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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Signed: ..................................................

Date: ....................................................
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73. Billy Ocean, ‘Get Outta My Dreams (Get into My Car),’ key change, 4.40-5.05
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75. Donna Summer, ‘This Time I Know It’s For Real (Extended Version),’ mm. 61-64, 2.07-2.15
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77. Thriftshop XL, ‘Dub Spin Me Round,’ mm. 31-38, 0.55-1.10

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1. Freelance Hellraiser, ‘Stroke of Genie-us’
2. S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix)’
3. S Club 7, ‘Natural (Album Version)’
4. Dana Dawson, ‘Show Me (Motiv8 Mix)’
5. Kike Boy, ‘JA’
7. Motiv8, ‘Rockin’ For Myself (Ultimate Vocal Mix)’
8. Motiv8, ‘Break the Chain (Direct Hit Mix)’
9. Motiv8, ‘Break the Chain (Dolomite Euro Radio Mix)’
10. Motiv8, ‘Break the Chain (Uprageous Club Mix)’
11. The Human League, ‘Don’t You Want Me (Ext. Dance Mix)’
12. Donna Summer, ‘I Feel Love (Summer ’77, Re-Eq ’95)’

CD 3
Complete Versions
1. Blondie, ‘Heart of Glass (Long Version)’
2. Gibson Brothers, ‘Que Sera Mi Vida (If You Should Go)’
3. Ami Stewart, ‘Knock on Wood’
4. Blondie, ‘Heart of Glass (Richie Jones Club Mix)’
5. Divine, ‘You Think You’re a Man’
6. Sinitta, ‘I Don’t Believe in Miracles (Extended Club Mix)’
7. Mandy Smith, ‘Positive Reaction (Our Mandy’s Extended Mix)’
8. Kylie Minogue, ‘Got to Be Certain (7-inch Version)’
9. Kylie Minogue, ‘Got to Be Certain (Extended)’
11. Kylie Minogue, ‘I Should Be So Lucky (Extended Version)’
12. Mirrorball, ‘Given Up (Original 12” Mix)’

CD 4
Complete Versions
1. Lonnie Gordon, ‘If I Have to Stand Alone (Club Mix)’
2. Thelma Houston, ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way (House Club Remix)’
3. Gloria Estefan, ‘Turn the Beat Around (Def Classic Mix)’
4. RAF, ‘We’ve Got to Live Together (Club Mix)’
5. RAF, ‘We’ve Got to Live Together (Digital Mix)’
6. Pulp, ‘Party Hard (Tom Middleton Vocal Remix)’
7. Stylophonic, ‘Soulreply (Tom Middleton’s Cosmos Dub)’
8. Almighty Allstarz featuring Lee, ‘A Little Respect (Definitive Mix)’
10. Donna Summer, ‘This Time I Know It’s For Real (Extended Version)’
11. Go Home Productions, ‘Ray of Gob’
12. Thriftshop XL, ‘Dub Spin Me Round’
This thesis explores the links between handbag dance music and gay male culture. Handbag (colloquial British slang for ‘uplifting,’ ‘girly’ remixes of Top 40 songs and similar club material) is frequently derided within club culture for being predictable, formulaic, and ‘commercial.’ However, the same music is hugely popular within gay male clubs: remixes of songs by Kylie Minogue, Madonna, Cher, and similar artists continue to dominate the playlists of certain gay male clubs in Sydney, Australia. Significantly, handbag tends to retain clear song structures, as opposed to the more open-ended instrumental ‘tracks’ which are the norm in electronic dance music.

Why would a marginalised group adopt such a low-status music as its own? Why does handbag have such low status in the first place? This thesis argues that the field of ‘electronic dance music’ is rife with distinctions between ‘credible’ dance music and ‘commercial trash,’ and that these distinctions are frequently used to downplay song-based genres. The pleasures of handbag can be better understood if we pay attention to the ways that ‘songs’ (rather than instrumental ‘tracks’) have always played an important role in club music. To this end, the thesis offers detailed musical analyses of remixes by producers such as Almighty Associates and Steve ‘Motiv8’ Rodway. These analyses confirm that the music is frequently standardised (in Theodor Adorno’s terms). However, they also show that handbag facilitates the type of dance floor performances which are of heightened significance in gay male clubs.

Love in the First Degree questions an emerging orthodoxy in sociology and popular music studies: that issues of identity can only be approached ethnographically. By interrogating the music itself, the thesis explores the ways in which musical conventions can be deployed to arouse desire on the dance floor—and the reasons that these musical strategies are particularly useful in gay male clubs.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
1.1 Gay men and ‘trash’ pop music

I find the quality rather bad but it does have a certain attraction.¹

There are those who really want to view the ESC [Eurovision Song Contest] performances seriously, they are still fixated within a 17-year-old mentality, because it is really not good music. But we come mainly to have a little laugh, to talk to each other…most of the songs do not even deserve to be listened to.²

The comments above are about forms of popular culture that are widely regarded as ‘trash.’ The first quote is from Ien Ang’s influential study of Dallas viewers.³ As Ang points out, many of the letters she received from viewers of the US television soap opera displayed an ambivalent response to the program. Her respondents frequently referred to the supposedly self-evident inferiority of the program, while declaring their ‘guilty’ pleasure in watching it. The second quote is drawn from Dafna Lemish’s study of Israeli gay men and the Eurovision Song Contest. Having noted the contest’s significant gay male following, Lemish approached a group of gay men to find out what the appeal of the contest was for them, and what sort of links might be suggested between gay male identity and the ‘camp’ qualities of the contest. In the comment cited above, one of her respondents repeats the familiar line from Ang’s study—he and his friends enjoy the contest even though the music is ‘really not good.’ For this respondent, the pleasures of the Eurovision Contest are of a more social nature, and are almost entirely unrelated to the music: ‘we come mainly to have a little laugh, to talk to each other.’⁴ In this view, any one trying to defend the music as music would be seriously misguided, trapped in a ‘17-year-old mentality.’⁵

³ See Ang, Watching Dallas.
⁴ Lemish, “‘My Kind of Campfire,’” 50.
⁵ Ibid.
The present thesis has a similar agenda to Lemish’s study. My topic is the relationship between gay male culture and a certain type of ‘dance music.’\(^6\) In particular, I am interested in the reasons that a meta-genre loosely referred to as ‘handbag’ music has been heavily associated with white, gay male night clubs.\(^7\) Instead of simply asking a representative group of gay male clubbers to comment on the issue, however, I am approaching this topic from a different (and equally partial) angle. The central questions with which I am concerned are as follows. What features of handbag music make this meta-genre more amenable to being taken up and used in gay male contexts? Or, to put the matter slightly differently: if the music has been largely appropriated by gay men, what makes these sounds appropriatable in the first place?

The prevailing trend in popular music studies is to accept the attitude of Lemish’s respondent quoted above: that is, to accept that in cases such as this, the music itself is of little concern to the researcher.\(^8\) In this view, the more significant parts of the music-culture-society triangle are the latter two points of the triangle. It has become deeply unfashionable to talk about musical texts as if these texts can tell us anything about the socio-cultural groups that make, consume, or otherwise engage with music.\(^9\) In this thesis, I take the opposite view. I will suggest that by closely attending to the actual strategies employed in concrete instances of popular music—and by comparing these strategies to discursive representations of the music—we can learn a great deal about the conditions in which the music is produced and consumed.

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\(^6\) My description of this music as ‘dance music’ goes against the grain of the prevailing terminology in both popular music studies and in ‘electronic dance music’ scenes. The reasons for my revised definition of the term ‘dance music’ will be made clear later in this chapter.

\(^7\) For brevity’s sake, I usually refer to handbag as a ‘genre.’ However, in the first instance, it is worth noting that it is more accurately seen as a *meta-genre*. The term ‘handbag’ is a word that was retrospectively applied to forms of pop and dance music which had previously been classified in different ways.


1.2 Why music?

My interest in musical recordings should not be interpreted as an attempt to downplay music’s use in actual social settings. On the contrary, the central questions of this thesis were sparked by my experiences dancing and DJing in a number of gay male clubs in Sydney, Australia during the 1990s and 2000s. The playlists in these clubs were often dominated by remixes of Top 40 songs, with the likes of the Spice Girls, Kylie Minogue, Jessica Simpson, Destiny’s Child, Cher, and an assortment of other ‘divas’ and ‘girls-next-door.’ In Britain, the association of this genre with working-class femininity during the 1990s was so strong that it was saddled with the patronising nickname ‘handbag house,’ a term that also had some currency within gay male circles in Sydney at that time. The popularity of this genre in Sydney’s gay clubs is not an anomaly: there are indications that it has been popular in the clubs of many Western, urban, predominantly white gay precincts. What intrigued me about these types of gay clubs was that they were among the only places in ‘club land’ where one could hear songs, albeit in remixed form. In the broader club environment where anonymous dance ‘tracks’ were the prevailing norm, and where Top 40 songs were generally marginalised, it struck me as unusual that these gay clubs should incessantly play this sort of music. While pop songs continue to be the staple of Saturday morning television, online peer-to-peer downloading services, and commercial radio airplay, they are emphatically not the norm in many club

For example, see: Cher, ‘All or Nothing (Almighty Definitive Mix),’ on All or Nothing (12-inch single) (Warner WEA 212T, 1999); Destiny’s Child, ‘Survivor (Calderone Club Mix),’ on Survivor (12-inch single) (Sony 44 79566, 2001); Kylie Minogue, ‘On a Night Like This (Motiv8 Nocturnal Vocal Mix),’ on On a Night Like This (CD single) (Mushroom MUSH019722, c.2000); Kylie Minogue, ‘Your Disco Needs You (UK Almighty Mix),’ on Your Disco Needs You (CD single) (Festival Mushroom 020262, c.2001); Jessica Simpson, ‘Irresistable (Hex Hector Club Mix),’ on Irresistable (promotional 12-inch single) (Sony 44 75978, 2001); Spice Girls, ‘Wannabe (Motiv8 Vocal Slam),’ on Wannabe (12-inch single) (Virgin 7243 8 38579 13, 1996).


Since the 1990s in Sydney, Australia, several long-standing fixtures on the gay club circuit have embraced handbag music to varying degrees.
cultures. Yet songs constitute a significant part of the tracklist for many gay clubs: in 1996 there was the Motiv8 Club Mix of the Spice Girls’ debut single ‘Wannabe’; in 2001 there was the HQ2 Club Mix of Tamia’s ‘Stranger in My House’; in 2007 I have danced to extended bootleg mixes of Madonna’s ‘Jump.’ Other examples can easily be found. Significantly, even those gay venues that regularly showcased more ‘credible’ types of dance music (for instance, progressive house or breaks) could not seem to escape the demands of the ‘gay old uncle lurking deep inside us all.’ In 2005, for example, one Sydney gay club would periodically host special retro-themed nights, during which unashamedly pop-oriented material would be foregrounded.

This taste for ‘songs’ rather than ‘tracks’ was unusual for other reasons, too. Where songs do appear in ‘credible’ types of electronic dance music (for instance, in some strands of house music), the records frequently adopt a relatively open-ended structure. While such records do have vocals structured along a familiar verse/chorus axis, this structure is not explicitly foregrounded. By contrast, the music of certain gay male clubs eschewed this type of open-ended structure. Instead, they clung much more closely to familiar, explicitly foregrounded and predictable song structures. This handbag music employed recognisable musical conventions in which pop songs would be extended to the length of the average 12-inch single. Significantly, the song-like aspects of the songs would be retained rather than being deconstructed (as was increasingly the norm in other types of dance music). In short, then, not only were songs preferred over ‘tracks’ in gay clubs, but obvious and familiar song


\[\textbf{15} \] For example, see the analysis of productions by Almighty Associates, pages 107-125.


\[\textbf{17} \] On one such occasion (10 February 2006), the tracks ranged from Stock, Aitken, and Waterman hits such as Rick Astley’s ‘Take Me to Your Heart (Autumn Leaves Mix),’ on *Take Me to Your Heart* (12-inch single) (RCA TDS521, 1988), Bananarama’s ‘Love in the First Degree (Eurobeat Style),’ on *Love in the First Degree* (12-inch single) (Liberation LMD 557, 1987), and Kylie Minogue’s ‘What Do I Have to Do (The Pump and Polly Mix),’ on *What Do I Have to Do* (12-inch single) (Mushroom X14944, 1991) to 1990s tracks such as Cher’s ‘If I Could Turn Back Time (Almighty Definitive Mix),’ on *If I Could Turn Back Time/Believe* (promotional 12-inch single) (Eternal SAM 00295, no date).

structures were preferred over the more open-ended types of song structures that might occasionally make their way into other dance music genres.

A further reason for my interest in this music was the blatant disdain with which it was regarded in almost every other club scene. Indeed, one of the most consistent features that I began to notice in the dance music press (and on related websites) was the way in which handbag did not count as ‘dance music’ at all. Handbag was (and continues to be) largely excluded from the realm of dance music ‘proper’ in two ways. Firstly, contributors to the dance-oriented street press tend to avoid the term, or use it only as an insult. Secondly, handbag is often linked with a catch-all insult: it is ‘commercial’ dance music, a term that attributes sinister intentions to the music (invoking the spectre of Adorno and of mass-produced ‘trash’) while conveniently overlooking the commercial underpinnings of more ‘credible’ types of dance music. The music most obviously associated with gay male culture just happens to be the most widely denigrated music within ‘electronic dance music’ scenes—so widely denigrated, in fact, that it is usually invoked as an exemplar of everything that was not dance music. This tendency is occasionally replicated in the scholarly press. For example, in a familiar rhetorical move, Hillegonda Rietveld identifies a general decline in the quality of disco music with the success of the film *Saturday Night Fever*:

> Every group and artist, even classical orchestras put a bit of the four quarter beat (bass drum-hand clap) disco flavour to their music *in order to secure a hit*…The market was flooded with ‘second rate’ dance music by *artists and producers whose heart was not in it*. In addition, disco in the influential style of the club Studio 54 was *more about trash than substance*.  

On some level, Rietveld is clearly aware of the problem of attributing value judgements to music so blithely, so she attempts to substantiate her view with a footnote: ‘With “second rate” I mean that the music was not made with the same sensibilities and without a finer understanding of the aesthetic forms from which

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disco had developed, such as funk, soul and gospel. Here, Rietveld imports the values of the music appreciation movement into the realm of dance music: to fully appreciate dance music, one needs to have the appropriate ‘sensibility’ and ‘a finer understanding of the aesthetic forms from which disco had developed.’ Conveniently, she seems privy to the intentions of a vast number of producers; she knows when their hearts were ‘not in it.’ Yet the more significant problem here is the unquestioning assumption that music made from the ‘heart’ is clearly opposed to music made ‘in order to secure a hit.’ Several writers have convincingly criticised this idea, but it is also indirectly dismantled in Pete Waterman’s autobiography, a book in which it is clear that producers make aesthetic and commercial decisions simultaneously. It would be difficult to judge what might be ‘popular’ and commercially successful without having a love of the music itself; it would be difficult to decide what ‘sounds good’ (that is, to make an aesthetic decision) without first having been exposed to years of commercially distributed popular music. Despite these complications, Rietveld upholds common-sense distinctions between ‘quality’ dance music and ‘trash.’ We can see, then, that in both the popular and the scholarly press, certain types of ‘commercial’ dance music are unproblematically shifted to the bottom of an implicit hierarchy.

These are the aspects of handbag music which led me to ask the following questions. Why do gay men seem to embrace this music more readily than other clubbing crowds? Of all the many subgenres of dance music available, why is it handbag—with its ‘inferior’ status within club cultures—that is most visibly and most audibly associated with gay men? This is not a new question. In the popular press, it is generally assumed that this type of music is more ‘gay’ than others, and it is also the guiding assumption that makes compilation albums such as *Queer As Folk* (the soundtrack to the television series) both possible and comprehensible. Yet the

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
commentary in the popular press and across the media is of limited value for several reasons. Firstly, such commentary almost always appears as an adjunct to another, core discussion. Comments on the association between gay men and handbag music, for instance, may appear in the middle of a CD review, a format that hardly lends itself to sustained analysis. In other cases, ‘experts’ are summoned to comment on the issue—but ‘experts’ in the popular press are often defined as practitioners rather than researchers. For instance, British talkshow host Michael Parkinson once asked Madonna why she thinks she has developed such a strong gay following. To her credit, she acknowledged that it was a complex question (which implied that it could not be answered adequately in the context of a television interview).\(^{23}\) The point that needs to be stressed here is not whether or not Madonna gave an adequate response. What is significant is that Madonna—by virtue of being a practitioner in the field of popular music—was automatically deemed to be qualified to comment on the issue.\(^{24}\) It is generally assumed, then, that extensive critical reflection and critique can only offer limited insights into popular culture, while any degree of direct experience in making popular music qualifies one to make comments on complex issues of sexual identity, fandom, and popular music.

Commentary in the popular press and on television, then, tends to be marred by brevity (there is not much space for detailed analysis in the context of a celebrity interview) and by anti-intellectualism (in which it is assumed that the only people who can comment on the issue must be practitioners). Since popular commentary often needs to appeal to as broad a base of consumers as possible, any specialised discussion of the sounds themselves—with reference, for instance, to the available tools of musicology—also tends to be sidelined. The scholarly study of popular music—including handbag music—needs to confront this general trend in the available commentary, particularly because the anti-intellectualism that I have just identified has its correlates in scholarly literature. While there is much to distinguish this approach from the knee-jerk anti-intellectualism of many rock critics, there is an


\(^{24}\) I do not wish to suggest that Madonna—or, for that matter, any other celebrity—does not have anything significant to contribute to the discussion. My point is simply that practitioners’ opinions tend to be prioritised in the popular press. Since they will usually be asked about these issues in the context of publicity appearances, interviews, or other related settings, the issue tends to be raised and then swiftly brushed aside in favour of other topics.
important similarity. Anti-intellectuals from within the academy tend to believe that the only valid or legitimate responses to socio-cultural life must be generated exclusively from outside the university. In this approach, reflective or critical responses to everyday life tend to be ridiculed.

1.3 Anti-intellectualism—inside and outside academia

It would be misleading to describe the anti-intellectualism of club cultures as a new development. The suspicion of critical reflection has been a crucial trait of writings about other genres of popular music (most notably rock) for at least thirty years. Admittedly, this suspicion of scholarly work has sometimes been validated by the more problematic examples of analysis that emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet there seems to be something more at stake when DJs or clubbers dismiss scholarly work. Rather than pointing out the problems with particular studies, the general tendency is to use any flawed work as a justification for ignoring all scholarly commentary.

Dance music’s anti-intellectualism is stronger than its counterparts in other popular music discourses. Firstly, any academic commentary on popular music is often assumed to be exclusively concerned with questions of meaning (rather than on the pleasures of the music, its functions, and so on). For example, when collecting data for his study of hip hop, Ian Maxwell felt a strong ‘institutional drive’ to find ‘something significant’ in the practices that he observed. It is all very well, then, to carry out dense semiotic decodings of texts that are clearly representational, such as

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26 See, for instance, Maria Pini’s critique of texts by Hillegonda Rietveld and Steve Redhead in *Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity: The Move From Home to House* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 45-50.
music videos or Elvis Costello songs. Dance music, on the other hand, is often seen to be somewhat detached from processes of ‘meaning-making.’ Clubbers want to lose themselves on the dance floor, not concentrate on the semiotics of what they are dancing to. The anti-intellectualism of earlier rock music discourses consequently finds a firm footing within dance music. Such anti-intellectualism is best summarised in the following excerpt from Frank Broughton and Bill Brewster’s book, Last Night A DJ Saved My Life:

Seen on a theoretical level the DJ is fascinating to cultural theorists […] DJing is…both consumption and production, and this confuses the hell out of sociologists (as if they needed help). [The DJ] is both a performer and a promoter. He is entertaining an audience and at the same time he is urging them to go out and buy something—the records that he uses for his performance. Again, people with a PhD find this troubling in the extreme.

This attitude is very similar to the one identified by musicologist Philip Tagg in 1982. In this view, academics are portrayed as being ‘so hopeless—absent-mindedly mumbling long Latin words under their mortar-boards in ivory towers—that the prospect of them trying to deal with anything as important as popular music is just absurd.’ A couple of paragraphs later, Brewster and Broughton make their attitude towards academics even more explicit:

Now these are fascinating angles to think about, but there’s not much more to them than that, unless of course you introduce some jargon. If you want to write about DJs without leaving the library, or if you want to pretend you’re a DJ even though you can’t make people dance, we recommend using ‘text’ or ‘found object’ whenever you’d normally say ‘song’ or ‘record,’ and calling the DJ a ‘bricoleur’ (French for ‘handyman’) whenever you can. Try slipping the words ‘signifier’ and ‘discourse’ into your sentences (use them however

29 This view is uncritically celebrated in Phil Jackson’s Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiments in the Art of Being Human (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 96. See the discussion of Jackson below.
you like, no one will know) and never say ‘slingin’ nuff choons’ when you could say ‘the cutting, sampling and interweaving of discrete media commodities.’

Of course, we could find many examples that contradict Brewster and Broughton’s simplistic portrayal of practitioners-versus-scholars. (To cite one of the more prominent examples, Ewan Pearson co-authored a theoretical study of dance music and also produces remixes for groups such as Goldfrapp and Playgroup.) Nevertheless, it is worth noting the way that Brewster and Broughton uphold a familiar distinction between theorists and practitioners. They imply that people who engage in close analysis of music must be—by definition—completely separate from the phenomenon they are writing about, and that the only people who really understand the phenomenon must be its practitioners. Anyone who is not a professional DJ should not write about DJs. This carries the dangers of what John Champagne has identified as the ‘Oprah Winfrey Show mentality,’ in which Descartes’s dictum ‘I think, therefore I am’ is converted to: ‘I experienced it, therefore I understand it.’

Such posturing may be unsurprising in a straightforward ‘History of the Disc Jockey,’ a history where description is privileged and analysis is mostly relegated to parenthetical notes. However, this anti-intellectualism finds curious bedfellows in academia itself. Although I shall be discussing some of these sources at greater length in Chapters Two and Three, it is worth noting the ways in which the existing research inadvertently supports the anti-intellectualism of Brewster and Broughton.

Phil Jackson’s book Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiments in the Art of Being Human is based on fieldwork that the author carried out in London from the late 1990s onward (although he also draws on his own experiences of clubbing over a

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32 Ibid., 15.
33 For example, see Goldfrapp, ‘Train (Ewan Pearson 4/4 Instrumental),’ on Train (12-inch single) (Mute 12Mute291, 2003).
In his study, Jackson seeks to explain the ways in which people learn new ways of perceiving themselves, and of relating to others, through clubbing. The book explores the ways in which the social mores of clubbing can give rise to more democratic or egalitarian social relations in the world at large (including, but not limited to, gender relations). At the start of his book, however, Jackson betrays an interesting attitude towards the process of reflecting and writing about club culture. The knowledge he gained through such reflection, it seems, always comes second to the primary knowledge that his respondents possess. *Experiencing* club culture is always a better way of understanding it than reflecting on, or writing about it: ‘The knowledge found in clubs is an embodied knowledge that you can feel deep in your guts and it must be lived if it is to be truly comprehended.’

On the one hand, this would seem to fit well with Robert Walser’s description of musicological analyses: if we consider an analysis as a kind of map to a piece of musical terrain, then there is no reason to dismiss the map on the grounds that it does not accurately reproduce every detail of the terrain. Similarly, in Jackson’s terms, an analysis of ‘the knowledge found in clubs’ may be useful even if it can only approximately map the outlines of this knowledge. *Living* club life will always (inevitably) convey more than the map. But in other comments in his book, this point seems to be taken to an extreme: it is almost as if the map is incapable of telling us anything that we did not already know from experiencing club culture directly. When he describes his methodology, for instance, Jackson mentions some of the theorists that he plans to draw on (Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman), but then seems to sweep all that intellectual material aside with the ultimate source of knowledge: ‘Mainly, though, I clubbed it up night after night with other clubbers who are, of course, the true experts in this field.’

We seem to have arrived back at a familiar slogan: ‘I experienced it, therefore I understand it’—that is, the same kind of suspicion towards critical reflection that Brewster and Broughton convey in their history of the DJ. At various points, Jackson tries to disavow whatever insights his critical reflection may have yielded. The sheer, visceral experience of clubbing is to be foregrounded at all times: ‘Throughout this book you must never forget that

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35 Jackson, *Inside Clubbing*.
36 Ibid., 1.
37 Ibid., 5.
clubbing is essentially about having fun with other people. Everything I say about clubbing arises out of that simple, social fact. It is almost as if Jackson is telling us: 'If I attribute any significance to club culture, please disregard it because clubbing is merely about having fun.'

As I pointed out earlier in this chapter, such anti-intellectualism is often more noticeable in studies of club culture than in studies of other popular music cultures, because dancing is so ‘obviously’ not concerned with making meaning, and because clubbing is so ‘obviously’ about having fun. To borrow Jackson’s terms, clubbing is about ‘dancing, smiling, drugging, flirting, fucking, friendship and having a ball,’ so it is very easy to reduce the significance of clubbing to this pleasurable aspect. However paradoxical it may seem, this privileging of bodily experience over cerebral reflection is also an increasingly important staple scholarly research on popular music. This can be seen in the work of Chris Kennett and Tia DeNora. In his article ‘Is Anybody Listening?’ Kennett takes Philip Tagg to task for the latter author’s semiotic readings of mass media musical texts, and for Tagg’s treatment of the music as a text. For the most part, Kennett does not criticise the pseudo-scientific rigour that makes Tagg’s work so demanding (for both the analyst and the reader). Nor does he take issue with the details of particular interpretations. Instead, he dismisses Tagg’s entire methodology on the grounds that the resulting interpretations only pertain to a class of supercompetent listeners. After quoting the results of one of Tagg’s ideological critiques (in this case, an appraisal of ABBA’s ‘Fernando’), Kennett states:

Whatever our reactions to this affect analysis, it is clearly the result of a great deal of reflection, exploration and experimentation—a reading which has

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39 Jackson, Inside Clubbing, 3.
40 I have deliberately placed the word ‘obviously’ in inverted commas. This word is often used as a way of shutting down a discussion about dance music—if something is ‘obvious’ then there is nothing left to talk about. I would argue the opposite: it is precisely in such ‘obvious’ truths that we get a glimpse into a culture’s most widely cherished and taken-for-granted assumptions.
41 Jackson, Inside Clubbing, 1.
43 It is partly on these grounds that Walser criticises Tagg’s work. See Walser, Running with the Devil, 38-39.
44 Kennett, ‘Is Anybody Listening?’ 204.
been evolving over several intensive, immersive listenings, with Tagg’s full concentration on the [song]. If we alter the listening, transplanting the experience to a supermarket…the range of meanings afforded by the recording of ‘Fernando’ will be of little relevance to us; nor will it make much conscious difference whether the song being broadcast is ‘Fernando’ or ‘Waterloo’, since we will probably be concentrating upon locating the olive oil rather than the epistemology of the barely audible Abba track at the time.\footnote{Ibid.}

In this view, offering an interpretation of the music is a largely fruitless exercise unless that interpretation can be corroborated and measured against the uses to which people put the music in everyday situations, such as grocery shopping or driving to work. Kennett goes on to offer a detailed alternative to Tagg’s semiotic method. His ‘cultural-acoustic model’ involves documenting the different types of listenings that may be brought to bear on a piece of music, with specific reference to the personal details of the listener. The hypothetical case he sketches involves two customers entering a rural wine shop in which a drum’n’bass track is being piped over the sound system. The first customer—22 years old, black, and with a high cultural competence in dance music—responds positively to the soundtrack. The second customer—70 years old, white, and with a preference for light classical and big band music—responds negatively and hurries out of the shop. Kennett suggests it would be more fruitful to analyse music from the perspective of these listeners. Rather than closely attending to the details of musical texts, it would be better, he argues, to document precisely what each listener is hearing. For instance, the young listener in this example hears many detailed nuances in the music; the second listener hears only a mess of noisy drums. This information can then be used to create a database of listener responses, and the ‘results from successive listenings [can] form a corpus of specifically corroborable personal analytical information.’\footnote{Ibid., 216.}

Kennett’s approach has much to recommend it, but two things stand out from his argument. The first is just how far we have travelled from Tagg’s calls for an
ideological critique of mass-mediated music. Many elements of Tagg’s approach are useful precisely because they grasp those details of the music that subtly, seemingly ‘naturally,’ shape our perception of the world. Examples include: the soundtrack from the film *Gone With the Wind*, which gives us a rose-tinted view of US imperial history; Sousa marches that mix ‘military’ and ‘holiday’ connotations to give the impression that war can be fun; and numerous other television and film themes that use stereotypical musical conventions to link men with urban bars, cars, weapons, and strength (while women are, conversely, linked to the ‘natural’ outdoors, the seasons, melancholia, and love). These connotations are powerful precisely because they are often *not consciously apprehended*. When prompted, Tagg’s respondents agree that a certain sound signifies ‘femininity,’ but the same listeners may not pause to reflect on the ramifications of this when they hear the music as part of a television advertisement for baby powder, or for a household cleaning product. For Kennett, the fact that such meanings can only be recognised through reflective, immersive study suggests that the meanings are not really there in the first place. In his view, when we hear a melancholic string section accompanying the entrance of a woman in a 1950s film, the only ‘meaning’ that can be legitimately attached to this music is whatever happens to be going through the minds of ‘ordinary’ listeners in front of the television. Since any reflection on the actual musical materials will tend to take us away from the ‘kneejerk’ or instantaneous reactions that we experience in everyday life, Kennett warns us against using such reflective, critical, and immersive approaches to popular music.

I would argue that this is a somewhat contradictory stance for a scholar to adopt. If spontaneous, unreflective responses to music should be privileged over careful, immersive listenings, does the same apply to Kennett’s own ideas? If taken to its logical conclusion, we could easily claim that Kennett’s findings are not worth reading. After all, his research is ‘polluted’ by the fact that he has clearly thought about an issue at length. To find the best way of analysing music, we should ignore

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48 To take another example: when sensationalist television news reports use a slow, minor-key solo piano with plenty of sustain-pedal to accompany images of a terminally ill cancer patient, viewers may not consciously think: ‘That’s a very melancholy piano piece.’ Their sympathy for the cancer patient, however, may well be triggered nonetheless.
Kennett and consult someone who has had only passing contact with academic commentary—someone who does not read scholarly research, who gathers information from their friends and from the internet, and who does not spend too much time thinking about any single issue. Such a ‘real actor’ (to borrow Tia DeNora’s terminology) would undoubtedly give us a more accurate picture of how ideas about music circulate in the ‘real world.’ Of course, I do not actually subscribe to this view (or to the assumption that non-academics are ‘unreflective’). Research is valuable precisely because it does give us an opportunity to engage with an issue at length. Such a sustained engagement with music should be regarded as a means towards greater understanding of the music, not as an obstacle to that understanding.

As distant as Kennett’s perspective may seem to be from that of Brewster and Broughton, then, both approaches rely on a similar assumption. Both assume that careful, immersive attention to the sounds themselves corrupts the music in some way (in Brewster and Broughton’s case, such careful analysis misses the ‘fun’ of dance music; in Kennett’s case, such analysis misses the ‘everyday’ uses to which music is put, and the fact that each listener is effectively hearing a different text). Against this view, this thesis argues that in order to take the ‘fun’ of certain dance musics seriously—in order to explain what makes this music pleasurable to dance or listen to—we need to be able to discuss its specific properties and musical strategies. To move from an analytical ‘hunch’—that certain sounds connote ‘celebration,’ ‘femininity,’ or simply ‘uplift’—to a more detailed explanation of what causes such connotations means that we need to move beyond the common-sense understandings of popular music that we are likely to come across in the popular press. In order to make sense of the sounds, I will need to provide at least a tentative, working definition of the term ‘handbag’ in relation to dance music.

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1.4 Defining and defending ‘handbag’

‘Handbag’ music is a potentially ambiguous term, and defining it is a difficult task. In many ways, it is theoretically dubious to suggest a checklist of musical features that characterise handbag music as a genre. One problem with such a checklist of generic traits is that it tends to enforce a prescriptive consensus on what the genre should be. While they may sometimes have the appearance of being static or relatively fixed, popular music genres are constantly negotiated, revised, and contested—and such contestation often tells us much about the relative status and power accorded to competing socio-cultural groups. A ‘checklist’ approach to genre is ill-equipped to deal with this sort of contestation.50

Delineating a musical genre with reference to a checklist of musical attributes is also problematic because genres may be considered a set of expectations rather than simply a set of musical attributes. Film theorist Steve Neale has summed up this point in relation to film as follows. He argues that genres

are not simply bodies of work or groups of films, however classified, labelled and defined. Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems [give viewers] a way of working out why particular events and actions are taking place, why the characters…look, speak and behave the way they do, and so on.51

While Neale focuses on aspects of genre that are specific to film (for instance, the behaviour of characters, the direction of the plot, and so on), his argument is easily applicable to popular music. Listeners bring ‘specific systems of expectation’ with them to night clubs, to band performances, and to any setting where they will be exposed to recorded popular music. When I play a new 12-inch single remixed by a

familiar name (Tracy Young, Ewan Pearson, or Richard X), I bring a set of expectations to bear on the music—expectations that help me to situate the music, marking some moments and musical strategies as significant and others as relatively insignificant. To give an example, the very fact that a Richard X remix may be found on 12-inch singles—in Sydney, most commonly found in specialist dance music stores in the inner-city area—already alerts me to the fact that the music will have been at least partly designed for DJs, and that it needs to be heard with the conventions of club music taken into account. Consequently, if I am listening to this music in the store, I will probably not regard a long, drawn-out and repetitive drum-loop as a ‘boring’ introduction, even though the exact same introduction would prompt me to switch television channels if it was ever broadcast as part of a music video program (where three-minute pop songs are the norm).

Neale’s argument is also useful because it gives us a way of explaining why certain pieces of music may be more useful to certain audiences, or may signify in particular ways. For instance, Neale notes that genre films usually select from a range of available conventions (at one point, the monster in horror films needed to be constructed as either supernatural or psychological), and that these selections may sometimes transgress or extend the repertoire (for instance, John Carpenter’s *Halloween* has a monster with both supernatural and psychological elements). So too, in popular music genres, certain generic markers may serve as a foil against which particular musical ‘transgressions’ or ‘extensions’ of the norm become significant. At the same time, however, the norms and expectations themselves are often significant—particularly when the music is historicised or compared with related genres in different eras.

This example illustrates that the genres of dance music cannot be discussed in an entirely abstract, decontextualised way. At the same time, the Richard X example illustrates that in order to account for the possible effects of music, for its connotations, or for its perceived value, an analysis needs to take the sounds themselves into consideration at some point. For instance, if we wished to explain

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52 Ibid., 56.
how certain musical strategies are classed as ‘boring’ in some contexts and ‘useful’ in others, we need to be able to provide an account of what those musical strategies are in the first place. For this reason, however difficult it may be to pin down a definition of ‘handbag’ music, and however much we risk reifying a form of music that is in reality more fluid and ever-shifting, a working definition of the term is necessary because so much of what follows will be using the term ‘handbag’ as the basis of an analysis. The work of Jonathan Bollen and Sarah Thornton provides a very useful starting point for defining handbag.

According to Sarah Thornton, the term ‘handbag house’ began to be applied to particular types of music during the late 1980s in the UK.\(^53\) The term ‘handbag’ already had a set of class and gender connotations. Before it became a meta-genre, the word was used as a contemptuous slur about working-class femininity. The clubbers whom Thornton interviewed almost invariably adopted a condescending attitude towards ‘mainstream’ ‘chartpop.’ By ‘chartpop,’ Thornton notes that they were referring not so much to the types of music that can be found on Top 40 charts, but more to a particular kind of dance music which included bands like Erasure and the Pet Shop Boys but was identified most strongly with the music of Stock, Aitken and Waterman (the producers of Kylie Minogue, Jason Donovan, Bananarama, Kim Appleby and other dance-oriented acts). Although one is most likely to hear this playlist at a provincial gay club, the oft-repeated, almost universally accepted stereotype of the chartpop disco was that it was a place where ‘Sharon and Tracy dance around their handbag.’\(^54\)

As Thornton pointed out, there were no equivalent stereotypes about ‘Camilla and Imogen’: this stereotype was clearly related to class. It was also linked to gender, for while similar stereotypes circulated about ‘Acid Teds,’ the notion of naïve young ‘Techno Tracys’ intruding on the venues of club cognoscenti was one of the most

\(^{53}\) Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 99-100.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 99.
prominent ways with which those ‘in the know’ could distance themselves from the masses.\textsuperscript{55}

In his research on dance floor practices at lesbian and gay dance parties in Sydney, Jonathan Bollen provided a more specific definition of handbag music. Interestingly, this definition was also gendered, but it lost the overtly negative connotations that Thornton’s respondents had attached to the term. Here, ‘handbag’ referred to a specific type of vocal dance music, similar to the dance pop that Thornton’s clubbers derided but with more of a club-orientation. The music seemed to encourage an enthusiastic—and performative—response from clubbers. In his field notes, Bollen describes what happens on the dance floor when this type of music is played:

\begin{quote}
Ok, they’re playing that ‘Together’ song…and again, after the intro, once the song was started, they were putting their arms in the air. I’ve got these guys dancing in front of us. They seem to be [stepping on each beat] and they were throwing their arms up in the air with every beat and, um, going ‘Wo!’ Everybody’s got their hands in the air for this bit… They actually really like this bit.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

We should be wary of invoking a ‘syringe model’ of affect—of claiming that the music has a simple causal relation to the actions of people on the dance floor. In such a model, musical strategy X directly causes performative action Y on the part of the dancer. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasising that in this setting, the music itself is important. For instance, clubbers recognise when they are hearing the introduction to a song (and may dance in a more restrained manner accordingly) as distinct from the ‘hands-in-the-air’ sections (where their movements become more frenetic). Dancers may be actively creating a series of performances on the dance floor, but these

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 100-102. This recalls Andreas Huyssen’s point that mass culture has often been construed as ‘feminine.’ See Andreas Huyssen, \textit{After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism} (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 47.

\textsuperscript{56} Field notes cited in Bollen, ‘Queer Kinaesthesia.’ 228. Given the date of Bollen’s research, the ‘Together’ song cited here is most likely David Michael Johnson, ‘I Say a Little Prayer (Club Mix),’ on \textit{I Say a Little Prayer} (12-inch single) (Whole/Media WHOLE 91269, 1993), which includes the lyrics ‘together, together, we never will part’ in its chorus.
performances are at least partly enabled by particular musical strategies. As Bollen explains, such strategies are more prevalent in certain genres of popular music:

This kind of elevated response to the music, marking maximal enjoyment with upper body extension, is most closely associated with a clustering of dance music genres that party-goers—gay male party-goers, in particular—described as ‘girly pop’ (‘Top 40’ dance hits by artists like Kylie Minogue, Madonna, Petshop [sic] Boys, Bananarama), ‘girly disco’ (disco classics and disco remixes by artists like Diana Ross, Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor, Thelma Houston, Sister Sledge), ‘girly handbag’ and ‘girly house’ (‘anthem’-style contemporary dance tracks from UK and USA markets, with an up-beat tempo, prominent melodic content, and gospel/soul style female vocals). What characterises ‘girly’ dance music is that it is ‘up-beat’, ‘up-tempo’, or just ‘up’, and ‘lighter’ than more ‘bass-y’, ‘heavier’, ‘harder’ or ‘hardcore’ genres of dance music such as garage, techno, trance, jungle rhythm’n’bass that emphasise rhythmic and bass elements over melodic and lyric content.  

In this passage, the term ‘handbag’ appears in the same sentence as ‘house’ music and the more general term ‘dance tracks.’ Handbag, then, may be seen as distinctive in many ways. It is temporally different from 1970s disco in that it rose to prominence during the 1980s and 1990s. It is spatially different from Top 40 pop music (even when it consists of adapted or remixed versions of Top 40 songs)—its natural habitat is seen to be the night club. Handbag is also different from other types of ‘heavy’ or ‘hardcore’ in that it privileges vocals rather than instrumental textures. Finally, and significantly, descriptions of handbag music tend to be explicitly gendered: it is a ‘lighter,’ ‘girly’ type of music that contrasts with the ‘hard’ and ‘heavy’ genres of ‘credible’ dance music. Although the term is not as common in the 2000s as it was during the 1990s, and although many stores never recognised the term (opting for related descriptors such as ‘commercial house’ or ‘Euro-house’), the examples above indicate that it is a useful shorthand description for a loose

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57 Bollen, ‘Queer Kinaesthesia,’ 229.
58 As I noted earlier, the term ‘handbag’ is arguably an umbrella term for various types of pop and dance music. See page 3 of this thesis.
collective of dance and pop sub-genres—particularly those that are closely associated with gay male culture.

The definition of handbag provided by Bollen and his respondents is important for two reasons. Firstly, it emphasises that not just any music will have the ‘necessary’ effects on the dance floor. Secondly, it demonstrates that within gay male culture, the value judgements that prevail in the dominant culture (or, in this case, in dance music discourse) are frequently inverted. ‘Handbag’ seems to have been used in a derogatory way by predominantly straight clubbers, while the same term almost becomes a badge of pride within gay male contexts.\footnote{See Thornton, \textit{Club Cultures}, 99-100; Bollen, ‘Queer Kinaesthesia,’ 229.} However, my purpose here is not so much to explain such a link in the first place. My purpose, rather, is to explore what features of the music itself make the music amenable to being appropriated as ‘girly’ or as ‘gay.’

This thesis, then, constitutes a defence of handbag music. Since I am treating handbag as a strand of ‘dance music,’ it may be expected that the thesis would be supported by the many published scholarly accounts of ‘electronic dance music.’ However, the existing literature on electronic dance music is somewhat ambivalent in relation to handbag. A few examples can illustrate this issue.

Dance music has been defended against the norms of Western art music by several writers. Some of these writers have done so implicitly. For instance, Richard Middleton has offered several insights into the nature and pleasure of repetition that are useful when we are considering a meta-genre of music such as electronic dance music.\footnote{See Richard Middleton, ‘“Play It Again Sam”: Some Notes on the Productivity of Repetition in Popular Music,’ \textit{Popular Music} 3 (1983): 235-70.} Other writers have defended the music more explicitly, noting that what may at first sound like overly ‘repetitive’ or ‘banal’ music actually generates its own idiosyncratic forms of musical interest.\footnote{For example, see Luis-Manuel Garcia, ‘On and On: Repetition as Process and Pleasure in Electronic Dance Music,’ \textit{Music Theory Online} 11, no. 4 (2005), http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.05.11.4/ mto.05.11.4.garcia_frames.html.} For my purposes, the conclusions of much other work support the argument that handbag music is not simply or inherently ‘girly’ or ‘gay.’ Instead, the music’s appeal is a product of its own idiosyncratic qualities and its ability to resist the norms of Western art music.
of this literature are ambivalent. Often, dance music is defended in terms that continue to leave handbag as a convenient ‘low-Other.’ One of the most common ways in which this takes place is by attributing some sort of radical potential to dance music’s apparent lack of narrative structures. As Robert Fink has pointed out, various electronic dance musics—including 1970s disco—have a reputation for shunning teleology and revelling in non-linear, non-narrative-based structures (even though its producers perceive the music in precisely such linear, goal-directed terms). Such analyses are frequently linked to a radical or progressive agenda. (For instance, overtly teleological forms have, at times, been linked to ‘straight white masculinity,’ while more open-ended or cyclical musical structures have been linked with non-hegemonic identities.) Despite the fact that even the most apparently ‘repetitive’ types of dance music (for instance, ‘micro’ or ‘minimal’ house) do, in fact, adhere to certain teleological principles, the construction of dance music as more resistant to conventional teleological narrative structures has persisted. It is this construction that helps to place handbag in an ambivalent position as far as its aesthetics and its value are concerned. For if electronic dance music is to be defended on the grounds that it constitutes a challenge to traditional Western narrative structures, then handbag comes across as a ‘failed’ kind of dance music—‘dance music lite.’ It is not as ‘challenging’ as the more credible, more ‘real,’ or more ‘underground’ versions of dance music. It is no coincidence that these terms resonate with gendered ‘Sharon and Tracy’ stereotypes (that is, handbag as a ‘lighter,’ ‘girly’ version of ‘real’ dance music).

This problem is inadvertently perpetuated in Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson’s thoughtful discussion. They admit that genres such as Euro-house retain many

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62 In most cases, the term ‘handbag’ music is not explicitly mentioned in these accounts. However, the ramifications of the author’s position for handbag can usually be discerned in the way that related genres and terms are treated by any given author. Thus, for instance, Rietveld describes Technotronic’s ‘Pump Up the Jam’ as a ‘poppy house track’ (incorrectly referring to it as ‘Pump It Up’), and describes mobile disc jockeys as people ‘who will play whatever pleases the crowd’—as opposed to the complex ‘performances’ staged by club DJs. See Rietveld, This Is Our House, 85 and 109.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 39.
66 Gilbert and Pearson, Discographies, 76-79.
features of the Western classical tradition, and may thus be considered slightly outside the norm for dance music:

Typical features of Euro-house include lush, full production, with its lavish deployment of synthetic strings, the piano and similar textures; a penchant for grand (if none the less simple) melodic gestures and the rigidly structured use of musical narrative: rising chord sequences, periodic crescendos consisting of bass drop-outs followed by intense drum-rolls which give way to a return to the central bass line and key melodic theme.  

While many dance cognoscenti use these features of the music to dismiss Euro-house as more ‘mainstream pop’ than ‘dance music,’ Gilbert and Pearson defend the genre because of the way that it rejects the dominant Western philosophical suspicion of bodily pleasure. Unlike some avant-garde music, some forms of rock, and so-called ‘intelligent’ techno, Euro-house cheerfully endorses bodily pleasure—indeed, many of its musical characteristics are specifically designed to ‘accentuate particular effects of MDMA taken in a club environment; the tingling anticipation, the big rush cheered by the crowd, the warm bath of lush sensation.’ However, Gilbert and Pearson stop short of simply defending this type of musical experience. They maintain that the most valuable type of musical experience is one in which our subjectivity is in some way challenged—music is to be regarded suspiciously if it does nothing more than affirm our current, subjective position in the world. Consequently, their defence of Euro-house is somewhat oblique. In their view, Euro-house is significant only because it can open the door to more challenging dance musics (for instance, minimal acid house or jungle). Euro-house is useful for those listeners who have only been exposed to conventional Western classical or pop traditions, and who need to be exposed to some sort of ‘transitional’ music—a bridge between the conventional narrative schemas of Western music and the more radical

67 Ibid., 77.
68 Ibid., 78. MDMA, or methalinedioxymethamphetamine, is the clinical term for the drug ‘ecstasy.’
deconstructions of those musical narratives as found in certain types of dance music.\textsuperscript{69}

Handbag occupies a similar position to Euro-house (indeed, although Gilbert and Pearson do not name any specific records, there are many Euro-house tracks that may fall under the umbrella term ‘handbag’).\textsuperscript{70} In some ways, it occupies an even lower position on the hierarchy of ‘credible’ electronic dance musics because of its affiliation with pop music.\textsuperscript{71} Handbag includes the extended house remixes of performers such as Kylie Minogue and Madonna—remixes that often dominate the playlists of gay male night clubs. This lowly position in the discourses of dance music means that Gilbert and Pearson’s arguments will only get us so far. For what I am interested in here is not so much the extent to which handbag may (or may not) offer a challenge to prevailing musical norms. Nor am I interested in the extent to which handbag challenges the subjectivity of its listeners, helping to constitute them in ways radically different from other types of dance music, and potentially ‘opening the door’ to future, more radical musical reconstructions of their subjectivity. On the contrary, I wish to explain the appeal of this music in the present tense for gay men, and the ways that the music gives people a visible model of ‘gayness’ that they can perform and perpetuate on the dance floor. This means taking the music itself seriously, rather than simply defending it on the grounds that it can open the door to other types of music.

1.5 Overview of the thesis

As noted above, one of the increasing trends within popular music studies is a kind of disguised anti-intellectualism: reflection on actual musical materials is sidelined while ‘ordinary,’ ‘everyday’ uses of the music are privileged (see pages 9-16 of this thesis). Consequently, the practice of ‘close reading’ is problematised. Such close readings—especially when they are applied to ‘frivolous’ musics such as handbag—

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{70} For example, see Morgana, ‘When I Dream of You (The Factory Team Mix)’ on When I Dream of You (12-inch single) (21st Century Records CNT 21-155, 1997).
\textsuperscript{71} See page 4 of this thesis.
could come under fire from both types of anti-intellectualism. For example, from Brewster and Broughton’s perspective, my analyses of Motiv8, Almighty Associates, or Stock-Aitken-Waterman would undoubtedly appear ridiculous: the music was not made to be dissected at length, and is not generally treated as such by many of its audiences, so any such dissection must necessarily be misguided. Since this view has already been dismantled in existing work, Chapter Two will deal with a related critique: the idea that the only legitimate ‘readings’ of music are those that are generated by ‘real actors’—a term that constructs an unnecessary division between academics and non-academics.\(^\text{72}\) Against the views of sociologists such as Tia DeNora and Peter Martin, I will argue that the practice of close reading can help illuminate the ways that certain musical strategies can enable certain types of socio-cultural performance.

One of the reasons that people such as DeNora are suspicious of musicological interpretation is the gap between the language used by non-musicians (‘if I am sort of feeling a bit miserable I might listen to *Les Miserables* and then I quite often listen to *Jesus Christ Superstar* because that is very emotional’) with the language used by musicologists (‘Like the numbers in the first half of Act I, the quintet is constructed through nested symmetries…’).\(^\text{73}\) DeNora’s point is that these differences in language are not merely superficial: they signal that ‘real actors’ are actually hearing a different set of musical events to those described by musicologists.\(^\text{74}\) In Chapter Two, I take issue with this idea on several fronts. Firstly, I challenge the unquestioning distinction made between ‘real actors’ and ‘professional semioticians,’ pointing out that in many cases, academics have a non-academic grounding in specific music cultures, and that this grounding should be considered an asset rather than a hindrance to an analysis.\(^\text{75}\) Secondly, by using the example of ‘bastard pop’ or ‘mashups,’ I demonstrate that so-called ‘non-academic’ audiences and producers do frequently hear music along similar lines to musicologists. This is

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\(^{72}\) For earlier rebuttals of the type of anti-intellectualism peddled by Brewster and Broughton, see: Tagg, ‘Analysing Popular Music,’ 37-39; Tagg and Clarida, *Ten Little Title Tunes*, 68-69.


\(^{74}\) DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 68.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 39.
not to suggest that ‘real actors’ necessarily use the same vocabulary as musicologists. However, the available commentary in the popular press and on related web sites indicates that listeners draw on definitions of ‘music’ that are often very much aligned with traditional—even quite conservative—musicological definitions of ‘music.’ Thirdly, I argue that many listeners do indeed hear music in terms of ‘keys,’ ‘structure,’ and so on. To reiterate my earlier point, these listeners may not articulate these structures in the favoured terms of musicological discourse (for instance, references to ‘binary’ or ‘ternary’ form are hard to find on message boards such as www.gybo.org), but they do refer to structural matters in a variety of terms. This amplifies Mark Butler’s point about dance music: the DJs and producers he spoke to may have had varying vocabularies for talking about the structure of dance tracks, but the main point here is that they did perceive musical structures, and they did organise their performances around such structures.76

In Chapter Three, I turn to two existing studies of club culture to which my work responds. Both studies perpetuate a long-standing avoidance of the ‘music itself’ in club cultural studies.77 At the same time, both studies suggest—in different ways—fruitful lines of inquiry for the present thesis. Sarah Thornton’s widely cited Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital offers a model (derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu) for understanding the stratification of the electronic ‘dance music’ meta-genre. One of the strengths of her approach is the way that she refuses to take the distinctions between various dance music ‘scenes’ for granted. Rather than treating the claims of her respondents as the ‘truth,’ she treats these statements as ideological, noting the ways in which the particular versions (or perceptions) of dance music culture serve some ends rather than others, and benefit some groups while denigrating others.78 To investigate the validity of her respondents’ claims—

77 For an earlier example of this, see Steve Redhead with Derek Wynne and Justin O’Conner (eds) The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). There are some brief descriptions of what is actually heard in clubs in Fiona Buckland, Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 65-85. See also Kai Fikentscher, ‘You Better Work!’: Underground Dance Music in New York City (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 89-91. At this stage, Butler’s Unlocking the Groove is one of the few monograph-length studies of music from a musicological perspective.
78 Thornton, Club Cultures, 9-10.
and to assess the degree to which they are self-serving statements—Thornton contrasts the accounts given to her by her interviewees with the phenomena she observed for herself while clubbing.\textsuperscript{79} In Chapter Three, I point out that this strategy could be used to re-assess the position of handbag music in relation to ‘electronic dance music’ in general. Thornton compares a mediated version of club cultures (for instance, as constructed by her respondents and the subcultural niche press) with the reality that she herself observes. But the ‘reality’ that she is interested in observing only extends to the practices that surround club music. For instance, she compares caricatures of various clubbing crowds (the ‘Sharons and Tracys’ universally ridiculed in the pages of the dance press) with descriptions of actual clubbing crowds. The point of the comparison is that there are highly significant gaps between the mediated reality of her respondents’ discourse and the reality that she observed directly. This is a valuable analytical method, but music is largely absent from Thornton’s account. In Chapter Three, I suggest ways in which we might insert music into Thornton’s model. I argue that it would be fruitful to employ a similar method of ‘comparison’ to the one that Thornton used. Instead of comparing various accounts of clubbing \textit{crowds} with my own observations of those crowds, my thesis shall compare various accounts of club \textit{music} with my own (deliberately revisionist) readings of the music.

Chapter Three also presents a detailed critique of Jackson’s \textit{Inside Clubbing} (see pages 78-88). Jackson’s work attempts to grasp the significance of musical details of club music, but his work also exemplifies some of the problems with such analysis that the present thesis seeks to overcome. These problems can be summarised as follows. Firstly, his descriptions of the music are not ‘close readings’ of the sounds. No specific tracks or artists are mentioned, and it is highly significant that his discography consists of only two discs.\textsuperscript{80} Consequently, his observations about the music tend to be sweeping and generalised: the ‘beat’ has one effect, the ‘bass’ has another. As Philip Tagg might put it, this approach makes a mockery of the musical

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 105-107.  
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 185.
decisions of most DJs and producers. If there is little discernable difference between the beats of various records within a given subgenre, then it is difficult to explain why DJs need to obsessively seek out particular records, and why some records need to be played at the start of a night, while others need to be reserved for later. Secondly, Jackson’s commentary on the music (and indeed, most of his book) is written exclusively from within the frames of reference of club culture. As such, he falls into many of the same traps identified by Thornton in her earlier study. All the recurring ideas perpetuated by clubbers (for instance, the idea of clubbing as completely separate from ‘everyday life,’ or the notion that all race, gender, and class divisions can be transcended in the club) are simply reiterated by Jackson. This thesis, then, moves beyond such studies by connecting an analysis of handbag with a discussion of how different types of dance music are valued (and devalued) within club culture.

In Chapter Four, I demonstrate that these arguments have a history in the widely cited work of Theodor Adorno. Yet Adorno is not only important as an intellectual precursor to the type of ‘anti-mass-culture’ position taken by many rock critics in the popular press. His work is also significant because it underlines the ways in which people’s sense of agency is pre-structured for them. On the surface, people appear to make rational decisions about their own behaviour, but in reality these decisions only occur within an already delimited sphere of possibilities. When critics claim that handbag music—and the gay appropriation of this music—simply reaffirms stereotypes of homosexuality (for instance, the notion of gay men as more

81 Philip Tagg, ‘From Refrain to Rave: The Decline of Figure and the Rise of Ground,’ Popular Music 13, no. 2 (1994): 212.
83 Idealised representations of the dance floor—as a place where all constraints of the everyday world are lifted—have been problematised by Jonathan Bollen. See Jonathan Bollen, ‘Queer Kinesthesia: Performativity on the Dance Floor,’ in Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 285-88. See also Thornton, Club Cultures, 110-14.
84 For instance, see Theodor W. Adorno (with the assistance of George Simpson), ‘On Popular Music,’ in On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 301-314.
‘emotional,’ more ‘sensitive,’ or more ‘flamboyant’ than other men), they overlook the ways in which dance floor performances accompanied by this music provide one of the most recognisable models of ‘gayness’ that can be taken up and used by gay men themselves.\(^86\) In my discussion of Adorno’s work, I will highlight the often missed point that Adorno did not always portray the consumers of mass culture as mindless dupes, and that, in some cases, there are good reasons for people apparently embracing a caricatured stereotype of their own identity.

In this chapter, I also address one of Adorno’s most famous claims about popular music: that it was largely ‘standardised,’ and that this music was largely characterised by part-interchangeability. The details of the songs (whether they be harmonic progressions, melodic phrases, or lyrics) could easily be substituted with similar details without affecting the overall effect of a song—much like the exhaust pipe on a car or the handle of an oven.\(^87\) Chapter Four offers a rebuttal of this view in relation to handbag. The aim of this analysis (in this case, an interpretation of the S Club 7’s ‘Natural (Almighty Mix)’ is to demonstrate that even though Adorno is correct in his general assessment about popular music (handbag, for instance, is highly standardised and relies on stock musical strategies), specific musical devices within the music have a distinctive affective ‘charge.’\(^88\) In ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ there are certainly elements that may be regarded as ‘substitutable,’ but these elements are also carefully placed to achieve ‘maximum’ effect on the dance floor. For example, the shift from the original song’s minor key to the major key introduced by Almighty occurs only at ‘peak’ sections of the track—that is, only after an extensive barrage of signposts signifying imminent ‘climax’ has been unleashed. When Adorno’s claims are tested against actual examples of the music, then, we can hear that various elements in the music are not actually as arbitrarily placed as Adorno would have us believe.

\(^86\) Given the historical background in which gay ‘disco bunnies’ and their music are ridiculed, it is perhaps understandable the critics such as John Gill seek to highlight the gay contribution to a wide range of musics (rather than just a narrow band of dance music). See John Gill, Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Music (London: Cassell, 1995).


\(^88\) S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ on Natural (promotional 12-inch single) (Polydor NATURAL4, 2000).
Having traced an important intellectual precursor to the current discourse of electronic dance music that devalues handbag, Chapter Five turns to that discourse itself, as found in the popular press and on related websites. Significantly, my analysis of popular discourse does not aim to assess how handbag music itself is treated in the popular press by DJs, clubbers, and critics. Instead, I am interested in teasing out some of the assumptions upon which the dominant dance music discourses are based. I argue that many of these assumptions are inimical to the appraisal of handbag music, and that they explain why handbag music is virtually inaudible in the various formats of the popular press: in record reviews, in profiles of producers, and so on. I argue that electronic dance music scenes have imported two key barometers of so-called ‘good’ music from related fields, sometimes with paradoxical effects. From the discourse of Western art music, electronic dance music has imported the notion that ‘innovation’ and ‘complexity’ are a priori valuable traits in music. These features are mentioned so frequently in descriptions of highly valued dance music that I have dubbed it ‘compulsory innovation’: the assumption that music must exhibit the traits of innovation and complexity (on whatever level) in order to be valued. Given that electronic dance music is often used for dancing rather than for quiet contemplation, I will note the paradox of importing such a barometer of ‘good’ music.

Meanwhile, from the discourse of rock music comes an emphasis on authenticity: on the idea that the music should express or transmit something about the person who made the music, and that this expression should be carried out in an ‘sincere’ or ‘honest’ way. Given that contemporary dance music is often based on samples of other records, that its sounds are generated almost entirely electronically, and that the aspect of ‘live’ performance is thus problematised in this meta-genre, the demand for authenticity will clearly manifest itself in ways that diverge from its roots in rock music. Nonetheless, I will show that such an idea (or ideal) can definitely be discerned in dance music discourse—for instance, in the way that many DJs ‘express themselves’ through their selection of appropriate tracks during a DJ set. This demand for authenticity has significant effects on the way that handbag music may be appraised. The chapter ends with some suggestions for an alternative framework for valuing handbag music—one that does not rely on the near-ubiquitous demands
for innovation, complexity, and authenticity that can be found within popular commentary on dance music. Having traced some of the obstacles to understanding the pleasures of handbag music on the dance floor, the thesis then considers some features of the music that make it more amenable to dance floor performance than other types of dance music. This is the subject of Chapter Six. Before dealing with the music in detail, I provide a review of why performance itself—in both a general sense and in the more specific sense suggested by Judith Butler—is so central to various types of gay male culture.  

The analysis in Chapter Six demonstrates that handbag is more than capable of functioning as ‘dance music.’ It is played at high volume in night clubs, facilitates dancing (rather than being considered ‘background’ music), and, in particular, exhibits many of the same traits that other writers have identified in club-oriented music. Handbag has the explicit ‘signposts’ of other dance genres (signposts that effectively tell audiences when a ‘climax’ or a significant change in the music is approaching); it employs the instrumental stratification that is a ubiquitous feature of many kinds of dance music; and its standardised pattern of textural crescendos and diminuendos is the same schema that has become the norm in house, trance, and other subgenres. In Chapter Six, I demonstrate that these aspects of the music make certain kinds of dance floor performance possible in gay male culture. I also explain why performance itself—in its poststructuralist sense—is such a crucial aspect of gay male culture.

Despite the findings of Chapter Six (namely, that handbag music exhibits many of the attributes of electronic dance music), the genre has largely been written out of histories of club culture. In Chapter Seven, I explore the ways that handbag has been effectively silenced in most existing accounts of dance music. My account of this music is at odds with the emerging orthodoxy of electronic dance music histories.

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91 For example, see Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*; Sheryl Garratt, *Adventures in Wonderland: A Decade of Club Culture* (London: Headline, 1998); Ulf Poschardt, *DJ
The general consensus holds that dance music is mostly about breaking free from the strictures of three-minute pop songs, and that ‘innovation’ and ‘challenge’ to established musical formulae should provide the basis for aesthetic (or even utilitarian) assessments of dance music’s value. Following from this, handbag is either the worst kind of electronic dance music available, or it should not be considered ‘dance music’ at all. I shall challenge this view by revisiting some of the oft-cited turning points in dance music’s history—for instance, the work of producers such as Giorgio Moroder—demonstrating that even those tracks that supposedly broke free of the three-minute pop formula can be heard as relatively straightforward, elaborated song structures. By doing so, I shall also highlight that these 1970s and 1980s records can be considered important precursors to the musical aesthetics of handbag music: these records are extended pop songs (rather than tracks) that nonetheless have a significant impact on the dance floor. If we admit the possibility that songs are a significant part of dance music’s history, then the handbag music that so repulsed Thornton’s respondents can start to be heard as a valid part of gay club culture. To demonstrate this, I apply a dual approach to the music of Stock-Aitken-Waterman, showing how their 12-inch singles can be heard as elaborated song structures and as club tracks.

This point is further substantiated in Chapter Eight, where I apply the argument to some examples of handbag music from the 1990s. Here, I show that handbag records are structured to facilitate DJ performance, further underlining these records’ dual status as ‘songs’ and as ‘tracks.’ If handbag music is a form of dance music which retains explicit song structures, it also retains some of the melodic and harmonic conventions of pop songs. Many of these conventions (such as key changes) are calculatedly deployed to heightened the effect of the music on the dance floor. Chapter Eight concludes with a discussion of some of these features in Stock-Aitken-Waterman’s music. This discussion amplifies the theme of the thesis overall: that the music itself matters when people ‘perform’ their identity, and that careful attention to these sounds can illuminate how music enables the performance of sexual identity.

CHAPTER 2

POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES AND THE PROBLEM OF CLOSE READING
2.1 Introduction

The main argument of this thesis is that popular music, like any cultural artefact, provides its listeners with a set of discourses with which to make sense of the world. More specifically, then, popular music provides gay men with various ways to ‘perform’ our sexuality both to ourselves and to others. While this thesis takes as axiomatic Judith Butler’s notion that all identities are ‘performed,’ I argue that this performative aspect is of elevated importance in gay male cultures because queers in general are commonly seen to ‘have’ a sexuality in a way that heterosexuals are not.

Of course, any discussion of this issue inevitably faces the charge of reductionism: in identifying some of the ways in which gay men have chosen to identify themselves, we may end up reifying and perpetuating limited models of what ‘gay’ lives should be. However, it is important to remember that no one lives their identity in a vacuum; our identities are always made from the existing identities, ideas, values, and beliefs that prevailing discourses have made available to us. Consequently, an exploration of a blatant stereotype (in this case, the association between gay men and handbag music) is just as important as an analysis of more isolated or idiosyncratic phenomena.

In this chapter, I shall review some of the ways that researchers have connected social identities with particular forms of music. Music’s social meanings have been at the centre of debates regarding popular music for several decades now. While it is generally accepted that popular music’s meanings are an important site for research, there is relatively little agreement on the best ways of researching this topic. This situation has been exacerbated by the very nature of ‘popular music studies,’ a field which encompasses a wide variety of academic disciplines. Here, I shall review two important tributaries to the field: the musicological studies that have contributed to

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1 An earlier version of this chapter was published as “‘Nice Tune, But What Does It Mean?’: Popular Music Studies, Ethnography, and Textual Analysis,” Context 26 (2003): 5-16. Sections of the chapter were also presented as part of the ‘Queer Theory and Music’ panel at the Musicological Society of Australia’s National Workshop, Performance and Experience, 3-5 October 2003, University of Queensland. I wish to thank the participants at the Workshop and the anonymous readers at Context for their valued feedback on this material.

2 Similarly, as Richard Dyer points out, it is non-whites who are deemed to have a ‘race,’ women who are ‘gendered,’ and so on. See Richard Dyer, White (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.
an understanding of the sounds themselves, and the influential ‘subcultural’ approaches to popular music which stem from cultural studies. These analytical frameworks are often seen as diametrically opposed: musicology deals with sounds, cultural studies deals with everything else. I wish to point out some of the continuities between the two areas. I shall be focusing on two similarities: the way both approaches implicitly seek to recuperate popular musics and cultures from dismissive portrayals of them; and the way in which researchers in these fields have employed close textual readings to substantiate their arguments.

The first point here—that popular music studies and cultural studies frequently seek to recuperate formerly devalued cultural artefacts—is significant for the thesis because of my argument that certain gay-identified dance musics are almost universally seen as ‘trashy.’ In recuperating this music, then, we are not simply talking about attaching some hitherto elusive credibility to the sounds themselves, but also recuperating the values of a particular culture. This question is complicated by the fact that the music is frequently celebrated within minority enclaves precisely for its ‘trashiness,’ and this throws into question one of the main concerns of popular music studies: for whom are we ‘recuperating’ this music, and to what end?

The second point here—the question of close reading—also needs to be addressed because I draw on this analytical tool later in the thesis. Critics such as Tia DeNora and Ruth Finnegan (among others) have argued that textual analysis is based on mistaken premises about the nature of meaning-making in music. For them, music does not produce or communicate meanings: those meanings are created by people in the act of listening to or using music. I shall argue that DeNora relies on a questionable distinction between ‘professional semioticians’ and ‘real actors’ to discredit the work of the former. In particular, she portrays the analytical work of

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4 There are, of course, some exemplary studies that engage in close readings. For example, see Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 179-200.
certain musicologists as somehow tainting the experience of music, and according to her, this is most evident in the gulf between the language of musicological analysis and the discourse of people in everyday life. Consequently, the final part of this chapter will explore a concrete example—the case of 'bastard pop'—in which it is clear that the preoccupations of even the most traditional musicologists (for instance, an interest in pitch relationships and harmonic progressions) are evident in the popular press and at the level of fan discourse.

2.2 On ‘rescuing’ popular music: the contributions of popular music studies and cultural studies

Popular music studies is not a unified ‘discipline’ in the strictest sense of the word. As several critics have pointed out, it is rather an umbrella term (or ‘co-disciplinary’ field) for a diverse range of approaches to the topic.\(^5\) Scholarly research on popular music has emerged from departments of sociology, media and cultural studies, (ethno)musicology, psychology, and anthropology.\(^6\) Popular music studies often overlaps with studies of popular culture more generally. This is partly an acknowledgement of the fact that music is never made or heard in a vacuum, but is socially situated. Many of these studies share certain preoccupations. One is the desire to ‘rescue’ popular music from various influential dismissals of it. For example, much early work on popular music foregrounded the ways in which it could be seen as complex or challenging, in order to counteract prevailing stereotypes of ‘simple,’ ‘primitive’ music.\(^7\) Many scholars took issue with critics of mass culture, arguing that, whatever ‘commercial’ trappings the music had, mass-mediated popular music was one of the means by which social groups defined

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themselves in relation to other groups. For this reason, it was seen as deserving solid, critical attention. This partly explains the explosion of interest in popular music audiences.

From a musicological perspective, however, such studies lacked a crucial ingredient: sustained attention to the sounds themselves. During the 1970s and 80s, Philip Tagg offered one of the most rigorous ways of approaching the music. In his monumental studies of television themes (such as *Kojak*) and Europop (ABBA’s ‘Fernando’), Tagg attempted to provide answers to the question: ‘why and how does who communicate what to whom and with what effect?’ His work diverged considerably from certain schools of musicology in which intra-musical concerns, rather than socio-cultural concerns, were foregrounded. Tagg was interested in the ways popular music conveyed extra-musical meaning. His work is significant because connections between music and society are still peripheral in certain types of musicological and music analytical work.

Tagg adapted a term from linguistics—‘phonemes’—and focused on what he called ‘musemes’: the smallest possible unit of semantic meaning. He then set about

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9 The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu remains significant for his explanation of how prestige is accumulated and used in the cultural sphere. See his *Distinction* and ‘The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,’ in *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 29-73.


13 See Tagg and Clarida, *Ten Little Title Tunes*, 808. At first glance, the process of defining a ‘museme’ may seem arbitrary (a single note? a chord? an interval? who decides?). However, Tagg clarifies: ‘If musemes do exist as minimal units of musical “code”, then each one must be a culturally specific musical structure…that different members of the same music-making community can consistently identify and produce; it must also be recognisable as having a consistently similar function when heard by different members of the same general music culture to which the
tracing the history of associations which each museme carried. Although the results of this research might seem obvious to the layperson, Tagg’s aim was not to simply identify such effects but to trace where these associations came from in the first place—to trace a realm of ‘primary’ signification. In other words, he was interested in why particular musical gestures conveyed particular meanings. His approach involved extensive testing of these ‘associations’ with listeners, to find out what ‘meanings’ were being ‘received.’ The research also involved extensive content analysis. In order to make any claim about a basic musical unit (or ‘museme’), Tagg had to trace the appearances of that unit in a vast number of other pieces belonging to the same repertoire (and, where relevant, in several related genres—hence the references to Bach in the ABBA analysis).

There is a definite critical edge to Tagg’s work. Here, I am adopting Nicholas Cook’s idea of the term ‘critical’ to denote the sort of research which questions the ideological work which cultural artefacts do. In this sense, his work foreshadowed some of the concerns of what would later be dubbed ‘critical’ musicology. In discussing the ‘meanings’ of given musical texts (that is, recordings), Tagg interrogated the sorts of ideological baggage which was (often inadvertently) transmitted through popular music. For example, his analysis of ‘Fernando’

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14 Tagg and Clarida, Ten Little Title Tunes, 94-106. If we were to apply Tagg’s analytical model to the atonal strings in the horror film The Evil Dead, for instance, we would most likely arrive at the conclusion that they connote ‘creepiness’—something that any viewer of the film would have been able to identify without writing a dissertation on the topic. For more on semiotic approaches to film music, see Anahid Kassabian, Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music (London: Routledge, 2001), 30-36. See also Kathryn Kalinak, ‘The Fallen Woman and the Virtuous Wife: Musical Stereotypes in The Informer, Gone with the Wind, and Laura,’ Film Reader 5 (1982), 76-82; Kathryn Kalinak, Settling the Score (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). The main approaches to film music have been summarised in Claudia Gorbman, ‘Film Music’ in Film Studies: Critical Approaches, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

15 Tagg, ‘Analysing Popular Music,’ 60.


18 There are resonances of this approach in several of the keystones in ‘new’ musicology more than ten years later. For example, see: Susan McClary, Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and
demonstrated how the potentially progressive lyrics were undercut by musical gestures conveying a more conservative message: ‘whereas the words say “If I had to go back and fight for freedom in Latin America, I would”, the music expresses the affective attitude “I may be longing for something here at home but I’m really quite content with things as they are.”’  

As Hesmondhalgh and Negus’s argument makes clear, there is a clear connection between Tagg’s version of ‘ideology critique’ and the way that later ‘critical’ musicologists such as Susan McClary and Robert Walser approached popular music. Despite several subsequent critiques of Tagg’s work, it remains significant for the way it attempted to deal with the music itself.

Tagg not only foreshadowed critical musicology’s central concerns; his research could also be seen as running parallel to contemporaneous developments in cultural studies. Here, researchers have frequently addressed issues of power, identity, and the social meanings of popular culture. This can be seen in one of the dominant concepts in this field: the notion of ‘subculture.’ The study of subcultures emerged in the sociological writing of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 30s, and became increasingly popular in the post-war years. Writers such as William Whyte challenged the idea (which is still influential in popular news reports today) that crime and ‘deviance’ can be explained in terms of individual psychology. Instead, he explored the ways in which such ‘deviant’ behaviour came to be regarded as ‘normal’ by the members of youth gangs, and the ways in which this was partly an adjustment to the social situation these youths found themselves in.

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19 Tagg, ‘Analysing Popular Music,’ 60.
‘subculture,’ then, became a way of foregrounding the very normality of these activities (that is, ‘normal’ for the network of people involved in them).\textsuperscript{24}

The study of subcultures found an institutional home in the 1970s and 1980s in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), based in Birmingham and directed for several years by Stuart Hall.\textsuperscript{25} The most well-known work which emerged from the Birmingham School includes Dick Hebdige’s \textit{Subculture: The Meaning of Style}, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson’s \textit{Resistance Through Rituals}, and Paul Willis’s \textit{Profane Culture}.\textsuperscript{26} These writers—adopting a Marxist approach—extended the Chicago’s School’s reassessment of ‘delinquent’ gangs, but their focus was increasingly on ‘youth’ styles rather than specific, locally anchored communities.\textsuperscript{27} In his influential book, Hebdige provided interpretations of many facets of youth subcultural styles, such as punk. An example of his approach is as follows:

the most unremarkable and inappropriate items—a pin, a plastic clothes peg, a television component, a razor blade, a tampon—could be brought within the province of punk (un)fashion. Anything within or without reason could be turned into part of what Vivien Westwood called ‘confrontation dressing’ so long as the rupture between ‘natural’ and constructed context was clearly visible (i.e. the rule would seem to be: if the cap doesn’t fit, wear it.)\textsuperscript{28}

Such a passage already gives us an indication of the problems which subsequent critics have identified in the subcultural approach to popular music. Some researchers pointed out that a focus on subcultural ‘style’ tended to privilege those cultures that were the most visible. It was no surprise that subcultural theory largely ignored the ‘teeny bopper’ culture of young girls, given that British ‘girl culture’ of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Bennett, \textit{Popular Music and Youth Culture}, 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Bennett, \textit{Popular Music and Youth Culture}, 23.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Hebdige, \textit{Subculture}, 107.
\end{itemize}
the time was largely confined to the home and the bedroom. Others criticised the tendency in this work to reify subcultures, treating them as relatively stable, concrete entities. Gary Clarke pointed out that the products (the dress codes, the music, and so on) of teddy boy or mod or punk subcultures were not only used by ‘fully paid up members,’ and Simon Frith argued that most youth in fact pass through a number of affiliations, rather than being loyal to one subculture. Others have suggested terms like ‘scene’ to capture the provisional nature of people’s attachment to particular forms of music.

Given that research on subcultures has often neglected the sounds of those cultures, it may seem odd to draw connections between this field and the musicological work reviewed above. However, two such connections can be readily found. The first link is the idea of re-evaluating popular culture. Just as Tagg, Walser, and others were exploring the ‘unintentional complexity’ of popular music texts (and hence deliberately or inadvertently legitimating it), many researchers of subcultures examined the uses to which certain audiences put popular cultural products. In doing so, they questioned the stereotype of audiences as ‘manipulated’ or ‘brainwashed’ dupes of the culture industries. Several sociological studies have explored the meanings of popular cultural ‘texts’ (from the nightly news to soap operas) for their audiences, emphasising the very different ways that audience members may interpret available texts. Janice Radway’s classic study of a group of romance readers found that these women often used reading time as an ‘escape’ from the constant demands of their families: even as they read books which were arguably based on ‘patriarchal’ principles, their reading time was one of the few times in the

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29 Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, ‘Girls and Subcultures: An Exploration,’ in Hall and Jefferson, Resistance through Rituals, 219; see also Bennett, Cultures of Popular Music, 20.
32 Hesmondhalgh, The Cultural Industries, 43.
33 David Morley, The ‘Nationwide’ Audience: Structure and Decoding (London: British Film Institute, 1980); Ang, Watching Dallas, 86-116.
Admittedly, this notion of resistance has been taken to extremes in the work of some researchers, but nonetheless, the basic idea remains central to much research in popular music studies. While the cultural industries wield considerable power in determining the shape and content of popular texts, it is generally acknowledged that audiences do the ‘other half’ of the work: making meaning out of the texts, and sometimes using them to undermine intended meanings. Such an observation is important for any appraisal of handbag music, given that it has usually been derided as dance music’s ‘low-Other.’

In light of the above, we can see that there is an important link between recent musicological and classic (sub)cultural treatments of popular music. Both musicology and cultural studies draw upon and implicitly respond to the work of theorists such as Theodor Adorno. Generally, they both reject Adorno’s claim that audiences are passive recipients rather than active creators of meaning. They frequently question established canons of taste, not only between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures, but also within and between various popular music cultures. McClary’s analyses of Madonna songs, for instance, purposefully read socio-cultural meanings

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37 I borrow the term ‘low-Other’ from Laurie Schulze, Anne Barton White, and Jane D. Brown; see “‘A Sacred Monster in Her Prime”: Audience Construction of Madonna as Low-Other,’ in *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory*, ed. Cathy Schwichtenberg (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 16. Schulze et al. write: ‘The low-Other is a symbolic and cultural construct, involving the production of a hierarchical order. Something is designated as base, gross, freakish, marginal, abject—pushed down into a “low” place and pushed away as “Other.” The result is the normalizing and the elevation of whatever “it” is not.’ See also Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 5-6.
off particular texts and she explicitly champions this work as ‘transgressive.’ Meanwhile, researchers in cultural studies have often been motivated by a similar concern to re-evaluate the cultures of the oppressed socio-cultural groups, and to legitimate practices and sounds which have been formerly dismissed by the popular press, by academia, or by both. The celebration of punk, the varied uses to which the memory of Elvis Presley may be put, and the phenomenon of ‘filksong’ (fan-authored songs about TV characters) all in their own ways defend forms of popular culture from various critics.\(^{38}\)

A second, related, link between these two broad approaches to popular culture is the firm belief that the meaning of a ‘text’ can never be taken for granted: the ‘meaning’ of a song is determined as much by the listener as by the ‘author.’\(^{39}\) Given this premise, it may seem surprising that several of the studies surveyed thus far—musicological and otherwise—have come under attack for their insufficient attention to audiences. This call for a greater emphasis on empirical work and ethnographic research has been gaining momentum in recent years, and now manifests itself routinely in studies of audiences.\(^{40}\) The following set of examples, though far from exhaustive, provide a snapshot of the direction that many popular music studies are taking. It is worth reviewing this trend, because it calls into question the very project of close musicological analysis.

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\(^{40}\) The issues that follow have, of course, been debated at length by ethnomusicologists, who are very familiar with the problems involved in establishing links between music and social life. For brevity’s sake, however, I shall restrict this discussion to the dialogue between musicology and sociology. See Hesmondhalgh and Negus, ‘Introduction,’ 3-4, for a brief overview of ethnomusicological work in this area. A more sustained discussion can be found in Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (eds) *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
2.3 Should we engage in close reading?

For David Muggleton, most classic accounts of subcultures are irrelevant because they neglected the views of the participants themselves (the ‘indigenous meanings’). The resulting studies may have said something about the researcher’s theoretical proclivities, but they said relatively little about the actual beliefs and practices of actual punks, teddy boys, mods, and so on. Mark Duffet, meanwhile, laments various ‘academic portrayals’ of Elvis fans and uses evidence from ‘biographers and fans themselves’ as a corrective. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan has attacked the very idea that one might examine musical ‘texts.’ The mere mention of ‘text,’ for her, invokes the spectre of self-appointed ‘experts’ decoding works for everyone else, passing off provisional readings as concrete fact. The performance researcher Ian Maxwell adopts a similar perspective. He argues that an ‘ethnographic, fieldwork-based approach privileges…people, rather than representations; experience, rather than abstractions.’ There have been similar calls for empirically grounded research in queer studies.

There are good reasons to advocate a return to empirical work, particularly in the field of popular music studies. As Victoria Alexander has pointed out, it can be very easy for academics to offer inappropriate readings when there are no ‘insiders’ to verify a researcher’s findings. In other words, interpretative freedom can slip into an interpretative free-for-all. When the journalist Paul Burston ridiculed a collection of essays about Madonna, he may have been invoking a familiar anti-intellectualism,

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42 Ibid., 2-3.
45 Finnegan, ‘Music, Experience,’ 189.
48 Alexander, Sociology of the Arts, 270.
but he was also reacting to the vast gap between academic readings of popular music and his own experience of that music:

What this [book] really amounts to is an exercise in naked opportunism—which, given the nature of the subject, seems to me entirely excusable. Far harder to forgive is the tendency towards wild exaggeration...and gross sentimentalizing of what is, after all, only pop music (see for example, Melanie Morton’s ‘Don’t Go For Second Sex, Baby!’, in which a fairly good pop tune is transformed, note-by-note, into a ‘decimation’ of ‘patriarchal, racist and capitalist constructions’).

Muggleton, Finnegan, and other critics propose that this type of reading be abandoned in favour of ethnographic research. What they all share is a belief that discursive analysis on its own cannot be taken for granted; such research must always be supplemented (or even replaced) with some form of ethnography.

The most sophisticated exponent of this view is the sociologist Tia DeNora. She too uses Adorno as a starting point, locating him in a ‘grand’ tradition of philosophical commentary. In her view, Adorno offers a theory about the relationship between particular musics and societies, but the links between the two are not so much argued in his work as asserted. She argues that Adorno does not empirically demonstrate his claims and that his approach leaves no way of doing this in the first place. The current interest in the way cultural forms such as music are used to ‘construct’ social identities could be seen as an extension of this ‘grand’ tradition, which DeNora informally labels the ‘music-is-parallel-to-society approach.’ This approach, she argues, is better suited to traditional modes of musicological inquiry, such as those which analyse particular works and composers, or those that account for large-scale

51 DeNora, Music in Everyday Life, 1-4.
52 Ibid., 1.
shifts in musical practice, and are less well-equipped to deal with ‘the subtler matter of music stylistic change, moment-to-moment, year-to-year, and within specifically circumscribed social worlds.’ While she would agree with Adorno’s belief that there are links between music and society, she argues that these links need to be demonstrated in a more concrete fashion than Adorno managed. To not engage with this project is to risk playing what Donna Haraway calls ‘the God trick’—that is, when the critic pretends that she has an omnipresent vantage point which, for some mysterious reason, is not available to her readers.

The only way to avoid this pitfall, DeNora argues, is through the use of ethnographic research. In this view, the work of people like Paul Willis (whose research on ‘bikeboy’ culture appeared in the book *Profane Culture*) is exemplary in that it evades ‘the “great Zero” of parallelism [music-reflects-society] by showing the reader how not *he*, Willis, but the boys *themselves* established [a] connection between music and social life.’ However, this immediately raises an important issue. DeNora implies that there is no overlap whatsoever between the ‘real’ world and the university. She implies that the university is, in some sense, less ‘real’ than the rest of the world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her critique of Susan McClary’s work – in particular, McClary’s reading of Bizet’s opera *Carmen*.

McClary’s interpretation of the opera draws attention to the ways in which the music constructs characters in ways that may be traced back to the race and gender norms of Bizet’s social epoch. For example, she notes how the character of Carmen is typically characterised by highly chromatic melodies and dance-oriented rhythms (for instance, the Habanera). Thus, during the course of the opera, the music identifies her as tonally ‘unstable,’ while her rhythms foreground her as a *body* (more than as a rational being). As McClary puts it, ‘[s]he arouses desire; and because she apparently has the power to deliver or withhold gratification of the

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53 Ibid., 4.
57 McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 57.
desires she instills, she is immediately marked as a potential victimizer.58 These sorts of conclusions were arrived at by paying careful attention to the musical discourses within which the opera *Carmen* operates. To put this another way, McClary first identifies some of the associations which have, over many years and with repeated use, become attached to particular types of music, then she analyses the ways in which these discourses have been deployed in this particular work.59 DeNora identifies two shortcomings with this approach.

The first is that there is an unacceptable slippage between descriptions of what is objectively there in ‘the music itself’ (for instance, in terms of scale patterns or intervallic leaps) and claims about the significance of these parameters in a wider context (what the music ‘signifies’). This slippage is unacceptable because it involves a shortcut wherein ‘an analyst’s understanding of music’s social meanings [is substituted] for an empirical investigation of how music is actually read and pressed into use by others, how music actually comes to work in specific situations and moments of appropriation.’60 On the surface, this would appear to be consistent with her earlier claim that ‘it is impossible to speak of music “itself” since…all discourses “about” the musical object help to constitute that object. The analyst exists in reflexive relation to the object of analysis.’61 There is a clear compatibility between this argument and that of Bruce Horner:

naming something ‘music’ confers a particular value, a way of understanding, and an experience on that which it so designates. By the same token, further designations—such as the various categories for music (e.g. ‘popular,’ ‘classical,’ ‘folk,’ ‘world,’ ‘blues’)—are also constructive of our knowledge and experience of these as such. To name a set of phenomena ‘rock music’ is to contribute to our sense of it and our experience of it. It

58 Ibid., 57.
59 In this sense, there are parallels between her work and that of Tagg. See pages 38-40 of this thesis.
60 DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 31. Given DeNora’s critique of McClary, it is almost certain that she would dismiss Walter Everett’s work altogether—particularly his explicitly stated aim: ‘to explain what I find interesting in what I listen to.’ See Everett, ‘Confessions from Blueberry Hell,’ 269.
gives us a sense of its relation to other phenomena (non-music, other types of music) and the ways in which we should think about, experience, and respond to it.  

If DeNora adopts this stance, however, it is unclear why she should hold ethnographic research up as a beacon to ward off the findings of ‘professional semioticians.’ Is the fan’s discourse not a *discourse* itself? For DeNora’s claim to make sense, one would have to dispense with Horner’s poststructuralist axioms above, and revert to the idea that social artefacts like music have a concrete ‘reality’ outside of the discourses which describe them—an idea that DeNora would mostly likely reject. The following passage neatly encapsulates the contradiction:

There is…an array of received meanings that may be linked—articulated—to any utterance. An analyst of spoken interaction cannot therefore deduce meaning from a particular text object, whether that object is one utterance or an entire conversation, to which he or she was not party unless he or she is familiar with local circumstances that surround it. To do so is to ply an interpretation—the analyst’s own account—upon that utterance. And in so doing, the analyst makes a fateful shift; he or she becomes party to the creation of meaning within that scene; his or her “map” of conversational significance becomes, as it were, a comment upon or way of framing meaning within that scene…To determine the meaning of an utterance *from outside* is thus to forgo an opportunity to investigate how particular actors produce indigenous maps and readings of the scene(s) in question and how to read them. *Real actors* engage in semiotic analysis as part of the reflexive project of context determination and context renewal. Telling what the meaning is, and deftly deflecting dispreferred meanings and readings, is part and parcel of the semiotic skills of daily life.  

The question here is: why is the analyst’s office ‘outside’ the world of ‘real actors’?

While the academic’s office is undoubtedly different to other contexts in which the

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music may be heard, it is unclear why this context should be seen as totally divorced from the ‘real’ world. Even if that assumption were taken for granted, it remains unclear why an analyst would be unable to draw on experiences from outside of the office—in other words, from the ‘real’ world. Furthermore, for DeNora’s argument to make sense, one must assume that the analyst is not a fan—one who is already ‘constructing meanings’ in ‘daily life.’ It is almost as if the analyst has no ‘daily life’: she is someone who does not listen to the radio at work, does not go dancing with friends, does not sing in the shower, and so on. Several crucial terms in DeNora’s work (note the italicised words in the above passage) hint at this dichotomy, wherein an intellectual’s account of the music is somehow more ‘tainted’ than an anonymous respondent’s perspective. The categories of ‘analyst’ and ‘fan’ are themselves discursive constructions which frequently mingle with one another. As Gilbert Rodman argues, intellectuals ‘regularly make fan-like investments in their objects of study, while fans regularly make nuanced critical judgments about the objects of their devotion.’64 Scholars may reflect on their experiences of popular culture more than other consumers, but this does not necessarily mean that their experiences are fundamentally different from others.65

The dichotomy between the ‘masses’ and ‘intellectuals’ has already been convincingly dismantled by Tagg.66 As he pointed out in 1982, contributors to the popular music press (such as the NME in the UK) often suggest that intellectuals have no business tampering with popular music. According to Tagg, this belief is ‘an ahistorical and strangely defeatist acceptance of the schizophrenic status quo in capitalist society. It implies atomisation, compartmentalisation and polarisation of the affective and the cognitive, of private and public, individual and collective, implicit and explicit, entertaining and worrying, fun and serious, etc.’67

Despite its theoretical sophistication, DeNora’s work tends to fall into the same trap: there is an assumption here that scholars are no longer engaging with music ‘first

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67 Ibid., 38.
hand’ when they write about it. Their very job description entails a necessary critical distance from what they are writing about. They cannot ‘just listen’ to the music either, because their training has instilled in them a very specific way of listening, one that is no longer commensurate with the ‘ordinary’ person. For example, I may appear to be clubbing in the same way as all my friends, but a part of me will always recognise a key change when I hear it, will always count the number of bars in each phrase during a lull in the DJ’s set, will periodically estimate the tempo of the music, and so on (and all of these aspects of the music will be mentally registered in just those terms: ‘there’s a key change’; ‘there go sixteen bars’; ‘it must be around 130 beats per minute now’). For critics such as DeNora, this deeply entrenched reflexivity renders the intellectual’s findings less trustworthy.

But there are several problems with this romanticised opposition between primitive natives and knowing intellectuals. Firstly, DeNora herself appears to have included musicians as possible subjects of ethnographic research. (One of her informants, ‘Lucy,’ uses terminology which indicates familiarity with certain musical discourses: ‘juicy chords,’ ‘alto,’ ‘soprano,’ and so on.68) If musicologists and music-psychologists are disqualified from the category ‘real actor,’ then surely musicians, too, should be excluded. Musicians, after all, have very particular ways of articulating music’s ‘effects’ on themselves and on others, ways which the ‘ordinary’ person might not have envisaged. Secondly, she has already rightly claimed that all people engage in semiotic work.69 If this claim is true, why should the claims of ‘professional semioticians’ be treated with such suspicion? Are they not—like everyone else—‘deploying linguistic formulations in order to tell particular stories about social reality’?70 Thirdly, an ‘ethnography only’ prescription automatically shuts down the possibility of a ‘grand’ theoretical critique. In his discussion of DeNora’s work, David Hesmondhalgh pinpoints precisely this tendency. As he notes, DeNora’s respondents may be ‘actively’ using the music, but there is little sense of the ways in which those uses have been (partly) pre-determined by the

69 Ibid., 39.
70 Ibid.
music, by its means of distribution, and so on. This reflects certain issues that may not be apparent to us in our ordinary, mundane practices. The problem here is one of consciousness, of how far we can be reflexively aware, in interviews, of what happens to us as we experience music. Good theory and good criticism can complement empirical work, as writers think carefully about aspects of experience which are not always apparent without considerable thought.

Ultimately, then, the main problem with DeNora’s approach is that she describes musical analysis (‘semiotic readings’) as partial and blinkered, but seems to think that ethnography can offer an impartial perspective.

For the purposes of my discussion, however, DeNora’s perspective is most problematic because of the way it demands a detached perspective from the researcher. Why should a ‘detached’ account be privileged? Even Radway has admitted that the information she gleaned from her sample group of women was largely ‘mediated if not produced’ by her own perspective. To put this another way, she succeeded only in producing ‘an interpretation of the interpretation that her readers gave to her about what they were up to.’ It should be stressed that this does not necessarily compromise her findings: any account of the world is always already partial. Lawrence Kramer has defended these kinds of readings, not by pretending

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72 Ibid.
73 Steven Feld has argued against this view, pointing out that ethnography is ‘partial in its point of view, selecting and privileging particular methods of scanning.’ See Steven Feld, Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), xi.
75 Maria Pini provides a good defence of ethnography taking this into account. See Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity, 59-79.
76 Radway, Reading the Romance, 5.
77 Alexander, Sociology of the Arts, 204.
that they are ‘the truth’ or that they accurately predict the way music will actually be pressed into service in ‘real life,’ but rather, by openly admitting to and emphasising their role as ‘constructive’:

Subjectivity…is not an obstacle to credible understanding but its vehicle. The semantic problem is solved by seeking, not to decode music as a virtual utterance, but to describe the interplay of musical technique with the general stream of communicative actions. Musical hermeneutics is asked, not to decrypt a hidden message, and far less to fix the form of anyone’s musical experience, but to suggest how music transcribes some of the contextual forces by which the process of listening to it may be or may once have been conditioned.78

There are several reasons to insist on the validity of such ‘engaged’ research. Just as McClary argues that her personal responses to music are a valid starting point for an analysis, Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuc have pointed out that ‘immediacy’ and ‘multivalence’ are perhaps defining characteristics of cultural studies.79 They also suggest that the new voices which are now emerging from this field (particularly those which were formerly marginalised: the voices of blacks, women, queers, and so on) lend extra urgency to the project: ‘Their engagement with popular culture cannot be…distanced. The stakes are simply too high.’80 None of this, of course, rules out the possibility or validity of ethnographic research. It does, however, point to the problems with DeNora’s approach, which sees ethnography as the only way to draw links between music and its socio-cultural contexts.81 Certainly, no researcher occupies an omnipotent position from which they can ‘see everything.’ The textual analysis of popular music is always situated in a particular time and place, and

78 Kramer, ‘Subjectivity Rampant!’ 126.
80 Jenkins et al., ‘The Culture that Sticks to Your Skin,’ 10.
81 I emphasise the word ‘only’ because DeNora is dogmatic on this point. As Negus puts it, she prescribes a ‘right’ level of analysis—anyone who diverges from her sociological model is ‘reprimanded and scolded’ for engaging in the ‘wrong’ level of analysis. See Negus, ‘Representing Music,’ 537.
always serves particular ends (and not others). Rather than perceiving this as a dismaying lack in popular music research, however, we would do well to acknowledge the advantages of an ‘engaged’ analytical approach to popular music.

Given DeNora’s firm belief in dualities such as insider/outsider and ‘academic’/‘real’ actors, it would be useful to examine the ways in which popular and academic discourses about music overlap. Such a discussion is best grounded in a particular example of music, and I shall use the case of ‘bastard pop’ to illustrate this. In the following section, I shall highlight the way that popular discourse surrounding bastard pop actually draws on many of the same assumptions and metaphors as traditional musicological discourse.

2.4 The musicologist’s discourse replicated: the case of ‘bastard pop’

If there has been one constant in the development of popular music studies, it has been the awareness that existing definitions of ‘music’ itself are contestable rather than static, and that they are always open to change. In many cases, this awareness has been triggered by the need to explicitly or implicitly ‘rescue’ popular music from various dismissals of it before commencing with analysis ‘proper.’ In order to take popular music seriously, it has been necessarily to engage equally seriously with those writers who have dismissed it as ‘trash.’ Any such engagement, of course, leads quickly to competing notions of what music should actually be in the first place. In the following section, I shall argue that this willingness to explore the limits of what music actually is has generally been a positive development. It has allowed musics which do not fit classical Western definitions of ‘music’ to be considered as music. At the same time, however, I will argue that the newfound emphasis on

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83 In this respect, it is not surprising that popular music theorists have embraced Jacques Attali’s concept of ‘noise’ in their work. For instance, see: Victoria Moon Joyce, ‘What’s So Queer About Composing? Exploring Attali’s Concept of Composition from a Queer Perspective,’ Popular Music and Society 21, no. 3 (1997): 35-59; Jacques Attali, Noise: The Political Economy of Music, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
aspects of music such as timbre and rhythm have perhaps been overstated. If we turn to forms of music which are predominantly made by non-musicians—in particular, the current vogue for ‘bastard pop’ or ‘mashups’—we find that the definition of ‘good music’ still has its basis in conservative, white European notions of ‘harmony’ and ‘melody.’ This is highly significant for the purposes of this discussion for two reasons. Firstly, such a finding effectively undermines DeNora’s claim that the language of musicologists is hopelessly removed from that of ‘real actors.’ On the contrary: as I will show, the language of lay people actually replicates the discourses of traditional musicology in several important ways. Secondly, my argument here will show that the current swing towards elements such as timbre, rhythm, and texture—while important—can sometimes overshadow the extent to which those ‘traditional’ aspects of music (harmony, melody, et cetera) still influence people’s reactions to popular music. I will argue that this trend can be traced back to popular music studies’ general preference for niche interests or subcultures (with bands such as The Velvet Underground and genres such as punk) rather than the ‘mainstream.’

The following discussion shows why it is worth focusing on aspects of music such as harmony, melody, key relationships, and so on. These terms remain a fundamental part of fan discourse.

Tricia Rose’s work on rap and hip hop provides a useful starting point. First and foremost, she draws attention to the actual sonic qualities of the records she is discussing: ‘Rap’s sample-heavy sound is digitally reproduced but cannot be digitally created. In other words, the sound of a James Brown or Parliament drum kick or bass line and the equipment that processed it then, as well as the equipment that processes it now, are all central to the way a rap record[sic] feels; central to rap’s sonic force.’

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86 Ibid., 78. Emphasis added.
This much is indisputable. It should also be pointed out that copyright law generally privileges the European definition of music: harmony and melody are protected, whereas timbre and ‘groove’ are not. The importance of the particular sound of a record—which has arguably been central since the 1950s—can be witnessed in particular production techniques employed in rap and hip hop. Rose gives the example of Steve Ett, the engineer and co-owner of a popular rap studio, who deliberately allows his bass drum track to ‘leak’ into other tracks to give a louder, ‘dirtier’ sound:

This leakage means that the bass will take up more space [in the mix] than is ‘normally’ intended and bleed into other deliberately emptied tracks, which gives the bass a heavier, grittier, less fixed sound. In traditional recording techniques, leakage is a problem to be avoided, it means the sounds on the tracks are not clearly separated, therefore making them less fixed in their articulation…[Here] leakage is a managed part of a process of achieving desired sounds, rather than a problem of losing control of fixed pitches.

Clearly, it would be irrelevant here to question whether the vocals ‘fit’ harmonically over the top of a given bassline. The orchestral sample which a hip hop track is based on may very well be in A minor, but to focus on this aspect of the music would be to misread where the music packs its most visceral punch. As Ett’s comments reveal, just as much work goes into perfecting a particular sound than in adjusting key relationships. This idea is compounded by the fact that hip hop is a genre in which the vocals are predominantly rapped rather than sung: the crucial elements here are word-play, rhythmic devices, and the sound of the voice itself.

While all of this is important in the genre of hip hop, it is worth remembering that this genre does not circulate within a vacuum. It competes with—and often draws on—other forms of music in which melody and harmony are central. More significantly, it is frequently appraised negatively on the basis that it is not really

88 Rose, Black Noise, 76.
music at all. This, in fact, was the reason that Robert Walser went to such lengths to illustrate its specifically musical properties. At this stage, David Brackett’s point about the continuing salience of traditional musicological parameters for appraising music is worth raising.

There is ample evidence that rap and hip hop are not considered ‘music’ by certain segments of popular music audiences. The example cited by Brackett is a flurry of letters to the New York Times which followed the publication of an article by Jon Pareles in 1990. In his article, Pareles engaged with hip hop seriously, arguing that it represented a continuation of key black American musical traditions—and, in doing so, arguing that it was indeed music. The following response to his arguments was particularly telling: ‘I always thought that music was a combination of rhythm, melody and harmony, but after relistening to a performance of Grandmaster Flash, I found it difficult to locate either a melody or harmony, leaving only rhythm, which most definitely was present. Perhaps the definition of music has changed.’

When Pareles published another piece in the New York Times in 1992 (‘On Rap, Symbolism and Fear’), the response was predictable: ‘loud, pounding rhythm with shouted lyrics and no melody do not constitute music.’ In an interestingly teleological approach, another letter writer proclaimed: ‘music began with rhythm, progressed to melody…reached its developmental culmination with harmony. Rap, despite its modern trappings, is a regression.’

As Brackett points out, these comments all tend to reproduce traditional musicological understandings of what music should be—and in one case, they even reproduce the linear model of ‘progress’ which can be found in older musicological texts. However, it could easily be argued that these views represent a predominantly

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93 Cited in Rose, Black Noise, 81.
94 Rose, Black Noise, 81.
white, middle-class audience with assorted ideological reasons for their opposition to rap and hip hop.\footnote{For more details on the ideological issues at stake here, see Brackett, ‘Music,’ 137.}

The predominance of sample-based music in the past decade—and the mainstream success of hip hop—might suggest that this resistance to ‘noise’ (that is, music which does not immediately fit conservative ideas of what music is) is in decline. I will now argue that the reverse is the case: that such conservative notions of music are actually on the rise in the least likely of places. I will ground this argument in a discussion of ‘bastard pop,’ a new name for the very old practice of pilfering musical material from other records.

‘Bastard pop’ is the name which has been attached to a particular type of ‘bootlegging’ since the late 1990s.\footnote{As Jeremy Beadle demonstrates, the sampler has been busily changing conceptions of what ‘original’ music is for at least thirty years. See Jeremy Beadle, 
\textit{Will Pop Eat Itself? Pop Music in the Soundbite Era} (London: Faber, 1993), 141-60.}

It involves deliberately placing the acappella version of one song over the top of the instrumental version of another song, in the hope of creating something more than the sum of its parts.\footnote{Tom Ewing, ‘Bootylicious! Bootlegs and Why I Love Them,’ \textit{Freaky Trigger} (2002) \url{http://www.freakytrigger.co.uk/bootlegs.html} (accessed 18 July 2003).}

The most well-known of these tracks frequently circulate on the internet (their copyright costs being too prohibitive to allow for official, commercial releases), and also tend to mix music from divergent popular music genres: a Nirvana track mixed with Beyonce Knowles’s vocals; the James Bond theme mixed with rapping from Eminem, and so on. It may seem odd that such an old practice—which has already been popularised by the advent of the sampler over the past few decades—has achieved newfound prominence in the popular imagination.\footnote{In contemporary club cultures and ‘bootleg’ scenes, the single word ‘acappella’ tends to be used as a noun rather than an adjective; it refers to any musical piece which consists of (mainly) unaccompanied vocals. (See \url{www.acappellas4u.co.uk} and \url{www.gybo.org} for evidence of this.) In keeping with this usage of the term, I have adopted a similar use of the word ‘acappella’ in this thesis rather than using the two-word adjective ‘a cappella,’ which carries connotations of very different (that is, Western art) musics.}

‘Bastard pop,’ however, is new insofar as it flags its ‘unoriginality’ with pride. As Tom Ewing explains, this is a scene where people generally tend to eschew the ‘auteur’ approach to art; a slightly humorous aesthetic prevails.\footnote{Bastard pop tracks are sometimes called ‘mashups’ because of the way they ‘mash’ the vocals from one song with the instrumental track of another.} The main objective of many such tracks is to simply revel in the unlikely mixture of sounds and voices (although, of course, there are many instances
of pointed irony, such as when macho, boastful rappers like Eminem are placed over 1970s Eurodisco tracks, or when ‘manufactured’ pop groups such as Aqua are merged with the Sex Pistols).

However, I am not focusing on bastard pop for its ‘newness.’ What is of interest here is the fact that this music is often assembled by people with no formal musical training. Certainly, one needs to be a competent user of various types of software, but in terms of musical training, the main skill one needs is simply to be able to distinguish a ‘good mix’ from a ‘bad mix.’ This has an important ramification: this is not a scene where self-conscious notions of ‘musical talent’ and expert knowledge proliferate. The songs which are deemed to be ‘valuable’ in this scene are deemed so as a result of ‘gut feelings’ about music. In this respect, then, bastard pop tracks are an effective window into the ‘unofficial training’ to which all members of a given popular music culture are privy. As Ben Malbon points out (drawing on the work of John Blacking), an ‘individual who has not been formally trained in music can display expertise in the form of recognition and knowledge of a piece of music.’

If we examine the songs which achieve exalted status within this scene, we are not looking at particularly esoteric experiments in music. Rather, we are seeing what a large number of people consider ‘music’ to be. When we examine such tracks, we find that the conservative notion of ‘melody + harmony = music’ is surprisingly prevalent.

Although bastard pop has only achieved widespread media attention since approximately 2000, there is arguably already a canon of works associated with the genre—a body of ‘classics’ which are mentioned with monotonous regularity in popular writings about the scene. Freelance Hellraiser’s ‘Stroke of Genie-us’ is described by Sasha Frere-Jones as follows:

‘Stroke’ is a perfect pop song, better than either of its sources. What was harmonically sweet in the original songs becomes huge and complex in the combination… Stripped of [the] electronic beats [of ‘Genie In A Bottle’],

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Aguilera’s sex-kitten pose dissipates, and she becomes vulnerable, even desperate. The opening lines now sound less like strip-club small talk and more like a damsel pining from a tower: ‘I feel like I’ve been locked up tight for a century of lonely nights, waiting for someone to release me.’ After another line, she shifts into a wordless “oh, oh” that lays over the Strokes’ chord changes so deliciously you can’t imagine why the song didn’t always do that. After hearing it twice, you can’t remember when it didn’t.101

The ‘Stroke of Genie-us’ track is also praised in Tom Ewing’s article:

The best bootlegs are Trojan Horses—you listen to them a few times because of the funny, recognition factor, but then something odd happens. You realise that whenever you hear ‘Hard To Explain’ start you really want to hear Chistina [sic] Aguilera singing and not Julian Casablancas. You realise that you can’t even remember how ‘Genie In A Bottle’ goes. And then you realise that you’re not listening to ‘A Stroke of Genius’ as two tracks any more—you’re listening to it as a great, lost but somehow hyper-modern girl-group or Blondie record, and the way the ‘ooh ooh ooh’s fit over the alcopop guitars tells you as much about desire and anxiety as any record you’ve ever heard.102

There are two significant points to draw out of this. The first is that the material which has already been canonised within the ‘bastard pop’ scene works harmonically.103 (This is why many people refer to musical elements that ‘fit together.’) The second point is that this process of canonisation is frequently carried out by non-musicians who are more than adept at recognising when songs are ‘in key’ or ‘out of tune,’ or at recognising when the ‘oohs’ fit over the ‘alcopop guitars.’ If we examine some of the most frequently cited ‘classic’ mashups, we find that

103 In fact, on forums such as www.gybo.org, dissonant mashups are even saddled with their own acronym: ‘OOK’ (out of key).
most of them ‘sound good’ because they mix musical material which is harmonically compatible.\(^{104}\)

For example, notice that both commentators cited above specify the same section of ‘Stroke of Genie-us’ as being particularly effective: the ‘wordless “oh oh”’ section that immediately precedes the chorus. While it may be relatively easy to find songs in compatible keys (for examples, see Appendix A and Appendix B), it is relatively rare to find a vocal line that follows not only the general chord progression of the accompanying song, but also the added ninths, elevenths, and so on of the accompanying chords.\(^{105}\) This is precisely what happens in the following section of ‘Stroke of Genie-us’ (see Musical Example 2.1, below).

\(^{104}\) For example, see Go Home Productions’ ‘Paperback Believer,’ a combination of the Beatles ‘Paperback Writer’ and the Monkees’ ‘I’m a Believer’; 2 Many DJs’ ‘Dreadlock Child,’ a combination of 10CC’s ‘Dreadlock Holiday’ and Destiny’s Child’s ‘Independent Women Part II.’

\(^{105}\) For comparison’s sake, Appendix A shows an excerpt from ‘Ray of Gob’ by Go Home Productions, which combines the vocals of Madonna’s ‘Ray of Light’ with instrumental tracks from Sex Pistols’ ‘Pretty Vacant’ and ‘God Save the Queen.’ Appendix B shows an excerpt from Thriftshop XL’s ‘Dub Spin Me Round,’ which combines the vocals from Beats International’s ‘Dub Be Good to Me’ with the instrumental track from Dead or Alive’s ‘You Spin Me Round.’ In both examples, the mashups ‘work’ because the harmonies from both songs follow a similar chord progression. Neither of these examples, however, contains the kind of progression in evidence in ‘Stroke of Genie-us’: the chords match the vocal line, but there are no added ninths (or other intervals) to follow the vocals.
Musical Example 2.1

Freelance Hellraiser, ‘Stroke of Genie-us,’ mm. 43-50, 1.01-1.13

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 1]

[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 1]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo

These observations also explain why, for several years in the early 2000s, artists such as Eminem were among the most frequently ‘mashed-up’ of all. As outlined above, it is not usually a high priority for rapping to be ‘matched’ to a particular key,

106 The scored example is already an analysis of the recording. It is used to highlight the salient features discussed here, rather than as a comprehensive representation of the music.
as the actual pitch material may resemble speaking more than singing. A rap, in other words, will ‘fit’ over virtually any harmonic material because of the very nature of rapping. It would seem that, despite the surging popularity of hip hop during the 1990s, traditional (read: European) notions of what music should be are still very much with us. Perhaps the crucial point is that these conservative ideas are not only perpetuated by musicologists, but are also in evidence on the internet, in the popular press, and in popular music itself. Consequently, our continued interest in matters of harmony and melody is not necessarily a regressive practice. Rather, it is a necessary complement to the work that has been done on other parameters of popular music.107

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has cleared a space within which to discuss the relationship between gay men and particular forms of popular music. This discussion can be productive if placed within the nexus between musicology and cultural studies. Since these two areas have frequently been viewed as diametrically opposed, I have sought to underline the areas in which we can see musicologists and cultural theorists grappling with similar issues and working towards similar goals. In particular, I have been interested in the ways in which both critical musicology and certain strands of cultural studies have sought to ‘rescue’ aspects of popular culture formerly perceived as ‘trash.’ This is of particular relevance to the overall subject of the thesis, since much of the dance music I shall be discussing is not only viewed as ‘inferior’ by people located outside dance music culture, but (more tellingly) by most of the people who consider themselves ‘insiders’ in this culture. While there are certainly traces of legitimation in the analyses that follow, the key point I wish to draw out of these debates is the fact that this research—in ‘rescuing’ a type of pop music—extends a theoretical tradition that stretches back several decades. As will become clear in Chapter Five, however, I do not simply seek to invert the hierarchies which

we find within dance music cultures (that is, to elevate this music to the status of so-called ‘Intelligent Dance Music,’ ‘Art,’ and so on). Rather, I seek to interrogate the implicit heterosexism which usually goes unnoticed in most denunciations of dance music. It has become commonplace to note the homophobic undercurrent in the ‘Disco Sucks’ campaigns of the late 1970s in the US. What I shall do in the following chapters is explore the extent to which heterosexism still informs the reception of dance musics today.

In this chapter, I have also stressed the continued usefulness of textual analysis and ‘close reading’ in the face of mounting calls for all such analysis to be replaced by ethnography. As I have shown, the belief that ethnography represents the only way to grapple with the connections between music and society is highly problematic, not least because it constructs false divisions between the ‘professionals’ who dissect music and the ‘real actors’ who presumably engage with music in a relatively unmediated form. This type of argument overlooks the ways in which some of those so-called ‘professionals’ are, in fact, committed ‘combatants’ in the social fabric. Peter Martin has inadvertently captured my argument perfectly here, when he dismisses Susan McClary’s work for the degree to which she remains engaged with her subject: ‘Rather than offering a detached account of the processes by which cultural configurations are formed and transformed…McClary presents a version of ‘social reality’; she is not so much an analyst of the conflict as a dedicated combatant in it.’

I contend that the implicit endorsement of a ‘detached account’ of social reality risks uncritically reproducing aspects of that reality. To reiterate Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuck’s point, my discussion of gay men’s relationship with popular music cannot be ‘detached’ (nor should it be).

Finally, I have extended David Brackett’s point that conservative definitions of ‘music itself’ are not simply perpetuated by musicologists, but can be readily found

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109 Jenkins et al., ‘The Culture that Sticks to Your Skin,’ 10.
in the popular press. Such a finding justifies the occasional focus here on matters of pitch relationships, the harmonic properties of pop songs, and so on. Though I find much to disagree with in Walter Everett’s perspective, I believe his claim that ‘rock music did not come from outer space’ is equally relevant to various dance musics.\footnote{Everett, ‘Confessions,’ 270.}

In other words, the most common measure of what actually counts as music is still frequently based on conservative notions of ‘harmony’ and ‘dissonance.’ The analyses which follow will extend Tagg’s, McClary’s, and Walser’s model, and explore the many ways in which various aspects of music—including not only timbre and texture but also those traditional aspects such as ‘harmony’—help to facilitate particular kinds of performance on the dance floor.
CHAPTER 3

CLUBBING IN SILENCE
3.1 Introduction

One of the aims of this thesis is to explain why handbag music lends itself to being appropriated by gay male culture. While this process of appropriation may not occur all the time, and while it may depend on any number of factors (not all of them musical), I maintain that at least part of the appeal of the music for gay male audiences lies in the sounds themselves. However, much of the existing literature on clubbing displays a distinct lack of engagement with music as music, almost as if the writers have gone clubbing in silence. Such literature, with its reliance on first-hand testimony, often gives us vivid imagery of what it looks and feels like to be immersed in a night club. Occasionally, we can also glean information about what the experience sounds like: for instance, in generalised comments about the music’s volume, instrumentation, and tempo. But given the centrality of music to the club experience, it is surprising that detailed analysis of music still constitutes only a small part of the scholarly literature on electronic dance music. Certainly, there are notable exceptions to the rule. For example, Stan Hawkins and Jason Toynbee have offered convincing interpretations of the sounds of dance music. Mark Butler’s book *Unlocking the Groove* offers even more detailed analysis of the sounds themselves. Other scholars, such as Stephen Amico, have applied musicological insights to studies of particular gay male clubs in New York City.

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2. For example, see: Matthew Collin, *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House* (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1997); Garratt, *Adventures in Wonderland*.
5. Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 117-75
However useful these sources may be (and I revisit them later in the thesis), they do not offer the kind of analysis that I propose here. Firstly, much of this research largely works within existing definitions of ‘electronic dance music.’ Butler cites music by Plastikman, Underworld, and 808-State (among others); Hawkins analyses Lil’ Louis’s ‘French Kiss.’ Most DJs, producers, and critics would have no problem classifying this music as ‘electronic dance music.’ One of the very purposes of this thesis, however, is to challenge the common-sense definition of ‘electronic dance music.’ In many ways, both the selection of tracks in certain gay clubs and the ways in which those tracks are played differ significantly from the kinds of practices that have been documented in the existing literature. The present study, then, aims to document a significantly different aspect of club cultures than has hitherto been discussed.

Amico’s work is more promising in this respect, because it focuses on the use of dance music within gay male clubs. But his agenda, too, is different from that of this thesis. In the article ‘‘I Want Muscles”: House Music, Homosexuality, and Masculine Signification,’ Amico focuses on genres of dance music that eschew the ‘girly’ stereotype of certain gay clubs. His analysis of 68 Beats’s ‘Music to My Ears’ emphasises the masculinised connotations of the sounds—the way that its dissonance, ‘complex beat structures,’ and ‘foregrounding of instrumental riffs’ parallels the muscular, almost militarised appearance and behaviour of the men who frequent Aurora (the club in which he carried out his field research). In contrast, the present thesis aims to explore a more familiar stereotype of gay male culture: the popularity of singers such as Kylie Minogue, Cher, and Madonna, and in particular, the reasons that their music (and remixes of their songs) seems to function so


For example, Butler notes the way that DJs may manipulate equalisation (EQ) controls on a mixer to constantly weave tracks together, blurring the boundaries between two records. As will become clear later in the thesis, the crowds who dance to handbag often expect to recognise songs and the distinctions between songs. See Butler, Unlocking the Groove, 94.

Amico, ‘‘I Want Muscles,’’ 362-65. This interest in repudiating the stereotype is also evident in his more recent article, ‘Su Casa Es Mi Casa,’ in which he writes: ‘Although the stereotyped “public face” of the “gay community” may be monochromatic, its variegated soundtrack, the product of its true heterogeneity, at least gives lie to this image; the music, in this regard, queers any simplistic notion of a homogenized gay community or culture.’ See Amico, ‘Su Casa Es Mi Casa,’ 133.
effectively in gay male clubs. Fikentscher’s study is also useful, but he largely accepts his respondents’ distinctions between ‘commercial’ and ‘underground’ dance musics, and handbag only occupies a peripheral space in his study.

With these notable exceptions aside, it is difficult to find detailed discussion of the music that goes beyond the level of general description. For example, the existing literature seldom tells us whether any drum loop will do in a house club, or whether the drum patterns need to follow an established schema. The importance of technological developments (such as the re-appropriation of ‘primitive’ machines such as the Roland 808 and 303 by early house music producers) may be described, but a whole series of related questions are usually left unaddressed. What rhythmic patterns are those machines programmed to play? What sorts of key relationships are preferred? How is such a ‘basic’ sound manipulated to generate interest over the duration of a seven-minute track? Will any noise from the machine do?

In this chapter, I take a closer look at the work of two scholars whose work does not pay detailed attention to the sounds themselves, but who in other respects occupy opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of research into club cultures. Sarah Thornton’s oft-cited *Club Cultures*—despite its lack of attention to the sounds themselves—provides a very useful model for how to approach the value systems of clubbers. Rather than treating club culture as a static entity, neatly divided into pre-existing musical categories or ‘scenes,’ Thornton explores the tensions, hierarchies, and competing claims to power that proliferate within dance music discourses. One of the most useful aspects of her research is the way that she contrasts the views of her respondents with the phenomena that she directly observed—an approach which is highly significant in any reappraisal of handbag music.

I shall also discuss Phil Jackson’s recent book *Inside Clubbing* at length, because it provides a vivid illustration of the arguments made in Chapter Two. Despite extensive ethnographic research, Jackson’s research does not substantially engage

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10 One of Amico’s respondents acknowledged this stereotype when he defined ‘straight music’ as music with ‘no vocals…it’s not all puffy. When gay men are on ‘E’ [Ecstasy], they want their music shaped like their men – puffy…Fags want to be in a happy environment. Puffy music is about getting laid, looking for a hook-up.’ See Amico, “‘I Want Muscles,’” 364.
with the music itself, and (more seriously) he tends to reify the views of his informants rather than subjecting them to critique. His work (inadvertently) raises many of the questions that I explore in more depth later in the thesis.

3.2 Thornton and ‘subcultural ideology’

Sarah Thornton’s discussion of what she calls ‘subcultural ideology’ is one of the key influences on the present argument.\(^{11}\) Her work is important for the way it shifts the analytical focus from ‘resisting subcultures’ to ‘subcultural ideologies,’ a shift that I explore below. At the same time, Thornton’s arguments do not dwell extensively on the culture of gay male clubs, nor does she draw any substantial connections between her arguments and the actual sounds of the cultures she is describing. In this section, I argue that her discussion clears a space for a new kind of analysis of handbag music, and that a musicological perspective will provide a useful complement to her work.

As noted in Chapter Two, the ‘cultural studies’ approach to popular culture has often been carried out under paradigms of ‘deviance’ or of ‘resistance.’ The work of the Birmingham School, in particular, typically construed youth subcultures as somehow resisting a dominant culture. For instance, Dick Hebdige’s influential 1979 study adopted the concept of ‘hegemony.’ Here, it was understood that one class could maintain its dominance over other classes by ideologically framing all alternatives within its own schema, such that the order of the ruling class came to seem natural, rather than ideological.\(^{12}\) Whatever advantages Hebdige’s notion had, the fact remains that it tended to rest on a taken-for-granted division between the dominant and the subordinate. Thornton’s significant contribution is that the subcultural approach ignored the power relationships at work within youth subcultures. The traditional focus in subcultural studies tended to romanticise the workings of youth subcultures, implicitly celebrating them as a ‘resistance’ to a dominant culture.

\(^{11}\) Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 10.

However, as Thornton points out, youth subcultures themselves tend to recreate ideological judgements ‘in the service of power.’\textsuperscript{13} Her focus, then, is on the ways that particular concepts (for example, the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘underground’) are deployed by youth themselves in the interests of gaining status and distinguishing themselves from other, competing youth groups.

Admittedly, Thornton’s approach is hampered by her faith in certain orthodox sociological notions, such as an unproblematic distinction between the subjective views of her respondents and the ‘objective’ reality that she observed. However, if we accept her views not as the ‘objective’ truth but rather as a deliberate re-interpretation of youth subcultures, then her approach has much to offer a musicological study of handbag. In particular, \textit{Club Cultures} is useful for the way in which it implicitly criticises the judgements of DJs, zine writers, and clubbers themselves—exposing the ways in which their descriptions of ‘commercial’ and ‘underground’ (read: inferior and superior) musics are far from objective descriptions of the sounds themselves. As I will show in later chapters, the terms in which handbag music has been denigrated are not innocent or impartial terms—they serve particular interests and specifically devalue the kinds of pleasures valued in gay male cultures.

It should be clear by now that this work is significant in shifting the focus of subcultural studies towards a more complicated picture of conflict and tension within youth culture. Along with its strengths, however, we must acknowledge that \textit{Club Cultures} does not deal with the sounds themselves in any sustained manner. In those sections where music is mentioned, the discussion avoids referring to its actual materials and processes, focusing instead on the ways in which discourses (such as record sleeves, liner notes, and zine commentary) serve to construct the music. The following passage exemplifies this trend:

\begin{quote}
Acid house music was perceived as authentic partly because it was said to come out of Chicago’s underground dance clubs. But exactly how did the
\end{quote}

genre come into being and how did its legend get into general circulation within British dance clubs? The answers to both questions lie with the commercial activities of London Records which coined the genre in the process of their importing, compiling and marketing several DJ International tracks on the third volume of their House Sound of Chicago series. Before the compilation’s release in January 1988, all that existed was a technological sounding bleep produced by a Roland TB303 found on the 1987 house music hit ‘Acid Tracks’ by Phuture.\(^{14}\)

As is clear in the above passage, Thornton traces most of the significance of rave culture back to its institutional home, rather than to any specific musical processes: ‘the commercial activities of London Records’ are of most importance here. The actual sound of a Roland TB303 machine seems almost arbitrary—it is mere raw material to be harnessed by the record industry and by the niche music press. Of course, the workings of the record industry and the press (whether through ‘mass’ publications or more specialised, niche media such as zines) are significant, insofar as they generate discourses that shape our perceptions of what the music sounds like. In my view, Thornton gives us a convincing ideological critique of the values that sustain the specialist dance music press and the discourse of ‘electronic dance music.’ The point I wish to make is that she applies her argument only to the textual and visual discourses that constitute the music. Her argument could usefully be expanded if we were to take the next logical step, and apply it to the sounds themselves.

In what way can Thornton’s points about club culture be applied to the sounds themselves? One way of achieving this is to compare the value judgements and descriptions of handbag music (as found in the popular press and in the niche dance music press) with the recordings themselves. As I will show in Chapters Five, Seven, and Eight, there are many noticeable discrepancies between the way that handbag tends to be written about, and the ways in which it is actually constructed and used in gay male clubs. This is similar to the situation that Thornton identifies amongst her

\(^{14}\) Thornton, Club Cultures, 155-56.
respondents, most of whom vigorously distance themselves from the so-called ‘mainstream.’ They commonly describe the ‘mainstream’ as a scene in which ‘Sharons and Tracys dance around their handbags.’15 Many of them characterise particular media texts—including entire genres of music—as belonging to the mainstream. The mainstream is inextricably linked to femininity and to a certain class of youth: there are, for instance, no corresponding stereotypes of ‘Camilla and Imogen.’ Unsurprisingly, the clubbers who make these claims perceive their own scene as relatively heterogenous, whereas the scenes of other clubbers are derided as mainstream and therefore homogenous.16 As Thornton points out, however, these claims are usually drawn from clubbers’ interpretations of media texts such as the Pete Waterman-hosted television show The Hitman and Her and the long-running Top of the Pops. After deliberately visiting a wide range of clubs, actively looking for this mainstream that everyone seemed so confident in describing, she states:

I was unable to find a crowd I could comfortably identify as typical, average, ordinary, majority or mainstream. Not that I didn’t witness people dancing to ‘chartpop’ or to techno music at raves. On the contrary, I observed all sorts of different configurations of these crowds…To apply the label ‘mainstream’ to any of these would have run the risk of denigrating or normalizing the crowd in question. I could always find something that distinguished them—if not local differences, then shades of class, education and occupation, gradations of gender and sexuality, hues of race, ethnicity or religion.17

In other words, Thornton went looking for the ‘mainstream’ and could never seem to find it. Her analysis, then, contrasts the discursive constructions of her respondents with her own observations of the scenes that they were describing. While I disagree with her confident assertion that her observations are necessarily more ‘objective’ than those of her respondents, I believe her strategy is useful insofar as it allows her

15 Ibid., 99.
16 This perception may be linked to the type of anti-mass-culture arguments that have long been a part of mass-produced popular music. For an historical perspective on these arguments, see Keir Keightley, ‘Reconsidering Rock,’ in Frith, Straw, and Street, Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock, 120-39.
17 Thornton, Club Cultures, 106-107.
to identify particular ideological agendas at work within this culture. The present thesis, then, extends Thornton’s argument. Where she compares her respondents’ accounts of clubbing with her own experiences of clubbing, I shall be comparing discursive accounts of the music with the sounds themselves.

In his study of club culture, Ben Malbon occasionally adopts a similar approach. At one point, he contrasts the celebratory comments of some clubbers—who, significantly, perceive the crowds in their favourite clubs as extremely diverse—with extracts from his own clubbing diary, where he writes that the crowd appeared to be relatively homogenous. In response to the question ‘What are the other clubbers like?’, two of Malbon’s respondents state:

VALERIE: All sorts—the only thing that they have got in common is that they go out clubbing, transvestites, girls in their little skirts and their spangly tops, people in trendy trendy club stuff, there’s like people in workman’s jackets and you’ve got all the lads in there in like dealer jackets, black men in their sunglasses. There’s people that look twelve in there, yeah…

KIM: That’s what’s so good about [the club] Banana Split—it’s not a trendy club, it’s not a hard club, it’s not a trance club—it’s just lots of people having fun, that’s all.

In sharp contrast with this romanticised view of the club, in which all the socio-cultural divisions of the outside world have been cast aside, Malbon’s diary reads:

[T]he clubbers were mostly between 17-20 years old, with very, very few people over 23, I’d say. Probably slightly more men that women; almost zero range in ethnicity—practically all white...as far as style was concerned, this was interesting: for the boys, jeans and either trainers or boots (lots of Ralph Lauren in evidence), short cropped hair; for the girls it seemed important to wear as little as possible, frequently little more than just underwear and lots

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18 As she puts it, ‘I did discover material that helped me to assemble a more objectivist picture of club culture...’ Thornton, Club Cultures, 107. Emphasis added.
19 Malbon, Clubbing, 158-60.
20 Ibid., 158-59.
of boob tubes and short skirts, lots of fake tans, chests crammed into Wonderbras. Overall, there seemed very little variation in style, dress, identity…most were HAPPY, that’s without the slightest doubt, but most were similar to each other, at least they seemed that way…

Like Thornton, then, Malbon is able to contrast the celebratory accounts of his respondents with his own observations. Unfortunately, this approach has rarely been applied to the sounds themselves. For instance, in the existing literature, it is exceedingly rare to find clubbers’ descriptions of dance music compared with a close analytical description of the music itself. I would argue that this partly explains why the existing literature on club culture—from Simon Reynolds to Hillegonda Rietveld—largely ignores the ‘pop’ remixes that dominate the playlists of many gay male clubs.

In the chapters that follow, I shall attempt to mount two arguments simultaneously: to show that handbag’s musical priorities are in some ways consistent with other, more ‘reputable’ genres of dance music; and, on the other hand, to demonstrate that the music is distinctive in a way that facilitates its use in gay male clubs. This approach may appear to be contradictory. However, this ‘double-playing’ should be considered as analogous to those feminist critics who campaign for the inclusion of women in the musical canon while simultaneously questioning the norms by which people are included in such canons. In different situations, both strategies may be useful.

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21 Ibid., 159.
22 See Reynolds, Energy Flash; Rietveld, This Is Our House.
23 Cook, Music, 111.
24 As Bronwyn Davies points out, people are constituted through different – sometimes contradictory – discourses throughout their lives. As a result, it is often necessary to adopt multiple strategies for dealing with the world. In relation to gender, Davies writes: ‘Sometimes I will engage in liberal feminist discourse when it is clear that the issue is one of unjust exclusion on the basis of sex. At other times I will celebrate being female on the basis of my own experience and the experiences of my female friends and colleagues. At other times I will feel free and powerful enough to move beyond these to a set of interactive and discursive practices in which the metaphysical nature of “male” and “female” is clear to me and to those with whom I live out the new narrative structures and metaphors of my life.’ See Bronwyn Davies, Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool Children and Gender, rev. ed. (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003), 165.
By adopting the first strategy (that of ‘inclusion,’ in which I demonstrate the consistencies between handbag and other types of dance music), it can be shown that the descriptions of handbag and associated ‘commercial’ genres available in the dance music press are ideologically loaded. Writers in this area actively seek to distance themselves from handbag music, and accordingly downplay any consistencies or similarities between it and their own preferred genre of music. This rigid dichotomous stance, in which genres are seen as belonging to one side of a divide rather than to a particular position along a continuum, is ideological because it clearly privileges one side of the divide over the other. Even more importantly, it construes the properties of the privileged field as somehow natural or organic, rather than situated and historical. There is a clear resonance here with Richard Middleton’s broader argument about repetition in popular music. Writing of the distinction between ‘high art’ music and ‘popular’ musics, he notes that ‘a conventional proportion of repetition to non-repetition is naturalised (I say “conventional” because, considering music world-wide, the extent to which repetition is characteristic of particular musical syntaxes varies enormously); most popular music is then said to transgress this norm.’

Similarly, the ‘norms’ of certain types of dance music (such as ‘breaks’ and ‘progressive house’) tend to be naturalised, such that handbag-related genres may be dismissed as inferior. The problem is not so much that there is a clear hierarchy in place, but that the hierarchy is rendered ‘natural,’ and made to seem inevitable, by discursively positioning the more privileged music as ‘real’ dance music. In the commentary of the dance music press, the differences in status accorded to these sub-genres of music is consistently claimed to arise unproblematically from the sounds themselves. Thus, the amount of ‘category-maintenance work’ needed to uphold these rigid distinctions is suppressed or ignored.

25 For examples, see the discussion on pages 131-150 of this thesis.
26 Middleton, “‘Play It Again Sam,’” 240.
27 I draw the term ‘category-maintenance work’ from Bronwyn Davies’s work with preschool children. In relation to gender, she writes: ‘individuals can deviate [from gender norms], but their deviation will give rise to category-maintenance work around the gender boundaries. This category-maintenance work is aimed partly at letting the “deviants” know they’ve got it wrong—teasing is often enough to pull someone back into line—but primarily it is aimed at maintaining the category as a meaningful category in the face of the individual deviation that is threatening it.’ See Davies, Frogs and Snails, 31. Emphasis in original. In a similar manner, the distinctions between sub-genres of
A discussion that focuses on the sounds themselves would complement Thornton’s argument by demonstrating certain contradictions within the ideology of ‘commercial’ versus ‘non-commercial’ musics. For instance, in critical denunciations of handbag music, the genre is often simultaneously attacked as being too predictable (in its adoption of certain musical strategies) but at the same time not repetitive enough (for instance, in its unashamed use of varying vocal lines, shifting harmonic schemas, and relatively rapid shifts in texture and timbre). Just as Thornton was able to identify contradictions in an ‘anti-mainstream’ ideology by contrasting respondents’ descriptions of the scene with her own observations of the same scene, I aim to expose some of these contradictions—and the ways they work towards devaluing the music associated with gay male club culture—by analysing the sounds themselves at the level of particular tracks.

An implicit aim of this strategy is to argue that handbag should at least be included in the very definition of ‘electronic dance music,’ a scene in which it is usually rendered invisible. Later in the analysis, I will adopt the very different strategy of defending handbag music’s difference. Here, I will argue that handbag, even while drawing on some of the same strategies as other dance music genres (such as the electronic manipulation of ‘synthetic’ timbres, the mode of stratified composition, the possibilities of sampling, the revelling in unashamedly ‘artificial’ sounds), is in other ways noticeably distinct from other dance music genres (for instance, in its heavy reliance on female vocals, its retention of adapted-but-still-recognisable song structures, and its palette of synthesised timbres). I aim to show how these distinctive features of handbag serve particular functions on the dance floor, and that when these aspects are ignored or devalued, the functions of the music in gay male culture are also downplayed.

All of this expands on Thornton’s key argument: that the claims of ‘insiders’—DJs, dancers, producers, critics—are ideologically loaded, and serve to cement those insiders’ position in relation to competing youth groups. Thornton was able to test dance music—and the distinctions between the people who embrace these genres—are held to be ‘natural’ or ‘obvious.’ Any sign that these distinctions are in fact constructed needs to be suppressed. For further explanation of the term, see Bronwyn Davies, *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities*, rev. ed. (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2003), 23.
the claims of these insiders by critically evaluating the discourses that she encountered, both in a number of nightclubs and also in the niche music press. My method of injecting *music* into this type of analysis will involve treating the specific properties of the music(s) as a discourse itself, and subjecting these discourses to critique.

Thornton’s perspective is by no means taken for granted within scholarly research on club cultures. Timothy D. Taylor, for instance, criticises her for being too hard on her informants, and for not adequately grasping what they mean by ‘mainstream.’ Consequently, it is worth illustrating what happens when the opposite approach is adopted—that is, when research on club culture simply replicates the world-view of the researcher’s respondents. To this end, I shall now engage in a critique of Phil Jackson’s recent addition to the literature, *Inside Clubbing*. Like Thornton, Jackson does not dwell on the specifics of the music (few DJs or producers are mentioned in his book, and there is only one reference to a specific track). Unlike Thornton, however, the main aim of his book seems to be the promotion of club culture in general, rather than the scholarly exploration of the clubbing experience. It is worth detailing his case at length, because when the norms and values of club culture are replicated within the academic press, handbag inevitably slips down several more rungs on the ladder club ‘credibility.’

### 3.3 Jackson and the shift away from ideology

As we have seen, *Club Cultures* gives us a convincing argument about the ideological content of dance music cultures, but does not substantively apply this argument to the music itself. Phil Jackson’s *Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiments in the Art of Being Human* attempts the reverse: he includes a chapter devoted to the ‘music’ of dance music, but is unable to criticise (or even discern) the ideological content of the music, or the cultural agenda of his respondents. His contribution is

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29 Jackson, *Inside Clubbing*. 
in some ways a regression from the theoretical and empirical insights of *Club Cultures*. What Jackson says, or fails to say, about the music itself will be most valuable to the present analysis. His chapter on ‘Music’ highlights the kinds of gaps that appear when an argument about club culture is extended to club music, without necessarily attending to the specific properties of the music or the particular strategies adopted in certain tracks.

Jackson’s broader argument is that clubbing teaches people new ways of experiencing their own bodies and of interacting with each other. As he puts it, ‘the knowledge found in clubs is an embodied knowledge that you can feel deep in your guts and it must be lived if it is to be truly comprehended.’ Later in his book, Jackson argues that clubbers take this knowledge—an appreciation of difference, and a set of new, more equitable gender relations, among other things—with them into everyday life, radically changing the fabric of social relations in the process. Like Jackson, I am interested in the ways in which music might contribute to this ‘embodied knowledge’—the ways in which musical strategies might facilitate particular modes of being on the dance floor, particular practices common in gay male culture, and so on. However, when it comes to the music itself, Jackson does not really try to establish these connections. Instead, he offers a sweeping overview of what it is like to listen to music in clubs, with no reference whatsoever to particular tracks, and with passing comments on a broad range of sub-genres. (Indeed, for someone who insists on privileging the views of clubbers themselves, much of Jackson’s discussion proceeds as if there is little empirical difference between the sound of a kick drum in a trance track and the equivalent sound in ‘girly’ house.)

In terms of musical characteristics, Jackson focuses on ‘bass’ and ‘acceleration.’ In both cases, his analysis never mentions specific tracks:

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30 Ibid., 1.
31 Interestingly, Jackson refers to his respondents as the ‘true experts’ of the field, downplaying the extent to which his own interpretative framework informs the study. See Jackson, *Inside Clubbing*, 5.
The advances in sound recording and reproduction, which have occurred in the current electronic age of music, allowed bass to reach a visceral zenith that sank deep into the flesh of those who experienced its intoxicatory allure.... A pumping bass beat launches you onto the floor before you’ve even thought about it. Its immediacy is lascivious and virulent and the rhythm it carries infects entire rooms.\(^{32}\)

While a prominent feature of much contemporary dance music, the bass drum varies from one genre to the next, as Jackson admits:

The emotional power of bass is derived from its material quality, which enfolds the listener within the tune. Sometimes it is heavy and dark like someone’s creeping up behind you possibly with an axe clutched in their sweaty, psycho paws; at others it is exhilarating like the kick bass of techno that imbues you with instant energy and makes dancing feel like a form of sonic surfing.\(^{33}\)

As this passage illustrates, Jackson can make sweeping statements about the music at the level of genre, but because he never quite reaches the specifics of particular tracks, the analysis cannot address certain crucial questions from a clubber’s perspective. For instance, while he sheds light on some of the differences between dance music genres, it remains unclear why producers would need to make certain aesthetic decisions within some of these genres—for instance, why choose drum loop \(X\) over drum loop \(Y\)? We also come away from this analysis with little idea of why one ‘heavy and dark’ bass drum tends to be privileged in clubs over other types of ‘heavy and dark’ bass drums (let alone why this bass drum has this connotation in the first place).\(^{34}\) This is significant for people involved at various stages of music production in clubs – from producers who must decide between drum sample \(A\) and \(B\), to DJs who must choose between tracks \(C\) and \(D\), to clubbers who dance frenetically during track \(E\) but take a toilet break during track \(F\). In the club world as

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 29.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Philip Tagg makes a similar point – see ‘From Refrain to Rave,’ 212.
constructed by Jackson, DJs may as well abandon their turntables, CD, and laptop computers, and replace the entire audio system with a relentless bass drum (perhaps occasionally changing the timbre of the drum). After all, if his informants are to be believed (and Jackson does not question views such as the following), only the bass frequencies are of any significance in the club:

You can completely feel bass and nine times out of ten when you’re drug fucked *they could turn the treble off and you’d hardly notice it had gone.* You don’t follow the treble when you’re dancing; you follow the mid-range and the bass. With bass you can get so immersed in the sound that you can’t even see; it just fills you up.³⁵

On a strictly musical level, then, this sort of analysis fails to grapple with the fundamental questions that concern the present thesis. What specifically musical properties facilitate certain types of dance floor performance in gay male clubs? Why is the dance music associated with gay male clubs typically shunned as ‘pop’ or as ‘commercial dance’ – terms that attempt to downplay any connections the music may have with other, supposedly more ‘credible’ genres? Simply noting some of the general characteristics of loud electronic dance music does not really help us to grapple with such questions. It is notable that despite extensive fieldwork, Jackson usually makes generalising statements about the things he observed in clubs. Frequently, we have no idea whether the kind of behaviour he witnessed was taking place in a gay, straight, or mixed club, or in a predominantly working-class district, and so on. In a way, this ‘defence’ of dance music might even be said to reinforce the most negative characterisations of dance music. Donald Clarke once argued that the ‘thump-thump beat’ was the most important characteristic of disco music, and that ‘other values could be ignored.’³⁶ To lavish attention on the bass drum—as Jackson does—without paying attention to how such sounds might be discursively situated, simply affirms the more simplistic interpretations of the music (‘yes, it is all

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about the bass’), without offering any more nuanced perspectives on why particular sounds function as they do in the club (‘why this bass drum rather than that one?’).

More seriously, Jackson appears unwilling to acknowledge some of the crucial ideological agendas that fuel both his commentary about the music and the commentary of his ‘informants.’ This is relevant to any discussion of the sounds themselves, because as Walser points out, any analysis that presents itself merely as ‘passive’ description is better understood as an analysis that conceals its own aims.37 One of the most obvious agendas at work in Jackson’s analysis is the notion that music is somehow above discourse, and that it does not function as a discourse itself. In this respect, he mirrors the view of Lawrence Grossberg when he suggests that dance music mysteriously bypasses people’s rational, critical faculties and hails them ‘directly.’38 This was clear in the passage cited earlier: the claim that a ‘pumping bass beat launches you onto the floor before you’ve even thought about it’ implies that one need not recognise any musical codes or be familiar with any related music before instantly reacting to the present piece of music.39 When his informants reiterate such views, Jackson does not subject them to any critique. We can only assume that he endorses the comments of his respondents, such as this one: ‘If you think about the tunes too much you loose [sic] the ability to feel them and you’ve got to feel them. You’ve got to let them in, if you’re really going to know them.’40

This is one of the most consistent myths promulgated by those involved in club culture (and in popular music more generally), and it is based on a mistaken assumption: that there is no thinking involved in simply ‘listening’ to music. On the contrary, the mere act of ‘listening’ involves a significant amount of processing: on some level, we need to recognise sounds as music, then distinguish which sounds are ‘music’ and which sounds are ‘noise’ (for instance, ignoring the crackling of an old record, or trying to hear ‘past’ the cheering of a crowd at a live concert), and finally sorting all the sounds into an established, recognisable schema. To demonstrate the

40 Ibid., 26. This notion that any ‘thinking’ about music will necessarily taint all our experiences of music is convincingly dismantled in Tagg and Clarida, Ten Little Title Tunes, 105.
amount of background knowledge necessary to even apprehend a piece of music, one need only play some of Jackson’s favourite tracks to a group of central African pygmies. There is a good chance that the music would garner a response, but that the response would be markedly different from that of Jackson’s respondents. I contend that listeners from other parts of the world—and even listeners from different cultures in the same part of the world—would not respond ‘automatically,’ and that this illustrates the ideological underpinning of his analysis. To claim that the music somehow works its magic without any mediation is to suggest that the music would function in the same way across all times and places. (Jackson comes remarkably close to such generalisations elsewhere. The ‘Music’ chapter begins with the sentence: ‘Every culture has its music; it is a human universal and music has a profound effect on those cultural worlds’—as if all cultures even have a term for what we know as ‘music.’) Such claims are ideological insofar as they naturalise the music of one culture (in this case, the London-based, underground club scene), implicitly calling into question whether music of other cultures are valid. Occasionally, Jackson’s own commentary suggests otherwise. As he admits, it is the ‘sudden rush of recognition’ that sends someone hurtling onto the dance floor,’ and of course, such recognition is built on wide background knowledge of the music at hand.

Nowhere is Jackson’s description of the music more ideologically loaded than those sections where he draws on informants’ understandings of the music. Where Thornton provided a critical appraisal of ‘insider’ views, Jackson simply reiterates and celebrates them. The most extensive description of the music in his book is provided by one of his informants, and it is worth quoting because of the numerous ways in which it betrays the informant’s ideological agendas. Note that in this passage, most descriptions of the music itself are bound up with judgements about the music’s perceived audience. It is also worth noting the way that the informant carefully distinguishes his own musical tastes from those of the masses, or from those other subcultural groups who do not share his extensive background knowledge:

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41 Ibid., 25. Emphasis added.
42 Ibid., 27. Emphasis added.
if you go to a house or garage club they’re very much into the way they look. They have to look very neat, precise...they don’t want to drench it in sweat [...] Then you get House music...mainly for people who are into the technical thing; they’re listening for the mix, this bit, that bit; they’re not really there to enjoy themselves. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred they’re with the media, coked out-of-their-brains...Once you get passed [sic] that stuff then you start getting into Hard House, Hard Trance...that’s my level...That’s when you can’t care how you look; you’re listening to the music; you’re going-for-it. People are supposedly into Hard House this year. Mixmag defined Hard House as a bassier version of House, but anyone in London who knows Trade knows that Hard House is faster and less jangly, less piano more bonk, bonk, bonk. (Male 26, 8 years’ experience)

This passage brims with exactly the same cultural agenda that Thornton identified in the early 1990s. Here, too, we can see this clubber drawing crude caricatures of other scenes while providing a wholly sympathetic portrayal of his own scene. In garage clubs, dancers are described as being too fussy about the way they look. The caricature of house clubs is even more dubious, with the respondent claiming that 99 percent of the people in these clubs are ‘coked out-of-their-brains.’ However, the comments on Hard House and Hard Trance abruptly change tone: this is ‘my level,’ where people no longer care about how they look. Instead, people in this scene are construed as having a more appropriate or ‘correct’ way of listening to the music (the respondent puts it this way: ‘It’s kind of grit your teeth music, but you can still smile as you grit them’). There is a noticeable narrative thread woven throughout this overview of club genres: each genre is described as a kind of ‘advance’ on the previous ones (‘then you get House music’; ‘once you get passed that stuff’), suggesting that people ‘mature’ into this genre—and of course, this clubber’s definition of musical maturity coincides with his preferred genre.44 We can see other

43 Ibid., 30-31. Emphasis added. Mixmag is the name of a prominent UK dance-oriented magazine. ‘Trade’ is the name of a popular London gay male club.

44 It is true that many clubbers move through ‘stages,’ gradually discovering new genres through an ad hoc process of following various existing genres. My point here is to highlight the ways in which Jackson’s respondent posits such development as a clear ‘progression’ or maturation—in other words, describing the development of his own taste as a universal model of ‘good’ taste.
types of subcultural capital being flaunted, too: he is able to understand the ‘real’ definitions of Hard House, unlike the masses that rely on Mixmag.

In light of Tia DeNora’s claims (reviewed in Chapter Two), this sort of ‘insider’ commentary on the club scene is more reliable than any interpretation by a musicologist. The comments above come from a ‘real actor’ rather than a ‘professional semiotician,’ and are therefore more trustworthy and less partial than the opinion of scholars such as Susan McClary. Clearly, however, this is not the case. The passage above demonstrates the same sort of subcultural capital that Thornton identified: we do not care how we look (unlike those poseurs in the house scene); we know what ‘real’ Hard House sounds like (unlike the masses that read Mixmag); we know how to have a good time (unlike those who are obsessed with ‘the technical thing’). These are not innocent descriptions of dance music scenes, nor are they ‘just assertions of equal difference; they…entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others.’\footnote{Thornton, \textit{Club Cultures}, 10. Emphasis in original.} In Jackson’s account, however, these ideologies are accepted without question.

Jackson would probably defend his work by claiming that neither he nor his respondents were consciously trying to distinguish themselves from other sub-groups involved with electronic dance music: ‘In its most extreme form this approach ends up as the “trainspotter” view of music and amongst my informants this “trainspotter” reflex was predominantly viewed in a negative light.’\footnote{Jackson, \textit{Inside Clubbing}, 26.} Or, as one of his informants puts it:

I don’t like those hardcore techno nights that are full of nodding blokes going: ‘Yeah tune, really obscure Derrick May remix, blah, blah, blah.’ And all that trainspotting shit. I hate it when people get all tight arsed about their music. When they can’t just kick back and let themselves loose because they’re too busy trying to spot a sample or guess the label so they can show off how much bloody useless musical knowledge they know.\footnote{Ibid.}
I would argue that this is a misrepresentation of the term ‘subcultural capital,’ which is not the same as ‘trainspotting.’ Jackson has interpreted ‘subcultural capital’ as a conscious process in which knowledge is openly flaunted in order to gain status within a culture. As Thornton makes clear, however, the process is a lot less transparent:

Both cultural and subcultural capital put a premium on the ‘second nature’ of their knowledges. Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard. For example, fledgeling clubbers of fifteen or sixteen wishing to get into what they perceive as a sophisticated dance club will often reveal their inexperience by over-dressing or confusing ‘coolness’ with an exaggerated cold blank stare.48

We can see, then, that Jackson is ignoring two crucial aspects of subcultural capital. He is ignoring the way in which knowledge about club culture is flaunted in ways that may not be apparent to participants (for instance, the respondent cited above states: ‘anyone in London who knows Trade knows that Hard House is faster and less jangly…’).49 He is also ignoring the ways in which embodied knowledge itself counts as knowledge. Time and again, clubbers flaunt a different kind of knowledge in their commentaries—the knowledge of how to listen to the music ‘appropriately.’ Their comments are strewn with prescriptive statements: avoid being ‘tight arsed’ about the music; avoid being obsessed with ‘the technical thing’; ‘just let go’; ‘just let yourself loose’; ‘just kick back.’ Not surprisingly, most of these prescriptions tend to mystify the music’s workings even as they attempt to specify exactly how people ‘should’ have a good time.

In short, while it may seem that Jackson’s account offers a more substantial analysis of the sounds themselves than Thornton, the actual analysis is hampered by two factors. Firstly, the commentary is as generalised as the chapter title suggests (‘Music’). Both Jackson and his respondents never actually talk about specific

48 Thornton, Club Cultures, 12.
49 Jackson, Inside Clubbing, 31.
tracks, the ways in which these tracks function on the dance floor, or the particular musical conventions that these tracks depend on in order to be intelligible to dancers. Secondly, Jackson ignores the ways in which his own commentary and that of his respondents is coloured by processes of distinction. This, too, has the effect of mystifying the music—of pretending that the music simply creates ‘automatic’ effects in dancers, rather than acknowledging that dancers’ responses are greatly conditioned by their extensive background knowledge of particular genres of dance music. As I will demonstrate later in the thesis, this mystification of what makes the music work (‘just let go,’ ‘just let yourself loose,’ ‘just kick back’) allows the predominantly straight niche press to ignore the pleasures of handbag music in gay male culture.

When it comes to the actual music of dance music, most scholarly accounts of club cultures fall into one of the traps identified above: they either treat music as a peripheral concern in the more important schema of record industry politics and audience discourses, or they describe music in highly impressionistic terms.\(^50\) In many of these scholarly texts, the most extensive commentary on the music itself comes not from the author, but from the clubbers themselves.\(^51\) This kind of testimony is often vague (as clubbers understandably have difficulty explaining exactly why certain sounds or genres seem to work so effectively on the dance floor), and at other times it is deliberately mystified (as clubbers subscribe to the ideology of autonomous music, maintaining that the music itself is a mysterious black box that cannot be scrutinised). I have reviewed Thornton’s work in detail because her analytical framework will be very useful for the analysis that follows, despite its lack of engagement with the sounds themselves. In contrast, I dwelt on the problems with Jackson’s work because they signal the kind of problem endemic in studies of club cultures. Since his own socio-cultural position seems to overlap to a significant degree with that of his informants, Jackson tends to treat their value judgements with

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\(^{50}\) This accusation is most commonly directed at the journalist Simon Reynolds. At one point in his book *Energy Flash*, he describes a track as having ‘gulf-stream currents of blood-temperature synth and bubble trails of mermaid-diva vocal.’ 31. As I have shown, this impressionist language is also the tool of more scholarly writers such as Jackson.

\(^{51}\) This is noticeable in some sections of Buckland’s study. See Buckland, *Impossible Dance* 143-57. It is also evident in Jackson’s *Inside Clubbing*, where respondents’ commentary on music—no matter how problematic—is more detailed than anything offered by Jackson himself.
little skepticism. If they were to tell him, for instance, that handbag songs are ‘cheesy,’ ‘predictable,’ or ‘formulaic,’ it is most likely that he would accept this assessment – an assessment which devalues not just a particular type of music, but also the values of particular people. If we are to challenge this hierarchy of dance music genres, then we will need to critically examine the extent to which handbag fits the negative descriptions of dance music pundits. The most effective way of doing that is to deconstruct the music itself, a task to which I turn in the next chapter.

52 Walser, ‘Popular Music Analysis,’ 38.
CHAPTER 4

ADORNO AND DANCE MUSIC
4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I noted that the present study of specifically gay-identified dance music genres necessarily involves an aspect of ‘rescuing’ the music. As I explained earlier, this recuperation of the music is not an exercise in arbitrary canonisation. The devaluing of particular forms of dance music carries an edge of implicit heterosexism which has so far remained unexplored. While several commentators have noted the gendered aspects of rock music criticism which work to devalue this music, the implicit heterosexism in accounts of handbag music tends to go unremarked. I will argue that for many gay men, the (re)valuing and positive endorsement of this music on the dancefloor is an implicit response to the heteronormative judgements which place it at the bottom of the hierarchy in the first place.

This ‘recuperation’ project involves questioning the usual process by which pieces of popular music (or particular artists) are elevated to canonic status. Following Brackett, I contend that denunciations of music are rarely, if ever, merely about ‘the music itself.’ What Brackett makes clear is that even apparently innocent appraisals of music carry traces of race, gender, and class relations. Therefore, if we are to establish a link between heteronormative denunciations of ‘other’ musics and the heteronormative denunciations of social ‘others,’ we need to revisit key arguments about popular music consumption. The theorist who has provided the most influential and enduring discussion of this theme is Theodor Adorno. There are several reasons why his work is a useful starting point for a discussion of gay-identified dance music. Firstly, some of his writings on jazz give us an idea of how the body, dance, and even pleasure itself are devalued in many approaches to popular music.

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2 Motti Regev has noted that there is now a recognisable canon of rock music. The same can be said—to a certain extent—of certain types of electronic dance music. See Motti Regev, ‘The “Pop-Rockization” of Popular Music,’ in Hesmondhalgh and Negus, Popular Music Studies, 254-55.

3 Brackett, ‘Music,’ 137.
music. This is a minor but still significant theme which runs through rock-oriented critiques of dance music since the 1970s.\(^4\) Secondly, his thoughts on ‘standardisation’ represent one of the more sustained and comprehensive attacks on dance-oriented music, despite the fact that he was notoriously vague on the specifics of the music. Although 1990s critics of acid house, progressive trance, and ‘handbag’ may never have heard of Adorno, their arguments frequently invoke his ideas. Therefore, to engage with Adorno’s thoughts on music is to engage with a much larger body of work on this subject. Thirdly, although his work has its problems, he manages to firmly establish the fact that the music and its consumption are inextricably linked. This is significant because gay-identified dance music is often dismissed in a manner which suggests it is only ‘about the music.’ As I will show in Chapter Five, these appraisals are never about the music in isolation, though they may advertise themselves as such. Consequently, Adorno’s work provides us with a solid model for the discussion—one in which it is frankly admitted that discourses surrounding music partly help to constitute the music itself.

In the first half of this chapter, I explore some of the ramifications of Adorno’s ideas for the present thesis. In particular, I examine his notion of popular music audiences as ‘dupes’ of a monolithic culture industry, and review the useful way he shifts the analytical focus from apparently ‘individual’ pathologies to broader socio-cultural structures. These have been contentious issues for many critics of Adorno, and one of the most salient criticisms has been that his appraisal of popular music was, for the most part, advanced without reference to specific details of the music itself. In the final part of this chapter, then, I apply his theory of ‘standardisation’ and ‘part-interchangeability’ to a representative handbag track, with the aim of highlighting the ambiguities of his theoretical framework.

\(^4\) For instance, see Walter Hughes, ‘In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco,’ in Ross and Rose, Microphone Fiends, 147-48.
4.2 Historical context

Adorno belongs to the Frankfurt School, a philosophical branch of Marxism which emerged after World War I, and his work needs to be situated in the inter-war context. The Frankfurt School was comprised mostly of German Jewish thinkers (including Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse), and much of their work should be understood as a personal, as well as philosophical, response to the rise of fascism in Europe. The School’s leading exponents escaped Nazism by moving to the United States, and many of Adorno’s diatribes against popular culture may be better understood when set against this backdrop.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s position on popular culture was set out in the most famous chapter of their book, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, entitled: ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as mass deception.’ In Germany, they had witnessed the rise of totalitarianism and the apparent complicity of the masses in accepting such a system of governance. Thus, their writings were infused with a pessimism not so readily apparent in the work of their Marxist predecessors. Whereas Marx had believed the masses would gradually and inexorably throw off the shackles of ‘false consciousness’ and begin a revolution, Adorno and Horkheimer saw people only too willing to accept totalitarian rule. Moreover, the so-called democracy they observed in the United States did not seem to offer much of an alternative from the functionings of fascism. It is here that their suspicion of popular culture was tied to political pessimism. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, America was a place where the masses were oppressed by cultural (rather than social) conditions. Capitalism had paved the way for entrepreneurial monopolies, and the result was a mass culture which always appeared identical and, alarmingly, encouraged extreme social conformity in the ‘herds’ who consumed it. For example, just as the products of different automobile companies were only superficially distinct, there could be little distinction drawn between the products of various film studios. All such

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8 Ibid.
cultural products adhered to well-established, pre-determined formulae, and were
distinguished only by such surface features as stars or the use of technology.⁹ Not
only were all these products (and Adorno underlined their status as ‘product’) similar
to each other, but their function was similar to that of fascist propaganda.¹⁰ In
another often-cited work, Adorno made the point that commercial song publishers
and propagandists alike were concerned only with the ‘title, the beginning of the
text, the first eight bars of the refrain and the close of the refrain, which is usually
anticipated as a motto in the introduction.’¹¹ Since all music under capitalism was
subject to the same ‘industrial commercial logic,’ even art music could no longer be
seen as automatically ‘sacrosanct.’¹² Whatever merits it may once had had, opera
was increasingly consumed as a collection of hit tunes rather than as a totality.¹³

Traces of Adorno’s ideas can be found in much of the rock music press, which often
adopts a similar pessimistic view of the music industry. Here, an oppositional stance
towards popular culture is typically taken, a phenomenon which will be explored in
further detail in the next chapter.¹⁴ This is not so surprising when it is conceded that
much of Adorno’s work seems to be based on readily quantifiable ‘facts’:

In an age when a symphony orchestra can appear in uniforms designed to
advertise tobacco-industry sponsors…when a small selection of endlessly
permutated pop songs provides the background for almost every social
activity; when rhythm tracks on disco records can be behaviouristically
planned and electronically produced, for maximum precision and control: one
cannot…avoid the feeling that if Orwell’s ‘1984’ ever arrives, it might well
consist of a continuous Eurovision Song Contest…¹⁵

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⁹ Ibid., 38.
¹⁰ Keith Negus, Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University
¹² See: Negus, Popular Music, 39; Theodor Adorno, The Philosophy of Modern Music (New
¹³ Negus, Popular Music, 39. A similar argument has recently been made by Julian Johnson.
Press, 2002), 27.
¹⁴ Weinstein, ‘Art Versus Commerce.’
‘Guidebooks’ for writing songs—such as Abner Silver and Robert Bruce’s 1939 text, *How to Write and Sell a Hit Song*—provide further substantiation for the salience of Adorno’s ideas. Adorno noted that such guides would regularly refer to ‘standard’ songs that employed recurring ‘hooks,’ the terminology of which emphasised both the songs’ primary function as commodities (designed to ‘hook’ listeners into buying them) and their essentially formulaic nature (wherein deviation from the ‘standard’ would result in diminished profits). Meanwhile, research by Timothy D. Taylor underlines the ubiquitous commodification of art music—for instance, the way in which art music performers such as Lara St. John and Linda Lampenius are marketed much like pop stars. Adorno’s ideas have also been taken up by theorists in cultural and media studies, who—while recognising the totalising nature of such a ‘grand’ theory—find valuable insights into the workings of contemporary cultural industries. All of this indicates that there are strong reasons for the continued use of Adorno’s theories.

What, then, are some of the pitfalls of the theory? Richard Middleton observes that the Frankfurt School’s general political economy generalises too much. Observations about one particular historical moment (1930s Germany) form the basis of a grand totalising narrative in which ‘tendential strategy’ is turned into ‘achieved fact.’ Adorno’s work suggests that the masses are invariably manipulated by the products of the culture industry, and that this cultural structure always functions smoothly; but this argument fails to account for many phenomena in which resistance to commerce mingles with creativity. As Middleton puts it, Adorno fails to account for the many tensions within the popular music industry. There is an abundance of research into the popular music industry which emphasises that there is not always such a neat ‘fit’ between popular music institutions (record companies, publishers and so on) and sub-groups within each institution. Several writers have emphasised the way that

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musical commodities (records, CDs, and so on) are produced within a climate of conflict and competing—sometimes contradictory—forces.\textsuperscript{20}

Despite these problems, Adorno’s theories stubbornly refuse to go away. As Robert Witkin has pointed out, his work finds resonances even within popular culture. Jazz writers working at the same time as Adorno tended to share his view that the ‘commercial world’ was dangerous for musicians and listeners alike, and that it had negative effects on music-making.\textsuperscript{21} There are numerous more recent parallels where writers in the popular press engage Adorno-esque ideas to make claims about particular popular genres or artists. This usually happens implicitly (as in the case of rock and roll’s early reception) and occasionally explicitly (as in Ben Watson’s writings in \textit{The Wire}).\textsuperscript{22}

4.3 Passive or active audiences?

Adorno’s contention that popular music audiences are essentially passive has usually been taken for granted. Many critics have accepted that Adorno had essentially pessimistic views of the mass audience, and have gone on to rebut his ideas by demonstrating some of the ways in which audiences can be seen as active.\textsuperscript{23} Much of Adorno’s rhetoric does indeed suggest that popular music consumers are automatons, driven by unthinking impulses and completely dominated by the imperatives of the culture industry. He goes further than this, in fact, in asserting that all music listeners under capitalism are reduced to this level. A Beethoven melody—


\textsuperscript{23} Paul Willis mounts an argument along these lines when he discusses the activity of home-taping amongst young people. See Paul Willis, \textit{Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young} (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 59-84. This defence is also implicit in Gerry Bloustien’s study of how teenage girls construct their identity through various uses of music. See Gerry Bloustien, ‘On Not Dancing Like A “Try Hard,”’ in \textit{Musical Visions: Selected Conference Proceedings from 6th National Australian/New Zealand IASPM and Inaugural Arnhem Land Performance Conference}, ed. Gerry Bloustien (Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 1999), 9-18.
if reduced to the status of a pop tune in extracted form—becomes just as ‘debased’ as jazz music. The famous ‘Culture Industry’ essay makes various claims to this effect. At one point it is argued that ‘[c]apitalist production so confines [audiences], body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them.’ At another point, Horkheimer and Adorno state that ‘the product prescribes every reaction.’ Adorno’s writings on popular music are similarly pessimistic. His ‘theory about the listener’ posits that consumers have been conditioned by the workplace to obey, to the point where they develop an intrinsic ‘desire to obey.’ For Adorno, popular music panders to this impulse by providing only the most predictable schemata. It is most telling that this idea of the listener-as-passive is built into Adorno’s description of both the music itself and his ‘theory about the listener.’ On the music, he writes:

The composition hears for the listener. This is how popular music divests the listener of his spontaneity and promotes conditioned reflexes. Not only does it not require his effort to follow its concrete stream; it actually gives him models under which anything concrete still remaining may be subsumed. The schematic buildup dictates the way in which he must listen while, at the same time, it makes any effort in listening unnecessary. Popular music is ‘pre-digested’ in a way strongly resembling the fad of ‘digests’ of printed material.

Why are listeners content with this passive mode of listening? Why do they not seek more challenging material in their leisure time? Adorno traces this back to the way that workers are conditioned in the workplace:

To be sure, the way in which they must work on the assembly line, in the factory, or at office machines denies people any novelty. They seek novelty, but the strain and boredom associated with actual work leads to avoidance of

24 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 159.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 309.
29 Ibid., 306.
effort in that leisure time which offers the only chance for really new experience. As a substitute, they crave a stimulant. Popular music comes to offer it.  

Despite the extensive evidence of Adorno’s dismissive attitude towards popular music listeners, John Durham Peters has argued that he does not actually construe consumers as complete ‘dupes’ of the culture industry. He points out that Adorno’s construction of ‘the masses’ is precisely one of active masses: ‘when they [Horkheimer and Adorno] do talk about audiences, little in their analysis suggests passivity.’  

This attention to audience activity manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, Adorno is keenly aware of the fact that keeping up with the products of popular culture demands attention and occasionally intense physical activity. He concedes that the culture industry needs to maintain a rapid turnover of products (books, films, pop songs) in order to keep the ‘meek’ ‘obedient.’  

It is true, of course, that he has no trouble incorporating this notion within the overall logic of the culture industry: planned obsolescence ensures that there will always be a new product for the masses to consume, and also fits with the idea that products need to be easy to consume, not demanding too much attention from the listener. However, the point that Peters is making—and the one that has the most implications for a discussion of how dance music ‘affords’ dancefloor performances—is that consumers should not be seen as ‘dupes’ of the industry. Rather, they should be seen as actively engaging with the products of that industry.

The second contention of Peters is that popular media audiences are active in the way they resist the products of the industry. ‘Resistance’ here does not necessarily take the deliberate, spectacular form privileged by studies of subculture, but more a ‘sullen truculence’ which nevertheless betrays the fact that consumers are thinking. Horkheimer summarised this attitude in a letter to Leo Lowenthal, noting that rather

30 Ibid., 311.
than issuing ‘bitter critiques’ against the film industry, consumers registered their
dissatisfaction by sleeping or making love to each other in the cinema.  

Though hardly optimistic, this new perspective on Adorno’s work seems to be
amenable to the type of analysis I perform in the later chapters. In other words, there
is hope for audiences of popular music. However, I would argue that Peters’s
defence of Adorno—and his attempt to locate Adorno within the same intellectual
tradition as theorists in cultural studies—actually leads us down a cul-de-sac with
regards to dance music and the many ways it is put to use. The problem regards the
question of consciousness: Adorno certainly recognises the ‘activity’ in which
consumers are engaged; he is merely frustrated at the fact that all this activity is
expended in the pursuit of ‘distraction’ rather than genuine liberation. This
interpretation, however, makes Adorno’s claims far more totalising than they might
otherwise have been. Any defence of intensely physical, ‘active’ consumption of
popular music can be explained away with reference to a notion of false
consciousness: ‘yes, you’re active but in the wrong way.’ Chuck Eddy’s defence of
Spice Girls fans, for instance, falls into this trap:

When Angela McRobbie distinguishes between the Spice Girls’ ‘commercial
audience’ and the ‘active audience’ of what she calls ‘dance subcultures,’ I
really don’t understand what she’s talking about. For one thing, Spice Girls
fans are themselves a dance subculture. If you go to a show by that group,
you’re certainly not gonna see a huge crowd of thirteen-year-old girls
standing still. They’ll be on their feet, singing at the top of their lungs and
bounding all over the place. Angela’s cryptic dichotomy reminds me of the
old fifties Situationist myth about capitalism making people passive
consumers, as if all those bodysockers were shrieking and wetting their pants
over Elvis ‘passively.’ The Spice Girls and Alanis Morissette…are now
heroines and role models to preteen girls just like Cyndi Lauper and
Madonna and Molly Ringwald used to be. To me, their fans seem more
actively involved and critically discerning than, say, most techno or mosh-pit

crowds, who seem to settle for any music sonically screwed-up enough to serve as a backdrop to their selected antisocial activities.\textsuperscript{35}

Eddy’s prose is intentionally colloquial, but it nonetheless reflects my concerns here. If we defend popular music audiences by simply asserting that they are \textit{active} in their consumption practices, we are not really mounting any kind of defence for these practices (or the music they accompany) in the face of Adorno’s critique. Following this line of argument, Eddy’s comments above could be swept away with the simple assertion that the ‘activity’ of all these Spice Girls fans is misplaced. (Or, worse, it is a training ground for future conformism and the replication of the existing gender order.\textsuperscript{36}) More significantly, it becomes difficult to imagine what sort of defence \textit{anyone} could mount for popular music consumption. What I am arguing here is that perhaps Adorno is not as ‘totalising’ as he has been made out to be. On the contrary, it is a particular interpretation of his work (in this case, that of Peters) which contributes to the sense of an implacable, immovable industry.

The approach of Peters to Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay ‘The Culture Industry,’ then, represents a risky strategy. After decades of strong criticism for his elitism and for the way in which he constructs audiences as cultural ‘dupes,’ Peters is understandably keen to look for overlaps between his approach and the findings of cultural studies over the past thirty years. What he proposes is that we observe the many (minor) ways in which Adorno granted cultural audiences a degree of \textit{agency} (for instance, in the indirect protests which they launched against the products of the culture industry).\textsuperscript{37} As I stated earlier, this approach risks exacerbating the more totalising aspects of Adorno’s writings, effectively undermining the usefulness of his work. This is not to argue, however, that there are \textit{no} links between the dominant approaches in cultural studies which emerged by the 1970s and Adorno’s approach which was spelled out some 40 years earlier. I will argue that there is still something worth reclaiming in his work for the present discussion. In particular, I will review

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Chuck Eddy, ‘Cinderella at the Headbanger’s Ball,’ in Kelly and McDonnell, \textit{Stars Don’t Stand Still}, 136.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Peters, ‘The Subtlety of Horkheimer and Adorno,’ 66-68.
\end{itemize}
Adorno’s attention to the way in which the ‘individual’ becomes a substitute for the ‘social’ in contemporary society. It is this aspect of his argument which establishes an important benchmark for an exploration of how particular forms of music come to be associated with gay men, and—significantly—what the ramifications of those associations might be. I will explore this idea by linking Adorno’s work with the ‘ideology critique’ to be found in Richard Dyer’s influential work on the star system, and to the sociologist George Ritzer’s more recent observations about the nature of contemporary life.\(^{38}\)

### 4.4 The individual-as-social

Adorno reserved some of his most scathing comments for the astrology columns available in many popular magazines of the day. As Robert Witkin points out, this aspect of popular culture seems harmless enough on the surface.\(^{39}\) Indeed, considering the rise of fascism in the 1930s or, for that matter, the re-emergence and increasing prominence of neo-conservative political agendas in the 2000s, the humble predictions foisted on us by astrologers may seem like a relatively innocent distraction. The fact that many people frame their own personalities within a model set by the stars (‘Are you Pisces or Sagittarius?’) should surely be relegated to a trivia column, rather than a scholarly treatise. However, Adorno saw the star-sign system as having more pernicious effects.\(^{40}\) Just as he saw music (whether that of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, or ‘sweet jazz’) as a microcosm of social relations, he also saw readers’ relationship with astrology columns as being akin to the relationship between individuals and broader social structures. As a critical Marxist, he held the view that most individuals were governed by objective structures (for instance, the economy and a political system) which rendered them powerless. The star-sign

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\(^{39}\) Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 68.

\(^{40}\) Here, I use the term ‘star-sign system’ to refer to the ideas promoted by astrologers. Later, I will use the term ‘star system’ as a way of describing the ‘cult of celebrity’ analysed by writers such as Dyer. See Graeme Turner, Frances Bonner, and P. David Marshall, *Fame Games: The Production of Celebrity in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
system was one of the significant ways in which this system was perpetuated, for it promoted the idea that any dissatisfaction in life was not the result of these broad, over-arching structures (which, after all, are difficult to apprehend in everyday life), but rather the result of individual actions. As Witkin puts it, the ‘fundamental experience to which the column is oriented is the experience of helplessness.’\(^{41}\) Adorno’s thoughts on the astrology column therefore present us with a neat summary of his thinking on other aspects of popular culture, including film and music. He sees the star-sign system as obscuring the real causes of people’s (and especially workers’) unhappiness. More importantly, the star-sign system sets a limited framework within which people are ‘free’ to improve themselves. The movements of the stars, of course, are presented as inevitable and unchangeable. No one is responsible for their movements. The best that individuals can do, given that they are at the mercy of the stars, is to learn how the system works and to adjust the trivial details of their personal lives accordingly. As Adorno puts it: ‘On the one hand, the objective forces beyond the range of individual psychology and individual behaviour are exempt from critique by being endowed with metaphysical dignity. On the other hand, one has nothing to fear from them if only one follows objective configurations through a process of adaptation.’\(^{42}\)

We can summarise Adorno’s main argument here by saying that the social is increasingly obscured by matters pertaining to the individual. This is an argument which Richard Dyer made in his influential study of another kind of ‘star system’: the celebrity culture associated with Hollywood films.\(^{43}\) In a chapter on the ideological implications of the star system, Dyer argues that one of the primary functions of stars in contemporary society is to displace ideological values.\(^{44}\) Rather than explicitly celebrating the status quo, he argues, stars may sometimes displacement the very questions which might interrogate the status quo in the first place. Here, he draws on earlier writings on film by sociologist Barry King, who notes that stars

\(^{41}\) Witkin, Adorno on Popular Culture, 76.


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 27.
deflect attention from social problems by reducing these problems to the level of the individual:

By embodying and dramatising the flow of information, the stars promote depoliticised modes of attachment (i.e. acceptance of the status quo) in its audience. The stars promote a privatisation or personalisation of structural determinants, they promote a mass consciousness in the audience. Individuals who perceive their world in terms of personal relevance alone are individuals in a privatised mass. Their personal troubles tend to remain personal troubles.\(^{45}\)

Contemporary examples of this are too numerous to recount here, but one example should suffice. In the 1990 Garry Marshall film *Pretty Woman*, Julia Roberts plays a prostitute who is fortunate enough to meet her own ‘Prince Charming’ in the shape of Richard Gere.\(^{46}\) By the end of the film, the two characters have fallen in love and she has given up her occupation for an idyllic existence in assorted penthouse suites. The penultimate scene in the movie sees the protagonist packing a bag and preparing to leave her squalid apartment, telling her friend, ‘You know, I used to get good grades in school.’ The implication is clear enough: she need only work harder to make something of herself. The symbolism is underlined by her attire: at the start of the film, Roberts wears knee-high boots, tight mini-skirts, and a blonde wig; at the end she is dressed in jeans, and sneakers. To put this another way: her appearance is explicitly coded as alternately ‘slutty’ and ‘respectable.’ The story perfectly encapsulates the contradictions of the star-sign system which Adorno attacked in his essay ‘Stars Down to Earth.’ On the one hand, the protagonist’s options in life are determined by luck (she is lucky to be intelligent—‘I used to get good grades in school’) and more significantly by individual choice. Her life’s path is influenced not by any structural determinants but by a number of personal decisions, which can easily be reversed by simply ‘deciding’ to go back to school and donning a new wardrobe. As King described it, this effacement of the social works by shifting the


emphasis to personal matters: the film hero ‘converts the question “why do people feel this way?” to “how does it feel to have such feelings?”’\(^{47}\)

There is a definite link, therefore, between Dyer and Adorno. Although Dyer might contest Adorno’s claims that popular culture invariably harms its consumers in a process of ‘dumbing down,’ he would certainly agree that some aspects of popular culture function to preserve the status quo. Popular culture—including the star system—is able to do this by deflecting attention from the ‘objective’ causes of people’s unhappiness (particular social structures, economic systems, and so on), and distracts them with an incessant focus on the level of the individual.

It may seem as though this idea would prematurely shut down any discussion of the relationship between gay men and popular music. After all, sexual identity is frequently experienced as intensely personal, something which has nothing to do with social structures. I would argue, however, that it is precisely this aspect of Adorno’s work—his insistence that we make the world but not in conditions of our own making—which most usefully aligns his ideas with those of later theorists in cultural studies. This also makes Adorno’s work very useful for the present discussion. It should be noted that the sort of music (and associated behaviour) that I shall be discussing in subsequent chapters is frequently vilified by both queers and heterosexuals for the extent to which it seems that queers themselves are perpetuating stereotypes of homosexuality. For instance, in his diatribe against mainstream gay culture, Toby Manning includes ‘dance music’ as part of the prevailing gay ‘sensibility’ of the 1990s, and argues that it has the same negative effects as gay appropriations of ‘camp’:

The adoption of camp by homosexuals themselves is often viewed as ‘challenging’, but it’s arguable that camp even at its most sophisticated – as in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*—is the politest of weapons. After all, its appeal to gay culture is always said to be connected to its manipulation of ‘surface’… And in its often tawdry gay form—the oo-er,

exclamatory gush of gay journalists, the fiasco of Channel 4’s Camp Christmas, the affected witlessness of waiters in gay restaurants—it presents not a challenge but the reassurance that fags are just as limp and pussified as homophobes had always suspected.48

The argument can easily be extended to the aspects of performance which we find on the dance floor. The argument seems to be that certain people almost deserve the opprobrium they receive because they have made a rational choice to fulfil certain aspects of a gay stereotype—as if there are no dominant and powerful assumptions that regulate the performance of gay identity. Queer theorist Michael Warner has summarised this problem in relation to the experience of being ‘closeted’:

Common mythology understands the closet as an individual’s lie about him- or herself. Yet queers understand, at some level, that the closet was built around them, willy-nilly, by dominant assumptions about what goes without saying, what can be said without a breach of decorum, who shares the onus of disclosure, and who will bear the consequences of speech and silence… Speech is everywhere regulated unequally. This is experienced by lesbians and gay men as a private, individual problem of shame and closeting. But it is produced by the assumptions of everyday talk.49

This is where Adorno’s arguments about the star-sign system become relevant. Whereas critics like Manning tend to pin the blame on individuals (the journalists, for instance, who willingly and knowingly perpetuate the flamboyant stereotype of the gay man), Adorno would draw attention to the fact that this identity is not being constructed from scratch: it is partly being shaped by over-arching determinants.50 In order for people to construct an identity from themselves which is intelligible and recognisable to others, the identity must necessarily be cobbled together from existing fragments—fragments that will be shaped by historical and social forces. This calls into question the extent to which identity formation can be said to be a

50 It is worth emphasising the word ‘partly’ here.
‘rational choice’ in the first place.\textsuperscript{51} By extension, Adorno’s work also calls into question the extent to which people’s leisure choices—for instance, gay men’s investment in handbag music—can be called a ‘rational choice.’

In order to explain this further, we can usefully draw an analogy between this situation and that described by the sociologist George Ritzer, in his thesis on the ‘globalisation of nothing.’\textsuperscript{52} Ritzer uses the term ‘nothing’ to describe those ‘generally centrally conceived and controlled social forms that are comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content.’\textsuperscript{53} Like Adorno, Ritzer claims that the superficial differences between various mass-produced cultural forms are just that: superficial. In this category, he includes the (non-) services offered by Amazon.com, the (non-) people who have been replaced by automatic teller machines, and the (non-) foods sold by companies like McDonalds. While some critics would say that millions of people rationally choose, on a daily basis, to consume these products and services, Ritzer argues that the ‘rational choice’ argument falters on two counts. Firstly, there is ample evidence that the decisions to purchase particular goods and services are not entirely ‘rational’—note how advertisements for cars make appeals to their ‘sexiness,’ to their ability to make one a better person, and so on.\textsuperscript{54} (Simon Frith has similarly noted that this is one of the reasons why the record industry has trouble predicting consumer taste: taste is inherently ‘irrational.’\textsuperscript{55}) Secondly, the cultural industries often manage to delimit one’s choices to the extent that it becomes more and more difficult to choose alternatives. (Ritzer gives the example of a motorway on which every ‘food stop’ sells mainly junk food.\textsuperscript{56}) In a setting where people have less and less choice about what they consume, it is difficult to sustain the argument that they are making a ‘rational’ decision to eat a certain brand of food. To a certain extent, our choices are being pre-determined for us.

\textsuperscript{51} Here, I refer not so much to the initial presence of same-sex desire, but rather to the ‘choices’ about how to represent that desire, and how to construct an identity around it.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., xi.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 214.
\textsuperscript{56} Ritzer, \textit{The Globalization of Nothing}, 215.
This issue of ‘pre-determination’ is relevant to the relationship between gay men and popular musics. Firstly and most obviously, sexual identity and sexual practices are by no means entirely worked out on a ‘rational’ level. As Michael Warner notes, sexual identity is one of the areas of social life where appeals to logic and reason are misguided. People do not necessarily behave in accordance with what their ‘rational’ minds tell them is in their best interests, a fact which is well-established in the literature on HIV prevention. More importantly, however, we need to recognise Ritzer’s crucial point that our choices are frequently constrained by the available fragments which we are obliged to work with. To relate this briefly to the overall thesis, let us take the example of disco music. Certainly, critics are right to argue that disco is not the only form of music which queers have embraced over the past few decades. It is also true that there is no essential relationship between the lyrical and musical content of disco and the experiences of many gay men. However, what is interesting about the entire disco-gay nexus is that this connection is far more likely to be seen by young gay men than any other configuration of gay identity. During the 1990s, the productions of remixers such as Motiv8 and Almighty Associates were among the most visible (or most audible) types of music within the limited range of musics that would be heard in white gay clubs in Sydney. This means that Motiv8 and Almighty Associates have a greater chance of being associated with homosexuality even though they do not necessarily represent the experiences of most gay men, and even though they do not identify as queer themselves.

I have invoked Ritzer’s idea not to suggest that mainstream gay male culture is ‘nothing’ (although there are many aspects of it which fit Ritzer’s criteria), but simply to extend Adorno’s contention that the way social life is structured is not merely to do with matters of rational, individual choice. This means that the standard criticisms of gay men who ‘flaunt’ a stereotype on the dancefloor are misguided, insofar as they expect social change to manifest itself solely at the level of the individual.

57 Warner, The Trouble with Normal, 195-98.
59 Gill, Queer Noises, 161-70.
60 Gilbert and Pearson, Discographies, 100.
In light of the above, it may seem that Adorno’s contributions are only useful insofar as he discusses links between society and the individual, or between mass culture and the individual. However, I would argue that some of his specific descriptions of popular music are salient, too, and can be adapted for the present discussion. In particular, his ideas about the way that popular music is structured against a prevailing backdrop of standard expectations unintentionally gets to the heart of the pleasures of certain dance musics. It is to these descriptions that I now turn.

4.5 ‘Natural’: tonality in contemporary dance music

One of the central ideas in Adorno’s dismissal of popular music is the notion of ‘standardisation.’ It should be made clear that he was not opposed to standardisation in music per se. Many forms of ‘high art’ music are similarly characterised by predictable formulae. One need only think of terms like ‘sonata,’ ‘fugue,’ and ‘rondo’ to see the extent to which certain forms of art music adhere to established formal principles. Adorno was more concerned with the effect of standardisation in the industrial age. He saw music—and indeed, all forms of culture—capitulating to the requirements of capitalist modes of production. Thus, he saw a shift from earlier forms of standardisation to a new, more mechanistic model in which mass-produced cultural forms came to resemble other mass-produced commodities.

There are some surface similarities to the claims of rock ideologues here. Many such critics label all ‘mainstream’ pop music as trash, and see only commercial imperatives at work in this music. Adorno’s argument, however, goes considerably further than this, particularly with regard to musical details. He distinguished the products of the ‘culture industry’ from ‘serious’ music by two features which became particularly pronounced under advanced, industrialised conditions: part-interchangeability and pseudo-individualisation. Both of these terms allude to the presumed ‘mechanical’ nature of popular music. Just as an automobile’s parts are largely interchangeable, so too may any number of chord progressions, melodies,

and arrangements be substituted without affecting the whole. When considering this idea in light of recent years, there is a sense that production values studied by Timothy Warner could easily be slotted into this schema: one drum loop could be as effective as any other for any given song.63 (Indeed, the remix phenomenon of recent decades only seems to reinforce the idea that one type of instrumentation, and one set of production values, is as good as the next when it comes to popular songs.64) More than commenting on the ‘mechanical’ character of assembly-line pop, however, Adorno was making a claim for the relationship between the part and the whole. He saw all the raw materials of popular music as ‘interchangeable’ because they were like isolated ingredients poured into a pre-determined mould. Unlike ‘serious’ forms of music which developed organically, popular music was typically generated from a static, unchanging formula.

To sum up the difference: in Beethoven and in good serious music in general...the detail virtually contains the whole and leads to the exposition of the whole, at the same time, it is produced out of the conception of the whole. In popular music the relationship is fortuitous. The detail has no bearing on a whole, which appears as an extraneous framework. Thus, the whole is never altered by the individual event and therefore remains, as it were, aloof, imperturbable, and unnoticed throughout the piece. At the same time the detail is mutilated by a device that it can never influence and alter, so that the detail remains inconsequential.65

These are grand claims, and Adorno rarely refers to specific songs to substantiate his case. But what if Adorno could illustrate his argument with reference to some representative handbag tracks? It is easy to claim that popular music in general—and handbag music more specifically—is ‘standardised.’ But would a close analysis of the music reveal absolute standardisation?

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64 For more information on common practices in remixing, see Jonathan Tankel, ‘The Practice of Recording Music: Remixing as Recoding,’ *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 3 (1990): 34-46.
In the analysis that follows, I use a handbag remix to highlight the ambivalence within the idea of ‘standardisation.’ The track—a remix of ‘Natural,’ by S Club 7—is in many ways a textbook example of handbag. The remix was produced by Almighty Associates (Martyn Norris and Jon Dixon), who established themselves in gay male clubs during the 1990s with a series of cover versions of ABBA songs released under the pseudonym Abbacadabra. They remained ubiquitous in many clubs thanks to their remixes of teen pop acts such as B*Witched, Scooch, and A1.66

In its structure, its adherence to the song form, its use of harmonic material, and its instrumental palette, the Almighty mix of ‘Natural’ conforms to the norms of handbag music to a significant extent. I am not aiming to comprehensively refute the idea of standardisation. However, I will argue that in both the ‘standardised’ and the ‘pseudo-individual’ parts of the track, Almighty Associates demonstrate a keen awareness of what works on the dance floor. The various elements that have gone into this track may be standardised, but they are not completely interchangeable (as Adorno would contend). Instead, these features are used strategically, to heighten the sense of excitement at specific points of the song. Such devices would not necessarily have the same effect if they were deployed in an arbitrary manner.

The analysis, then, contributes to the larger thesis in two ways. Firstly, it highlights some of the ways in which the music becomes functional on the dance floor, with reference to a specific track. Unlike the work of Thornton and Jackson reviewed in Chapter Three, the following analysis takes the actual sounds of this music seriously, and argues that specific details matter in making the music useful on the dance floor. The analysis is a response to both Adorno’s general pessimism about popular culture, and to clubbers’ patronising attitude towards handbag music.67 By paying close attention to Almighty Associates’ musical material, I argue that there are concrete and readily identifiable reasons that this music functions effectively in

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67 See pages 92-94 and 84-85 of this thesis, respectively. The dismissal of handbag music within the dance music press is explored in more detail in Chapter Five. See pages 131-150.
certain night clubs, and that ‘standardisation’ is actually a necessary part of this function.

The original version of ‘Natural’ is based on the song ‘Tous Les Maux D’Amour’ and incorporates an extract from Gabriel Fauré’s ‘Pavane.’ The Fauré extract is not a sample from an orchestral recording of the piece, but is reproduced on synthesisers. This is a salient point: the ‘synthetic’ nature of the music is one of the key ingredients with which listeners can situate the music in generic terms (‘a teen-pop track’). I have mapped the various sections of the remix in Figure 4.1.

**Figure 4.1**

*Structural Overview of S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix)’*

[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 2]

Graphic Representation by Adrian Renzo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Min:sec</th>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Key area</th>
<th>Gradual shift to F major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Intro - build-up</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td>Gradual shift to F major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0:14</td>
<td>Riff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>0:29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>0:43</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>0:58</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>1:27</td>
<td>Gradual shift to F major</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>1:41</td>
<td>Riff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>1:56</td>
<td>Riff</td>
<td></td>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>2:10</td>
<td>Verse 1</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82</td>
<td>2:26</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>2:41</td>
<td>Riff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>2:55</td>
<td>Verse 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106</td>
<td>3:10</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>114</td>
<td>3:24</td>
<td>Riff*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122</td>
<td>3:39</td>
<td>Int.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>130</td>
<td>3:53</td>
<td>Riff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
<td>4:08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Continued overleaf.]

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68 ‘Tous Les Maux D’Amour’ is written by Norma Ray and Jean Fredenucci.
The diagram shows that the ‘song’ sections of this remix (beginning at bar 73) are predominantly in D minor, just like the original version of ‘Natural.’ It also shows that Almighty have added two sections in F major. Significantly, and with only minor alterations, the main riff of the song fits seamlessly over both the F major and D minor sections. This switching between keys is of great interest to any Adorno-esque reading of the song. On the surface, it appears not to matter if individual parts of the song are moved around or changed arbitrarily; the parts are so interchangeable that they will fit almost anywhere, with little discernable difference to the overall product. The excerpts below show the riff in both its F major and D minor permutations (see Musical Example 4.1 and Musical Example 4.2, below).
Musical Example 4.1
S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ mm. 69-72, 2.03-2.10
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 2]
[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 2]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

Musical Example 4.2
S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ mm. 94-97, 2.48-2.55
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 3]
[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 2]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo
However, I would argue that the different versions of the riff are not completely interchangeable. The F major version is always carefully set up with an extensive ‘buildup’ or textural crescendo (see bars 9-64 and 130-45), while the D minor section appears to be tacked on to the end of vocal sections (see bars 90-97). As we shall see, the riff appears in D minor only to preserve the flow of the ‘song’ sections. The F major riff, on the other hand, carries connotations of explosive release—to borrow Gilbert and Pearson’s terms, it sounds like a ‘warm bath of lush sensation.’ To illustrate this, it will be useful to explore the ways in which the F major riff is framed within the track. This analysis will also give us an insight into some of the parameters (other than pitch material) that signify a buildup and explosive release in this music.

The opening of ‘Natural’ consists of a standard buildup of instruments, as illustrated in Figure 4.2, below. The introduction uses what I will call a ‘restricted’ version of the harmonies of the song ‘proper.’ To put this another way: the song is in D minor, and, like many other handbag tracks, the introduction is largely restricted to a series of repeated tonic notes in the bass line, with some tonic-centred ‘padding’ from additional synthesisers. (See Appendix C for a full definition of ‘harmonic restriction.’)

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69 A ‘buildup,’ to borrow Butler’s term, is a section of the track in which various elements are deployed to signal an imminent climax or ‘peak’ of the track. See Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 223-24.

70 Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 78.
There are many ways in which this section may be heard as a buildup—the part of the track when we are supposed to dance most frenetically, ‘marking maximal enjoyment.’

The first and most obvious technique is the stratified composition, in which instruments are added to the mix one layer at a time, so that the density of the track steadily increases.

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71 Most of the changes that occur in this section of the track take place as indicated in the graph: that is, instruments are either switched ‘on’ or ‘off.’ However, sometimes there are subtle variations to this formula. In those cases where the variations are sufficiently minor, I have retained the binary on/off appearance of the graph for clarity’s sake. (For example, I have indicated that riff 2 begins at bar 41, even though it actually fades into the mix slightly before that point.)

72 Bollen, ‘Queer Kinaesthesia,’ 229.
This textural crescendo is reinforced by the increasing fanfare with which each element is introduced. The staccato synth riff at bar 9 is introduced with a mere cymbal crash (see Musical Example 4.3).

**Musical Example 4.3**

*S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ mm. 8-10, 0.12-0.18*

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 5]

[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 2]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo

When the bass line is introduced in bar 17, the cymbal crash is heard again, but this time it is supplemented with the synthesised equivalent of a brief orchestral hit, reinforcing the tonic, D (see Musical Example 4.4, below).
Musical Example 4.4

S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ mm. 16-18, 0.27-0.32

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 6]

[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 2]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo

By the time the next layer of music is introduced, the cymbal crash and the orchestral hit, it seems, are no longer enough to mark the beginning of a new phrase. Instead of simply repeating these elements at the start of the following eight bars, Almighty add two new effects to signal that a new section is imminent—both of them in bar 24. First, a descending swirling effect is introduced. Secondly, the four-to-the-floor bass drum is briefly interrupted. It falters on the third beat of the bar, and is then heard on the sixth and eighth quavers of that bar: off the beat and suddenly in synchronisation with the bassline (see Musical Example 4.5, below).
Musical Example 4.5
S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ mm. 24-26, 0.41-0.47
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 7]
[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 2]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

All of these techniques are standard signifiers of ‘building-up’ in handbag music. It is worth emphasising them here because they acquire a retrospective significance when we hear what we have been building up to: a shift to F major.
At bar 49, Almighty employ a staple of their repertoire: the muting of all instruments except for one new synthesiser riff. The riff seems to be in D minor, particularly given that all the preceding harmonic material has been centred on D (see Musical Example 4.6).

**Musical Example 4.6**

S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ mm. 49-56, 1.27-1.41

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 8]

[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 2]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo

However, when the riff is repeated at bar 49, it is joined by a number of harmonies that suggest a switch to F major (see Musical Example 4.7, below).
Musical Example 4.7
S Club 7, ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ mm. 57-64, 1.41-1.56
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 9]
[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 2]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

The thickening of the pitch material—changing from a monophonic melody to a series of chords—is supplemented with a parallel change in the timbre of the synthesiser. From bar 49 onward, the sound is gradually made sharper, with the higher frequencies gradually becoming louder. From bar 57, a synth snare drum gradually emerges, playing a series of continuous semiquavers—another conventional signifier of imminent climax. In bar 63, we hear another descending ‘swirl’ effect, and in bar 64, the snare drum semiquavers turn into demisemiquavers. When the bass line, drum loops, cymbal crashes, and synth pads return at the start of bar 65, it can come as no surprise—everything that has happened in the music thus far has been signalling that this is the ‘peak’ of the song. Since this textural
crescendo ‘climaxes’ with a switch to F major, the key change itself comes to signify ecstatic release or ‘maximal enjoyment’ on the dance floor.

As I noted on pages 111-113, an Adorno-inspired reading of this song could easily focus on the riff that is featured during the sections just cited. By bar 73, the riff is firmly established in the key of F major, and during bars 90-97, it is seamlessly grafted onto a D minor chord progression. If the individual parts of the song can be cut-and-pasted so easily, surely they are utterly interchangeable? On the surface, it seems that one riff can function as well as any other. However, if we pay closer attention to the D minor version of the riff, we find a slightly more complicated story.

There are a number of reasons that the F major riff later appears in D minor. Almighty appear to do this to conform to handbag’s standardised formulae. Paradoxically, however, the switch to D minor highlights just how important the context of these specific details are. In other words, it is only after we have heard the riff in D minor that we notice just how differently the earlier, F major version was constructed. The two versions are, in short, not interchangeable. To explain this further, I shall briefly recount some of the formulae that Almighty adhere to at bars 90-97.

During bars 90-97, the riff appears in D minor. This is a thoroughly conventional place in which to situate such a riff. (In a three-minute pop song, a chorus will often segue immediately to the next verse.\footnote{This is the case in the original, album version of ‘Natural.’} In an extended remix, this structure is expanded; producers will often use an additional riff as ‘filler’ material between the chorus and the subsequent verse.\footnote{This is the case in the Almighty Mix of ‘Natural.’}) If this were the only convention guiding the production of ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ then the F major riff could be unproblematically inserted at bar 90, directly after the chorus. However, such a move would be awkward in the context of this remix, because the vocal line of the chorus leads unambiguously back to D minor (see Musical Example 4.8).\footnote{S Club 7, ‘Natural,’ on 7 (CD album) (Polydor 549 057-2, 2000).}
Musical Example 4.8
S Club 7, ‘Natural (Album Version),’ end of chorus, mm. 23-25, 0.54-1.01
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 10]
[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 3]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

To avoid a potential clash between the sung D (‘oh so natural to me’) and the F major chord that would inevitably accompany it, Almighty have adapted the riff and continued the chord progression from the chorus (see Musical Example 4.9, below).
In this section, then, there is a clear case of substitution for expedience. It seems that Almighty would *like* to insert the riff in this section (the format almost demands it),
but in order to conform to another dictate of the format—that of foregrounding the vocals, particularly during the chorus—Almighty are forced to adapt their riff. On the surface, this would seem to bolster Adorno’s case that the individual parts of pop songs are interchangeable—all the cutting-and-pasting evident here does not markedly change the whole of the track. However, the D minor riff does not carry the same connotations as its F major counterpart. For instance, we may note that the D minor version only lasts for eight bars (see Figure 4.1, page 110). More significantly, it is not framed as a particularly noteworthy event in the track. It is not preceded by a lengthy buildup; in fact, it is not really ‘prepared for’ in any way—the vocals simply segue into it with little fanfare. Even more tellingly, when another version of the D minor riff appears at bars 130-145, it does so as part of another lengthy, teleological buildup—and it climaxes in the return of the F major riff at bar 146.

If this D minor version had the same affective charge as the F major version, then Almighty could easily have used it throughout the track, including the point at bars 49-72 (see Figure 4.1, page 110). I have re-recorded the track with such a substitution (see CD 1, tr. 12), and the result is arguably less effective than the full F major version from the released Almighty Mix.

In short, then, we have a song that was originally written in the key of D minor, which only moves to F major in the Almighty Mix, during those extended, ‘12-inch’ sections—sections that only appear at the start and approximately two-thirds of the way through the track.\footnote{For details about typical characteristics of the 12-inch format and its historical development, see: Rietveld, \textit{This Is Our House}, 105-107; Straw, ‘Dance Music,’ 167-69; Will Straw, ‘Value and Velocity: The 12-inch Single as Medium and Artifact,’ in Hesmondhalgh and Negus, \textit{Popular Music Studies}, 165-68; Thornton, \textit{Club Cultures}, 58-61.} As with many Almighty mixes (and as is the case in many works from this genre), the remix adds a new riff and uses this as raw material to be manipulated and ‘played with’ during the extended sections of the track. What is significant here—in Adorno’s terms—is the fact that the ‘cog’ is not slotted into the machine arbitrarily. On the contrary: key relationships in the song amplify the connotations of the riff in different contexts.
To make sense of this, we need to clarify the difference between the original three-minute pop song and the Almighty remix. The distinction between the two is comparable to the difference between pop songs generally and 1970s disco, and is elucidated in Richard Dyer’s influential article ‘In Defense of Disco.’ Dyer notes the way that disco tunes ‘open up’ the structure of traditional pop songs by incessantly repeating smaller phrases, rather than following rigid structures such as the classic AABA form of Tin Pan Alley tunes. He notes that the power of the tonic—its status as the harmonic ‘anchor’ of a song—is considerably weakened through repetition. It is this repetition which, for Dyer, allows the music to ‘invade the whole of one’s body.’ We might call this the ‘extended ethos’ of 12-inch singles: the principle of isolating certain parts of a track and delaying their development indefinitely, with the intention of creating a new set of textures, rhythms and tonal colours for the dancefloor. This ethos—the notion that a song can be more than a verse, a chorus, and a middle-eight—is now well established in many of disco’s contemporary descendants. What is significant about the key relationships in the Almighty Mix, then, is that it is precisely during those ‘extended’ sections—the ones that most resemble instrumental, club tracks, designed to ‘invade the whole of one’s body’—where Almighty choose to switch to F major. If this music sounds standardised, the standardisation is used with one eye firmly on the dance floor.

In light of my discussion in Chapter Two, it is worth emphasising that the ‘significance’ (for want of a better term) of these sections does not stem from ‘the music itself’—the usual charge of the sociologist. Rather, the ‘meaning’ of the music stands ‘in interdependent relation to social contexts.’ When played on a car stereo on the way to a club, the most significant parts of the remix may indeed be the ‘song’ sections, which present a more or less coherent version of ‘Natural,’ with all verses and choruses where they should be, following the expected sequence. In the

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78 Ibid., 414.
79 The ‘handbag’ genre which Almighty work in is an obvious descendant of disco. See Thornton, Club Cultures, 87-115.
80 Note the arguments reviewed in the previous chapter. See also: DeNora, Music in Everyday Life, 41-45.
81 Ibid., 37.
club itself, however, the ‘extended’ F major sections can become the main attraction of the song. We know this because it is during these sections that the full panoply of textural and timbral effects (detailed earlier) are exploited by the producers in order to encourage dancers to move ever more frenetically. It is during these sections that the original song structure is loosened, and where dancers can concentrate on the sounds themselves (as opposed to the lyrics, or even the familiar structure of the song). This, of course, does not mean that the music suddenly shifts to a magical convention-free zone where anything is possible. Arguably, the very idea of an ‘extended’ section to a pop song has become just as standardised as the song form itself. However, it is worth noting the choice of musical ‘cogs’ for these sections: a shift from D minor to F major which does not happen in the original version of the song, and which is amplified here by the use of every timbral trick in the producer’s arsenal.

The analysis above, then, has not aimed to simply assert that this music really is complex in ways that Adorno could not have imagined. Rather, it has raised the possibility of shifting the focus of the discussion away from the ‘standardisation/innovation’ argument altogether. Rather than identifying the extent of standardisation (and what this standardisation might ‘signify’ in a broader sense), we may be better off exploring why certain features of the music are deployed in particular ways in certain contexts to fulfil particular functions. Aside from avoiding well-established arguments about ‘high vs low’ culture, this approach also allows us to take a more flexible approach towards musical aesthetics, a point that I take up in Chapter Five.

It may seem that my close descriptions of the music—along with the implicit attribution of intent to the producers—may undermine this point. Yet, in describing the Almighty Associates’ music as I have above, I am not attempting to make any grand claim for its musical sophistication, or that it is worthy of being included in a new dance music canon.^{82} Nor am I advancing the idea that its producers have been

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^{82} It is becoming increasingly clear that such a canon already exists. Not surprisingly, it ignores the more ‘girly’ and ‘mainstream’ strands of dance music such as that produced by Almighty. For examples of this see: Garratt, *Adventures in Wonderland*, 36-64; Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 2-33.
bestowed with some sort of metaphysical inspiration, a claim which has, from time
to time, been applied to their counterparts in rock music. On the contrary: the
patterns and ‘demands’ that I have outlined do not stem from the ‘genius’ of Martin
Norris and Jon Dixon. Rather these patterns are the result of a set of norms being
internalised and reproduced. To seek to elevate this music to some sort of canonical
status, I would need to mount an argument not only about the unique characteristics
of the music, but also about the unique qualities of the individuals who produced it.
In doing this, I would need to draw on traditional approaches to creativity, which see
the producers of culture as somehow separate from the rest of the world. However,
I would argue that the musical details I have been describing are both non-
tentional and the result of an immersion in the field of dance music. Most
commonly, this is seen as undermining the credibility of the analysis. (We can see
this in the common complaint: ‘Did she really mean to do that? Or are you reading
too much into things?’). This line of reasoning, though seductive and extremely
common, is not necessarily accurate. Looked at in a different way, these musical
devices might be seen as illuminating precisely because they are not performed intentionaly—because they reflect an unofficial training in the norms of the music.
This, I would argue, is why it is so common for club DJs to make the transition into
music production. As Will Straw points out, they are the people most likely to have
observed the effects of particular devices on actual crowds of dancers, and are then
able to incorporate this newfound knowledge in their studio practice. The key point
is that this process is not articulated, or even necessarily conscious in the first place.
Antoine Hennion’s observations of hit song producers in France perfectly
demonstrates this. Virtually all the participants he observed in his ethnographic
research were trying to bring the ‘public’ (however vaguely defined) into the studio,

83 On this issue, see Keith Negus and Michael Pickering, ‘Creativity and Musical Experience,’ in Hesmondhalgh and Negus, Popular Music Studies, 179-80.
84 Psychologists have also begun exploring the socio-cultural dimensions of creativity. See Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi, ‘Implications of a Systems Perspective for the Study of Creativity,’ in Handbook of Creativity, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 313.
85 David Hesmondhalgh notes that much work in this field seeks to elucidate the ‘unintentional complexity of cultural texts.’ See Hesmondhalgh, The Cultural Industries, 43. Emphasis in original.
87 Ibid.
88 Antoine Hennion, ‘The Production of Success: An Antimusicology of the Pop Song,’ in Frith and Goodwin, On Record, 202-204.
to hear the songs ‘afresh’ as they evolved. Most significantly, Hennion described the producer’s role as representing the public’s ‘ears.’ The successful producer was the person who—on a seemingly instinctive, ‘gut’ level—could sense what would work and what would not work for the masses:

The producer is not a calculator. His [sic] knowledge of the pop music scene and his experience of the public are of value only when he has integrated them within an ‘immediate’ sensitivity: only then do they mutely guarantee the genuineness of his taste, which can exercise itself spontaneously and in a subjective, noncerebral fashion. He can forget the criteria that he has interiorized and allow himself to give in to his feelings, to react to what he perceives as purely physical sensations produced by such and such effects: ‘I select the takes according to what gives me a thrill when I listen. It’s completely idiotic, but that’s the way it is. I can’t even explain why; it’s purely physical, I wait until it makes my skin tingle’...

What I am keen to stress here is the fact that we need not take the comments of these musicians (‘I wait until it makes my skin tingle’) at face value. Certainly, Hennion’s record producer does not articulate the process through which he came to learn what sounds ‘good’ and what does not. However, this does not prove that no learning has taken place. Rather, following Hennion’s observations, we can see how the most successful practitioners in the field are the ones who have sufficiently internalised the norms of their respective genres, to the point where they no longer need to explicitly invoke that knowledge but can use it on an ‘instinctual’ level. If the music of these producers is ‘standardised,’ that may well be a measure of their success at learning to play the game, rather than reflecting their failure to be ‘innovative.’

This point places my analysis of ‘Natural’ in a more ambivalent light. The very act of describing the sounds tends to make the music sound complex—a strategy that is still associated with canonisation. However, this raises the question: if such close analysis has a history of being put to ‘canonising’ use, does this automatically rule it

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89 Ibid., 201.
out as a valid form of analysis? If, as I have made clear, the description is aimed at revealing *norms* and *conventions* rather than blinding flashes of innovation, then it is difficult to see why the close analysis of what is actually being heard should be regarded as a particularly dangerous relic from traditional musicology.\(^90\) The alternative would be to simply leave all close analysis to those who *do* seek to assert the inherent superiority of ‘their’ music over other musics.\(^91\) As I will show in the next chapter, there is no shortage of such commentary. Much of the discourse found in the dance music press and on dance-oriented websites seeks to uphold one set of values (and champions particular subgenres of music) at the expense of others. As I argued in Chapter Three, this process of distinction is not an arbitrary or neutral one: it carries traces of social power. An analysis that focuses on the norms of dance music (along with specific instances of those norms being put into practice) is useful for counteracting the claims of people who perpetuate these discourses. Therefore, Chapter Five will critically examine how dance music is constructed within the popular press and on fan-oriented websites, and the many ways in which this construction serves to devalue particular forms of dance music such as handbag.

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\(^90\) The very analysis of ‘innovation’ is relatively meaningless without some sense of the field in which – or against which – ‘innovation’ happens. On this point, see Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6-7.

CHAPTER 5

HANDBAG AS LOW-OTHER
5.1 Introduction

The discussion of Thornton and Jackson’s work in Chapter Three highlighted the fact that value judgements are rife within dance music scenes. The many genres and sub-genres that constitute ‘electronic dance music’ are usually positioned as part of a hierarchy: some are highly valued, while others are perceived as relatively worthless. While this hierarchy is always open to contestation and negotiation, it remains (in many circles) remarkably resilient. I contend that this is because of the large amount of category-maintenance work that is carried out around the music. This maintenance work sustains not only the differences between the various genres of dance music, but also between the different levels of value accorded to each genre. The present chapter, then, elaborates on the findings of Chapter Three, by exploring the various ways in which music tends to be valued in dance music culture. I will highlight the fact that this set of values tends to place handbag music at a disadvantage.

This chapter also continues the theme established in the previous discussion of Adorno. While Adorno and his followers tend to dismiss all aspects of popular music as equally standardised and pseudo-individual, I have demonstrated (in the analysis of S Club 7’s ‘Natural’) that specific elements carry a very specific connotative or affective charge. To simply substitute one element for another is to significantly change the desired affect of the song, or the desired effect of a particular part of the song. In the Almighty remix of ‘Natural,’ we saw how particular devices (such as the shift to the key of F major) coincided with the full panoply of textural and timbral devices that connote ‘climax’ in handbag. Thus, while some aspects of the music (a synthesiser riff, a drum loop) may appear to be pseudo-individual and entirely replaceable, they are in fact carefully placed to maximise particular effects on the dance floor. In the following analysis of popular discourse in the dance music press and on fan-oriented web sites, I shall demonstrate that this way of approaching the

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1 Sections of this chapter were presented in a paper entitled ‘“Handbag and Homos: A Marriage of Convenience,” at Music as Cultural Interpretation, the 23rd National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia and the 17th Annual Conference of the New Zealand Musicological Society, 27-30 April 2000. I wish to thank the participants at these sessions for their invaluable feedback.

2 See pages 76-77 of this thesis. See also Davies, Frogs and Snails, 31.
music is consistently and deliberately shunned in favour of a totalising, dichotomous approach—one that sets up clear distinctions between ‘worthy’ musics (variously defined) and the low-Other. As we shall see, these distinctions are not the exclusive preserve of the popular press, and can be traced back to more scholarly positions on music. Significantly, the music that is construed as the low-Other is frequently that which is most closely associated with gay male culture.

In particular, I shall focus on the following aspects of the commentary in the popular press. Firstly, I will show that much discourse around dance music uses a framework for evaluating music which has been adapted from other genres. In short, I will demonstrate that this commentary falls into the trap of evaluating dance music according to terms that ultimately devalue handbag. Notions of music being ‘innovative,’ ‘unique,’ and ‘challenging’ are all invoked to advance particular subgenres of dance music as inherently superior to others. Handbag is rarely mentioned in this commentary, but it nevertheless serves as a convenient shadow to all ‘good’ music. Secondly, I will show how these implicit dismissals of everything that handbag stands for are frequently bound up with implicit scorn for the feminine.

In the final section of the chapter, I turn to some alternative ways of appraising this music—ways which acknowledge the pleasures of handbag for a gay male audience.

5.2 Innovation over pleasure

The very term ‘dance music’ implies that the music in question is designed with a specific use in mind. Arguably, the most successful examples of dance music are those that take into account the desires of people on the dance floor, as opposed to contributors to the dance press. Interestingly, however, in the discourse that now pervades dance music culture—as exemplified in the pages of the Australian dance music press and its online equivalents—the priorities of dancers seems to be increasingly sidelined. The effectiveness of dance music as utilitarian music, as music designed for dancing, or as music that can intensify our experience of the present, is frequently ignored. Instead, the main criteria for determining the value of such music is drawn from familiar discourses of Western music and from rock
music. These discourses place a high value on innovation rather than functionality, and their application in the field of dance music does much to explain why handbag music is largely ignored or dismissed as inferior.

When we read the opinions of critics within the popular and dance-oriented press, there are curious echoes of how rock music imported values already established in the criticism of high art. As Keir Keightley points out, rock music and culture has always been characterised by a central contradiction. It is a massively popular form of music with a distinctly anti-mass ideology. While rock music is a ‘standardised commodity…that is available virtually everywhere,’ the people with an investment in this music have tended to embrace the music in terms of ‘freedom, rebellion, marginality, oppositionality, uniqueness and authenticity.’ One of the ways in which rock fans and critics have dealt with this contradiction is by establishing a stratification of taste. Some forms of consumption are viewed as ‘special’ while others are debased and merely ‘commercial.’ In this respect, rock musicians and fans have managed to import some of the ideological baggage associated with other musics into the sphere of rock music. Keightley traces this back to the historical significance of an ageing generation of baby boomers. Many people of this generation, he argues, identified intensely with rock music as they grew up, and were wary of the dominant culture’s assumption that one’s musical tastes should ‘mature’ as they got older:

Typically, ‘maturity’ had meant a shift to ‘adult’ popular music (or classical music, or jazz), and away from those sorts of music which were now, with ageing, meant to seem trivial. Rock culture managed to adopt the dominant culture’s value system (with its claims that the serious was better than the trivial), but to find the serious within the realm of mass-produced popular music. To find it there meant that one could continue listening to rock music,

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3 For a discussion of the pertinent discourse of Western art music, see pages 136-137 of this thesis. For a discussion of rock music’s discourses, see pages 142-143.
4 See Regev, ‘Producing Artistic Value,’ 86.
6 Ibid., 125-29.
and buying it in its various commodity forms, throughout the ageing process, throughout those years in which tastes were to ‘mature.’

Like Sarah Thornton in her work on dance music subcultures, Keightley draws attention to the fact that rock music comes with a particular type of ideology, one that is rarely acknowledged in the popular press. This ideology is built from the materials of the various musical cultures which have fed into rock music. For instance, from garage bands comes ‘an appreciation for passion and spontaneity over technical ability,’ and from soul music comes the notion of ‘autobiography as a pinnacle of musical authenticity’.

As I showed in Chapter Three, dance music, too, comes with various ideological positions attached. When we inspect the commentary of critics and musicians in this field, we see that the need to uphold the music as a type of ‘art’ has infiltrated the perspectives of clubbers and dance music producers. This notion that music must be considered ‘artistic’ in order to be valid puts handbag music at a serious disadvantage. Handbag, a music that explicitly foregrounds its own performative aspects and gives clubbers an opportunity to ‘perform’ on the dance floor in various ways, clashes with the values of the newly ‘artistic’ connoisseurs of ‘electronic dance music.’ The first and most obvious way in which it does this is the way it eschews what I would call ‘compulsory innovation’: the demand that tracks be groundbreaking, challenging, or innovative in order to be considered valid.

This implicit demand was evident in the British dance press of the late 1980s (as documented by Thornton), and it was a persistent thread throughout the 1990s, as can be seen in the following comments from Stuart McMillan and Orde Meikle.

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7 Keightley, ‘Reconsidering Rock,’ 130. The following passage by critic Giles Smith neatly captures the dilemma faced by aging baby boomers who continue to listen to ‘youth’-oriented music: ‘Growing up in the 1970s, you were often told by your elders that pop’s tyrannical rule over your life would not last. Pop, they said, was just a phase you were going through, a kind of teenage mood. It would clear, like spots, as you entered your twenties to be smoothly replaced by an adult taste for classical music – orchestras, operas, the real thing. music which demanded more of you than a three-minute spasm of helpless assent and (the rumour was) gave you so much more in return. But I’ve reached thirty-two and it still hasn’t happened. Pop isn’t only for young people any more and it isn’t only made by them.’ See Giles Smith, Lost in Music (London: Picador, 1995), 2-3.
8 Ibid., 119.
When reviewing a disc from the duo Masters At Work (MAW), they write: ‘We’re into MAW’s lurching drums and grooves, but even quality formula is STILL formula; you can predict every step; [the] vocals arrive on cue, then 20 bars later a stringy section will soar up...yup.’9 In the same issue of DJ magazine, remix producer Rollo admitted: ‘I’ve compromised a bit more recently, I tend to do eight bars of hi hat and bass drum at the beginning and then drop into the starting point. Long breakdowns are par for the course.’10 Paradoxically, the formula that Rollo singles out—that of including a drum ‘break’ at the beginning of a record—is one which facilitates DJ performances.11 When two records begin and end with a minimal drum pattern generated by a drum machine, a DJ will usually find it easier to synchronise and then segue from one to the other. Despite this, Rollo shuns the convention, simply on the grounds that it is not original or innovative enough—any concession to convention is interpreted as a ‘compromise.’

This insistence that music be ‘innovative,’ ‘challenging,’ or ‘ground breaking’ is still a staple of the popular commentary that surrounds dance music, and is particularly evident in the Sydney-based street press, such as The Brag and 3D World. When asked what their idea of ‘good music’ is, one member of Swedish duo The Knife states: ‘Well, it’s not easy to define I guess, but I think music should be a bit challenging and free—both artistically and creatively.’12 Similarly, producer Adam Goodlet tells an interviewer: ‘Writing across genres teaches you a lot about production, and the skills can be passed from genre to genre. For example, we’ve learnt a lot about writing breakbeat from our time writing freeform. We think that it’s really important to do this, because it helps to not get stuck in the production comfort zone of writing formulaically in one genre.’13

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9 Stuart McMillan and Orde Meikle, review ‘I Can’t Get No Sleep 95,’ by Masters at Work Present India, DJ, 6 July 1995, 60.
10 Rollo [Roland Armstrong], interview by Daniel Newman, DJ, 6 July 1995, 38.
11 In this context, the term ‘break’ connotes any section of a track in which the texture is reduced to a basic drum pattern.
12 Knife, The [Olof Dreijer and Karin Dreijer Andersson], ‘Slice of Life,’ interview by Rezo Kezerashvili, 3D World, 22 May 2006, 22.
‘Challenge’ and ‘innovation,’ it would seem, are necessarily positive attributes, while ‘formula’ is automatically seen as negative. This type of value system has become so pervasive that it seems counter-intuitive to question it. It has become the bedrock on which much rock music ideology rests, and the comments above demonstrate that it is increasingly becoming a part of dance music culture. Interestingly, this emphasis on innovation frequently metamorphoses into a general disdain for the people who are dancing to the music. DJ Johnny Deep, for instance, recently told an interviewer that he prefers to broadcast music on the radio, rather than in night clubs: ‘the neatest thing with radio is you don’t have the pressure of a dance floor and this allows you to be more experimental.’ In their guide How to DJ Right, Frank Broughton and Bill Brewster convey a similar distrust of the audience. At one point, they draw distinctions between the ‘shape’ of different DJ ‘sets.’ For instance, some sets are structured as a ‘roller coaster,’ with the songs steadily rising in intensity until they reach a ‘frenetic peak,’ followed by a calmer selection of songs and a repetition of the steady crescendo. Broughton and Brewster note that the most common shape of a DJ set seems to move ‘up, up, and away’: the DJ ‘start[s] off fairly quickly and continue[s] in an upward curve until the dancefloor is banging away so fast that everyone’s running on the spot.’ Despite their frequent calls for DJs to pay attention to what the crowd wants, this part of their book suddenly adopts a sneering tone towards the audience. If crowds respond enthusiastically to the ‘up, up, and away’ format, it is ‘only because they’re rarely offered anything different.’ This vaguely contemptuous attitude—one that says, ‘we know better than the crowd’—is everywhere present in Broughton and Brewster’s commentary, and it dovetails neatly with dance music’s compulsory innovation. When reviewing the benefits of being a mobile (rather than a more ‘credible’ club) DJ, they note: you will have to put up with ‘tacky’ ‘commercial dance’ records, but you will also have enough equipment to ‘throw your own, more underground parties.’ At weddings,
you may have to play dozens of ‘familiar’ tunes, but you will also see how, ‘after they’ve gone loopy to three records they know, you have enough momentum to slip in one they don’t.’ The familiar and the crowd-pleasing are devalued, almost by default. In this respect, the mobile DJ who plays at birthday parties, weddings, and other celebrations outside of night clubs occupies a similar lowly position as the handbag DJ. The commentary of Angharad Llewellyn in 3D World displays a similar distaste for the familiar, almost managing to convey an Adornian attitude. Writing about the DJ FreQ Nasty, Llewellyn states: ‘In amongst the lust for tearout breaks within the European scene, it must be tempting to fill a set full of crowd pleasers, yet FreQ Nasty refuses to pander to the crowd, having developed a strong signature style.’ For Llewellyn, FreQ Nasty ‘has it all; incredible production, fantastic DJing skills and most importantly, a vision of how the breakbeat scene should progress to remain fresh, innovative and interesting.’ It seems that the provision of pleasure and the mere enjoyment of the music are no longer enough to guarantee a genre’s credibility within the wider dance music scene. One needs to have ‘vision’; one needs to make ‘innovative’ music.

The assumption that a reliance on convention is artistically bankrupt is not new. It first arose in relation to Western art music and was subsequently imported into the makeshift ideology of rock music connoisseurs. Musicologist Janet Levy notes that in Western art music, a disdain for convention emerged sometime during the nineteenth century. It was then that the ‘taint of convention’ became loaded with negative attributes. From this period onwards, to call a composer ‘conventional’ was to invoke the dreaded shadows of ‘falsity, routine, enslavement to rules,’ and so on. Consequently, much musicological work attempts to downplay the role of

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20 Ibid., 126.
21 Rietveld largely endorses this hierarchy. When she describes mobile DJs as people who play ‘whatever pleases the crowd,’ she implies that there exists another type of DJ—the club DJ—who will presumably do something more than merely ‘pleasing the crowd.’ See Rietveld, This Is Our House, 109.
23 Ibid. Emphasis added.
24 Keightley, ‘Reconsidering Rock,’ 130.
26 Ibid.
conventions in the canon of ‘great’ composers—suggesting, instead, that in truly
great music, there is little or no reliance on convention at all. Carl Dalhaus notes
that this assumption has not always been taken for granted:

The concept of originality which grew up in the later eighteenth century
established itself in the nineteenth as an unquestioned aesthetic
doctrine...Until the end of the eighteenth century a musical idea could be a
platitude, something quite commonplace, without attracting the charge of
being meaningless; convention—recognizable dependence on precedent—
was still regarded as aesthetically legitimate.

By the twentieth century, this had changed dramatically, as Susan McClary notes:
‘We interpret reliance on convention as betraying a lack of imagination or a blind
acceptance of social formula.’

What is particularly interesting about this devaluing of the familiar is the extent to
which dismissals of the sounds themselves are linked with particular socio-cultural
groups, such as women and gay men. In one record review, Jack Tregoning suggests
that the presence of a ‘female vocal’ is potentially regressive: ‘[d]espite the DJ’s
obvious soft-spot for a female vocal, the tracklisting stays true to the Balance edict
of forward-thinking dance music.’ It seems that progressive, innovative (‘forward-
thinking’) dance music is at odds with any trace of femininity. The reviewer Stuey

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27 Ibid., 24-25.
29 McClary, Conventional Wisdom, 3. There is a parallel to this in popular music studies, which is only just beginning to pay as much attention to the ‘commercial’ or ‘formulaic’ as it does to the ‘counter-cultural.’ See Anaheid Kassabian, ‘Popular’ in Horner and Swiss, Key Terms, 117. This point has also been raised in Frith, ‘Pop Music,’ 108; Charles Hamm, Putting Popular Music in its Place (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36.
30 Jack Tregoning, review of Balance 009, by Various Artists, mixed by Paolo Mojo, 3D World, 3 April 2006, 32.
31 The many people who have written about ‘women in rock’ would undoubtedly note the paradox here: at one stage, women were granted partial, limited access to the field of popular music as long as they could serve as the ‘sexy’ front person for a band. In dance music, it seems that even that limited access is denigrated by construing the feminine as ‘regressive.’ For further discussion of this issue, see Huysse, After the Great Divide, 47. This also relates to Helen Davies’s point about the British rock music press, which often constructs an ideal notion of ‘credibility’ that is difficult, if not impossible, for women to achieve. See Davies, ‘All rock and roll is homosocial,’ 301. There is an
Dean, contributing to the web site www.inthemix.com.au, is even more explicit when he discusses a *Ministry of Sound* compilation:

There is a little bit of a drop off in quality after the first half of Goodwill’s disk, with the sound getting a bit lighter and fluffier. It’s the point in the CD where *my chic will start to tap her toes as my itchy finger wiggles towards to skip button*… Disk 2 is handled by Axwell and has a distinctive Swedish sound. If I could compare it, I’d say it straddles the progressive and house genres, in a similar way to Steve Porter or probably even closer to Luke Fair. The big difference between Porter or Fair and Axwell is that Axwell has a LOT of more vocals, mainly female. I find it very cheesy. They bug me…32

Here, the term ‘cheesy’ is a synonym for ‘tacky,’ ‘tasteless,’ ‘commercial,’ and ‘mainstream,’ and it is explicitly associated with the feminine.33 A similar strategy was adopted in Victoria Thaine’s review of a performance by DJ Steve ‘Silk’ Hurley:

I tried to get into the candy-laced vocals, the relentless and unvaried beat [and the] predictable bass lines…If you were there for the music you were probably one of the bikini-clad girls jumping round like it was the celebration-party-scene at the end of [a] teen-high-school movie…[Terry Hunter followed with] less predictable bass riffs and some more heartfelt gospel.34

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33 Kevin Dettmar and William Richey define ‘cheese’ as ‘a highly rhetorical embrace of those things that many would consider to be in bad taste.’ In the dance music press, however, there is no sense of this material being embraced. On the contrary, ‘cheese’ in this context is invariably a derogatory term. See Kevin H. Dettmar and William Richey, ‘Musical Cheese: The Appropriation of Seventies Music in Nineties Movies,’ in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 312.

34 Victoria Thaine, review of Steve ‘Silk’ Hurley and Terry Hunter at *Tank, 3D World*, 12 March 2001, 90.
The fact that the reviewer is a woman does not stop her from making a familiar association between caricatured femininity and supposedly inferior, standardised music. It is almost as if ‘bikini-clad girls’ are naturally drawn to ‘predictable bass riffs.’

Gay men are similarly positioned within dance music discourses. The music associated with gay male clubs (such as handbag) is frequently derided as being too formulaic, too familiar, too predictable, or otherwise inferior. James Fry’s review of a dance compilation album makes the link explicit: ‘Consistency, rather than ground breaking seems to be the order of the day, as we are delivered up tracks by Stonebridge, Para Beats and DJ Disciple to name but a few. It’s a rather camp sound that dominates.’ ‘Camp’ sounds are associated with ‘consistency’—the enemy of innovation. If this link is not obvious enough, Fry notes that ‘A Higher Place is sure to be a well-worn favourite in the clubs come this Mardi Gras’—a reference to the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras festival.

In his history of DJ culture, Ulf Poschardt describes the 1980s genre Hi-NRG as ‘gay dance music,’ then he draws attention to its ‘absolute simplicity,’ and finally he notes that it is now ‘an accepted part of mainstream pop.’ The implication may have been unintended, but it is unmistakable nevertheless: gay men will embrace the worst that mass culture has to offer. In an online interview, one reviewer notes that Sydney DJ Alex Taylor plays ‘progressive, more beat and bass orientated house’ music in straight clubs, while saving the ‘crowd-pleasing’ stuff for gay clubs. An anonymous reviewer for the US-based retailer http://www.perfectbeat.com describes a single by disco divas Kelly Marie and Tina Charles in the following way:

Ibid. Another vivid example of this can be seen on Front Room DJ’s blog, ‘I Like These Tunes.’ In a review of Sarah McLeod’s ‘He Doesn’t Love You,’ the author writes: ‘Normally when there’s a dub version of a track it’s usually what I’ll prefer playing most, especially when the vocal is female because they’re usually so lovey dovey and shite (see most commercial house tracks for examples).’ See Front Room DJ, review of ‘He Doesn’t Love You (Hook ‘n’ Sling Mixes),’ by Sarah McLeod, http://ilikethesetunes.blogspot.com/2006_10_08_ilikethesetunes_archive.html, 10 October 2006 (accessed 15 October 2006).

James Fry, review of A Taste of Candy, by Various Artists, 3D World, 27 February 2006, 32.

Ibid.

Poschardt, DJ Culture, 241-42.

Almighty fans and virtually any other dance music enthusiast with a high tolerance for cheese will no doubt drool over this two-part single from the lovely Kelly Marie and Tina Charles. Grandstanding like two happy moms at a PFLAG meeting, both ladies belt out hi-NRG versions of gay anthems ‘To Sir With Love’ and ‘Your Disco Needs You.’

This frequent link between ‘cheese’ and gay male culture mirrors the insults those levelled at disco music during the 1970s. Such critiques often come with homophobic strings attached: ‘mindless,’ ‘repetitive,’ and ‘synthetic’ genres tend to be lumped with ‘unnatural,’ ‘decadent,’ and ‘indistinguishable’ ‘clones.’

I do not wish to suggest that this attitude applies to everyone within the field of dance music. In some cases, reviewers and clubbers do embrace ‘commercial’ music that is explicitly associated with ‘girls’ or ‘gay men.’ Interestingly, however, these celebrations of the music invariably acknowledge the existence of a hierarchy in the first place. The music can only be defended once its relationship to a superior, ‘credible’ type of music has been established. In a review of a disco-inflected compilation album—one on which vocals feature prominently—Miss Munnee writes: ‘A mix of upfront disco-house with a whole lot of vocal action throughout. Whilst it certainly isn’t going to appeal to everyone, those that love this variation of house will be in their element…’ Even the most enthusiastic DJs who endorse ‘Seasons of Love’ (a track from the musical *Rent*) need to frame their opinion as a defence: ‘all the remixes are great…How can some people call it cheesy?’; ‘Who cares about the cheese factor. We are all guilty of liking songs with some cheese’; ‘I think the remixes are a little cheesy, but I like them! They’re happy and upbeat,'

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41 Hughes, ‘In the Empire of the Beat,’ 147.

42 Dean, review of *Ministry of Sound Clubbers Guide to 2006*.

which are exactly the kind of songs I like playing.’

This recalls Thornton’s observations of the girls she interviewed. While some of the girls were willing to opt out of the game of accumulating subcultural capital, they always needed to acknowledge the existence of such capital: ‘they will often defend their tastes (particularly their taste for pop music) with expressions like “It’s crap but I like it”.

In so doing, they acknowledge the subcultural hierarchy and accept their lowly position within it.’

The discourse of the dance music press and of associated web sites, then, implicitly positions handbag music at the bottom of a hierarchy. Handbag’s focus on providing pleasure (rather than innovation) is at odds with the aesthetic values of many dance music connoisseurs, including DJs and critics. From the arena of Western art music, dance music has imported the notion that innovation should be prized above all else—even at the cost of losing the audience.

Another value that has been brought into the sphere of dance music is a particular notion of authenticity, typically expressed as ‘being real.’

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45 It also recalls Ang’s observations of her respondents: ‘the fans [of Dallas] cannot apparently avoid [the ideology of mass culture]. Its norms and prescriptions exert pressure on them, so that they feel the necessity to defend themselves against it.’ See Ang, Watching Dallas, 109.

46 Thornton, Club Cultures, 13. In other instances, writers can safely defend low-status ‘commercial’ music by referring to specific remixes of a song, as in the following example from the ‘I Like These Tunes’ blog: ‘I’ll admit: I like Rogue Traders! […] Their next big UK hit is Watching You, where they recorded the riff from The Knack’s “My Sharona”. I have to say that I find the original tracks catchy as hell anyway, but to make me posting about them on this blog a bit more credible I’ve gone for the Chris Lake Downtown Dub.’ See http://ilikethesetunes.blogspot.com/2006_10_08_ilikethesetunes_archives.html, 11 October 2006 (accessed 15 October 2006). Emphasis added.

47 As I have demonstrated, there are echoes of this aesthetic criteria within the rock music field as well. See Appen and Doehring, ‘Nevermind the Beatles,’ 32.

48 Specifically, I refer to what Allan F. Moore has called ‘first-person authenticity’: ‘when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience.’ See Allan F. Moore, ‘Authenticity as Authentication,’ Popular Music 21, no. 2 (2002): 214.
5.3 ‘Being real’: The problem of authenticity

In her discussion of rock music and authenticity, sociologist Deena Weinstein notes that many rock musicians have taken on certain aspects of nineteenth-century Romantic philosophy. They ‘consistently champion will, feeling, passion, intuition, and imagination against regulation by intellectual and practical disciplines.’ For example, in an interview with the Sydney-based publication *The Drum Media*, Warren Ellis of the group The Dirty Three declared: ‘I do understand the three-and-a-half-minute song for radio thing but I don’t really know how you do that. I think the way our music has gone has definitely come from a very emotional and I think really deeply rooted place spiritually. It’s sort of finished when it’s over rather than being told to be over.’

To borrow Weinstein’s terms, the ‘three-and-a-half-minute song for radio thing’ equals ‘expediency and conformism’, whereas the Dirty Three’s music equals ‘personal authenticity.’ From this perspective, the market never dictates how or when this music is created. The music apparently does not rely on formulae. It simply emerges—free of conventions—from the artist’s very soul (a ‘deeply rooted place’).

This helps to explain why many aspects of pop music are regarded with such disdain from a rock perspective. What matters in rock music is authentic expression. As Ralf von Appen and André Doehring found in their analysis of the rock canon, the works most highly valued in rock music either appealed to fans within the traditional aesthetic frame of Western art music (the ‘innovation’ argument discussed in the earlier part of this chapter), or they appealed on the basis of their deliberate

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49 Weinstein, ‘Art Versus Commerce,’ 58.
50 Warren Ellis, cited in ‘Veil of Illusion,’ interview with The Dirty Three by Murray Engleheart, *The Drum Media*, 14 March 2000, 40. This interview peddles several popular Romantic myths, including that of the tortured, struggling artist. ‘It had been an emotionally brutal week for the band. A number of friends had suddenly passed away and just hours before stage time the trio discovered that their sound mixer had been cruelly added to that number. In a light drizzle and with a black arm band violinist Warren Ellis played the show of his life...The day took its toll. He ended up dead drunk and recovering from re-enacting Humpty Dumpty’s greatest moment somewhere. But the music without any doubt had been enriched enormously by the pain.’ Emphasis added.
simplicity, often construed as a mark of their authenticity.\textsuperscript{51} Where rock music can be found to be ‘progressive’ or ‘innovative,’ these qualities will be called upon to verify the status of the music as ‘art.’ Where simplicity is foregrounded, the music can still be championed as a vehicle of expression, rather than as a valid form of artifice.\textsuperscript{52} It is little surprise, then, that much pop music is dismissed by rock fans for not authentically representing the position of the performers. Any signs that a group is simply following instructions or—worse still—has been assembled in a completely calculated manner by a Svengali tends to generate critical scorn.\textsuperscript{53} The critics who dismiss girl groups such as the Spice Girls frequently have a model of ‘organic’ musical composition in mind. ‘Real’ music, according to this view, should be generated spontaneously as a result of performative interactions between band members.\textsuperscript{54} The Spice Girls model—in which professional songwriters have their work presented by young performers—falls short according to the ‘rockist’ ideal.\textsuperscript{55} According to this view, ‘real’ musicians should write and perform their own material. Only then can they be said to be ‘expressing’ themselves.

That these ideals should have infiltrated dance music culture is curious for several reasons. Firstly, the idea of the autonomous artist organically generating music as a vehicle of self-expression is complicated by the highly mediated nature of most electronic dance music. Like most forms of contemporary popular music, there are many factors that come between the ‘performer’ and the listener.\textsuperscript{56} Indeed, the very notion of a ‘performer’ is undercut in this music: a ‘performance’ could be attributed

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\item[51] Appen and Doehring, ‘Nevermind the Beatles,’ 30. In the case of Nirvana, they note that simplicity is rather considered a requirement for the band’s two most essential qualities: expressiveness and authenticity, or “passion and honesty.”
\item[54] For accounts of other, similar models of pop songwriting, see the discussion of Tin Pan Alley performers in Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, \textit{American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 236. See also the account of 1950s and 1960s girl-groups in Gillian G. Gaar, \textit{She’s a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock and Roll} (London: Blandford, 1993), 43-50.
\item[55] Leach, ‘Vicars of “Wannabe.”’ 146-47.
\item[56] The heavily romanticised notion of ‘self-expression’ is equally anomalous in rock music. See Keightley, ‘Reconsidering Rock,’ 131-35.
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\end{footnotesize}
to anyone from the drummer being sampled on a new record, to the DJ who spins the record in a club. Secondly, the notion of completely ‘original’ music being generated with drums, guitars, and the idiosyncratic performances of the musicians themselves sits ill at ease with the common-place practices of dance music. Many dance tracks are routinely built around samples of other music.\textsuperscript{57} Even in those cases where there no direct samples have been used, practitioners frequently have an idea of what they would like the record to sound like, whether this be articulated in terms of genre (for instance, making a ‘hard house’ record), artist (aiming for that ‘Plump DJs’ sound), or technology (adding a ‘303 squelch’—a reference to the Roland 303 drum machine). This music is explicitly modelled on the notion of creative appropriation at the level of production. This is also the case at the distribution level. In many genres, the primary mode of distribution is the 12-inch vinyl single, which typically consists of an ‘original’ track with two or three remixes by other artists.\textsuperscript{58} If listening to this music in a club, the tracks will invariably be played as part of a DJ ‘set,’ seamlessly overlapping with one another. The logic of the set (that is, music by various artists, assembled by a DJ) is continued at home, where the mix CD is prevalent. Such compilations may be attributed to a DJ, but these condensed DJ sets are stitched together from pieces of other people’s music.

In other words, dance music is largely based on the notion of creative appropriation through electronic means. Given this state of affairs, it would seem logical that the producers and punters involved in these dance music scenes would be suspicious of the ‘rockist’ hierarchy that places ‘original’ (that is, newly recorded) music on a pedestal, and explicitly frowns on any form of appropriation, whether that be in the form of a sample on a record or the use of turntables rather than guitars.\textsuperscript{59} However, in many cases, the opposite seems to be the case. Where artists have not written their own tunes or played their own instruments, they may establish their authenticity in other ways—by proving, in other words, that they really \textit{are} expressing themselves

\textsuperscript{57} Tony Langlois, ‘Can You Feel It? DJs and House Music Culture in the UK,’ \textit{Popular Music} 11, no. 2 (1992): 235.
\textsuperscript{58} The original version of the track is sometimes excluded altogether.
\textsuperscript{59} Such ridicule is still relatively common. For example, a song by Australian band Jet is entitled ‘Rollover DJ,’ and lambasts DJs for building careers from playing other people’s music.
despite the mediated nature of their music. For example, notice the distinction drawn in the following record review between Kylie Minogue and Norwegian singer Annie:

Parallels have been drawn between Norway’s Annie and Kylie, and it’s not hard to see why. They’re both porcelain-doll pretty, style icons and sought-after by the people that matter. Where Annie sets herself apart from her pop counterpart is the stellar production team that she has chosen to work with on this debut artist release. She also pens her own tunes. Over five years in the making, _Anniemal_ bears the hallmarks of some of Northern Europe’s most respected producers, names like Richard X, Röyksopp’s Torbjørn Brundtland and Op:I Baastards’ Timo Kaukolampi.  

Here, Annie is constructed as an authentic, self-expressive artist in two ways. Firstly, she ‘pens her own tunes’ (even though they may draw extensively on samples from other musics). Secondly, she selects her own producers—an act which is seen as a valid creative decision. In contrast, Kylie Minogue is presented as someone who relies exclusively on her ‘porcelain-doll pretty’ appearance to shift units.

Despite the apparent anomalies, then, dance music has effectively imported the ideal of truth-to-self in musical expression. The most common way in which this ‘honesty’ can be displayed is through the display of musical taste. In their talk about choosing records to play to a crowd, DJs regularly echo the point raised by Weinstein: they emphasise that their choice of music reflects who they ‘really’ are, and is not tainted by any extraneous influences, such as the market, the crowd, or the record industry. British DJ Steve Lawler tells an interviewer: ‘I select the music that I love, music that turns me on, music that excites me.’

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60 Jen Paterson, review of _Anniemal_, by Annie, _3D World_, 20 March 2006, 30.
61 Andrew Goodwin documented a similar shift when he compared the grand claims of certain progressive rock musicians to the more modest claims of sample-based musicians such as Tim Simenon. He writes: ‘in 1988, “creativity” has shifted so far from its 1970s progressive rock heyday (when musicians tried to invent new, unique musical forms, as well as original music) that Tim Simenon can lay claim to it merely by noting that he didn’t steal something from another record.’ See Andrew Goodwin, ‘Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction,’ in Frith and Goodwin, _On Record_, 267.
62 Steve Lawler, ‘Get Twisted,’ interview by Cyclone, _3D World_, 30 January 2006, 36. Similarly, the well-known house producer Miguel Migs once gave the following advice to other
underline this truth-to-self: ‘Some DJs probe interviewers on venues ahead of tours so as to pack their crates accordingly. Not Steve.’63 Apparently, it is not enough to play records for a crowd, to gauge their responses, to change a set list accordingly. When playing records, you must be perceived as expressing yourself, and consequently you must play records you ‘love’ rather than (merely) records that function effectively on the dance floor.64 This attitude is a convenient sleight-of-hand. It obscures the fact that DJs tend to internalise the tastes of their crowds, so that they can then ‘spontaneously’ play the records that simultaneously flag their own identity and cater to the crowd’s needs.65

The need for self-expression is often intertwined with a disdain for discourse—‘labels,’ ‘categories,’ and ‘genre names’ are often held to be the enemy of the musician and clubber. Producer and DJ Mike Monday complains: ‘While it is very useful in marketing terms and for journalists to put things on pegs…I find it really stifles me…I fight quite hard against being put into a genre…To be honest with you…I just get inspired by various things and write them.’ On the one hand, this may be understood as a legitimate recognition of the fact that language always falls short of describing the full impact of music.67 But I would argue that this wariness of words about music is disingenuous, for musicians and critics draw on a complex genealogy of genres, sub-genres, and sub-sub-genres in their discussions: ‘Skeewiff caters in funk-fuelled breaks seasoned with lashings of jazz, lounge and soul’;68 ‘Melbourne’s K-Oscillate is quick to point out that its raw hybrid of breaks, drum ‘n

budding producers: ‘Be true to what you believe in. It’s all about the passion of music here. If you do become successful, then great; but don’t go into it with the intention of making millions. Just have fun making your music and stay open-minded.’ See Miguel Migs, interview by Francis Preve, Keyboard, February 2006, 48.

63 See Lawler, ‘Get Twisted,’ 36.
64 Langlois found similar results in his field research: ‘The DJs I spoke to had no doubt that they were expressing themselves in a performance and considered it a creative occupation.’ See Langlois, ‘Can You Feel It?’ 234. Emphasis in original.
65 This is similar to the findings of Antoine Hennion, who pointed out that pop producers need to internalise the tastes of the ill-defined ‘public’ so that they can represent the masses in the studio. See Hennion, ‘The Production of Success,’ 201. See also the discussion on page 127 of this thesis.
68 See Skeewiff [Alex Rizzo and Elliot Ireland], ‘Skeewiff’s Perfect Private Funktion,’ 3D World, 3 April 2006, 30.
bass and dub is loop and sequencer free’,’ the UK star-in-the-making courts the deep and housey end of prog, steering clear of protracted atmospherics and pseudo-trance wankery…’ The writers at 3D World always tread a fine line between labelling music and declaring the futility of labelling music. On some level, they recognise that these labels are useful—this is why such labels routinely appear at the start of promotional pieces such as the one cited above—but at the same time, the pages of the street press are filled with declarations that we should not worry about the labels, that we should just focus on the music itself, and so on. The following comment from Felix Stallings (better known as Felix Da Housecat) illustrates this:

Man, my new album is going to upset a lot of the electro kids. I just want to move away from what I’ve done previously and do something different—there’s only so much you can do with house. I’ve always know [sic] it is a limited idea, like everything – and I always learned from [DJ] Pierre and [Frankie] Knuckles that you should make music that doesn’t label you—always dare to be unique.

The suspicion towards labels frequently spills into a broader suspicion of any words about music. In an interview with the Timothy Wiles (a musician better known as Uberzone), Rezo Kezerashvili writes: ‘Indeed, the loose breaks vibe Uberzone embraces is not easily defined. Nor does Tim like the idea of trying to encapsulate its fundamentals into words.’ Wiles himself continues the theme: ‘As a musician, you really hate [describing your sound] because you box yourself in, as it were. Throughout the Uberzone lifespan, I’ve been reluctant to staple my name to the hot flavor of any month, I try to avoid that.’ This reluctance to ‘box yourself in’ is, of course, immediately undercut by a description of sounds and influences, several of which are fashionable at the time of writing: ‘Sure, my heaviest influences were

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70 Tregoning, review of Balance 009, 32.
71 Tagg and Clarida offer an excellent critique of this position. See Tagg and Clarida, Ten Little Title Tunes, 104-105.
73 See Uberzone [Timothy Wiles], ‘Ubercool,’ interview by Rezo Kezerashvili, 3D World, 3 April 2006, 36.
74 Ibid., 36.
Kraftwerk and I loved the song writing and melodies of Depeche Mode as well as early electro and hip hop…”  

The pages of *3D World* are littered with this type of two-pronged approach to dance music. Comments such as ‘Don’t try to put UK live act Ephexis into a pigeonhole because they won’t fit’ are immediately followed by descriptions that undercut this stance: ‘The Southampton foursome hotwire the twisted elements of psy-trance with the high-octane propulsion of freeform hardcore to startling effect.’  

Dance music fans are encouraged to lose themselves in the music, while also learning a complex genealogy of genres and sub-genres.

In these comments, clubbers are not merely expressing the frustration of describing music through language. Their comments also betray a clear investment in the ‘compulsory innovation’ model that I identified earlier (‘always dare to be unique’; don’t ‘box yourself in’). This is significant for any consideration of handbag, or, indeed, for any dance-oriented music that is excluded from the dance music canon. This ideology conveniently downplays the extent to which dance music scenes are characterised by exclusionary practices—or it makes such exclusions appear ‘natural’ and inevitable. For instance, when asked what music he likes to listen to outside of the club, DJ Schwa responds: ‘I listen to chill radio called Over Exposure. Great music selection. I also like abstract hip-hop or Ninja Tune stuff. I am able to listen a lot of different kinds of music [sic], because there is no style definition [sic] for good music.’  

Implicitly, then, if certain types of dance music are not mentioned within the dance music press—or if they are consistently denigrated—then this simply reflects their inferior status. This process of classifying music is an important way in which practitioners within dance music establish themselves as ‘expressive,’ ‘honest,’ or ‘real.’

Gay men have good reason to be suspicious of this insistence on ‘being real,’ for it is often based on a specious dismissal of artifice, and an assumption of an unproblematic, seamlessly coherent identity. The DJ Carl Kennedy states:

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75 Ibid.
76 See Ephexis, ‘In Full Ephex,’ 38.
I have this expression that life can be boring or life can be rock and roll. You don’t have to be a rock star to be rock and roll. It’s all about having fun and being real. I used to shy away from being the person I was inside, but now I’m like, if I want to have my tattoos and my jewellery and a beard, then why not? So I guess I just do what I feel like, and not for anyone else, without being over the top.\footnote{Carl Kennedy, ‘King of New York,’ interview by Carlisle Rogers, 3D World, 29 May 2006, 20. Emphasis in original.}

There is an assumption here that one must wear their identity on their sleeve. What is highly valued is doing ‘what [you] feel like, and not for anyone else.’\footnote{Ibid.} The less a performance appears to be a façade or representation, the more ‘authentic’ it will appear. The same applies to virtually all appearances that a musician makes in the mass media, such as interviews on television shows, music videos, and so on. The more an artist appears to be ‘performing’ or playing at some sort of artifice, the more suspiciously they will be received within the popular press. Kennedy’s talk about ‘being real,’ expressing ‘the person…inside’ relies on a belief in the subject as a unitary, linear, rational, and coherent being.\footnote{Frigga Haug, \textit{Female Sexualization}, trans. Erica Carter (London: Verso, 1987), 41.} As Bronwyn Davies has pointed out, this should not surprise us, since one of the most pervasive beliefs in Western democracies today is the notion that individuals be able to provide a coherent and unitary explanation of their actions in order to be taken seriously as subjects.\footnote{Davies, \textit{Frogs and Snails}, 165.} There is little acknowledgement here of the contradictions in everyday life. People inevitably take up a variety of subject positions, depending on the context and on the necessities of a particular situation.

While they may not always articulate it in these terms, I would argue that many queers develop a sense of this contradiction in the process of coming out—what we might call a poststructuralist ‘sixth sense.’ The experience of living in the closet, of coming out, and of maintaining a coherent ‘queer’ persona, gives rise to many situations in which queers become attuned to the contradictions of their own experience. For example, many people quickly learn that there is no ‘rule’ on coming
out that can be simplistically applied to every situation. In some cases, it may feel necessary to reveal my sexuality almost immediately upon entering a new social setting; in other cases, I may engage with people for months without feeling the need to divulge this information to them (and without feeling that I have become ‘closeted’ as a result). There may be situations in which it feels appropriate to ‘play up’ to the stereotypes associated with gay men (for instance, deliberately adopting the mannerisms of the dandy or dancing flamboyantly), and other situations in which it feels appropriate to ‘perform’ other aspects of my identity (‘Abruzzese,’ ‘Italian,’ ‘student,’ ‘teacher,’ and so on).\(^{82}\)

The point worth stressing here is that dance music’s ideology of ‘realness’ is more desirable if you have an unproblematic relation to ‘realness’ in the first place. If, on the other hand, you are acutely aware of the performativity that comes with any sort of ‘realness,’ and you have first-hand experience that artifice has its own pleasures—experiences that many gay men are familiar with—then this particular aspect of the ideology may not be as self-evidently desirable as it is usually held to be. The comment of Pet Shop Boys singer Neil Tennant (who happens to be gay) takes on an added resonance in light of the above discussion: ‘It’s kinda macho nowadays to prove you can cut it live. I quite like proving we can’t cut it live. We’re a pop group, not a rock and roll group.’\(^{83}\)

The ideology of dance music, then, does not only devalue handbag as ‘inferior’ (read: conventional and formulaic) music. It also upholds a notion of personal authenticity that is at odds with the experiences of many gay men. In Chapter Six, I will explore some of the ways in which this notion of ‘personal authenticity’ or truth-to-self clashes with the more performative aspects of gay male culture. In the remainder of this chapter, however, I turn to the crucial question of how to evaluate handbag and associated ‘pop’ musics. If the dance music press does not help us to understand the pleasures of handbag music, what might constitute a more valid approach to these sounds?


\(^{83}\) Neil Tennant, cited in Goodwin, ‘Sample and Hold,’ 268.
5.4 On valuing handbag: An alternative approach

If we are to take handbag music seriously, then we will need to address the question of its aesthetics, and this means questioning the very concept of ‘taking the music seriously.’ How, for instance, can we take an Almighty Associates remix seriously when it is explicitly designed to last only a month (or less)? Does this not simply invert the conventional hierarchy, so that ‘formulaic,’ ‘predictable,’ and ‘disposable’ musics are now privileged (in research terms) over more ‘ground-breaking’ material?

It is, of course, tempting to respond to the opinions of dance music connoisseurs with the usual rock-oriented defence: that certain, special forms of popular music themselves stand the test of time; that certain examples of popular music elevate themselves just as various forms of art music do; that handbag really is complex and challenging—it just takes some analysis to ‘uncover’ this complexity.84 As Andrew Goodwin points out, this is a common strategy:

art/pop distinctions can be made (and are made, by fans and critics respectively), in mainstream pop (Pet Shop Boys/New Kids On the Block), soul (Prince/Michael Jackson), rock (Sonic Youth/U2), heavy metal (Metallica/Def Leppard), and rap (Public Enemy/MC Hammer). The briefest of conversations with almost any fan of one of the above acts would confirm that arguments about art versus trash remain rampant within today’s pop.85

However, in research terms, I believe this approach takes us down a cul-de-sac. It leaves intact a whole range of assumptions about what makes music valid to people that have been imported from a different era and a different set of values. This is a problem which Julian Johnson has recently summarised from the ‘other side of the fence,’ as it were.

84 Notice the attribution of a quasi-mystical intent here: the music simply ‘elevates itself’ rather than being promoted or perpetuated by any actual human beings.
In his book *Who Needs Classical Music?*, Johnson offers three very useful premises worth observing in this debate. If we apply these premises more widely, I believe we arrive at a more useful framework within which to situate the music under discussion here. This notion of musical ‘value’ is crucial because it is related to rock culture’s claims to musical superiority—claims that are hardly universal or ‘transcendent,’ but are bound up with ideas of gender and sexuality.

Johnson’s first premise is that classical and popular musics have different aims and different functions: classical music ‘makes a claim to a distinctive value because it lends itself to functions that, on the whole, popular music does not, just as popular music lends itself to functions that, on the whole, classical music does not.’ This is something worth remembering when discussing specific types of popular music. Given some of his later assertions, it should also be noted that Johnson would admit any music into the category of ‘art.’ Rather than referring to a static and never-changing ‘canon,’ he uses the term ‘classical music’ to refer to any music which ‘functions as art.’

Secondly, Johnson, notes that people do make judgements about musics, despite there being a strong cultural imperative to avoid enforcing those tastes. But it is Johnson’s third premise that interests me most here. This is the implication that classical music is frequently popularised according to the ‘wrong’ criteria, and is evident in his denouncement of the commodification of popular music. For him, the commercial culture which brings recorded music into our hands is a ‘pseudo-democracy,’ one which ‘accords equal validity and equal status to all of its products.’ When we combine this with his claim that ‘art’ music should be distinguished from mere ‘entertainment,’ then we can safely assume that Johnson would not appreciate a performer like Andrea Bocelli, let alone classical ‘stars’ like

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87 In the discussion that follows, I retain a distinction between ‘classical’ and ‘popular’ musics for argument’s sake. However, it is worth noting emphasising that such distinctions have been problematised by many commentators. For example, see: John Parakilas, ‘Classical Music as Popular Music,’ *The Journal of Musicology* 3, no. 1 (1984): 1-18; Alan McKee, ‘Conclusion,’ in McKee, *Beautiful Things In Popular Culture*, 207-209; Walser, ‘Popular Music Analysis,’ 25-26.
89 Ibid., 14.
Vanessa Mae, Nigel Kennedy, or the recent crop of operatic ‘boy groups’ such as Amici and Il Divo. The problem with these artists, he would no doubt argue, is that they are evidence of classical music being used as popular culture—that is, as entertainment. Bocelli’s renditions of popular tunes (the sort of thing most likely to feature in television advertisements, such as Puccini’s *Nessun Dorma*) would probably be labelled as ‘popular culture.’ His stance is clear in the following passage:

There is…evidence to suggest that classical music, far from suffering a demise, has in recent years enjoyed a marked increase in popularity. But the limited degree of commercial success in some areas of classical music has come at a price: the loss of the distinctive claim made for classical music as a whole. The newfound popularity of some classical music depends on it dropping a claim that is at odds with populism and the logic of commercialism. The claim is based on an understanding of music as defined primarily by the musical work and its inward, intrinsic, and objective properties, and only secondarily in terms of listeners’ responses to it. This emphasis has little place in commercial music, whose success, by definition, rests on being shaped by commercial demands, not purely musical ones.  

Of course, Johnson’s argument is similar to that of certain rock critics: that most forms of music are magically untainted by commerce, except for his preferred genre. There is, nevertheless, a valid point in his objection to the rise of ‘pop-classical’ music. Johnson does not object to it because it is ‘popular,’ but because it is not fulfilling its critical potential. The classical CD that one sees promoted by HMV around Christmas time is simply functioning as another choice of pop tunes—one choice among many. Next year, that particular ‘classical’ CD will be relegated to the garbage heap just as quickly as the Vengaboys were. As I stated earlier, we might say that it is being appreciated (and selling) for the ‘wrong’ reasons.

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90 Ibid., 27.
91 As Parakilas’s discussion shows, much of the ‘classical’ music sold in this context will go on to be used as background music – that is, as a type of ‘popular’ music. See Parakilas, ‘Classical Music as Popular Music,’ 13-14.
I would argue that the same thing tends to happen with popular music. Many forms of popular music fulfil all of Johnson’s criteria for ‘art’: they are self-conscious, aware of their own musical processes, striving to stretch existing formal structures, claim to offer universal redemption, and so on. As I have shown, these values are often imported wholesale into the sphere of dance music. However, there is much evidence to suggest that the primary appeal of handbag and associated ‘pop’ music, is more often measured according to the criteria of immediacy, emotional resonance, and sheer physical sensation. In the customer reviews of artists such as Shania Twain, Alanis Morissette, and Garth Brooks (that is, artists who sell millions of records but are ignored in the rock music canon), ‘we find fun, entertainment, emotional as well as physical motivation’ to be key criteria of value. We see a similar emphasis on the immediacy (rather than complexity) of popular music in these comments from Simon Frith. Here, there is also a sense of alternative criteria being used to judge the music, particularly in his telling phrase ‘[o]ld pop songs with unexpected resonance’:

I desultorily watch the pop video shows on German television, but only Ace of Base’s ‘Eyes of a Stranger’ (intrigue on the Stockholm underground) holds my attention. I trawl the dial on my walkman and, pushing past the ubiquitously ingratiating Elton John, find things I do want to hear...Old pop songs with unexpected resonance: Rick Astley solemnly marking time to a cheap ’80s disco beat; Cat Stevens’ ‘Father and Son,’ well-meaning ’70s advice; Whitney Houston swinging though a ballad like a trapeze artist.

However, the following comments from Nick Hornby are the most telling of all, and are worth quoting at length:

The song that has been driving me pleausurably potty recently is ‘I’m Like a Bird’ by Nelly Furtado. Only history will judge whether Ms Furtado turns out

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92 The critical commentary on artists like the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and—more recently—Radiohead provides convincing evidence of this. Notice how Keir Keightley singles out an overweening ‘seriousness’ as one of the key characteristics of rock music. See Keightley, ‘Reconsidering Rock,’ 129-30.
93 Appen and Doehring, ‘Nevermind the Beatles,’ 32.
94 Frith, Performing Rites, 277.
to be any kind of artist, and though I have my suspicions that she will not change the way we look at the world, I can’t say that I’m very bothered: I will always be grateful to her for creating in me the narcotic need to hear her song again and again. 95

There is one thing that all these critics have in common: they are all appraising popular music according to criteria that differs from the parameters that matter in classical music. All admit that here, in this particular context, ‘innovation,’ ‘complexity,’ ‘difficulty,’ and ‘challenge’ are simply not on the agenda.

Johnson is entirely justified, then, in saying that classical music should not necessarily be judged according to the dictates of ‘pop’ tastes (it would be inappropriate to ask ‘Do the Brandenburg Concertos rock the stadium?’). But that idea also applies in reverse: it may be inappropriate to ask ‘Is this dance track ground-breaking? Is it innovative? Does it defy categorisation?’ The more interesting question, for research purposes, may be to ask ‘what gives this music its sense of “immediacy,” “visceral force,” or simply “usefulness” in a given context?’ 96

This may displease Johnson (who is wary of simply describing music rather than elucidating the potential in music), but if we are to take his argument to its logical conclusion, then we must admit that all musics may be judged against ‘inappropriate’ criteria. Our aim—as he points out—should be to recognise what criteria is most appropriate for the music at hand. 97

In the case of handbag, the most appropriate criteria is a crowd’s response to particular sounds on the dance floor, and the extent to which the music provides a basis for dance floor performance. Chapter Six explores the links between particular kinds of performance, sexual identity, and handbag music.

CHAPTER 6

PERFORMANCE AND QUEER IDENTITY
6.1 Introduction

In Chapter Five, I suggested that existing appraisals of dance music (particularly within the popular press) give us a limited framework for understanding the pleasures of handbag music. The dominant critical approach taken by musicians and clubbers is remarkably similar to established models of aesthetic criticism in rock music. People either look for signs of complexity and unpredictability to legitimate the music, or they look for signs of personal authenticity (‘realness’) in the sounds. As I argued earlier, none of this helps to explain the way that handbag music tends to be taken up and used within gay male culture. I would argue that the dance musics most visibly associated with gay male culture tend to ‘afford’ particular kinds of performance. In this chapter, I will be detailing some aspects of this music that make it particularly appropriate for gay dance floors. Here, however, I want to establish that the concept of performance is particularly important in gay male culture, and that it is a fundamental aspect of various queer sexualities. As Richard Dyer points out, the notion that gay men are highly attuned to the vagaries of everyday self-presentation (as embodied, for instance, in the stereotype of the fashion queen) has a kernel of truth to it.2

As I noted in the discussion of Tia DeNora’s work, a common complaint against any sort of analysis that draws connections between the formation of social identities and the production or reception of particular musics is that the analysis prescribes those connections rather than ‘objectively’ documenting connections that may or may not be ‘out there.’3 We could logically extend DeNora’s argument here, by noting the dangers of any such prescription when it comes to discussing queer sexualities. To assert that there are concrete differences between the cultures of queers and non-

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1 Earlier versions of this chapter were presented in a paper entitled ‘Gay Dance Music Sucks?’ at the 24th National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia, University of Melbourne, 18-22 April 2001 and the 8th National Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Australia-New Zealand branch, 27-29 September 2001, University of Technology, Sydney. Sections of the chapter were published as ‘Gay Dance Music Sucks?’ in Musical In-Between-ness: The Proceedings of the 8th IASPM Australia-New Zealand Conference 2001, ed. Denis Crowdy, Shane Homan, and Tony Mitchell (Sydney: University of Technology, 2002). I wish to thank the participants at the relevant conferences and the anonymous readers who have offered feedback on the arguments presented here.

2 Dyer, ‘Dressing the Part,’ 63.

3 DeNora, Music in Everyday Life, 30.
queers risks constructing monolithic distinctions that are more harmful than useful. I am fully aware of the fact that my analysis is constructing rather than merely documenting particular phenomena. However, at this point, there is a useful analogy to be drawn between the present analysis and John Gill’s appraisal of UK pop group the Pet Shop Boys. In discussing their lyrics, Gill points out that:

It is difficult…to contemplate a pre-homosexual Pet Shop Boys. From ‘Later Tonight’ off Please to ‘One in a Million’ off Very, these are songs sung by men to other men. Heterosexual songwriters just don’t write songs that way, employ such language, entertain such contingencies, structure relationships in certain ways, negotiate culture (big or small c), mediate experience, in short conduct the manoeuvres of bricolage, the act of cladding ourselves with social meaning, in that fashion.4

To be sure, this passage comes with quasi-essentialist trappings. In particular, to claim that ‘heterosexual songwriters just don’t write songs that way’ veers dangerously close to claiming that there is some sort of biological basis to the ways in which both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals construct (sub)cultures.5 However, Gill’s larger argument is that the musical closet is not a ‘natural’ phenomenon, but has been imposed and enforced through specific practices on the part of the music industry and the press. Given this larger argument, it would be reasonable to assume that the essentialist undertones here are unintended. A full reading of Gill’s book leaves one with the distinct impression that the way queers ‘act’ in social life is not merely the spontaneous expression of a queer ‘sensibility.’ After exposing the extent to which queer musicians’ careers are structured by what we might call closeting structures (that is, tendencies within the music industry that encourage queers to remain silent about their sexual proclivities, in ways that do not apply to heterosexuals), one is most likely to conclude that if queers do have some sort of unique ‘sensibility,’ then this is much more the result of specific historical situations and human actions than it is a ‘spontaneous,’ biologically determined disposition. This idea also connects with the findings of Adorno who, in his own

4 Gill, Queer Noises, 4.
5 Ibid.
way, argued passionately against the Thatcher-esque view of society as a mass of atomised individuals. Gill’s claim, then, is useful because it manages a difficult feat: straddling the line between essentialism and structural determinism. On the one hand, he avoids any crass essentialism by insisting that both queer and non-queer sexualities are structured by historical and social forces (acknowledging that there is no innate difference between queers and non-queers). At the same time, however, this perspective does not shy away from asserting that there is a difference between the ways that queers and others ‘negotiate culture.’ The crucial point here is that asserting that difference need not entail an essentialist approach to queer sexuality. We can still choose to see the differences between gay and other (sub)cultures as being socially conditioned, and as something learned rather than something ‘natural.’

There is another reason why Gill’s rhetoric is useful here. The claim that ‘heterosexual songwriters just don’t write songs that way’ reveals as much about Gill as about the phenomena he is describing. As we saw in the previous chapter, critics such as Peter Martin would see this as a flaw in the argument, as evidence that he did not objectively report on what was actually ‘out there.’ However, I would argue that it is precisely this that gives his ideas some grounding. Gill is clearly writing from an ‘engaged’ perspective, as a queer who has acquired a certain competence in reading queer cultural codes in popular culture. (As David Brackett puts it, ‘we must always take into consideration the listening context, function, and individual ‘competence’—that is, the memory and history—of the listener.’) In one sense, it could be said that Gill is asserting his case rather than arguing it. However, I would argue that the content of Gill’s perspective has some validity, because he clearly speaks both as an insider to a subculture and as a more ‘detached’ commentator on that subculture. While his method of substantiation may not be theoretically grounded (which, after all, would exceed the limits of a journalistic piece), his

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6 In this respect, Gill’s general position echoes one of the claims in Daniel Harris’s *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*: that a queer sensibility is ‘a political response to oppression’ rather than ‘an innate characterological predisposition for the arts and aestheticism. See Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997), 6.

7 Gill, *Queer Noises*, 4.

8 Martin, *Sounds and Society*, 159.


reading of the Pet Shop Boys is not automatically invalidated because he has not conducted systematic qualitative interviews with other queers. As an ‘insider,’ he does not necessarily require an ‘accountant’ or ‘mediator’ to verify his findings. To question his status as a gay man simply because he writes about his experiences as a gay man would signal an unnecessarily rigid methodology. This perspective would also risk reinforcing the populist view that any critical thinking about popular culture ‘taints’ that culture, a view that I argued against in Chapter Two.

In the section that follows, then, I shall attempt something similar to Gill: I wish to provide some details of the way in which social structures affect the ways in which queers see themselves and negotiate everyday life. I shall suggest that queers often have a different perspective on popular culture even though there is nothing biologically ‘different’ about them. In particular, given that I am interested in the ways that dance music is used in gay male clubs, I will be focusing on an idea suggested by anthropologists Ellen Lewin and William L. Leap: that the ‘management of information about our homosexuality is still a central theme in how we move around in the world.’ Therefore, a heightened sense of performance becomes a fundamental part of queer identity regardless of individual queers’ immersion in, or distance from, the closet. This aspect of queer identity is revealed in many interviews with queers. Here, I shall review the findings of sociologist Steven Seidman, who finds that elements of ‘performing’ are constantly woven through queers’ accounts of their lives. Before exploring this issue, it is worth reviewing Seidman’s larger thesis.

11 Ibid.
12 There is recent research to suggest that gendered—and sexual—behaviour may be traced to people’s biological profile. See Barker, Making Sense of Cultural Studies. This idea, however, is convincingly dismantled by sociologist Vera Whisman, who writes: ‘Even if there are essential differences among individuals, there is no reason to assume that current categories accurately capture them.’ See Vera Whisman, Queer By Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Politics of Identity (London: Routledge, 1996), 122. See also Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 8.


6.2 Performance and queer identity

In his book *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life*, Seidman draws on a number of qualitative interviews with queers, asking them to recount their experiences of being in the closet, coming out, or living ‘beyond’ the closet. As he notes, the term ‘being closeted’ is now used rather loosely in popular parlance, often denoting virtually any situation in which queers hide their sexual identity. However, Seidman proposes a more sociologically rigorous definition of the term. He notes that there is a considerable difference between occasionally ‘passing’ for an uncle or casual acquaintance, and making life-shaping decisions in an effort to pass. The man who deliberately gets married, becomes a parent, and chooses a particular profession to avoid being identified is certainly closeted; the man who is out to all his closest family and friends and occasionally conceals his sexual identity from (say) a client is not in the same league.\(^{14}\)

The comments of Seidman’s respondents are significant because most of them reported a certain degree of self-consciousness about their identity. That is, their coming-of-age stories did not involve an unproblematic queer identity simply ‘emerging.’ Nor did they mirror the common heterosexual experience in which sexuality is rendered invisible, or in which sexuality does not need to be thought about in the first place, thanks to the way in which it is successfully perpetuated through a number of social institutions. All of them, to varying degrees, found that their adoption of a queer identity involved a certain amount of performance. In what follows, I will highlight some of the comments made by these respondents, to demonstrate the extent to which ‘performance’ is a fundamental part of constructing and maintaining a queer identity. I do not wish to claim that this aspect of queer identity is universal, but I do wish to stress that it is a pervasive and recurring aspect of queer lives. I will also be arguing that, even in those cases that Seidman describes as being ‘beyond the closet,’ the performative aspect of sexual identity does not automatically fade away, for reasons that I explain below.

Seidman defines identity as ‘the way we think of ourselves and the self image we publicly project.’ From the outset, then, the poststructuralist axiom that identities are a type of performance is evident. Identities are not only about naming ourselves, but also about learning how to ‘perform’—for ourselves and for others. A common objection to this way of approaching identity is to argue that it trivialises a very important issue, turning it into little more than a consumer shopping spree in which we are free to ‘try on’ (and discard) identities at will. If queer sexuality is merely a ‘performance,’ after all, then we can surely ‘choose’ to perform something else—a scenario that is frequently advocated by those on the far right. In light of this, it is no surprise that many people—including some lesbians and gay men—reject the vocabulary of ‘choice.’ Another reason why the concept of ‘choosing’ a sexuality is unpopular is that this concept has been co-opted by consumer capitalism. The word ‘choose’ seems appropriate when we are talking about different brands of toilet paper, but it does not seem to capture the significance of our sexual identities. Many people experience sexual identity as a fundamental part of their subjectivity. To argue that this is ‘chosen’ does not testify to the depth of that experience.

I wish to retain the related concepts of ‘performance’ and ‘choice,’ however, for the reasons suggested by sociologist Vera Whisman. She wholeheartedly agrees with the idea that sexual identity is more fundamental to us than our preferred brand of breakfast cereal. At the same time, however, she warns that we should not use this as an excuse to reify the categories ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual.’ As the historical record shows us, these identities are not always stable, concrete, and unchangeable, even if we often experience them as such in our everyday lives. To put it simply, there are many more sexualities than we have names for. The categories that we are saddled with (homosexual/heterosexual) fall short of capturing all possible configurations of sexual identity: ‘[e]ven if there are essential differences among individuals, there is no reason to assume that current categories accurately capture them.’

Judith Butler, the theorist whose name is most often associated with performance and ‘performativity’ has also defended the concept. In a 1992 interview

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15 Ibid., 9.
17 Ibid.
with Liz Kotz, she protested against the ‘consumerist’ reading of her book *Gender Trouble*. She emphasised that gender, for her, is ‘not radical choice and it’s not voluntarism.’ On the contrary: ‘Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to force them to resignify. This is not freedom but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.’ While she may not put her case as negatively as Adorno, there are clear overlaps between Butler’s idea of performativity (working ‘the trap that one is inevitably in’) and Adorno’s argument that we can make so-called ‘rational’ choices in our lives, but these choices are already pre-structured for us.

This poststructuralist view of identity, then, does not necessarily deconstruct gender and sexuality until they are no longer meaningful. Rather, this understanding of sexual identity approaches it, in pseudo-Marxist terms, as something that we make but not in circumstances of our own making. In Seidman’s terms, ‘we fashion identities by drawing on a culture that already associates identities with certain behaviors, places, and things.’ While we may feel that these identities are deeply rooted and thus find expression in ‘spontaneous’ ways (what some people refer to as the ‘we can’t help it’ thesis), the only way to ‘project an identity’ is through ‘acting purposefully.’ In this thesis, I am interested in exploring some of the purposeful actions that come to bear on popular music, and the ways in which music functions as part of a culture that is already associated ‘with certain behaviors, places, things.’

Among Seidman’s respondents, the people who came of age before the 1970s and who identify as closeted describe a life characterised by near-constant self-monitoring and performance, frequently cast in terms of ‘acting.’ For example, Lenny (b.1935), a man who married and became a father partly in order to avoid

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19 Ibid.
20 See the discussion on pages 100-102 of this thesis.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
being suspected of homosexuality, tells Seidman: ‘I am always concerned that somehow, some way, I will be found out. I am always suspicious that somebody might pick up something.’ Lenny learnt to compartmentalise his homosexual desires, and separates his gay experiences from the rest of his life. (He only has sex with other men while on work-related trips.) Such a ‘double life’ has meant that Lenny needs to consistently monitor both his own behaviour and the behaviour of those around him. He ‘reads’ people for any signs that might betray homosexuality, and diligently purges any such elements from his own dress, demeanour, and posture: ‘I know of a man who embroiders or crochets and right away I think, “He’s gay.”’

This notion of homosexuality as something that can be signified and must therefore be policed is even more obvious in the account of Bill (b.1958). Lenny had the ‘advantage’ of coming of age in an era when public discourse about homosexuality was only just beginning to rear its head (and thus, at a time when heterosexuality did not need to be enforced as aggressively as it would be later). Bill, on the other hand, was routinely exposed to a culture of homophobia, and this had a significant impact on the performative aspect of his identity. While in high school, Bill dated and had girlfriends to ensure that his homosexual leanings were never discovered. Seidman speaks of him ‘vigilantly’ monitoring his behaviour. Bill’s own account makes this strategy vivid: ‘I’m like a chameleon. I was attuned to how others felt about gays and would adjust.’ Significantly, he compares being homosexual with being an actor: ‘I don’t think anybody really wants to be homosexual. Who wants to be subjected to the jokes, the harassment, the beatings, the condemnation, having to live your life as an actor?’ His efforts to appear straight encompass all aspects of his demeanour and public presentation, right down to the way he walked: ‘I was very practiced in walking very straight and very military-like.’ This echoes Seidman’s earlier observations about passing:

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24 Ibid., 33.
25 Ibid., 34.
26 Ibid., 37.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 37-38.
29 Ibid.
Passing is not a simple, effortless act; it’s not just about denial or suppression. The closeted individual closely monitors his or her speech, emotional expression, and behavior in order to avoid unwanted suspicion. The sexual meaning of the things (for example, clothes, furniture) and acts (for example, styles of walking, talking, posture) of daily life must be carefully read in order to skillfully fashion a convincing public heterosexual identity. For closeted individuals, daily life acquires a heightened sense of theatricality or performative deliberateness. The stuff of the closet reveals something of the workings of heterosexual domination but also of how gays negotiate this social terrain.\(^{30}\)

The overall argument then, is as follows: because queers need to learn how to ‘pass’ in order to survive, they often have an unofficial training in performance. As Bill aptly put it, queerness involves (at least partly) ‘having to live your life as an actor.’ However, I do not believe that the link between performance and queer sexualities is only relevant in the case of closeted queers. What goes unremarked in all these accounts is the extent to which this ‘training’ remains useful after the closet has been superseded. Richard Dyer hints at this in his article ‘Dressing the Part,’ which explores the stereotypical connections between gay men and the fashion industries. In a similar way to Gill, Dyer does not see gay men’s penchant for fashion as a biologically determined disposition. Rather, in terms that foreshadow Seidman’s argument, he argues that gay men have learned to adapt to heterosexist society, and that part of this adaption process involves learning to ‘pass’ as heterosexual:

Surviving as a queer meant mastering appearances, knowing how to manipulate clothes, mannerisms and lifestyle so as to be able to pass for straight and also to signal that we weren’t. To stay alive and unharmed we had to handle the codes of heterosexuality with consummate skill; to have any erotic and sentimental life we had to find ways of conveying our otherwise invisible desires.\(^{31}\)

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 31. Emphasis added.
\(^{31}\) Dyer, ‘Dressing the Part,’ 63.
In some ways Dyer’s argument overlaps with Seidman’s: the ‘heightened theatricality’ of queer life is a by-product of a closeted existence. When viewed in this way, the notion that queers have any special investment in ‘performativity’ is limited, because the notion is only applicable in those situations where we find ourselves in a hostile environment, where we need to conceal our sexual identity. In fact, we could go so far as to say that Seidman is not necessarily asserting a connection between performativity and queer life in general; he is purely making a link between performativity and the closet. If this were as far as the connection went, then the idea of performativity would have limited significance in gay male nightclubs, since such venues presumably provide a relatively open space in which the closeted would be, for the most part, instantly outed by mere virtue of being in the space.

This is where Dyer’s extension of the idea is crucial. He maintains that this heightened level of self-awareness—being aware of one’s clothing, mannerisms, speech, and so on—is not only applicable to people in the closet (although that is certainly part of the picture, as seen in his colourful if overstated language: we have to ‘handle the codes of heterosexuality’ to ‘stay alive’). Just as significantly, queers need to have some sense of performance in order to convey who they are to other potential mates (sexual or otherwise). Therefore, it would be reasonable to suggest that this sense of performance continues to be relevant even after we emerge from the closet.

There are several other aspects of Seidman’s study that point to this conclusion. Firstly, every one of his respondents experienced high school as a ‘seamless homophobic environment.’ This suggests that by the time most queers have completed high school, it is highly likely that they will have been exposed to many situations in which ‘passing’ is necessary. Consequently, they will have internalised the ‘codes’ of heterosexuality (walk, talk, mannerisms, and so on), the codes of defiance (which would necessarily draw on a range of existing ways to be publicly ‘gay’) or a combination of both. It is highly unlikely that this unofficial ‘training’

32 Ibid.
33 Seidman, Beyond the Closet, 36.
would dissipate as soon as high school is over. Furthermore, Seidman reports a marked decline in the familiar narratives of coming out and migrating to more hospitable urban ghettos, in keeping with the general trend of lesbians and gay men becoming more integrated with ‘mainstream’ society.34 With the diminishing importance of gay ghettos, many queers will find themselves ‘performing’ their identity for straight people in everyday life. Living and working in an environment where heterosexuality is the presumed norm will have an impact on the ways in which queers ‘perform’ their homosexuality. It should be noted that straight people do not need to undergo the intense self-scrutiny that accompanies the ‘coming out’ process, partly because representations of their ‘lifestyle’ or ‘orientation’ (to borrow the parlance of the right) are ubiquitous. As queer theorist Michael Warner puts it, heterosexuality ‘is the one thing celebrated in every film plot, every sitcom, every advertisement […] Nonstandard sex has none of this normative richness.’35

In the face of a society that incessantly promotes heterosexuality and thus renders it invisible, it seems reasonable to assume that heterosexuals do not need to undergo the same type of ‘coming out’ process that is common amongst queers. Thus, whether queers intentionally disguise or flaunt their sexuality, it is more likely that they will be identified as divergent from the norm, and will be classified accordingly. In these circumstances, a heightened sense of performance and self-monitoring for queers is almost inevitable. This has been made explicit by Ellen Lewin and William Leap:

What personal narratives of gay men and lesbians reveal consistently is the urgency of identity management in the course of ordinary activities. We must consider on a daily basis how much of our personal lives to reveal how to create a ‘role’ for ourselves that will lessen the likelihood of ostracism or other hostile treatment, and how to coordinate our homosexuality, however we perceive it, with other dimensions of our identities. It doesn’t matter whether we gravitate personally toward an essentialist position on sexuality, a constructionist theory or some position in between… Whether we believe

34 Ibid., 9.
35 Warner, The Trouble with Normal, 47.
that sexual orientation is a biologically driven propensity or a negotiated identity, whether we wish we could change or are defiantly proud, whether we believe that our sexual orientation is ‘who we are’ or only a minor theme in our larger identities—the management of information about our homosexuality is still a central theme in how we move around in the world.\(^{36}\)

The paradox of this situation is clear. As representations of lesbian and gay life proliferate throughout the mass media (for instance, on television programs such as *Queer Eye For the Straight Guy*) and as we become more like the ‘girls/boys next door’ (note the straight-friendly, middle-class and homely characters on the sitcom *Will & Grace*), lesbian and gay sexuality becomes increasingly normative. Far from lifting all restraints and prohibitions from queer sexuality, the arrival of queers in the cultural mainstream potentially increases some of the pressures that come to bear on openly gay men and lesbians. Instead of attempting to project a seamless heterosexual persona, many queers are under increasing pressure to project the right kind of homosexual persona. There is a heightened awareness that certain behaviours will be ‘read’ in a particular way, to fit existing characterisations of a queer sensibility. In her discussion of ‘fag hags,’ Deborah Thompson has noted that visibility frequently comes with these sorts of strings attached. For instance, the corollary of visibility is surveillance, which can be marshalled by the dominant culture to fix the ‘unknowable.’\(^{37}\) Or, to borrow Peggy Phelan’s words, ‘in framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other.’\(^{38}\) The more we assimilate, the more we become ‘normal.’ Seidman effectively sums up the ways in which this new-found ‘normality’ is a double-edged sword:

Normality carries ambiguous political meaning. The status of normality means that gays are just like any other citizens. We have the same needs, feelings, commitments, loyalties, and aspirations as [straights]. Accordingly, we deserve the same rights and respect. But normal also carries another

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\(^{37}\) Deborah Thompson, ‘Calling All Fag Hags: From Identity Politics to Identification Politics,’ *Social Semiotics* 14, no. 1 (2004), 47.

normative sense: the normal gay is expected to exhibit specific kinds of traits and behaviours. He is supposed to be gender conventional, well adjusted, and integrated into mainstream society; she is committed to home, family, career, and nation.\textsuperscript{39}

To put this another way, the so-called ‘liberation’ of queer sexuality during the 1970s simply led to another set of gender and sexual norms, which police a new set of (sub)identities and practices. This has been the result of the ‘assimilationist’ character of many gay liberation movements.\textsuperscript{40} The transition of queer sexuality from a ‘love that dares not speak its name’ to the love that appears on prime-time television has not broken down the notion that some sexualities are ‘normal’ and others ‘deviant’:

there is a dominant culture that associates normal sexuality with sex that is exclusively between adults, that conforms to dichotomous gender norms, that is private, tender, caring, genitally centered, and linked to love, marriage and monogamy. There is then a wide range of consensual adult practices that are potentially vulnerable to stigma and social punishment; for example, rough or S/M (sadomasochistic) sex, ‘casual’ sex, multiple-partner sex, group and fetishistic sex, and commercial and public sex. Individuals who engage in some of these acts will be scandalized as ‘bad citizens’.\textsuperscript{41}

The ramifications of this are twofold. On the one hand, as discourse about sexuality proliferates in popular culture, queers are more likely to internalise normative views of sexuality and of themselves. This means that, after coming out (if, indeed, coming out has been necessary), the monitoring of one’s own gendered performance increases, rather than decreases. The dominant culture’s contradictory and often ambivalent message is that it is fine to be a queen, as long as one is not a flaming queen. At the same time, the apparent ‘tolerance’ of gays in everyday life means that it becomes less and less necessary for queers to migrate to urban ghettos, since it is

\textsuperscript{39} Seidman, Beyond the Closet, 14.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 15.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 17.
now possible for them to be integrated in ‘mainstream’ life. So, increasingly, queers find themselves ‘performing’ queer sexualities in everyday life amongst straight people who—though they may be our closest friends—do not ultimately share the experiences of passing, choosing not to pass, and monitoring their own sexual behaviour in quite the same way as we do. This is another factor that may cause our self-monitoring to increase. Of course, the language I am using here inadvertently suggests that this performance is all a deliberate, conscious, and rational strategy—a view to which I do not subscribe. However, if we take into account the findings of theorists such as Judith Butler, then we can safely say that the way in which we fashion our identities are a type of ‘reiterated performance.’\(^{42}\) The point I wish to advance here is that these performances are not only related to the experience of being in the closet. To put this another way, we do not only ‘perform’ when we are passing. Rather, I would argue that we ‘perform’ at all times, and that this performative aspect of queer sexuality actually increases after we have publicly declared our sexuality.

In some ways, this argument can be viewed as a return to some earlier, pre-Foucauldian understandings of sexuality. We may draw a link, for instance, to earlier sociological research into primary and secondary ‘deviance.’ As Steven Epstein puts it: ‘A homosexual identity, in this view, is created not so much through homosexual activity per se (what labeling theorists…would call “primary deviance”) as through the individual’s reactions to being so labeled, and through the internalization of the imposed categorization (“secondary deviance”).’\(^{43}\) This is congruent with the arguments of sociologists such as Mary McIntosh, who argued against the idea of homosexuality as a particular ‘orientation,’ treating homosexuality more as a ‘role’ which fulfilled significant social functions.\(^{44}\) On the one hand, the homosexual role serves to keep ‘homosexuals’ confined to a single category, isolating them from the rest of society. At the same time, the ‘homosexual

\(^{42}\) See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24-25.


role’ acts as a general deterrent to the members of society who are not labelled as such; any person who engages in potentially ‘homosexual’ practices risks being aligned with the category ‘homosexual’ in toto.\(^\text{45}\) Thus, the role effectively polices the boundaries between permissible and non-permissible behaviours.\(^\text{46}\) Like the work of later queer theorists, this sociological understanding of sexuality shifts the analytical emphasis from ‘deviance’ (that is, from an interest solely in ‘minority’ perspectives, behaviours, and identities) to an interest in the field as a whole (that is, the ways in which discursive differences between ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ identities are constructed, maintained, and resisted).

However, with regard to the specific argument being advanced here (that queer identities tend to be marked by a heightened sense of the ‘theatrical’ and the ‘performative’), this more recent approach to sexuality comes with associated risks. We have rightly moved beyond the notion that queers are innately sensitive to matters of public persona and presentation. However, the alternative position I am advancing here—that any such heightened sensitivity should be traced to the experience of being gay in a predominantly heterosexist world—risks naturalising heterosexuality.\(^\text{47}\) To argue that most queers are made to be more conscious of the ways in which they ‘perform’ their homosexuality inadvertently suggests that heterosexuals magically adopt their sexuality without participating in any discourses whatsoever. One of the key insights of much queer theory has been the notion that all sexualities are social constructions, and that all of these are regulated by a set of discourses which allow us to understand what it means to be, for instance, ‘straight’ or ‘bisexual’ in the first place.\(^\text{48}\) Even hegemonic masculine heterosexuality is, in certain ways, a performance. However, if we accept this position, we may veer close

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 32.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) See Dyer, ‘Dressing the part,’ 63. Dyer uses the phrase ‘the nature of being gay in a homophobic society.’ I have deliberately replaced the term ‘homophobic’ with ‘heterosexist’ because the former term usually designates only the ways in which homosexuality is explicitly regulated. In contrast, I am arguing that the performative aspect of being queer can arise as much from the normative heterosexual culture that we live in as from explicit homophobia. Lisa Duggan provides an excellent discussion of the ways in which heterosexual normativity can be challenged in her article ‘Queering the State,’ in Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture (London: Routledge, 1995), 188-93.

to arguing that there is nothing of special interest in the experiences of queers, since they are not alone in living a ‘constructed’ identity. Everyone is now seen to be performing such an identity. What should be clear at this stage is that I wish to argue the opposite: that there are several aspects of queer life which are distinctive, and which may be illuminated through the discursive practices which they engage in (including the act of participating in music-making). Having already discussed the experiences of some closeted gay men, it is worth turning now to the experiences of a heterosexual, so as to examine some of the ways in which heterosexuality and homosexuality are experienced differently.

Let us take the findings of Michael Messner as an example. Messner is an Associate Professor of sociology and gender studies, and so some critics may dismiss his self-narration as the view of someone who is paid to pontificate on these matters. It may be argued that Messner brings a degree of intentionality to his story that may not have emerged if he had not entered academia (and so have read the work of theorists such as Alfred Kinsey, Sigmund Freud, and Herbert Marcuse). However, Messner’s self-narration is significant precisely because he underlines the way that his heterosexuality—though certainly ‘performed’—was nevertheless performed in a less conscious fashion than that of his gay counterparts. In his article ‘Becoming 100 Percent Straight,’ Messner recounts a crush he had on ‘Timmy,’ a fellow student in the ninth grade. Within a short period of time, Messner sensed that he could not continue his friendship with the skinny, boyish Timmy without putting at risk the heterosexual persona he had carved out for himself. Timmy ‘was, we all agreed, a geek. He was a faggot.’ Following from this, Messner began to publicly make fun of Timmy, and eventually went so far as to deliberately elbow him during a basketball game, to signal that he (Messner) was not afraid of the

49 ‘Music-making’ is broadly conceived here to include both production and consumption practices, such as dancing in a club.
50 Michael A. Messner, ‘Becoming 100 Percent Straight,’ in Williams and Stein, Sexuality and Gender.
51 Messner, ‘Becoming 100 Percent Straight,’ 349. As Messner points out, this kind of experience is entirely in keeping with the findings of Alfred Kinsey, who observed that the actual practices of heterosexuals and homosexuals did not always match a person’s ‘official’ (named) identity. See Alfred Kinsey, W. B. Pomeroy, and C. E. Martin, Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948).
52 Ibid., 349.
‘sometimes brutal contact under the basket.’\textsuperscript{53} As Messner makes clear, this sort of behaviour was far from a ‘natural’ manifestation of his ‘natural’ heterosexuality. Rather, it demonstrated the way in which heterosexuality was \textit{actively} taken up in a particular context: ‘I actively took up the male group’s task of constructing heterosexual/masculine identities in the context of sport.’\textsuperscript{54} Heterosexuality should not be seen, then, as a ‘natural,’ magically unmediated complement to the artifice and constructedness of homosexuality. Both identities are socio-cultural and discursive constructions, created within particular contexts. In this case, the sports arena served as the context in which a narrow definition of heterosexuality was constructed and enforced.\textsuperscript{55} Rather than seeing these identities as something which \textit{we are}, Messner suggests that we approach them as something which \textit{we do}, with the necessary corollary that it is possible to change how we perform these sexualities.\textsuperscript{56}

This is a necessary rejoinder to the argument that queers are somehow more ‘in tune’ with the constructedness of their identities. (Indeed, the number of lesbians and gay men who subscribe to essentialist, biologically rooted understandings of sexuality implies that we should be wary of ascribing this quality to all queers.) However, even in Messner’s account, we can find traces of the ways in which heterosexual normativity gives rise to substantially different life stories between gay and straight men. In particular, we can find traces of ‘coming out’ stories which betray the ‘heightened sense of theatricality’ which Seidman mentions in his account of the closet.\textsuperscript{57} When Messner began to distance himself from the somewhat stigmatised figure of Timmy, he could not really articulate \textit{why} he needed to act this way. On some level, he recognised that Timmy was not performing heroic masculine heterosexuality as effectively as he was, but could not have explicitly said, ‘This is why I must distance myself from him.’ Even when his actions seemed to take the

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 350.
\textsuperscript{55} In their study of a number of elementary schools in the US, Barrie Thorne and Zella Luria found that heterosexuality and male homophobia were inscribed early on as the ‘norm’ in the daily life of children at school. See Barrie Thorne and Zella Luria, ‘Sexuality and Gender in Children’s Daily Worlds,’ in Williams and Stein, \textit{Sexuality and Gender}, 138.
\textsuperscript{56} Messner, ‘Becoming 100 Percent Straight,’ 352.
\textsuperscript{57} Seidman, \textit{Beyond the Closet}, 31.
form of deliberate performance (for instance, in his realisation that he was not a sports ‘star’ because he was not aggressive enough on the basketball court), there was little sense of him putting on a façade which would disguise the ‘real’ person underneath.

Messner compares his story of taking up heterosexuality with that of Tom Waddell, an athlete who also ‘performed’ heterosexuality but in a much more deliberate way. Waddell came of age in the 1950s and remained in the closet for the duration of his career, but founded the Gay Games after his retirement. Unlike Messner’s story, there seems to be a certain degree of deliberateness in Waddell’s version of ‘coming out.’ Waddell was ‘fully conscious of entering sports’ as a way of warding off the spectre of homosexuality.\(^{58}\) Though he was interested in gymnastics and dance, he was also fully aware that such an interest did not send the ‘right’ signals about his sexuality. Given the social climate of the time, Waddell made the entirely reasonable decision to participate in more ‘masculine’ pursuits instead, including football. Indeed, he was so successful at carving out a heterosexual persona that he was generally viewed as a ‘jock’: ‘that’s how I was viewed, and I was comfortable with that.’\(^{59}\)

At several points, Messner concedes that this process was more ‘conscious’ and ‘dramaturgical’ for Waddell (that is, for a self-identified gay man) than it was for himself. This is clear in Waddell’s comments on the way he deliberately sought to ‘fit in’ with the ‘locker room’ culture of which he was a part: ‘I wanted to be viewed as male, otherwise I would be a dancer today. I wanted the male, macho image of an athlete. So I was protected by a very hard shell. I was clearly aware of what I was doing…I often felt compelled to go along with a lot of locker room garbage because I wanted that image—and I know a lot of others who did too.’\(^{60}\)

\(^{58}\) Messner, ‘Becoming 100 Percent Straight,’ 351.


\(^{60}\) Ibid.
Messner admits that the way he adopted a heterosexual identity was not quite the same:

unlike my story, Waddell’s may invoke a dramaturgical analysis. He seemed to be consciously ‘acting’ to control and regulate others’ perceptions of him by constructing a public ‘front stage’ persona that differed radically from what he believed to be his ‘true’ inner self. My story, in contrast, suggests a deeper, less consciously strategic repression of my homoerotic attraction. Most likely, I was aware on some level of the dangers of such feelings, and was escaping the risks, disgrace, and rejection that would likely result from being different.\textsuperscript{61}

This further amplifies Seidman’s findings. It is clear that both heterosexuality and homosexuality are constructed identities, sustained by particular social discourses and institutions.\textsuperscript{62} However, it is also clear that for non-heterosexuals, the very constructedness of these identities is something which will be underlined in everyday life, particularly because the stigma (or even reverse stigma, as seen in the way that certain narrow versions of queerness are portrayed as ‘cool’ in popular culture) will not always be associated with sexual acts. This point is one of Messner’s most crucial conclusions. The two stories that he compares (his own and that of Waddell’s) do not involve actual sex. Both heterosexuality and homosexuality are ongoing practices that continue well beyond the confines of the bedroom.\textsuperscript{63} Thus, to argue that there is something ‘different’ in gay male culture need not be equated with the erroneous claim that there is something essentially different about gay males per se.

There is a final, significant point that we may draw from Messner’s self-narrative. None of the developments which he recalls happened solely within what we might call a heterosexual context. The ‘performativity’ that was a necessary part of his

\textsuperscript{61} Messner, ‘Becoming 100 Percent Straight,’ 351.
\textsuperscript{62} It also illustrates one of the ways in which the category of heterosexuality depends on its counterparts, homosexuality, for coherence. See Butler, ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination,’ in Diana Fuss, Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories (New York: Routledge, 1991), 23.
\textsuperscript{63} Messner, ‘Becoming 100 Percent Straight,’ 352.
active engagement with heterosexuality was only brought to the surface when the spectre of homosexuality reared its head. To put this another way, the ‘performance’ of heterosexuality only became an issue for Messner when he perceived it as being at risk. His efforts to actively take up ‘the male group’s task of constructing heterosexual/masculine identities’ were given a sense of urgency ‘precisely because of my fears that I might be failing in this goal.’ The ramifications of this are significant. It is not only homosexuality itself which is commonly constructed as having a ‘performative’ aspect to it; the mere ‘threat’ of association with homosexuality is enough to make people assert other sexualities more strenuously. Or, as Seidman observed of some of his respondents, the increased visibility of homosexuality encourages some people to enforce their own heterosexual persona more vigorously.

This idea is significant for my broader argument about queers and dance floors. Sexualities of all types may be considered as performative constructions, albeit constructed in circumstances which are not of our own making. However, because heterosexuality tends to pass as ‘invisible’ in most of society’s fundamental institutions, non-heterosexuality—what I am referring to as ‘queerness’—is rendered visible by default. Thus, the people who are marked by this identity tend to become more conscious of the ways in which they ‘perform’ it. As I pointed out earlier, this does not necessarily mean that they will subscribe to a social constructivist position on sexuality; many queers experience their ‘queerness’ as something innate, something that they were born with, and as something which is relatively fixed and unchanging over time. What is crucial here is that—regardless of how this sexuality is experienced—the heteronormative nature of most Western societies usually means that some degree of self-monitoring becomes necessary for queers. The importance of this is readily demonstrated in Messner’s story—in the way that even the threat of homosexuality is enough to increase some heterosexuals’ performance of their sexuality. This observation leads us back to the argument of Lewin and Leap. They point out that it is primarily queers who ‘must consider on a daily basis how much of our personal lives to reveal how to create a ‘role’ for ourselves that will lessen the

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64 Ibid., 350.
65 Seidman, Beyond the Closet, 12.
likelihood of ostracism or other hostile treatment, and how to coordinate our
homosexuality, however we perceive it, with other dimensions of our identities.  

In light of the above, we can start to see one of the reasons why dance music and
dance floor practices have been a fundamental part of many gay male subcultures
over the past several decades. Gay male nightclubs offer the possibility—and
occasionally the realisation—of a space in which open expressions of homosexual
desire will not be policed to the same extent that they are outside the club. However,
far from simply lifting all social and cultural contraints and allowing queers to ‘be
themselves,’ the space of the gay club frequently produces a heightened sense of
_performativity_—the legacy, for many gay men, of years of self-monitoring. I would
argue that handbag music ‘affords’ dance floor performances in ways that many
other (more ‘credible’) genres of dance music do not, and that it is consequently
taken up more enthusiastically within gay clubs. To illustrate this, I shall explore the
way one handbag producer—Steve Rodway (better known as ‘Motiv8’)—exploits
the expectations of clubbers on the dance floor.

### 6.3 Performance on the dance floor

In the mid- to late-1990s, Motiv8’s productions were a staple of certain types of gay
male nightclubs. These productions—usually commissioned for other performers—
allude to 1970s gay disco or Eurodisco. During the 1970s, there was a distinction
(admittedly blurred sometimes, but notable nonetheless) between songs with
sweeping string arrangements and other orchestral flourishes and more overtly
‘synthetic’ timbres. For an example of the contrast, note the difference between the
instrumentation of The Ritchie Family’s ‘American Generation’ (see CD 1, tr. 13)

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67 In Sydney, one could regularly hear his productions being played at venues such as the
Flinders Hotel.
68 For further explanation of Eurodisco, see Peter Shapiro, _Turn the Beat Around: The Secret
and Donna Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’ (see CD 1, tr. 14). Motiv8’s music is clearly aligned with the latter type of instrumental palette. In his mix of Dana Dawson’s ‘Show Me,’ for instance, we hear a patently ‘synthetic’ mix of sounds overlaid with light female vocals (see CD 1, tr. 15; complete version on CD 2, tr. 4). Hence, the sounds Motiv8 uses and his arrangement of them is a coded gay cultural reference—in this case, a reference to a genre (disco) whose connection to gay clubs is well established.

This, however, is not the only reason for Motiv8’s popularity in this scene. What is more crucial is the extent to which this music functions on the dance floor, and the extent to which it facilitates dance floor performances amongst clubbers. In her article ‘The Beat Goes On’, Georgina Gore argues that after the explosion of acid-house in the late 1980s, the dance floor became a place of relative anonymity and impersonality, as opposed to the days when it was used for spectacle and sexual posturing. Simon Reynolds attributes this to the influence of drugs like ecstasy, which tends to encourage ‘cuddles’ rather than ‘copulation,’ ‘sentimentality’ rather than ‘sticky secretions.’ These claims have some validity, but they tend to apply more to straight clubs and raves. Virtually every social institution (the workplace, the school, the supermarket) provides avenues for straight socialising and potential sexual contact. In this respect, the dance floor in straight clubs is not markedly different from other spaces of social interaction. The dance floor in gay clubs, on the other hand, provides a space for spectacle and sexual posturing that is still vilified outside. Maria Pini’s research on rave culture confirms this. She notes that there are certain types of dance floor spectacle which are ‘traditionally more closely associated with femininity and gay male culture’—these include ‘open displays of

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70 Dana Dawson, ‘Show Me (Motiv8 Mix),’ on Various Artists, Motiv8tion: The Official Motiv8 Remix Collection (double CD album) (Pure Music PURECD6, 1999).
72 Simon Reynolds, ‘Rave Culture: Living Dream or Living Death?’ in Redhead, Wynne, and O’Conner, The Clubcultures Reader, 106.
“happiness”, auto-erotic pleasure, “friendliness” and enjoyment of dance.” The music in gay clubs, then, needs to provide a basis for that male spectacle which is still only sanctioned in these sorts of clubs—a basis for the special kinaesthetic performances that one learns by regularly attending gay clubs. An important way in which this is achieved is through the overt (or even overwrought) narrative structure that is a staple of handbag music.

Reynolds notes that some types of rave music place less emphasis on linear narrative structures than others. This is not to say that they have no narrative structures to speak of. As Fink points out, narrative structures in disco and house music may be slightly less obvious than in other types of popular music, but they are certainly there. Many house tracks, for instance, have a ‘micro’ narrative drive, embedded in circular chord progressions that lead inevitably back to their commencement. This is yet another reason that handbag has typically been regarded as ‘too easy’ by its critics: its linear, goal-directed structures are too obvious, rammed home with every climactic cliché that producers can summon (as we shall see in the discussion below). As Fink is careful to remind us, many supposedly teleology-free kinds of dance music are in fact governed by familiar narrative tropes. However, it would be fair to say that the narrative structures of handbag do tend to be more overt—perhaps even flamboyantly overstated—than in other genres. A brief comparison should illustrate my point here.

In the minimal house track ‘JA’ by Kike Boy, there is a striking similarity between the beginning, middle, and end of the track (see CD 1, tr. 16, 17, and 18; complete version on CD 2, tr. 5). Heard from start to finish on a loud club PA system, all manner of subtleties emerge in terms of texture and timbre, which possibly makes a track like this closer to Steve Reich than to much Western pop music. Overall, however, there are no major or dramatic changes in this track, which consists of little

74 Fink, Repeating Ourselves, 46.
75 Ibid.
76 See Gilbert and Pearson’s discussion of Euro-house in Discographies, 77.
more than looped drum samples. In contrast to this, Motiv8’s music adheres to the linear narrative structures so familiar to fans of Western pop. Tracks usually feature breaks during which the metric pulse is weakened, followed by grandiose crescendos in which the texture gradually thickens and the activity of the instruments increases. For instance, synthesised snare drums play quavers, then semiquavers, then demisemiquavers, and so on, and finally ‘climaxes’ during which the full panoply of synth-sounds are unleashed, and a riff (or chorus) signals that this is the ‘peak’ of the track. I noted similar clichés in the Almighty mix of ‘Natural’ in Chapter Four. Motiv8’s mix of Robert Palmer’s ‘Addicted to Love’ is also representative of this trend (see CD 1, tr. 19; complete version on CD 2, tr. 6).

Jonathan Bollen’s study of Sydney’s gay dance parties suggests that these devices provide a basis for kinaesthetic performance. For example, during the ‘break,’ pelvic-support action is usually minimised in favour of upper-body gestures, and the pelvis begins gyrating again when the beat recommences. Because this schema is so firmly established (and predictable), the mere act of muting the drum machine instills a desire for its return. Motiv8 employs a range of musical devices which act as ‘signposts,’ leading the way to the next climax. In musical terms, this can be achieved in several ways. His single ‘Rockin’ For Myself’ is a useful example of this technique. A textural graph has been provided in Musical Example 6.1, below.

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78 Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 77.
79 Motiv8 Meets Robert Palmer, ‘Addicted to Love (Addicted to Dub),’ on *Addicted to Love* (promotional 12-inch single) (White Label FX98, no date).
80 Bollen, ‘Queer Kinaesthesia,’ 223.
81 See Garcia, ‘On and On,’ [4.4].
82 Motiv8, ‘Rockin’ For Myself (Ultimate Vocal Mix),’ on *Rockin’ For Myself* (12-inch single) (WEA International 4509 96771-0, 1994).
**Figure 6.1**

**Textural Graph of Motiv8, ‘Rockin’ For Myself (Ultimate Vocal Mix),’ mm. 1-49, 0.00-1.26**

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 20]

[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 7]

Textural Graph by Adrian Renzo

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<th>Measures</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>9</th>
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<th>17</th>
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- **Vocals (reverse reverb)**
- **Synth riffs 1 and 2**
- **Synth riff 3**
- **Bass line**
- **Additional percussion**
- **Bass drum and hi-hat**

[Continued overleaf.]
The track begins with reverberation from singer Angi Brown’s voice, played in reverse. Throughout the first minute of the track, that sound is deliberately established as a signpost: it is only ever heard at the end of four- or eight-bar phrases, invariably just before some significant change in the music (for instance, the addition of a new synthesiser riff, or the muting of the drum machine, and so on). Hence, the very presence of the sound alerts us to an imminent change in the music. This introductory section of the track is typical of such dance songs in other ways, too. The texture thickens not gradually, but one step at a time. New instruments enter the mix at regular intervals (frequently, at the beginning of an eight-bar phrase), with the texture thickening like so many bricks being added to a wall. This—like the inclusion of a minimal drum pattern which Rollo so derided (see page 134 of this thesis)—facilitates DJ performance. As one track is deconstructed (for instance, the vocals may cease, followed by the bass line, followed by the hi-hats, and so on), another track is constructed in a similar fashion. Playing the two tracks simultaneously provides a smooth segue from one to the other.\footnote{I provide a fuller description of how this applies to handbag on page 241 of this thesis.}
Approximately fifty seconds into the track, this steady crescendo is interrupted by the familiar reverse reverberation from Brown’s voice. The drum machine, the bass line, and all the synthesiser riffs which have been introduced thus far cease, giving way to a new riff consisting of sustained open fifths (not unlike the sustained synthesiser sounds that characterised Donna Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’). This section, predictably enough, lasts for eight bars. In the final bar of the section, however, Motiv8 employs three devices to ‘tell’ clubbers that a dramatic climax is imminent (see Musical Example 6.1, below).
Musical Example 6.1
Motiv8, ‘Rockin’ For Myself (Ultimate Vocal Mix),’ mm. 29-38, 0.51-1.05
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 21]
[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 7]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo
The first notable device is the early muting of the synthesiser. In and of itself, there is no reason that this should signify a climax, but this relatively simple action needs to be contextualised. Within a genre where eight-bar phrase structure is the norm, the muting of any central instrument or sound just before the end of a phrase becomes a clear indication that something new will be introduced at the beginning of the next phrase. Even if the next phrase continues precisely as expected, the momentary break in the music creates a small climax. Over the top of this second of silence, two other elements are deployed. The first is the now-familiar vocal reverberation, which has been established for just this purpose (that is, to signal a climax). The second is the introduction of Angie Brown’s voice, heard ‘normally’ now, singing the title of the track: ‘Rockin’ for myseeeeeeelf!!’ However, the last syllable of that line—

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84 DJs will sometimes exploit this strategy by muting the music momentarily just before the end of a phrase, and then raising the volume again on the first beat of the next bar. In this instance, I am using the term ‘break’ to refer to a small period of silence, rather than to a breakbeat or breakdown.
‘seeelf’—has been filtered by the equivalent of an electronic gate. In other words, the voice sounds as if it is rapidly stopping and starting: ‘Rockin’ for myse- e- e- e- e- e.’

As Reynolds notes, within dance music culture, as soon as someone comes ‘up with a new idea, it’s instantly ripped off a thousand times.’ Thus, in the months and years following the release of ‘Rockin’ For Myself,’ we could expect to hear literally hundreds of similar dance tracks with similar effects (‘prematurely’ muted instruments, reverse reverberations from various instruments, gated vocals, and so on). By the time Motiv8’s next single was released, then, the connotations of all these musical techniques were firmly entrenched.

In the Direct Hit Mix of Motiv8’s ‘Break the Chain,’ it is possible to discern a playful manipulation of musical desire, wherein an expected climax is deliberately ‘stalled.’ I shall demonstrate this with the gated vocals from this more recent track.

Like many songs of this genre, ‘Break the Chain (Direct Hit Mix)’ features a musical break (or middle-eight) in which the drums drop out of the mix, and a new piano melody is introduced, leading inevitably back to the final, triumphant chorus. This section lasts for eight bars, and several elements are deployed in the final bar to encourage dancers to ‘really get into it’ (as one of Bollen’s respondents put it). The first is a gated sample of the singer’s voice, in this case singing: ‘I don’t need your lo- o- o- o- ove!’ The second device is a more traditional one: a ‘drum fill’ from the drum machine, consisting of just two semiquavers and a quaver. This is a potent signifier of imminent climax; similar drum fills (with similar functions) can be found

86 As several writers have pointed out, many listeners who are immersed in this culture develop a keen sense of the ‘rules’ that make the music comprehensible, and what particular sounds ‘signify,’ see Malbon, Clubbing, 82; Philip Tagg, ‘Music In Mass Media Studies: Reading Sounds For Example,’ in Popular Music Research, ed. Keith Roe and Ulla Karlsson NORDICOM (Göteborg: University of Göteborg, 1990), 104.
87 Motiv8, ‘Break the Chain (Digital Mix),’ on Various Artists, Direct Hit 16/1 (LP) (Direct Hit Remix Service [no catalogue number], c.1995). This mix is a re-edit of two mixes on the original single release. See the Dolomite Euro Radio Mix and the Uprageous Club Mix on Motiv8, ‘Break the Chain’ (CD single) (Warner WEA010CD, 1995).
88 Bollen, ‘Queer Kinaesthesia,’ 228.
on 1960s Motown records such as the Temptations’ ‘Ain’t Too Proud to Beg.’
Instead of delivering the ‘pay-off,’ however, the track simply lurches into another piano crescendo. The drum machine does return, but only in the form of a sampled tambourine sound, rather than the full onslaught of bass drums, snares, and hi-hats (see Musical Example 6.2).

**Musical Example 6.2**

*Motiv8, ‘Break the Chain (Direct Hit Mix),’ mm. 145-56, 4.10-4.31*

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 22]

[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 8]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo

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This element of surprise—that is, of withholding the return of the bass and snare drum at precisely the moment where we most expect it—is reinforced by the original source material that was used in the Direct Hit Mix. The section just described has been spliced together from two mixes available on the original single of ‘Break the Chain.’ The piano section, ‘lo-o-o-o-ove!’ vocal, and drum fill are taken from the Dolomite Euro Radio Mix, while the anti-climax is taken from the Uprageous Club Mix. Anyone familiar with the Dolomite Mix would be aware that it is at exactly this moment (‘lo-o-o-o-ove!’) that the drums return (see Musical Example 6.3, below).
Musical Example 6.3
Motiv8, ‘Break the Chain (Dolomite Euro Radio Mix),’ mm. 1-12, 0.00-0.21
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 23]
[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 9]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo
So our expectations are thwarted in an additional way. Not only does the Direct Hit Mix deploy signifiers of imminent climax (the gated vocals and drum fill): it also removes the climax that earlier mixes of the song have ‘trained’ us to expect.

Why would a surprise anti-climax be effective—even desirable—on the dance floor? ‘Joseph,’ one of the clubbers Bollen interviewed for his study, stated that he really ‘gets into it’ by ‘anticipating changes in the music, changes in the beat, listening to the music to hear what’s coming up, so I can do something in my dance, so I can really hammer a certain key change or something… [T]he satisfaction I get out of that when I get it right is just amazing.’

This comment highlights several important characteristics in Motiv8’s music. Firstly, the music needs to be familiar. It is only possible to ‘anticipate’ what you already

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90 Ibid.
know is coming—hence, ‘standardisation’ becomes the price of admission. Secondly, Joseph only achieves that ‘satisfaction’ when he ‘get[s] it right.’ In other words, sometimes clubbers do not get it right. The ‘satisfaction’ is heightened if they can memorise the producer’s stalling tactics.

There is an obvious parallel between this argument and Susan McClary’s reading of seventeenth-century tonality. She writes that such tonality has the ability to instill in the listener an intense longing for a given event: the cadence. It…creates an artificial need (in the real world, there is no reason one should crave, for instance, the pitch D; yet by making it the withheld object of musical desire, a good piece of tonal music can—at within a mere ten seconds—dictate one’s very breathing.) After that need is established…tonal procedures strive to postpone gratification of that need until finally delivering the payoff in what is technically called the ‘climax’...

So too in handbag music, producers such as Motiv8 routinely set up desire for a musical event, and then postpone it for as long as possible. ‘Desire’ is generated here by rhythmic, textural, and timbral changes in the music, as well as harmonic procedures. In the real world, there is no reason that one should crave a cymbal crash, a thundering bass line, or a new synthesiser riff. However, after familiarising themselves with the norms of this music by clubbing regularly, Motiv8’s music has just this effect on dancers.

In this way, then, Motiv8’s music affords dance floor performances in ways that other types of dance music do not. There are several points worth drawing from this analysis. Firstly, considerations of the ‘authenticity’ of this music miss the point. The dance music press tends to dismiss this music because of its calculated manipulation of the crowd’s desire, and because so much of the music appears to be ‘made to order.’ This approach also appeals to established aesthetic criteria developed for high art and adapted in rock music cultures, showing how the music fails to transcend its

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91 McClary, Feminine Endings, 125.
historical moment, fails to deliver complexity, and so on.\textsuperscript{92} If we were to add an Adorno-inflected analysis, we could also note the thoroughly standardised nature of Motiv8’s musical strategies. In light of the analysis above, however, I would suggest that what matters here is the way that those standardised strategies give gay men an opportunity to ‘perform’ on the dance floor. This ‘performance’ is a crucial aspect of gay male culture, and as Bollen’s respondents demonstrate, the performance is explicitly linked to specific strategies in the music itself (‘changes in the music, changes in the beat’).\textsuperscript{93}

There are several other elements in this music—the foregrounding of vocal lines, the maintenance and privileging of song-structures within the longer 12-inch format, and so on—that tend to be ridiculed by dance music connoisseurs. All of these elements depend on listeners being familiar with a wide range of musical conventions in order to be effective. In the following chapter, I shall examine why handbag draws on these conventions. In order to do this, it will be necessary to place the 12-inch format within its historical context, and to note some of the forerunners to handbag that also deploy familiar musical conventions in order to appeal to gay male audiences. I turn to this issue in Chapter Seven.

\textsuperscript{92} See page 135 of this thesis.
\textsuperscript{93} Bollen, ‘Queer Kinaesthesia,’ 228.
CHAPTER 7

THE 12-INCH SINGLE AS SONG
7.1 Introduction: ‘songs’ versus ‘tracks’

The music heard on gay male dance floors is almost invariably distributed on 12-inch vinyl singles and on CD singles. The music heard in these clubs, then, is a very specific type of popular music that has been curiously neglected in the relevant literature. It consists neither of three-minute pop songs, nor of extended instrumental electronic dance tracks. It is rather, a type of music in which extended pop songs are the norm. This chapter revisits some of the records that have achieved canonic status within the field of ‘electronic dance music,’ along with the much-maligned 12-inch ‘extended versions’ of UK producers Stock, Aitken, and Waterman (SAW), from a musicological perspective. Since my aim is to explain the appeal of extended pop songs and handbag music in gay male culture, my interpretation of these records is at odds with many existing histories of the 12-inch format. It is worth recounting the various threads of this thesis that make such a revisionist perspective necessary.

In Chapter Six, I argued that dance floor performance is particularly important in gay male culture. Night clubs and bars are a central feature of gay male enclaves in many cities of the industrialised world, and there is a definite performative aspect to the specific types of dance that take place in these clubs. In the previous chapter, I described some of the features of handbag music that afford such dance floor performances, providing evidence that the music is particularly suited to the socio-cultural context of the gay male club. In the discussion of Motiv8’s work (specifically, the singles ‘Rockin’ For Myself’ and ‘Break the Chain’), I demonstrated that the music relies on precisely the kinds of musical strategies that are disparaged within the ‘credible’ dance music press to achieve its effects on the

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1 Sections of this chapter were presented in a paper entitled ‘Twelve Inches of Pleasure: How Pop Songs are Stretched in “Extended Mixes,”’ at the 2006 National Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Australia-New Zealand branch, 23-25 June 2006, JMC Academy, Sydney.

2 During the 1970s and 1980s, most DJs preferred to use 12-inch singles (rather than album cuts) because of the improved sound quality of the extended single format. Another reason that singles have usually been the staple of dance music cultures is the prevalence of extended remixes available on this format (which are usually not available on albums). See Straw, ‘Value and Velocity,’ 165-68.

3 For discussion of the relationship between night clubs, dance music and gay male culture, see: Amico, “‘I Want Muscles,’” 359-78; Gilbert and Pearson, Discographies, 99-100; Gill, Queer Noises, 134-39; Buckland, Impossible Dance, 128-58. The commentary of Bollen’s respondents, cited in the previous chapter, clearly demonstrates this point. See Bollen, ‘Queer Kinaesthesia,’ 228.
dance floor. These tracks openly flaunt their reliance on convention and on clichés, make no appeal to established criteria of aesthetic value, and privilege (apparent) simplicity over complexity. Perhaps most significantly, where ‘simplicity’ is foregrounded in the music, there is no accompanying discourse that hints at other redeeming qualities such as personal authenticity. The simplicity of Nirvana’s music is widely celebrated as ‘honest’ or ‘genuine’; the simplicity of handbag music, on the other hand, is dismissed because it offers only alienated simplicity (along the lines suggested by Adorno). Rather than being taken as a symptom of the ‘tortured artist’ or of ‘personal honesty,’ the simplicity of handbag music is frequently associated with the commercial machinations of the record industry.

These denigrated aspects (simplicity, adherence to formula, and so on) manifest themselves most obviously in one aspect of handbag 12-inch singles and extended versions: these remixes tend to retain song structures, complete with vocal lines and a clear demarcation of verses and choruses. While other types of dance music tend to eschew song structures and concentrate instead on gradually shifting textures and changes of timbre, handbag usually retains a firm grounding in song structures. Of course, as I noted earlier, most types of dance music do, in fact, exhibit some kind of narrative structure (see pages 23 and 179 of this thesis). However, a phrase from songwriter Mike Stock, the instrumental trappings, harmonic progressions, and steadily rising melodies of handbag music tend to ‘go somewhere’ in a more obvious way than in other kinds of dance music. (See also my comparison of Motiv8 with Kike Boy, page 179). This is why, in the following chapter, I draw a distinction between ‘songs’ and ‘tracks.’ For my purposes, the word ‘songs’ refers to music that is specifically oriented around a prominent vocal line, and which adopts at least some of the conventions of Top 40 pop songs, such as the clear demarcation of verses and choruses. The term ‘tracks,’ on the other hand, refers to the other types of narrative that are commonly found in electronic dance music which are not explicitly

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4 As Walser has pointed out, however, it frequently takes considerable skill to make ‘simple’ formulae function effectively within the context of a song, and ‘simplicity’—rather than complexity—is often a crucial part of a song’s signification. See Walser, ‘Popular Music Analysis,’ 28.  
5 See Appen and Doehring, ‘Nevermind the Beatles,’ 30.  
6 See Fink, Repeating Ourselves, 37-46.  
song-oriented. My understanding of ‘tracks’ is informed by Tony Langlois’s discussion of house music. He writes:

On a cognitive level, [the] repetitive aspect denies the ‘good continuation’ of a piece; [during a DJ performance] no single record is allowed to be satisfactorily resolved musically, in fact the records, without clear ‘verse, chorus, verse’ structure, are not produced to be appreciated in that way […] Played individually, and in non-dance contexts, many recordings sound over-redundant, too long, lacking in development and contrast. In the new narrative created by the DJ from these records, however, the listener’s experience of time is twisted—rhythmic patterns pound relentlessly for hours at a time, whilst many layers of changing colours and meanings flow in and out of the matrix, enveloping the dancer in a sensual environment in which they can be completely absorbed.\(^8\)

In this chapter, I argue that one of the reasons that handbag music has been ignored or denigrated within electronic dance music scenes is because—in contrast to the type of open-ended structure outlined by Langlois—handbag frequently retains song structures, either explicitly (with the use of sung verses and choruses) or implicitly (with filter effects or samples being slotted into a recognisable ‘song’ form).\(^9\) Moreover, I would suggest that in many of handbag’s predecessors (such as the Eurodisco of Giorgio Moroder, the music from Salsoul Records, and the adapted form of hi-NRG popularised by SAW), the continuing resilience of song-based narrative structures has been downplayed. This strategy conveniently downplays handbag’s antecedents within the field of ‘credible’ dance music, making it appear as though the proper place of these 7-minute (or longer) songs is on children’s television rather than in night clubs. As a result, the music most audibly associated with gay male culture is infantilised and relegated to a low-Other ‘pop’ realm.

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\(^8\) Langloës, ‘Can You Feel It?’ 236. Emphasis in original. See also Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 34.

Why are song structures so important within handbag music? Firstly, such structures provide a benchmark of familiarity amidst some of the more esoteric subgenres of dance music. Songs, with their verse-chorus-verse-chorus structures, are reassuringly predictable. This means that even where producers may be experimenting with relatively new timbres or unfamiliar synthesised sounds, such material will consistently be framed within a familiar framework, something that provides a very useful backdrop for the kinds of dance floor performances that I discussed in Chapter Six. Song structures are also important because, in contrast to the more minimalist norms of electronic dance music, there is ample space within song structures for conventional musical signifiers of ‘emotion’ and ‘sentimentality’—elements that have conventionally been associated with femininity and, by extension, with gay male culture. To be sure, even the most bare percussion sample or the most obviously ‘synthetic’ timbre on a 12-inch single is capable of signifying particular affective states. Goodwin, for instance, points out that we ‘have grown used to connecting machines and funkiness.’\textsuperscript{10} Cauty and Drummond note the way that machine-generated musics can signify ‘sex’ or ‘soul.’\textsuperscript{11} However, the relatively linear song structures of handbag (as opposed to the more cyclical, repetitive, or ‘open-ended’ tracks of other dance music genres) provide more scope for the stereotypical signifiers of emotion and sentimentality.

The present chapter will establish the ways in which some form of song-based structure is maintained on the types of 12-inch singles that have been popular in gay male night clubs. The analysis is divided into two parts. Firstly, I shall argue for a dual approach to 12-inch singles, pointing out that it is possible to hear many of the canonic records in electronic dance music’s history as both ‘tracks’ and as elaborated ‘songs.’ Secondly, I apply this dual approach to the much-derided work of SAW, highlighting the two very different frameworks within which these records can be heard and interpreted. I am particularly interested in the ways that song structures are elaborated or even emphasised within the longer (generally 6-7 minute) duration of SAW’s ‘extended versions,’ and the implications of this for their usefulness within gay male culture.

\textsuperscript{10} Goodwin, ‘Sample and Hold,’ 263.
\textsuperscript{11} Cauty and Drummond, \textit{The Manual}, 55.
7.2 A dual approach to 12-inch singles

Much scholarly work on dance music has tended to emphasise the ways that the 12-inch single diverged from ‘pop’ conventions.\(^\text{12}\) Gilbert and Pearson go so far as to define dance music as primarily instrumental music. Most ‘house and techno tracks,’ they argue, ‘have no lyrics. Vocal samples are used as pieces of sound rather than as meaningful phrases. The fact that dance music is a new form of popular instrumental music is what makes it so striking: it is a music which is not based on songs.’\(^\text{13}\)

Poschardt’s history of the DJ similarly focuses on the ways that the extended mixes of the 1970s (such as those by Walter Gibbons and Tom Moulton) radically changed the format of standard 7-inch singles—even while admitting that some of the results were not all that radical. In one telling sentence, he states that despite Moulton’s general adherence to the original version of the songs that he was remixing, he ‘achieved some interesting reinterpretations.’\(^\text{14}\) When Kai Fikentscher discusses actual musical strategies of dance 12-inch singles, there is a noticeable emphasis on records as ‘tracks’ rather than songs. In an interview with producer Victor Simonelli, for instance, Simonelli states: ‘a dub gets fun, like, I can experiment a lot…the difference between an instrumental [and a] dub could be a lot of delay, or vocals coming in and out, breakdowns that you wouldn’t expect, just interesting stuff that surprises you.’\(^\text{15}\)

Certainly, ‘dub’ and ‘instrumental’ mixes—that is, the reinterpretations of songs that radically depart from the source material of the original master tapes—constitute an important part of dance music’s history. But Fikentscher’s study does not really explain the continuing salience of explicitly song-based structures in dance music. In the one section of his study where he compares actual recordings, songs are made to

\(^{12}\) Roy Shuker has pointed out that the term ‘dance music’ once denoted any genre ‘capable of being danced to.’ It was during the 1980s and 1990s that the phrase became associated with a more specific scene or scenes—and by implication, with a more specific set of musical genres. See Roy Shuker, ‘Dance Music,’ in *Popular Music: The Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 75. Emphasis in original.

\(^{13}\) Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 38. Emphasis in original.

\(^{14}\) Poschardt, *DJ Culture*, 123.

\(^{15}\) Victor Simonelli, cited in Fikentscher, *You Better Work!*, 52.
seem as if they are limited to 1970s and 1980s incarnations of dance music. First Choice’s ‘Dr. Love’ (1977) is described as having an ‘easily recognizable song form,’ whereas Grampa’s ‘She’s Crazy’ (1993) is described as being ‘farthest from the song-based concept that informs “Dr. Love.”’ The same narrative is at work in Rietveld’s account of club music. She argues that during the 1980s and 1990s, the dub mix available on the B-side of a record gradually became more and more important than the A-side vocal mix. Interestingly, she acknowledges that A-side mixes—with their ‘clearly defined verses, chorus and middle break’—are still popular in gay clubs. But this fact is not taken to upset the general tendency that applies in club music, where ‘tracks’ rather than ‘songs’ are the norm.

Dyer’s discussion of disco—despite its many valuable insights—tends to fall into the same trap. The elements of disco music that he believes are most significant for gay male audiences are precisely those elements that deconstruct standard pop song structures:

Popular song’s tunes are rounded off, closed, self-contained […] Thus although popular songs often depart from their melodic and harmonic beginnings—especially in the middle section (B)—they also always return to them… Compare the typical disco tune, which is often little more than an endlessly repeated phrase which drives beyond itself, is not ‘closed off.’ Even when disco music uses a popular song standard, it often turns it into a simple phrase. Gloria Gaynor’s version of Porter’s ‘I’ve Got You Under My Skin,’ for instance, is in large part a chanted repetition of ‘I’ve got you.’

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16 See Fikentscher, You Better Work! 89-91.
17 Ibid., 90. See First Choice, Doctor Love (12-inch single) (Gold Mind 12G-4004, 1977); Grampa, She’s Crazy (Movin’ Records MR020, 1993).
18 Rietveld, This Is Our House, 43.
19 Ibid.
20 This tendency—that is, of making ‘tracks’ seem like the only norm in dance music—parallels the way that heterosexuality is normalised and made invisible in everyday discourse. The music that functions effectively in straight clubs (or in unlabelled clubs, which often amounts to the same thing), is often taken to be representative of all of club culture. The music of gay clubs, on the other hand, is assumed to be a niche interest.
21 Dyer, ‘In Defense of Disco,’ 413-14. Simon Reynolds makes a similar case, arguing that electronica represents a ‘break with traditional musicality’ in many ways. He argues that in electronica, ‘processing is more important than playing; the vivid, ear-catching textures matter more than the actual notes played. For conventionally trained musicians, the chord progressions and
I do not wish to dismiss these claims entirely. Certainly, when people nominate these areas of dance music history, their claims have some basis in the sounds themselves. Even a casual hearing of certain productions by Larry Levan can substantiate the claim that disco music and its various contemporary offshoots significantly deconstructed the conventional song structures found on the Top 40 (or dispensed with these conventions altogether). Even certain pop-oriented 12-inch singles from the 1980s eschew the pop format of the original songs. For example, The Human League’s ‘Don’t You Want Me (Extended Dance Mix)’ features only snippets of Philip Oakey’s voice singing the title of the song. The rest of the track is a largely instrumental version of the song, combined with some added sections in which delay and echo effects are applied to some of the drum sounds (see CD 1, tr. 24; complete version on CD 2, tr. 11).

But the decision to focus on these kinds of strategies (and it is a decision, although it is often presented as simply ‘the way things happened’) overlooks what was also happening in other types of 12-inch singles, particularly those popular in gay male night clubs. Such a selective focus in these historical narratives is significant for any evaluation (or re-evaluation) of handbag music. By ignoring the historical precedents for the use of songs rather than ‘tracks’ on 12-inch records, such histories prop up the current trend of dismissing songs and vocals as ‘pop’ rather than ‘dance’ music. If electronic dance music is the result of influential records by producers such as Kraftwerk (in the 1970s) or DJ Pierre (in the 1980s), then handbag tracks such as harmonic intervals used in electronic music can seem obvious and trite. But this misses the point, for the real function of the simple vamps and melody-lines is as a device to display timbre, texture, tone-colour, chromatics…the pigment is more important than the line [...] Most of this music is devoid of lyrics...’ See Simon Reynolds, ‘Historia Electronica Preface,’ in The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates, ed. David Brackett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 484.

22 For example, see Loose Joints, ‘Is It All Over My Face (Female Vocal)’ [originally 1980], on Various Artists, Larry Levan’s Classic West End Records Remixes Made Famous at the Legendary Paradise Garage (triple LP) (West End Records WES 2001-1, 1999).


24 This process is similar to that described by Shane Homan in his research on the Oz rock scene in Sydney; see Shane Homan, ‘Losing the Local: Sydney and the Oz Rock tradition,’ Popular Music 19, no. 1 (2000): 33. He notes that within this scene, ‘mythologies of difference become “real” strategies of belief.’ In other words, local music that may or may not be ‘different’ from international musics is actively constructed as being different. In a similar way, handbag music is often constructed as being very different from ‘real’ dance music, when in fact it could be shown to be consistent with many of the trends of contemporary club music. See also the discussion on pages 240-247 of this thesis.
Dream’s ‘He Loves U Not (HQ2 Club Mix)’ and Girls Aloud’s ‘Biology (Tony Lamezla Remix)’ do not seem to have any precedent in dance music. If there is no acknowledged precedent for this music within the sphere of electronic dance music, then it is perfectly logical for critics of these acts to attribute the entire package—both the original and the remixed versions—to a low-Other ‘pop’ world, the very antithesis of ‘credible’ dance music. Handbag is thus excluded from the realm of dance music ‘proper.’

This selective historical perspective does not only focus on some producers rather than others (for instance, Juan Atkins rather than Mauro Farina), but also tends to privilege particular productions even within a single producer’s output. The reception of Giorgio Moroder neatly exemplifies this. He is revered for popularising the Moog synthesiser and for setting the template for techno, trance, and hi-NRG music in his production of Donna Summer’s ‘I Feel Love.’ His contributions to film soundtracks, however, are generally less commented on. There has been much talk about Summer’s ‘Love to Love You Baby,’ but relatively little commentary on Moroder’s hit songs from prominent film soundtracks. These include: Irene Cara’s ‘Flashdance…What A Feelin’ (from the soundtrack to the film Flashdance), Giorgio Moroder and Philip Oakey’s ‘Together in Electric Dreams’ (from the soundtrack of the film Electric Dreams), and Limahl’s ‘Neverending Story’ (from the soundtrack of the film Neverending Story). In some ways, the Hot Tracks Mix of Irene Cara’s

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27 Where this music is mentioned in the available literature, it is generally described as inferior, as in this example from Peter Shapiro: ‘Away from the dance floor, Moroder’s music becomes like Tangerine Dream’s score for Risky Business—there’s a hint of alienation, but it’s the alienation of privilege and not giving a fuck. It’s the alienation of the salesman.’ See Shapiro, Turn the Beat Around, 115.

'Breakdance’ is no less ‘adventurous’ than ‘I Feel Love’ in terms of timbre; it is nonetheless ignored in most of the available literature. To put this another way, it is easier to canonise material such as ‘I Feel Love’ than ‘Flashdance’ or ‘Breakdance.’ Moreover, even within the Eurodisco genre that Moroder specialised in during the late 1970s and early 1980s, commentators tend to focus on the timbral or textural (rather than structural) elements that Moroder popularised. For example, whenever his productions are mentioned, the key ingredients cited tend to be the ‘rigid’ drum patterns, the ‘galloping’ bass lines, and ‘simplified funk rhythms.’ This is an understandable perspective, particularly in light of the remarkable similarity between Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’ and subsequent developments in dance music. Yet, perhaps equally significant in Moroder’s output is the prevalence of songs in his 12-inch versions. For every experiment such as ‘Chase’ (from the soundtrack to Midnight Express) there are several song-based 12-inch singles (Cara’s ‘Flashdance,’ Deborah Harry’s ‘Rush Rush,’ or the Moroder and Oakey collaboration ‘Goodbye Bad Times’). Arguably, all of these records form a parallel history of dance music, one which is more closely related to the pop music of the


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29 See Irene Cara, ‘Breakdance,’ on Various Artists, Hot Tracks 3/3 (LP) (Hot Tracks SA 3-3, c.1984). Virgil Moorefield demonstrates this tendency towards canonisation in his book The Producer As Composer: Shaping the Sound of Popular Music (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 82. For him, the manipulation of Summer’s voice in ‘I Feel Love’ is ‘almost diabolically skillful…Moroder has a keen ear for detail, a superb sense of pacing, and a pop producer’s ability to cut concise compelling tracks.’ That ‘ability to cut concise compelling tracks,’ of course, is never explored in relation to Moroder’s more ‘commercial’ ventures.


31 Many subsequent tracks have sampled ‘I Feel Love.’ For example, see Moloko, ‘Sing it Back (Mousse T.’s Feel Love Mix)’ on Indigo (12-inch single) (Echo ECSY0140, 2000). Perhaps more significantly, the timbre of the synthesesers used in ‘I Feel Love’ has formed the backdrop for innumerable club tracks. For example, see Goldfrapp, ‘Ride a White Horse (Serge Santiago Re-Edit),’ on Ride a White Horse (12-inch single) (Mute 12Mute356, 2006). I am not suggesting that this influence has always been a deliberate strategy for producers, but the similarity of both the rhythmic patterns, their staccato articulation, and above all their timbre, does suggest that the Moroder/Summer production had considerable influence (whether direct or indirect) on subsequent dance music.

relevant era (the 1970s, the 1980s, or the 1990s)—but also one that has been
excluded from the canon of ‘electronic dance music.’ For instance, when Moroder is
celebrated on websites such as Stylus magazine, it is the more obscure releases in his
ouvre that are cited, rather than the more famous soundtracks to Flashdance or Top
Gun.33

I do not wish to explain away the many variations on pop songs that emerged on 12-
inch singles—that is, to argue that there is little discernable difference between 12-
inch singles and more conventional 3-minute pop songs (even if some pop 12-inch
singles do precisely that: reproduce the original radio version of a song precisely).34
Rather, I would argue that it is possible to hear many examples of this format as both
dance ‘tracks’ and as elaborated ‘songs.’ If we listen retrospectively to 12-inch
singles of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and we are looking for clear precedents for
the kinds of musical strategies that have since established themselves as ‘norms’
within electronic dance music, then we will undoubtedly find what we are looking
for in all the canonic 12-inch records that have been cited thus far. However, if we
re-listen to these records searching for traces of pop song conventions, I would argue
that we will not come up empty-handed. The LP version of Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’
provides the paradigmatic example here, and much of what follows applies just as
much to the 12-inch version.

Simon Reynolds has described ‘I Feel Love’ as a ‘revolution,’ ‘constructed almost
entirely out of synthesised sounds.’35 He hears it as a significant landmark partly for
the way in which it bent the rules of conventional pop songs: “‘I Feel Love” had no
verse or chorus laid out in advance; Summer improvised her gaseous, eroto-mystic
vocals over Moroder and [Pete] Bellotte’s grid-like juggernaut of percussive pulses

34 Many 12-inch singles of the 1980s were identical to their 7-inch or LP counterparts. For
example, see: KC & the Sunshine Band, ‘Give It Up,’ on Give It Up (CBS/Epic EPCA 12-3017,
1983); George Michael, ‘Faith,’ on Faith (CBS/Epic 651119 6, 1987). British band ABC drew
attention to this by including the following note on the sleeve of one of their 12-inch singles: ‘This
record is exactly the same as the 7” version. The choice is yours.’ See ABC, ‘That Was Then But This
Is Now,’ on That Was Then But This Is Now (Neutron NTX 105, 1983).
35 Reynolds, Energy Flash, 16.
and clockwork clicks. The result, at once pornotopian and curiously unbodied, was acid house and trance techno *avant la lettre*. \(^{36}\)

Heard in this way, it is no surprise that dance purists often single out the 1982 Patrick Cowley version of the song as particularly innovative. \(^{37}\) Cowley’s lengthy mix (lasting more than fifteen minutes) is the one that most closely matches the norms of electronic dance music—a mix in which the vocals frequently give way to lengthy synthesiser solos and relatively sparse, minimalist textures. Even the vocals (from both the original and Patrick Cowley remix) seem overly repetitious and open-ended when viewed on the page:

Ooh…it’s so good, it’s so good, it’s so good, it’s so good, it’s *so* good
Ooh…heaven knows, heaven knows, heaven knows, heaven knows, heaven knows
Ooh…I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I *feel* love
I feel love, I feel love, I feel love
Ooh…fallin’ free, fallin’ free, fallin’ free, fallin’ free, fallin’ free
Ooh…you and me, you and me, you and me, you and me, you *and* me
Ooh…I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I *feel* love
I feel love, I feel love, I feel love

It is tempting to read these lyrics as confirming Reynolds’s interpretation of the track. There seems to be little distinction between the verses and the choruses; the title of the song can be found (and is repeated incessantly) in every section. Even the melismatic emphasis on certain words—which I have indicated through the use of italics—occurs at approximately the same points on each line (that is, towards the end of each line). If we were to focus merely on the way the lyrics *appear* on the page, we would have further evidence that the song structure is weakened in ‘I Feel Love.’

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\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) See ‘The 100 Greatest Dance Singles of All Time,’ 4.
As in many pop songs, however, lyrics that do not appear to conform to a strict verse-chorus structure on the page delineate precisely that kind of structure when they are realised as part of a recording. In the recording of ‘I Feel Love,’ the lyrics clearly reinstate a familiar verse-chorus structure, as indicated below:

VERSE 1
Ooh…it’s so good, it’s so good, it’s so good, it’s so good
Ooh…heaven knows, heaven knows, heaven knows, heaven knows_, heaven knows
Ooh…I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love

CHORUS
I feel love
I feel love
I feel love
I feel love

VERSE 2
Ooh…fallin’ free, fallin’ free, fallin’ free, fallin’ free
Ooh…you and me, you and me, you and me, you and me, you and me
Ooh…I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love

CHORUS
I feel love
I feel love
I feel love
I feel love

My counter-reading of ‘I Feel Love’ is suggested by three aspects of the recording: the specific recording techniques used for Summer’s voice; the frequency of chord changes; and the instrumental palette or texture of the song.

See Goodwin, *Dancing In the Distraction Factory*, 83.
During the verses, Summer’s voice is heard on its own, with extra reverberation added towards the end of each line (see CD 1, tr. 25). During the chorus, however, she is joined by a chorus of Summers: her voice is multitracked in close harmony on the word ‘love,’ which is held for almost four bars (see CD 1, tr. 26). The chorus, then, follows a convention familiar from many other pop songs: a mass of voices—either trained or untrained, ‘live’ or multitracked—that signify some sort of ‘release.’ This verse-chorus schema is also mapped out harmonically. During the verses, the bass line usually underpins a single chord for eight bars before shifting upwards. In contrast, during the chorus, an upward shift occurs at the start of every bar. To put this another way, the harmonies of the verses are somewhat restrained, while the harmonies of the chorus are relatively fast-moving. A third distinction between the verses and choruses can be heard in the instrumental palette of the song. During the verses, the most prominent instrumental sounds are a series of staccato ‘bleeps’; during the chorus, these are supplemented with sustained synthesiser notes (or synth pads). All of these musical strategies suggest a structure which has been mapped in Figure 7.1, below.

39 This strategy—using solo voices during the verses, and added backing vocals for the chorus—can also be heard in: Donna Summer, ‘Could It Be Magic,’ on A Love Trilogy (LP) (Casablanca OCLP 5004 N, 1976); Kylie Minogue, ‘Hand On Your Heart,’ on Enjoy Yourself (LP) (Mushroom TVL93294, 1989); Kylie Minogue, ‘Turn it into Love,’ on Kylie (LP) (Geffen GHS 24195, 1988); The Weather Girls, ‘Can You Feel It (Hollywood Fashion Mix),’ on Can You Feel It (12-inch single) (Eastwest 4509-93002-0, 1993); Matthew Wilder, ‘Break My Stride (Remix/Club Version),’ on Break My Stride (12-inch single) (CBS/Epic ES 12085, 1983); Madonna, ‘Like A Prayer (12” Extended Remix),’ on Like a Prayer (12-inch single) (Sire 0-21170, 1989).
Figure 7.1

Structural Overview of Donna Summer, ‘I Feel Love (Summer ’77, Re-Eq ’95)’
[Complete version: CD 2, tr. 12]

Structural Overview by Adrian Renzo

If this structure diverges from standard pop practice, it does so only in the sense that some sections are slightly longer than is usual for a pop song. The original 12-inch version is longer only because the middle-eight, third verse, and final chorus are repeated—not because the song is suddenly stripped down to another kind of texture, or because some new synthesisers are introduced.

One possible objection to my interpretation of ‘I Feel Love’ as a song is that I am deliberately downplaying the longer-than-usual introduction and middle-eight sections: that is, the sections where the music is stripped back to a bass line and to drum loops, so that timbral aspects of the production can be pushed to the fore. But to what extent should this be considered a break from the pop norm? To take a contemporaneous example, ABBA’s ‘Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! (A Man After Midnight)’ employs a similar stripped-back, ‘stuck-to-the-tonic’ section as its middle-eight. Here, the listener can focus on the timbre of the synthesisers more easily because the harmonic material has been restricted, and because much more
space has been left in the mix so that previously unheard nuances can come to the fore (see CD 1, tr. 27; complete version on CD 2, tr. 13).

Even the trademark sound that dance purists tend to fasten on—the Moog bass line—fits neatly with pop traditions. Simon Frith once noted that pop is ‘essentially conservative. [It’s] about giving people what they already know they want rather than pushing up against technological constraints or aesthetic conventions. The new in pop thus tends to be the novelty.’40 Some of Moroder’s own comments suggest that he is more closely aligned with this ‘pop’ aesthetic, rather than with ‘art’ or ‘underground’ aesthetics. After producing some (failed) synth records, he gave up making such records for several years in the 1970s, figuring that ‘The audience didn’t really want the synthesizer.’41 At one point, he even states that he used use the synthesiser ‘a little bit too much as a gimmick, like making all those interesting, but I guess ultimately boring sounds.’ Far from deliberately ‘pushing up against aesthetic convention,’ Moroder’s concern seems to have been more squarely based in pop conventions: does the audience like this? Does this novelty work?42

Many of the records that have been canonised as the ‘greatest dance singles of all time,’ then, have been constructed as tracks rather than songs. Notice the way that Reynolds applies a retrospective reading of the track: ‘I Feel Love’ was ‘house and trance music avant la lettre’ at least five years before the advent of house music, and approximately ten years before house music was widely disseminated and popularised.43 This type of selective history inadvertently substantiates the

40 Frith, ‘Pop Music,’ 96.
41 See Shapiro, ‘Disco,’ 48.
42 My argument about Giorgio Moroder could apply just as easily to other staples of the gay male club scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For example, clear verse-chorus structures are evident even on Patrick Cowley’s Mind Warp album (Megatone Records M-1004, 1982). Such structures are even more obvious on his productions for Sylvester. See Sylvester, ‘Do Ya Wanna Funk,’ on Do Ya Wanna Funk (12-inch single) (RCA TDS-125, 1982).
43 See ‘The 100 Greatest Dance Singles,’ 4; Reynolds, Energy Flash, 16. A similar example can be found at a mashup site by Partz. Perhaps noting the surface similarities between Ultravox songs such as ‘The Thin Wall’ and 2000s productions by Tom Neville, Mylo, Tonite Only, and the like, Partz refers to Ultravox as the ‘No. 1 electro outfit of the 1980s.’ (This is a noticeable change from the 1980s, when they were generally referred to as ‘synthpop,’ ‘New Wave,’ or as part of the ‘New Romantic’ movement. See The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music, s.v. ‘Ultravox.’) Like Reynolds and other club enthusiasts, Partz applies a retrospective interpretation to music of the past. Just as ‘I Feel Love’ is re-classified as ‘techno and trance à la lettre,’ Ultravox is re-classified so that they can be slotted into a history which we now see resulting in ‘electro.’ See
ideological agenda reviewed in Chapter Five. By creating a history of dance music focused on ‘tracks’ rather than songs, ‘instrumental’ mixes rather than ‘vocal’ mixes, and open-ended structures rather than concise ‘song’ forms, the dance music press renders the precedents of handbag invisible.44 As I have shown, it is possible to hear ‘I Feel Love’ both ways: as a track in which the interplay of instruments, the subtly shifting textures, and hypnotic, open-ended structure is the focus, or as a more conventional song that—in time-honoured ‘pop’ fashion—used a novel sound (the rigidly sequenced semiquavers of a Moog synthesiser) to appeal to pop sensibilities.45 (Indeed, as the documentary film Scratch demonstrated, there are several examples of ‘gimmick’ pop songs inspiring the music of people in more specialised ‘scenes’: the case of Herbie Hancock’s record-scratching ‘Rockit’ is a notable example.46) To counteract this tendency in the available literature, I shall briefly recount the history of 12-inch singles from an alternative perspective, looking for elaborations and adaptations of song structures rather than radical departures from pop conventions.

The distinctions I am drawing between 12-inch singles of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s are rarely as clearly defined as the following analysis will suggest—it would be easy to find exceptions to the trends that I identify here. Nevertheless, I contend that these trends are clearly discernable when we explore a number of dance-oriented 12-inch singles from each of these periods. The overall developments may be characterised as a shift from ‘extended’ versions (in which the source material for a particular version of a song is drawn almost exclusively from the original master tapes) to ‘recompositions,’ in which only the barest skeleton of a song would be

http://www.partzvstheworld.co.uk/tracks.htm (accessed 28 August 2006). See also: Ultravox, ‘The Thin Wall’ and ‘We Came to Dance,’ on The Collection (double LP) (Chrysalis RML 53159, 1984); Mylo, ‘Guilty of Love,’ on Destroy Rock & Roll (double LP) (Breastfed BFD007LP, 2005); Sneaky Sound System, ‘Pictures (Tonite Only Remix),’ on Pictures (CD single) (Whack WHACK05, 2006).

44 This is akin to the process by which a ‘high/low’ distinction was established and maintained in Western music. As Michael Pickering and Keith Negus put it, the placement of ‘German classical music…from the early nineteenth century at the apex of an aesthetic hierarchy follows from the result of listening to it in a particular way, and then in consequence of doing likewise with other forms and genres of music in a descending evaluative order.’ See Michael Pickering and Keith Negus, ‘The Value of Value: Simon Frith and the Aesthetics of the Popular,’ New Formations 34 (1998): 115. Emphasis added.

45 See Frith, ‘Pop Music,’ 96.

retained, and remix producers would provide a relatively ‘new’ instrumental backing for the song.

Three examples from the 1970s illustrate the overall trend for that decade particularly well. In Blondie’s ‘Heart of Glass,’ the ‘Long Version’ of the song is achieved simply by including additional repetitions of the final section of the song (see CD 1, tr. 28; complete version on CD 3, tr. 1). There are no sections in which any of the instruments are heard separately. To be more specific, the instrumental layers of the song are heard in almost exactly the same way as in the shorter, radio version of the song. The swirling synth pads that are heard intermittently between verses are never isolated and heard on their own. The same can be said about the drum tracks, the bass line, the keyboard lines, and the staccato synthesised semiquavers that run throughout most of the song. If there are sections where some layers of the track are isolated, then this separation of the layers is no more pronounced than in the original version of the song. For instance, after the second chorus (with its additional male vocal lines of ‘la, la-la…’), there is a brief pause in the song (see CD 1, tr. 29). The bass drum ceases for two bars (but, significantly, the space created in the audio mix by this ‘silence’ is also partly filled by a snare drum fill). The staccato synthesisers can be heard more clearly, but they are still joined by other elements, such as Deborah Harry’s mellifluous ‘ooh-whoh’ vocals. Within seconds, the song has returned to the type of thick texture established at the start of the song. More importantly, the ‘respite’ cannot properly be considered a new element introduced only in the 12-inch version—it was already firmly established as part of the original version of the song.

In the 12-inch version of the Gibson Brothers’ ‘Que Sera Mi Vida (If You Should Go),’ the song has been ‘extended’ in a slightly more obvious way than in ‘Heart of Glass,’ but this extension is still relatively mild when compared to the type of musical strategies that became common in the 1980s and 1990s. The most notable ‘extension’ of the song occurs about two-thirds of the way through the disc: it

consists of an extended percussion break. It is significant that at no other part of the song is the ‘extended’ aspect obvious: as in the Blondie track, the bulk of the material in the song is heard exactly as it would have been heard in the radio or album version of the song. Only the (lone) drum break is characterised by the features with which 12-inch singles—and electronic dance music—have conventionally been associated. For instance, it is only during this drum break that a more minimalist texture is introduced, and it is only during this break that (percussion) instruments are muted and re-introduced into the audio mix. It is notable that all the definite pitch material of the song—the bass line, the brass section, the vocals, and so on—are muted simultaneously (see CD 1, tr. 30; complete version on CD 3, tr. 2) and that they also re-enter the soundscape simultaneously (see CD 1, tr. 31). In a third example—Ami Stewart’s ‘Knock On Wood’—no such break occurs. The song is extended merely by repeating the last section of the chorus (‘You’d better knock, knock, knock on wood…You’d better knock, knock, knock on wood…’) (see CD 1, tr. 32; complete version on CD 3, tr. 3). These singles from the 1970s, then, demonstrate the resilience of song-based structures within disco 12-inch singles, and within pop songs that were extended to fit the relatively new 12-inch format.

If we compare the Long Version of ‘Heart of Glass’ with a 1995 remix of the same song, we get a snapshot of just how far remixing practices had developed by the 1990s. In the Richie Jones Club Mix, for instance, the only elements of the original song to be used are the vocals and a sample of the drum machine pattern that underpinned the 1978 12-inch version (see CD 1, tr. 33; complete version on CD 3, tr. 4). Every other element has been either newly recorded, or sampled from other sources. Most notably, Richie Jones has gone so far as to set the song within a different key (C# minor rather than the original key of E major; see CD 1, tr. 34). Despite the new instrumentation, the focus of the track is arguably still the song-based structure: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, break, chorus. That this structure has been embellished with a more open-ended, repetitive section at the end of the track is

48 See Gibson Brothers, ‘Que Sera Mi Vida (If You Should Go),’ on Que Sera Mi Vida (If You Should Go) (12-inch single) (RCA TDS-067, 1979).
no reason to suppose that the remix is completely divorced from conventional song structures.

Such song structures can also be heard in 12-inch singles of the 1980s. In the following section, I use SAW’s output as an example for two reasons. Firstly, their approach to the 12-inch single is fairly representative of conventions in a wide range of dance-oriented and pop-oriented 12-inch singles of the 1980s. As such, it demonstrates some of the ways in which song-forms continued to exert an influence on 12-inch singles—even the type of singles intended for consumption in night clubs. Secondly, their output was aimed at both a teenage female demographic and gay male culture. (As Stock blithely put it, ‘If 20 per cent of the male population is gay and 50 per cent of the entire population is female—then, as songwriters, we’ve got at least 60 per cent on our side!’49) As such, it constitutes an important early example of handbag. Indeed, as Thornton has pointed out, the term ‘handbag’ was initially applied to clubs in which SAW records were played. In the 12-inch versions of SAW songs, we can see some of the musical strategies that make handbag so useful within gay male culture.

7.3 Stock-Aitken-Waterman: the significance of songs in gay male clubs

In Chapter Six, I noted the prevalence of songs rather than tracks within certain gay male clubs. This point is echoed in the comments of DJ Frankie Knuckles, who told an interviewer that techno tracks are ‘not songs. Not at all. Most of the gay crowds that I play for—and I have a pretty big audience—they’re not into it. They like being able to hear songs with great voices, either male or female, that are saying something that they can embrace. A lot of noisy trash doesn’t appeal to them.’50

It is clear, from this perspective, that SAW consciously directed some of their product towards gay male club scenes. In his biography of the trio’s rise and fall, Stock, The Hit Factory, 70.

Mike Stock identifies much more strongly with the stereotypical markers of homosexuality than he does with more hegemonic ways of ‘doing’ masculinity:

Our records were a big hit in the gay community, and as a result some people assumed that Matt [Aitken] and I were gay. I’ve never been offended by it because I’m quite secure in my own sexuality. My assessment of gay men is that they tend to be sensitive and like songs that move them. That’s different from young bucks, male heteros who like thrashing guitars and being aggressive. I don’t know that approach, but my songs have always been about human relationships, love and romance, loss and longing. And they are emotional subjects that have always appealed to gay men and to women.\(^{51}\)

I shall return to the essentialising subtext of this quote (‘emotional subjects…have always appealed to gay men and to women’) in due course. While SAW is best known for their work with singers such as Kylie Minogue, Jason Donovan, and Rick Astley (all of whom fit the image of the girl- or boy-next-door), certain records to emerge from the PWL stable were not necessarily designed to ‘crossover’ to the mainstream pop charts, but were directly aimed at gay male clubs.\(^{52}\) (Stock cites Divine’s ‘You Think You’re a Man’ as an example.\(^{53}\)) Waterman is just as explicit in his assessment of the relationship between gay male clubs and the trio’s music. In 1986, he bluntly told Record Mirror: ‘We make gay records, there’s no question about it and we’re not afraid to say that.’\(^{54}\) As Beadle makes clear, the musical base for SAW’s records, particularly in their earlier incarnations, was drawn from the ‘high-energy’ (or hi-NRG) genre that dominated white, gay male clubs of the early 1980s.\(^{55}\) Like Boystown Gang’s ‘Just Can’t Help Believing,’ Hazell Dean’s ‘Searchin (I’ve Gotta Find Me A Man),’ and contemporaneous Italo disco records such as Ryan Paris’s ‘Dolce Vita’ and Silent Circle’s ‘Touch in the Night,’ SAW’s

\(^{51}\) Stock, The Hit Factory, 69-70.
\(^{52}\) Beadle, Will Pop Eat Itself? 47-48. PWL (Pete Waterman Limited) Records was the label through which much of SAW’s output was released.
\(^{53}\) Stock, The Hit Factory, 100. See Divine, ‘You Think You’re a Man,’ on You Think You’re a Man (12-inch single) (Liberation LMD 224, 1984).
early output placed accessible and often sentimental melodies within an up-to-date hi-NRG soundscape. For example, in ‘You Think You’re a Man,’ an accessible pop song—complete with a linear chord progression, a steadily rising melody, the addition of close harmonies sung by female backing singers during the chorus—is furnished with several hi-NRG features: rigidly sequenced handclaps and cowbells; a sampled slap bass sound playing a conventional disco rhythm (one note on each beat of the bar, supplemented with repetitions of each note one octave higher); and a heavy snare drum sound with a sharp attack and decay. (See CD 1, tr. 35; complete version on CD 3, tr. 5).

While SAW’s intentions may help to shed light on the particular production techniques and the specific aesthetic that has been utilised, these authorial intentions are hardly paramount in determining the eventual meaning and connotations of the music. As Frith puts it, it is ‘not where pop songs come from that matters, but where they get to.’ Interestingly, then, the reception of SAW’s music—just like the comments of Stock and Waterman cited above—suggest that this music is inextricably linked with gay male culture. British journalist Richard Smith acknowledges the extent to which the music has been deliberately marketed for a gay male audience (‘it’s not just the pretty faces—but the way they’ve been dressed to thrill’), but he also defends the music from an audience’s perspective. In his view, SAW have provided the soundtrack to many nights in gay male clubs, and as a result, the music itself—regardless of how it has been marketed, or of how manipulative these marketing strategies have been—has become a legitimate expression of gay male life.

Discussions of why SAW’s music dominated the playlists of many gay male clubs during the late 1980s and early 1990s tend to focus on non-musical parameters of

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57 Frith, ‘Pop Music,’ 106.
59 Ibid., 40-41.
their output. For instance, Stock mentions the lyrical focus of the songs, perpetuating the ‘proper place’ of gay men in the process (‘my songs have always been about human relationships, love and romance, loss and longing’).\textsuperscript{60} Smith focuses on the imagery with which many of SAW’s records were associated: muscle-bound formation dancers in Bananarama videos; innocent, clean-cut stars such as Rick Astley; and the ‘rent-boy chic’ of later Jason Donovan singles.\textsuperscript{61} However, I would argue that the music itself is important here for several reasons. Firstly, SAW’s 12-inch singles place an emphasis on songs—and songs provide a space in which sweeping string sections (albeit synthesised), ‘melancholy’ piano sequences, and other ‘camp’ signifiers can more easily be added to the mix than in other types of dance music. Earlier, I emphasised that many of the canonic cornerstones of dance music history, as embodied on 12-inch singles, had been celebrated for the ways in which they eschewed pop song conventions and pop song structures. (See the discussion of Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’ above.) I argued that in retrospect, it is equally possible to hear these records as elaborated songs—records on which pop songs are extended but where a large part of the pleasure of listening or dancing to them is still generated by the explicit or implicit use of pop song structures. SAW’s 12-inch singles provide an even more explicit example of this: they were designed for use in night clubs, but retain obvious elements of the songs on which they are based. The use of song-based structures and other conventions on these singles is an important precursor to the handbag music that came to dominate the playlists of (white) gay male clubs in the 1990s and 2000s. In the following section, I shall provide two possible interpretations of SAW’s work: the first deliberately emphasises these records as ‘tracks’; the second deliberately emphasises the more song-like qualities of these extended versions.

\textsuperscript{60} Stock, \textit{The Hit Factory}, 70.
\textsuperscript{61} Smith, ‘Blaming It On the Boogie,’ 41.
7.3.1 SAW’s 12-inch singles as ‘tracks’

In the earlier discussion, I noted that we can apply a dual approach to the 12-inch singles of Giorgio Moroder. It is possible to focus on the hypnotic effect of the repetitive Moog synthesiser patterns (a strategy which privileges the dominant narrative that has emerged in literature on ‘electronic dance music’), but it is also possible to focus on the elaborated song structures that are also an important part of these records. The same applies to SAW’s 12-inch singles, which frequently pilfered particular sounds from the arena of club music. For instance, notice the way that the piano sound of Black Box’s ‘Ride on Time’ (see CD 1, tr. 36) and Starlight’s ‘Numero Uno’ (see CD 1, tr. 37) is adapted on the SAW production of Lonnie Gordon’s ‘Happenin’ All Over Again’ (see CD 1, tr. 38). The orchestral stabs of early-1990s rave music are mimicked on Kylie Minogue’s ‘Do You Dare’ (see CD 1, tr. 39); the early Chicago house sound is mined on the Mel & Kim’s ‘Showing Out’ (see CD 1, tr. 40). The earlier 1984 productions for Divine and Dead or Alive are also clearly modelled on a high-energy template, as Brewster and Broughton have pointed out.

In much the same way as it is possible to hear ‘I Feel Love’ within two quite different frameworks (that of ‘songs’ and that of relatively open-ended ‘tracks’), SAW’s output on 12-inch singles can be heard according to two different schemas. On the one hand, they can be heard as incorporating some of the musical strategies of contemporaneous dance music (see the comments by Mark Butler, cited on page 242 of this thesis). Not only do they deliberately use instrumental timbres fashionable in various dance (sub)genres; they also introduce the broad textural

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62 See Black Box, ‘Ride on Time (Massive Mix),’ on *Ride on Time* (12-inch single) (RCA PT 43242, 1989); Starlight, ‘Numero Uno (Club Mix),’ on *Numero Uno* (12-inch single) (Virgin VOZT 054, 1989); Lonnie Gordon, ‘Happenin’ All Over Again (Digital Mix),’ on Various Artists, *NRG For the 90s 11* (LP) (Hot Tracks [no catalogue number given], c.1993).

63 Kylie Minogue, ‘Do You Dare (NRG Mix),’ on *Give Me Just a Little More Time* (12-inch single) (Mushroom X14368, 1992); Mel & Kim, ‘Showing Out (Get Fresh at the Weekend),’ on *Showing Out* (12-inch single) (Supreme SUPET 107, 1986). Stock acknowledges the way that SAW incorporated sounds and other musical conventions of dance music in his book *The Hit Factory*: ‘We did something quite new with Mel & Kim. We used Chicago house music, which was just coming to the fore in America…Pete Tong, the A&R man from London Records—now the famous broadcaster and DJ—brought me a cassette of the latest US music. He’d hoped we’d use it with Bananarama, but it actually inspired our first records with Mel & Kim.’ See Stock, *The Hit Factory*, 40.

64 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, 196.
shape that has been a staple of house music and other electronic dance genres for at least twenty years. Note the textural graph of Sinitta’s ‘I Don’t Believe in Miracles (Extended Club Mix)’ in Figure 7.2, below.\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{Figure 7.2}

\textbf{Textural Graph of Sinitta, ‘I Don’t Believe in Miracles (Extended Club Mix),’ mm. 1-45, 0.00-1.30}

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 41]  
[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 6]  
Textural Graph by Adrian Renzo

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{textural_graph.png}
\end{figure}

This graph recalls a diagram drawn by one of Butler’s respondents, in which the general shape of a club track is characterised by a gradual build-up of the texture at the start of the track (and a corresponding breakdown at the end).\textsuperscript{66} Certainly, it would be perverse to claim that the Sinitta track adheres strictly to the structure of all

\textsuperscript{65} Sinitta, ‘I Don’t Believe in Miracles (Extended Club Mix),’ on \textit{I Don’t Believe in Miracles} (12-inch single) (Liberation LMD 600, 1988).

\textsuperscript{66} See Butler, \textit{Unlocking the Groove}, 222.
electronic dance tracks. For instance, many club tracks place more emphasis on the
crescendo or buildup sections, allowing them to last longer. However, the basic
strategy of making the music incrementally more dense is a trademark of much
electronic dance music. This same strategy can be found in most SAW 12-inch productions.

There are other ways in which SAW’s 12-inch singles can be heard as drawing on
club music conventions. Mark Butler has identified one of those conventions as
being a tendency to use underdetermined musical patterns during the course of
particular tracks—especially at the start of a track. Underdetermined sounds are
those sounds that are heard in the middle of a relatively sparse textural framework: in
many examples of such patterns, the listener does not yet have enough musical
information in order to determine the metre of the piece, or the precise placing of the
sounds in relation to metrical divisions or subdivisions. For example, a pulse such as
the one set out in Musical Example 7.1 may well be in 3/4 time.

Musical Example 7.1
Bass drum pulse (underdetermined)

For a recent example, see Metamatic, ‘Music Everywhere (Maurizio Gubellini Wave
For instance, see: Bananarama, ‘Venus (Extended Version),’ on Venus (12-inch single)
(Liberation LMD 474, 1986); Big Fun, ‘Can’t Shake the Feeling,’ on Can’t Shake the Feeling (12-
inch single) (Jive JIVE T 234, 1989); Big Fun, ‘Blame It on the Boogie (PWL Mix),’ on Blame it on
the Boogie (12-inch single) (RCA ZT43062, 1989); Big Fun, ‘Handful of Promises (12” Version),’ on
Handful of Promises (12-inch single) (Jive JIVE T 243, 1989); Dead or Alive, ‘My Heart Goes Bang
(Get Me to the Doctor),’ on My Heart Goes Bang (Get Me to the Doctor) (12-inch single) (CBS/Epic
ES 12167, 1985); Dead or Alive, ‘You Spin Me Round (Performance Mix),’ on You Spin Me Round
(12-inch single) (CBS/Epic ES 12131, 1984); Mel & Kim’s ‘Respectable,’ on Respectable (12-inch
single) (Liberation LMD 502, 1987); Sigue Sigue Sputnik, ‘Success (Extended),’ on Success (12-inch
single) (EMI 12 SSS 3, 1988); along with most of the Kylie Minogue 12-inch singles produced by
SAW.

Butler, Unlocking the Groove, 111-13.
If it is then joined by other percussion instruments playing the figure shown in Musical Example 7.2, then our interpretation of the initial pulse may change.

Musical Example 7.2
Bass drum pulse with added percussion

In examples such as this, the introduction of new elements may serve two functions: the new elements may change an earlier interpretation of the track; in other cases, these elements may simply anchor musical patterns that previously appeared to be ‘free-floating.’

It should come as no surprise that this type of strategy proliferates in dance music, because in order to achieve this effect of metrical ‘re-alignment’ or re-interpretation (what Butler refers to as ‘turning the beat around’), a producer needs to be able to let each sequence of notes or rhythms repeat over a longer time span than the usual three-minute duration of a pop song. This technique often features in SAW-produced 12-inch singles, but in their case (and in keeping with their emphasis on songs rather than tracks), the strategy of deliberate underdetermination is more frequently applied to the realm of harmony than to that of rhythm. Their production of Mandy Smith’s ‘Positive Reaction (Our Mandy’s Extended Mix)’ provides a

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70 Ibid., 141.
useful example of this strategy. The first definite pitch material heard in this version of the song is as follows (see Musical Example 7.3, below).

Musical Example 7.3
Mandy Smith, ‘Positive Reaction (Our Mandy’s Extended Mix),’ mm. 1-8, 0.06-0.22
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 42]
[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 7]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

The riff—along with the brief sampled orchestral stabs that preceded it—strongly indicate that the tonal centre of the song will be G. At this stage of the song, there is little indication of what the overall harmonic progression will be; ‘Positive Reaction’ could easily be a song based on one chord. Then, in the next section of the track (see Musical Example 7.4), some occasional guitar strumming is introduced. While the guitar part plays only occasional chords, it does begin to shift our attention away from the earlier, ‘one-chord’ interpretation of the song.

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71 Mandy Smith, ‘Positive Reaction (Our Mandy’s Extended Mix),’ on Positive Reaction (12-inch single) (Liberation LMD 560, 1987).
Musical Example 7.4
Mandy Smith, ‘Positive Reaction (Our Mandy’s Extended Mix),’ mm. 13-18, 0.30-0.41
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 43]
[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 7]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

This shift is further compounded by the introduction of the bass line (see Musical Example 7.5, below).
Musical Example 7.5
Mandy Smith, ‘Positive Reaction (Our Mandy’s Extended Mix),’ mm. 20-24, 0.43-0.53
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 44]
[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 7]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo
Finally, the full harmonic schema is made clear with the introduction of additional synthesisers, which also begin to play melodies that will accompany the chorus of the song, as shown in Musical Example 7.6.

Musical Example 7.6
Mandy Smith, ‘Positive Reaction (Our Mandy’s Extended Mix),’ mm. 25-26, 0.54-0.58

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 45]
[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 7]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

The stratified approach to composition that SAW employ here was a staple of 1980s pop 12-inch singles, and has also become a staple of handbag and many other electronic dance music genres. Virtually every track that Butler analyses, for example, is characterised by stratified composition—that is, a structure in which instruments are added to the audio mix either one at a time, or in small groups, rather than being introduced en masse at the start of the track. It is this stratification that
leads to the kind of dance-oriented (and, for that matter, minimalist-oriented) techniques, such as underdetermination, that occur in Smith’s ‘Positive Reaction.’

7.3.2 SAW’s 12-inch singles as ‘songs’

At the same time, however, SAW’s 12-inch singles can be heard as elaborated song structures, and—somewhat paradoxically—the extended duration of the records arguably assists this way of hearing their music. Indeed, as I will show in the following section, one of the crucial pleasures of hearing these ‘extended versions’—which are intended primarily for the dance floor—is that of hearing details of the songs that are not audible in the original radio versions. One of the pleasures of this music, then, is the possibility of hearing more of the songs we know, rather than radically new re-interpretations of the songs that are more or less completely divorced from the original song. This reliance on familiarity is a key ingredient of handbag and of the associated genres that dominate the playlists of gay male night clubs. Such familiarity, as I argued in Chapter Six, is part of the price of admission to the club; the familiarity of songs, and the (slight) variations on those songs, helps to facilitate dance floor performances.

Stratification helps to emphasise the familiar by deconstructing the original instrumental layers of the song. (In this respect, 12-inch singles of the 1980s—including those produced by SAW—diverge significantly from those of the 1990s and 2000s. In recent years, it has become the norm to radically change and re-record instrumental parts, or to use different samples as the basis of the track.\footnote{See the discussion of Blondie, ‘Heart of Glass (Richie Jones Club Mix)’ on page 211 of this thesis.} The 12-inch version of Kylie Minogue’s ‘Got to be Certain’ provides an apt example of this.\footnote{Kylie Minogue, ‘Got to Be Certain (Extended),’ on \textit{Got to Be Certain} (12-inch single) (Mushroom X13323, 1988).} In the original (radio) version of the song, most of the instrumental palette, the full chord progression, and most of the melodic riffs of the song are introduced within the first few seconds of the track (see CD 1, tr. 46; complete version on CD 3, 8). In the 12-inch version, by contrast, many layers of the song are introduced
separately. The following is a list of the layers that are introduced, along with indications of when they are introduced in Table 7.1, below.
Table 7.1
Kylie Minogue, ‘Got to Be Certain,’ mm. 1-44, 0.00-1.32
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 47]
[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 9]
Table by Adrian Renzo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Min:sec</th>
<th>Entry of musical layers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reverse cymbal crash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass drum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hi-hat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hand claps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bongos (occasional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Slight percussive reverberation  (at the start of every second bar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 0.10</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hi-hat doubled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 0.15</td>
<td></td>
<td>Synth riff 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 0.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass line 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 0.34</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bass line 2 (deeper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Semiquaver emphasis on bass notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Snare drums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Added cymbal crashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bongos now on every beat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 0.42</td>
<td></td>
<td>Added melodic phrase (descending)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 0.50</td>
<td></td>
<td>Added melodic phrase (ascending)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 0.51</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sustained string melody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 1.07</td>
<td></td>
<td>Main riff from 7” version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 1.23</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vocals (verse 1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Extended Version of ‘Got to be Certain,’ then, separates the various layers of the song and allows them to be heard in (relative) isolation. This strategy extends the song well beyond the confines of the conventional three-minute duration, and also allows the 12-inch version to conform to the general textural shape that I identified on page 217 of this thesis. In these ways, the Extended Version of ‘Got to be Certain’ fits the convention of several dance music subgenres. However, it is also possible to hear this record as an elaborated pop song. The technique of stratification that I have discussed above allows the listener to hear more of a familiar pop song. This is in stark contrast to the convention of remixing that took hold in the 1990s and which continues to the present day, in which tracks are radically re-composed in a remixed version—to such a great extent, in fact, that all of the commercially available remixes of certain songs bare little resemblance to the original version.

Stock’s biography substantiates this two-pronged approach to SAW’s music. On the one hand, he admits to drawing on the conventions of dance music. He notes that the use of ‘cutting-edge technology’ was crucial to their success, and in a telling passage talks about how particular sounds are made available by their use in associated dance genres:

You’ve only got 10 seconds at the start [of a song] to make a statement and get potential listeners interested. Then you’ve got a minute to deliver the first chorus. All those constraints are built into the songs. You are working within a limited framework but in a sense the possibilities are limitless. Fashion accounts for some of the constraints. For example, before 1986 you couldn’t use pianos because techno was in and pianos were ‘out’ and most pop records featured synthesizers. Then, all of a sudden, House Piano became accepted and the piano was back in fashion.

For instance, compare the original version of Kylie Minogue’s ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head’ with the commercially released remixes. See Kylie Minogue, ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head,’ on *Fever* (CD album) (Festival Mushroom 334642, 2001); Kylie Minogue, *Can’t Get You Out of My Head* (double 12-inch single) (EMI/Parlophone 12R 6562, 2001).

Stock, *The Hit Factory*, 122. Stock does not provide a concrete explanation of what he means by ‘techno.’ Nevertheless, his general point—that his records had to work within the limits of whatever dance fad was ‘in’ at the time—still stands.
I noted this tendency in relation to Mel & Kim’s records, above.\textsuperscript{76} At other points, however, Stock emphasises the ways in which SAW records fit within established pop traditions, rather than conforming to the dictates of the dance floor. In the following comment, he further illustrates a point I made in Chapter Two—that traditional Western musicological definitions of ‘music’ still wield considerable influence in the pop realm. In Stock’s words: ‘a lot of dance stuff you hear just isn’t music. It may be rhythmic but it’s simply a machine-made ugly noise. And unless you are drugged up on Es you just can’t stand it!’\textsuperscript{77} At several other points, he identifies more with Tin Pan Alley and associated pop traditions than with club culture: ‘I prefer to write songs like they used to for Broadway musicals; songs that go somewhere and reveal lots of different melodies.’\textsuperscript{78} Stock’s emphasis on melodies and harmonic progressions that ‘go somewhere’ is highly significant. As the comments by Frankie Knuckles and the discussion in Chapter Six demonstrated, records with a noticeable song structure are common within gay male night clubs. (Gilbert and Pearson note a similar tendency in Euro-house.\textsuperscript{79})

It follows, then, that the appeal of many SAW records—even the supposedly ‘club-oriented’ 12-inch singles, and even the ones that most obviously pilfer musical techniques from the world of electronic dance music—still stems from the \textit{song-based} qualities of the records. Somewhat paradoxically, the elements that Stock identifies with pop songs (‘different melodies that go somewhere’) are more obvious in the club-oriented mixes of the records.\textsuperscript{80} For example, staccato riffs that were barely noticeable in the radio edits of the songs are pushed to the front of the mix—becoming, in effect, pseudo-riffs. In the original, shorter version of Minogue’s ‘I

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 56. It should be noted that what Stock is referring to as ‘songwriting’ is actually ‘arranging.’ As Phillip McIntyre points out, in earlier eras the core components of a song came be seen quite literally as the melody and the lyric with a simple harmonic content framing those two elements. The ‘different melodies’ (and counter-melodies) that Stock refers to would have been provided by \textit{arrangers} rather than songwriters. See Phillip McIntyre, ‘The Domain of Songwriters: Towards Defining the Term “Song,”’ \textit{Perfect Beat} 5, no. 3 (2001): 106. Thanks to Phillip McIntyre for drawing my attention to this point.
\textsuperscript{79} Gilbert and Pearson, \textit{Discographies}, 76-79.
\textsuperscript{80} I refer to this as ‘paradoxical’ because these extended club mixes are the least likely versions to be featured in most pop-oriented forums—they are unheard of, for instance, on UK television programs such as\textit{Top of the Pops}, Australian programs such as\textit{Video Hits} and\textit{Rage}, and on commercial pop radio formats.
Should Be So Lucky,’ the most prominent riff has a loud, brassy timbre driven by sustained, syncopated notes, as indicated in Musical Example 7.7.\textsuperscript{81}

\textbf{Musical Example 7.7}

\textit{Kylie Minogue, ‘I Should Be So Lucky,’ mm. 1-4, 0.01-0.05}

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 48]

[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 10]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo

\begin{music}
\StaffType{crl}
\contralmode{crl}
\context{ Staff }
\context{ Text }
\phrase{ Lead synth }
\end{music}

In the 12-inch version, however, what originally functioned as textural ‘filler’ material becomes a pseudo-riff in its own right, as shown in Musical Example 7.8, below.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{81} Kylie Minogue, ‘I Should Be So Lucky,’ on \textit{I Should Be So Lucky} (7-inch single) (Mushroom K485, 1987).

\textsuperscript{82} Kylie Minogue, ‘I Should Be So Lucky (Extended Version),’ on \textit{I Should Be So Lucky} (12-inch single) (Mushroom X13306, 1987). A similar example of this strategy can be heard in Jason Donovan’s ‘Nothing Can Divide Us.’ The loud, brassy synthesiser tones of the 7-inch version give way to a more subtle interplay between several staccato guitar samples and synthesiser melodies. See Jason Donovan, ‘Nothing Can Divide Us,’ on \textit{Ten Good Reasons} (LP) (Mushroom TVP93295, 1989); Jason Donovan, ‘Nothing Can Divide Us,’ on \textit{Nothing Can Divide Us} (12-inch single) (PWL PWLT17, 1988).
Musical Example 7.8
Kylie Minogue, ‘I Should Be So Lucky (Extended Version),’ mm. 1-4, 0.00-0.08
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 49]
[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 11]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

The 12-inch versions, then, allow us to hear more of the songs that have already become familiar through radio play. Different aspects of the songs are emphasised in these extended versions, without necessarily losing the overall structural emphasis on song-based forms.

This tendency can also be seen in SAW’s approach to the harmonic material of their songs. In much post-1980s club music, harmonic material tends to be restricted during ‘buildup’ sections, middle-eights, outros, and so on. A fuller elaboration of the harmonic material occurs during the ‘peak’ sections of the track. (For evidence of this, see the selection of 12-inch singles listed in Appendix C.) The example I have
used is the introduction of Mirrorball’s ‘Given Up (Original 12” Mix).’\textsuperscript{83} Notice that during the introduction, the harmonic material is relatively ‘restricted.’ That is, if we take the chorus of the song as representing the full riff, then, the introduction only contains a snippet of that full riff. Consequently, much of the song is driven by the one-chord pattern shown in Musical Example 7.9.

\section*{Musical Example 7.9}

\textbf{Mirrorball, ‘Given Up (Original 12” Mix),’ mm. 1-4, 0.00-0.07}

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 50]

[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 12]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo.

\textsuperscript{83} Mirrorball, ‘Given Up (Original 12” Mix),’ on \textit{Given Up} (12-inch single) (Multiply Records TMULTY46, 1998). This record samples a Giorgio Moroder production: see The Three Degrees, ‘Giving Up, Giving In,’ on \textit{Giving Up, Giving In} (12-inch single) (RCA TDS-024, 1978).
The full chord progression is only heard during the ‘peak’ sections of the track—what we might refer to as the ‘chorus’ (as shown in Musical Example 7.10).

Musical Example 7.10
Mirrorball, ‘Given Up (Original 12” Mix),’ mm. 97-100, 2.53-3.00
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 51]
[Complete version: CD 3, tr. 12]
Transcription by Adrian Renzo

Significantly, in most SAW-produced 12-inch singles, no such ‘restriction’ occurs at the start of the song. (For evidence of this, see Appendix D.) Instead, we hear a full statement of the harmonic progression to be deployed later in the song. The key difference between this introductory material and the actual ‘song’ sections of the 12-inch singles is that the introductions (and the endings) tend to employ the technique of stratification that I identified in Sinitta’s ‘I Don’t Believe in Miracles’ and in Kylie Minogue’s ‘Got to be Certain.’ Notice how, in the Club Mix of Lonnie Gordon’s ‘If I Have to Stand Alone,’ we hear a full statement of the harmonic
material, even before all the instruments have been introduced (see Table 7.2, below). \(^{84}\)

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\(^{84}\) Lonnie Gordon’s ‘If I Have to Stand Alone (Club Mix),’ on *If I Have to Stand Alone* (12-inch single) (Liberation X14919, 1991).
Table 7.2
Lonnie Gordon, ‘If I Have to Stand Alone (Club Mix),’ mm. 1-33, 0.00-1.03
[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 52]
[Complete version: CD 4, tr. 1]
Table by Adrian Renzo

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Min:sec</th>
<th>Entry of Musical Layers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>Synth line (staccato, with slight pitch bends)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kick drum with reverberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>Drum loop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>Open hi-hats (left channel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Synth line muted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>Bass line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tambourine (right channel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>Synth harmonies (with 'squelch' envelope)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>Sustained synth strings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Piano riff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Piano chords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>Piano riff muted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>Vocals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite its longer duration and the use of stratification (which I have shown to be a staple of club musics from the 1980s and 1990s), the Club Mix of ‘If I Have to Stand...
All this can be heard as an elaborated pop song. In fact, one can even sing the entire first verse and chorus over the extended introduction outlined above, and the harmonic progression will provide a perfectly synchronized accompaniment, much like an instrumental karaoke track.

Of course, many pop-oriented 12-inch singles of the 1980s used exactly the same technique that I have identified in ‘If I Have to Stand Alone.’ As Appendix E makes clear, many pop-oriented 12-inch singles of the 1980s allowed the full harmonic progression to fully run its course, even during the most sparse, ‘extended’ parts of the 12-inch. Therefore, it could be argued that SAW were simply adhering to the conventions of the 1980s by doing this. However, given Stock’s strongly voiced opinions (cited earlier in this chapter), I would argue that this technique is an effort to retain the ‘emotion,’ ‘drama,’ or even ‘camp’ effect of the songs within a club setting. Indeed, Stock continued to use this strategy even in 1999, long after it had become less prominent in club culture. In Scooch’s ‘When My Baby (Extended Mix),’ the bass line is treated in the same manner as ‘If I Have to Stand Alone (Club Mix)’: it plays the entire sequence of the song’s verse from the moment it is first introduced (see CD 1, tr. 53). It is only on the Almighty Remix that the harmonies are restricted, in keeping with the new norms of club culture (see CD 1, tr. 54). (For evidence of the extent to which harmonic restriction had become the norm by the 1990s, see Appendix C.)

In light of the above, we can see that SAW’s 12-inch productions can be heard as both ‘tracks’ and as ‘songs.’ In this respect, they can be approached using the same dual perspective that I advocated for the earlier form of Moroder-esque Eurodisco. Such a finding is significant because it demonstrates that the exclusion of this music from most histories of dance music is at least partly ideologically motivated one rather than a purely musical one. Handbag music can easily be dismissed as disposable ‘pop’ partly because the influence of song structures within dance music itself has been downplayed in many histories of the genre. In Chapter Eight, I shall

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85 This is a point I take up in Chapter Eight.
87 This echoes the claim I advanced in Chapter Six.
draw on specific examples of more recent handbag tracks, demonstrating the ways in which their stratified composition conforms to the norms of contemporary club music. The discussion of Eurodisco and SAW productions has also paved the way for the latter half of Chapter Eight, in which I examine some of the ways that the song-like qualities of handbag make the music more amenable to being used within gay male clubs.
CHAPTER 8

HANDBAG, DJ CONVENTIONS, AND SONGS
8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated two points about handbag music and its predecessors. Firstly, I noted that the song-based structures associated with handbag music can be shown to be a significant thread in the history of dance music. This was particularly clear in the case of Giorgio Moroder’s Eurodisco productions, in which some of the very tracks that were held to be cornerstones of instrumental dance music (recall Reynolds’s claim that Summer’s ‘I Feel Love’ was trance music ‘a la lettre’) could be re-interpreted as conventional pop songs, complete with ‘gimmicky’ Moog synthesiser. This pre-history of handbag music was significant because it showed that the remixes of pop songs that are now a staple of many gay male clubs did not simply ‘come from nowhere,’ nor are they exclusively limited to the world of Top 40 music: they have their own precedents, and thus can be shown to be as much a part of ‘dance music’ as more instrumentally-oriented genres such as drum’n’bass, trance, breaks, and electro. The second finding of Chapter Seven was that song-structures were a particularly important part of the 12-inch ‘extended versions’ that were a staple of gay clubs in the 1980s. Here, I adopted a dual perspective in listening to the output of Stock, Aitken, and Waterman (SAW). I demonstrated that in some ways, SAW’s 12-inch singles conform to the dictates of ‘dance music’ (for instance, in the explicit adoption of club-oriented fashions of the day and in the stratification of extended versions). In other ways, SAW’s music clearly retains an emphasis on song-based structures. Most significantly, of the many examples in which a ‘stratified’ approach to composition was used in an extended version, the specific pop pleasures of the single were rarely, if ever, discarded. The focus was still on melodies, counter-melodies, and harmonic progressions that ‘go somewhere.’¹ SAW’s music, then, was popular within gay male clubs partly because of the specific musical strategies that they adopted. The music blatantly draw on the conventions of white gay clubs (the hi-NRG influence).² Perhaps more significantly, this music foregrounded familiar, linear song structures that provide a basis for dance floor performances—and ‘performance’ in general has been particularly important within gay male culture for decades, as I showed in Chapter Six.

¹ Stock, The Hit Factory, 56.
Chapter Eight expands on this issue in several ways. The first part of the chapter considers the ways in which handbag music may be ‘slotted into’ DJ performances in clubs. By discussing one transition (of many possible transitions) between two handbag tracks of the mid-1990s, I will demonstrate that this music is stratified (as was the norm in SAW’s 1980s productions). Despite the retention of clear song structures in this music, the 12-inch remixes are specifically designed to be mixed—as is the case with the vast majority of 12-inch remixes from the 1990s through to the present day.

The second part of the chapter expands on Mike Stock’s comment that gay men ‘tend to be sensitive and like songs that move them.’ While not wishing to reinforce the normative aspects of this comment, I do wish to explore why it is the song rather than the minimal instrumental track that dominates the playlist of many gay male clubs. Chapter Eight will argue that handbag songs are significant in this context because it is easier to deploy many familiar signifiers of emotional ‘excess’ and drama within song structures than in stripped-back minimalist dance music.

### 8.2 Stratification as DJ tool

We have already seen that SAW’s music can be understood as belonging both to the ‘pop’ realm of short, standardised pop songs, and to the world of club music. This dual perspective was useful in explaining the prevalence of a crucial compositional technique that was ubiquitous in these records: stratification (see the textural graph of Sinitta’s ‘I Don’t Believe in Miracles’ in Figure 7.2, page 217). I argued that stratification satisfied the dictates of both competent pop listeners and of DJs playing these records for the benefit of a dancing audience. For pop listeners, one of the pleasures of hearing extended versions of pop songs (and here I refer to the specific technique of ‘extending’ the songs, rather than recomposing them, as has become the dominant practice since the 1990s) is to hear material that is vaguely familiar.

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3 Stock, *The Hit Factory*, 70.
(because it was actually a part of the original song, albeit submerged or masked by other sounds) and yet relatively new (because in the 12-inch version, such sounds tend to be foregrounded in the audio mix, creating a relatively ‘new’ textural arrangement and—in some cases—turning such previously submerged material into pseudo-riffs).

In the following section, I shall elaborate on the second potential use of stratification: the way that stratification allows these records to function as the basis of a DJ performance. This discussion should be understood as a continuation of the arguments presented in Chapter Five. While the prevailing discourse of electronic dance music scenes tends to ignore handbag and other song-based forms as mere ‘pop’ music (in spite of the appeal of such music in gay male clubs), I will show, through an analysis of this music’s stratification, that the music is in fact very amenable to being used as a DJ tool, and as part of a larger DJ set. To come to grips with this issue, we need to establish some of the conventions that govern DJ practice in night clubs.

Music theorist Mark Butler distinguishes between two aspects of DJ practice: programming and composition.\(^5\) The former refers to the skills of track selection—being able to select the most appropriate track for a particular point in the night, taking into consideration the type of crowd for whom one is playing records, and so on. The more ‘compositional’ side of DJing involves musical decisions about which tracks work best when played simultaneously, which frequencies should be emphasised or attenuated during particular sections of a record, and the many other potential manipulations of the sounds that a DJ may employ.\(^6\) While these two areas may overlap at times, the distinction remains useful because within certain dance music scenes, and in different historical periods, one of these approaches often comes to the fore. For example, in early discotheques of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, a number of factors converged to make *programming* the dominant DJ method. These factors include the unavailability of twelve-inch vinyl singles and the

\(^5\) Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 50.
\(^6\) Ibid., 49.
fact that many of the songs were still structured as three-minute pop songs, making it difficult to segue in quite the same way as DJs are able to segue today.

As Butler points out, one of the main objectives of many DJs is to treat their performances (or ‘sets’) as a seamless whole, rather than as a number of discrete songs. To this end, it is common practice to deliberately make records overlap, preferably in such a way as to disguise the ending of one and the beginning of the next. It could be argued that in gay male clubs where handbag is the dominant form of music, we can hear definite echoes of the 1970s disco era, in which programming took precedence over composition:

Writers attempting to capture the ecstasy of the disco dance floor… during the 1970s often describe the joy of hearing a particular track at a particular moment; programming was clearly a major emphasis in New York gay clubs in the 1980s as well… Since the 1990s, the compositional side of DJing has become more prominent, and it has become much less common to hear identifiable, discrete tracks within a DJ’s set.7

Since songs, rather than anonymous ‘tracks,’ are still the dominant format in clubs that play handbag, it becomes less desirable for a DJ to ‘tweak’ the sounds as much as s/he might for other genres. In this respect, the DJ practices heard in certain gay male clubs are considerably different from those that have become the norm in electronic dance music culture more generally. Many of the DJ techniques that have become prevalent in other dance genres—the rapid-fire cutting from one disc to another in hip hop ‘turntablism,’ the deliberate and extended combination of multiple tracks (in techno), and the manipulation of sounds via the DJ’s mixer—have arguably remained relatively peripheral in gay scenes that privilege songs over tracks.

There is, however, one norm of electronic dance music that has infiltrated the DJ booths of even the staunchest handbag adherents: the practice of playing discs

7 Ibid., 50.
continuously. As Butler notes in relation to techno, dance tracks are often structured in such a way as to facilitate their incorporation within a DJ set. This explains the prevalence of an arch structure in dance tracks, particularly in relation to the number of instruments heard at any one time: ‘the sections in which the DJ is most likely to be moving from one record to another are intentionally made thinner so that the two records can be overlaid, while the thicker middle sections are more capable of standing on their own.’

This norm applies equally to handbag music. As I noted in the discussion of S Club 7’s ‘Natural (Almighty Mix),’ this music tends to be stratified (see page 114 of this thesis). That stratification—particularly when it is underpinned by a strong bass drum or other metronome-like pulse—makes it easier for DJs to segue from one track to the next. In many cases, the strict 8-bar phrases of handbag music mean that a DJ can segue from one song to the next with relatively little manipulation of the controls on their mixer. Two representative handbag tracks from the mid-1990s illustrate this tendency.

In Figure 8.1 below, I have provided a textural graph of the end of Thelma Houston’s ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way (House Club Remix).’ The stratified composition that I noted in Almighty Associates’ work is also evident here: instruments are inserted or taken out of the mix at regular intervals, and the density of the track is gradually thinned.

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8 Ibid., 232.
9 Thelma Houston, ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way (House Club Remix),’ on Don’t Leave Me This Way ‘94 (12-inch single) (Dig It International DMX 10194, 1994).
Figure 8.1

Textural Graph of Thelma Houston, ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way (House Club Remix),’ mm. 141-79, 4.26-5.41

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 55]

[Complete version: CD 4, tr. 2]

Textural Graph by Adrian Renzo

In Figure 8.2 (below) I have provided a similar sketch of the beginning of a contemporaneous track: Gloria Estefan’s ‘Turn the Beat Around (Def Classic Mix).’ In both examples, the stratification process is used flexibly. While the general trend is to gradually thicken or thin the texture (each layer of music being ‘switched on’ or ‘switched off’ once only), this is not an absolute rule. For example, ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ has a new set of orchestral hits introduced at bar 171 (at a point when the texture overall is thinning). Similarly, the vocals in ‘Turn the Beat Around’ are introduced at bar 1, but temporarily cease at bar 17, recommencing at bar 25. Aside from these variations, however, the general pattern is clear in both Figures: layers gradually build up, or break down.

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10 Gloria Estefan, ‘Turn the Beat Around (Def Classic Mix),’ on Turn the Beat Around (promotional 12-inch single) (Sony/Epic EPC 660682 6, 1994).
To illustrate the effects of this convention, I have recorded one of several possible transitions from ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ to ‘Turn the Beat Around.’ The recording was made with a DJ console consisting of two Technics turntables and a Vestax mixer, and involves superimposing the beginning of ‘Turn the Beat Around’ over the end of ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ in such a way as to segue smoothly between the two tracks. I have mapped this transition in Figure 8.3. In the diagram, I have divided the music into 8-bar phrases, with each vertical line representing the start of a new 8-bar phrase. The diagram illustrates how ‘thin’ sections of two different songs can be overlaid to facilitate smooth transitions from one song to the next. In this example, the ‘thinning’ of ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ clears a space in which the Estefan song can gradually build.

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11 For a discussion of typical equipment utilised by club DJs, see Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 47-58.
Figure 8.3
Textural Graph of Transition between Thelma Houston, ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way (House Club Remix)’ and Gloria Estefan, ‘Turn the Beat Around (Def Classic Mix),’ mm. 1-62, 0.00-1.43
[CD 1, tr. 57]
Transition recorded by Adrian Renzo
Textural Graph by Adrian Renzo

<table>
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<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Don’t Leave Me This Way**
- Vocals
- Tonic synth
- Orchestral hits
- Arpeggiated synth
- Synth chords
- Synth pads
- Bass line
- Snare drum and tambourine
- Bass drum + hi-hats

**Turn the Beat Around**
- Vocals
- Keyboard
- Bass line
- Hand claps
- Shaker and tambourine
- Drums
There are, of course, many possible ways to segue between tracks. The simplest way would be to simply cue ‘Turn the Beat Around’ at a random point towards the end of ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way,’ and to then slide the crossfader on the mixer. This would have the effect of gradually muting Thelma Houston’s song and simultaneously ‘fading in’ the Gloria Estefan song. Cueing the second song at a random point, however, would most likely result in metric dissonance: beats from each song would inevitably collide against each other. A slightly more sophisticated way of achieving the transition would be to ‘beat match’ the record—synchronising the beats and the tempo of both songs, so that they may continue any metrical dissonance while the DJ adjusts the volume settings and brings the second song to the foreground of the mix. In cases where volume adjustment and beat matching still do not result in a ‘smooth’ mix, DJs may utilise the equalisation controls (usually referred to as ‘EQ’) on their mixing console. In principle, the use of EQ is similar to the DJ’s use of the volume controls: the aim is to slowly make one song fade out while simultaneously making another song fade in. The EQ controls allow the DJ to target specific groups of frequencies. In this case, for instance, it could be possible to raise the volume on both songs, but have the bass frequencies of ‘Turn the Beat Around’ muted. Then, when the desired transitional point arrives, one could gradually mute the bass frequencies of ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ while raising the bass frequencies of ‘Turn the Beat Around.’

In the example I have recorded, I have chosen a different strategy. Rather than playing both songs at full volume and adjusting the EQ controls as necessary, I have sought to mute certain instruments in the currently playing song, and immediately replace them with equivalent instruments from the subsequent song. This is particularly evident in the treatment of the vocals and the drums. In some ways, the use of this strategy means that the mix is not as ‘smooth’ as it might otherwise have been. For example, there is a noticeable shift in the timbre of the drums when the bass drum switches from ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ to ‘Turn the Beat Around.’

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12 Butler describes this skill as follows: ‘To match the beats of record B with those of record A, the DJ listens to record B (or to the combination of A and B) through headphones, while keeping the mixing board on a setting that allows the audience to hear record A only. The slider is then used to adjust the tempo of record B so that the two records are moving at exactly the same speed. In addition, the beats must be synchronized, which is accomplished by pushing the record very slightly forward or backward.’ See Butler, *Unlocking the Groove*, 55.
other ways, however, this strategy makes the transition smoother, because it ensures that approximately the same number of instruments is being heard at any given time – as indicated in Figure 8.3. The reason I focus on this particular example, however, is to demonstrate the way that segues between different records are planned for and effectively built into the structure of the records themselves. I may refer to ‘muting’ certain instruments and ‘replacing’ them with others, but this ‘muting’ and ‘replacement’ is not actually performed on the mixer. It is a byproduct of playing the two records simultaneously.

This is highly significant because it demonstrates that remixes of Top 40 pop music—like the most obscure techno tracks and other ‘underground’ records—are specifically designed to be mixed, and deserve to be considered a type of ‘dance music.’ This is not to suggest that the records virtually ‘mix themselves,’ or that DJs do not need to make what Butler calls ‘compositional’ decisions when selecting and mixing the records. As he rightly points out, this process still involves many musical decisions. For example, for the transition to work effectively, I needed to: select these particular mixes of ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ and ‘Turn the Beat Around’; use the pitch controls on the turntables to determine the approximate beats per minute (BPM) of each record; calculate the best point at which to begin playing ‘Turn the Beat Around’ (in this case, the ideal point is situated 24 bars before the end of ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’); begin playing ‘Turn the Beat Around’ at a slightly softer-than-usual volume, so as to ensure that any slight timing errors would not be glaringly obvious at the start of the transition; slowly raise the volume of ‘Turn the Beat Around’; check if the combination of Houston’s synthesisers and Estefan’s voice caused any dissonance; and finally allow ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ to run its entire course. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the structure of the records themselves—the thinning of the texture in both instances—is crucial to the success of the mix.

When considered against the evidence presented in Chapter Five (that is, the extensive commentary in the dance press which marginalises this music, or simply refuses to acknowledge it as ‘dance music’ in the first place), we can see further evidence that the exclusions of the dance music community are ideological rather
than purely ‘musical.’ Clearly, the failure of 3D World and www.inthemix.com.au to recognise genres such as ‘Eurohouse’ or ‘handbag’—and to denigrate these genres as ‘pop’ rather than ‘dance’—conveniently overlooks such important aspects of the music as its structure, focusing instead on the presence of vocals and clearly delineated harmonic progressions. The type of production and mixing strategies that I have just outlined demonstrate that in many cases, handbag remixes are wilfully marginalised within dance music culture in spite of their obvious ‘dance-oriented’ elements.

8.3 The significance of song structures in handbag music

Up to this point, I have deliberately focused on the ways in which the music of Motiv8, Almighty Associates, and other producers can plausibly be labelled ‘dance music.’ This has largely been a reaction to the incessant disparagement of this music within the electronic dance music press, and within the discourses that circulate around dance music scenes. (Thus, this line of argument is also part of a long tradition that I identified in Chapter Two—a tradition concerned with ‘rescuing’ various types of popular music from premature critical dismissals of it.) However, in Chapter Seven I advocated a dual perspective towards handbag music—one which acknowledged both the ways in which this music conforms to the dictates of current dance floor conventions, and the ways in which it diverges from such conventions. It is time to turn our attention to the latter aspect of the music. Of all the possible genres that could be adopted by gay male culture, why is it handbag that is so visibly associated with this culture? What makes it different from other electronic dance music genres such as breaks, electro, the many derivatives of house and so on?

As in the case of SAW’s 12-inch extended singles that I discussed in Chapter Seven, one of the crucial differences is the way in which handbag has resisted dance music’s wider shift from ‘songs’ to ‘tracks.’ As Will Straw pointed out, house music has left an important legacy for dance music in general. With the spread of house:
the idea of songs gave way to the notion of ‘tracks’, records lasting from four to ten minutes in which the important things going on had to do with the relationship between a consistent rhythm and the wide variety of things which might be mixed over the top of it. A deejay might use bits of one record to offer a house rhythm; over the top of that rhythm, fragments from other records, or sounds played live on electronic instruments might be added...House music lent itself more easily to creating long stretches of unbroken music, often lasting several hours, as records and sounds were interwoven by deejays in a process that might be considered one of live composition.  

The opposite tends to be the case in handbag music, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the output of Motiv8, whose work I discussed in Chapter Six. While he occasionally released his own material (‘Rockin' For Myself’; ‘Break the Chain’), the more visible side of Motiv8’s profile was as a commissioned remixer for a large number of pop outfits, such as the Spice Girls and the Pet Shop Boys. Even though his remixes would bring the full panoply of studio production techniques to bear on these groups’ songs, he would nevertheless retain a focus on the songs themselves—so much so, in fact, that many of his remixers were decidedly difficult for DJs to add to their sets.

In recent years, this sort of ‘problem’ has been solved by the advent of customised DJ-oriented CD players which are capable of seamlessly segueing from one section of a CD to another. (The emergence of computer-based ‘live’ mixing has made such manipulation even more accessible.) For instance, if a track begins with no clear pulse with which the music can be synchronised with another (currently playing) disc, a DJ can simply introduce the track by using a drum break from the end of the disc. Then, when appropriate, s/he can easily segue to an earlier part of the disc in order to allow the main part of the song to be heard. However, up until the 1990s (the decade in which Motiv8’s music became a staple of many gay male clubs), a

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13 Straw, ‘Dance Music,’ 172.
number of specialist DJ remix services would produce special versions of these songs that drew on the commercially available versions, but which were also re-edited so as to make the songs structurally amenable to DJ use. These remixes were compiled on albums ostensibly available only to subscribers, but would often find their way into specialist dance music stores. In light of the above analysis of Thelma Houston’s ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ and Gloria Estefan’s ‘Turn the Beat Around,’ we could say that these specialist DJ services aimed to provide mixes of popular songs that conformed to the general arch-shape that was (and still is) desirable to DJs. Such an arch-shape makes the synchronisation of different records or CDs easier for DJs who need to provide a smooth, seamless mix of continuous music.

The commentary that accompanied these specially re-edited versions often pointed precisely to the problems involved in playing tracks with a certain structure. For instance, the Hot Tracks Digital Mix of R.A.F.’s ‘We’ve Got to Live Together’ is accompanied by the following note: ‘A great example of “NRG-meets-rave”…this was unfortunately almost impossible to program from the original 12-inch. Mark fixed the structure problems, added some cute effects-edits and created new intro/break/outro sections so you can mix in and out of this without even trying (almost!).’

When we compare this version with the original club mix, it becomes clear why the original was perceived as a ‘difficult’ version to mix. The opening of the Club Mix consists of a synth-string section with some additional synth pads (see CD 1, tr. 58; complete version on CD 4, tr. 4). The strings are not simply washes of sustained sound—they do play well-defined notes. However, even the rhythmic pattern that they play is not percussive enough to clearly convey the underlying pulse of the music to a DJ. It is easily possible to introduce these strings over the drum break of another song, but the most likely outcome of this is that when the R.A.F. drums are introduced, they will be slightly out-of-synch with the preceding track. In contrast,

15 Liner notes for NRG for the 90’s, Volume 11, by Various Artists.
16 RAF, ‘We’ve Got to Live Together (Club Mix),’ on We’ve Got to Live Together (CD single) (PWL PWCD 218, 1992).
the Hot Tracks version introduces a clear and unambiguous drum loop (including both bass and prominent snare drums), and then ‘loops’ back to the section of the original track in which the vocals are introduced (see CD 1, tr. 59; complete version on CD 4, tr. 5). This is what makes the song ‘easier’ for a DJ to add to their set. A similar strategy is applied to the end of the track. This is a persistent thread in the production notes that accompany specialist DJ re-edits: the original mix of RuPaul’s ‘Snapshot’ ‘had no workable intro’ so Hot Tracks ‘provided one that builds nicely into the driving synth hook and chorus’; the same team added a ‘new intro and break’ to Dana Dawson’s ‘Show Me’ ‘which are much easier to use’; the commercially available mixes of Deuce’s ‘No Surrender’ ‘did not have any workable intro or exit to speak of so Producer Ron Hester used sampled beats to create an intro blending them flawlessly with the original track.’

Significantly, Motiv8’s foregrounding of song-like qualities in his remixes frequently made his versions more difficult for DJs to incorporate in their sets. For example, his remix of Diana Ross’s ‘I Will Survive’ includes a rubato introduction (clearly drawing on the original Gloria Gaynor version) which is virtually impossible to synchronise satisfactorily with any other song from the same genre (see CD 1, tr. 60). Many of his remixes end not with a formal ‘outro’ (a term which connotes a ‘proper’ winding down of the instrumentation, which facilitates the layering of another song over the top of the currently playing record) but with a classic pop convention: the fade-out during the final chorus. Such fade-outs—as heard, for instance, in Mozaic’s ‘Nothing in the World’ (see CD 1, tr. 61)—make it difficult for a DJ to unobtrusively segue to another track because they usually include the entire instrumental palette (all of which fades simultaneously). Consequently, there can be no ‘layering’ of the tracks as demonstrated in the Thelma Houston/Gloria Estefan example discussed above.

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17 See liner notes for NRG for the 90’s, Volume 30, by Various Artists and NRG for the 90’s, Volume 29, by Various Artists.

18 See Diana Ross, ‘I Will Survive (Motiv8 Club Vocal Mix),’ on I Will Survive (12-inch single) (EMI 7243 8 82686 6 0, 1996). As DJ Shiva told Butler, such introductions are often omitted by DJs: ‘I usually just spin forward until there are beats. Sometimes I’ll use the no-beat sections for intros, but when mixing, I prefer to use the first kick-drum beat as my guide.’ See Butler, Unlocking the Groove, 234.

19 See Mozaic, ‘Nothing in the World (Motiv8 Mix),’ on Nothing in the World (12-inch single) (EMI/Positiva 12TIV-19, 1994).
His own comments on the production process confirm the notion that he is as concerned with the *pop sensibilities* of these records as he is with their dance music credentials. In a discussion of his remix of the Pulp song ‘Common People,’ he told *Sound on Sound* magazine:

> A passing chord was added on the chorus. This brought out the passion in Jarvis [Cocker’s] voice, and had the effect of breaking up the repetitive sequenced bassline in the chorus a bit, which needed to go somewhere else at that point. Finally, a lead synth line was added as a hook, from my Oberheim Matrix 1000 and Roland Jupiter 6, which had a little portamento. I felt the track needed something like that, because the chorus was quite long.\(^{20}\)

Far from wanting to indulge club crowds’ preference for long, repetitive or ‘hypnotic’ sections in which timbres can gradually shift, Motiv8 foregrounds the need to conform to the dictates of the Top 40 pop song: the bass line ‘needed to go somewhere else’ during the chorus; the length of the chorus needed to be offset by something new (in this case, the addition of a new synthesiser riff) (see CD 1, tr. 62).

This, then, returns us to the dual perspective that I suggested was appropriate for SAW’s music in Chapter Seven. Motiv8’s music can be heard as dance music, but it also includes certain elements that upset some of the well-entrenched conventions of electronic dance music (even within the limits of specific genres such as Euro-house and hi-NRG). As in the SAW examples that were discussed earlier, we can hear that the producers of handbag music engage certain musical strategies in order to make the music more dance-floor friendly (the up-to-date synthesiser productions; the use of stratification to facilitate programming by DJs; the restriction of the harmonic palette during non-peak sections of the records). At the same time, however, there are elements that tend to foreground the status of these records as *songs*. For instance, Motiv8’s extended remixes may be stratified (part of the price of admission

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to the club world), but instead of foregrounding loops of percussive sounds, the introduction to these versions frequently consists of a melodic riff (for example, Mary Kiani’s ‘I Imagine,’ see CD 1, tr. 63) or an outline of the harmonic schema that will underpin a subsequent riff (for example, Heaven 17’s ‘Designing Heaven,’ see CD 1, tr. 64).\(^{21}\) In some cases, riffs will be dispensed with altogether, and we will hear uncharacteristic rubato introductions (as in the Diana Ross example—see above).\(^{22}\)

This focus on *songs* is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it ensures that even within tracks that audiences may never have heard before, or within songs that have been remixed and thus adapted into a relatively new sound world (for instance, an r’n’b pop song being recomposed as a house track or a disco pop single being recomposed as a trance track), the overall narrative structure of each musical piece will be familiar to clubbers on some level. Few, if any, clubbers can claim to have never heard a pop song; most will have a relatively high level of familiarity with the pop genre. So the ‘uplifting’ chorus—even if it happens to be a chorus that certain dancers have never heard before—will be at least vaguely familiar insofar as it will deploy standardised textural crescendos, increases in the density of the tracks, and so on. It will also be familiar because it will have been set within a pre-existing schema. While I would not wish to adopt Adorno’s pessimism about this process, it is nevertheless undeniable that his arguments about popular songs hearing for the listener have some validity in relation to handbag music. In this case, however, this level of ‘pre-digestion’ is part of what makes the music so useful on the dance floor: it is easier to ‘perform’ to a soundtrack when you have some idea of what is coming up in the mix.

The way that songs are foregrounded in handbag music is also significant because it has the potential to make this (overly) familiar material appear ‘new.’ When the norm in dance music tends towards static bass lines and subtle shifts in timbre and

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\(^{22}\) The Diana Ross example should be qualified: while the rubato introduction is certainly ‘uncharacteristic’ of Motiv8’s work, it also draws on the well-known recording by Gloria Gaynor for its effect.
texture, the introduction of conventional pop harmonic procedures comes across as relatively novel. This helps to explain why, when handbag ‘anthems’ are played within as part of a ‘credible’ DJ set, they typically appear towards the end of the set. While an Adorno-inspired perspective would emphasise the standardisation of this music, it is frequently standardised pop songs themselves that diverge from club norms.

To get a clearer idea of this, one need only compare some representative instrumental house tracks with handbag songs to get an idea of how the song structure itself comes to seem ‘new’ within a club context. House producer Tom Middleton, for example, tends to foreground the gradual (or sudden) changes and in the timbre of particular sounds—the actual pitch material is still significant, but it is less so than in conventional pop songs. In the Tom Middleton remix of ‘Party Hard’ (by British band Pulp), the first half of the track consists of a guitar sample that is processed with several types of amplitude filters (see CD 1, tr. 65; complete version on CD 4, tr. 6). In this section, it would be tempting to dismiss pitch material as irrelevant, and so it is worth noting that even in this minimalist texture, one effect of the filters is to gradually draw out different frequencies, a musical device that effectively alters the pitch material. The guitar sample being used here may only utilise one or two chords, but the filter effects gradually emphasise different pitches in the sequence. Even the rhythm—on the first listen, a simple repetitive pulse—is ‘thickened’ or rendered more complex by the way that the duration of the sampled guitar loop is lengthened incrementally. Similarly, in Stylophonic’s ‘Soulreply (Tom Middleton’s Cosmos Dub),’ musical interest is generated not so much by harmonic progressions that ‘go somewhere’ (to borrow Mike Stock’s expression), but by textural and timbral shifts. Occasionally, these are radical shifts—at one point, most of the percussion material fades out of the audio mix, and it returns dramatically after a brief hiatus in the music. More frequent, however, are the gradual timbral shifts that happen throughout the track. While there may be a number

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23 Gilbert and Pearson, Discographies, 38.
of different instruments or sounds heard simultaneously, the timbral shift is often applied to a single sound—at one point, for instance, a ‘squelching,’ pitch-bending synthesiser sound vaguely reminiscent of 1980s acid house is gradually ‘muffled’ via a filter effect (see CD 1, tr. 66; complete version on CD 4, tr. 7).

What is significant about handbag music—particularly with regards to its use in gay male night clubs—is the way that these musical strategies are both incorporated (for instance, through the restriction of harmonic material, the use of filters to gradually change the timbre of sounds) and yet song structures are retained. As a consequence, the appearance of the actual ‘song’ in the middle of a typical extended remix (usually between six to eight minutes) sounds novel, no matter how well-worn the actual musical materials are. It needs to be remembered that within dance music more generally, the development of harmonic progressions that span more than a few bars is relatively unusual (with some noteworthy exceptions, such as trance music). This dual approach can be heard in Almighty Allstars’ version of the song ‘A Little Respect (Definitive Mix)’ (see CD 1, tr. 67; complete version on CD 4, tr. 8). The mix begins with a drum loop (0.00), to which a one-note synthesiser pattern is added (0.14), followed by the entry of a bass line which is centred on the same note as the first synth line (0.29). Vocal samples are added to this section gradually—they are muffled at first (‘I try to discover’), and alternate first with a synthesiser line playing brief bursts of semiquavers (0.43-0.47) and then with another vocal snippet which is noticeably clearer and less processed than the first sample (‘a little something’; ‘a little something to make me sweeter’) (1.00-1.13). Towards the end of this introductory section, the filter being applied to the original vocal sample (‘I try to discover’) is gradually lifted. This happens at precisely the same point that the bass line and the sustained synth pads begin to shift for the first time (1.20). As in the Almighty remix discussed in Chapter Four (S Club 7’s ‘Natural’), the introductory section climaxes in a shift from a minor key to its relative major, and with the addition of a new synthesiser riff that will underpin the ‘song’ section of this remix (1.27). While most dance pundits seek to downplay the similarities between handbag music and the work of more ‘credible’ producers, it is worth noting the similarity

between the way that Tom Middleton generates musical interest in his mixes of ‘Party Hard’ and ‘Soulreply,’ and the way that the vocals of ‘A Little Respect’ are manipulated in this introductory section. In these cases, both genres rely on the gradual shifts in timbre made possible by filter effects.

If we compare the two types of tracks above—the Middleton house tracks and Almighty Associates’ extended handbag song—we can see how the necessary song structure in the handbag example is made to seem ‘new’ by being inserted into a club-oriented context. Chord shifts that were formerly introduced from the very start of the radio edit (see CD 1, tr. 68) are now set within a new harmonic schema—in the case of ‘A Little Respect,’ the major-key chord sequence is now only introduced after a substantial introduction in the relative minor key. I would argue that the harmonies of the original song are given an additional affective ‘charge’ by being set within this new context, particularly since the shift in harmonies is so clearly preceded by what we might call a textural crescendo: muffled vocal samples are gradually made clearer (as discussed above); the density of instrumentation is gradually increased; and synth ‘swirls’ (0.10), stuttered handclaps (0.28), and cymbal crashes (0.43) clearly signal the introduction of each new instrumental layer; the dynamic range of the pitch material is incrementally widened (at first it is mainly found in the mid-range, but with the introduction of the bass line and additional synthesiser flourishes, this range widens).

This has important ramifications for the way that handbag is taken up and used within gay male night clubs. The insertion of song structures within club-oriented studio productions gives the usually banal musical strategies of the pop songs an extra affective charge. Elements that were once the basic and expected musical tools of the song—shifting chord progressions over 4-bar, 8-bar, or even 16-bar phrases; linear and teleological melodies—become a divergence from the dance music norm of subtly shifting textures and relatively static harmonic and melodic material.

The adoption and incorporation of song structures within handbag music also points to the contentious issue of signification. While all dance music carries at least the potential of signifying something (contra Chris Kennett’s argument), I would
suggest that the musical devices that have conventionally been used as signifiers of ‘drama,’ ‘camp,’ and ‘excess,’ are more easily deployed in linear song structures.\textsuperscript{27} We need to establish, then, to what extent handbag music revels in stereotypical musical signifiers of drama and excess. Should such an appropriation be seen as a regressive step back into a stereotype (in which gay men are seen as ‘naturally’ more emotional or sensitive than their straight counterparts), or does it represent a more ambiguous response to the experience of being queer?

\subsection*{8.4 Drama and Excess in Handbag Music}

Associating words such as ‘drama,’ ‘excess,’ and ‘camp’ with gay male culture usually invokes charges of essentialism, and it is worth prefacing any discussion of this issue with the necessary if oft-repeated point that there are many different ways in which queerness is taken up and lived by different people. For every instance of commentary in the popular press that seems to perpetuate a narrow, essentialised conception of ‘gay identity,’ there are others that acknowledge the multiple ways of ‘being gay.’ For instance, in a promotional description of the compilation \textit{Fabulous: Music from the Ceremonies of the Gay Games VI}, a writer for the online store Perfect Beat states:

\begin{quote}
Although the kids these days are proudly fixated on dark, tribal beats and ear-splitting circuit anthems, there’s still a little bit of that gay old uncle lurking deep inside us all. For that secret, arts n’ crafts lovin’ side, there’s \textit{Fabulous—Music for the Gay Games VI}, a celebratory collection of new and classic gay hits from artists like Bronski Beat…Mary Mary [and] Clivilles & Cole.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Clearly, there are many available ways of ‘being gay,’ or of being perceived as gay. Of course, to say that there are many available ways of ‘being gay’ should not be

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27] Chris Kennett, ‘Is Anybody Listening?’
\end{footnotes}
taken to mean that one can do this in an infinite number of ways: the available modes of public ‘gayness’ are always already circumscribed within the terms of available discourses. Indeed, the very focus on ‘performativity’ that I discussed in Chapter Six already sets limits on what gayness can ‘mean’ in various socio-cultural contexts: as Lewin and Leap pointed out, no matter how ‘free’ queers are to take up a particular subject position, one of the enduring features of those subject positions is the need to manage information about homosexuality.29 To put this differently, the need for queers to monitor themselves in many social situations already places limits on what kinds of behaviour will be deemed ‘acceptably’ queer. If nothing else, ‘being gay’ means to adopt a particular style of everyday performance that will be (to a certain extent) more self-conscious than the equally socially constructed performances of heterosexuals.

With these qualifications in mind, the above comments from Perfect Beat illustrate that there is more than one way of connecting ‘gayness’ with particular tastes in dance music. Even amongst those gay men who self-identify as ‘unreconstructed…disco bunn[ies],’ there are many available modes of engagement with dance music.30 Gay club culture caters for more than just the ‘gay old uncle’ in gay men. Indeed, this is one of the central planks of Stephen Amico’s ethnographic research in gay male clubs. As he noted, much of the music popular within this scene actively resists earlier (and still pervasive) stereotypes of ‘effeminate’ gay men. Records such as Club 69’s Style were promoted not with images of rainbow flags, pink feather boas, or other accoutrements of ‘effeminate’ gay culture. Instead, the sleeve of the record portrayed an almost preternaturally attractive young man astride a large motorcycle, clad in nothing but leather boots and air-force type sunglasses. The pose is arranged to avoid full frontal nudity, and his shirtless torso is finely chiselled, exceptionally muscular and vaguely sweaty. The image here is not one of the ‘dandy’; it is, rather, one of a stereotypical masculine visage, one which

30 Gill, Queer Noises, 176.
dispenses with ‘foppishness’ in favour of the symbols of ‘masculinity’—the musculature, the motorcycle, the boots, the military-type eyewear.\textsuperscript{31}

As Amico goes on to demonstrate, the music that he heard in gay male clubs reinforced this highly conventional mode of masculinity—a type of masculinity that actually serves to sustain existing gender norms rather than upsetting them. In the club Aurora, the set-up of the sound system was customised so as to emphasise bass frequencies, and the music would typically be played at such a loud volume that the bass drum, in particular, would dominate the audio mix.\textsuperscript{32} This foregrounding of the drums already came with certain connotations attached—as Amico put it, drums are often stereotypically associated with male (rather than female) performative displays.\textsuperscript{33} In encouraging clubbers to dance for hours on end—much like a marathon—the music also helped to create an atmosphere of competitive masculinity in the club: ‘there is a decidedly, almost purely physical (as opposed to aesthetic) component to this dancing, making it almost like a “workout”…It is apparent that the majority of men here…do, in fact, go to the gym on a regular basis; there is, accordingly, an air of “sport”, of pure physicality that imbues the dancing at Aurora.’\textsuperscript{34}

While the anonymous reviewer for Perfect Beat referred to the ‘gay old uncle deep inside all of us’ who presumably swishes effeminately to the gospel r’n’b anthems of Mary Mary and to the uplifting house rhythms of Cliville & Cole, Amico emphasises the aspects of contemporary (white) gay masculinity that uphold conventional definitions of ‘appropriate’ male gendered behaviour.

The various ways of performing ‘gayness,’ then, compete with and sometimes contradict each other. Unfortunately, the mere existence of these various modes of engaging with gendered performance is often taken to mean that any analytical approach needs to take account of \textit{all or none} of them. For instance, in previous

\textsuperscript{31} Amico, “‘I Want Muscles,’” 361.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 362. To preserve anonymity, Amico has changed the names of clubs and of participants in the scenes that he observed.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 362-63.
presentations of this work, one persistent response could be paraphrased as follows: ‘Yes, some gay men conform to the descriptions you’ve provided, but not all gay men do so.’ As Susan Bordo has pointed out, this type of comment betrays a perspective in which any analysis of a niche cultural pattern (for instance, the gay appropriation of flamboyant, melodramatic disco music) can be fragmented simply by noting an exception to the general ‘rule’ (for instance, the gay presence in jazz or avant-garde music, or the gay appropriation of more ‘serious,’ less ‘fluffy’ or ‘uplifting’ types of dance music).\(^{35}\) What I wish to emphasise here is that, while there may be many available discourses within which people can take up a ‘gay’ subject position, it is valid for an analysis to focus on one particular discourse. Such an analysis need not be seen as automatically ruling out the possibility of other discourses, other types of subjectivity, or other modes of engagement with gender norms. The analysis can more fruitfully be considered as a partial perspective that sheds light on (only) one aspect of gay experience, rather than speaking on behalf of all gay men.

In relation to handbag music, the particular mode of engagement that I am interested in is the notion of music as melodrama. Ien Ang has defined melodrama as a cultural genre ‘whose main effect is the stirring up of the emotions.’\(^{36}\) In his article ‘Television Melodrama,’ David Thorburn refers to it more specifically as ‘a sentimental, artificially plotted drama that sacrifices characterization to extravagant incident, makes sensational appeals to the emotions of its audience, and ends on a happy or at least a morally assuring note.’\(^{37}\) It is useful to draw an analogy between handbag music and ‘the melodramatic imagination’ because these genres occupy a similar position in their respective fields (film and music). Both are regarded as ‘feminine,’ and both are regarded as being ‘too easy’—a set of mass-produced texts that do not place enough demands on their audiences.\(^{38}\)

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Earlier in this chapter, I discussed some of the reasons that ‘songs’ continued to play a significant role in gay male clubs. The use of recognisable song structures within extended dance remixes helps to provide a familiar ‘background’ against which people can ‘perform’—in some cases quite self-consciously—on the dance floor. But song structures are also significant for the ways in which they allow stereotypical musical signifiers of pathos and yearning to be heard in the club. These kinds of connotations have been a persistent thread in the dance music favoured in gay male clubs from the disco era to the present day. I would argue that treating these musical effects as aspects of ‘melodrama’ can give us useful insights into the appeal of handbag within gay male cultures. Like film and television melodrama, handbag is often seen as emotionally manipulative, full of sweeping string sections and other clichés connoting emotional ‘excess.’ However, such manipulation or ‘overwrought drama’ is also a point at which queers can gain purchase on supposedly ‘mainstream’ (read: not gay) popular cultural texts. An examination of the harmonic and melodic properties of this music can help shed light on this matter. As I will demonstrate, much handbag music revels in what Philip Tagg has called ‘big’ emotional connotations, although it is realised in quite a different way to the ‘big’ orchestral Romantic settings that he discusses in his analysis of ‘The Dream of Olwen.’ I will show that some of the harmonic strategies adopted by producers and songwriters such as SAW help to create a melodramatic feeling of emotional ‘excess.’ Precisely what sort of ‘excess’ is almost beside the point: the crucial point is that feelings of emotional turbulence, pathos, and excess are built into the harmonic and melodic structures of these songs. This music, then, is very much a part of the ‘camp,’ overwrought conventions of gay male culture that have been identified by scholars such as Richard Dyer. It also connects with the type of passionate identification with female stars that continues to mark opera fandom.

39 Currid, “‘We Are Family,’” 187.
40 Of course, a consideration of such elements as harmony and melody may not be appropriate for all types of dance music. However, as I have indicated, handbag retains many of the conventions of Western pop songs. This means that the affective charge of particular harmonic and melodic strategies may well be related to equivalent strategies in pop songs. For this reason, I do not believe that a partial emphasis on harmony and melody, in this case, constitutes a distortion or misrepresentation of the music.
41 See Tagg and Clarida, *Ten Little Title Tunes*, 203.
As we saw in Chapter Six, it is not just any (arbitrary) type of song that can function as a ‘gay anthem.’ Typically, such anthems tend to follow linear, teleological harmonic schemas. To borrow Mike Stock’s term, these are songs that ‘go somewhere.’ In describing these songs as ‘teleological,’ however, I do not wish to imply that they consistently follow the ‘rules’ of functional harmony as practiced in certain types of Western art music. Here, ‘teleological’ should be understood as a relative term. Songs produced by SAW, for instance, tend to involve much more harmonic movement than the average house track. (See the contrast between Tom Middleton and Almighty Associates on pages 254-256 of this thesis.) While all dance music can be understood as ‘signifying’ particular affective states, the musical strategies found in handbag music frequently lends itself to the sort of emotional ‘excess’ and ‘drama’ that has been identified as a key aspect of melodrama. Such melodramatic excess can be musically rendered in many ways. A SAW-produced song recorded by Donna Summer gives us a particularly vivid example of this excess: ‘This Time I Know It’s For Real’ takes the type of dramatic upward key change that is usually reserved for the end of a song, and weaves it into the fabric of the song itself.43

As the parodic act Morris Minor and Majors once noted, a staple of many pop songs is the abrupt key change that occurs towards the end of the song. In their song ‘This is the Chorus,’ the lyrics of the final chorus are amended to: ‘This is the key change, this is the key change / It’s a standard device to stop us sounding mundane…’ Somewhat less cynically, Cauty and Drummond note that such a device is ‘an attempt to add dramatic effect into a song which is beginning to flag.’44 Such key shifts sound ‘dramatic’ partly because they are not painstakingly set up in functional harmonic terms (this is why I have largely avoided using the term ‘modulation’ to describe these abrupt shifts). They also carry a connotative charge of ‘drama’ or ‘excess’—depending on the context in which they are used—because a singer’s voice needs to rise in order to meet the ‘new’ (yet familiar) notes of the chorus.45 Of course, even a melody that remains in a given key for the duration of a song may

43 See: Donna Summer, ‘This Time I Know It's For Real (Extended Version),’ on *This Time I Know It's For Real* (12-inch single) (WEA International 0-257779, 1989).
45 See Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 123.
well have a relatively large range. Singers may create the impression of straining their voices in a final chorus simply by ad-libbing on the regular melody, or by joining the backing singers in performing a higher-pitched version of the chorus. A key change, then, is not essential for conveying emotional ‘excess.’ However, an abrupt key change—particularly at the end of a song—makes such upward movement in a singer’s voice more obvious. The fact that we are hearing mostly the same material (for instance: the same sequence of chords; the same lyrics; the same string section in the background) draws attention to what has changed (namely, the pitch of all these instruments and of the singer’s voice).

It should come as no surprise, then, to find such key changes near the end of The Communards’ ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way,’ Aretha Franklin’s ‘Who’s Zooming Who,’ and Diana Ross’s ‘Chain Reaction,’ among many others. Even in the brief list of examples offered here, there are clearly several different ways of working such a key change into the fabric of a song. On the one hand, it is possible to integrate the key change within the harmonic progression of the song itself, so that the eventual rise in pitch is carefully laid out in advance. This is the case in Aretha Franklin’s ‘Who’s Zoomin’ Who.’ In this song, the key change is not introduced abruptly, nor is it juxtaposed in an obvious way with the song’s original key. Instead, the middle eight section begins in the song’s original key, and gradually modulates to a new key. This careful ‘setting up’ of the key change does not diminish the effect of the rise in pitch (if anything, the shift is amplified by Franklin’s characteristic soul-influenced wail), but it does create a different effect than the stark jump up a semitone or tone that can be found in songs such as Billy Ocean’s ‘Love Really

Hurts Without You.’ Despite Franklin’s non-verbal vocalisation that coincides with the key change, this section of the song does not immediately suggest a ‘break’ from the harmonic terrain that has already been established in the song—rather, it comes across as relatively controlled, thanks to the way that the harmonies have been carefully set up and consolidated.47 By the time Franklin begins singing in the new key, the listener has already had several bars to become accustomed to the new harmonic terrain, with several bars of vocal ad-libs before the launch of the final chorus. To get a sense of this, it is worth comparing the introduction to the song (see CD 1, tr. 69) with the middle-eight and final chorus (see CD 1, tr. 70; complete version on CD 4, tr. 9). Billy Ocean’s ‘Love Really Hurts Without You’ provides a useful contrast to this type of strategy: the key change in his song is much more abrupt (see CD 1, tr. 71).48 In other songs, such as The Communards’ ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way’ (see CD 1, tr. 72) and Ocean’s ‘Get Outta My Dreams (Get Into My Car)’ (see CD 1, tr. 73) the key change is highlighted by some sort of break in the music immediately prior to the key shift.

What is significant about SAW’s productions with Donna Summer is the way in which they manage to weave the effect of these dramatic key changes into the very fabric of the song, so that every chorus seems to push upwards in the style of the final Communards’ chorus, or in the style of Ocean’s ‘Love Really Hurts Without You.’ In the song ‘This Time I Know It’s For Real,’ the verse centers on a repeated IV-I chord sequence in E major, as shown in Musical Example 8.1, below.

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48 I have adopted the term ‘key change’ rather than ‘modulation’ partly because the former term is already well-established in regular pop music parlance. For example, see Morris Minor, ‘This is the Chorus (30cm Mix),’ on This is the Chorus (12-inch single) (10 Music TENX 229, 1988). Also, as noted above, the term ‘key change’ serves to distinguish these relatively abrupt shifts from the type of modulation described in ‘The Dream of Olwen.’ See Tagg, Ten Little Title Tunes, 172-216.
At the end of the verse (‘write your name across the sky’), the harmonies seem to be moving unproblematically back to chord I via a IV-V-I progression. However, on the first beat of the chorus, it suddenly becomes clear that the progression is moving ever upward: the IV-V-I progression in E major is ‘interrupted,’ and instead of hearing chords moving from A to B and back to E, the harmonies move from A to B and onwards up to C (see Musical Example 8.2, below).
I have referred to this harmonic shift as ‘sudden’ because, in relation to the harmonic rhythm that has been established thus far in the song, the shift occurs very quickly. Where most of the verse had tended to linger on a single chord for at least one bar at a time, here the chords rapidly move upwards every 1-4 beats. The change is made more dramatic by the fact that the sequence of rising chords beginning in the verse continues in the chorus itself.\(^{49}\)

\(^{49}\) A similar shift occurs in Donna Summer, ‘I Don’t Wanna Get Hurt (Multiple Lacerations Edit),’ on Various Artists, *Hot Tracks 8/7* (LP) (Hot Tracks SA 8-7, c.1989).
We should be wary of constructing this sort of device as a radical deconstruction of pop norms, as Morton did with Madonna’s ‘Express Yourself.’ Such a chord progression is not significant because it is completely new to pop audiences, or because it necessarily upsets their expectations of what ‘should’ happen next in the pop song (even though it may occasionally have this function). On the contrary: the abrupt shift upwards is important because it is such a well-established convention for signifying a harmonic climax in a song. It is only because it is so familiar that it can so easily convey connotations of ‘drama’ and emotional ‘excess.’ This is why, as I demonstrated earlier, it is more prevalent towards the end of pop songs, rather than the beginning. The significance of this sort of constant ‘rising’ in pitch (with its connotations of ‘drama’ and ‘excess’) for gay male culture has been identified in Mitchell Morris’s article on The Weather Girls’ song ‘It’s Raining Men.’

There is another aspect of this section of ‘This Time I Know It’s For Real’ which amplifies the key shift. The final note that Summer sings in the verse is on the word ‘sky’ (F♯). This note slides up to G for the chorus and is sustained for the first bar of the chorus. Summer’s voice is multitracked at this point: one voice holds the note G, while the other commences singing the chorus. The steadily rising harmonic progression, then, is amplified by the sustained note in Summer’s melody, which rises in tandem with the chords precisely at the ‘sudden’ shift that I have identified (namely, the move from a B-major chord to a C-major chord).

To draw attention to these features of pop music—and to link them with gay male culture—I risk invoking the ire of critics who are (rightly) wary of celebrating the world the way it is. There is a strong tendency within cultural critique for this type of popular culture to be frowned upon—not because it is associated with gay men, but because it gives the ‘wrong’ impression of gay men to outsiders. To paraphrase Toby Manning, the gay male investment in handbag’s overwrought sentimentality may reassure certain people ‘that fags are just as limp and pussified as homophobes had

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50 Morton, ‘Don’t Go for Second Sex Baby!’ 226-29.
always suspected. However, just because many people perceive this version of gay masculinity as politically regressive does not mean automatically mean that this mode of queerness ceases to exist. On the contrary, critiques of this sort cannot avoid the fact that for some gay men, this music *is* pleasurable for the kinds of reasons I have outlined above. No matter how dubious it may appear from outside the club, or how much it appears to reinforce negative stereotypes of gay men, the fact remains that performing flamboyantly to this music in clubs is still one of the dominant ways in which men learn the codes of (a certain kind of) gay masculinity. This is why I have drawn attention to precisely those stereotypically ‘gay,’ sentimentalised features of the music, in an attempt to examine how handbag music makes ‘dramatic’ and ‘excessive’ modes of homosexuality possible and pleasurable. If ‘drama’ and emotional ‘excess’ are (still) among the most visible models of homosexuality, it should not surprise us that a music which panders to this stereotype will achieve immense popularity in gay male clubs.

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52 Manning, ‘Gay Culture,’ 107.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION
9.1 Research findings

I began this thesis with a series of questions about handbag music and gay male culture. Why are songs the general currency of handbag? Why are song structures explicitly foregrounded in handbag music, in contrast to the relatively anonymous ‘tracks’ of contemporary club culture? More significantly, I wanted to explore the ways in which this music was denigrated within dance music culture itself, serving as a useful ‘low-Other’ against which other musics could be constructed as more ‘credible.’ Why do gay men seem to embrace this music more readily than other clubbing crowds? Of all the many subgenres of dance music available, why is it handbag—with its ‘inferior’ status within club cultures—that is most visibly and most audibly associated with gay men? My findings can be summarised as follows.

In the analysis of specific handbag tracks, I have sought to illustrate two points. On the one hand, I have argued that specific harmonic, melodic, and textural features of handbag music provide a basis for dance floor performances in gay male clubs. The very notion of performance is of heightened significance for queers. Anyone who has spent a certain amount of time ‘in or around the closet’ will be well aware of the dynamics of performing in order to pass as straight. As a result, many gay men (‘even the most liberated’) will have a certain cultural competence when it comes to ‘performing’ their public persona. Moreover, they are more likely to be aware of this performance as a performance: notions of ‘keeping it real’ and ‘personal authenticity’ are less believable in a culture where most participants are attuned to the very constructedness of their identity. (This is why Dyer and Goffman argue that many queers already have some of the critical skills needed to deconstruct the norms of everyday social interaction and everyday performance.) Following on from this, I argued in Chapter Five that many queers have a poststructuralist ‘sixth sense.’ As a result of this, music that offers the opportunity of flamboyant performance, of

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1 Gill, Queer Noises, 4.
3 See Dyer, ‘Idol thoughts: orgasm and self-reflexivity in gay male pornography,’ in The Culture of Queers, 201. See also Goffman, Stigma, 111.
4 See the discussion of authenticity in dance music discourse, Chapter Six.
signalling ‘gay identity’—especially when the straight club next door is most likely to be playing anonymous dance tracks—becomes the staple soundtrack to many gay male clubs. In Chapter Six, I demonstrated the extent to which the supposedly ‘formulaic,’ ‘predictable,’ and ‘cheesy’ aspects of the music are the very same aspects that facilitate the appropriation of this music within gay male clubs. The music functions as a kind of ‘reverse discourse.’ This provides one answer to the question, ‘why is handbag music ubiquitous in gay male clubs?’

A second explanation for the link between gay male clubs and handbag music can be found in the specific musical devices that prevail in this genre—particularly the types of harmonic and melodic shifts that I identified in Chapter Eight. These musical strategies are closely related to the ‘camp’ aesthetic that is of considerable significance in gay male culture. Through various means, handbag music creates a sense of melodramatic excess that is very much in keeping with the conventions of other kinds of gay cultural texts. (The term ‘gay cultural texts’ refers as much to those cultural texts that have been appropriated by gay male culture as it does to those cultural products that have been produced by queers.) The popularity of handbag within gay male clubs, then, can be linked with the kinds of strategies that have been appropriated as ‘queer’ in related fields. The ‘excess’ and ‘drama’ to which opera queens are drawn also constitutes a significant part of handbag’s appeal to gay men.

To be sure, since handbag circulates in a different milieu and is structured according to a different set of conventions to opera, its specific modes of connoting overwrought drama will vary significantly from operatic ‘excess.’ However, I would argue that the reasons for this ‘excess’ being popular amongst gay men remain consistent across these genres. When people within a given culture have learnt to monitor their everyday ‘performances,’ and when they have been told that

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their desires are somehow ‘against the grain’ or ‘unnatural,’ it follows that many in such a group may be attracted to patently synthesized music that nevertheless connotes ecstatic or overwrought emotion (‘real’ emotion).

My invocation of a ‘camp’ perspective suggests an additional link between gay clubs and handbag music. In his essay ‘Reading as an Opera Queen,’ Mitchell Morris notes that one of the features of a camp perspective is its willingness to invert all hierarchical categories of prevailing taste cultures: it ‘subverts any claims to privilege, including its own.’\(^8\) It should not surprise us, then, to find that the patrons in many gay male venues embrace a subgenre of music which the rest of the clubbing fraternity dismisses as ‘trash.’ As well as providing the musical basis for dance floor performance and conveying connotations of ‘excess’ and melodramatic emotion, it is also significantly devalued within the wider realm of electronic dance music—so devalued, in fact, that many clubbers would be surprised to hear me describe it as ‘dance music’ in the first place. It is in this camp re-appropriation of ‘trash’ pop music that we can discern a third answer to the question: ‘why is handbag so popular in gay male clubs?’ This third explanation brings us back to my earlier point about the significance of performance within gay culture. I have already noted that queers are more likely to be attuned to the constructedness of their own sociocultural position.\(^9\) This also applies to that group’s perception of widespread value judgements about music. Queers, having already negotiated the tensions between a socially ‘acceptable’ sexuality and their own ‘deviant’ desires—and having seen that their own definitions of ‘appropriate’ sexual behaviour can prevail within certain contexts—will be in a stronger position to question the established hierarchies and value judgements of the wider culture.\(^10\) I would suggest that club cultures in general may constitute a ‘wider culture’ which the gay club scene stands in (partial) opposition to, even as it overlaps with that wider culture in certain respects. To put this another way, the relation between handbag and other types of dance music is analogous to the relation between gay men and the broader culture. In some ways, gay culture can be interpreted as a separate (sub)culture, with its own argot, styles of

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\(^8\) Morris, ‘Reading as an Opera Queen,’ 190.

\(^9\) See also Warner, The Trouble with Normal, 180.

\(^10\) Morris, ‘Reading as an Opera Queen,’ 197.
dress, modes of comportment, and institutions. At the same time, gay men participate in and often perpetuate the norms of the dominant culture themselves.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, handbag music is generated by the same culture and the same institutions that foster rock, jazz, and other genres—yet it is also taken up and used in a culturally specific way by gay men.

Having stated the initial questions that shaped the project, and having summarised my research findings, two things remain to be done. Firstly, it is necessary to situate my findings in relation to the methodological debates that I reviewed earlier in the thesis. Lastly, I shall consider the significance of this research for the realms of popular music studies and musicology.

\subsection*{9.2 Studying ‘the music itself’: cultural competence and textual analysis}

My initial question about handbag music was not only about ‘the music itself”—it was also a question about people. In the current research climate (and especially within popular music studies), the established party line regarding methodology would have been to ask a representative group of gay men to comment on the issue from two angles—that is, to explain why they thought they were positioned by others as ‘disco bunnies,’ and how they negotiated this association. For instance, I might have begun by gauging the extent to which they affirm the connotations of handbag music, negate them, or adopt a more ambivalent stance towards the scene.\textsuperscript{12} As I showed in Chapter Two, the ‘pendulum’ in popular music research has swung markedly towards the more sociological end of the spectrum. In this view, music itself is only interesting insofar as it carries out some other sociological function.\textsuperscript{13} The notion that music itself might come with certain pre-determined or ‘preferred’ meanings already attached to it, or that it can be read for social content, has become

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} See Gregg Blachford ‘Male dominance and the gay world,’ in Plummer, \textit{The Making of the Modern Homosexual}, 186-93; Amico, “‘I Want Muscles,’” 368-69.
\textsuperscript{12} I use the term ‘disco bunnies’ as Gill does in \textit{Queer Noises}, 176.
\end{flushleft}
decidedly unfashionable in some parts of popular music studies. Consequently, the practice of ‘close reading’ of musical ‘texts’ (the word ‘text’ is used here in its widest sense, denoting any type of meaning-making system) has been called into question. It is against this backdrop that I offered the textual and discursive analysis here. If some parts of this discussion (particularly my discussion of DeNora’s work) appear somewhat defensive or combative, then this should be understood not as a blanket dismissal of ethnography—which remains a valuable research tool—but rather as a response to DeNora’s own combative and quasi-authoritarian stance. (As Negus has pointed out, in DeNora’s view, there is a ‘right’ level and a ‘wrong’ level on which to conduct music research. Any sort of dialectical, interpretative, or speculative analysis is dismissed unless it can be immediately converted into the currency of empiricism.) At this point, then, it is worth emphasising the links between these approaches, rather than the features that mark them as separate.

In much of my analysis, I have referred to music’s ‘potential’ use within gay male club cultures. These arguments about the ‘potential’ affordances in the music are not completely arbitrary. I have spent considerable time dancing in the types of club settings that I have described, and I have also frequented a large number of Sydney-based ‘heterosexual’ venues to get a sense of the differences that mark gay male culture. (I place the word ‘heterosexual’ in inverted commas not as a distancing tactic, but rather, to indicate that many such venues are not labelled as such: heterosexuality is still presumed to be the norm against which any other sexuality is marked as deviant, and so it usually does not need to be named.) My experience of music produced by SAW, Motiv8, or Almighty Associates draws on the cultural competence that one inevitably accrues when spending time in the club(s). Such competence may be acquired by: listening to the way the music is structured; hearing it amplified by loud sound systems; observing the way that crowds respond to

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14 Cohen, ‘Ethnography and Popular Music Studies,’ 122-38; Finnegan, ‘Music, Experience,’ 187-91. See also the discussion in Chapter Three. This shift is not limited to studies of popular music, but also applies to a wide range of studies of popular culture. For instance, see Joke Hermes, Re-reading Popular Culture (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005); Peter Jackson, Nick Stevenson, and Kate Brooks, Making Sense of Men’s Magazines (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 3-4.

15 Negus, ‘Representing Music,’ 537. Negus is referring to DeNora’s more recent book, After Adorno, but his observations apply just as much to Music in Everyday Life, which was discussed in Chapter Three.
particular riffs and textural or harmonic shifts; and witnessing the large-scale shaping of DJ sets and the ways in which these DJ performances calculatedly play with the expectations of the crowd. In other words, such listening competence is often acquired as a result of what anthropologists would call *immersion in the field*. This immersion was crucial because it helped me to understand the way that music and performance functions within gay clubs.

I do not wish to glorify this immersion, or to suggest that it even approaches a full-fledged, methodologically rigorous ethnography. What I *do* want to argue, however, is that the time taken to transcribe the recordings that I once danced to or played as a DJ in these clubs was as well-spent as time taken to interview clubbers or other DJs. It was not, to borrow DeNora’s words, an unacceptable ‘shortcut.’ The reason for this has been spelt out by McClary, who is well aware of the usual accusation levelled at musicologists: that their readings of the music are out-of-touch with the ways in which ‘real people’ use the music in ‘everyday life.’ In response, McClary points out that her readings may be shaped by her own socio-cultural position, but they are not

'subjective' in the sense that they reflect only my own quirks. Rather, I take my reactions to be in large part socially constituted—the products of lifelong contact with music and other cultural media. Thus I regard them as invaluable firsthand evidence of how music can influence listeners affectively, how it can even participate in social formation.

Similarly, my immersion in gay and straight dance music cultures—as a dancer and regular clubber, and later as a DJ—gave me substantial insights into the ways in which music facilitates dance floor performances, and the ways in which the performances within gay male culture were frequently of heightened significance in that scene. The way that I listened to the music for the purposes of transcribing it may have been somewhat different to the way that I would listen to records for DJing purposes, but there were significant overlaps between the two modes of

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listening. In both modes, I was looking for those moments that seemed to signal a feeling of being ‘uplifted,’ or that seemed to combine melancholia with powerful, crashing drum machines or squelching Moog synth bass lines.18 Each mode of listening informed the other. In both modes, I also looked for particular structural ‘signposts’ in the music—counting the bars at the start of an extended mix, for instance, or noticing when the texture of a track ‘thickened’ or ‘thinned,’ and so on.

The experience of clubbing was extremely helpful as a basis for subsequent textual analysis and interpretation of particular songs. As a result of my earlier experience mixing records and CDs on DJ-oriented equipment (Technics turntables, Denon CD players, and so on), I had acquired a solid awareness of the structural features of handbag music, and of the ways in which DJs within most specialised sub-genres of dance music—even the most ‘credible’ or ‘underground’ genres—need records that are structured in a very specific way, so as to facilitate the norms of seamless, continuous mixing. (These conventions were discussed in Chapter Eight.) The process of transcribing and playing these songs, and closely attending to the changes that unfold during their most ‘intense’ or ‘dramatic’ moments, alerted me to the ways in which these moments never simply appeared ‘from nowhere.’ While producers are always free to introduce variations on an established cliché or musical convention, the demands of the dance floor usually restrict their compositional choices in some way: as Motiv8 noted, sometimes the music just ‘needs’ to ‘go somewhere’; and as Rick Snoman has argued, the most successful DJs, producers, and remixers in dance music tend to be the ones who have internalised the desires of their crowds, and have adjusted their own choices to align with those desires.19

My earlier experience as DJ and clubber was also important to this research in another way. When developing the appropriate competence to be able to ‘go clubbing’ or to be able to select the ‘right’ sort of track to play for a club crowd, one learns the unspoken rules or conventions that prevail in any given scene. For example, by observing other DJs working, discussing particular choices of tracks

18 A good example of the latter occurs in Cheryl Beattie, ‘Fly (Almighty Definitive Mix),’ on Fly (12-inch single) (Eternal SAM 00125, 1999).
with them, trying my own hand at the decks, and then repeating the process, I quickly acquired a sense of what was and was not permissible within particular clubs. Three-minute R’n’B tracks in one club were the norm; in other clubs, 7-minute handbag tracks were preferred. Within these broad, generic restrictions, one could also discern finer delineations of taste: on one occasion, the experienced club DJ who I was playing alongside told me why a bootleg mix of Kylie Minogue’s ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head’ was superior to the original mix. Even though the record lacked one of the main sections of the song (‘Won’t you stay…’), the bootleg was preferable because of its ‘stomping’ bass drum—a drum sound that was more in keeping with the conventions of house music at the time. As Howard Becker once pointed out, practitioners in a given ‘art world’ (by which he refers to both ‘high’ and ‘popular’ art forms) often learn what particular terms in their field mean only instinctively. Musicians, for instance, may rely on the yardstick that something ‘sounds better that way’ and may ‘know’ what this means even if they cannot explain this to a lay person who has no experience or prior knowledge of their musical field. My experiences in the field of dance music gave me a crucial insight into this frequently unspoken aspect of musical taste (on the part of DJs and clubbers). Importantly, it allowed me to grasp that even that music praised as ‘innovative’ or ‘challenging’ within electronic dance music scenes tended to rely on at least some established schemas in order to be comprehensible. This awareness, then, pervades my analysis of what many would regard as ‘simplistic’ or ‘too easy’ music. While sociologists such as Peter Martin would probably chastise me for being too closely involved with this scene—for becoming a ‘combatant’ in the scene rather than a detached observer of it—I believe that this prior experience was crucial in alerting me to the kinds of decisions that producers and DJs make on a daily (or nightly) basis. Even where they were not explicitly signalled, these experiences of clubbing and DJing have functioned as a guide to the analysis that I have carried out.

20 See Kylie Minogue, blue label bootleg, ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head.’
22 In the realm of art music, even a largely conceptual piece such as John Cage’s 4’33” exploits the conventions of using a musical instrument (in its original version, a piano), assembling an audience for the ‘performance,’ relying on a notated score, and so on. While 4’33” radically changes the way in which these conventions are deployed, the piece would nevertheless lose much of its meaning and impact without this prior, ingrained knowledge on the part of the composer and audience alike.
23 Martin, Sounds and Society, 159.
I do not want to suggest that my analyses are plausible simply because I am a ‘real’ representative of the gay club world. Such an argument would be untenable for several reasons: few people can claim to ‘represent’ such a diverse and dispersed scene; the issues I raised in Chapter Five call any such appeals to ‘realness’ or personal authenticity into question; there is already enough literature on club cultures (for instance, Jackson’s *Inside Clubbing*) that privileges the ‘insider’ accounts of clubbing. Rather, I would suggest that my analyses are useful precisely because I did reflect on them. Chris Kennett would probably argue that an unreflective response—what we might call the ‘grocery-shopping-with-muzak-in-the-background’ interpretation—is more valid than the close readings I have presented here. An unreflective response is surely more ‘real’ or ‘honest’ than one that has been carefully crafted after lengthy study and reflection. But in this respect, I am more convinced by David Hesmondhalgh’s point: there is a limit to how ‘self-reflective’ we may be in interviews, and therefore there is a limit to the usefulness of the interview technique for gaining insights into how music participates in social formation. In this respect, then, my thesis argues against the anti-intellectualism that pervades much commentary on dance music (witness Broughton and Brewster’s sneering comments about ‘people with a PhD’). The thesis also stands in opposition to those scholarly critiques in which anti-intellectualism—and an acceptance of the status quo—is dressed up as a demand for what ‘real people’ think.

### 9.3 Significance of the research

In what ways has this research contributed to the field of popular music studies? This project’s most significant contribution is the extent to which it has ‘textured’ existing ethnographic analyses of club music, adding musicological depth to the many fleeting descriptions of dance music that are currently available. As I noted in Chapter Three, there is a steadily increasing number of studies that shed new light on

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24 See Kennett, ‘Is Anybody Listening?’ 204.
27 Kennett, ‘Is Anybody Listening?’
the specific pleasures of clubbing for clubbers themselves. There are also related studies that expose some of the ideological agendas at work within the discourses of dance music cultures. Very few of these works, however, have been able to shed light on the specifically musical strategies deployed in club music. While clubbing has been construed as a valuable ‘escape’ from the everyday world (see Jackson), as a place in which the hierarchies of the everyday world are replicated or reinforced (see Thornton), most studies have not really linked their findings with the sounds themselves. Where music has been the focus of the research, the writers frequently accept the widely held definition of ‘electronic dance music’ as it currently stands.

Conversely, within research that deals specifically with gay male culture, there has been much material written about ‘camp’ aesthetics, about the ways in which popular cultural texts may be valued within these cultures, but again, the findings of such research usually offer only fleeting connections between the sounds themselves and the arguments made about the culture. The first significant contribution that this thesis has made to the field of popular music studies is that it has sought to illustrate some of the existing arguments about clubland and gay male culture in relation to music. In his analysis of The Sound of Music, Dyer did not simply argue that the film’s ideological agenda (the ‘real’ message) was disguised behind the ‘lovely tunes,’ but that the ideological agenda was part of what made the tunes lovely in the first place. In a similar fashion, I have tried to avoid arguing that the sounds of handbag music are a ‘smokescreen’ or subtle veneer for the ‘real’ ideological work going on ‘behind’ the music. Rather, my analysis has demonstrated that the music itself is capable of being used in particular ways, and of conveying particular connotations. The sounds are inextricably bound up with these uses and connotations; it is not separable from them in the manner suggested by some neo-formalist music analysts.

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28 See Amico, “‘I Want Muscles’”; Jackson, Inside Clubbing; Malbon, Clubbing.
29 See Thornton, Club Cultures.
30 As I noted earlier, Butler’s Unlocking the Groove constitutes an exception here.
31 See Cleto, Camp; Lemish “‘My Kind of Campfire.’”
When researchers such as Dafna Lemish claim that Israeli gay men’s investment in the Eurovision Song Contest is barely related to the music itself, my analysis can offer a counter-reading. Where she claims that the ‘nature of music’ for gay men is ‘negligible’—that they are attracted to the Eurovision spectacle for purely non-musical reasons, my analysis can show that not just any sounds will do in such a context. If the ‘cheesy’ drum machines were replaced with more ‘credible,’ more ‘real’ drum sets; if the overwrought drama of high-pitched, keening voices were replaced with a Leonard Cohen-esque drawl; if the crisp, bright, ‘shiny’ synthesiser timbres were converted to lo-fi Sebadoh-like guitars—if any or all of these elements were altered, these songs would no longer be so amenable to gay appropriation.33 Both Lemish and her respondents want to claim that the link between ‘crap’ Eurovision songs and gay identity arises exclusively from other aspects of the contest (for instance, the visual image of typical contestants), but this should not surprise us. Since music is a difficult medium to talk about, and since it often appears to achieve its effects ‘spontaneously’ and without mediation, it is understandable that Lemish downplays the significance of particular sounds. My research can offer a substantiated counter-claim to this. In relation to handbag, the analysis of the sounds themselves demonstrates that if the music didn’t adopt a particular set of strategies (for instance, if it used a different set of tonal conventions, if it lacked the obvious ‘signposting’ of build-ups and crescendos, if it used a different range of textural devices), it would not be available to be taken up and used in the ways that Lemish has identified.34 Similarly, where researchers such as Tia DeNora focus on the ways in which music is ‘taken up’ and used by ‘real people,’ on the ways in which it is nothing but a ‘toolkit’ for ‘world-making’ (and so on), my research highlights that these ‘toolkits’ and ‘resources’ are still widely apprehended as ‘music,’ and that particular moments in music carry a particular affective ‘charge.’ Not all music, in other words, can be used in precisely the same way as I suggest

33 As Dave Laing notes, Eurovision both incorporates trends from European pop music but there is also a ‘strong pull toward an opportunistic “Eurovision” style…characterized by a bouncy rhythm complemented by rousing melody and simple lyrics.’ See Dave Laing, ‘Eurovision Song Contest,’ in Shepherd et al., Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music, 444.
34 Tagg would refer to this process as ‘hypothetical substitution’ or ‘commutation’: deliberately changing specific aspects of the music to test what exactly is creating a given effect. See Tagg and Clarida, Ten Little Title Tunes, 98-99. When playing a DJ set, one can quickly determine what musical strategies do (or do not) achieve certain effects among the crowd—the most obvious case being when a record clears the dance floor.
handbag music is used, and this is because there are certain qualities to the music itself that lend themselves to being taken up in a certain way by a range of socio-cultural groups.

My analysis also makes a significant contribution to debates about the aesthetics of popular music. When researchers—especially from a journalistic perspective—adopt a default position of looking for ‘challenging,’ ‘innovative,’ or ‘difficult’ sounds when they select ‘important’ music to be included in their histories, my work offers a different interpretation of the same sounds. The research I have presented has not aimed to present a substantial overhaul of dance music history as it is commonly told, but I have aimed to debunk some of the guiding assumptions that frequently accompany attempts to tell this multi-faceted and often fragmented history. In particular, I have demonstrated that highly routinised, predictable, and formulaic musics are capable of being used in ways that defy Adornian expectations of passively ‘dumbed-down’ masses. I have also demonstrated that it is possible to value music according to terms outside the dominant ‘compulsory innovation’ model. Even if the vocabulary for doing this is not as well developed or as substantial as Adorno-inspired critiques of ‘mind-numbing’ ‘simplistic’ ‘pop pap,’ the fact that such a counter-discourse can be found in fledgling form (on websites such as www.popjustice.com and in the pages of assorted teen magazines) underlines the fact that such a discourse is possible. This has important ramifications for the aestheticisation of popular music that several scholars have called for.\(^{35}\)

A second contribution that this thesis makes to the field of popular music studies is a critical evaluation of the term ‘electronic dance music’ and all the exclusions that the phrase has now come to imply. At the start of this chapter, I described handbag as an anomaly within club culture, because of the predominance of conventional songs within this genre. But my research has led me to believe that this very perception—‘handbag-as-anomaly’—is a construction of dance music discourse, and it relies on a

\(^{35}\) See Frith, \textit{Performing Rites}; Theodore Gracyk, \textit{Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). Roy Shuker has argued that ‘dance pop…is due for a critical reappraisal as part of audience-oriented cultural studies analysis.’ This thesis has shown that such a reappraisal can also be carried out within a musicological framework. See Shuker, \textit{Popular Music}, 203.
very selective reading of dance music’s past. Specifically, this discourse constructs ‘electronic dance music’ as a progression of ‘tracks’ rather than ‘songs.’ It suggests that ‘tracks’ are musically more progressive than mere ‘pop songs,’ particularly in the way that it allows listeners to be enveloped in a dense (or sparse) sound world over longer durations (the average 7-minute duration of an extended dance track, or the longer durations of DJ sets that last for many hours). In cultural commentary on dance music, there have also been suggestions that ‘tracks’ are more politically progressive than the staid, traditional linear narratives of pop songs: since ‘tracks’ avoid the linear narrative structures of pop songs, they make new forms of narrative (or indeed, non-narrative) possible.36

However, as writers such as Thornton have pointed out, generic boundaries should not be understood as innocent, impartial descriptions that aim to capture a well-defined set of musical attributes.37 On the contrary, markers of genre can also have persuasive discursive effects.38 As Steve Neale points out in his influential work on film genre, ‘genre’ can be understood as a set of expectations, rather than simply as a set of stylistic attributes.39 The same clearly applies to popular music as much as it does to film. One of the discursive effects of the current definition of ‘electronic dance music’ is that the very music that is most likely to be played in certain types of gay male clubs is silenced or rendered inaudible.

This point calls into question such definitions of ‘dance music’ as have been offered by writers in the past.40 It may be unhelpful to claim that ‘dance music is anything that people dance to,’ but at the same time it is worth asking why so much of the music that is played in gay male clubs simply does not count as ‘dance music’ in the popular and scholarly press. I am confident that the researchers who have written about this field are not engaged in a conscious conspiracy to exclude this music from their commentary. At the same time, it is an interesting coincidence that handbag—

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36 See the discussion in Fink, Repeating Ourselves, 37-46.
37 Thornton, Club Cultures, 10.
38 Horner, ‘Discourse,’ 23.
40 See, for instance, Gilbert and Pearson’s definition of ‘dance music’ as predominantly ‘instrumental’ music. See Gilbert and Pearson, Discographies, 38.
simply rendered inaudible in most available commentaries. The configuration of
generic boundaries at the present time seems to work against handbag: it is too ‘pop’
to be considered dance music ‘proper,’ and yet many of its most central features
(usage within night clubs; structural design facilitating DJ segues; distribution on
promotional 12-inch singles; extended durations exceeding the norms of Top 40 pop)
locate it as more club-oriented than ‘pop’-oriented. (In his introduction to the
practice of discourse analysis, David Hesmondhalgh has noted a similar tendency in
the reporting of race-related statistics in the news media. As he points out, many
reporters who do not have a racist agenda unwittingly reproduce racist stereotypes in
the results of their research.) It is only through empirical attention to the sounds
themselves that the ideological policing of dance music’s boundaries can begin to be
questioned.

Finally, this thesis has contributed to debates about what constitutes gay male
masculinity. For many people, the ‘handbag = gay’ equation is nothing more than a
stereotype, much like the related ideas of the ‘disco bunny,’ the ‘opera queen,’ and
so on. While these stereotypes may have undesirable effects, they are nonetheless
some of the most visible and most available ways of taking up ‘gayness.’ As cultural
critics, we may want to change the available models of perceived ‘gayness,’ or we
may want to disrupt the pattern of taking up a fixed identity in the first place (and
thus being positioned and ‘put in our place’). But such refiguring of the cultural
terrain usually only takes place after considerable, broader cultural shifts have
occurred. In the meantime, my analysis has sought to elucidate some of the pleasures
of participating in existing social configurations. The use of handbag music in gay
clubs may not be the most politically ‘progressive’ mode of taking up gayness, but as
Dyer reminds us, no politics can proceed by grimly deferring pleasure until some
utopian society is realised in the far-distant future. Handbag powerfully signals

41 David Hesmondhalgh, ‘Discourse Analysis,’ in Analyzing Media Texts, ed. Marie Gillespie
and Jason Toynbee (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006).
42 Much work within cultural studies is committed to some vision of a utopian future – one
characterised by more democratic and egalitarian social relations. As Barker makes clear, however, it
is somewhat dubious when such research ambitiously claims to be radically ‘changing the world’
simply by offering another interpretation of it. See Barker, Making Sense of Cultural Studies, 5.
'gayness' here and now, and its musical procedures are therefore worth exploring for what they can tell us about gay masculinity.
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DISCOGRAPHY

Musicological studies generally treat recordings the same way as they treat books: singles are indicated with inverted commas; full-length albums are indicated with italics. This format is inadequate for a detailed study of dance music, because such a study need to distinguish between several remixes of a song which may appear on the same single. (For instance, in Chapter Six, I have referred to both the ‘Dolomite Euro Radio Mix’ and the ‘Uprageous Club Mix’ of Motiv8’s ‘Break the Chain.’)

For this reason, I have dispensed with the usual distinction between singles and albums. Instead, I have distinguished between ‘individual tracks’ and discs (whether they be singles, albums, EPs, et cetera). Individual tracks appear in inverted commas; discs of any type appear in italics. The format has been noted separately.


ABC. ‘That Was Then But This Is Now.’ On That Was Then But This Is Now. 12-inch single. Neutron NTX 105, 1983.


———. ‘The Tide is High (Get the Feeling) (Groove Brother 12”).’ On The Tide is High (Get the Feeling). CD single. Virgin 7243 5 51356 2 9, 2002.

———. ‘Whole Again (M*A*S*H Master Mix).’ On The Tide is High (Get the Feeling). CD single. Virgin 7243 5 51356 2 9, 2002.


———. ‘Rapture (Fake Blonde Mix).’ On Fake Blonde. White label 12-inch single.


Carlisle, Belinda. ‘Heaven is a Place on Earth (Heavenly Version).’ On *Heaven is a Place on Earth*. 12-inch single. Virgin VST 1036, 1987.


Chimera. ‘Show Me Heaven.’ On *Show Me Heaven*. White label 12-inch single.


Como, Perry. ‘Beyond Tomorrow (Love Theme from Serpico).’ On Beyond Tomorrow. 7-inch single. RCA 10426, 1974.


———. ‘Maybe (We Should Call It a Day) (Extra Beat Boys Remix).’ On Maybe (We Should Call It a Day). 12-inch single. EMI ED 370, 1988.


Double You. ‘Run to Me (Extended Dance Mix).’ On Run to Me. CD single. Central Station CSR CD5 0077, 1994.


———. ‘This is Me (Mike Rizzo’s Hyper Mix – Extended Club).’ On This is Me – Remixes. Promotional 12-inch single. Bad Boy Entertainment BBDP-9378, 2001.


———. ‘It Doesn’t Have to Be (Boop Oopa Doo Mix).’ On It Doesn’t Have to Be. 12-inch single. Mute 12Mute56, 1987.


---------. ‘For All We Know (The Yerp Mix).’ On *For All We Know*. 12-inch single. Love This Records BAGST4, 1995.

---------. ‘For All We Know (The Freddy Edit).’ On *For All We Know*. 12-inch single. Love This Records BAGST4, 1995.


Gibson Brothers. ‘Que Sera Mi Vida (If You Should Go).’ On *Que Sera Mi Vida (If You Should Go)*. 12-inch single. RCA TDS-067, 1979.


———. ‘If I Have to Stand Alone (Club Mix).’ On *If I Have to Stand Alone*. 12-inch single. Liberation X14919, 1991.


———. ‘Showing Out (Get Fresh at the Weekend).’ On Showing Out. 12-inch single. Supreme SUPET 107, 1986.


Milian, Christina. ‘AM to PM (Hex Hector/Mac Quayle Club Mix).’ On AM to PM. 12-inch single. Island/Def Jam 314572972-1, 2001.


———. ‘In Your Eyes (Mr Bishi Mix).’ On In Your Eyes. CD single. Festival Mushroom 020682, 2002.

———. ‘In Your Eyes.’ On Pink and Kylie Minogue, Get This Party Started/In Your Eyes. White label 12-inch single.


———. ‘Love at First Sight (Scumfrog’s Beauty and the Beast Vocal).’ On Love at First Sight. 12-inch single. EMI 12r6577, 2002.

———. ‘Never Too Late (Extended).’ On Never Too Late. 12-inch single. PWL PWLT 45

———. ‘On a Night Like This (Motiv8 Nocturnal Club Mix).’ On On a Night Like This. CD single. Mushroom MUSH019722, c.2000.


——. ‘Word is Out (Summer Breeze 12”).’ On Word is Out. 12-inch single. Mushroom X14215, 1991.


Minor, Morris, and the Majors. ‘This is the Chorus (30cm Mix).’ On This is the Chorus. 12-inch single. 10 Music TENX 229, 1988.


———. ‘Break the Chain (Digital Mix).’ On Various Artists, Direct Hit 16/1. LP. Direct Hit Remix Service [no catalogue number], c.1995.


Nevil, Robbie. ‘C’est La Vie (Extended Remix).’ On C’est La Vie. 12-inch single. EMI ED-246, 1986.


———. ‘Opportunities (Let’s Make Lots of Money) (Dance Mix).’ On *Opportunities (Let’s Make Lots of Money)*. 12-inch single. EMI/Parlophone ED 156, 1985.


———, and Dusty Springfield. ‘What Have I Done to Deserve This? (Extended Mix).’ On *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* 12-inch single. EMI/Parlophone ED 297, 1987.

Pink. ‘Get This Party Started.’ On Pink and Kylie Minogue, *Get This Party Started/In Your Eyes*. White label 12-inch single.


Power Station, The. ‘Some Like It Hot and the Heat is On.’ On *Some Like It Hot*. 12-inch single. EMI/Parlophone ED 103, 1985.


Pseudo Echo. ‘Funky Town (Dance Mix).’ On Funky Town. 12-inch single. EMI ED 237, 1986.


RAF. ‘We’ve Got to Live Together (Digital Mix).’ On Various Artists, NRG For the 90s 11. LP. Hot Tracks [no catalogue number given], c. 1993.

———. ‘We’ve Got to Live Together (Club Mix).’ On We’ve Got to Live Together. CD single. PWL PWCD 218, 1992.

Real Life. ‘Catch Me I’m Falling (Extended Mix).’ On Catch Me I’m Falling. 12-inch single. Wheatley Records WRST007, 1983.


Ross, Diana. ‘I Will Survive (Motiv8 Club Vocal Mix).’ On I Will Survive. 12-inch single. EMI 7243 8 82686 6 0, 1996.


Spiller. ‘Groovejet (If This Ain’t Love) (Spiller’s Extended Vocal Mix).’ On *Groovejet (If This Ain’t Love)*. Double 12-inch single. Kontor Records 12 Kontor 124, 2000.


Stewart, Jermaine. ‘We Don’t Have to…’ On *We Don’t Have to…* 12-inch single. Virgin TEN 9612, 1986.


———. ‘This Time I Know It’s For Real (Extended Version).’ On This Time I Know It’s For Real. 12-inch single. WEA International 0-257779, 1989.


Tatjana. ‘Santa Maria (Wah-Hey Mix).’ On Santa Maria. CD single. Central Station CSR CD5 0087, 1995.


Turner, Tina. ‘We Don’t Need Another Hero (Thunderdome) (Extended Mix).’ On *We Don’t Need Another Hero (Thunderdome).* 12-inch single. Interfusion X13216, 1985.


———. ‘Young Guns (Go For It).’ On *Young Guns.* 12-inch single. CBS/Epic ES 12052, 1982.


APPENDIX A

Excerpt from Go Home Productions, ‘Ray of Gob,’ mm. 13-20, 0.19-0.32

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 76]
[Complete version: CD 4, tr. 11]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo
APPENDIX B

Excerpt from Thriftshop XL, ‘Dub Spin Me Round,’ mm. 31-38, 0.55-1.10

[Excerpt: CD 1, tr. 77]
[Complete version: CD 4, tr. 12]

Transcription by Adrian Renzo
APPENDIX C

Harmonic restriction in selected 1990s 12-inch singles

This list shows how often harmonic restriction occurs in a selection of 1990s 12-inch singles. ‘Harmonic restriction’ is defined here as any point where the harmonies are restricted to one chord (in analytic parlance, chord I) with the bass line playing the root of the chord, rather than playing the full chord progression of the song. I have measured harmonic restriction in relative terms. In other words, if a song already contained substantial ‘tonic-only’ sections in its original version, then an extended introduction consisting of the tonic only is not considered ‘restricted.’ Harmonic restriction usually occurs at the start, middle, or end of a remix. Consequently, these are the sections that I have noted in this list.

Where necessary, titles have been abbreviated. Full details for all tracks are included in the Discography.

KEY:

| I | The introduction or early, ‘pre-song’ section of a remix. |
| M | The middle-eight or ‘break.’ |
| E | The end or ‘post-song’ section of a remix. |
| R | Harmonic restriction occurs in this section. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Mix</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
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<td>1Plus1</td>
<td>Cherry Bomb!</td>
<td>Hex Hector Club Mix</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98 Degrees</td>
<td>Give Me Just One Night</td>
<td>Hex Hector Club Mix</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>A1</td>
<td>Take On Me</td>
<td>D-Bop Saturday Night Mix</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aguilera et al.</td>
<td>Lady Marmalade</td>
<td>Thunderpuss Club Mix</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>Alcazar</td>
<td>Crying at the Discoteque</td>
<td>Extended Version</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Crying at the Discoteque</td>
<td>Illicit Remix</td>
<td>R</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>Classic Alex Party Mix</td>
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<td>Original Version</td>
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<td>Uh La La La</td>
<td>Almighty’s Mighty Mix</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>HQ2 Big Room Club Mix</td>
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APPENDIX D

Harmonic restriction in selected 12-inch singles produced by Stock, Aitken, and Waterman

This list shows how frequently harmonic restriction occurs in a selection of 12-inch singles produced by Stock, Aitken, and Waterman. See Appendix C for a definition of 'harmonic restriction.'

Where necessary, titles have been abbreviated. Full details for all tracks can be found in the Discography.

KEY:

I = The introduction or early, ‘pre-song’ section of a remix.
M = The middle-eight or ‘break.’
E = The end or ‘post-song’ section of a remix.
R = Harmonic restriction occurs in this section.

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APPENDIX E

Harmonic restriction in selected 1980s 12-inch singles

This list shows how frequently harmonic restriction occurs in a selection of 1980s 12-inch singles. See Appendix C for a definition of ‘harmonic restriction.’

Where necessary, titles have been abbreviated. Full details for all tracks can be found in the Discography.

KEY:

| I | The introduction or early, ‘pre-song’ section of a remix. |
| M | The middle-eight or ‘break.’ |
| E | The end or ‘post-song’ section of a remix. |
| R | Harmonic restriction occurs in this section. |

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