instance, has outlined how media and commerce tend to incorporate subcultures into the broader cultural and economic hegemony, dismantling them in the process, and within the rise of 2000s indie rock, there are echoes of alternative rock in the 1990s and the co-option that occurred following Nirvana’s breakout success.⁵ Yet, in key respects, the indie rock ascendancy was somewhat different: it was driven by a new wave of online tastemakers that maintained connections with indie subcultures; it involved listeners breaking away from physical, location-based scenes and instead sharing/consuming music online via MP3s, YouTube and other

⁴ Fonarow, 28-29.

⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 2012), <http://www.mylibrary.com?ID=32730> (accessed May 23, 2015), 92-96.

services; and its most successful artists were also some of its most acclaimed, avoiding the culture's dreaded "sellout" label. Yet for *Paste* and other critics, indie rock's success was ultimately a challenge to its core values: "Indie is dead," wrote *Paste* editor Josh Jackson, "in part, because indie has won."⁶

This thesis, its title borrowed from a 2000 song and album by Vancouver indie rock supergroup the New Pornographers, is an attempt to understand how and why indie rock "won" in the 2000s and to address the implications of that success for indie rock as a genre of popular music. My argument, building on Fonarow's analysis, is that the tension between indie rock Puritanism and Romanticism shifted in the early twenty-first century in favour of Romanticism, inspired in no small part by an age of digital consumption that made it easier than ever before to find, consume, and share music and, in the process, served to weaken indie's Puritan barriers. This shift in genre culture helps illuminate how indie rock managed to infiltrate popular culture so thoroughly in the 2000s, but it also challenges indie rock's traditional boundaries. The declining interest in indie rock's Puritan sentiments has meant a greater incorporation of sampling, dance beats, keyboards, mainstream pop production and sensibility, and melodically complicated constructions, all under the banner of "indie rock." At the same time, there are notable examples of mainstream pop music that not only sound like indie rock but also have been openly embraced and celebrated by indie rock fans. Through a general overview of these developments and two detailed case studies, this project assesses the changing state of indie rock in the digital age and the implications raised by the weakening of its antagonism towards mainstream culture.

⁶ Josh Jackson, "Editorial: R.I.P. Indie," *Paste Magazine*, February 2010.

2. Notes on genre

Though it is only within the last twenty years that genre studies have taken hold in popular music scholarship, genre has always been central to popular music culture. Genre, as Fabian Holt writes, “is a fundamental structuring force in musical life, as it has implications for how, where, and with whom people make and experience music, and the very concept of music is bound up with categorical difference.”⁷ Those categorical differences operate in three key ways, as outlined by Simon Frith in his book *Performing Rites*: organizing the sales process (how music is packaged/marketed/distributed); organizing the playing process (how individuals focus their music writing/recording/performing); and organizing the listening process (how individuals seek out and engage with recorded or live music).⁸ Far from an academic exercise, genre codes and practices are constituted within the interplay between music’s commercial and cultural processes, producing what Holt, Frith, and fellow genre scholar Keith Negus refer to as a “genre culture”: “systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text, and subject” and which arise “from the complex intersection and interplay between commercial organizational structures and promotional labels; the activities of fans, listeners, and audiences; networks of musicians; and historical legacies that come to us with broader social formations.”⁹

⁷ Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

⁸ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 75-88.

⁹ Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 28, 29-30.

Understanding this concept of genre culture allows us to unpack some of the complexities surrounding the term “indie rock.” In her book *Empire of Dirt*, Fonarow provides a survey of indie rock’s various meanings: an association with independent labels and distribution methods; a genre of music with a particular sound and style; music that communicates a certain ethos; a category of critical assessment; and music as contrasted with other genres (rock, pop).¹⁰ The way in which Fonarow chooses ultimately to define indie rock very much fits the model of a genre culture. Ryan Hibbett’s essay “What is Indie Rock?” argues that indie rock is “a malleable space filled by discourse and power, whose meaning is always under construction by various agents (bands, listeners, labels, critics, etc.) with diverse objectives.”¹¹ That meaning is shaped by indie rock’s contentious but symbiotic relationship with mainstream culture, in which indie’s cultural products gain value by being *not* mainstream: “indie rock,” Hibbett writes, “demonstrates the principles and politics of a ‘superior’ art and applies them within the immense and multifarious domain of ‘popular culture.’”¹² These terms—“mainstream,” “popular culture”—are not without their problems, particularly considering the increasingly demassified and splintered media environment of the early twenty-first century. They do, however, serve purpose in shaping indie rock’s sense of subcultural value: just as rock defines itself as an authentic “other” in opposition to the profit motives and mass-audience ambitions of pop’s catch-all style, indie rock further defines itself as a more authentic other within rock. This authenticity is shaped not only by the Puritanism-Romanticism tension Fonarow describes (and which I will explore in more detail in

¹⁰ Fonarow, 26.

¹¹ Ryan Hibbett, “What is Indie Rock?” *Popular Music and Society* 28 (2005): 58.

¹² Hibbett, 57.

Chapter One) but also by Sarah Thornton's concept of "subcultural capital."

Subcultural capital, based on theories of cultural capital as modeled by Pierre Bourdieu, assigns value based not on popularity or financial assessment, but perceived cultural worth.¹³ Just like consumers of avant-garde or high culture, indie rockers value musical products that are less known or successful than products they perceive as "mainstream," as the latter has traditionally been seen as something that must be resisted or, at the very least, approached with great skepticism.¹⁴

So what, exactly, do indie rock's musical products sound like? In many respects, indie rock has traditionally reflected the rock genre more broadly: music based around electric guitars, bass, and drums, performed mostly by bands that have tended to skew young and male.¹⁵ Distinguishing indie rock as a subgenre separate from rock is the low premium it places on production values: indie rock songs have often been recorded and performed with what Fonarow calls "a raw, underperformed quality" that suggests authentic creation, as opposed to the note- and sound-perfect productions often found in mainstream popular music.¹⁶ These features, which can include distortion, tape hiss, and other elements of "lo-fi" sound, mark the music as

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). Sarah Thornton. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 11.

¹⁴ Given the role of punk in shaping and informing indie rock culture, Erik Hannerz's study of punk attitudes towards mainstream culture is relevant here. The punk youth Hannerz interviewed for his study associated the mainstream with "the fake, the dependent, and the shallow," but their definitions of what "mainstream" meant were diverse: "the binary subcultural/mainstream was constantly being worked as a meaning of the mainstream was disputed and reaffirmed, drawing boundaries between participants, actions, and spaces. The only thing the punks I followed agreed upon regarding the mainstream was that it had to be fought and kept at bay." From: "The Positioning of the Mainstream in Punk," in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, ed. Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2003): 53.

¹⁵ For an overview of the rock genre, see: Kier Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109-42. As for the gendering of rock as male, see: Jacqueline Warwick, "Midnight Ramblers and Material Girls: Gender and Stardom in Rock and Pop," in *The SAGE Handbook of Popular Music*, eds. Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman, 332-45 (London: SAGE Publications, 2015).

¹⁶ Fonarow, 41.

uncommercial and, therefore, uncompromised.¹⁷ Another distinguishing feature of indie rock as genre (as with rock more generally) has been its “whiteness”—not only in terms of its performers and audience members, but its musical tradition. David Hesmondhalgh notes that indie rock’s “canon of white, underground rock references” stood in stark contrast to the influences shaping hip hop, electronic, and pop music during indie rock’s rise in the 1980s and 1990s: “The mainstream pop charts were dominated by funk figures and rhythms, but indie records turned to jangly guitars, an emphasis on clever and/or sensitive lyrics inherited from the singer/songwriter tradition in rock and pop, and minimal focus on rhythm track.”¹⁸

Indie rock’s genre culture is also heavily shaped by class: its listeners and musicians tend to be upper-middle class but, as noted by Fonarow, often express disdain for the middle-class lifestyle and its mainstream connotations.¹⁹ Indeed, while the term “indie rock” has been common in British music culture since the early 1980s, in North America the progenitor of indie rock was more often dubbed “college rock.” The defining American independent bands of that era—R.E.M., the Replacements, Husker Du, Sonic Youth, and the Pixies, to name a few—became popular amongst a growing population of postsecondary students, and were supported by an emergent network of college and university radio stations.²⁰ Some of these bands were also dubbed “alternative,” though

¹⁷ Hence, one of indie rock’s great ironies: the presence of production artifacts signifying the *absence* of production. Hibbett, 62.

¹⁸ David Hesmondhalgh, “Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre,” *Cultural Studies* 13 (1999), 38.

¹⁹ Fonarow, 52.

²⁰ Michael Azerrad’s *Our Band Could Be Your Life* (Boston: Little, 2001) is perhaps the definitive text on American college rock. Ryan Moore, in his book *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, further colours this relationship between American colleges and the genre that would eventually evolve into indie: “These scenes developed in bohemian urban enclaves and college towns and were less defined by a particular sound or sartorial style and more by the social relationships forged among musicians, audiences, and cultural producers like fanzine writers. Live performances served as the primary medium for organizing these social relations, while

after the success of Nirvana (whose sound owed much to 1980s college rock, particularly the Pixies) that term became mostly associated with the heavier, metal- and hard-rock-influenced elements of underground rock culture, including grunge. The bands that became known as indie rock reacted to alternative music's rise by moving in the opposite direction, taking on more British influences and becoming much more focused on melody and on noise as a playful, dissonant element. "When Seattle's scene flamed out," writes Kyra Oakes, "what indie bands wanted to do was play around, making music on their own terms, and reinvent indie music as something lo-fi and DIY—to take it back to its punk roots but with a different kind of beat and a less strident lyrical flow."²¹

3. Chapter breakdown

Accounts of indie rock by the likes of Fonarow, Hibbett, and Bannister—all focused largely on the genre at the turn of the millennium—are increasingly out-of-date when one looks at indie rock as it is today. Chapter Two of this thesis presents a narrative of the indie rock genre in the 2000s, laying a foundation for the two case studies that follow. After providing a brief framework for understanding indie rock's Romanticism, particularly in light of the modern digital age, the chapter highlights three dominant trends that speak to its rising influence. The first of these is indie's embrace of communal arena-rock sensibilities, which I explore through the connection between two artists on the Merge Records label: Neutral Milk Hotel and Arcade Fire, the latter of which translated the former's hyper-emotive songwriting

independent record labels, fanzines, and college radio provided an infrastructure of media for connecting scenes to one another across space." (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 10.

²¹ Kyra Oakes, *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), 137.

and vocal style into widescreen, stadium-ready anthems. The second trend is the use of indie rock in commercial entertainment. This I examine through the music of Seattle's Death Cab for Cutie, a band that became an intrinsic part of the television show and teen pop-culture phenomenon *The O.C.* The final portion of the chapter considers indie rock's embrace of the language and sentimentalities of dance music by looking at the work of scenester-turned-sentimentalist James Murphy and his band LCD Soundsystem, widely credited with being at the forefront of this trend.

After establishing Romanticism's increasing role in modern indie rock, the subsequent two chapters each explore how this trend reshaped indie rock's genre culture and its relationship with a perceived "mainstream," from two different perspectives. Chapter Three considers the strange case of Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone," a top-10 pop hit from the first *American Idol* winner that cribbed its sound and sentiments from indie rock culture but was openly embraced and celebrated by indie rock fans and tastemakers. The chapter questions what it means for indie rock's relationship with mainstream culture when such appropriation is celebrated, not scorned. While Chapter Three focuses on mainstream culture's embrace of indie rock, Chapter Four flips the coin and examines indie rock's embrace of once off-limits (from a cultural capital perspective) elements of mainstream culture. My case study explores the surprising popularity of Bruce Springsteen as an influence among a handful of popular, late-2000s indie rock bands: Arcade Fire once again, the Hold Steady, the Killers, and the Gaslight Anthem. These bands openly acknowledged and celebrated Springsteen in their work, something unimaginable in irony-fetishizing indie rock scenes a decade earlier. The case study examines indie rock's growing interest in nostalgia and "retro" sentiments

as well as the failure of these bands to translate Springsteen's working-class vision into indie rock's middle-class culture. The thesis concludes with some thoughts on the state of indie rock as genre in 2015.

CHAPTER TWO: HEARTS ON FIRE

Indie rock is the choice of a new generation! Allegedly! Don't let the exclamation points fool you into thinking I'm being sarcastic! Just try selling iPods or straight-leg jeans without knowing what fresh-faced guitar band is the hip new thing; just try telegraphing to audiences that a character on your television show is quite special and interesting.

- Nitsuh Abebe, "The Decade in Indie," Pitchfork.¹

1. Introduction

One of indie rock's key identifiers has traditionally been its antagonistic relationship with mainstream culture. Kaya Oakes writes that indie culture exists as a "shadow history" of sorts, "one that parallels and reflects mainstream culture but also posits itself as being a subculture of outsiders."² Indie rock's subcultural capital can be accumulated in its objectified form ("fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections") and its embodied form ("being 'in the know,' using [but not overusing] current slang"), both largely governed through media engagement and generated via perceived differentiation from what indie rock's adherents perceive as mainstream or popular.³ "When music and style [that indie rock fans] believe to be 'underground' are commercialized and become available to a mass market," writes Ryan Moore, "they experience a sense of alienation because they no longer own or control the culture they have produced and because their expressions of rebellion are now consumed by the 'mainstream' audience they oppose."⁴ Indie rock's celebration of relative obscurity, thus, stems from its adherents' belief in their superior, discerning taste, an elitism that in many respects reflects the culture's upper-middle class orientation.

¹ Nitsuh Abebe, "The Decade in Indie," *Pitchfork*, February 25, 2010, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/7704-the-decade-in-indie/> (accessed March 2, 2014).

² Oakes, 12.

³ Thornton, 11-13.

⁴ Moore, 138.

Yet, something shifted in the 2000s, as Abebe suggests in the above excerpt from his decade-end essay for the popular music criticism website *Pitchfork*. This chapter presents an overview of the indie rock genre in the first decade of the twenty-first century, laying a foundation for the two genre case studies that follow in subsequent chapters. It argues that indie rock's success in the 2000s—its increased role in commercials, on television programs, on music and pop-culture websites, at sold-out music festivals—is predicated on a shift in the tension between what Fonarow posits as indie rock culture's two fundamental impulses, seemingly opposite but deeply intertwined: Puritanism and Romanticism.⁵ After providing a brief framework for this tension, I then highlight three particular trends, with associated artists, that speak to the rising role of Romanticism within indie rock, and the declining influence of Puritanism and its associated anti-mainstream antagonism.

2. Indie rock Romanticism

As outlined in this thesis' introduction, attempts to define indie rock as both a culture and a genre can lead to what seem like contradictions: its accessible melodies against its contrarian streak, its affection for the past alongside its adherents' belief in cultural authority within the present. Reconciling these tensions requires an appreciation of what Fonarow identifies as the two impulses at the heart of indie rock culture: "Puritanism" and "Romanticism." These impulses, and the tension between them, flow through the various components of indie rock: recordings, production processes, economic relationships, visual presentation, performances of persona, etc. While elements of these terms could apply to various musical genres, Fonarow's analysis

⁵ Fonarow, 26-28.

focuses particularly on their depth of their influence (and the intensity of their debate) within indie rock.

In selecting these terms, Fonarow draws, in part, on religious terminology.⁶ “Puritanism” refers to nineteenth-century movements that sought reform of the dominant Western churches (the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church) through a stricter adherence to religious doctrine. In the case of indie rock, Fonarow uses Puritanism to refer to the doctrines by which the culture values and ensures authenticity of its output. “Within indie,” she writes, “we find a Puritan distrust of authority; a preference for non-corporate, independently owned commercial operations; an avocation of simplicity in musical form, production, and style; a promotion of high moral standards regarding issues of sexuality and conduct; an emphasis on education, underlying themes of austerity and abstinence.”⁷ Indie rock’s Puritan barriers serve to keep out “posers,” “sell-outs” and other lesser-thans who fail to live up to the culture’s standards of authenticity. It is these barriers that best support indie rock’s anti-mainstream antagonism, particularly through their focus on simplicity and production methodology in contrast to the glossiness of commercial pop music.

Yet inside its Puritan barriers, what indie rock reveres and celebrates shares more in common with Romanticism, a movement that existed alongside Puritanism but was much more focused on its secular counterpoint, Rationalism. Romanticism was primarily focused on the celebration of emotion within art and culture, what William Wordsworth

⁶ This is a fitting choice, given indie rock’s interest in the past and its adherents’ fevered belief in its cultural products. Indeed, it seems hardly a coincidence that indie fans are often dubbed “purists.”

⁷ With regards to her comments on sexuality, Fonarow argues that indie rockers distance themselves from the rock musician stereotype as hyper-sexualized, instead following moral limitations that downplay rock’s hedonism, egotism, and destructiveness. Fonarow, 28, 236.

called “the spontaneous overflow of feelings” stemming from the essence of the artist.⁸ The movement’s features reflect some of the key tenets of its original age: imagination, egotism and the individual, an interest in antiquity and the primitive, and connection to the natural.⁹ In this, Fonarow sees much in common with indie rock: its celebration of the cultivation of emotion and passion; its interest in artistic movements of the past and a preference for the natural; its acclaim of exceptional individuals; and its distaste for middle-class society despite being middle-class in and of itself.¹⁰ Author Marc Spitz further colours this Romantic streak within indie rock with his assessment of “twee” culture. Twee, he argues, celebrates beauty and childhood, expresses joy but with pathos and an awareness of darkness, and dispenses with “cool” in favour of fetishizing the nerd and the geek. “For decades,” Spitz writes, “twee has been a school of the larger catchall indie and a home to the indie kids who held a close bond with Hello Kitty and the Lovin’ Spoonful as well as if not in place of being versed in J. G. Ballard, the harsher end of Neil Young, and Slint.”¹¹ This impulse towards the kitschy and playfully juvenile is a key facet of indie rock’s Romantic streak, and many of the twee antecedents to 2000s indie rock—acts like Belle and Sebastian, Cat Power, and Neutral Milk Hotel—stood in decidedly stark contrast to the masculine hard-rock alternative music that dominated the 1990s.

Indie rock’s Romanticism is also strongly focused on authenticity, but rather than the structural authenticity prioritized by its Puritanism—how the music is produced or

⁸ R.L. Brett, and A.L.R. Jones, *Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth and Coleridge* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1991), <http://www.mylibrary.com?ID=5852>>(accessed May 23, 2015), 237.

⁹ Nicholas Roe, *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁰ Fonarow, 29.

¹¹ Marc Spitz, *Twee: The Gentle Revolution in Music, Books, Television, Fashion, and Film* (New York: !T, 2014), 1.

marketed, for example—indie’s Romanticism values a sort of emotional authenticity, as

Fonarow writes:

In indie we find none of [traditional] Romanticism’s fanciful exaggerations, opulence, or imaginative posturings. Yet a Romantic strain does exist in indie’s tendency to value the natural or organic, in its introspection, and in its preference for ordinary people. The untrained artist combines the simplicity of Puritanism with the Romantic notion of the untrained artistic genius whose intuition, instinct, and spirit govern his artistic creations.¹²

Together, these two impulses—Puritanism and Romanticism—serve to manage the borders of indie rock both as a musical form and as a broader genre culture. They ensure that indie rock music stays pure from perceived corruption so its artists can express their “true” selves.

3. A new digital age

In their survey of American indie rock’s history, Vincent Novara and Stephen Henry argue that the genre’s most noteworthy accomplishment in the 2000s is the transcending of its traditional barriers to enter the mainstream consciousness. “Songs in a variety of indie rock subgenres feature in films, advertisements, and television programs,” they write. “Indie rock albums by new artists debut at high chart positions, bringing greater attention than one would previously have thought possible to this once-obscure corner of the pop music marketplace.”¹³ Yet the authors offer minimal explanation of why, exactly, indie rock was able to achieve a prominence that eluded it in decades previous.

¹² Fonarow, 50.

¹³ Vincent J. Novara and Stephen Henry, “A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock (1980-2005),” *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 4 (2009): 829.

Unquestionably, the Internet is a key factor in this shift. The maturation of the modern World Wide Web, the rise of file sharing, and the growth of social media platforms provided new peer-to-peer channels for music conversation, consumption, and creation. MP3 and file-sharing programs at the turn of the century (Napster, Kazza, others) allowed individuals to cultivate entire libraries of music from one another. Subsequent platforms like YouTube, Spotify, Grooveshark, and Pandora allowed users to access music on-demand at a low (and, in many cases, non-existent) cost. Tools such as Twitter became new channels for cultivating networks of taste and influence; never before was it easier or faster to hear about an exciting new indie rock album. “This social interaction is personal yet physically distant,” writes Kostas Karasas in his account of digital communication. “Traditional sources of identity—like those of the 'neighbourhood', local communities, and the nation-state—are transformed into new intermediated social groups... The Internet provides a vehicle for music lovers with the same cultural capital to 'meet' each other, organize themselves into specific communities and exchange their favourite songs.”¹⁴ As William Dutton outlines, this proliferation of communication options tends to produce new gatekeepers, leading to the emergence of websites such as *Pitchfork* and *Stereogum*.¹⁵ These served as digital proxies for the indie “zines” of old but on an Internet-wide level, maintaining their authority within indie rock circles even as they became large and well-read enough that they can “break” a band with a single review.¹⁶ And, in many cases, these new gatekeepers are the bands and fans

¹⁴ Kostas Karasas, “Music in the Age of Free Distribution: MP3 and Society,” *First Monday* 1 (2005), <http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1455/2128> (accessed April 22, 2015).

¹⁵ William H. Dutton, “The Internet and Social Transformation,” in *Transforming Enterprise: The Economic and Social Implications of Information Technology* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 375.

¹⁶ And, in the case of *Stereogum*, can be subsequently bought out by conglomerate SpinMedia while still staying connected with up-and-coming indie artists.

themselves: as outlined in a study led by communications scholar Daniel Davis, the Internet has been uniquely able to connect bands and their most devoted fans directly through websites (and increasingly, social media channels), allowing these fans to become more effective ambassadors and critics for the bands.¹⁷

Yet Internet communities, while they touch upon group or local solidarities, also tend to enhance what Barry Wellman and his coauthors call “networked individualism”: “Rather than a unified neighborhood,” they write, “people increasingly operate in a number of specialized communities that rarely grab their entire, impassioned, or sustained attention.”¹⁸ This splintering of attention, I would contend, weakens music listeners’ perceptions of a dominant or mainstream culture, and increases their individual sense of autonomy as they navigate their preferred specialized communities (music-focused or otherwise). Accordingly, this sense of networked individualism aligns well with the Romantic elements of consumer culture as outlined sociologist Colin Campbell. Campbell’s *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Consumerism* describes how the “modern hedonism” of consumer culture appeases the perceived needs and wants of the individual, linking the engagement with (and purchase of) products to the assembling of a personal identity. This process characterizes consumption as “a voluntaristic, self-directed and creative process in which cultural ideals are necessarily implicated.”¹⁹

Though indie rock has traditionally been skeptical of mass commerce, this sort of Romantic individualist ethos, enabled through Internet engagement, has its attractions for

¹⁷ Daniel Cochece Davis, Brian P. Delaney, and Heidi M. Keller. “Fandom of the Internet: Musician Communication with Fans,” in *Rock Brands: Selling Sound in a Media Saturated Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Barfoot Christian (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 115.

¹⁸ Barry Wellman et al, “The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism,” in *The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 8 (2003), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2003.tb00216.x/full> (accessed May 23, 2015).

¹⁹ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 203.

both artist and audience. “On the one hand,” writes Oakes, “artists are more in control of how their work gets distributed and promoted than they’ve ever been before, with the proliferation of cheap and easy technologies for doing so”—a development that echoes the original DIY ethos that spawned indie rock in the first place. On the other hand, “the more overexposed indie music, comics, publications, and design get, the more those art forms can be co-opted by the mainstream and its masters.”²⁰ This, of course, had happened before—note, again, the post-Nirvana raiding of the independent music underground in the 1990s—but Ryan Moore argues that capitalist infrastructure became more efficient and successful at this in the 2000s: “The ideological opposition between art and commerce that alternative culture inherited from bohemia, romanticism, and modernism collapsed in this new age of capitalism where markets absorb new trends faster than ever before and the consumer culture thrives on expressions of difference, novelty, and authenticity.”²¹

While Moore may be correct, the “collapse” of opposition within indie rock was decidedly in line with its Romantic values. Many of the most successful and emblematic indie rock artists in the 2000s reflected the genre’s Romantic side: its cultivation and expression of emotional sincerity, its interest in the artistic movements of the past, its celebration of individual expression and authority. The following examples demonstrate this point along three separate lines of analysis: emotional expression as a way to reach broader audiences; the embrace of commercials and television shows as platform for indie rock music; and the incorporation of more pop-focused musical forms within indie, in particular dance music.

²⁰ Oakes, 200.

²¹ Moore, 11.

4. Arena rock status: From Pavement, to Neutral Milk Hotel, to Arcade Fire

Though Arcade Fire is new enough that the band has yet to receive detailed scholarly attention, the Montreal-based group easily ranks among the most notable indie rock bands of the 2000s in several respects: sales, critical acclaim, scale of live performance. After a glowing review on the ascendant *Pitchfork* website made the band's debut *Funeral* a minor sales sensation in late 2004, the band's fame and acclaim continued to grow steadily. By decade's end, *Funeral* was named one of the top ten albums of the 2000s by *Pitchfork*, *Spin*, and *Rolling Stone*; Arcade Fire headlined major music festivals such as Coachella and Glastonbury; and the band pulled off a surprise Album of the Year Grammy Award win for its 2010 record *The Suburbs*.

Also in 2010, Arcade Fire headlined its hometown Osheaga Music and Arts Festival in a lineup that also featured a reunited Pavement, the California indie rock band music critic Robert Christgau once called “the finest rock band of the nineties—by critical acclamation.”²² Attending both bands' sets at the festival, I found the juxtaposition jarring. Unlike much of what gets dubbed “indie rock,” there was little raw or “lo-fi” about Arcade Fire's music or performance: adorned in military-inspired uniforms its members would wear for the entire tour, the band members bounded around the stage in highly theatrical fashion, performing boisterous, anthemic music that would not have been out of place in a large arena show. Pavement, in contrast, dressed in average-looking street clothes, moved little on the stage, and approached its (admittedly, accomplished) songs with a loose, improvisatory, and amateurish aesthetic. Yet if one were to ascribe a label to both bands, “indie rock” would be the likely starting point.

²² As quoted by: Abebe, “How Pavement Became the Greatest Band of the Nineties This Year,” *Vulture*, September 21, 2010, <http://www.vulture.com/2010/09/pavement.html> (accessed May 25, 2015).

Pavement's 1992 debut album *Slanted and Enchanted* is considered a landmark record within the indie rock genre, credited as "mark[ing] the point at which indie rock split completely with its predecessors (hardcore, punk, alternative rock, etc.)."²³ This is not only because the album's "amateurish flavour" and "primitive recording techniques" were swiftly imitated, but also because "singer [Stephen] Malkmus's lackadaisical drawl and the band's willingness to accept mistakes in execution spawned a movement that was dubbed (fairly or unfairly) 'slacker rock.'"²⁴ At a point at which grunge and hard-rock "alternative" were at the height of their popularity, *Slanted* offered an alternative in its own right, a celebration of amateurism and an anti-style performance style that informed and influenced many contemporaries, as Oakes notes:

[Pavement] inherited indie's freedom but chose not to make a big deal about it, preferring to engage in sonic experimentation and identity play... punk's anger and frustration, which had been so radically reinvented in Olympia and Seattle, was being supplanted by sounds and lyrics that were lo-fi, apolitical, and lackadaisical. Punk still existed, but it spun off into its own scene, with its own sounds and rules, and indie rock began to evolve.²⁵

Though Pavement's guitar and drum sounds were often distorted, its song structures and melodies were playful and accessible. Songs like "Summer Babe (Winter Version)" (from *Slanted*) and "Gold Soundz" (from its follow-up *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain*) echoed 1960s guitar pop, with Malkmus's raspy voice delivering lyrics laced with irony but with a playful smirk as much as a wink. In this sense, Pavement embodied Fonarow's balance between Puritan impulses and the Romantic celebration, and thus became the prototypical indie rock band of the 1990s.

²³ Novara and Henry, 825.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Oakes, 138. Some of these evolutions sounded, at times, like Pavement (such as the music of Liz Phair and Dinosaur Jr.) and others did not (output from post-rock artists like Slint and Godspeed You! Black Emperor, for example).

The transition point between Pavement's ironic style and the theatrical emotionalism of Arcade Fire can be found in the Athens, Georgia band Neutral Milk Hotel. Part of a collective of musicians called Elephant 6, Neutral Milk Hotel is best known for its 1998 album *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* and the subsequent self-imposed exile of its vocalist and songwriter Jeff Mangum.²⁶ Many have noted Arcade Fire's musical similarities to Neutral Milk Hotel, and how within a few years of *Aeroplane's* release, "bands like the Arcade Fire and the Decemberists who bore *Aeroplane's* obvious influence were getting successful enough to make it onto the pop charts, just as the Internet was making the album easily available to anyone, no matter their proximity to the right kind of record store that would stock it."²⁷ Arcade Fire has openly acknowledged the influence, adding that Neutral Milk Hotel's presence on Merge Records was a key reason for the band's signing with the label.²⁸

Neutral Milk Hotel's sound is defined by what Marc Spitz calls its "vast and homemade quality," combined with "a pre-emo burst of undiluted (and... unselfconsciously nonmasculine) emotion: pain, joy, and hope."²⁹ "The music is like nothing else in the '90s indie underground," writes Kim Cooper in her book on *Aeroplane*, "a psychedelic brass band, its members self-taught yet scarily adept, forging

²⁶ Mangum not only ceased recording and touring after initial dates for *Aeroplane*, he did not re-emerge in public for over a decade. He is often referred to, hence, as a "J.D. Salinger-esque" figure within indie rock.

²⁷ "In 2003, Pitchfork named it the fourth best album of the 1990s, two spots above *Nevermind*," wrote Miles Raymer for *Esquire*. "That might seem outlandish, but if you look at the *Billboard* charts right now, you'll see Neutral Milk Hotel's influence, via the sentimental folk-pop of acts like the Lumineers and Phillip Phillips, much more clearly than you will Nirvana's." From: "How the Cult of Neutral Milk Hotel Came to Be," *Esquire* [online], March 23, 2013, <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a18341/neutral-milk-hotel-tour/> (accessed May 28, 2014).

²⁸ Ryan Schreiber, "Interview: The Arcade Fire," *Pitchfork*, February 14, 2015, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/5963-the-arcade-fire/3/> (accessed August 12, 2014).

²⁹ Spitz, 46.

polychromatic washes of mood and tribute.”³⁰ The foundation of *Aeroplane*’s vision are Mangum’s lyrics and their delivery. Loosely based on Mangum’s reading of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the album contains a primal, physical set of lyrics, combining abstract sexual imagery with a childlike wistfulness. Aided by these vivid images, Mangum’s music and its creation embodies the Romantic spirit of indie rock, as bandmate Julian Koster explained:

there’s something pure and infinite in you, that WANTS to come out of you, and can come out of no other person on the planet. That’s what you’ve got to share, and that’s as real and important as the fact that you’re alive. We were able, at a really young age, to somehow protect each other so we could feel that. The world at large, careerism, money, your parents, the people at the rock club in your town, other kids, nothing is going to give you that message, necessarily... And any time I encounter something beautiful that came out of a human somewhere, that’s them, that’s their own soul.³¹

The album is also credited with nurturing an expanded interest in folk influences within indie rock, leading to bands adopting instruments like accordions and Glockenspiels alongside guitars. These “folk-influenced songs,” wrote Miles Raymer in *Esquire*, “were the diametric opposite of the detached irony that the previous decade’s worth of underground rock bands were pumping out,” a comment that suggests Pavement in particular.³²

So how, then, did Arcade Fire translate this model to international success whereas Neutral Milk Hotel remained a beloved cult band? The obvious answer—Mangum’s seclusion—warrants deeper analysis. Mangum’s belief in the purity of his

³⁰ Kim Cooper, *Neutral Milk Hotel’s In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), accessed via Kindle Edition.

³¹ Ibid. Mangum does not take part in interviews, but based on the sentiments outlined in Cooper’s book this seems well in line with his own vision as well.

³² As Raymer notes, there is a rather direct line that can be drawn between Arcade Fire and late-2000s folk-indie bands such as Mumford and Sons and The Lumineers. (Though, notably, as those bands became popular Arcade Fire moved in a different direction and embraced dance rhythms with the help of producer James Murphy, whose LCD Soundsystem project is considered later in this chapter.)

own music made him wary of success; fearing what happened to a band like Nirvana, he rejected nearly all traditional methods of building a larger audience, including turning down a chance to open for R.E.M. In contrast, as Arcade Fire's sound began to win fans, they embraced select opportunities to connect with wider audiences, such as opening for U2 and performing on a fashion charity TV special with David Bowie. Secondly, Arcade Fire was able to leverage the Internet in a more robust fashion, becoming a so-called "blog band": "the beneficiary of an instant, white-hot outpouring of online enthusiasm from a core of fans who loved the record immediately," as Merge itself described it in the label's oral history.³³ Arcade Fire's word-of-mouth acclaim spread much more quickly, and much more organically, than such praise would have travelled before the Internet (and, in particular, a more social-focused Internet). Individuals could blog, share, and comment on the band's music with ease, offering a person-to-person and less overtly "marketed" approach to building an audience not available to Mangum six years earlier.

But the largest difference was how Arcade Fire expanded Mangum's emotional palette. Replacing Mangum's abstractions with universal themes of childhood, family, and loss, *Funeral* was particularly at place in 2005, a year when according to *Spin*, "it wasn't a bad idea to promote music that isn't afraid to get weepy. *Funeral* seemed to resonate as Americans grappled with war, hurricanes, and a general sense of anxiety. Rather than laugh off their cares, people were drawn to art that captured futility and discomfort."³⁴ Nick Zinner, of contemporary indie rock band the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, was quoted as such: "I like that they make very passionate and empathetic music without it being too precious... I get emotionally affected by their music, but it's never in a 'woe is

³³ John Cook with Mac McCaughan and Laura Balance, *Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2009), 285.

³⁴ Caryn Ganz, "Breakout Band of the Year: Arcade Fire," *Spin*, January 2006.

me' kind of way. I find their music really empowering."³⁵ Many others did, too: that sense of emotional empowerment is what helped Arcade Fire build on its Romantic expression to become one of the most successful indie rock bands of the 2000s.

5. Death Cab for Cutie, *The O.C.* and commercial placement

Another indie rock artist that embodies the Romantic shift within the genre is Ben Gibbard, songwriter and vocalist behind two of the decade's most successful indie music projects. Seattle's Death Cab for Cutie, initially considered an offshoot of the emo subgenre, released a series of increasingly successful independent albums before topping the *Billboard* albums chart with its major-label debut *Plans* (2005). Alongside, Gibbard launched a side-project with producer Jimmy Tamborello called the Postal Service, whose one and only album *Give Up* (2003) was so successful that it became the highest-selling album in the history of Seattle's Sub Pop records. As described by Novara and Henry in their guide to American indie rock, Gibbard's projects represent a "tweaking of the indie aesthetic [that] has led to increasingly polished performances and better sound, a reluctance to hide song forms behind noise, and more earnest, direct lyrics"—a notable example of an artist who followed indie rock's Romantic impulses to acclaim and success.³⁶

Yet, for our purposes, what might be most significant about Gibbard's music is its use in commercial entertainment. A cover version of one of Gibbard's compositions, the Postal Service ballad "Such Great Heights," appeared on the soundtrack to Zack Braff's 2004 film *Garden State*. That cult film, which Spitz identifies as "twee's overground

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Novara and Henry, 831.

moment,”³⁷ produced a million-selling soundtrack that illustrated “indie rock’s ability to convey a feeling of exclusivity and hipness even while appealing to a mass audience.”³⁸ But Gibbard’s defining indie rock soundtrack connection started the previous year with the launch of *The O.C.*, a Fox network teen soap opera that in its debut season was the highest-rated new television drama among adults aged 18-34.³⁹ The show’s accompanying score was largely indie rock: bands such as the Doves, Spoon, OK Go, and the Dandy Warhols, among many others.⁴⁰ Gibbard’s Death Cab for Cutie was further profiled as the favourite band of Seth Cohen (as played by Adam Brody), one of the show’s protagonists and a character defined in large part by his indie rock fandom. Accordingly, Death Cab received repeated mentions and soundtrack placements on the series over the course of its four-year run. Among these mentions are Cohen presenting two potential love interests with a “Seth Cohen Starter Pack” including one of the band’s albums and, in another episode, telling one of those love interests “Do not insult Death Cab!” when she refers to the band as “one guitar and a whole lot of complaining.”⁴¹

Bands such as Death Cab might have interpreted *The O.C.*’s interest in indie rock as a cynical attempt to co-opt the genre’s cultural capital and sense of “coolness,” and resisted it accordingly. Instead, these bands increasingly welcomed *The O.C.*’s spotlight.

The Wall Street Journal, writing about the show as a music phenomenon, noted that

³⁷ Spitz, 279.

³⁸ Novara and Henry, 832.

³⁹ During its first season, the show averaged 8.7 million viewers weekly. “Ratings shine in ‘The O.C.’,” *USA Today*, March 2, 2004.

⁴⁰ The end of each episode even directed fans to the show’s website, where a listing of the songs used was available. “For the first seven episodes,” creator Josh Schwartz told the *Wall Street Journal*, “we didn’t have a music supervisor, so we were taking music off my iPod.” Ethan Smith, “Ticket Out of Obscurity: Featuring Underground Bands Confers Coolness on ‘The O.C.’ and Helps Propel Album Sales,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 2, 2004.

⁴¹ Schwartz, Josh et al. “Episode 7, The Escape” and “Episode 13, The Best Chrismukkah Ever,” *The O.C.: The Complete First Season* (DVD. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004).

bands were jockeying to get onto its compilation CDs, and that artists singled out the show for praise because “its writers and producers use the music as overt elementals of place and dialogue, not just as atmosphere.”⁴² This sensibility was furthered in season two of the series with the launch of a fictional music venue within the show called the Bait Room. This allowed *The O.C.* to feature music acts performing as part of the show, with the second season including mimed live performances from the Walkmen, Modest Mouse, the Thrills, the Killers, and, in April 2005, Death Cab for Cutie. In its episode, Death Cab is seen performing excerpts from the songs “The Sound of Settling,” “A Movie Script Ending,” and “Title and Registration” at the Bait Shop but, in a cruel twist, Cohen himself is unable to attend due to his work on a comic book project.⁴³ Rather than simply including bands like Death Cab as background performers or an atmospheric soundtrack, *The O.C.* made them central to key plot and character moments.

This synergy between indie rock bands and visual mass entertainment was not completely without precedent. Early in the 2000s Aimee Mann performed on the final season of underground teen hit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and several of the bands that appeared on *The O.C.*, including Death Cab, cited the Flaming Lips’ appearance on *Beverly Hills 90210* in 1995 as a key precursor.⁴⁴ That said, in the 1990s such

⁴² Smith, *The Wall Street Journal*. For more on the particulars of music supervision in twenty-first century television, see Tim Anderson’s “From Background Music to Above-The-Line Actor: The Rise of the Music Supervisor in Converging Televisual Environments,” in *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25 (2013): 371-388.

⁴³ When Cohen arrives at the very end of the show, he exclaims: “Arrrg, I cannot believe I missed Death Cab. Just kill me. Seriously, shoot me in the face.” Schwartz, Josh et al., “Episode 20: The O.C. Confidential,” *The O.C.: The Complete Second Season* (DVD. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005). Death Cab’s narrative inclusion in this episode is much more fluid and seamless than the show’s first attempt to feature a live act. In the show’s first season, an up-and-coming band named Rooney was the focus of an episode in such aggressive fashion—with all of the characters raving about the band *ad nauseam*—that one would be forgiven for thinking Rooney was already a million-selling rock band.

⁴⁴ The Flaming Lips were signed to Warner Brothers but, for all intents and purposes, were positioned then (as they are now) as an avant garde indie rock band. Michelle McFarland, “Seattle’s own Death Cab for Cutie to appear on ‘The O.C.’,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 20, 2005.

engagements were far from commonplace and, when they did occur, fans typically responded with outrage, as explored in an in-depth 2013 *Buzzfeed* article by journalist Jessica Hopper:

Band manager Howard Greynolds, who looks after the careers of [indie acts] Iron and Wine and the Swell Season, was an employee at indie label Thrill Jockey when two of its flagship bands, Tortoise and Freakwater, licensed a song for a 1995 CK One campaign. “I remember people calling us saying, ‘I can’t fucking believe that they did that, I can’t support this band anymore!’” says Greynolds... A generation ago, refusing these kinds of offers was a way for bands to telegraph where they stood, the sort of thing that showed their allegiance to the underground and their community.⁴⁵

In a *New York Times* feature on the decline of the “selling out” criticism, the author quotes the sentiments of Hilarie Sidney, wife and collaborator of influential indie rock songwriter Robert Schneider (Apples in Stereo, an Elephant 6 band alongside Neutral Milk Hotel): “Hilarie could still remember the breathless thrill of discovering her favourite band, Pavement, and the loss she felt when they became popular, available to just anyone.”⁴⁶ That said, it was one thing to be seen as “selling out” simply by becoming more popular; it was another matter entirely court mass audiences openly by placing one’s music within the commercial infrastructure and, in the process, seemingly embrace a profit motive that sat in opposition to indie’s ethos of authentic expression.

One of the factors that shifted this attitude in the 2000s was changing revenue patterns: given the overall decline of record sales in the Internet era, a commercial placement (or “sync”) became one of the most reliable ways for bands to generate income

⁴⁵ Jessica Hopper, “How Selling Out Saved Indie Rock,” *Buzzfeed*, November 10, 2013, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jessicahopper/how-selling-out-saved-indie-rock#.qs2q81VID> (accessed March 20, 2015).

⁴⁶ John Leland, “For Rock Bands, Selling Out Isn’t What It Used To Be,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2011.

while also seeking audiences for their music.⁴⁷ In addition, many artists also saw commercial placement as a method of artistic autonomy, framing it within the language of authentic expression: “Licensing,” wrote the *New York Times*, “can provide operating money and blanket exposure—through commercials, film and television soundtracks, even toys and video games. This means freedom not just from record companies but also from the boundaries of radio and MTV.”⁴⁸ Moby’s 1999 album *Play* represented a watershed moment in this respect: the acclaimed electronica artist licensed nearly all of the album’s songs to various ads, in the process not only paying for the record but selling more than 12 million albums.⁴⁹ Some of the decade’s most artistically credible artists like Wilco (whose disputes with its label over its 2002 album *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* made its members anti-corporate crusaders in the eyes of many) formed corporate partnerships to expose its music to new audiences.⁵⁰ As for Death Cab, Gibbard explained his band’s appearance on *The O.C.* as such:

Really, at the end of the day... There’s really no difference between us being on *The O.C.* and us being on Conan O’Brien or David Letterman. It serves the same purpose: we’re sharing with people what we do, and what our music is about, and what we’re about. And what we look like. There just happens to be a bunch of characters running around and talking about other stuff.⁵¹

⁴⁷ A one-year license for an existing song by a smaller band could run in the range of \$10-25,000 as of 2003. Also in Hopper’s *Buzzfeed* article, Greynolds cites another culture change: the layoffs in the record industry that meant “music” people suddenly ended up working in marketing, advertising and brands. “People from our world,” as he put it. “They might be feeding you a line of shit, but there was trust. They were different.”

⁴⁸ Leland, *The New York Times*.

⁴⁹ See: Gavin Haynes, “Moby’s ‘Play’ Becomes the Thriller of Licensing,” *Noisey*, March 11, 2013, http://noisey.vice.com/en_uk/blog/moby (accessed July 27, 2015).

⁵⁰ Jonathan Cohen, “Wilco Takes A Spin With Volkswagen For TV Ads,” *Billboard*, June 5, 2007, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/1051724/wilco-takes-a-spin-with-volkswagen-for-tv-ads> (accessed May 25, 2015).

⁵¹ McFarland, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Gibbard's assertion is not without its complications: the audience for a late-night talk show such as Letterman on Conan is quite different than that for a teen soap opera, and late-night shows have long been a reputable and expected performance destination for rock bands. What is notable, then, is that Gibbard considered a show like *The O.C.* be equally as reputable (and perhaps expected) by this point.

Death Cab, like Wilco and other bands who embraced these collaborative approaches, suffered little for this exposure: rather than backlash, they saw increased album sales and continued critical acclaim. That is not to say there was unanimous consensus around this sort of corporate or commercial engagement; there are many cases where artists themselves fought over the appropriateness of this sort of placement, including a debate between critical darlings Bon Iver and the Avalanches over a Bushmills whisky campaign.⁵² That said, Death Cab's experience embodies how indie's Puritan attitudes towards commercial infrastructure began to lose sway, replaced by a more Romantic view of individual autonomy connected with artistic expression. Gibbard's language reflects the desire to share his music with more people, and forge new connections with audiences, regardless of the medium utilized.

6. LCD Soundsystem and the broadening of indie music

On the surface, LCD Soundsystem, a band led by producer and musician James Murphy, checks many of the same boxes as other acclaimed and successful indie rock artists of the 2000s: based in a prominent scene (Brooklyn); transitioned from critically-acclaimed underground artist to a major festival headliner that sold out New York's

⁵² Carrie Battan, "The Avalanches Attack Bon Iver Over Whiskey Advertisements, Grammys," *Pitchfork*, December 5, 2011, <http://pitchfork.com/news/44808-the-avalanches-attack-bon-iver-over-whiskey-advertisements-grammys/> (accessed May 25, 2015).

Madison Square Garden for a farewell show; considered by critics as one of the top artists of the decade.⁵³ Yet one listen to the band reveals a sound that would have been near unthinkable in 1990s indie rock: a fusion of indie rock attitude with the structures and sensibilities of dance music. Much of Murphy's music does not feature any guitar at all; when the songs do, it is decidedly as an accompaniment element, with the bass tones driven almost entirely by electronics. Murphy, along with bands such as Animal Collective, Cut Copy, and the Knife, is credited with reintroducing dance music into indie rock, "blurring the lines effectively enough to bridge the divide between fans who probably don't otherwise like dance music and those who put on LCD records only to dance to," as critic Sasha Frere Jones put it.⁵⁴

Though many early primogenitors of indie and post-punk such as Joy Division and Public Image Ltd. made use of dance rhythms, those sounds were difficult to find in the music that eventually adopted the indie rock descriptor in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Nearly all the bands featured in Michael Azerrad's seminal survey of 1980s indie, *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, are guitar-based rock bands. Fonarow describes indie's traditional attitude towards dance as being founded in "technophilia," with indie rockers interpreting dance music as faceless and anti-personality in contrast to indie's focus on artistic expression.⁵⁵ In this respect, indie has tended to reflect a similar point of view as rock more generally, skeptical of pop and anything that seems openly manufactured and preferring more "traditional" instrumentation based on guitar, bass, and drums. Dance also is seen as a futuristic genre (famously described by Giorgio Morodor as "the sound

⁵³ Rolling Stone listed three of the band's songs in its top 100 songs of the 2000s (with one album in its top 20) and Spin ranked 2007's *Sound of Silver* as one of the best albums of the previous 25 years.

⁵⁴ Sasha Frere-Jones, "Let's Dance," *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2010.

⁵⁵ Fonarow, 70.

of the future”⁵⁶), which conflicts with indie rock’s commitment and devotion to excavating the musical past and recontextualizing it.

This line of thought is furthered in one of the most discussed and debated pieces of late-2000s music criticism: Sasha Frere-Jones’s “A Paler Shade of White.”⁵⁷ Writing in *The New Yorker*, Frere-Jones argued that rock music, and indie rock in particular, underwent a racial re-sorting in the 1990s.⁵⁸ During that decade, he argued, indie rock “came to implicitly mean white rock,” losing some of the “black” sources of rock and roll’s foundation and choosing a band such as Pavement—“a flat-footed mixture of shaggy, improvisational rock and sylvan curlicues taken from obscure folk groups”—as its flagbearer. By taking 1960s rock as its primary influence, nineties distinguished itself from a pop landscape increasingly infused with hip hop and dance rhythms. Yet Frere Jones noted change occurring in the 2000s:

People embraced house acts, got excited about the possibility of "dance punk," dabbled with underground rap. At first, plenty of folks derided these trends as faddish, embarrassing, or somehow even elitist, like the people who went for them were trying to fool someone. But as far as I can tell, things changed. You can see it just visually: Neon t-shirts and skinny pants and fashion and "hipster"ism—the stuff some indie kids recoiled from when new electro came along—won out. Daft Punk and M.I.A. have big old parking spots reserved for them in the indie world. All sorts of new things wound up getting absorbed into indie's sensibility, because indie is a superb thief: It gets into things and then picks up their trappings. Electro, minimal techno, French house, the production on hip-hop and R&B singles—at this point you probably don't think twice when an indie act grabs something from these genres; you don't think twice about whether the result is "indie" or not. It's assimilated, just another option.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ As quoted on Daft Punk’s 2013 track, “Giorgio by Moroder” from the album *Random Access Memories*. 2013, vinyl record (Columbia 88883716861).

⁵⁷ Frere-Jones, “A Paler Shade of White,” *New Yorker*. October 22, 2007.

⁵⁸ The piece also echoes the points made by David Hesmondhalgh regarding indie rock and race, as quoted in my introduction.

⁵⁹ Frere-Jones, “A Paler Shade of White,” *New Yorker*.

Indie rock has rarely been *un*-curious, but the more rigid boundaries that authors such as Fonarow, Hibbet, and Hesmondalgh ascribe to the genre reflect its 1990s conservatism. In contrast, the gradual adoption of dance and its focus on rhythm under the indie rock umbrella is in line with the Romantic elements of the culture: its focus on the individual author, its interest in the sounds of the past (particularly, in this case, disco), and the valuing of emotional expression and release.

James Murphy, with his LCD Soundsystem project, is a transitional artist through which to understand this broadening of indie rock's borders. Murphy is a dance music advocate who simultaneously expresses indie's traditional skepticism of the dance genre: "I always hated dance music," he told *Rolling Stone*, adding "except for Deee-Lite," referring to the performers of the late-80s single "Groove is in the Heart."⁶⁰ Indeed, Murphy was once a more traditional indie rocker, describing his pre-LCD musical project as "boring Nineties indie rock... another unnecessary band. Indie is a genre. You're playing with this rigid set of expectations."⁶¹ This sort of jaded scenester tone continued on his breakthrough single, 2002's "Losing My Edge." On the track, Murphy doesn't so much sing as he does talk, rattling off a series of existential fears all based around losing touch with music culture. "The kids are coming up from behind," he says, as he begins to run through a list of all of the "cool" things he has done, seen, and collected, but is suddenly realizing are not enough to keep pace with the next generation of culture curators. This expression of elitism as status encapsulates indie rock culture, and yet it is delivered over an evolving, repetitive dance beat. It is a track on which indie rockers

⁶⁰ Mark Dinelli, "Dance Rock's Cranky King," *Rolling Stone*, March 8, 2007.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

could hear themselves, and yet at the same time it enveloped influences that were less common within indie's genre culture.

Just as indie rock itself moved from referential irony to emotive expressiveness over the course of the 2000s, so too did Murphy. His most beloved composition among both fans and critics is perhaps "All My Friends," the centerpiece of 2007's *Sound of Silver* album. Murphy claims he actually hated the song at first—"it was way too poppy, and I was embarrassed"⁶²—but the track was perfectly in tune with its times. Based around a repeating staccato piano pattern with only two chords, and a simple A-to-D bass riff, the piece is defined by Murphy's escalating emotional lyrics, detailing the experience of growing older and out-of-touch—not laced with the referential irony of "Losing My Edge" but instead based around more universal themes of friendship, worry, fear. The song's directness won broad acclaim, with *Pitchfork* naming it both the best song of the year and the second-best song of the decade.

"All My Friends' woke me up to something else," Murphy said in one interview. "I didn't realize what emotional impact melody has on people. I always think about lyrics and what they actually mean and then I realized the energy I respond to physically people respond to emotionally."⁶³ His weapon of choice in that emotional response was his pastiche of tastes, curated by essentially leapfrogging backwards over 1990s indie rock as an influence to a more diverse and eclectic musical New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Wrote *Pitchfork*: "The friction between new wave, post-punk, underground disco, electro, and early hip-hop created some of the most invigorating music of the rock

⁶² Frere-Jones, "Let's Dance," *The New Yorker*.

⁶³ Dorian Lynskey, "Interview: Beat Disconnect – James Murphy Says Goodbye to LCD," *The Quietus*, June 28, 2010, <http://thequietus.com/articles/04522-lcd-soundsystem-james-murphy-interview> (accessed May 20, 2015).

era, and Murphy homed in on that, first as a DJ and later as producer and musician.”⁶⁴

Nitsuh Abebe pointed out how even as indie rock began to envelop more sounds, it often did so on a band-by-band basis: “Each one will have a very specific sound and mood, and make entire albums that give you nothing but the one thing they do best.” In contrast, Murphy “made records like it was the late seventies and you might only be able to afford one a month: You picked up an LCD Soundsystem LP expecting him to be funny in spots and moving in others, playing frothy New Wave on one track and a deep, dark hustle on another. You expected a sense of time and place to them.”⁶⁵

As noted, that time and place sounded like a seventies/eighties New York pastiche—but also, accordingly, a lot like the mid-2000s. Indie’s interest in the past was appeased by a digital revolution that placed the history of recorded music at the fingertips of artists and audience alike. That indie’s Puritan barriers failed to withstand this sea change is perhaps not surprising—there may be simply too much creativity and inspiration to be had in embracing the digital diaspora—but that it led to emblematic artists like Arcade Fire, Ben Gibbard, and James Murphy embracing their Romantic streaks is certainly noteworthy. In the 2000s, indie rock became a mass-market phenomenon, subjugating its opposition to mainstream commerce while still maintaining its indie bonafides through emphasizing the artistic autonomy of its authors, its sense of honest emotional expression, and its overall Romantic spirit. In doing so, indie opened its

⁶⁴ “You Were There: The Complete LCD Soundsystem,” *Pitchfork*, March 28, 2011, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/7947-you-were-there-the-complete-lcd-soundsystem/> (accessed April 22, 2015).

⁶⁵ Abebe, “Good-bye, LCD Soundsystem: James Murphy’s Art of Hopeless Commitment,” *Vulture*, March 29, 2011, http://www.vulture.com/2011/03/lcd_soundsystem_committed_to_m.html (accessed March 2, 2014).

genre borders far wider to musical and cultural exchange—the implications of which will be explored in the following two chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: IT WAS COOL, BUT WAS IT ALL PRETEND?

I just don't know, man. I'm falling apart. The new Kelly Clarkson single, "Since U Been Gone"...unarguably good. No — stop it — don't even try! It's unarguable.

– Ted Leo, musician¹

1. Introduction

In February 2005, Internet multimedia website *UGO* recorded an acoustic studio session with indie punk rocker Ted Leo, who was promoting his politically charged album *Shake the Sheets*.² Though Leo was on the small California independent label Lookout! Records at the time, his profile was growing thanks to positive coverage on leading indie music blogs and websites such as *Pitchfork*. In the video performance, Leo, dressed casually in a sweater, strums a G5 power chord before palm muting the guitar and launching into a rendition of Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone." Clarkson, the winner of the first *American Idol* television singing competition in 2002, had released "Gone" as the second single from her sophomore album *Breakaway* three months prior to Leo's performance, and at the time the song sat in the top 10 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. (It eventually peaked at number two).³

Given indie rock's traditional attitudes towards mainstream pop, one would be forgiven for presuming Leo had chosen the song as a lark or an ironic appropriation. His

¹ Leo's blog post no longer exists online, but was quoted by: Catherine, "i can breathe for the first time," *unrequited narcissism*, February 24, 2005, http://www.zunta.org/blog/archives/2005/02/24/i_can_breathe_f/ (accessed November 6, 2011).

² The video has been archived on *YouTube*: Ted Leo, "Since U Been Gone / Maps," *YouTube*, uploaded April 8, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBr5FPIL8UU> (accessed November 5, 2011).

³ "The Hot 100, Week of February 26, 2005," *Billboard*, <http://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/2005-02-26> (accessed June 2, 2015).

presentation, though, provides no knowing nods or winks, and later interviews would confirm Leo's affection for the song as genuine.⁴ Aside from the palm muting, a performance choice that pulls the song closer to Leo's punk aesthetic, he makes one other important change to the song: after playing its sliding octave chord bridge, Leo switches songs entirely and begins to perform the chorus of "Maps" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, a ballad that had been a breakthrough single for the New York garage rock trio the year before.

Had this been an isolated event—a quirky combination of songs from two seemingly disparate artists performed by a respected independent musician—it would have been a minor novelty at most. But Leo's performance became a sensation across music blogs and websites because it tapped into a broader sentiment just starting to gain traction online: indie rock fans were noticing that "Since U Been Gone" sounded a lot like some of their favourite songs, including "Maps."⁵ As Jonathan Gray of *Stylus Magazine* put it: "Pop radio was playing my music and I had no understanding as to why."⁶ More importantly, in spite of Clarkson's complicated history (in indie rock terms) as a reality television star, these listeners were actually *enjoying* the song, and were increasingly comfortable admitting as such. As 2005 continued, expressions of this sentiment grew in number and spanned media outlets, from mainstream publications like

⁴ Said Leo to MTV: "I was like, 'Wow, that's a shockingly good song for a pop star. It's just one great hook after another... A lot of people have asked me about adding some cachet to Kelly Clarkson, as if I'm trying to tell people that she should be considered more than she is, but honestly, I was poking more fun at myself and my own weakness for a good hook.'" Corey Moss, "When Did Kelly Clarkson Become So Hip?" MTV.com, August 23, 2005, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1508202/when-did-kelly-clarkson-become-so-hip.jhtml> (accessed November 6, 2011).

⁵ A Google search for "Ted Leo 'Since U Been Gone'" on December 4, 2011 returned about 68,500 results.

⁶ Jonathan Gradley, "The Turntable >> Kelly Clarkson – Since U Been Gone," *Stylus Magazine*, uploaded December 11, 2005, <http://stylusmagazine.com/turntable/2005/12/11/kelly-clarkson-since-u-been-gone/> (accessed November 6, 2011).

Rolling Stone and *Blender* to Internet tastemakers like *Pitchfork* and *Stereogum*.⁷ While the song was also a legitimate mainstream hit—the fourth-most downloaded and fifth-most played song of the year—its crossover success was more often than not the story, inspiring the *New York Times* to ask, “Who knew that deep down, Kelly Clarkson, the original *American Idol*, was a hipster in the making?”⁸

The juxtaposition implied by that question—mainstream pop’s artifice versus the authenticity demands of indie rock—presents “Since U Been Gone” as an ideal case study to examine further the Romantic shift within 2000s indie rock and its impact on the genre. “Gone,” written by Lukasz “Dr. Luke” Gottwald and Max Martin, borrows explicitly from early-2000s indie rock, including but not exclusively limited to the connection with “Maps” that Leo’s rendition suggests. Despite these songwriters’ appropriation of indie rock sounds in the interest of serving a pop singer—one associated with a reality competition television show, no less—indie rock fans and tastemakers not only tolerated but embraced “Gone” and its vocal-powered emotional release. Clarkson’s promotional efforts to support the song deserve some credit for this, as she made subtle yet notable breaks from her *American Idol* pop image—and from the show itself—that enhanced perceptions of her individual authenticity. That said, the song’s appeal also highlights how indie rock’s rising Romanticism shifted its valuing of authenticity towards expression rather than the particulars of production, and further colours the decline of indie’s Puritan antagonism towards mainstream culture.

⁷ *Stereogum*, the Internet’s most-cited indie rock blog, was so caught up in “Since U Been Gone” that it even ran a post about the Kidz Bop version of the song, a group which re-records popular songs with kids singing the vocals as a children’s product. “New Kidz Bop: ‘Since U Been Gone’ Video,” *Stereogum*, entry May 11, 2005, http://stereogum.com/1481/new_kidz_bop_since_u_been_gone_video/video/ (accessed November 8, 2011).

⁸ “On the downloads,” *USA Today*, January 5, 2006. Jon Caramanica, “Kelly Clarkson and the Kidz,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2005.

2. Indie rock and pop idols

As suggested in my introduction, pop and rock are traditionally understood as oppositional genres. The degree to which “pop” is a genre at all is certainly open to question. Simon Frith argues that pop is largely a residual category, defined more by its ideology towards profit and commercial reward than any particular musical element: “Pop is about giving people what they know they want rather than pushing up against technological constraints or aesthetic conventions.”⁹ While each era’s pop music has its own sonic signifiers, the genre is most strongly associated with the cultural and economic imperative to reach the largest possible audience, thus defining it as “mainstream.” Rock, by contrast, defines itself in opposition to this thrust, as Keir Keightley outlines:

Pop operates as a catch-all category into which rock dumps adult easy listening, bubblegum teenpop, and sell-outs, frauds, and musical trifles more generally. Pop is understood as popular music that isn’t (or doesn’t have to be, or can’t possibly be) ‘taken seriously.’ Rock, in contrast, is mainstream music that is (or ought to be, or must be) taken seriously.¹⁰

The crux of the split between pop and rock, Keightley argues, is the latter’s commitment to authenticity: “the compass that orients rock culture in its navigation of the mainstream.”¹¹ Rock brings the mindset of folk culture to bear on the mainstream, constructing a sense of “real” music to cope with the mediation and commercial structures of modern mass culture.¹² That realness has often been defined in production:

⁹ Simon Frith, “Pop Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, eds. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 95.

¹⁰ Keightley, 128.

¹¹ Keightley, 131.

¹² Keightley, 137. Write Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan: “Most fans do not wish to see themselves as consumers, even though they pay for recordings or concert tickets. They prefer instead to see the issue in terms of the constant and necessary resistance of rock to the industry on whose support its life depends but whose authority must always be resisted. In other words, the situation is conceived of in the same terms

the instruments used, who writes the songs, and how those songs are translated into live performance. The divide between rock and pop is also strongly gendered: as Norma Coates outlines, rock's discursive spaces reinforce and multiply representations of masculinity and link them strongly with authenticity, while pop's supposed artificiality is feminized.¹³ As a sub-genre of rock, indie rock defines its authenticity through an even stronger oppositional relationship to pop and antagonism towards the mainstream, as Ryan Hibbett notes:

Because indie rock gains its appeal through its defiance of mainstream conventions, because it does not meet the protocols for radio or music television (whose audience lacks the necessary cultural capital), it cannot achieve a mass following. Thus indie enthusiasts turn to symbolic value, defending what they like as "too good" for radio, too innovative and challenging to interest those blasting down the highway. They become the scholars and conservators of "good" music."¹⁴

Based on this model of indie rock, "Since U Been Gone"—a well-marketed major label hit single by a female vocalist, written by two professional songwriters—seems a hard sell within indie rock's genre culture. Clarkson's subcultural capital within indie rock was additionally handicapped by her *American Idol* pedigree, with *Idol* widely considered a commerce-focused mainstream enterprise with deeply-embedded corporate sponsorship and a voting mechanism that valued popularity over "expert" assessments. The show's genre bias, especially in its early years, also leaned heavily towards soul and soul-infused pop, such as Motown, that valued certain musical techniques (like vocal

used by critic theory to distinguish the genuine from the ersatz." "Modeling Authenticity, Authenticating Commercial Models," in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, eds. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 34.

¹³ Norma Coates, "(R)evolution Now: Rock and the political potential of gender," in *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 52.

¹⁴ Hibbett, 60.

melisma) that are toxic to rock fans.¹⁵ *Idol*'s construction of authenticity differed substantially from indie rock's traditional values in its focus almost exclusively on personal biography, what Matthew Stahl refers to as an "ever-expanding backstory upon which all of [the contestants'] performances, musical and otherwise, build, as well as to the narrative self with which their on-stage utterances may be judged as consistent or contradictory."¹⁶ These genre and personality biases—"Simon Cowell's definition of pop," as Tom Ewing put it, referring to the show's most famous judge¹⁷—can make for great television, but pose challenges when reaching fans and critics seeking "serious" music.¹⁸ Accordingly, early critical reception of Clarkson's post-*Idol* career moves were scathing: one critic wrote that her debut single, "A Moment Like This," made Mariah Carey and Celine Dion, two common rock critic punching bags, seem like "the twin pillars of subtlety and restraint."¹⁹ Making matters worse was the disastrous *From Justin to Kelly*, a rush-produced motion picture starring Clarkson and *Idol* runner-up Justin Guarani that grossed only \$5 million and was met with scathing reviews.²⁰ So while both "Moment" and the subsequent album *Thankful* were reasonable hits, the perception

¹⁵ Katherine Meizel identifies that while melisma is highly valued in vocal-centered popular music—where it is seen as an authentic form of a vocalist's expression—it is often understood as an unnecessary, excessive addition of style without true creative substance. *Idolized: Music, Media and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 68.

¹⁶ Matthew Wheelock Stahl, "A Moment Like This: American Idol and Narratives of Meritocracy," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, eds. Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 219.

¹⁷ Tom Ewing, "The Decade in Pop," *Pitchfork*, August 27, 2009, <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/7703-the-decade-in-pop/> (accessed November 6, 2011).

¹⁸ As *Time* magazine noted, "While '28 million [votes]' and 'winner' are positives in the context of reality television, singing the swollen talent-show ballad 'A Moment Like This' in a prom dress with mascara cascading down your face is not the kind of thing that endears you to cool-conscious pop-music fans." Josh Tyrangiel, "Miss Independent," *Time*, February 13, 2006.

¹⁹ Skip Hollandsworth, "Since She's Been Gone," *Texas Monthly*, May 2005.

²⁰ Given that neither Clarkson nor Guarani were versed as actors, the result was laughable in all the wrong ways. Wrote *Entertainment Weekly*, "It's like *Grease: The Next Generation* acted out by the food-court staff at SeaWorld." Owen Gleiberman, "Movie Review: *From Justin to Kelly*," *Entertainment Weekly*, July 11, 2003.

among critics and tastemakers in the early 2000s was that Kelly Clarkson was little more than an idle tool of the *Idol* machine.

3. Making indie rock go pop

Upon its release in late 2004, “Since U Been Gone’s” earliest reviewers noted the song had a rock sensibility that was absent from Clarkson’s earlier work: Michael Paoletta of *Billboard* mentioned its “edge” and “fast tempo,” and Shirley Halperin of *Rolling Stone* wrote that Clarkson was channeling “Avril [Lavigne] rather than Ashlee [Simpson].”²¹ However, a few months later, after the song started to take off on radio, Internet tastemakers began to point out a wider array of influences, particularly from the wave of indie-aligned garage rock bands that were popular at the time such as the Strokes, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and Interpol. Since that point, few reviews or comments on the song fail to mention these connections: when writing up “Since U Been Gone” as the twenty-first best song of the decade, *Pitchfork*’s Jess Harvell only had to mention its “homage to certain new millennium New York bands,” presuming her readers would fill in the rest. The common assessment of the song today is, as Harvell put it, “a 21st-century indie rock pastiche given a world-conquering pop glaze.”²²

“Since U Been Gone’s” guitar sound sets its tone. With mild distortion, a G5 chord is played in eighth notes entirely with downstrokes through the song’s first two bars and carries into the opening lines. This guitar style’s lineage can be traced back through Johnny Ramone and the punk scene’s rejection of the sort of virtuosic performance often

²¹ Michael Paoletta, “Since U Been Gone (Music),” *Billboard*, November 20, 2004. Shirley Halperin, “Kelly Clarkson: *Breakaway*,” *Rolling Stone*, December 30, 2004.

²² Jess Harvell, “Kelly Clarkson, ‘Since U Been Gone’ - The Top 500 Tracks of the 2000s,” *Pitchfork*, August 20, 2011, <http://pitchfork.com/features/staff-lists/7692-the-top-500-tracks-of-the-2000s-50-21/3/> (accessed November 6, 2011).

valued in 1970s and 1980s guitar rock (Led Zeppelin, The Eagles, Van Halen, etc.). Accordingly, this style was particularly common on early 2000s albums by nostalgic indie rock bands such as The Strokes and Interpol that echoed artists like Television, Joy Division, and others. As in songs like the Strokes' "Barely Legal" and Interpol's "PDA," this guitar pattern provides "Gone" with a "chunky" rhythmic pattern based on eighth-note power chords to drive the song forward. (This also leaves the voice to provide the melody, in the case of "Gone's" verses based around the simple triad notes of the G-major chord.)

The most noted indie rock sound in "Since U Been Gone," though, is the one Ted Leo references: that the bridge bears a striking resemblance to "Maps" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. Both songs are in the same key (G-major) and feature bridges with heavily distorted and reverberated lead guitar played in octave chords, where the guitarist hits the same note, one octave removed, on two strings (usually the low E and D or the A and G) while muting the string in between. In both recordings, the majority of other guitar and/or bass sounds are pulled from or reduced in the mix, placing the entire emphasis on the lead guitar riff.²³ Their melodies are not identical, as demonstrated below, but the rhythmic pattern of each bridge—in particular, the eighth rest that starts every second measure—gives them a remarkably similar feel. The connection is reinforced when the drums kick in during the second half of "Since U Been Gone's" bridge in an eighth note pattern that emphasizes pulses one, three and seven—remarkably similar to the way that Yeah Yeah Yeahs drummer Brian Chase performs most of "Maps."

²³ It is noteworthy that this moment gets so much attention in discussion about the song, because it is also the one moment where the track embraces indie rock's affection for reverb. Writes Matthew Bannister: "Reverberation achieves a sense of distance and vastness, at the expense of personality... It's like the big picture, but at the expense of detail... its attraction for young men is not hard to understand. It sounds impressive, and you can hide the messy details." Bannister, 89.



Bridge of “Maps,” as performed by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.²⁴



Bridge from “Since U Been Gone,” as performed by Kelly Clarkson.²⁵

Though one commenter on *Stereogum* remarked “god, i thought i was the ONLY one who heard ‘maps’ in the breakdown to ‘since you been gone!’” the sonic connection was soon obvious to most listeners as discussion of the song spread.²⁶ Gottwald and Martin have never admitted to intentionally borrowing from “Maps,” but did explain they were deliberately trying to incorporate the indie rock sounds of the time into a pop hit: “We were listening to the Strokes and the Hives, some emo stuff,” Gottwald stated in 2005. “And we were like, ‘God we love this shit. But why can’t they write a hit song?’ Don’t you just wish a Strokes song went to where you wanted it to go?”²⁷ This suggests Gottwald believed those songs lack a boisterous pop chorus, which is precisely what he and Martin added to “Since U Been Gone.” The crunching chorus benefits greatly from

²⁴ Yeah Yeah Yeahs, “Maps,” 2003, *Fever to Tell*, CD (Polydor 760612).

²⁵ Kelly Clarkson, “Since U Been Gone,” 2004, *Breakaway*, CD (RCA 64491). See also: Lukasz Gottwald and Martin Sandberg, “Since U Been Gone,” *Breakaway* (musical score: piano, vocal, guitar) (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2005).

²⁶ “Since U Been Blogged,” *Stereogum*, March 29, 2005,

http://stereogum.com/1339/since_u_been_blogged/news/ (accessed November 8, 2011).

²⁷ Brian Raftery, “Woman of the Year: Everybody Loves Kelly (Yes, Even You),” *Blender*, January/February 2006. Given Martin and Gottwald’s familiarity with the Strokes and the Hives, it is unlikely they would not have heard a song as successful as “Maps” (reaching number nine on the *Billboard* alternative charts and performed on the MTV VMAs), suggesting the homage was likely intentional.

Clarkson's performance choices, particularly her restraint in the verses: by singing the verses in her lower register, Clarkson makes the octave jump in the chorus sound even more monumental. This contrast—what one critic, in a reference to the Strokes, called a “half hyper-emo and half [Julian] Casablancas-bored vocal”²⁸—allows Clarkson to connect with listeners interested in both styles.

A full understanding of “Since U Been Gone's” crossover success requires extending our analysis to performances beyond the studio recording. The song's official music video, for example, alternates between scenes in two different settings: an upstairs apartment where Clarkson, playing the role of the wronged girlfriend, mopes around before trashing her boyfriend's belongings and exiting, in redemption, out to the street; and a downstairs music club in which she performs the song with a backing band for an energetic audience.²⁹ The split, matching the song's verse/chorus format, suggests that true transcendence and identity are achieved through rock performance.³⁰ The downstairs scenes are also filled with signifiers directing the viewer to consider both the song and performance as more rock than pop: simple stage dressing, a standing/moshing audience, an editing focus on Clarkson's seemingly impromptu mannerisms (head shakes, bounces), and ample screen time for the backing band and its shaggy haircuts, skinny ties, army jackets, and blue jeans. Though Clarkson's appearance is somewhat less amateurish by comparison—her makeup and her leather ensemble both stand out—the commonality between the band's attire and that of the attendees signifies a lack of barriers between

²⁸ Gradley, *Stylus Magazine*.

²⁹ Kelly Clarkson, “Since U Been Gone,” YouTube, uploaded September 7, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7UrFYvI5TE&ob> (accessed November 5, 2011).

³⁰ Even when the editing starts to jump between the settings, Clarkson's actions in the upstairs apartment take on elements of performance: she jumps on a bed of feathers in slow motion, sending them flying in the air like confetti at a concert, and she begins to destroy larger household objects—paintings, end tables, and CD shelves—in a manner resembling a punk rock band destroying its gear at the end of a show.

performers and audience, and a community endorsement of Clarkson and her song.³¹ The video's conclusion also has genre implications when viewed through the lens of Sara Cohen's analysis of spaces in popular music. Bedrooms, she argues, are associated with pop and gendered as female, whereas "the street" is seen as a male, rock space—hence, Clarkson ending the video by leaving her apartment and walking confidently out into the street symbolizes her sense of rock swagger.³²

In terms of her public persona, Clarkson took advantage of "Since U Been Gone's" promotional cycle to make numerous gestures asserting her artistic independence, in particular from *American Idol*. She split from 19 Entertainment, the management and production company responsible for *Idol*, which managed her career since she won the competition. Her new management had *American Idol* removed from her official biography, and Clarkson began insulting elements of the *Idol* machine, especially *From Justin to Kelly*. ("Contractually obligated," she remarked.) Perhaps most notably, she talked in interviews about her fights with her label to include several songs that she co-wrote on the album (though "Since U Been Gone" was not one of them).³³ These statements of independence proved a good fit with the sentiments of "Since U Been Gone," particularly when we consider the quasi-feminist implications of the song's performance. In pop music, the authentic voice "comes less from what the speakers know

³¹ These sentiments were reinforced in Clarkson's performance at the 2005 MTV VMAs, where Clarkson performed with a backing band dressed similarly as in the video and seemed far more committed to encouraging the crowd to engage in rock gestures than hitting all the notes precisely: "Jump!" she yells, repeatedly. Clarkson, thus, ably navigates a tension identified by Jacqueline Warwick in her essay on the gendering of rock and pop: "[Rock's] doctrine that the best music performances are spontaneous and unselfconscious makes for an uncomfortable fit with performers who show that they expect to be looked at and have prepared accordingly. The competing expectations of femininity and rock authenticity can be difficult to reconcile, and so it should not surprise us that women are most likely to achieve stardom in genres and styles of pop music." "Kelly Clarkson Since U Been Gone VMA 2005," YouTube, uploaded July 12, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WzYLYpff9g> (accessed November 5, 2011); Warwick, 339.

³² Sara Cohen, "Men Making a Scene: Rock Music and the Production of Gender," in Whitely, 30.

³³ These are all covered in detail in Tyrangiel's *Time* feature on Clarkson, February 2006.

than how effectively they can relate emotional states,” as Sarah Dougher has argued, and Clarkson’s righteous burst of self-empowerment resonated on both cultural and gender terms; asked Sean Michaels, reviewing the song for *Said the Gramophone*, “Why don’t guys do songs like this?”³⁴ The song’s message and energy tapped into the sentiment of the “angry girl rock” of both the riot grrrl movement and its pop successors—Alanis Morissette, No Doubt, Fiona Apple, and others—but with euphoric sensation replacing angst.³⁵ *Pitchfork*’s Harvell summed up this distinction, fittingly, with a comparison to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs (a band with obvious antecedents in riot grrrl): “while Karen O was sitting around whining about how she couldn’t live without her man, Ms. American Idol was shouting that, now that he had walked on out that door, she would survive.”³⁶

One final clue to “Since U Been Gone’s” appeal emerges in an *MTV.com* article from August 2005, which posted the question, “When did Kelly Clarkson become so hip?” The responses from a variety of different performers—including pop-punk performers like Patrick Stump of Fall Out Boy and Simple Plan’s Pierre Bouvier—hit upon two key points: Clarkson’s vocal prowess and her unpretentious personality, both of which, ironically, were persona elements crafted through the *Idol* experience. Ted Leo, also contributing to the article, summed this up best: “In that world, she got where she is

³⁴ Sarah Dougher, “Authenticity, Gender, and Personal Voice: She Sounds So Sad, Do You Think She Really Is?” in *This Is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project*, ed. Jason Lee Oakes. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 151. Sean Michaels, “From the Tower of Evil,” *Said the Gramophone*, February 28, 2005, http://www.saidthegramophone.com/archives/from_the_tower_of_evil.php (accessed November 6, 2011).

³⁵ Kristen Schilt outlines how Morissette and her peers formed a positive relationship with the media, answering questions and making themselves available, in stark contrast to Riot Grrrl’s media blackout policy. This, when paired with their pop music style and more traditionally feminine appearance, made them seem angry but not threatening. “‘A Little Too Ironic’: The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics By Mainstream,” *Popular Music and Society* 26 (2003): 11. Clarkson is arguably one step further: a friendlier angry that is explicitly empowering in its message.

³⁶ Harvell, *Pitchfork*.

because she can sing. She's not some heiress with a Chihuahua.”³⁷ Philip Auslander has written about how an authentic rocker “must have a history as a live performer, as someone who has paid those dues.”³⁸ While Clarkson’s path through *Idol* is hardly the traditional rock path of proving musical worth, her experience appears to have convinced observers as to the credentials of her vocal ability and character, particularly in contrast to reality TV personalities of the time. (It seems no coincidence that more than one reviewer makes reference to Ashlee Simpson, sister of singer Jessica and star of *The Ashlee Simpson Show*.³⁹) In rejecting *Idol*’s complicated commercial elements, while maintaining the persona elements more valuable to indie rock audiences, Clarkson managed to have it both ways, building an identity that could cross between pop and indie without necessarily alienating listeners in the process.

4. A place for pop

It is possible that “Since U Been Gone” was just a case of the right performer with the right song to cross over to indie rock listeners. However, it was also the right time: in the 2000s, indie rock’s shift towards Romanticism and the decline of its anti-mainstream antagonism made it more accommodating to pop than in decades previous. Indeed, while “Gone” is emblematic of this trend, it hardly exists in isolation. Throughout the 2000s, more and more writers and bloggers with indie rock interests and leanings found pop songs or artists to not only appreciate, but acclaim outright. The trend of indie rock

³⁷ Moss, “When Did Kelly Clarkson Become So Hip?” *MTV.com*.

³⁸ Philip Auslander, “Seeing is Believing Live Performance and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock Culture,” *Literature and Psychology* 44 (1998): 10-11.

³⁹ Interestingly, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ Karen O also references Ashlee Simpson when *Rolling Stone* asked her about “Since U Been Gone’s” similarity to “Maps”: O admits that she was kind of “freaked out” by it, but adds “if it wasn’t [Clarkson], it would have been Ashlee Simpson.” The implication is that Clarkson was a preferred performer, even if only by a degree or two. Rob Sheffield, “Clap Your Hands And Say Yeah Yeah Yeah,” *Rolling Stone*, April 20, 2006.

tastemakers embracing pop became so pronounced as the decade progressed that VH1's culture blog *Best Week Ever* actually coined a term for it: "The Annual 'Since U Been Gone' Music Blog Phenomenon." The award, which the site's writers dubbed the "Since-y," recognized pop hits that indie blogs celebrated in what they considered to be an attempt on the part of indie rock listeners to be "deliberately mainstream at optimally calculated opportunities."⁴⁰

But were endorsements of "Since U Been Gone" really so calculated? A sampling of blog posts suggests that not only was there support for the track beyond major tastemakers like *Pitchfork* and *Stereogum*, but that those who embraced the song were acutely aware of and genuinely struggled with how it challenged their favourite genre's traditional boundaries. Blogger "Catherine," who claimed to be a fan of such acclaimed bands as the Wrens, Wilco, and Arcade Fire, worried about going to "Clear Channel hell for feeling this way" about the song, a reference to the media conglomerate which, at the time, was the United States' largest radio station owner and often criticized for homogenizing music radio playlists.⁴¹ Another blogger to write about the song in early 2005, Jason Kottke, commented on being "just like, wtf?" when his indie rock friends all admitted to liking the song.⁴² And several bloggers were initially convinced that the acclaim for the song was actually a scam or a prank: "all those blogs are trying to trick

⁴⁰ Some of the songs cited include Rihanna's "Umbrella," Justin Timberlake's "My Love" and, of course, "Since U Been Gone." Dan Hopper, "The Annual 'Since U Been Gone' Music Blog Phenomenon," *VH1 Best Week Ever*, December 18, 2007, <http://www.bestweekever.tv/2007-12-18/the-annual-since-u-been-gone-music-blog-phenomenon/> (accessed November 6, 2011).

⁴¹ Catherine, "i can breathe for the first time," *unrequited narcissism*. For more on Clear Channel, see Alec Forge's book *Right of the Dial: The Rise of Clear Channel and the Fall of Commercial Radio* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2009).

⁴² Jason Kottke, "Earworm." *kottke.org*, March 10, 2005, <http://www.kottke.org/05/03/earworm> (accessed November 6, 2011).

posers into proclaiming their love for Clarkson’s music,” as one put it.⁴³ These bloggers appear aware that, by the perceived authenticity rules of indie rock’s genre culture, they are not supposed to accept or celebrate “Since U Been Gone.” Thus, when Leo’s version arrived, it served almost like a granting of permission: if a rocker as authentic and uncompromising as Leo could like “Since U Been Gone,” maybe it was okay for everyone else as well.⁴⁴

The fact that these anxieties were playing out online is critical. As noted in Chapter Two, the Internet has brought with it dramatic changes to music listener culture, challenging not only the business models of the music industry and the distribution/reception of musical records, but key parts of the of subcultural capital economy including indie rock’s Romantic/Puritan tension. Music critic Carl Wilson provides an overview of these shifts:

A new generation moved into positions of critical influence, and many of them cared more about hip-hop or electronica or Latin music than about rock, mainstream or otherwise. They mounted a wholesale critique against the syndrome of measuring all popular music by the norms of rock culture—”rocksim,” often set against “popism” or “poptimism.” Online music blogs and discussion forums sped up the circulation of such trends of opinion. The Internet pushed aside intensive album listening in favor of a download-and-graze model that gives pop novelty more chance to shine. And downloading also broke the corporate record companies’ near-monopoly over music distribution, which made taking up arms against the mass-culture music Leviathan seem practically redundant.⁴⁵

⁴³ Mike Schram. “American Idolatry,” *MikeSchramm.com*, March 11, 2005, <http://www.mikeschramm.com/general/american-idolatry-20050311> (accessed November 6, 2011).

⁴⁴ We do not know whether “Gone” would have still have found its way to indie rock acclaim without Leo—I have an inclination it might well have—but it is noteworthy that a male performer was a key component of translating a female-performed song into indie rock culture. Indie rock’s Romanticism and its valuing of emotional expression may well have expanded the genre and culture’s openness to the feminine, but the masculine still held immense cultural weight.

⁴⁵ Carl Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 12.

Wilson's summary touches on a number of compelling explanations for why indie rock was ready to embrace a song like "Since U Been Gone." One is that the Internet makes it easier for fans not only to share their so-called "guilty pleasures" with the world, but also to peel back the image and assess why, exactly, they were such pleasures in the first place. "Often, the pleasure of pop is surrender," writes Tom Ewing, but that sentiment "isn't easy to write about, let alone argue over. So the primary tactic of the new pop critic was to bypass that and twitch back the showbiz curtain to locate these records in a production system."⁴⁶ Accordingly, in the years that followed "Gone," co-writer Gottwald became something of a pop celebrity in his own right, and his subsequent records with artists such as Katy Perry and Ke\$ha were critiqued not only as performances, but as his constructions.⁴⁷ This idea of pop as a craft, rather than simply commerce, began to hold more sway among indie rock tastemakers, with figures like the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson becoming increasingly influential.⁴⁸

Another factor is that the idea of one track explicitly borrowing sonic elements of another is not the cause for outrage or concern it might once have been. As early as the late 1980s, *New York Times* critic Jon Pareles was noting that, "Music, in particular, is demanding we rethink our cherished notions and artistic independence. In today's music, as in the culture at large, it seems that sophisticated copying of past and present has overtaken innovation."⁴⁹ As with the incorporation of dance elements by acts such as LCD Soundsystem, hip hop's focus on sampling and remixing became increasingly prominent within indie rock culture in the 2000s, from the Avalanches' found-sound

⁴⁶ Ewing, "The Decade in Pop."

⁴⁷ Gavin Edwards, "Dr. Luke's Awesomely Trashy Pop Sound is Ruling the Airwaves," *Rolling Stone*, April 29, 2010.

⁴⁸ Abebe, "The Decade in Indie"

⁴⁹ Jon Pareles, "In Pop, Whose Song is it, Anyway?" *New York Times*, August 27, 1989.

smorgasbord *Since I Left You* in 2000, to Danger Mouse's acclaimed Jay-Z/Beatles fusion *The Grey Album* in 2004, to the widespread appeal of mashup evangelist Girl Talk (particularly following his 2006 album *Night Ripper*). Writes George Plasketes:

Standardization, interpretation, incorporation, adaptation, appropriation and appreciation have been manifest in a multitude of manners and methods, including retrospectives and reissues, the emergence of rap and sampling as commercially dominant pop styles, karaoke, and a steady flow, if not wave, of cover compilations and tribute recordings which revisited a significant cross section of musical periods, styles, genres, and artists and their catalogs of compositions.⁵⁰

With this background, the idea of a pop artist borrowing indie rock sounds—and, in the case of “Since U Been Gone,” practically an entire guitar riff—is not cause for concern but arguably celebration: like a great sample, it serves as a validation of the quality and worth of the original as much as it is an appropriation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the deconstruction and declining influence of the major record labels in the era of digital downloads threw indie rock's oppositional role into doubt. Writes Auslander: “Rock's authenticity effects are thus dependent on the nomination of something to serve as the inauthentic Other, whether that thing is current pop music or earlier rock.”⁵¹ In the Internet era, the major labels' control over music production, distribution, and discussion has been diminished, and the declining sales of major label artists has removed some of the perception of (as Carl Wilson put it) a Leviathan-like, mainstream “other” for indie rock to combat. When combined with the “networked individualism” discussed in Chapter Two, this offered space for indie rock fans to embrace “Since U Been Gone” as a celebration of a particular sound and

⁵⁰ George M. Plasketes, “Re-flections on the Cover Age: A Collage of Continuous Coverage in Popular Music,” *Popular Music and Society* 28 (2005): 146.

⁵¹ Auslander, “Seeing is Believing,” 6.

sentiment, rather seeing the song as a cynical attempt to co-opt their favourite music genre.

5. Conclusion

Gottwald, Martin and Clarkson’s achievement with “Since U Been Gone”—a pop song built on indie rock sounds, beloved by fans from both listener cultures—was often imitated in the subsequent years.⁵² In many cases, as with “Gone,” the fact the songs were performed by major-label pop artists (most of whom were, like Clarkson, not the song’s author) was taken as a given, and quickly accepted among indie rock fans. “Since U Been Gone’s” success suggests that Romantic takes on persona, attitude, and sound took on an increased prominence in the indie rock subcultural economy in the 2000s as opposed to the structural issues—labels, production, etc.—that dominated the 1990s and earlier. In this respect, “Gone” represents one side of an increasingly porous dialogue between indie rock and more mainstream culture, with my next chapter exploring another facet of this exchange: indie rock’s own embrace of mainstream influences.

⁵² In October 2011, Amos Barshad prepared “A Partial List of the Songs that Crib from Kelly Clarkson’s ‘Since U Been Gone.’” *Grantland - Hollywood Prospectus*, October 26, 2011, http://www.grantland.com/blog/hollywood-prospectus/post/_id/36292/a-partial-list-of-the-songs-that-crib-from-kelly-clarksons-since-u-been-gone (accessed December 4, 2011).

CHAPTER FOUR: IT'S A PRETTY GOOD SONG, MAYBE YOU KNOW THE REST

Bruce Springsteen has been one of the world's biggest rock stars for more than three decades now, but he's never been seen as particularly "hip." He was part of what the punks were rebelling against in the late '70s, was the ultimate stadium rock act in the '80s, and in the '90s, well, he released "Human Touch" and "Lucky Town." Nothing hip about that.
 – David Mallitz, *Washington Post*¹

1. Introduction

Though Bruce Springsteen has been featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone* more than a dozen times, he has only appeared on the front page of the more indie-friendly (and now defunct) *Spin* magazine on two occasions. In 1985, when Springsteen had become a global icon following the release of his blockbuster album *Born in the USA* the previous year, *Spin* considered “The Meaning of Bruce” in a collection of short essays. Though some of the essays were positive, many reflected a backlash against Springsteen’s omnipresence at that time. In the most scathing piece, Richard Meltzer referred to Springsteen as “the youth-demographic Wayne Newton/Bette Midler”: “In this magazine?” he asked, “As opposed to, y’know, the other one?” (referring, of course, to *Rolling Stone*.)² In this reality, Bruce Springsteen was decidedly uncool. The second time Bruce Springsteen appeared on the cover of *Spin*, more than two decades later, he was not alone: he was joined by Win Butler, one of the two primary vocalist/songwriters in Arcade Fire. Billed as “The Conversation” on the magazine’s cover, the 2007 story was a

¹ David Mallitz, “Meet the New Bosses: Indie Rock Finds Its Inner Bruce,” *Washington Post – PostRock*, November 12, 2007, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/postrock/2007/11/meet_the_new_bosses_indie_find.html (accessed April 9, 2013);

² Richard Meltzer, “The Meaning of Bruce,” *Spin*, November 1985.

dual interview, a mutually appreciative conversation framed as a meeting of the minds.³ In his introduction to the issue, editor Doug Brood referred to Springsteen and Butler as, “two of rock’s most original voices.”⁴ In this alternate reality, Bruce Springsteen had become cool.

What changed between 1985 and 2007 to lead an influential tastemaker like *Spin* to dramatically shift its assessment of Springsteen? One could consider that this simply reflects a change in *Spin*’s critical tastes, but the second cover actually spoke to a broader development in post-millennial indie rock: Bruce Springsteen becoming an openly acknowledged and celebrated influence. He became a regular talking point not just for reference-seeking critics and journalists, but for bands themselves, particularly bands within the indie rock genre.⁵ Springsteen’s own management team even got in on the action, commissioning a YouTube video series of younger, largely indie-related artists covering his material.⁶ As journalist Michael Barclay noted in his cover story on the Springsteen revival for Toronto’s *Eye Weekly*, “This was unthinkable in the irony-laden ‘90s, when any serious talk of Springsteen’s oh-so-earnest showmanship was usually laughed out of the room.”⁷

While “The Boss” is one of the more documented figures of the rock era, there has been minimal scholarly attention paid to this new generation of Springsteen-influenced

³ Richard Candell, “The Feeling’s Mutual,” *Spin*, December 2007.

⁴ Doug Brood, “Editor’s Letter: Rites of Springsteen,” *Spin*, December 2007.

⁵ For a detailed overview of the trend, see: David Mallitz, “Meet the New Bosses: Indie Rock Finds Its Inner Bruce”; Michael Barclay, “Reborn to Run,” *Eye Weekly*, October 11, 2007.

http://contests.eyeweekly.com/eye/issue/issue_10.11.07/music/feature.php (accessed April 15, 2013).

⁶ “Hangin’ Out on E Street,” *YouTube* playlist, <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL04100E13628750BE> (accessed April 14, 2013).

⁷ Barclay, “Reborn to Run.”

indie rock artists.⁸ How and why this Springsteen revivalism occurred offers further insight into indie rock's evolving genre culture in the 2000s. Just as Kelly Clarkson adopted indie attitude, style, and sound and was subsequently embraced by indie rock fans, the embrace (often explicit) of Springsteen's persona and music in albums by Arcade Fire, the Killers, the Gaslight Anthem, and the Hold Steady was similarly well-received within indie rock culture. The elements of Springsteen's oeuvre celebrated by these bands reflect indie rock's Romanticism, in particular Springsteen's perceived earnest expression and his intertextual connection to rock music's past, and these factors superseded previous assessments of Springsteen as a clichéd, mainstream rock icon. Yet the core of Springsteen's authentic persona—his class consciousness, or as Greg Smith puts it, his status as “the foremost purveyor of American working-class rock and roll”—failed to translate fully to his indie rock successors, raising questions about the extent to which indie rock's middle-class sensibilities render its embrace of an artist like Springsteen more a matter of style than substance.⁹

⁸ As is often the case with classic rock icons, many of the key works on Springsteen have skewed towards biography. Of these, I have found more recent contributions to be among the most compelling: Peter Ames Carlin's *Bruce* (New York: Touchstone 2012) stands out for its unprecedented access to Springsteen's inner circle, while Marc Dolan's *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012) and Clinton Heylin's *E Street Shuffle: The Glory Days of Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012) both feature compelling analysis of Springsteen's life and musical work. In addition to other texts such as Jim Cullen's *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), Springsteen also has several edited collections devoted to him, including: Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zolten and Mark Bernhard's *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight's *Reading the Boss* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010); and David Garrett Izzo's *Bruce Springsteen and the American Soul* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011).

⁹ Greg Smith, “Whitman, Springsteen, and the American Working Class,” *Midwest Quarterly* 41 (2000): 302.

2. Identifying Springsteenian indie

My analysis in this chapter focuses on four albums by North American indie rock bands: *Boys and Girls in America*, by Minneapolis's the Hold Steady; *Sam's Town*, by Las Vegas' the Killers; *Neon Bible*, by Montreal's Arcade Fire; and *The '59 Sound*, by New Brunswick, New Jersey's the Gaslight Anthem. Each of these albums was released within a relatively narrow timeframe, between October 2006 and August 2008. They were all commercially successful, in each case the most successful album to date by the band, and received largely positive reviews.¹⁰ The albums not only invite musical and lyrical comparisons to Springsteen—comparisons made in multiple reviews and feature articles—but all four artists acknowledged Springsteen as an influence in interviews and performed his songs live in concert. Springsteen has even returned the favour, collaborating live with members of all four bands.¹¹

As discussed in my introduction, debates over membership within indie rock are endemic to its genre culture, and accordingly some might take issue with some of these bands being considered indie at all (in particular, the Killers, who have never been on an independent label.) At a macro level, all four bands perform similar music—predominantly masculine guitar rock, 4/4 rhythms, a “white” sensibility favouring the rock tradition over soul/funk/hip hop—and all garnered serious consideration on major

¹⁰ The criticism aggregate site Metacritic lists average scores for *Neon Bible*, *Boys and Girls in America*, and *The '59 Sound* at 87, 85, and 77, respectively, out of 100, with none of the albums receiving a negative review. *Sam's Town's* reviews are more mixed at 64/100, with a handful of negative reviews responding poorly to the album's sense of bombast and shift in the band's sound from its previous album.

¹¹ Springsteen invited the Killers' Brandon Flowers on-stage at the 2009 Pinkpop Festival to sing “Thunder Road.” Craig Finn of the Hold Steady sang “Rosalita” with Springsteen at a 2007 benefit show. The Arcade Fire and Gaslight Anthem crossovers are more notable in that Springsteen actually performed *their* songs in the collaborations: the E Street Band learned Arcade Fire's “Keep the Car Running” to play with the band's Win Butler and Régine Chassagne in Ottawa, and Springsteen has joined the Gaslight Anthem on multiple occasions to perform songs including “American Slang” and “The '59 Sound.” All these performances can be found on YouTube as of this writing.

indie rock criticism and discussion platforms such as *Pitchfork*, *Stereogum*, and *Tiny Mix Tapes*. The bands do come from different ends of the indie rock spectrum, though: the Hold Steady and the Gaslight Anthem echo the urban/Midwestern American sounds of 1980s college rock (with the Replacements as a key influence), while Arcade Fire and the Killers feature a sound based on more European sensibilities (influenced by post punk and new wave, respectively).

Beyond their generic similarities, what these bands mostly share in common is their connections to the work of Bruce Springsteen. Given that comparative references are one of the easiest ways for music critics to convey what a band sounds like, it may be tempting to dismiss the Springsteen references as lazy critical shorthand. Yet there is solid basis for these comparisons, in two key respects. The first is rhythmic patterns; Simon Frith, in a 1986 piece that remains one of the more compelling pieces of critical work on Springsteen, writes that the “thundering” drums in Springsteen’s songs “give his stories their sense of unstoppable momentum; they map out the spaces within which great things happen.”¹² That sense of forward momentum is expressed in driving, overpowered backbeats, pushed up in the mix ahead of all other percussion sounds—the sort that can be heard in songs such as “Working on the Highway” or “Dancing in the Dark,” and are quite distinct in Arcade Fire’s anxious song “Keep the Car Running.” In the case of the Hold Steady, the Springsteen comparison owes a lot to another rhythmic element: the piano. On songs like “Stuck Between Stations,” keyboardist Franz Nicolay plays in a style very reminiscent of the E Street Band’s Roy Bittan, rolling arpeggios that Scott

¹² Simon Frith, “The Real Thing: Bruce Springsteen,” in *Music for Pleasure: Essays on the Sociology of Pop* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988), 100.

Plagenhof of *Pitchfork* describes as “twinkling” and which propel the song’s momentum forward.¹³

The other major “Springsteenian” element of these albums is their lyrics, both in content and delivery. Frith notes that Springsteen’s craft, “is marked not by ‘poetic’ or obscure or personal language, as in the singer/songwriter tradition following Dylan and folk-rock (and some of his own early material), but by the vivid images and metaphors he builds from common words,” suggesting stories for his characters that extend beyond what we are privy to.¹⁴ The Hold Steady’s Craig Finn does not so much sing as speak his lyrics in a manner not unlike Springsteen’s early albums, with direct character-based narratives that often span songs or even albums, and leading critic Robert Christgau to call him, “Springsteen for Hold Steady’s new generation of shadows in the backstreets.”¹⁵ Brandon Flowers of The Killers, taking a slightly different approach, adopts some of the nature-based language that Springsteen increasingly incorporated in his late-seventies work.¹⁶ The Gaslight Anthem’s Brian Fallon embraces Springsteen’s rock ‘n’ roll consciousness, an intertextuality that makes explicit reference to musical history. While Springsteen sang of “Roy Orbison singing for the lonely” in “Thunder Road,” it is Springsteen and his contemporaries (Tom Petty, Joe Strummer) that Fallon references. He even pays homage to specific Springsteen characters and songs: “At night I wake up with

¹³ Scott Plagenhof, “The Hold Steady: *Boys and Girls in America* (review), *Pitchfork*, October 2, 2006, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/9474-boys-and-girls-in-america/> (accessed April 2, 2013).

¹⁴ Frith, “The Real Thing,” 99.

¹⁵ Robert Christgau, “Boys and Girls in America (Review),” *Consumer Guide: Robert Christgau*, http://robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?name=The+Hold+Steady (accessed April 2, 2013).

¹⁶ In “When You Were Young,” Flowers sings: “We’re burning down the highway skyline on the back of a hurricane, that started turning when you were young.” It recalls some of the Western imagery Springsteen wove throughout 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, particularly on a song such as “The Promised Land”: “There’s a dark cloud rising from the desert floor / I packed my bags and I’m heading straight into the storm / Gonna be a twister to blow everything down / That ain’t got the faith to stand its ground.”

my sheets soaking wet / It's a pretty good song, maybe you know the rest," he sings on "High Lonesome," referencing Springsteen's "I'm on Fire."

In interviews, the songwriters cited various reasons for appreciating or admiring Springsteen's work. The Hold Steady's Finn suggested the primary connection between his band and Springsteen is live performance: "We kind of do this bar-rock thing, and the E Street Band is one of the best bar-rock bands ever."¹⁷ He also acknowledged that his character-based songwriting is decidedly Springsteen-influenced.¹⁸ Flowers said he was attracted to Springsteen's idea of a working-class American dream: "Most of the songs are about getting to that place, of making it to the promised land. I don't think it's about getting rich; it's the idea of working hard and having your castle in the sky."¹⁹ Yet these sorts of comments alone fail to elucidate why it was that, at this particular point in time, Springsteen became an indie rock touchpoint when this was not the case a decade earlier.

One explanation for the trend might be Springsteen's cultural re-emergence in the 2000s: after being relatively absent from mass culture in the 1990s, a series of acclaimed albums and tours in the subsequent decade made Springsteen more available and present as a reference point for bands and critics alike.²⁰ Another is generational change: the arrival of a new set of twenty-something songwriters who have only vague childhood memories of the overwhelming and, at times, kitsch-heavy "Brucemania" years following

¹⁷ Tom Breihan, "Interviews: The Hold Steady," *Pitchfork*, December 4, 2006, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6497-the-hold-steady/> (accessed April 2, 2013).

¹⁸ Finn on writing in characters: "It gives the fans something, because everyone wants to hear what happens next. That's why I started using characters in the first place, because I'd hear songs by Bruce Springsteen or Bob Dylan when I was younger, and hear references to these seemingly real people, like Wendy in 'Born To Run,' and I'd think, 'Wow, I'd like to know a little more about her.'" Christopher Bahn and Noel Murray, "The Hold Steady," *The AV Club*, October 18, 2006, <http://www.avclub.com/article/the-hold-steady-14022> (accessed April 2, 2013).

¹⁹ James Montgomery, "Killers' Next LP Will Show Strong Influence Of . . . Bruce Springsteen!?" *MTV.com*, May 1, 2006, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1529924/killers-next-lp-will-show-strong-influence-of-bruce-springsteen/> (accessed April 3, 2013).

²⁰ Though most of Springsteen's biographies focus on his "glory days" in the late seventies and eighties, Peter Ames Carlin's *Bruce* is a good resource for the later eras of Springsteen's career.

Born in the USA that Meltzer was critiquing. Thus, these artists have been able to approach Springsteen's catalogue on their own terms. Win Butler of Arcade Fire, for example, says he never saw much difference between Springsteen and the Clash, a statement that would have been quite contentious in the early 1980s.²¹ It is also worth considering how the E Street Band's wide emotional range—a bar band with stadium reach and folk credibility—would be attractive to bands coming from different ends of the indie rock spectrum. Sounding more like Springsteen offers enlarged scope and scale for raw, straightforward rockers like the Gaslight Anthem and the Hold Steady, while for Arcade Fire and the Killers, it adds Americana edge to their European-driven sound.

Still, none of this seems likely without the ascendance of Romantic indie rock. In a manner akin to the response to “Since U Been Gone” described in Chapter Three, the elements of Springsteen's persona aligned with indie's Romanticism rendered the more Puritan complaints—his previous “uncool-ness” and mainstream popularity—decidedly secondary. Returning to Fonarow, and her notion of indie rock's “cultivation of emotion, passion, and the spirit,” many of the indie rock bands outlined in Chapter Two (including Arcade Fire) succeeded on a perceived sincerity and earnestness of expression.²²

Springsteen's early career is often associated with the word “romantic,” in the way albums like *Born to Run*, “explore the romance and mythology of American cities, American car culture, and rock ‘n’ roll.”²³ Even as his mid-career work turned towards darker, less heroic themes, Springsteen maintained his directness and simplicity of

²¹ Barclay, “Reborn to Run.” Barclay's article also quotes Mac McCaughan, frontman of 1990s punk rock group Superchunk and co-founder of Merge Records, one of the most successful independent labels in the United States. He echoes some of these points: “For this generation [Springsteen's] just part of a massive 20th century discography: it's not about punk or not punk, cool or not cool. *London Calling* came out in 1980, and so did *The River*.”

²² Fonarow, 29.

²³ Rob Kirkpatrick, *Magic in the Night: The Words and Music of Bruce Springsteen* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), xv

expression in a manner that linked back to the American heritage of authors such as Walt Whitman and songwriters such as Stephen Foster and Woody Guthrie.²⁴ This simplicity extended through to Springsteen's presentation, in particular the way in which he and the E-Street band dressed on stage and in their music videos: "straightforwardly, practical, sensible," as described by Frith.²⁵ For an indie rock genre culture losing interest in hiding song forms behind noise, and increasingly interested in earnest, direct lyrics—as Novara and Henry note in their survey of the era—Springsteen became a welcome reference point.²⁶

3. Indie rock in the retro age

In Chapter Three, I discussed how indie rock culture's growing accommodation towards sampling and borrowing helped "Since U Been Gone" find an eager audience among indie rock fans. In his 2005 analysis of cover songs, George Plasketes makes a similar argument about popular culture more broadly: "Since the 1980s, American culture has been operating on 'Re' mode," he writes, referring to Tom Shales's essay on 1980s television as "The Re Decade." This condition, Plasketes continues:

is an endless lifestyle loop of repeating, retrieving, reinventing, reincarnating, rewinding, recycling, reciting, redesigning and reprocessing. Reverse gear rammed in maximum overdrive. Creators and audiences alike are revisionaries, infatuated with the familiar and wired with all access passes to the antecedent, reconsidering, reexamining, reinterpreting, revisiting, and rediscovering the world through replays and reissues, reruns and remakes.²⁷

²⁴ For a detailed overview of Springsteen's connection with the lineage of American writers, see: Jim Cullen's *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*.

²⁵ Frith, "The Real Thing," 97.

²⁶ Novara and Henry, 830.

²⁷ Plasketes, 138.

Plasketes is not alone in his critique. Simon Reynolds's book *Retromania* explores post-millennial culture's obsession with the past, arguing that nearly all the major developments in 2000s popular music were either tweaks to established genres or "archive-raiding" styles that fused multiple aesthetics together: "recycling and recursion became structural features of the new music scene, substituting novelty (difference from what was immediately preceded) for genuine innovation."²⁸

Indie rock's interest in Springsteen takes place against this backdrop, but also alongside other trendy appropriations of previously uncool performers. American indie artists Sleigh Bells, Neon Indian, and Yeasayer discussed how Phil Collins's rhythmic and melodic styles had influenced their own work, despite Collins once being considered one of the more reviled mainstream artists of the eighties and nineties for his "cheesy" solo material and for leading his band Genesis away from prog rock and towards a pop sound.²⁹ Wisconsin indie rocker Bon Iver's acclaimed 2011 self-titled album owed a great deal to the soft rock of Bruce Hornsby, particularly on its final song "Beth/Rest," textured by heavily reverberated keyboards and prominent saxophone.³⁰ In a 2010 article in *The Guardian*, Reynolds traced this trend back to Daft Punk's influential 2001 electro-dance album *Discovery*. That album reappropriated the original utopian aura of synthesized music ("the idea of plastic as the material of the future") and anticipated the "blurry and

²⁸ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addition to Its Own Past* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), 407.

²⁹ These artists were interviewed for a feature for the Norwegian television series *Lydverket* in 2010. Unfortunately, the video clip is no longer available online, but news coverage of it is still readily accessible. Kali Holloway, "Indie Stars Unironically Heart Phil Collins," *Prefixmag.com*, September 27, 2010, <http://www.prefixmag.com/news/indie-stars-unironically-heart-phil-collins/44482/> (accessed July 21, 2015).

³⁰ Bon Iver leader Justin Vernon was the first to suggest this comparison in an interview during the recording of the album. Ryan Dombal, "Bon Iver's Justin Vernon Talks 'Experimental' New Project," *Pitchfork*, May 5, 2009, <http://pitchfork.com/news/35254-bon-ivers-justin-vernon-talks-experimental-new-project/> (accessed July 21, 2015).

irradiated” uptake of 1980s pop in the decade’s second half, a trend that stretched from “glo-fi” artists like Ariel Pink to mainstream pop artists like Lady Gaga and La Roux.³¹

It is tempting to use the word “nostalgia” to describe this trend. As defined by Svetlana Boym—“a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed... a sentiment of loss and displacement... a romance with one's own fantasy”—nostalgia certainly aligns with some of the more Puritan elements of indie rock, with Fonarow noting indie’s longing for a past innocence that can only be addressed through strict adherence to authenticity and a return to the practices of the past.³² Yet “nostalgia” struggles to describe the more pastiche engagement with the past that occurred in the 2000s, especially when compared to Reynolds’s choice of “retro.” Elizabeth Guffey defines retro as “an interpretation of history that taps nostalgia and an undercurrent of ironic understanding,” one “steeped in satire and humour.”³³ Guffey’s focus on irony is not uncommon in assessments of retro, but this perspective lacks nuance. I find Reynolds’s definition of retro more compelling: a fetishization of period styling from the immediate past (within living memory) through creative pastiche and citation, based on readily available documentation and cultural artifacts, focused less on idealizing or sentimentalizing the past than being amused and charmed by it.³⁴ Paul Grainge’s assessment of retro in American culture furthers this line of thought, building on the analysis of literary critic Fredric Jameson and cultural critic Kaja Silverman to identify how nostalgia modes increasingly do not necessary relate to nostalgia moods (ie. malaise and discontent towards the present and a longing for a particular historical period).

³¹ Simon Reynolds, “The 1980s Revival That Lasted a Decade,” *The Guardian*, January 22, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2010/jan/22/eighties-revival-decade> (accessed July 21, 2015).

³² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii. Fonarow, 75-76.

³³ Elizabeth Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 26.

³⁴ Reynolds, *Retromania*, xxx-xxxi.

Instead, they are formed through a complex series of cultural, demographic, technological, and commercial factors that make a generalized “pastness” an expedient and marketable mode:

The aestheticization of nostalgia has emerged in a cultural moment able to access, circulate, and reconfigure the textural traces of the past in new and dynamic ways, that has taken up nostalgia in particularly representational and taste regimes, and that has generally disjointed nostalgia from any specific meaning located in the past.³⁵

This disjointed nostalgia that Reynolds and Grainge describe is more curatorial and playful than traditional definitions of nostalgia, and better aligns with indie rock’s Romantic elements than a stricter, more Puritan adherence to the practices of the past.

This drive towards a “retro” take on the past accelerated in the 2000s, thanks in no small part to the impact of the Internet and social media. In the case of popular music, the Internet essentially dismantled the two dominant barriers to accessing musical products: scarcity (what is available to access in a particular store/city/etc.) and price (what one can afford to access). Through early digital distribution channels and, later, video and audio streaming sites and services, individuals gained easy, affordable access to more music in the 2000s (in many forms: songs, albums, recorded live performances) than at any other point in human history. “The young musicians who’ve come of age during the past ten years or so have grown up in a climate where the musical past is accessible to an unprecedentedly inundating degree,” writes Reynolds. The result, he argues, is a recombinant approach to music-making he dubs “record collection rock”: “a meticulously

³⁵ Paul Grainge, “Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes, and Media Recycling,” in *The Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 23 (2000): 33.

organized constellation of reference points and allusions, sonic lattices of exquisite and often surprising taste that span the decades and the oceans.”³⁶

Springsteenian indie rock certainly fits this description, but what makes Springsteen a doubly interesting reference point is that, in many respects, he could be considered the original record collection rocker. Particularly in the *Born to Run* era, Springsteen offered up a pastiche of early rock ‘n’ roll, combining Phil Spector’s “wall of sound” production with the sentiment and aesthetic of fifties and sixties rock and soul artists.³⁷ In the most well-known review of Springsteen’s career, Boston critic (and future Springsteen manager/producer) Jon Landau wrote in 1973 that, “I saw rock and roll future and its name is Bruce Springsteen.” Yet, just prior to that infamous quote, Landau wrote, “I saw my rock and roll past flash before my eyes,” suggesting Springsteen’s live performance also recalled Landau’s lived experience with the rock genre.³⁸ Lester Bangs’ review of *Born to Run* for *CREEM* similarly connected Springsteen with the past, noting how the artist may have seemed “somewhat anachronistic to many—black leather jacket, street poet, kids on the run, guitar as switchblade.” Rather than being innovative in an avant-garde sense, Springsteen instead offered “a brilliant rearrangement and reassessment of where we’ve already been. Which is more than mere nostalgia.”³⁹ Thus, by appropriating Springsteen in a manner similar to Springsteen’s own appropriation of early-era rock, indie rockers get to play with a twice-removed sense of “pastness,” one that stretches back not only to the seventies and eighties but through more than fifty years

³⁶ Reynolds, *Retromania*, xx.

³⁷ During this period, Springsteen’s setlists regularly included covers by the likes of Mitch Ryder and Gary U.S. Bonds. See the live album: Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band, 2006, *Hammersmith Odeon, London ’75* (Columbia 82876779952).

³⁸ Jon Landau, “Growing Young With Rock and Roll,” *The Real Paper*, May 22, 1974. Reproduced online at <http://all-the-wine.blogspot.com/2010/04/growing-young-with-rock-and-roll-jon.html> (accessed July 21, 2015).

³⁹ Lester Bangs, “Born to Run,” *CREEM*, November 1975.

of rock lineage. Referencing Springsteen provides these bands with a sense of historical heft, leveraging the credibility of the past and repurposing it for the modern age. The question this begs, though, is whether these bands' engagement with Springsteen is primarily stylistic and referential, or whether some key ideological tenants of Springsteen's oeuvre are successfully translated into their work.

4. Working-class heroes?

Assessing Springsteen's persona, Elizabeth Bird provides an overview of the ways that critics, fans, and scholars alike have branded Springsteen as the standard-bearer for rock's core authenticity, from his lyrical simplicity to his wardrobe, emphasis on live performance, and un-flashy sexuality.⁴⁰ I contend that, cumulatively, these signifiers add up to the most important element of Springsteen's authenticity: his status as working-class spokesperson. Springsteen's reputation in this regard owes as much to his persona and fanbase as it does his writing, but there is still plenty in his work to suggest a nuanced class consciousness that begins with his lyrics and extends through his image and performances. And while indie rockers successfully adopted Springsteen's sound and style in the 2000s, their embrace of this key substantive element of his persona is much more muddled.

Adam Aliano's analysis posits five distinct "phases" to Springsteen's career, of which the first three—"raw youth," "the harsh reality," and "a political voice"—are the most crucial to understanding the evolution of Springsteen's class consciousness.⁴¹ On his

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Bird, "'Is That Me, Baby?': Image, Authenticity, and the Career of Bruce Springsteen," *American Studies* 35 (1994): 42-43.

⁴¹ Adam Aliano, "Songwriting and political awareness: The development of Springsteen's emotional community," in *Bruce Springsteen and the American Soul: Essays on the Songs and Influence of a Cultural Icon*, ed. David Garrett Izzo (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 27.

first three albums, Springsteen crafted a romantic mythology informed by American cities, car culture, and rock ‘n’ roll: working-class images, certainly, but with no sense of how the weekend warriors he wrote about were spending their 9-5 days. 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, however, represented a major shift in Springsteen’s work: both in setting (trading New Jersey/New York for an unspecified American Midwest) and in detail. Over his next four studio records, Springsteen wove more and more descriptions of labour into his lyrics, detailing the experience of working-class characters living through America’s transition from a Fordist economy to a post-Fordist regime of deindustrialization and flexible accumulation, in styles that echoed writers like Allan Nevins, Henry Steel and Flannery O’Connor.⁴² Three major themes emerged on these records related to labour and the working class: a lack of agency, in which characters are at the mercy of their environments and external forces; labour as crucial to individual identity, and without which individuals become lost and aimless; and labour as essential to community. Rarely, though, did Springsteen’s songs suggest a vision for solving the problems he raised: Bryan Carman notes that Springsteen, unlike a Woody Guthrie, offers hurt songs that are less manifestos than a “state of the union address.”⁴³

⁴² Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm’s essay “Dead Man’s Town: ‘Born in the USA,’ Social History, and Working-Class Identity” outlines how Springsteen’s work, particularly *Born in the USA*’s title track, reflect the decline of an industrial based working class and the rise of a capitalism-focused American right that attempted to use patriotism and social issues to win support. The song, the authors write, “reveals blue-collar America separated from an economic identity, sheltered only by the empty shell of a failed social patriotism, contained in a hometown under attack, and fighting in little but isolation and silence.” In Womack, Zolten and Bernhard, 27. These themes are also explored in more detail in Teresa Abbruzzese and Mike Cado’s look at Springsteen’s deep-cuts collection, *Tracks*. “Tracking place and Identity in Bruce Springsteen’s *Tracks*,” in *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen*, eds. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010), 52. O’Connor, in particular, is often linked with Springsteen, a connection discussed in detail in Irwin Streight’s essay “The Flannery O’Connor of American Rock,” in *Reading the Boss*, 53-75.

⁴³ Bryan Carman, *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 196.

So what can we learn from indie rock's Springsteen devotees about the state of the union in the mid-to-late 2000s? Not much, frankly. The title of *Boys and Girls in America* should give some sense of its perspective: its characters bounce around Midwestern locales in search of the opposite sex, fuelled by alcohol and other substances that overwhelm any potential for self-awareness. *Sam's Town* is a record about malaise, stories from a town that echoes the dead-end places Springsteen's characters sought to escape in "Thunder Road" or "Born to Run," but with minor exceptions like drug dealing and a traveling carnival, nobody seems to work in Sam's Town. The experiences on *The '59 Sound* do touch on labour as a limiting factor in people's lives: for example, a character talks about ten years of work "just trying to find a better life for me and my own" in the song "Film Noir." Missing, though, is any sense of work's broader social purpose. Instead, these characters' escapes are almost wholly nostalgic, found in old books, movies, and records: their lives are well read, and well listened, but their lived experience remains opaque.⁴⁴ Of the four albums, *Neon Bible* is easily the most explicit in its economic context. Dripping with apocalyptic dread, the album is driven by distrust of wealth and status, but often from an undefined, classless voice. The one exception is "Antichrist Television Blues," conveniently one of the songs that also distinctly Springsteenian in rhythm and melody. The character in the song, in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and fear of his own shortcomings, is desperate to escape his office job and find glory and fame through his young daughter.⁴⁵ Manically, he yells at his daughter to transcend his working-class life: "Do you know where I was at

⁴⁴ A key lyric from the song "Old White Lincoln": "I always dreamed of classic cars and movie screens / And trying to find some way to be redeemed."

⁴⁵ Win Butler has strongly hinted the song is inspired by Joe Simpson, father of singers/reality TV stars Jessica and Ashlee. See: "Win Butler on Joe Simpson," *Stereogum*, February 14, 2007, <http://www.stereogum.com/?p=004615> (accessed April 30, 2013).

your age? Any idea where I was at your age? I was working downtown for the minimum wage, and I'm not gonna let you just throw it all away.”

This exception aside, if one were looking for a working-class vision in Springsteen-influenced indie rock, these four albums represent a rather underwhelming survey. The furthest Springsteen's indie rock successors go is to occasionally point out problems related to work. More often, they are content to stick to Springsteen's vision of romance sans its context: the heart-on-sleeve passion of the masculine hero rescuing a lonely girl, for example, but nothing about how he spends his daytime hours, or the economic experience he is looking to forget or escape from. Perhaps we should not be surprised that younger songwriters would be more attracted to the romance in Springsteen's persona than its grittier, more detailed edges, but these songwriters aren't *that* young: Springsteen was in their age range when his songwriting took a turn on *Darkness*. Addressing their failure to translate Springsteen's working-class consciousness requires us to return to considering indie rock's own class consciousness and its role in shaping the genre's sound and sensibility.

5. Conclusion

As suggested at various points in this thesis, indie rock has typically been a musical form practised by and participated in by middle-class teens and young adults. While some of the bands detailed in Michael Azerrad's survey *Our Band Could Be Your Life* have working-class roots, they became part of a middle-class, college-driven fan

culture.⁴⁶ After the post-grunge collapse of alternative rock and the rise of hip hop and dance music as the dominant pop forms, indie rock became arguably even more middle class. Responding to a Sasha Frere Jones' "Paler Shade of White" essay in the *New Yorker* (discussed in Chapter Two), pop critic Carl Wilson argued that the driving issue in the perceived "sameness" of select indie rock music in the late 2000s was not race, but class. "It's a cliché," he wrote, "to picture indie musicians and fans as well-off 'hipsters' busily gentrifying neighborhoods, but compared to previous post-punk generations, the particular kind of indie rock Frere-Jones complains about is more blatantly upper-middle class and liberal-arts-college-based, and less self-aware or politicized about it."⁴⁷ Wilson used words like "bookish" and "nerdy," and cited the form's preference for allusions and postmodern pop culture references rather than instrumental or vocal virtuosity. Note, also, his use of "hipster"—a term that, particularly near the decade's end, became a common descriptor for a certain type of bohemian, trend-focused 20-something that aligns with Fonarow's portrayal of indie rock fashion as "conspicuous poverty."⁴⁸ A few years later, looking back at the decade, Nisuh Abebe argued that indie rock had become "pop music for the 'thoughtful' person," music for "sophisticated" listeners.⁴⁹ These phrases are loaded with class connotations, strongly implying a higher level of education and class status.

⁴⁶ Azerrad, x. Matthew Bannister further notes the correlation between indie rock and educational institutions and how universities served as venues, as meeting places for bands and for distribution platforms (radio stations, newspapers). Bannister, 78.

⁴⁷ Carl Wilson, "The Trouble With Indie Rock," *Slate*, October 18, 2007, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2007/10/the_trouble_with_indie_rock.html (accessed April 28, 2013).

⁴⁸ Linton Weeks, "The Hipsterfication of America," *NPR.org*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/16/142387490/the-hipsterfication-of-america> (accessed July 21, 2015). Fonarow, 43.

⁴⁹ Abebe, "The Decade in Indie."

While it may be tempting to interpret indie rock's embrace of Bruce Springsteen and his working-class rock music as evidence of the genre's evolving class consciousness, the music itself fails to justify such a line of analysis. Instead, this trend aligns much more strongly with indie's interest in allusions and "retro" references, and (in particular) its ability to identify influences aligned with its Romantic sentiments and accommodate them under its middle-class taste umbrella. While it would be a stretch to say that either Kelly Clarkson or Bruce Springsteen were embraced as "indie rockers" themselves, indie rock's genre culture found space for celebrating "Since U Been Gone" and Springsteen's influence because they aligned with its Romantic values. As explored throughout this thesis, the decline of indie rock's Puritanism and the increasing focus on its Romanticism meant that indie rock, at the end of the twenty-first century's first decade, had changed in two key respects: it was more open to a broader canvas of musical styles, and its antagonistic relationship with mainstream culture had softened dramatically. This had enabled indie rock to achieve unprecedented heights of commercial success and cultural impact, yet at the same time begged questions about its future, *Paste's* "Is Indie Dead?" being the most confrontational of these. Provocative framing aside, the debate at the heart of *Paste's* question is certainly supported by this thesis, and it is one that continues as of this writing: whether indie rock has changed to such a degree that the usefulness of the term may be nearing its end-point.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

At the midpoint of the twenty-first century's second decade, obituaries for indie rock in the manner of Rachel Maddux's *Paste* cover story continue. Writing for *Grantland* in late 2013, Steve Hyden identified the wave of indie-influenced pop at that time, which included Chvrches, Icona Pop, and Haim, as symbolizing the indie aesthetic's full integration within the pop sphere and, therefore, its endpoint.⁵⁰ The next year, Zachary Lipez argued in *Noisey* that the genre had fallen under a "new solipsism," comparing it to the self-indulgence and tunnel vision of 1970s Lauren Canyon singer-songwriters.⁵¹ In early 2015, Carl Wilson wrote "Against 'Indie'" for *Slate*, arguing that the race, gender, and class limitations of the term had led to a self-selecting "indie" identity that is more "social category" than a proper descriptor of the music itself.⁵²

Perhaps in reflection of this uncertain status quo, indie culture has increasingly looked backwards in recent years, building a narrative of the early-to-mid 2000s that moves beyond "retro" towards outright nostalgia. Inspiring Wilson's article were "comeback" albums (in most cases simply long-gestating albums, not reunions of disbanded lineups) by several key indie rock artists from the early 2000s: Sufjan Stevens, Modest Mouse, the Decemberists, and Death Cab For Cutie. Influential blog *Stereogum* (now owned by online media conglomerate SpinMedia) regularly produces tenth-anniversary feature articles on milestone albums from the mid-2000s' wave of indie rock,

⁵⁰ Steve Hyden, "Indie Rock's Tuneful Death Rattle," *Grantland*, October 1, 2013, <http://grantland.com/features/haim-days-gone-indie-rock-death-rattle/> (accessed March 15, 2014).

⁵¹ Zachary Lipez, "The New Solipsism: What the Fuck Happened to Indie Rock?" *Noisey*, March 13, 2014, http://noisey.vice.com/en_ca/blog/the-new-solipsism-what-the-fuck-happened-to-indie-rock (accessed March 15, 2014).

⁵² Wilson, "Against 'Indie'" *Slate*, April 9, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/music_box/2015/04/against_indie_new_albums_from_modest_mouse_sufjan_stevens_and_more_show_single.html (accessed July 22, 2015).

including *Funeral*, *Transatlanticism*, and others. As Internet publishing moved towards a “listicle” content model—in its form popularized by *Buzzfeed*, often built on providing accessibly reminders of one’s own lived past—indie rock was no exception: a quick online search finds dozens of articles along the lines of “10 Post-2000 Indie Albums You Forgot You Kinda Dig” and “Checking In With 10 Buzz Bands From the Early 2000s Indie Rock Renaissance.”⁵³

If the sounds of mid-2000s indie rock have officially entered the realm of nostalgia, does that suggest that *Paste* was right (if ahead of the curve) in its declaration of indie rock’s demise? Properly answering that question would require a more detailed evaluation of the subsequent half-decade of indie music and discussion than is offered in this particular project. That said, this thesis has shown how the rise of indie’s Romanticism and the decline of its Puritanism led its artists and listeners to embrace once off-limits musical influences and weaken the anti-commercial and anti-mainstream tenants that were once so essential to shaping what indie rock looked and sounds like. There may well be a point at which indie’s fundamental Romanticism-Puritanism tension becomes so imbalanced that indie rock stops being “indie rock” and becomes something else entirely. Maddux, Wilson and others clearly think that point is approaching, if not already upon us, but their analyses are more successful at critiquing indie rock than identifying what its future might hold. Five years later after its publication, the concluding question of Maddux’s “Is Indie Dead?” essay—“What’s next?”—remains an uncertain one.

⁵³ Kenneth Partridge, “10 Post-2000 Indie Albums You Forgot You Kinda Dig,” *Consequence of Sound*, February 11, 2014, <http://consequenceofsound.net/2014/02/10-post-2000-indie-albums-you-forgot-you-kind-a-dig/> (accessed July 24, 2015). Zach Kelly, “Checking In with 10 Buzz Bands from the 2000s Indie Rock Renaissance,” *Paper*, March 10, 2015, http://www.papermag.com/2015/03/mid_aughts_new_rock_bands.php (accessed July 24, 2015).

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