Docility, Resistance and the Indie Guitarist: A Foucaultian Interpretation of the Guitar- Hero

by

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Abstract

Using Foucault's notions of discipline, docility and resistance, this thesis unpacks the impact of sociological, ideological and genre histories in negotiating normative, goal-directed activities in guitar culture. These activities are explored through reading Foucault's theoretical coinages of the apparatus, capacity and systems of communication onto guitar culture. Given the use of Foucaultian terminology, a particular emphasis is placed on analyzing the workings of power. The guitar is investigated through the evolution of indie, mapping the genre onto a discourse of differentiation which negotiates institutional factors, a continuous sociological and historical narrative, musical identifiers and an affinity for 'resistance' or 'independence.' This differentiation and resistance will be explored in its relation to power, working both subversive to and as a part of power. The White Stripes and St. Vincent serve as the two case studies. Indie's resistance is explored through both their careers and, specifically, through their guitar playing.

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Introduction: Indie Rock, Deconstruction and Guitar Canonism

Upon opening the *Rolling Stone* special issue ranking the ‘100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time,’ author David Fricke invites the reader to celebrate rock & roll’s “primary expressive weapon” and “defining instrumental voice.”¹ To most, it seems unnecessary to justify the centrality of the electric guitar to Western popular music’s mythology and practices. It is, recognizably, one of the most popular instruments for aspiring rock musicians as it plays a leading role in defining the rock band. Additionally, there is a wealth of journalistic resources devoted to the instrument (guitar-based trade magazines like *Guitar World* or *Guitar Player* and music journalistic publications which create guitar-based material like the *Rolling Stone* special issue). In spite of the electric guitar’s centrality, there have been surprisingly few extended academic studies of the instrument. A full length study has been pursued by Matthew Bannister (2006) on U.K. indie guitar rock, Andy Bennet and Kenneth Dawe (2001) offer a collection of essays providing a global perspective on ‘guitar cultures,’ Mavis Bayton’s (1997) chapter from *Sexing The Groove* explores women in electric guitar culture and there are a few other standalone essays. Steve Waksman² offers a full book, *Instruments of Desire* (1999), which seeks to examine “the ways in which the electric guitar has been integrated into a diverse set of existing musical contexts, and the ways in which the electric guitar has reshaped those contexts, and has created new fields of knowledge within the history of popular music.”³

I highlight this goal because it is shared by each of these authors. Though it is recognized

¹ David Fricke, “Introduction,” *Rolling Stone Presents The 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time* (2012), 7.

² Waksman also provided a chapter in the Bennet and Dawe (2001) compilation and various other journal articles which will be integrated throughout this thesis.

³ Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10.

that the electric guitar offers interesting and novel perspectives on music culture, there is a lack of cultural insiders (guitar players) who can write about the instrument in a meaningful way to both guitarists and academics. As such, the goal of this thesis is to begin rectifying this issue by combining my two backgrounds in creating a deep analysis of an issue in popular music studies from the perspective of a guitarist.

In order to acknowledge the electric guitar's productive role in negotiating musical contexts, we must first unpack the 'processes and problematizations' which are navigated in becoming a guitar subject. In "The Subject and Power," Foucault argues that the *subject* is the objectification of a human being. This objectification occurs in one of three ways: firstly, it may occur through a scientific mode of inquiry into human affairs (e.g. biology, linguistics); secondly, an external apparatus may use 'dividing practices' to categorize and separate one subject from another, or even separate subjects from themselves (e.g. sick from healthy, good boys from criminals); lastly, humans seek to recognize themselves and, in doing so, they categorize and divide themselves (e.g. sexuality).⁴ In each of these scenarios, the subject is a static and manipulable entity – we can recognize and categorize a gay subject or a sick subject. Foucault seeks to understand the process through which this 'static image' is created. A *game of truth* emerges wherein one may identify "what the subject must be, to what condition he is subject, what status he must have, what position he must occupy, in reality or in the imaginary, in order to become a subject of this or that type of knowledge."⁵ The 'objectivity' embedded in

⁴ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New York Press, 2003), 126.

⁵ Maurice Florence, "Foucault," in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New York Press, 2003), 1.

becoming the subject is compromised through an investigation into the construction of true knowledge. In unpacking these knowledges, relations of *power* emerge as guiding forces which narrate the subject's free choice.

A crucial moment in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* occurs when he ties together power and subjection within the context of the *discipline* – a system through which subjects may increase their utility in a manner not antithetical to freedom (read as: individualization). For Foucault,

The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely.⁶

A discipline “increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).”⁷

What emerges from the discipline is a ‘normal guitar subject.’ Though, as a discipline will allow for individualization, the normative subject is not one archetype. *Normalization* is a force which imposes a homogeneity, yet creates spaces for subjects to occupy differing identities.⁸ One important characteristic of this normalizing force is the creation of measurable gaps, rendering subjects more ‘useful.’ For example, subjects may be measured by who can play the fastest arpeggios, guitarists render themselves useful by working on their quickness (thereby reifying a norm which is ‘faster is better’) but are separated by the reality of who actually plays the fastest. These gaps are best exemplified

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 137-8.

⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁸ Ibid., 184.

through the ‘greatest guitarists lists,’ that privilege the guitar-hero as the most disciplined guitarist. As ‘greatest guitarist’ lists imply a narrative with objective and measurable gaps in order to numerically separate the abilities of different guitarists, it becomes possible for subjects to pursue power within the guitar-hero narrative. In analyzing the decisions that are made in constructing these lists, Waksman writes:

Electric guitarists...are the true guitar heroes; for the values embedded in the figure of the guitar hero -- virtuosity, bodily flamboyance, an aesthetics of excess in which the sonic and physical presence of the guitarist spills over the boundaries of the pop songs format -- are in a sense dependent upon the literal and metaphoric amplification of the guitar's role brought about by the incorporation of the electric guitar.⁹

The guitar-hero is a figure of great prestige, amplified prestige to match their amplified presence. The guitar-hero is both the master and the innovator of the various capacities, knowledges and moral propositions that the guitarist must occupy in order to display the propensity to be ‘great.’

While the subject is the crucial and focal character in Foucault's late work, I have also chosen to base much of my exploration around the *apparatus*. In my own experiences, the first means through which one guitarist creates value judgements about another guitarist is by assessing their gear (a cultural term encompassing a guitarists' guitars, amplifiers, and pedals). It activates, situates and categorizes all subsequent impressions afforded by a guitarist. I have chosen to highlight the apparatus for a few reasons. There is an interesting resonance between the apparatus as a conceptual term and a popular definition of an apparatus as a technological tool. Additionally, there was a

⁹ Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, 279.

strong congruence between Foucault's treatment of the apparatus and the way that gear functions within guitar culture. Foucault employs the apparatus as:

[A] thoroughly heterogenous set of discourses, institutions, forms, regulations, laws, statements or moral propositions...These formations function in response to a specific urgency in a strategic manner, inscribed in a play of power but also linked to certain limits of knowledge.¹⁰

Foucault contrasts the apparatus with another conceptual coinage, the *technology*.

Technologies control and monitor the apparatuses' product through a norm.¹¹ Foucault's distinction between technology and the apparatus is analogous to the distinction I wish to draw between most academic discussions of the electric guitar and the way that I wish to discuss the electric guitar. I find that many electric guitar studies treat the instrument as a culturally constructed device which controls and monitors its subjects through a monolithic, normative conception of 'the guitarist.' To the credit of these studies, there is a fairly obvious (and interesting) normative guitar subject, as evidenced by studies interrogating the 'guitar-hero.' Unfortunately, by treating the guitar so vaguely, these studies omit important insider knowledges. I wish to explore each individualized apparatus' deployment of a unique set of discourses, regulations and moral propositions.

When faced with the urgent need for identity, individual pieces of gear are employed in a strategic and productive manner to navigate through the range of individualizations. As each of these apparatuses are invested with moral propositions, not every one will aim at being a carbon-copy of the guitar-hero. Punk guitarists will largely reject the privileging of virtuosity within this narrative, basing this rejection in moral

¹⁰ Stephen Legg, "Assemblage/Apparatus: using Deleuze and Foucault," *Area* 43:2 (2011): 130.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New York Press, 2003), 342.

judgements concerning authenticity. Accordingly, Johnny Ramone's Mosrite Blue Ventures guitar activates a discourse of 'garage' instruments (lacking value), imposes particular limitations (Foucault would likely use the word 'regulations') on the body (it lacks a whammy bar to perform vibrato flourishes) and situates these differences within an ethical rejection of the rock-star posturing embedded in the narrative of guitar heroics. It acts as a 'counter-power,' a power which is not external to power, yet it rejects some aspect of the dominant narrative in order to identify as a 'resistance.'

Along with assessing the depths of guitar-decision-making, this thesis also explores my introduction to indie. Similar to Johnny Ramone's guitar, the *independence* of indie acts as a 'counter-power' that asserts its resistance to an (imagined) mainstream. The genre effectively (re)situated the various knowledges and capacities which I inherited as an active participant in guitar culture; indie rock's proclivity for deconstruction and resistance encouraged me to 'UN-discipline' myself as a guitarist. Though, indie is not entirely composed of acts of resistance. Insofar as indie may be viewed as a cohesive genre, a particular difficulty is presented against claims of 'deconstruction' and 'resistance.' As such, two different kinds of power may be attributed to interpersonal relationships between indie subjects. Indie subjects express power as a 'counter-power' achieved through an act of resistance, wherein individuals gain 'indie credibility' through creating new, immediate ways to express themselves as artists. For example, following the standardization of 'punk' with the Sex Pistols, Johnny Rotten experimented with synthesizers in Public Image Limited. There is also the docile indie subject, who gains their indie credibility through disciplining themselves as an indie subject (e.g. indie

record labels, amateurist performance). Interestingly, this ‘docile’ subject also displays a shallow resistance, in that the typical indie subject will be required to adequately reject a ‘mainstream.’ The first two chapters of this thesis are devoted to unpacking the role of ‘differentiation’ in indie. This discussion serves as a backdrop to my work on the electric guitar, as a cultural insider, investigating the ways in which indie ideology operates as a negotiator of guitar knowledges – particularly the guitar hero.

Given the importance of *resistance* to indie (whether it be resistance as counter-power or a docile resistance), I have decided to employ Foucault’s theoretical framework in discussing indie as a genre. Foucault’s entire literary career may be mapped onto different imaginings of resistance: he begins with the subjects ostracized by society in *Madness and Civilization*, he then moves to analyzing the acceptable methods for political resistance in *Power/Knowledge* and he ends with trying to understand resistance within the processes of becoming a human subject in *The History of Sexuality*. This analysis of resistance is not always made possible in other theoretical paradigms for genre analysis. One of the most popular frameworks for analyzing genre is Franco Fabbri’s five categories: formal and technical rules, semiotic rules, behavioral rules, social and ideological rules and commercial and juridical rules.¹² Simon Frith, in considering this framework, argues Fabbri assumes a “static picture of genres with clearly defined boundaries.”¹³ Fabbri treats each of these categories equally relevant for each genre and, further, fails to recognize that the phenomena that he is categorizing into his

¹² Simon Frith, “Genre Rules,” in *Performing Rites: On The Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 91-3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 93.

five headings are difficult to pin to one genre. Returning to the importance of resistance in indie, the ideological rules of the genre will be privileged over formal and technical rules – this is how indie survives shifts in its formal or behavioral characterization. For Frith, genres work through a “deliberate process of rule testing and bending,”¹⁴ to which the Foucaultian theoretical framework of normalization, discipline, docility, power, etc., may be mapped on with considerable ease.

My approach to the role of indie in negotiating guitar (qua discipline) is one of creating an ethos which generates impulses towards resistance – these impulses often lead to similar techniques being employed (i.e. the use of synthesized tones, ‘uncontrolled’ noise, excessive reverb). This ethos is simultaneously articulated as a resistance (in indie discourse this could be called ‘going mainstream,’ ‘burning out’ or ‘selling out’) and a congruence (there are appropriate and controllable avenues within which resistance can be articulated e.g. indie labels, indie media outlets). I will refer to this indie figure as the ‘anti-hero’ – resisting guitar heroics. To best convey indie as an ethos of resistance or independence, I have chosen two case studies which push the boundaries. While indie encourages a resistance towards guitar-heroics, the presence of a guitar-hero in indie rock will be an (ideologically) ‘indie’ approach on the dominance of anti-heros. Jack White will occupy the position of a guitar-hero (sociological, historical and sonic signifiers) who displays a sufficient amount of anti-hero qualities to complicate his identity. St. Vincent will occupy the position of a guitar-hero for anti-heros and an anti-hero amongst

¹⁴ Frith, “Genre,” 93.

guitar-heroes, complexly negotiating both signifiers within the sociological subject of the anti-hero.

These issues will be explored within the context of guitar gear. Jack White and St. Vincent both share an atypical selection of gear which comes to underwrite and resonate in their identities as transgressive figures. Through the active appropriation of instruments with a coded difference, these artists find spaces with an emptier history to negotiate their identities – balancing their own self-determination with the boundaries of the instruments, modifying both themselves and the instruments in the process. For instance, Jack White's Airline was an unknown C-list vintage guitar, made of fibreglass instead of wood, which was distributed by the Montgomery Ward department store. St. Vincent's Harmony Bobkat is a similarly devalued instrument, distributed by the Sears department store. Other instruments which they employ will bring them closer to the guitar-hero tradition. Both artists have a history with Fender amplifiers. These complex, conflicting signs will be a source of investigation into the extents of indie discourse and the boundaries of being a guitar anti-hero.

Chapter one of this thesis begins by creating the foundation for a working definition of 'indie.' The dual impulses of resistance and docility will be examined as a constant cycle of death (standardization) and rebirth (independence). Indie will continually fracture as it attempts to assert its independence from itself. Throughout this process, indie will display consistent narratives of infrastructural independence, alternative masculinities and a (somewhat) cohesive musical history originating with punk. As such, there will emerge the possibility for becoming a docile indie subject, both

benefitting from and contributing to indie's standardization. An ideological commitment to activism and antagonism will be unpacked through the discursive treatment of the genre.

Chapter two divides into two sections; the first situates the White Stripes within indie discourse and the second situates St. Vincent. This chapter will apply a working definition of indie to each of these artists. This working definition will be arrived at through the first chapter's historical exploration. It will follow both artists as they negotiate indie's infrastructural, sociological, musical and ideologic tenets. Though guitar knowledges are considered part of this negotiation, enacted simultaneously with and inseparable from any other indicators of 'indie-ness,' they will be avoided in this chapter. The third chapter will seek to investigate these guitar knowledges as their own phenomena (for the sake of highlighting what has been absent from previous studies).

The third chapter also divides into two sections for each case study, investigating the role of indie's negotiation and differentiation within guitar-hero and anti-hero signifiers. By investigating trade magazines, particularly 'greatest guitarist' lists, I will examine Jack White's inclusion into a history of guitar-heroics and St. Vincent's exclusion from it. The exploration will highlight their gear (apparatuses), and their role as counter-powers within guitar as a discipline.

The goals of this investigation are twofold: to create appropriate exegeses of both indie and guitar cultures. Investigating each of these discourses together will help situate elements of each practice; they will each tease out what the other is not, offering an evaluation of what the other might be. It will particularly examine guitar-based indie

groups, and suggest how indie guitar subjects define themselves through a negotiation of normative guitar practices (governed by similar sociological, ideological, ethical and sonic principles to other indie subjects). The two case studies occupy interesting positions in the middle of both knowledges, creating a rich quandary through which we may magnify and dissect the intricacies of these two discursive formations.

Chapter One: Indie, Counter-Powers and The Possibility of Resistance

While the term 'indie' receives considerable usage and carries a rich cultural connotation, a detailed interrogation and unpacking reveals inconsistencies in reaching both stable contributors to a definition of itself. Particularly in the past decade, increased participation in indie culture has created a diversity of 'indie' subjects which complicate a stable definition for the term (sonic, institutional, etc.). The genre has grown to seem, simultaneously, tied by a narrative of antagonism while being infinitely divisible. Consequently, the search for a logic which ties the enterprise together seems feasible, but addressing the entirety of a monstrously large and ever-changing indie culture can grow to be a chimeric endeavor.

For this reason, I must restrict the scope of my project. This chapter will attempt to construct a significant history which ties together the roots of the White Stripes and St. Vincent in garage rock and post-punk, through a continuous history of indie. While this is only a selected snapshot of the indie whole, there is a common discourse permeating the exploration. Through this discourse, participants (artists, fans and mediators) either accept or reject potential phenomena (people, bands, media outlets, labels, etc.) as 'indie' or 'mainstream.'¹⁵ I intend to unpack this discourse as the history of a particular kind of 'art-rock,' as a product of the cross-pollination of rock with the art-school and the avant-garde. Michael Hicks (1999), in describing garage-rock, borrows Poggioli's definition of an avant-garde. For Poggioli, an avant-garde is defined by activism and antagonism.¹⁶

¹⁵ 'Indie' and 'mainstream' are, I would argue, ethical propositions which are contextual and subjective (related to Frith's "Genre Rules"). This history will also seek to problematize the usage of these two terms.

¹⁶ Michael Hicks, "Avant-Garage," in *Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic, and Other Satisfactions* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 26.

This definition of an avant-garde can be seen as resonating within many of the works considering punk, post-punk and indie, even if Poggiolo is not a reference. As such, the terms 'activism' and 'antagonism' will be guiding metaphors for resistance. The indie subject will exhibit a historical consistency in belonging to and supporting a self-conscious community (sociological, musical, infrastructural and ideological) which seeks out new methods to define itself through negation from an (imagined) mainstream. This 'activism and antagonism' translates into the 'independence' of indie.

While Foucault will not always be an overt reference during this historical narrative, I would like to briefly outline how this work will be translated into this section. A key theme in this chapter is a constant fluctuation between the standardization of an indie sound and the negation of that sound as a means of (re)asserting independence. As indie becomes 'standardized,' one may recognize the possibility emerging for people to *discipline* themselves into becoming indie subjects. These subjects, then, increase their forces, in economic terms of utility, and diminishes these forces, in political terms of obedience, altering themselves to fit a norm. As the subject seeks to define themselves in an objective manner (assert an absolute state of 'being indie'), the resistance (independence) of the indie ethos will seek to complicate that objectivity. As such, there will be a conflict between the musical signifiers of indie practices and their ideological (and sociological) counterparts. As such, 'activism and antagonism' within the genre may be read as resistance to indie disciplining. Though, the musical components of indie culture also represent a resisting of a 'mainstream' disciplining. Consequently, indie also emerges as a counter-power – a force which asserts an independence which, nonetheless,

is cultivated by and cultivates the power of the music-industries. As I intend to work through this chapter by pulling keywords from each of my sources over each other (establishing consistent narratives), I will highlight the applicability of Foucault's terminology throughout the enterprise.

Garage-(punk/rock)

The chronological starting point of this historical snapshot begins with garage-rock, as the term began to gain circularity in the sixties. It was applied to prominent acts (i.e. The Rolling Stones) as well as amateur groups.¹⁷ The inclusion of commercially successful acts in the 'garage' category eliminates recourse to institutional affiliations as identifying garage within an indie tradition. Thus, if garage-rock is to be viewed as an indie practice (as an avant-garde), it must be seen as a moveable sound/practice. For Hicks (1999), this sound/practice fixates on a simplicity in songwriting, rhythm and harmony combined with timbres signifying amateurism (lo-fi) and masculinity (integrated through loudness, fuzz-tones and "post-Jagger¹⁸ vocalisms"¹⁹). Given that these ideals could also, conceivably, represent an emerging sixties rock aesthetic, their inclusion as an avant-garde requires further exploration.

For Hicks, the 'garage' of garage-rock is a metaphor. The garage is a place for male camaraderie, where one undertakes rough and dirty jobs. These jobs are simple enough to be done at home (garage-rock is an important precursor to punk's do-it-

¹⁷ Hicks, "Garage," 23.

¹⁸ Hicks' coinage of a Jaggerian style iterates a common academic citation that Mick Jagger's (The Rolling Stones) vocals have a characteristic drawl and sexual urgency (Sheila Whiteley, "Little Red Rooster v. The Honky Tonk Woman: Mick Jagger, Sexuality, Style and Image," in *Sexing The Groove* [New York: Routledge, 1997] 67).

¹⁹ Hicks, "Garage," 37.

yourself culture) but are difficult enough to require tools and techniques which are gender-coded as masculine.²⁰ Waksman explains that DIY (do-it-yourself) culture was driven by the dual impulses of recovering manual labor as the proper realm of masculine activity and carving out a distinctly masculine sphere within the feminized space of the suburban home.²¹ Within Hicks, this would be the metaphoric (and, often, actual) space of the ‘garage.’ Hicks also views the garage as a “place of noise and alienation...In this light “garage band” implies a distancing from more respectable bands...Yet, garage bands may have also seen themselves as a new musical elite – authentic practitioners of music on the cutting edge of an emerging culture.”²² Thus, Hicks argues that garage-rock was a “self-conscious community whose participants insist on their independence from the masses and the rightfulness of their artistic path.”²³

This ‘alienation’ and ‘distancing’ is exemplified in the discursive treatment of the Rolling Stones in comparison to the Beatles. A 1965 television appearance introduced the band:

The Rolling Stones struck new horror into conservative English houses. From the start, they were rebellious, cynical and rude – presenting themselves as the radical alternative to the Beatles. While the Beatles could do songs like ‘Little Taste of Honey’ and ‘Till There Was You,’ the Stones would never have considered anything so sentimental.²⁴

²⁰ Hicks, “Garage,” 25.

²¹ Steve Waksman, “California Noise: Tinkering with Hardcore and Heavy Metal in Southern California,” *Social Studies of Science* 34:5 (2004): 678.

²² Hicks, “Garage,” 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁴ The Rolling Stones & Brian Jones – I Wanna Be Your Man [1965] Live,” video clip, YouTube.

Regardless of whether the Rolling Stones songs were simpler than the Beatles, or whether their songs actually did contain an amplified 'rebellion,' 'cynicism' or 'rudeness,' the discourse which introduces the Rolling Stones contra the Beatles reifies their transgression. This discourse is not unfounded: the television excerpt highlights a fairly opaque foundation for their claim. This 'rebellious, cynical and rude' attitude is attributed to choice of cover songs. There are no hard distinctions between their repertoires; the differentiation between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones was largely discursive (and became increasingly difficult to draw as the sixties progressed). That said, the television excerpt highlights the Rolling Stones' tendency to cover Chicago Blues while the Beatles were able to cover blues *as well as* Tin Pan Alley Pop songs.

This 'rudeness' is likely an ethical evaluation of the hyper-masculinization read onto (a racialized interpretation of) Chicago Blues. This masculinity problematizes the assimilation of garage rock into the indie tradition. Mick Jagger is often viewed as emblematic of this masculinity; analyses of gender in his performance often make recourse to 'cock rock.' Frith and McRobbie define 'cock rock' as the "male-centered exhibitionism of hard rock performance."²⁵ Mick Jagger's performance (re)presents "an ideal world of sex without physical or emotional difficulties, in which all men are attractive and potent and have endless opportunities to prove it."²⁶ This performative masculinity also extends to garage rock. Seth Bovey argues that garage rock also portrayed teenage girls as "unusually treacherous and predatory creatures."²⁷ Garage-

²⁵ Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, 247.

²⁶ Whitely, "Honky Tonk Women," 73.

²⁷ Seth Bovey, "Don't Tread On Me: The Ethos of '60s Garage Punk," *Popular Music and Society* 29:4 (2006): 454.

punk songs “can be seen as male fantasies which helped to empower young men and prepare them for the hard knocks of real-life relationship.”²⁸ Whitely (1997) traces this masculinity back to Muddy Waters’ Chicago blues; the Rolling Stones took their band name from Muddy Waters’ song ‘Rolling Stone.’ The lyrics of this song emphasize male potency, beginning with:

Well, I wish I was a catfish,
Swimmin’ in a deep blue sea,
I would have all you good lookin’ women
Fishin’, fishin’ after me.

Combined with lyrical grunts and a mythic black male sexual potency, a forceful masculinity was read onto the Chicago Blues.

As evidenced by the influence of Muddy Waters, the connection between ‘cock rock’ and ‘garage-rock’ is racial (as well as gendered). Though garage rock was part of a white, bohemian counterculture, it borrowed heavily from black musical forms. Matthew Bannister (2006) defines the ‘rock aesthetic’ (*sans-garage*) as one borrowed from black culture. This aesthetic combined a folk authenticity (the blues being the music of a people) with a racialized and sexualized rebellion (through exoticism and Othering).²⁹ The folk authenticity valued “seriousness, political critique, an anti-mass, individualised, marginalized expression which was organically connected to a community, rather than being an industrial product.”³⁰ The use of black forms added a symbolic marginality,

²⁸ Bovey, “Don’t Tread On Me,” 455.

²⁹ Matthew Bannister, *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2006), 33.

³⁰ Bannister, *White Boys*, 33.

savagery and mythic sexuality.³¹ While the rock aesthetic does not require an ideology of amateurism, garage-rock's lo-fi timbres and bluesy simplicity can both, conceivably, represent rock's folk aesthetic. The burgeoning masculinity in both the rock and garage-rock aesthetics were based on an idealization of black masculinities. Thus, garage rock represents something of an enigma for this geneology, its sociological subject residing outside of an emerging indie character. It represents a male subject directly enacting a history of patriarchal domination, rather than an 'alternative' subject representing a 'counter-power.'

Evident through its valuation of folk immediacy, there appears to be something 'punk-ish' about garage-rock. Bovey (2006) introduces a taxonomical distinction with the term 'garage-punk.' He does not explicitly contrast garage-punk and garage-rock. He argues that garage-punk is only one strand of garage music, implying that 'garage-rock' would be a related but distinguishable style.³²

"Garage punk developed when American youths mimicked the sound of British R&B and the attitudes of British rockers but ended up creating a cruder, snottier, and more urgent sound in their attempts to express their concerns and views of life."³³

Garage-punk "focuses on resistance to or liberation from social expectations, conventions, mores and institutions,"³⁴ values which came to be identified with punk rock's 'resistance.' This taxonomical distinction leads to two important observations about garage-rock. First, as a point of historical note, the discursive, sonic and ethical

³¹ Bannister, *White Boys*, 34.

³² Bovey, "Don't Tread On Me," 452.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

roots of punk were partly dormant in garage-rock. Second, as evidenced by the complex and simultaneous signification of garage-rock both as part of the 'rock aesthetic' and as a potential negation of it, the relationship between punk and pop is one of cooperation rather than separation. The history of punk which blends into indie will include a continuous, ironic support of, in Bannister's words, 'trash' (pop) culture.³⁵ While the rock aesthetic required a personal authenticity from its practitioners which made them seem real (in accordance with the Romantic tradition), punk embraced the negation, an aesthetic of authenticity as simulation.³⁶ This authenticity is most closely mirrored in pop music, where lip synching and dance routines also highlight simulation. Importantly, this adoption of a pop sound as a means for articulating transgression will complicate a 'pure' antagonism by searching within power in order to create 'counter-powers' – a tacit resistance which is enabled by ironic distancing, suggesting support laden with devaluation.

Punk Consolidation: Art-Rock, Whiteness and Alternative Masculinities

The first wave of punk bridges the avant-garde discourse (and the indie subject) between garage rock and post-punk. The indie aesthetic consolidated and became more identifiable in this era, spearheaded by Andy Warhol, art rock and punk.³⁷ Bannister argues the aesthetic of Warhol (as well as punk and indie) is "structured around the concept of negation...the music is declared autonomous from the mainstream, and

³⁵ Bannister, *White Boys*, 25.

³⁶ Barker, Hugh and Yuval Taylor. "Public Image: Punk's Paradox of Authenticity," in *Faking It: The Question for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W. W Norton & Company, Inc., 2002), 271.

³⁷ Bannister, *White Boys*, 29.

negative and critical in character.”³⁸ Reebee Garofalo further specifies the character of this negation by introducing punk as the translation of rock into “(white) noise”³⁹ – noise representing ‘negation’ as it is (here) considered the opposite of music. Its whiteness was derived from the simplification of rhythms (partly a consequence of amateurism), symbolically ostracizing the body and, with it, the black masculinities of Bannister’s rock aesthetic. The whiteness of the genre is important when punk is considered as an avant-garde – the art-school appears as a site of bourgeois privilege. It should be noted that indie is recognized as a (primarily) middle-class phenomenon; the average indie fan is university educated.⁴⁰ Overt antagonism will be sonically and ideologically amplified through this period in the historical narrative though, with the creation of a method of disciplining oneself to be punk, the possibility of resistance will be problematized.

Bannister uses the Velvet Underground (influenced by Warhol) to tease out a punk tradition which supports a self-conscious camp aesthetic. This camp aesthetic aims at critiquing the ‘repressive hypothesis,’ the idea that rock is a regressive art form. While hyper-valuing pop culture, Bannister argues the rejection of the regressive hypothesis was *not* a symbol of equality. Placing low culture as superior to high culture effectively inverted the hierarchy. In doing so, it rejected “the essentialist identification of rock culture with ‘freedom from repression,’ but also resurrected ‘primitivism’ in the form of an idealised representation of the mass cultural consumer as dupe or innocent eye.”⁴¹ The

³⁸ Bannister, *White Boys*, 29.

³⁹ Reebee Garofalo, “Punk as (White) Noise,” in *Rockin Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A.*, 4th ed, (Massachusetts: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008), 280.

⁴⁰ Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 52.

⁴¹ Bannister, *White Boys*, 26.

punk impulse of the Velvet Underground involved a negation of *both* the high-art tradition and an (imagined) 'mainstream' rock. Thoroughly antagonistic, Warhol and his Exploding Plastic Inevitable felt they were the new cultural elite.

It is hard to consider the Velvet Underground as the standard template of all early American punk seeing as there was considerable variation from group to group. Dave Laing follows punk genealogy from the garage-rock bands of the sixties, immediately to the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls and the MC5.⁴² The Velvet Underground's artistic (pop) imperative and the MC5's radical political agenda articulated an obvious antagonism.⁴³ To these political or artistic agendas, the Stooges added violent performance style to the list of punk indicators.⁴⁴ While violence was included in some rock performances at the time, it was usually articulated as a (masculinist) mastery of one's domain – smashing instruments as dominance. Iggy Pop employed a categorically different kind of violence, one of self-mutilation. Bannister refers to this character as the:

sadistic intellectual...[who] typically construct themselves as cerebral observers of excess and debauchery, reproducing a traditional division of 'high' aesthetic awareness (mind) with a view of the body as abject, and violated.⁴⁵

Warhol's inversion of the high-art/low-art hierarchy is reified through the maltreatment of one's own body. Hence, there is a case to be made for this 'alternative' masculinity acting as a 'counter-power,' a method of apprehending power which is (in a shallow sense) antithetical to a dominant narrative, yet it is nonetheless situated and shaped by that

⁴² Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985), 12.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Garofalo, "(White) Noise," 283.

⁴⁵ Bannister, *White Boys*, 140-1.

narrative. It utilizes an antagonistic identity, but is situated within the homogenizing force of normalization. By identifying as an alternative, it carves out a space for itself which is subversive of the dominating power in a way which maintains that power's dominance. While there exists a potential multivalency, the salient reading (discursive reading) of Iggy Pop is one of resistance.

The musical variety of the American scene dissipated when the British first wave of punk adopted a sound heavily centered on the Ramones and the New York Dolls. The success of the British scene effectively created the potential to discipline oneself into being 'punk' – tying the punk subject to their own (relatively) singular sound, fashion and ethos.⁴⁶ Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor describe this sound as “[t]hree-chord drones and breathless speed...favored over any sign of musical complexity.”⁴⁷ This ‘breathless speed’ largely contributed to the elimination of complex rhythms⁴⁸ (read as: blackness). Michael Gelbart (2011), similarly, argues that The Clash’s ‘London Calling’ represents the standardization and codification of punk into a coherent sound, though this sound is different from that of the Sex Pistols (particularly with reference to black musical influences).⁴⁹ There are differences between Barker and Taylor’s punk standardization (derived from The Sex Pistols) and Gelbart’s (derived from The Clash); though, there exists a notable agreement that a British sound, fashion and ethos had become identifiable

⁴⁶ Barker and Taylor, “Public Image,” 278-9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 279.

⁴⁸ Thrash metal, in the late eighties, will complicate this proposition. It combines punk’s incredible speed with complex syncopations.

⁴⁹ Gelbart adds this record was assisted by a series of historical events and an attitude/subculture of extra-musical phenomena which, together, defined ‘punk.’ The Clash’s sound exhibits greater signs of seasoned studio musicianship and the (re)establishment of iconically punk narratives.

as signifying the rebellion of 'punk.' Antagonism was jeopardized towards the late-seventies as it became possible to conform to being oppositional.

Barker and Taylor also write that, prior to the British standardization of punk:

most American punk bands could be identified as art-rock – even bands like the Ramones, the Dictators and the Stooges saw themselves this way. In this respect they were all following in the footsteps of the Velvet Underground.⁵⁰

UK punk brought a particular contempt for 'art,' as it was associated with a grandiosity which (punk felt) reeked of artifice – of false emotion ejaculated through twenty minute guitar solos, excessively elaborate stage setups and concept albums. That said, U.K. punk was still birthed from the art-school sensibility undergirding the indie ethos. The theoretical underpinning was 'Situationism,' which "aimed imaginatively to disrupt the everyday life of capitalism in order to expose its oppressive nature."⁵¹ Punk (as situationist art) would employ a populism that helped amplify its successes beyond the reach of preceding anti-art (avant-garde movements like Surrealism and Dada). This populism is a double-edged sword as it encouraged a criticism of Malcolm McLaren (the Sex Pistols' manager) from both art circles and a rock aesthetic. Thus, the status of punk as an 'avant-garde' is thoroughly contentious and contextual; its practitioners did continue Poggioli's 'activism' and 'antagonism' through its amateurism, speed and loudness, but the implied resistance was largely discursive as subjects were able to obediently make use of 'resisting' musical, ethical and sociological templates.

⁵⁰ Barker and Taylor, "Public Image," 279.

⁵¹ Laing, *One Chord*, 126.

Welcome To Machine: New Wave and Roboticism

UK punk bled back into North America, resulting in a second wave of punk and adding a considerable diversification to the genre. Many of these second wave punk bands were given the label 'new wave' or 'post-punk.' 'New-wave' bands are not as intuitively separated from a 'mainstream.' Laing notes that many musicians used the label 'new wave' to dissociate themselves from the punk tradition, thus avoiding stigmatization from airplay and gaining access to new live performance spaces.⁵² 'Post-punk' contains a more obvious genealogical tie to the earlier waves of punk – the word 'punk' ties them together. In spite of the possible difference, the sounds and sociological figures in 'new wave' and 'post-punk' are fairly consistent. This is largely due to the eighties cultural popularization of a 'new male sensibility.' Both new-wave and post-punk unmade and explored musical languages and meanings which became standardized as 'punk,' as a means of resurrecting antagonistic impulses through an 'UN-disciplining.'⁵³

Stan Hawkins explores the 'new male sensibility' through the Pet Shop Boys, described as displaying "constrained gestures within fashionable oversize suits, stylish jackets and designer clothes"⁵⁴ combined with "their sullenness, seriousness and sobriety in attitude blending in with the new face of the 1980s man, irrespective of sexual orientation."⁵⁵ The clause 'irrespective of sexual orientation' in Hawkins' assessment signals the queering of alternative masculinities. This subdued masculinity was

⁵² Laing, *One Chord*, 37.

⁵³ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁴ Stan Hawkins, "The Pet Shop Boys: Musicology, Masculinity and Banality," in *Sexing The Groove* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 123.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

foundational for the “depressed, obsessive loner”⁵⁶ indie sociological archetype. This identity stood “as a strong catalyst against the chauvinist styles of heavy metal, rap and cock rock.”⁵⁷ Though, similar to Bannister, Hawkins explores these changes in masculinity as a process of “*modification* rather than *resistance to* patriarchy [emphasis mine].”⁵⁸ This is aided by the ‘popular’ masculinity having shifted towards an alternative; patriarchy was not overturned, it had to find a new way to articulate itself within a popular new male sensibility. This continues the multivalency of ‘alternate’ masculinities as both resistance and counter-power.

The purported ‘dehumanization’ and ‘roboticism’ in new-wave’s musicality and ethos further solidified the ‘alterity’ of its masculinities. Theo Cateforis examines this approach through the music of Devo, arguing they “relentlessly ridiculed the alienating mechanisms and social conditions of America’s dominant ideological system.”⁵⁹ Their stiff body movements were the antithesis of the late-seventies, male cock-rocker.⁶⁰ The body presented in new wave was a “malfunctioning body, a white male one too controlled and too disciplined to appear natural.”⁶¹ This awkwardness did not eliminate all bodily movement; through new wave emerged “the popularity of the “rock disco,”...a new social context, where one apparently did not have to sacrifice one’s intellect in order

⁵⁶ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 53.

⁵⁷ Hawkins, “Pet Shop Boys,” 131.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵⁹ Theo Cateforis, “Performing the Avant-Garde Groove: Devo and the Whiteness of New Wave,” *American Music* 22:4 (2004): 565.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 579.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 581.

to join the dance-floor community.”⁶² The ‘rock disco’ capitalized on dancing and glamour’s significant history with the queered community. These masculinities can be historically traced through The Velvet Underground (commonly called a ‘fag band’⁶³) and was continued by stars like David Bowie.⁶⁴ “As the glam, performative element was absorbed into the mainstream (New Pop), what was left was a kind of autistic blankness, exemplified in punk and continued in indie.”⁶⁵ The new wave disco took the negative connotations of dancing in rock-culture and intellectualized it to alienate those to whom dancing did appeal. It is this white body of an ambiguous sexuality which continues to, sociologically, define the indie subject.

The ‘roboticism’ of Devo and new-wave may also be explored through the history and use of the synthesizer.⁶⁶ The synthesizer, before new wave, had undergone a fracturing in its usage. In the fifties and sixties, the instrument was kept in academic labs, used for sound experimentation. At this point, the instrument was cumbersome to transport and difficult to manipulate, which restricted its usage to people with access to knowledge and financial resources. The people who occupied this knowledge were those occupying academic positions in the racialized, gendered and sexualized atmosphere of the fifties and sixties. In the seventies, the instrument makers increased accessibility to the synthesizer by simplifying its user interface (integrating a conventional keyboard as

⁶² Cateforis, “Devo and Whiteness,” 583.

⁶³ Lou Reed, one of the band’s key figures, has had a complex public history with his sexuality. At different times, he has self-identified as straight, bisexual and gay. Currently, he is married to the female but gender-bending eighties new wave star Laurie Anderson.

⁶⁴ Bannister, *White Boys*, 45.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Cateforis, “Devo and Whiteness,” 567.

its controller) and making the instrument more portable.⁶⁷ Its consequent integration into rock music, and the adoption of seventies hard-rock standards for authenticity, blended its usage with a keyboard virtuosity dating back to Franz Liszt.⁶⁸ Though virtuosity is not wholly antithetical to the academic tradition, seventies rock privileged “displays of passionate skill and energetic sweat [which were] taken to be commensurate with bodily authenticity.”⁶⁹ Due to the visually evident increase in bodily activity, displays of virtuosity generally took the form of extended solos. Combined with the ‘male exhibitionism’ of cock-rock in the performer’s bodily movements. By the end of the seventies, it became possible to locate a rock aesthetic’s influence in synthesizer performance practice. In the eighties, post-punk capitalized on the possibility of creating an antagonistic sound/image to the rock aesthetic by, again, altering its popular usage.

Bob Doerschuk (assistant editor of *Keyboard* magazine) referred to the late-seventies, radio-friendly progressive rock (a tradition which borrows the rock aesthetic’s valuation of skill, mastery and labor) synth players as the ‘new romantics.’ He distinguished the new wave synth players by referring to them as the ‘new classicists.’ The dehumanized and robotic attitude of new wave recalled the objective, detached, ‘classical’ approach of the sixties academics.⁷⁰ The ‘new classicists’ connected themselves to the amateurist aesthetic of garage and punk by avoiding displays of

⁶⁷ Paul Théberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 52.

⁶⁸ Theo Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave? Modern Pop and the Turn of the 1980s* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 155.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

virtuosity.⁷¹ Additionally, new-wave turned to the antiquated keyboards of the sixties as they signified a particular (rock) inauthenticity in their timbre – they sounded overly electronic and artificial.⁷² Cateforis argues, “these instruments perfectly suited the new wave’s evocation of garage bands and AM radio hits of the past.”⁷³ The synthesizer also reinforced the queering of new wave. New wave synth players “betrayed the possibilities that rock music offered to “perform” their gender.”⁷⁴ A projection of ideal masculinity, having borrowed a sexual virtuosity, exoticism and primitive power from a mythic blackness, was tied to the displays of bodily virtuosity articulated by the new romanticists. This left the new classicists tied to a tradition of white, alternative masculinities. As such, throughout the eighties, an additional complication to resistance emerged as patriarchy was reformulated and mapped onto punk’s adopted counter-power.

Enter (Institutional) Independence

Cateforis introduces Gary Numan as the first synth-punk/new-wave star.⁷⁵ Numan released his debut record on a small independent label called Beggars Banquet. These independent labels would create an institutional mark of differentiation for the ‘indie’ band – indie being an abbreviation of independent. The independent label predates this era. Examples include the collector’s labels that who worked for an “uncommercial”⁷⁶ niche market, along with jazz and folk groups where the album was consider a souvenir

⁷¹ Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave?* 152.

⁷² Ibid., 160.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 160.

⁷⁶ Laing, *One Chord*, 10.

of the live performance, instead of the primary commercial object.⁷⁷ Acting in accordance with punk's amateurist aesthetic (now popularly referred to as D.I.Y., do it yourself), a crop of British independent labels were set up in the mid-to-late seventies. These labels were created with the intention of establishing an infrastructure wherein punk sounds and ideals could operate on their own terms. Through controlling the means of production, punk groups were able to further actualize their discursive, sonic and visual antagonism by operating (institutionally) exterior to a 'mainstream.'

While setting up a label was simple and cheap, and recording equipment was becoming more accessible, the biggest obstacle in staying afloat was securing a network of distribution.⁷⁸ One large-scale distribution network for independents was created by Geoff Travis, named the Cartel. Geoff Travis was the founder of Rough Trade, arguably the most focal British independent label. Fonarow notes that Rough Trade was felt to embody the values of independence and, therefore, the Cartel was actively sought by new independent labels to distribute their releases; even if it wasn't the largest distributor, it was the most important distributor.⁷⁹ Bannister adds that Rough Trade gained importance because the Cartel operated with the label as its focal centre. The Cartel distributed records for many important independent labels, including Creation Records, the label which many argue would typify the 'UK indie guitar rock' sound.⁸⁰ As the sociological and ethical parameters of an alternate aesthetic have already been created as a foil to

⁷⁷ Laing, *One Chord*, 10.

⁷⁸ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 33.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸⁰ Bannister, *White Boys*, 67.

rock, the role of the independent label was to foster an environment wherein these people could interact with these ideals and produce material which suited their ends.

Initially, all workers at Rough Trade were paid the same and all company decisions were made at general assemblies where everyone had a voice.⁸¹ The primary objective of the label was to democratize the music industry through the fair distribution of the means of production and distribution. This objective resonated with the interests of other independents (as it, likely, also resonates with the definition of 'independence'). As such, "[i]ndependent labels were seen to value unmediated artistic vision, facilitating rather than intervening in an artist's release to the public."⁸² These indie labels, definitionally, pursued a project whose end goal was increased participation and access. This project included decentralized media technologies and organizations, an increased collectivism, collaboration and cooperation between artists and mediators and also supporting diverse and innovative management practices (often with aesthetic consequences).⁸³ It is difficult to be an indie label without believing that there needs to be an alternative circuit for the production and distribution of music, and alternative (radical) methodologies found these grassroots organizations to be a natural fit.

While acknowledging this definitional antagonism to the mainstream, David Hesmondalgh also critically interrogates the idealistic view of the UK independent label

⁸¹ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 34.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸³ David Hesmondalgh, "Post-Punk's Attempt to Democractise the Music Industry The Success and Failure of Rough Trade," *Popular Music* 16:3 (1997): 255-6.

network as a grassroots attack on the British record industry.⁸⁴ He argues, a care for creating an alternative musical product was always balanced with entrepreneurial spirit. Geoff Travis (Rough Trade) denounces the implied 'art-school sensibility' of the indie aesthetic. He says, "I hate the idea of 'artists.' Rough Trade is simply a place where people are trying to do their work."⁸⁵ This view fits within indie's historically founded reluctant 'artistry' – just as Warhol inverted low and high cultures as a means of artistically denouncing 'artistry.' Though, for Hesmondalgh this anti-artistry goes beyond mere discourse. Rough Trade had set up German and American distribution and manufacturing branches as early as 1979, indicating a present and ambitious entrepreneurial spirit.⁸⁶ Additionally, as money issues became increasingly pressing (especially following the attempts at internationalization), the label started to loosen its grip on its cultural-political aims.⁸⁷ Brenda Kelly (editor at, Rough Trade publication, *The Catalogue*) reflects on the entirety of her experience, saying "there were no women in key management positions, just like everywhere else, but it wasn't a secretary kind of culture either, 'cos everyone who worked there had a certain independence."⁸⁸

Independent labels had potential for creating cultural-political change and, sometimes, actualized that potential. This change was initiated by the historical foundations of indie.

⁸⁴ Hesmondalgh specifically covers the UK independent labels. This ignores the important American labels (e.g. SST, Sub-Pop). The White Stripes and St. Vincent arguably have their feet in both camps. They have significant histories in the UK independent circuit as well, making Hesmondalgh's coverage pertinent, not only by analogy.

⁸⁵ Hesmondalgh, "Post-Punk," 262.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 266.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 269.

The role of independent labels in actualizing this change became increasingly complicated as indie became sonically and visually standardized, allowing for its easy abstraction from its institutional support system.

This standardization of indie was attributed to the impact of the Smiths and Creation Records. Similar to punk after the Sex Pistols, certain (permeable) boundaries were erected. Indie music was “generally played by slender young white males in their late teens to early thirties. Most indie bands were basic four-piece combos with electric guitar, bass, drums and vocals.”⁸⁹ The music was “primarily guitar rock or pop combined with an art-school sensibility.”⁹⁰ The term ‘jangle-pop’ was often applied because the recordings tend to be ‘top heavy’ (using cheap instruments with tinny sounds). Guitarists were often influenced by the Byrds, specifically Roger McGuinn’s rhythm playing on his 12-string Rickenbacker (adding an additional high octave to his guitar parts).⁹¹ Songs tend to be simple and repetitive. Reverb was heavily employed to fill out the minimal instrumentation and cover up the mistakes of amateur musicians.⁹² Also similar to punk, indie groups avoided guitar solos.⁹³ Lyrically, the songs dealt with isolation, alienation, and childhood nostalgia; the excessive use of irony is not infrequent.⁹⁴ In continuity with the punk narrative, indie became a new “white middle-class bohemianism”⁹⁵ which

⁸⁹ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 39.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹¹ Bannister, *White Boys*, 71.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

further renounced all forms of blackness in its music as a product of antiracism.⁹⁶ Thus, the 'UN-disciplining' after punk was met with a 'RE-disciplining,' symbolizing a continuous death and rebirth in indie.

Bannister and Fonarow offer highly specific descriptions of an 'indie' sound, capable of being displaced from indie institutions. This has implications in assessing the impact and necessity of indie labels following the major label buyouts of the nineties. Hesmondalgh continues to interrogate this impact by exploring the economic dynamic of the independent label. In "Indie Aesthetics," he makes a slight modification to his position from "Post-Punk." While he previously argued that indie labels were guided by both aesthetic/ethical decisions and commercial imperatives, he now argues the 'alternative' aesthetics of indie rock were a consequence of and a factor in institutional politics and business decisions – rather than the two being antithetical. He explores two common discursive tropes which follow labels whose 'indie' status becomes complicated. These two motives are:

'sell-out,' which assumes that independents abandon previously held political and aesthetic commitments for financial gain; and 'burn-out,' which is slightly more generous to independents and which assumes that institutional alterity can only be maintained for a short period before human and financial resources run dry.⁹⁷

Hesmondalgh explores the validity of these two motives through One Little Indian and Creation Records. The story of One Little Indian begins with Crass Records, founded by anarcho-punk band Crass. As a basis of comparison, Hesmondalgh notes Crass were

⁹⁶ Bannister, *White Boys*, 85.

⁹⁷ David Hesmondalgh, "Indie Aesthetics: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre," *Cultural Studies* 13:1 (1999): 36.

more explicitly and actively political than Rough Trade.⁹⁸ After Crass dissolved, many of its signees switched labels to One Little Indian.⁹⁹ As the founders of One Little Indian found it too difficult to be in constant contact with issues surrounding wealth and consumption,¹⁰⁰ the company was sold to Brian Bonner. Bonner represented a more ‘traditional’ entrepreneur, who proceeded to focus his strengths on Björk’s *Debut* record. The ‘highly produced’ Björk sound was viewed by Crass-members as ‘selling-out,’ the motives for such an action were attributed to the Bonner’s professionalism and the “increasing encroachment of PolyGram and Mayking.”¹⁰¹ The label that ‘sells out’ alters their sound to one that is more ‘commercial’ in an attempt to keep up with a changing marketplace.¹⁰²

The ‘burn-out’ narrative is not dissimilar: it follows a label that tries to avoid change but seeks financial assistance (and, consequently, aesthetic input) from major labels. The sale of Creation Records to Sony is Hesmondalgh’s case study. As the Smiths became one of the major models for indie groups, it was possible for the sound to be abstracted from the indie infrastructure. As such, Creation’s sale to Sony records allowed for a Smiths-like record to be released as a Sony product. While the Smiths released their final record five years prior to the deal, the label was accused of ‘burning-out’ because they sought financial assistance in pursuing goals too lofty for an indie label.

⁹⁸ Hesmondalgh, “Indie Aesthetics,” 40.

⁹⁹ Founded by members of anarcho-punk bands Flux and Pink Indians.

¹⁰⁰ Hesmondalgh, “Indie Aesthetics,” 42.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰² The inherent contingency of these claims is perhaps best exemplified by the seemingly unanimous journalistic consent that Björk’s identity resonates with an indie aesthetic.

Hesmondalgh argues that Alan McGee, entrepreneur behind Creation records, always felt it was logical to set his sights on internationalization.

The costs of development, marketing and recording are high; marginal costs for reproducing each copy are very small...Creation's goal was to produce international stars, not merely in order to make money, but because the classic pop dream involves going global.¹⁰³

McGee explains that the people at Sony "see me as a guy who can come up with alternative product and maybe given them two or three superstars."¹⁰⁴ This reaffirms his intentions to both create an alternative product and achieve a global impact. Following the Sony deal, Creation's success with Oasis "affirmed, for many in the independent sector, the view that close deals with majors are the only way to achieve mass popularity."¹⁰⁵

Hesmondalgh suggests that major and independent labels, regardless of their aesthetic agenda, often have similar aspirations. He writes,

"discursive, psychological and aesthetic factors were applied in circumstances delineated by the economic logics of the cultural industries...It is understandable that musicians and record companies should want their music to *matter*, to be consumed and battled over on the largest stages."¹⁰⁶

One Little Indian's process of professionalization is viewed as an expansion of the natural ambition for success that resides even in proponents of alterity. Additionally, the desire for professionalization at Creation records was dormant long before their merge with Sony. It is the contention of indie fans, as curators of high-art, that everyone ought to

¹⁰³ Hesmondalgh, "Indie Aesthetics," 47.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 53.

listen to good music – and indie is *the* good music. Crucially, these case studies complicate an intuitively sensible proposition: ‘indie bands are on indie labels.’ The British indie label circuit grew out of an infrastructural sensibility to support an actively antagonistic music through a differentiated institutional framework. This institutional framework accepted the musics that sought to transgress rock’s problematic racial and sexual histories. The economic necessities of running a label (a business) added a further complication to a ‘pure’ independence; to some extent all labels must have the same goals, that is to stay financially afloat. Through considering this complication, there has emerged an issue of a similar nature to that which punk and indie have faced sonically; there is the potential to create an independent label by disciplining oneself to utilize only indie distribution channels and working only with bands that are identifiably indie. As such, indie labels are added to the many possible negotiators of indie identity which this history has ruled out of being the singular negotiator of indie identity. Thus, the necessary question: *What is indie?*

What is Indie?

Wendy Fonarow argues “[i]ndie is located ultimately in its discourse about its boundaries, in discussions about what it is and is not, because what it is constantly changes.”¹⁰⁷ There are four boundaries which, Fonarow argues, discursively section off ‘indie.’ First, the artist’s institutional affiliation is considered: if an artist is indie, they will distribute their music through an independent distribution network (usually through

¹⁰⁷ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 77.

an indie label).¹⁰⁸ While institutional affiliation seems like an intuitive and decisive distinction, the boundaries containing indie labels or networks of distribution have endured significant complications (as evidenced by the Creation/Sony merger). Pete Dale (2008) suggests, in the post-nineties indie-label landscape, an entire taxonomy can be made of independents, micro-independents and their other variants. Thus, there is considerable room for ‘negotiation’ in the identity of each institutional affiliation. Returning to Fonarow, a band is, secondly, negotiated based on their fit within indie, conceived as a genre with a particular sound and stylistic conventions. Indie, in this sense, can be considered both tied by a narrative of antagonism while being infinitely divisible and diverse. Borrowing from centralization of the Smiths as the indie ideal type, the genre’s sounds and conventions include a hyper-valuation of simplicity and directness (manifesting itself through song structure, attire, stage demeanor and the use of vintage instruments with a nostalgic aura). It also manifests itself through lyrical and visual tropes of childhood naiveté and nostalgia. Though indie is heavily nostalgic, it is not revivalist.¹⁰⁹ It values a “contemporary sensibility”¹¹⁰ which mirrors the active, forward-looking attitude of an avant-garde. Indie, recently, has also entertained larger ensembles with elaborate instrumentation, odd meters and intricate songwriting. While this seems at odds with the hyper-valuation of simplicity, it is viewed within the indie community as a

¹⁰⁸ The institutional definition of indie focusing on the distribution network aids major labels who purchase indie labels as satellite operations and allow them to foster talent, distributing it through an indie network. The hope is that, as McGee suggested, they would offer an alternative product which can then be distributed through the larger network as they gain popularity.

¹⁰⁹ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 49.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

direct mode of communication from an arty, educated subject, speaking without mediating their thoughts through conventional songwriting.

Third, indie subjects exhibit an indie ethos, characterized twofold as a 'spirit of independence' and the sociological subject of the 'pathetic, depressed loner.' Each of these attributes have been discussed throughout this historical narrative. Fonarow describes the 'spirit of independence' as a mix of aesthetic and financial imperatives which feed off each other, agreeing with Hesmondalgh's work in "Indie Aesthetics." The sociological profile is considered a byproduct of Romantic (folk) authenticity combined with a Puritan asceticism and abstention, creating an ultimate 'truthful' subject.¹¹¹ The final facet, negotiating the parameters of indie, is a discourse of critical assessment that can be employed by fans and professionals (journalists, artists, executives, etc.) in order to separate high-art from low-art (high-art or 'good music' being indie). This is similar to the 'divisive practices' which, Foucault argues, undergird subjectification – the making of the indie subject is grounded in separation (as a means of objectively identifying oneself as belonging to a history). This critical eye creates an indie identity that is "forged in opposition to the contrived images of others."¹¹² "The two categories that indie invokes most frequently are the over-generalized and under-examined category of "the mainstream and the wildly diverse category of "dance".¹¹³ The use of 'dance' as negative became complicated with the proliferation of independent electronic dance

¹¹¹ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 56.

¹¹² Ibid., 62.

¹¹³ Ibid., 63.

musics in the late eighties. All four of these attributes are shaping and being shaped by members of indie culture, determining the boundaries of indie.

Ryan Hibbett adopts a similar stance to Fonarow:

Rather than attempt to provide a stable and decisive definition of indie rock, I want to examine its significance both as a category and within this process of categorizing – or endless differentiation – that characterizes the music industry and its consumers...at the intersection of various aesthetic, social, and commercial phenomena.¹¹⁴

For Hibbett, engaging in the process of negotiating the boundaries of indie rock offers its cultural insiders a forum for social differentiation and hierarchization. He extends Bourdieu's work on taste and social distinction, arguing that indie's processes of differentiation demonstrate "the principles and politics of a "superior" art"¹¹⁵ which is consumed by 'superior' people.

"One can begin to see, then, that indie rock exists largely as an absence, a nebulous "other," or as a negative value that acquires meaning from what it opposes. Indie rock is far from a static entity; rather, it is a malleable space filled by discourse and power, whose meaning is always under construction by various agents (bands, listeners, labels, critics, etc...) with diverse objectives."¹¹⁶

This 'not' by which indie distinguishes itself is often called 'the mainstream,' as Hibbett writes, "indie rock gains its appeal through its defiance of mainstream conventions."¹¹⁷ Hence, indie appears as a negotiation of proper resistance, a resistance which can both discipline itself to uniformity and negate itself to maintain an ideological alterity. There are multiple ways to achieve power as an indie subject.

¹¹⁴ Ryan Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock," *Popular Music and Society* 28:1 (2005): 55.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

Both Fonarow and Hibbett suggest that indie is a discourse that functions as a process of exclusion. In this interpretation, indie functions as a Foucaultian power/knowledge. Borrowing from Friedrich Nietzsche's 'will to power,' Foucault argues knowledge "was always purposive: it was characterized by a will to dominate or appropriate."¹¹⁸ This domination manifests itself through the 'truth.' The discourse of different knowledges (medicine, literature, indie rock) operate and mutate within different regimes of truth, meaning "[e]ach different truth is the truth about an actuality as it was conceived at that particular moment."¹¹⁹ Indie, then, appears as a *problematization*: "the ensemble of discursive and non-discursive practices that make something enter into the play of truth and false and constitute it as an object of thought."¹²⁰ This problematization is the process of negotiating the boundaries in determining, for example, whether the White Stripes or St. Vincent are 'indie' subjects – whether their labels are indie, whether they sound or look indie, whether they display an indie ethos and whether one can find a way to remain a participant in indie culture while supporting them. This assists in negotiating whether they are, as well, indie objects fit for consumption by indie subjects and distribution within indie channels.

The thinker is neither entirely outside the games of truth that govern the problematization, nor trapped inside with no options.¹²¹ Here enters the possibility of *negotiable* boundaries. Subjects have gained knowledge which, necessarily, has been

¹¹⁸ Paul Strathern, *Foucault in 90 Minutes* (Chicago Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 55.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹²⁰ Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, "Introduction," in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), xviii.

¹²¹ Rabinow and Rose, "Introduction," xix.

shaped by power relations and contemporary discursive practices. That said, each subject's freedom is necessary, as freedom is the ontological condition of Foucaultian ethics. Foucaultian power acts positively, shaping action; in being as such, it can only act when both subjects are free.¹²² Herein lies the balance between indie as a tradition with a history and an open future, constantly evolving. One becomes an indie subject by expressing an affinity for its various discourses, shaping oneself to be presentable as an ideal indie subject; furthermore, there is little precluding a band who operates from outside the Smiths' standardization of the indie sound from negotiating these various discourses in their favor. As Fonarow and Hibbett suggest, indie constantly changes: different methods of finding the truth – finding the most direct way to mediate the musical message – will become permissible. Through this essential freedom, the possibility of constantly reifying Poggioli's 'activism' and 'antagonism' becomes possible. Indie can continuously regenerate itself.

Complicating Antagonism and Transgression

While Fonarow and Hibbett emphasize resistance or independence as the common denominator of indie, other scholars are less friendly to this interpretation. I have used Bannister's work as means of complicating the 'antagonism' of indie. He argues that indie rock (re)articulated rock culture's white, heterosexual homosociality. Interestingly, he argues this stems from indie's focus on the electric guitar (which will become extremely significant in Chapter Three). For Bannister,

“The prevalence of guitars is a preliminary indication of indie's canonical nature – it immediately suggests affiliation to rock tradition. But the presence

¹²² Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 137.

of guitars also complicates attempts to understand the genre in terms of an alternative ethos, which may explain why it is not highlighted in other studies.”¹²³

Bannister restricts his analysis to 1980s Indie Guitar Rock, hence there is an immediate difficulty in applying his comments to a consideration of *all* indie. Defined by Fonarow, Hibbett and others, indie includes an evident diversity of identities beyond and within this genre and era. In that this thesis seeks to investigate two indie guitarists, an investigation of Bannister’s position is still prudent. He notes that “[i]t is a critical orthodoxy that rock music and the discourses surrounding it are homosocial and homophobic.”¹²⁴ While “indie initially defined itself not only by its opposition to commercial contemporary pop, [it also identified itself] by its opposition to ‘rockism,’ the traditional association of rock music with machismo, spectacle, virtuosity, excess and self-indulgence – in other words, forms of “vulgarity”.”¹²⁵ The electric guitar (re)articulates this homosociality and homophobia. As such, Foucault would argue that this genre functions as a ‘counter-power’ – working within a normalized masculinity as a self-identified ‘alternative’ which reifies a homogeneity by affirming what a hegemonic power is not and self-identifying from a position of inferiority. It is Bannister’s contention that 1980s Indie U.K. Guitar Rock recreates these exclusions through an epistemological connection to high-art, the exclusion of women from manipulating technology and the maintenance of patriarchy by co-opting feminist struggle through an alternative masculinity.

¹²³ Bannister, *White Boys*, 67.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 64.

Indie rock's exclusions have been articulated by Fonarow and Hibbett, though they have not been presented derisively (as they appear in Bannister's work). Following from Bourdieu, Bannister also views taste as a form of cultural power, justified through recourse to a (gendered) intellectual criteria.¹²⁶ He argues,

“[A]ny aesthetic that depends on mutually opposing categories of high and low culture repeats patriarchal dualism. This also applies to inversions of the system where the low is represented as high, as in the idealisation of a ‘pure’ folk culture or ironic advocacy for ‘trash’ culture.”¹²⁷

Adorno's infamous work on pop music and false consciousness is indicative of the original dualism, without inversion. The high/low distinction of Adorno and the Frankfurt school cultural critique is repackaged in indie as an ironic and distanced support of ‘trashy’ pop. Hence, pop music (and its accompanying, stereotypical, proponents: women, gays) are not truly liberated, indie culture is just as critical of this ‘trash.’ In Foucaultian terms, the process of normalization creates a homogenizing narrative with ‘measurable gaps’ through which the *distancing* of irony reifies the rock/pop hierarchy.

Bannister's second point investigates the traditional roles occupied by indie instrumentalists. Because chapter three (on the electric guitar) will discuss this in detail, I do not want to fully explore it here – however, I will introduce it. He argues that indie guitarists' preferred playing style embraces an ideology of impersonality. There is an absence of individualistic expression (guitar solos), an emphasis on drone/jangle and lots of reverb. This ‘impersonality’ mirrors the mind/body dualism symptomatic of the patriarchal epistemology underlying the connection to a rock aesthetic. This

¹²⁶ Bannister, *White Boys*, 25.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

‘impersonality’ comes off as an ironic distancing of a trash aesthetic; Bannister sums up his ideas in one of the subchapter titles, “Ironic amateurism, technological infantilism.”¹²⁸ As one of my case studies is a female guitar player, there will be a considerable examination of guitar masculinities. Bannister’s argument begins to unravel throughout the nineties with the riotgrrl movement as well as the integration of female musicians into a popular alternative rock aesthetic exemplified by the Smashing Pumpkins or Hole. St. Vincent, in addition to being a female guitarist, is also an incredibly virtuosic one. Hence, this argument will, by the end of the thesis, become contextualized as symptomatic of a small portion of the indie whole.

Bannister’s third point unpacks the ‘pathetic’ alternative rock masculinity. This masculinity appropriates feminist struggle by adopting an effeminate masculinity. As such, it functions as “a kind of antisexist sexism.”¹²⁹ The “feminine sensibility is part of his [the artists’] genius,”¹³⁰ with this particular genius being read as mental illness or deformity. The nostalgic infantilism or sadistic narcissism of Bannister’s typical indie subjects articulate an ‘alternative’ masculinity which mirrors many of the qualities found in a hegemonic masculinity. Bannister writes, in summation, the

“key aspect is his self-sufficiency and autonomy, and it seems to me that melancholics incarnate a very similar discourse of masculinity defined as a mode of non-relation: they don’t need other people either, or else they claim the terms of the interaction to be too threatening to their own identity.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ Bannister, *White Boys*, 113.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

As such, it follows the ‘new male sensibility’ in repackaging patriarchy within a seemingly anti-patriarchal identity. By functioning as a counter-power, their resistance is amalgamated into a larger web of power relations, both cultivated by and opposing a hegemonic power.

Conclusion

Bannister’s comments are incredibly insightful in explaining the psychological realities of a specific historical period in indie rock. While this offers an interesting unpacking of the realities which shape the discursive practices constituting indie rock, there is a sense in which the discourse can be abstracted and evaluated for what it suggests, as opposed to what psychological workings may be underpinning it. It is still through a discourse of transgression, opposition and difference that indie rock seeks to dislodge itself from ‘the mainstream’: caricatured by its absent-minded consumers that lap up the racist, misogynist and homophobic histories of rock. Accordingly, Foucault uses the term ‘practices of freedom’ instead of ‘practices of liberation’ – as counter-powers are never *liberated* from a web of power relations, in spite of signifying a kind of freedom.¹³² The discursive practice of indie still operates by seeking out these ‘alternative’ qualities, even if those ‘alternative’ qualities are prized through the same (masculine) universalizing hierarchy that sets standards for greatness in rock culture. This psychological continuity with a fundamental patriarchy does not lead to sonic or visual conformity to the ‘rock aesthetic’ from which indie sets to differentiate itself. A closer

¹³² Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of The Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), 26.

investigation into the masculinity of Jack White and the femininity of St. Vincent will further interrogate the universalizability of Bannister's arguments.

Undergirding Bannister's critique is the idea that we must judge indie rock by its realities rather than its ideals, arguing that indie is never a 'pure' antagonism. By this logic, there exists a problematic discontinuity between indie's revolution and its realities. This train of thought is not unfounded: many scholars have been weary of asserting 'transgression' in popular music (or heavily criticized for asserting it too hastily). As one may discipline themselves into becoming a transgressive subject, the possibility of a real transgression becomes complicated. Pete Dale breaks down this standardization through the proliferation of DIY.

"The problem...was that whilst anyone can 'do it yourself' in theory, some will inevitably have certain power to create a durable statement which, in practice, not everyone is likely to be able to create."¹³³

Dale then defines indie very narrowly, as a sound best associated with the Smiths – an assertion that was echoed by many, especially Bannister, and conceded as providing a hegemonic influence by others (including Fonarow). DIY, as a part of indie, was articulated and received through these sounds regardless of their origins. While he acknowledges the Marxist stance of the early independents, following the buyout of Creation Records by Sony, the landscape muddies. He offers the example of Richard Branson's V2 label, owned by Universal Records (at the time of this writing), which produced many 'indie' bands – even releasing a compilation disk 'The State of Independence.' These challenges still do not question indie's discourse as being one that

¹³³ Pete Dale, "It Was Easy, It Was Cheap, So What?: Reconsidering the DIY Principle of Punk and Indie Music," *Popular Music History* 3:2 (2008): 178.

identifies the possibility of transgression by engaging in a process of Othering and differentiating itself from a category called 'the mainstream.' There are plenty of ways to complicate the negotiation of the indie subject, and this is accounts for the consistent fracture and debate that exists within the indie community. This fracture and debate was accounted for in Fonarow's definition of indie as a discourse surrounding the placement of four boundaries which, altogether, contribute to constructing the indie subject. In Chapter Two, I will examine this fracture and debate as it manifests itself through the histories of two groups.

Chapter Two: What Makes Them Indie?

Accumulating the sources investigated in the previous chapter, I will proceed to define indie as:

A discourse in which (1) institutional affiliations (record companies, distribution networks and media outlets), (2) a historically and sociologically continuous musical tradition, (3) conventions which sonically and stylistically can be identified as a genre hyphenated as 'indie-[-----]' and (4) an ethos of independence and resistance which borrows values from the avant-garde, are all negotiated in determining whether an artist sufficiently transgresses an (imagined) mainstream.

Each of these knowledges are absorbed and negotiated by different participants in indie culture: record labels, distribution networks and music stores organize and categorize the bands which would be marketable to indie-fans; media outlets (blogs, magazines, radio) contribute to the discussion by assessing which bands are successful in exemplifying an 'indie-ness'; and indie fans argue over whether these professionals made correct predictions. This is not a chain; there is no initial and/or final operator. No participant can ignore the will of another. They all rely on each other to affirm their identities as participants within indie culture. While each of these participants plays an important and productive role in (re)creating indie discourse, and therefore become objects of it, the *primary* object is the band. Fans often discuss other fans as being more or less 'indie' (stores may discuss other stores in a similar fashion, etc.) but, more often than not, these judgements rest on the bands with which they associate.¹³⁴

Likewise, this exploration will take two bands as its point of focus. Due to the band-focused nature of this investigation, the role of the record store, the radio station,

¹³⁴ Though, discussions of fashion and other facets of culture are not uncommon.

the blogger and the fan will operate more silently. It is important to note these participants are central to the development of indie knowledges as a continuous historical, sociological and musical narrative. As such, any and all decisions which this history writes as attributable to an artist (e.g. decisions regarding musical conventions) should be taken as result of a complex process of negotiation between several types of participants wherein a collective knowledge informs each individuals' choices regarding appropriate action.

Also important is the variation in tangibility between these knowledges, most importantly institutional affiliations. To reflect this tangibility, I will introduce 'opacity' as a theoretical term. The opacity of a negotiator is the degree to which it can mask potential complications in identity. As we seek new paradigms to frame and reframe identity, certain negotiators are less susceptible to reformulation. Foucault acknowledges this complication in his 'games of truth,' where he admits that certain truths are going to be more tangible than others – "[t]here are games of truth in which truth is a construction and others in which it is not."¹³⁵ For instance, an institutional affiliation (e.g. record label) may be more opaquely indie than a sonic signifier (e.g. chord progression). While it is possible to re-imagine the history of independent labels as conformity to an alternative aesthetic (rather than an impulse towards antagonism), it is difficult to discount the truth of an opaque self-identification to an independent network. The popular definition of an 'indie' artist – an 'independent' artist – is one who records for an independent record label – thus, institutional affiliations may be the most opaque negotiating factor; though,

¹³⁵ Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self," 39.

as previously discussed, buyouts and the popularization of 'indie' styles have placed indie-sounding artists on major labels, major labels running indie labels and other complications. As such, opacity is a matter of degree and 'relative opacity' of negotiators will be unpacked throughout this chapter.

During this discussion of opacity, one should be aware that indie is a fickle discourse wherein the constraints for authenticity require a particular nonchalance towards being authentic (often translated into a desire to be a 'pop' artist¹³⁶). As such, self-identification and disciplining will often be minimal or problematized. For instance, while *Stereogum* advertises itself as an Internet blog for "Indie Music News, MP3 Downloads, Music Videos, Reviews,"¹³⁷ *Pitchfork* solely identifies as a music publication. A google search will yield the tagline 'The essential guide to independent music and beyond,' but it is unclear who authored this description. The identity of these publications are negotiated in a manner similar to indie artists, both articulating and complicating an impulse towards alterity. Media outlets tend to evade an overzealous desire for authenticity by sincerely reviewing records that are intuitively *not*-indie,¹³⁸ while extensively covering groups that receive no coverage in media outlets that carry more economic power (*MTV*, *MuchMusic*, *Billboard*). As such, they can articulate an opaque backdrop of 'independence' which allows them room to transgress that image.

¹³⁶ This will be discussed at more length in the section on St. Vincent. For a full exploration see Emily Dolan (2010).

¹³⁷ Stereogum. "Homepage."

¹³⁸ For instance, this positive review of Rihanna's *Loud* record in *Pitchfork*: <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14897-loud/>

Following from the irony present in indie coverage, the mere mention of the White Stripes or a St. Vincent is meaningful but a relatively translucent (as opposed to opaque) negotiator. My analysis of these two artists will begin with academic accounts of indie conventions and then depart to include journalistic sources as they serve to highlight these negotiators. Each artist will come to represent different 'counter-powers' and 'resistances,' either sustaining what a 'mainstream' is by being what it is not, or contributing to a romantic authenticity cultivated by a 'mainstream' as a means of resisting itself (as art of a larger cultural narrative valuing artistic independence). The following sections will take each of the four criteria of my working definition and explore them in succession within the context of each artist, in order to examine how truth is articulated and complicated throughout the process of negotiation.

The White Stripes

Institutional Affiliations

As was previously suggested, the institutional affiliation is perhaps the most tangible negotiator and, subsequently, yields the strongest opacity. As the White Stripes' popularity grew and the band is moved to larger labels, their indie-backdrop became increasingly translucent. Their first label was a local Detroit operation (Italy Records), which could only afford to support the creation and (local) distribution of 45rpm singles.¹³⁹ After a short tenure with Italy, the band moved to Sympathy For The Record Industry to release a full-length record.¹⁴⁰ In spite of being a larger operation, Sympathy

¹³⁹ Martin Roach, *Morphing the Blues: The White Stripes and the Strange Relevance of Detroit* (Surrey: Chrome Dreams, 2003), 63. Through Italy, the White Stripes released two singles, 'Let's Shake Hands b/w6 Look Me Over Closely (1998)' and 'Lafayette Blues b/w Sugar Never Tasted So Good (1998).'

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 80. With Sympathy, the band released full lengths *The White Stripes* (1999), *De Stijl* (2000) and *White Blood Cells* (2001), along with many singles.

was intuitively identifiable as an independent organization. They prefer to use ‘indie-style’ contracts, assuring the independence of the group by only tying them to the label for a single release.¹⁴¹ Further reinforcing the ‘anti-contract,’ Ben Blackwell (Jack White’s nephew and business partner) says his “biggest problem when people talk about bands singing to independent labels...is that no one ever signs anything.”¹⁴² These verbal agreements offer an aura of ‘unprofessionalism,’ working without ‘lawyers and businesspersons.’ Realistically, they are working without *professional* lawyers and businesspeople, as each member in the verbal negotiation must become an amateur lawyer or businessperson in dealing with matters of law and business. Reinforcing this ‘unprofessionalism’ is the label’s self-deprecating amateurist aesthetic – their website currently advertises the tagline: “20 years of performance anxiety, instability & poor judgement.”¹⁴³ As well, the scale of the label’s operations appear somewhat unambitious when considering the niche audience of (owner) Long Gone John’s “preference for raw, female rock released on seven-inch.”¹⁴⁴ A *Washington Post* article on the owner refers to him as “indie rock’s anti-mogul,”¹⁴⁵ reinforcing this ‘lack of ambition.’

Following their third full-length release, the band received a cover story in *New Musical Express* (released in August 2001), resulting in a drastic increase in profile. The band was moved to a larger label to support their expanding popularity. In the United

¹⁴¹ The owner (Long Gone John) would recoup his contribution to recording the record and the remainder of the profits would be split 50/50 (Everett True, *The White Stripes and the Sound of Mutant Blues* [Spain: Omnibus Press, 2004], 73).

¹⁴² True, *Mutant Blues*, 73.

¹⁴³ Sympathy For The Record Industry, “Homepage.”

¹⁴⁴ True, *Mutant*, 73.

¹⁴⁵ David Segal, “A Label All His Own,” *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2003.

Kingdom, XL Recordings received distribution rights.¹⁴⁶ XL Recordings is distributed through Beggars Group, an organization that has evidenced a historical affiliation with the indie tradition (beginning as Beggar's Banquet, working with Gary Numan¹⁴⁷). In the United States, the band signed with Richard Branson's American label, V2 Records. Branson's V2 records,¹⁴⁸ was perceived as a large independent label – akin to XL Recordings. V2 Records was also involved in key releases within the indie historical tradition,¹⁴⁹ though Branson reached outside of the indie tradition as well, releasing pop records with strong commercial success.¹⁵⁰ The only XL release that would rival their first White Stripes output (*Elephant* [2003]) is the Prodigy's *The Fat of the Land* (1997).¹⁵¹ As the White Stripes were represented by increasingly larger labels, the band was now being booked to perform in considerably larger venues and received media coverage in larger-scale publications. They won three *MTV* Music Video Awards in 2002, a *GRAMMY* in 2004 and performed at both events. At this point, the relative opacity of their institutions' independence from an (imagined) mainstream was weakening.

¹⁴⁶ True, *Mutant*, 125.

¹⁴⁷ Beggar's Group started as the label Beggar's Banquet. Beggar's Banquet acquired 4AD records and began to sign new bands on that roster. Beggar's Group was used to link additional acquisitions, Matador and Rough Trade, with XL and 4AD.

¹⁴⁸ Founded after the sale of his Virgin Records label to EMI in 1996.

¹⁴⁹ Ex. Moby's *Play* (1999) and *18* (2002) and The Smashing Pumpkin's *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* (1995).

¹⁵⁰ Branson's first label, Virgin Records, released top-selling albums for Janet Jackson and Lenny Kravitz. As evidenced from Hesmondalgh (1999, *Indie Aesthetics*), many owners of indie labels had commercial aspirations. That being said, they rarely signed on with bands who did not fit the 'indie' mold. Their success was dependent on indie achieving mainstream popularity.

¹⁵¹ Though, the White Stripes' sales figures have been shattered by one of the label's most recent output, Adele's *21* (2011). *Elephant* was their largest release to that date.

Ian Montone (an L.A. based lawyer who represents many indie groups) cleverly negotiated the V2/XL deals in a way that allowed the band to retain ownership of their recordings.¹⁵² Signing an ‘independent style’ contract complicated the ability for a major-leaning label to fully colour the band’s identity. Additionally, Jack White was given his own imprint (Third Man Records), which was attached to his releases.¹⁵³ As such, the V2/XL deal maintained a strong degree of tangible alterity. Though, their subsequent musical output was not free of critique from indie media outlets; *Pitchfork*’s review of their second release under V2/XL, *Get Behind Me Satan* (2005), begins with heralding the band’s inevitable burnout: “White Stripes fans have always known that the time would eventually come when Jack White’s abilities and ambitions would outpace the duo’s deliberately limited musical vocabulary.”¹⁵⁴ In spite of noticeable and emergent dissent, the White Stripes continued to gain popularity within many markets. Jack White reinforced and capitalized on his popularity by releasing a side project¹⁵⁵ and acting in a Hollywood film.¹⁵⁶ Branson sold V2 Records to Universal Music in 2007 and, subsequently, the White Stripes were in a position where they had the opportunity to change labels.

The White Stripes signed with Warner Records for the release of their final record, *Icky Thump* (2007). Warner Records is unquestionably a major label. Tom

¹⁵² Barney Hoskyns, “‘There’s A Voice in Me Saying Slow Down’: Jack White Looks Back,” *Rocky’s Backpages Library*.

¹⁵³ Roach, *Morphing*, 120.

¹⁵⁴ Matthew Murphy, “The White Stripes: Get Behind Me Satan Review | Album Reviews | Pitchfork,” *Pitchfork*, June 5, 2005.

¹⁵⁵ The Raconteurs’ *Broken Boy Soldiers* (2006).

¹⁵⁶ *Cold Mountain* (2003).

Whalley (CEO of Warner Brothers at the time) recalls his meeting with Jack White to pitch their contract.

Jack White and the White Stripes was a case of a band being not only fully developed but at the top of their game when they became available to sign. Jack had this reputation of being an independent creative force who made great records but did things his way. The recordings the White Stripes had made were popular both with the difficult-to-please indie rock fans who loved the authenticity of what the band was all about *and* mainstream rock audiences.

For Jack, it was all about trust. He wanted to know that he could put his career into someone's hands and feel completely at ease with it. He wanted to be certain that he wasn't going to be forced to do things, musically, that he didn't want to do. That was easy for me to agree to because that was what Warner Bros. was always all about.¹⁵⁷

Given the traditional "rock ideology of youth, rebellion, positive rawness and the ephemeral,"¹⁵⁸ a certain degree of 'independence' is normative with rock stars. Artists are expected to be suspicious of authorities (like record labels), reflecting a larger narrative in Western culture which views art and commerce as irreconcilable motives. Hence, while Warner paints a public picture of 'trust,' it is reasonable for an indie fan to view the deal as part of the band 'burning out' or 'selling out.' The media treated it as such: *Pitchfork's* review of the new record offered a cautious praise. It refers to it as a "resurrection" which "packs an unexpected freshness," but also mentions that the White Stripes took considerably longer to record the record, highlighting the significantly more "robust" sound of the record (noting that their second release, *De Stijl* [2000], sounds "anorexic"

¹⁵⁷ Warren Zanes, *Revolution in Sound: Warner Bros. Records* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008), 235.

¹⁵⁸ Carys Wyn Jones, *The Rock Canon: Canonical Values in the Reception of Rock Albums* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 50.

by comparison).¹⁵⁹ The overall tone is optimistic, praising the group for offering a better record than their previous endeavor, but notes their expanding popularity and resources as a potentially inhibiting factor for a band whose strength was their rawness.

The spirit of independence never fully escapes the band's identity during their short tenure with Warner Records. Jack White's Third Man Records (TMR) imprint was brought to Warner Records. The label opened its own facilities where it operates as a self-standing independent label. It distributes its own material, solely printing in vinyl (as well as only recording on a reel to reel). It signs its own acts to indie-style single record contracts. The label's website boasts that,

Almost all¹⁶⁰ of our records are recorded, printed and pressed in Nashville, TN and produced by Jack White. In this fashion TMR strives to bring a spontaneous and tangible aesthetic back into the record business.¹⁶¹

The White Stripes, throughout their career, have been paired with representation best capable of capitalizing on their growing success. Consequently, their career grew to tread a fine line where their spirited affection for independence can be simultaneously read as a lasting commitment to an indie ethos or a normative 'mainstream' articulation of rock rebellion. As such, the relative opacity of their indie backdrop gradually waned as their careers progressed. The kind of 'resistance' associated with the group was similarly repackaged. In her paper exploring the Spice Girls, Elizabeth Eva Leach writes,

¹⁵⁹ Rob Miltchum, "The White Stripes: Icky Thump Review | Album Reviews | Pitchfork," *Pitchfork*, June 18, 2007.

¹⁶⁰ The 'almost all' clause likely refers to Jack White's four acts (The White Stripes, The Raconteurs, The Dead Weather and his solo career) which, due to Jack White's high profile, would be distributed on a larger scale through Warner Records.

¹⁶¹ Third Man Records, "About."

“it is possible, rather than seeing Adorno’s critique as instrumental, simply to recognize in both Adorno and popular music, shared roots in romanticism, particular in the late-romantic definition of authenticity as a defence against commercialisation in the wake of a decrease in artistic patronage and the rise of market relations. This, as Middleton points out, is reflected in the employment structure of popular music, whose performers are not paid pro-rata like workers, but given royalties, i.e, treated as artists.”¹⁶²

As romanticism shares its roots with most popular music, commercial institutions (e.g. record labels) needed to cultivate a resistance against themselves in order to enact and embody their product, to properly articulate a culturally-specific authenticity. The White Stripes, placed against the Warner Records backdrop, came to represent this resistance through portraying the label as one which respects artistic independence.

Historically and Sociologically Continuous Musical Tradition

Though his book is rife with polemics and exaggerations, Eric James Abbey (2006) offers a concise summation, of some merit, to the backdrop within which the White Stripes entered their scene.

With the advent of contemporary Garage Rock, the music scene was forced to recognize specific concerns relating to nostalgia and its use in our constructed individualism. Beginning in the city of Detroit, Michigan, and its suburbs, contemporary Garage Rock found its home equally among ruined streets and wealthy neighborhoods. From the start, this underground movement experienced rapid growth due to its insistence on staying away from mainstream culture and its break with traditional popular modes of musical representation.¹⁶³

Abbey, unfortunately, treats ‘mainstream culture’ as an easily recognizable, material entity. Subsequently, his analysis of the ‘individualizing’ factors in garage rock carry a positivistic flavour, lacking due care. In spite of this oversight, his comments may be

¹⁶² Eva Elizabeth Leach, “Vicars of ‘Wannabe,’ *Popular Music* 20:2 (2001): 145.

¹⁶³ Eric James Abbey, *Garage Rock and its Roots: Musical Rebels and the Drive for Individuality* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2006), 1.

analyzed and carefully situated to extract highlights. Abbey does uncover the influence of Detroit as part of a continuous sociological and historical progression of indie rock. Additionally, this tradition suggests an archaeological and discursive transgression¹⁶⁴ with which multiple classes could identify.

Introducing Detroit's sonic ecology, Martin Roach writes:

Detroit made practical cars and served ordinary people, and in its entire musical history it could be argued it has produced working, practical music that meets the requirements of ordinary people too. Motown, the MC5 and the Stooges are in a sense practical concepts just as the blues was a practical way of releasing tension into that vein, nothing is superfluous, everything counts. So even if Jack White doesn't come home and slip a Supremes album into his player, or a live record by the MC5 or Stooges, they are there, watching over his shoulder.¹⁶⁵

The Stooges were included in the previous chapter as one of the early groups to actualize the 'underground' ideals of agonistic and provocative performances. Genealogically, they remain a key influence to punk rock. Likewise, the MC5 displayed an "[e]nergy born out of anger¹⁶⁶ and frustration...that connects them to the later rise of punk rock."¹⁶⁷ Roach includes that Jack White is a fan of The Stooges' *Fun House* (1970), an album which he believes "sounds like Detroit."¹⁶⁸ The city would not return as a focal centre of indie

¹⁶⁴ I use the word 'transgression' instead of 'constructed individualism' because for Abbey 'individualism' appears to be defined as 'staying away from mainstream culture.' As such, the individualism of an affinity for popular dance musics or top 40 singles would not be an individualization – which feels problematically ideological.

¹⁶⁵ Roach, *Morphing*, 31.

¹⁶⁶ Waksman argues that to solely characterize the MC5's sound as one born of anger is to engage too zealously in myth surrounding the band. However it is, nonetheless, an important attribute of their 'noisy' sound.

¹⁶⁷ Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, 211.

¹⁶⁸ Roach, *Morphing*, 23. Motown appears as an outlier to this history. Roach argues that their economical arrangements and structures, though ornate, reflect Detroit's 'working-man' aesthetic (Roach 20). This aesthetic is better reflected, sonically, in The Stooges and the MC5. It can be argued that The White Stripes adopts both, severely paring down The Stooges' and the MC5's long, often experimental, song structures.

development until the late-eighties when it carved its niche in the 'underground' scene with Detroit Techno. Being a fan of hard rock, not rap or electronica, Jack White sought out alternate influences.¹⁶⁹ While apprenticing in an upholstery shop, Jack White was introduced to Flat Duo Jets and, locals, the Gories by his mentor (Brian Muldoon). Each of these bands were bass-less, garage-influenced blues groups.¹⁷⁰ The Gories also had a female drummer. These punk influences were complemented by rock staples of Bob Dylan¹⁷¹ and Led Zeppelin – choices that Roach argues were countercultural in an environment whose major contributions of the era included Eminem and Kid Rock.

The Gories, the Dirtbombs and the Sights were all local contemporaries of the White Stripes creating similar musics, involved in similar movements. The White Stripes were the only one of the groups that achieved significant, lasting success. Subsequently, while they were part of a contemporary scene, viewing The White Stripes as being historically and sociologically continuous with an indie tradition benefits from stretching beyond their immediate locale to a globally mediated indie ethos. Both members of the White Stripes are white. The two-piece ensemble is an extension of the punk's minimalist legacy (when compared to the standard garage-rock five piece band). They have a female member who is not (often) a vocalist,¹⁷² her primary role is as an instrumentalist. The female presence helped increase the band's appeal to labels like Sympathy For The

¹⁶⁹ Roach, *Morphing*, 14.

¹⁷⁰ The Gories had two guitars and a drummer whereas the Flat Duo Jets were solely one guitar and one drummer.

¹⁷¹ The White Stripes covered Bob Dylan's 'One More Cup of Coffee' for their first record.

¹⁷² Meg White sings lead on two songs in the White Stripes discography, neither of which are singles.

Record Industry, who had a noted affinity for ‘female music.’¹⁷³ Sixties garage-rock was a markedly male enterprise (though nearly all non-vocal instrumental positions in popular music were as well, at the time).¹⁷⁴ While the im/plausibility of reading a feminist imperative into the White Stripes will be discussed later, for the current discussion of demographics, Meg White’s presence is important.

Musically, the White Stripes clearly enact nearly all the attributes of a sixties garage-rock band indicating their affiliation with the early 2000s garage-rock revival. However, they tend to take these attributes a step towards punk-rock thereby enacting its significant history of authenticity through resistance. Michael Hicks (1999) exploration of garage rock identifies the definitive attributes of garage-rock as the rhythmic monad, a “quasi-futuristic love of sheer speed,”¹⁷⁵ restricted harmonic vocabulary, rhythmic riffs, fuzz tones and post-Jagger vocalisms. The ‘rhythmic monad’ is an accentuation of every beat in the bar (in the typical 4/4: strong-strong-strong-strong), connoting pure power and accelerating the tempo.¹⁷⁶ While Hicks’ example, The Yardbirds, used this rhythmic monad to create a point of emphasis or climax in the song, the White Stripes use it throughout entire songs. In ‘Black Math,’¹⁷⁷ Meg White accentuates every beat of the bar to create a blistering tempo of nearly 180 beats per minute. This tempo is not an anomaly. Their first single, “Let’s Shake Hands” reaches a speed around 185 beats per minute. Meg

¹⁷³ True, *Mutant*, 73.

¹⁷⁴ The notable exception would be Maureen Tucker, the drummer for The Velvet Underground – though, we have already explored how Tucker functions as an early precursor for the indie community.

¹⁷⁵ Hicks, “Garage,” 30.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30-1.

¹⁷⁷ With the exception of the chorus which adopts a half-time feel.

White's drum technique in 'Let's Shake Hands' further emphasizes the band's tendency towards speed, power and amateurism. The drum pattern, written in Figure 1,¹⁷⁸ is performed with one hand instead of two; the only time two drums are struck simultaneously, one of the drums is operated by a foot pedal (the bass drum). Meg

Figure 1:

	1	2	3	4
c	X			
sd		X	X	X
bd	X		cymbal	

bd= bass drum, sd = snare drum, c =

White's tendency to perform this beat while grasping onto her drum throne with one hand, leaning heavily into her strokes, is captured on 2007's *Under The Great White Northern Lights* tour DVD.¹⁷⁹ The gesture seems to imply the placement of excessive force (power) into her strokes, while the minimalistic beat permits the prolonged performance of a song at such a quick tempo. Grasping onto the drum throne may also be taken as a sign of amateurism, lacking (a masculinized) control over the manipulation of her instrument. Meg's approach to the drums, eschewing steady, constructed beats in favor of strictly accenting the skeletal rhythm, is considerably minimalistic compared to the norm for rock drumming. This proclivity for minimalistic beats with even accents and fast tempos carries with the White Stripes throughout their career.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Interestingly, the beat also happens to be a skeleton of the "2-and, 4" drum-beat archetypal of British Invasion pop and its rockabilly predecessor (James E. Perone, *Mods, Rockers, and the Music of British Invasion* [London: Prager Publishers, 2009], 42).

¹⁷⁹ "The White Stripes - Let's Shake Hands (live)," video clip, YouTube.

¹⁸⁰ 'Blue Orchid,' the leading single off their penultimate record, *Get Behind Me Satan*, employs the technique to reach a tempo of roughly 160 beats per minute.

Hick's assertion that garage-bands employ a 'restricted' harmonic foundation is better conveyed as a 'blues-based,' guitar-focused, harmonic foundation (focusing on I, IV and V harmonies in the open-position¹⁸¹ guitar keys of E, A, D and G). Seeing as how a blues-based vocabulary is the basis of a vast amount of popular music after 1950, this hardly appears as a distinguishing characteristic. That said, certain White Stripes songs express a pronouncedly limited vocabulary. For instance, in 'Little Room' Jack White sings a short melody with only drums as accompaniment, of which there is an implied harmony of only two chords (See Appendix A). Interestingly, the lyrics suggest that the band's expansion was inevitable, but the only way to move forward is to return to your roots. 'Cannon' bases its chord changes around a repeated riff, but there is no change in overall harmony from the tonic chord of E major. The 'rhythmic riffs,' which Hicks finds emblematic of garage rock, use guitar chords in a repeated rhythmic pattern, instead of dextrous single note riffs. He offers "Louie Louie" by The Kingsmen as an example. While this is hardly a unique attribute to garage-rock, there is something to be argued for in the garage-ness (punky primitivism) of bands who employ this 'rudimentary' form of composition. The White Stripes almost exclusively use these kinds of 'rhythmic riffs,' even popular single note riffs like 'Seven Nation Army' or 'The Hardest Button To Button' become chordal riffs as the song climaxes. Even towards the end of their career, as their musical language became more expansive, *Icky Thump*'s 'Bone Broke' and strictly employs the technique.

¹⁸¹ Chords are constructed with the aid of open strings.

Hicks further includes that garage-rock groups are characterized by the use of ‘fuzz’ and ‘post-Jagger vocalisms.’ The use of ‘fuzz’ as a stylistic indicator is also difficult to translate into the garage-rock revival – guitar distortion is hardly a distinguishing factor in the twenty-first century. Jack White favors fuzz tones which seem over the top, or out of control: the opening seconds of their breakthrough single, ‘Dead Leaves And The Dirty Ground’ contain a loud squeal from Jack White’s guitar unintentionally feeding back. This feedback is not the virtuosic sort, employed and controlled; it appears as a mistake signifying a lack of control over one’s instrument (enacting a punk-rock amateurism). ‘Post-Jagger vocalisms’ are similarly difficult to decipher. While it is difficult to determine what might be ‘Jaggeresque’ about a vocal performance, there are some salient attributes of Jack White’s vocals that are decidedly ‘not-Jaggeresque’ – if we are to expand ‘Jaggeresque’ as emblematic of Whiteley’s treatment of the Rolling Stones as ‘cock rock.’ Most prominently, this ‘anti-machoism’ can be heard in the use of relatively indecipherable falsetto vocals. An example occurs in ‘Black Math,’ but this style is featured more often in the White Stripes live work.¹⁸² The falsetto vocals may have origins in early African-American blues music, seeing as Jack White listens to and covers much of that repertoire, though they are also indicative of a punk aesthetic. Jack White does not employ his falsetto vocals with the intent of creating precise vocal flourishes, as would Thom Yorke of Radiohead or Björk. His falsetto exemplifies Seth Bovey’s interpretation of punk vocals: “raspy, nasal, and slightly high in

¹⁸² Jagger tended to avoid falsetto vocals, though there are exceptions, for example ‘Miss You.’ However, the falsetto vocals are consistent with the disco influence on this track, which was a relatively short-lived phase in their career.

pitch, with the power to penetrate the sonic clutter generated by the band.”¹⁸³ This description is echoed in *Pitchfork*’s review of *White Blood Cells*: “The guitar echoes the second half of Neil Young’s *Rust Never Sleeps* [a similarly fuzz-driven record]. But Jack’s vocals are pure indie rock -- bratty and unashamedly so -- and in his upper register, his voice yowls and cracks with pissed adolescence.”¹⁸⁴

It is nearly impossible to find songs from the White Stripes discography that are missing more than one of Hicks’ key attributes. As was presented in the previous chapter, Hicks interprets garage-rock as an early site for values of independence through antagonism and agonism. The White Stripes amplify these trends. As the White Stripes’ fiscal resources expanded throughout their career, so did the amount of time spent in the recording studio (and, for *Icky Thump*, the sophistication of the studio itself). While it would be difficult to argue they ever fully abandoned their garage-rock roots, it is appropriate to acknowledge the sounding of these roots became complicated later in their career. Meg White’s drum beats still rarely, if ever, featured fills. At the same time, her patterns became more technically proficient as she ventured beyond skeletal accents. The ‘restricted’ harmonic framework and focus on rhythmic riffs, particularly in *Get Behind Me Satan*, was challenged as Jack White started to write songs on the piano rather than the guitar.¹⁸⁵ The possibility of ‘Jaggeresque’ vocals accentuate towards the end of their career as Jack White adopts a slightly more ‘macho’ persona. These final two attributes

¹⁸³ Bovey, “Don’t Tread” 452.

¹⁸⁴ Dan Killan and Ryan Schreiber, “The White Stripes: White Blood Cells | Album Reviews | Pitchfork,” *Pitchfork*, August 23, 2001.

¹⁸⁵ Guitarist, “Jack White: Total Guitar Interview,” in *Guitarist Presents: Rock Guitar Heroes*, ed. Cliff Douse (Bath: Future Publishing, 2011), 214.

will be discussed in more depth when considering the indie ethos and its praise of sonic experimentalism as well as the role of masculinity in the White Stripes. In sum, the White Stripes represent a heavily punk-influenced form of garage-rock. The punk influenced encouraged a reading of resistance, though as their career progressed and the increasing translucence of their indie backdrop allowed for a reframing of their identity, there emerged a multivalency between reading their resistance as a movement contrived by power (representing its own roots in romantic authenticity) or a movement which seeks to break from that power.

Indie Conventions

Indie's conventional amateurism is shared with the 'garage-band' and punk-rock ethos, each woven into the White Stripes' sonic imprint. Jack would always instruct engineers "about not making [his music] sound too good. He wanted it as raw as possible."¹⁸⁶ Everett True (journalist), in his own analysis, writes "Like all the best blues and punk, *The White Stripes* is raw, tuneful and primarily concerned with feeling and texture, not commerciality. The emphasis is on starkness, the silences that linger ominously in the gaps between vocals and drums or guitar on songs."¹⁸⁷ While a tad mythologizing, True's comments capture the overall reaction to the White Stripes' sonic identity. This identity was not unfounded, as their first record was recorded with cheap, discarded equipment (including the recording of vocals through a guitar amp to create additional distortion). As well, it featuring no overdubs, recorded live off the floor with a drummer who had been playing for no more than a couple years. However, these ideals

¹⁸⁶ True, *Mutant*, 105.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

were challenged as the band moved to more sophisticated studios and spent more time recording.¹⁸⁸ In spite of this sonic shift, *Rolling Stone* reviews their final record writing, “The White Stripes are justly renowned for cracking a hit parade of mad compression and synthesized everything with naught but a guitar, a drum kit and some analog tape.”¹⁸⁹ Through any changes, the ‘minimalist’ two-piece identity seems inescapable. Highlighted in this quote are the two instruments (guitar and drums), no doubt emphasized for their ‘primitive’ character,¹⁹⁰ along with their use of vintage equipment.

When Jack White wrote the songs for *Get Behind Me Satan* on piano, without transferring the songs back to guitar as was done on *Icky Thump*, the album was widely rejected (by fans and media) as being too ambitious. Their normative ‘self-limitation’ resonates with the overwhelming majority of their material, but is also aided by the amount of self-mythologizing with which Jack White engages. Jack White’s famous ‘rule of three’ limits the band to certain rules: only three colours will be used (red, white and black), only three sounding instruments (voice, Jack’s instrument and Meg’s instrument),¹⁹¹ three elements of a songwriting: melody, rhythm and storytelling (harmony is notably absent), are amongst the most commonly referenced materializations

¹⁸⁸ Though, the longest they ever spent recording was three weeks – this is still a notable and unprecedented expediency.

¹⁸⁹ Christgau, Robert. “Icky Thump | Album Reviews | Rolling Stone.” *Rolling Stone* June 11, 2007.

¹⁹⁰ The drums are, perhaps, the most ‘primitive’ instrument – “a membrane stretched across a circular frame that is beaten with a wooden stick (Théberge, *Any Sound*, 3).” While the electric guitar is far from primitive, its identity as a ‘real’ instrument, stemming from the physical relationship between the player and the instrument, separates it from synthesizers and other electronic instruments (Théberge, *Any Sound*, 158).

¹⁹¹ There are a few tracks in the first record with more than one guitar being played, however those parts were performed by an additional guitarist. On the second record, *De Stijl* the ‘rule of three’ is broken by the addition of a distorted violin part on ‘I’m Bound To Pack It Up.’ Thus, this rule appears more so as a myth based on what usually happens, which often distorts what does happen. It also borrows from their (visual) live presentation.

of this rule. Jack White mythologizes the ‘rule of three,’ naming himself ‘Jack White III’ on his album credits and creating the Third Man Complex.¹⁹²

Their ‘self-limitation’ is also highlighted through the use of vintage equipment. These mediums are conceived as a more direct relationship to the music, borrowing (as does the electric guitar) from the qualitatively different (laborious) physicality of the medium. The *Elephant* record sleeve boasts “No computers were used during the writing, recording, mixing or mastering of this record.”¹⁹³ Jack White’s vinyl-only record label adds to this image, and their third full-length release was the first to be immediately released as a CD (earlier records were only on vinyl). The sonic amateurism of the White Stripes borrows from an association of the electric guitar within a narrative of folk authenticity, accompanied by the identity of the band as a two-piece, inciting listeners to focus and emphasize limitations (often attributing them to the absence of band members typical to the rock format).

Their sonic amateurism/minimalism is further conveyed through their choice and implementation of reverbs and fuzzes, along with the use of live-off-the-floor recording. Bannister argues reverb “fills out...minimal instrumentation...[and it also] has the effect of covering up mistakes.”¹⁹⁴ On *the White Stripes*, this is extraordinarily audible. Listening to the first track, ‘Jimmy The Exploder,’ the added spring reverb¹⁹⁵ fills in the space during pauses. As their production and arrangements were filled out with

¹⁹² Including Third Man Studios, Third Man Records and others. He also began with Third Man Upholstery.

¹⁹³ The White Stripes, *Elephant*, 2003. V2/XL. Vinyl.

¹⁹⁴ Bannister, *White Boys*, 74.

¹⁹⁵ Spring reverb is the least expensive and most technologically unsophisticated form of reverb. It is also, likely, the most frequently used form of reverb; it is an added feature on most guitar amplifiers due to its low-cost and compact nature.

compression and overdubs in their late career, the amount of space left for reverb to fill was limited. On their final record, even songs that similarly emphasize space do not feature reverb as prominently in the mix (e.g. 'I'm Slowly Turning Into You'). The group's use of fuzz tones similarly gravitates towards sludgy and uneven timbres instead of neater distortions. 'Aluminum' best displays this 'out-of-control' character, where Jack White's guitar squeals to the extent that the melody is backgrounded. This 'out-of-control' character is aided by the 'live-feel' of their recordings. The White Stripes' recordings often include shifts in tempo that clearly problematize playing with a constant click-track (e.g. 'Icky Thump' and 'Jimmy The Exploder'). Thus, it becomes obvious that the songs were recorded live off the floor. The dirty-ness of their timbral selection also recreates the live setting inside the studio. Jim Diamond (producer, *The White Stripes*), recalls an exchange between himself and Jack after Jack insisted on singing through a guitar amp:

JD: Yeah, because I'd go, "Hey Jack, try this mic", and he'd be like, "It sounds like we're in a studio". He was very self-conscious of having it sound polished like he's in a studio. But I said, "You ARE in a studio, if you want to make a field recording, dig up Alan Lomax and have him go hook up his Ampex."¹⁹⁶

The group's iconographic minimalism is bolstered by avoiding techniques crucial in conveying a disciplined, polished studio sound.

The amateurist identity of the White Stripes also borrows from their live presentation. In Charles Keil's "People's Music Comparatively," he explores the 'counter-hegemonic' or 'people's musics' of polka and blues. He argues that, insofar as

¹⁹⁶ True, *Mutant*, 74.

economic power resides in big record companies who prefer an Apollonian style to recording (one in which technical precision is the standard), the Dionysian aspects of these musics are reserved for live performance.¹⁹⁷ ‘People’s music’ artists are forced to conform to a standard of technical precision in order to maintain commercial viability. Accordingly, the White Stripes fill out their ensemble in studio recordings: Jack White often records additional keyboard parts for studio albums. In contrast, the White Stripes take on a pronouncedly Dionysian live show. They, famously, do not use set-lists. Every show becomes unique, combatting the tendency for arena rock shows to become heavily standardized (as technical cues became too intricate to improvise). This also reflects punk’s history as situationist art.¹⁹⁸ Jack will often cut off songs in the middle, stringing sets of four or five songs into one, creating a true uniqueness to each presentation of the material. As *Guitar World* writes, “the threat of the show being destroyed by improvisation *is* the performance.”¹⁹⁹ The situationist imperative attacks the disciplining of proper performance etiquette.

While not necessarily amateuristic, the White Stripes convey a (cautious) nostalgia that recalls a childhood naiveté. This childishness is most present in the band’s attire, wearing matching outfits and introducing themselves as a brother and sister act (Jack and his big sister Meg). Indie often has sixties mod-rock revivals where performers

¹⁹⁷ Charles Keil, “People’s Music Comparatively,” in *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues*, eds. Charles Keil and Steven Feld (Tuscan: Fenestra, 2005), 214.

¹⁹⁸ Laing, *One Chord*, 126.

¹⁹⁹ Christopher Scapalleti, “The House That Jack Built,” *Guitar World*, May 2004 (United States: Future US, 2004), 76.

dress uniformly or in striking colours.²⁰⁰ The ‘neat and tidy’ presentation of mod-rock was translated into pop, adopted as a sign of artifice/commerciality – real (read: authentic) bands play music, they do not worry about their outfits.²⁰¹ The White Stripes red, white and black aesthetic evoke this mod-rock uniformity. The accompanying peppermint candy imagery conveys a childlike campiness. Jack White claims “The point was to be as cartoonish as possible, to distract from the fact that they were white kids playing the blues.”²⁰² This, interestingly, articulates the indie unease with performing blues music – in spite of their heavy reliance on the genre. It is important to note that indie, in being an avant-garde, requires its nostalgia to avoid appearing revivalist.²⁰³ Accordingly, True writes:

[the White Stripes] wasn’t simple revivalist fare. Too many musicians fail to understand that the lessons to be drawn from old blues singers like Johnson and Leadbelly, and primitive Sixties garage bands like Alarm Clocks, Novas and early Troggs, aren’t musical, necessarily. It’s not about recreating old favourites note-for-note. No, what matters is the spirit.²⁰⁴

The two-piece punk ensemble was a position from which the blues had not yet been popularly explored.

While their garage-based sound lends itself towards amateurism, the accompanying garage and blues roots complicate indie’s history with alternative

²⁰⁰ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 45. This is likely due to the significant history of mod rock as a precursor to punk – mods were also viewed by ‘rockers’ as effeminate snobs who liked music that was too modern (Perone, *Mods and Rockers*, 3).

²⁰¹ While, obviously, attire is extremely important in rock and a degree of care is instilled in attempted to present a lack of care.

²⁰² Josh Eells, “Jack Outside the Box: Jack White Is The Coolest, Weirdest, Savviest Rock Star of Our Time.” *New York Times*, April 5, 2012.

²⁰³ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 49.

²⁰⁴ True, *Mutant*, 77.

masculinities. “A majority of the terms used to describe indie as a genre are gender coded feminine,”²⁰⁵ which follows from its history with queered/alternate masculinities. This is at odds with Bovey’s garage-punk misogyny, treating women as treacherous or predatory creatures.²⁰⁶ Jack White’s masculinity resides ambiguously between these two poles. He was nicknamed ‘gentleman Jack’ following the release of ‘I’m Finding It Harder To Be A Gentleman Everyday.’ The song does not suggest that Jack wants to stop being a gentleman, the tone is melancholic and lamenting. The song does place Jack White at a crossroads between his earlier work and his later work, where he would gain some (figurative) muscle. The final verse articulates this crossroads, but punishes Jack for trying to gain this muscle (by getting mud on his shoes),

Well I never said I wouldn’t throw my jacket in the mud for you,
 But my father gave it to me so maybe I should carry you,
 Then you said, “you almost dropped me”
 So then I did, and I got mud on my shoes.

Towards the final record, Jack White’s lyrics shifted towards a garage-rock misogyny. *Icky Thump* includes ‘You Don’t Know What Love Is (You Just Do What You’re Told)’ and ‘Effect and Cause,’ both of which feature Jack taking a sharp tongue at a woman who has wronged him. Consider this excerpt from ‘Effect and Cause,’

I ain’t the reason that you gave me,
 No reason to return your call.
 You built a house of cards,
 And got shocked when you saw them fall.
 Well I ain’t saying I’m innocent,
 In fact the reverse,
 But if your heading to the grave,
 You don’t blame the hearse.

²⁰⁵ Fonarow, *Empire*, 40.

²⁰⁶ Bovey, “Don’t Tread On Me,” 454.

You're like a little girl yelling at her brother,
Cause you lost his ball.

Jack White chastises and blames the female character for his lack of freedom.

Meg White's presence grouped the White Stripes with other 'female' rock groups, recording for labels and performing in venues (arranged by promoters along with managers, other bands, etc.) that were friendly for 'female rock' – a niche audience.²⁰⁷ Jack may present himself as the leader of the group, but he affords Meg considerable power as well. Ben Blackwell explains that, "Jack directed Meg. Essentially he told her what to play until she was able to come up with her own things. He didn't record the drums himself — why not? It wouldn't have been a band."²⁰⁸ While this has the effect of elevating Meg, making her contributions essential, her contributions are essential in conveying the amateurism of the group. Jack did encourage her to take more of a leading role in the group and their divorce also allowed Meg to become more confident. She felt better able to give input when she was not married to Jack.²⁰⁹ The White Stripes' placement within punk's feminist imperative is fortified by Meg's presence and, simultaneously complicated by her relationship with Jack.

All in all, Meg's presence in the group is not focal. Meg sings lead vocals on two tracks, 'Into The Cold, Cold Night' and 'Passive Manipulation.' The latter features a repetitive, fem-positive lyric:

Women, listen to your mothers
Don't just succumb to the wishes of your brothers

²⁰⁷ True, *Mutant*, 73.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 79.

²⁰⁹ True, *Mutant*, 80.

Take a step back, take a look at one another
 You need to know the difference...
 Between a father and a lover

Meg, however, does not receive a songwriting credit for 'Passive Manipulation.' The drums are not a soloist instrument and Meg is not considered the leader of the group. The drums are an instrument of considerable power; they are more present than a bassist playing root notes, for example. Nonetheless, Meg approaches her instrument with a stronger sense of amateurism than Jack (likely due to her lack of training). Almost all literature discusses the White Stripes' and Jack's intentions as one in the same.

Additionally, during the film *Under The Great White Northern Lights*, the few occasions wherein Meg did choose to speak, she was captioned – either due to her soft-spoken nature or because it was humorous to make it seem like she was too soft-spoken to be heard. The film shows Jack fiddling around and playing music (particularly the piano) in his spare time, while Meg is always the observer.

As indie rock masculinities have been queered, the sociological figures involved in the subculture developed an identity as “depressed, obsessive loners.”²¹⁰ This is best heard in 'When I Hear My Name,' whose lyrics are almost solely, “when I hear my name, I wanna disappear.” The effeminization of 'Gentleman Jack' is part of this aesthetic. Additionally, while rock bands often feature high vocal ranges, the guitarist is generally the balance of masculinity in the ensemble. By collapsing the vocalist and lead guitarist into one character, in addition to the only other member of the band being a woman, The White Stripes can be seen as upsetting this balance. Jack White takes this a step further when he covers Dolly Parton's 'Jolene' without changing the gender pronouns, begging

²¹⁰ Fonarow, *Empire*, 53.

another woman to please “not take his man.” The complex continuum between macho and fem that characterizes the White Stripes’ identity resonates with the delicate balance of garage and indie in their sound.

Indie as Resistance

It is difficult to separate indie’s stylistic and genre conventions from its ethos of resistance, hence the attributes that were placed in the previous subsection may seem a bit arbitrary. Though, this is not a crucial error with the framework, as all of these elements are simultaneously enacted and negotiated as part of each band’s identity. As with its punk-predecessors, indie is characterized by an ‘art-school sensibility.’²¹¹ This occasionally manifests on record. ‘The Nurse’ (off the ‘experimental’ *Get Behind Me Satan* record) is written for marimba, evoking a sound-art experimentalism with awkward electric guitar and drum shots. ‘St. Andrew (Battle Is In The Air)’ is similarly experimental, albeit this time working with a guest musician playing bagpipes. ‘Aluminum’ is an instrumental track about ‘what making aluminum might sound like,’ mostly containing feedback. Jack White’s affinity for the Dutch modernist art movement De Stijl is exemplified by the naming of the record (*De Stijl*) and the album artwork. In live performance, the resistance towards preplanned set lists can be taken as an interest in situationist art – ideologically attacking boredom and repetition²¹² – however, a better example would be their ‘one-note show’ featured at the beginning of the *Under The Great White Northern Lights* film, wherein Jack and Meg play one note and then leave the stage. Additionally, as many indie groups adopt an anti-performative ‘shoe-gazing’

²¹¹ Fonarow, *Empire*, 40.

²¹² Laing, *One Chord*, 126.

approach to their stage demeanor, Jack often plays facing Meg, instead of the audience. The White Stripes' resistance has been presented as possible, perhaps likely, but complicated. As their career progresses, it becomes easier to read their assertions of independence as a generic rock ambivalence towards authority figures. In their first music video, 'Hotel Yorba,' Jack and Meg seem disinterested and uncomfortable. By their final video, 'Conquest,' they are clearly adept at performing for the camera. The ability to read this 'resistance' as part of an indie tradition will largely borrow from the other negotiating factors which have been explored in this section as constantly veering towards challenging the boundaries of what may be considered indie.

Summary

Garage Rock is a less-than-obvious extension of the indie tradition, if an extension at all.²¹³ Its genealogical relation to Chicago Blues creates a musical language and systems of signification which map onto a 'mainstream' rock aesthetic. As was explored by Leach, there is a strand of romantic authenticity embedded in popular music that emphasizes resistance and discursive anti-commercialism.²¹⁴ Garage Rock has come to be integrated into indie rock by: A. amplifying and focusing on its resistance's relation to punk rock (particularly punk's amateurist aesthetic) and B. transplanting the music into a time where it develops a sense of kitsch – it evokes a sense of aesthetic distance that amplifies the importance of nostalgia and sentiment at the expense of other authenticities.

²¹³ Bannister links both indie and rock to modernism and its patriarchal epistemology through canonism (Bannister, *White Boys*, 67). Interestingly, recent articles in *Stereogum* (Chris DeVille, , "Deconstructing: 10 Years of The White Stripes *Elephant* And Exploded Hearts *Guitar Romantic*," *Stereogum*, April 1, 2013.) and *SPIN* (Rob Harvilla, "The White Stripes', 'Elephant' Turns 10," *SPIN*, April 1, 2013.) have celebrated the ten year anniversary of *Elephant*'s release.

²¹⁴ Leach, "Vicars," 145.

The White Stripes exhibit these two trends and their identity as an indie group is, thus, negotiated in conjunction with the various signs they deploy through their institutional affiliations, significant history in punk rock, indie ethos and their situationist art-rock. In *Under The Great White Northern Lights*, Jack White recalls his favourite quote written about the band: “the White Stripes are simultaneously the most real band in the world and the most fake band in the world.” The White Stripes recognize the ‘fake’-ness of white-bred blues-rock and, in a move rife with postmodern pastiche, approach it from the viewpoint of a meta-commentary through their amplification of its punk attributes, their presentation and their (multivalent) ethos of independence and resistance.

St. Vincent

Institutional Affiliations

The White Stripes’ career has been characterized as treading a careful line, prodding at (or passing) the boundaries of indie discourse. Conversely, my discussion of St. Vincent’s identity will investigate her embodiment of multiple different subjects adopted by and developed within indie at the turn of the twenty-first century. The historical identity of her institutional affiliation and the relative magnitude of her commercial impact strongly ground her identity as indie. All three of St. Vincent’s records have been released on 4AD Records. The label has a significant history within U.K. post-punk, creating a “dark skeletal sound”²¹⁵ which was taken as emblematic of the genre. As U.K. post-punk and new wave started cross-pollinating with the indie scene, 4AD followed suit. According to Collins, “By 1985 the 4AD label had established itself

²¹⁵ Andrew Collins, “1980 Forward - 25 Years of 4AD,” *BBC 6 Music*.

as one of the leading independent record companies on the planet.”²¹⁶ It crossed into North America releasing all four of the Pixies’ studio records. Unlike many of its competitors, 4AD was never sold to a major label. In the late-nineties, the label was sold to Beggars Group, who have their own significant history in indie-rock and post-punk. Beggars Group, beginning as Beggar’s Banquet, released the first Gary Numan record. 4AD became one of Beggars Group’s four subsidiaries, which ties 4AD with Rough Trade, XL Recordings and Matador Records.²¹⁷

Indie is meant to feel small. This manifests in and is negotiated through performance spaces, circulation numbers and media outlets. The two concerts that I attended in St. Vincent’s 2011 tour were at Ritual Nightclub in Ottawa, with a venue capacity of 335 people²¹⁸ and the Town Ballroom in Buffalo, with a venue capacity of 950 people.²¹⁹ Most of her performance venues hover closer to a 1000 person capacity.²²⁰ The low profile of most 4AD artists (aside from recent exception, Bon Iver) immediately suggests an ‘indie’ affiliation. US sales figures place Bon Iver’s breakthrough record at 317,355 units compared to St. Vincent’s 44,334 for their 2011 releases.²²¹ The top selling record of the year was released by Adele, selling 5.82²²² million copies, over one hundred

²¹⁶ Andrew Collins, “1980 Forward - 25 Years of 4AD,” *BBC 6 Music*.

²¹⁷ While St. Vincent’s first record was released the same year as the White Stripes final record (released on Warner Records), the Beggar’s Group sale does tie the two groups together.

²¹⁸ OttawaVenues.com, “Ottawa Venues - Venue Directory.”

²¹⁹ Ticket Seating!, “Town Ballroom Tickets in Buffalo, NY. Town Ballroom Seat Charts, Events and Schedule.”

²²⁰ Fonarow, *Empire*, 63

²²¹ Drowned In Sound, “Sales Figures for Pitchfork’s top 50 albums,” December 27, 2011.

²²² Keith Caulfield, “Adele Rules 2011 With Top Selling Album.” January 4, 2012.

and thirty times more than St. Vincent's *Strange Mercy* (though, interestingly Adele's record was released through XL Recordings). Though, it is not popular practice to watch album sales as a means of informing decision-making. Decisions are more immediately based on the identity of media outlets within which artists receive coverage and their discursive treatment of the artists. St. Vincent's duet with Bon Iver for the *Twilight: New Moon* soundtrack received considerable attention, given the high profile of the film (the record reached #1 on the *Billboard Top 200 Albums Chart*). A *Pitchfork* interview with St. Vincent following the release of the film writes:

When the *Twilight* folks announced the tracklist for the soundtrack album, we did triple-takes. Thom Yorke! Death Cab! Grizzly Bear with Beach House's Victoria Legrand! Bon Iver with St. Vincent! This is almost certainly the most Pitchfork-friendly teenage vampire romance soundtrack album of all time!²²³

The interview acknowledges that the target audience of the film does not match that of the music. As such, it becomes more understandable that St. Vincent's audience did not extend itself following her contribution to the film. She has one *MTV* interview and has not received any video awards. The interviewer highlights his surprise at the discovery of St. Vincent's Janet Jackson influence.²²⁴ He also questions whether she has gotten used to her increased profile in magazines, which then focuses on her cover story in *SPIN* – the highest-profile publication of BUZZMEDIA, which ties together other indie outlets *Stereogum*, *Absolute Punk*, *Indie Shuffle*, *Brooklyn Vegan* and more. Thus, her coverage is sparse (small), generally within outlets with historical indie affiliations, and the discourse similarly reifies her position within as indie.

²²³ Tom Breihan, "St. Vincent Talks *Twilight* Soundtrack," *Pitchfork*, October 1, 2009.

²²⁴ "St. Vincent Interview (2011)," video clip, YouTube.

Historically and Sociologically Continuous Musical Tradition

Given the opacity of her indie backdrop, St. Vincent will be much freer to embody different kinds of subjects and authenticities as they will all be lent a fairly unquestionable smallness (read: resistance). St. Vincent (Annie Clark) is a solo artist. The ambiguous group name could refer to the entire ensemble or Clark herself, mirroring indie's adoption of punk-rock's derisive attitude towards individualistic expression. Like Meg White, St. Vincent plays an instrument, the guitar²²⁵; importantly different, St. Vincent has an evident background in instrumental training. As is prototypical within the indie community, she is white and (deducing from lyrics) straight, displaying a particular unease with her own sexuality.²²⁶ While her attire is feminine, it is not youthful or campy (she often wears very neutral colours, whites and blacks). She confesses in a *Pitchfork* interview, "Physically, I'm a demure-looking person,"²²⁷ conveying a mature and reserved image. Born in Tulsa, raised in Dallas, St. Vincent now lives in Brooklyn. As such, her work does not seem to be necessarily continuous with a local scene. After spending three years at Berklee College of Music (majoring in guitar), she toured as a backing musician for indie-folk artist Sufjan Stevens and indie-pop ensemble The Polyphonic Spree (also natives of Dallas). Signing with a strongly British-based label to release her 2007 solo debut, St. Vincent is a product of the new globalized landscape. Her connection to a history in indie-rock came mediated through various global outlets (the

²²⁵ On record she plays virtually all the instruments. A woman playing any instrument is considered novel compared to the music which indie opposes.

²²⁶ Fonarow, *Empire*, 72.

²²⁷ Amanda Petrusich, "St. Vincent: Annie Clark Returns With Her Most Candid Album Yet, *Strange Mercy*," September 6, 2011.

Internet, globally distributed records, international media). She tells *Pitchfork* that she grew up listening to artists on 4AD and Matador, finding her music at CD World in Dallas.²²⁸ Her genre has been described as indie-pop, art-rock and occasionally as synth-punk (though this classification is only especially apt to describe her third and fourth releases). Because her first two records (*Marry Me*, *Actor*) have a significantly different sound from her third and fourth releases (*Strange Mercy*, *KROKODIL b/w GROT*), I will explore indie conventions through her sound as divided by these two categories.

While her sound gravitates between two different sonic manifestations of the indie ethos (art-rock to synth-punk), St. Vincent's connection to a continuous indie tradition largely rests on her fitting of a sociological profile. Theo Cateforis (2004) exploration of Devo and Whiteness identifies many of the sociological trends that would carry through new-wave into indie. Devo appeared as 'mechanical men' with a significant history in the early twentieth century avant-garde, namely the Futurists.²²⁹ Their robot identity was articulated through a heavy reliance on synthesized sounds (not just synthesizers but also drum machines and synthesized bass emulators), the use of odd-timings to disrupt danceability and sharp, jerky stage motions that would suggest an unusually visible nervousness for an experienced performer. It also disrupts the fluidity that has become indicative of a (racialized) 'naturalness' identifiable with a (similarly racialized) sexual potency.²³⁰ St. Vincent's body mannerisms on stage follow in this tradition of sharp,

²²⁸ Petrusich, "St. Vincent."

²²⁹ Cateforis, "Devo," 567.

²³⁰ Bannister, *White Boys*, 34.

jerky, nervous shudders, subverting the sexualization of her character.²³¹ Cateforis argues the disruption of the humanism through the use of robotic imagery lends articulates a particular unease over the white body in European and American cultures.²³² This is re/articulated through tropes of childhood and nostalgia which idealize a state of preadolescence when sex was still tabooed. St. Vincent continues this trend of intellectualism and discomfort with one's body, suggesting a social alienation. Combining this presentation with her relatively obscure public profile, St. Vincent conveys a fairly tangible image through which one can recognize her as 'indie.' The exploration of her ethos will follow suit. Her sonic identity presents itself as (somewhat) problematic with ties to some of rock's more grandiose moments. Bearing in mind that certain signifiers may carry more weight (power) than others, the exploration of her sound should be read more so as an exploration of how a sound became adopted as indie (fitting her sociological and institutional profile), rather than how indie developed into a particular sound. In this light, her work will be viewed as representative of two different kinds of 'independent' or 'resisting' subjects.

Indie Conventions

Marry Me (2007)/Actor (2009)

In the mid-to-late nineties it became increasingly common for indie groups to expand membership beyond the four-piece ensemble, create ornate orchestrations and break free from a lo-fi religiosity.²³³ St. Vincent's first two releases are both a product of

²³¹ Cateforis notes David Byrne's use of these motions (Cateforis, "Devo," 583). St. Vincent recently released a duet record with David Byrne.

²³² Cateforis, "Devo," 568.

²³³ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 39-40.

and contributor to this trend. The instrumentation in 'Paris Is Burning' is a good representation of her style in this period, making heavy use of brass, woodwind and stringed instruments along with a rock ensemble (vocals, guitar, bass, drums). As would be expected, the technical proficiency needed to compose for and manipulate all these instruments would complicate indie's normative amateurism and simplicity. For *Actor*, St. Vincent explains: "my writing process was that I didn't touch any instruments to write it, so I was making it all on the computer, and really the arrangements were coming first, the intricate thing."²³⁴ 'Without instruments,' in this context, refers to the use of a MIDI keyboard and sound samples to emulate a vast array of instruments. While this eliminates some of the difficulties associated with learning the instruments, a degree of virtuosity is required to create and balance contrapuntal figures for each voice. Through this emphasis on large orchestration, St. Vincent aligns herself with a history of art-rock.

The term 'art-rock' denotes both the artsy impulse which followed the Velvet Underground through to indie culture, as well as a brand of "[60s and 70s] progressive rock which emulates the European classical tradition: extended pieces, orchestration, complex harmonies and rhythms and 'grand concepts.'"²³⁵ Chapter one examined the Velvet Underground genealogy as foundational for the 'art-school origins' of indie-rock. Bannister argues indie and prog rock share a high/low art distinction, each representing themselves as high art.²³⁶ This intellectualized high-art, in both cases, becomes

²³⁴ Shalin Graves, "Interview: Annie Clark A.K.A. St. Vincent On 'Strange Mercy'," *Coup De Main*, May 26, 2012.

²³⁵ Bannister, *White Boys*, 37.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25. Albeit, indie rock refuses to acknowledge its high art status. It gains its high-art status by separating itself from what might be too 'mainstream,' thus implicitly carving out a category of low-art.

desexualized as its school-bred virtuosity (reflecting the hegemonic influence of classical music in school curricula) is attached to the sociological figure of ‘the nerd.’²³⁷

Progressive rock’s grandiosity, read as self-indulgence, became a key precursor for the creation of punk; consequently, it is difficult to see how indie could locate resistance in a sound to which it considers itself a foil. Though, there appears to be an important continuum between sociological (and some ethical) attributes of both musics.

Hesmondalgh argues the nostalgic classicism in indie culture (a lo-fi disciplining) had become emptied of its political meaning by the nineties. As there emerged the possibility to discipline oneself into being an indie subject, the lack of transgression from its tokenisms become indicative of a kind of ‘rockist self-indulgence’ to which indie was intended to be the antithesis.²³⁸ Indie subjects sought new sounds to revive its ideological resistance, one of which was post-rock. Post-rock articulated high art loftiness through larger bands, fuller instrumentation and extensive multi-tracking.²³⁹ While St. Vincent is not a post-rock artist – she writes shorter songs with vocals instead of long, expansive instrumentals with minimal harmonic motion – the change represents a larger trend in which indie turned favorably to (properly articulated) grandiosity. Recognizing the similarities between the sociological figures involved in both strands of art-rock music, the musical techniques can be repurposed within different contexts, with different audiences, and signify different results. Indie labels are an important negotiator in signification, but also (as evident from groups like Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic

²³⁷ Bannister, *White Boys*, 38.

²³⁸ Hesmondalgh, “Indie Aesthetics,” 55-6.

²³⁹ Hibbett, “Indie,” 65.

Zeros) taking a communal approach to this orchestral grandiosity is equally important. By avoiding extended solos and marketing individual members of the group (there is no one named Edward Sharpe in Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros), the use of a large musical conglomerate can come across as folky – the presentation of the group as a band of lonely nobodies.

St. Vincent's initial records avoid art-rock's individualism by situating her technical virtuosity as part of a larger ensemble, not focusing on her own instrument. This is most evident through the ambiguous band name and her computer-heavy compositional technique that facilitates diversity in orchestration. Of the twenty-two album tracks released during this period, only two contain guitar solos²⁴⁰ ('Now Now' and 'Marrow') – though they are both textural and melodic, fitting within the song, rather than emphasizing a distance from the rest of the ensemble. Most of her virtuosic, single-note lines appear as hooks or melodies (e.g. 'Actor Out Of Work' or 'Black Rainbow'). Additionally, the brass and woodwind usually occupy the (non-vocal) melody lines, as they function monophonically.

Much of her virtuosity in this phase of her career is articulated through compositional technique. St. Vincent often writes vocal melodies that present themselves as 'awkward' in phrasing, requiring some time to digest (thwarting the generic contour of popular song). The 'Paris Is Burning' vocal melody is emblematic of this syncopation. Notes are suspended across bars, subverting the expected meter, resulting in phrasing

²⁴⁰ I am defining a guitar solo as the use of the guitar as the lead instrument in a way which is not replicated throughout the rest of the song (suggesting a melodic figure).

which feels disruptive.²⁴¹ Chord progressions and accents uncommon to popular music are used frequently. The outro of 'Black Rainbow' employs a (+4/-2) sequence (an immediate, transposed, restatement of a motif in the same instrumental voice which was a popular composition technique in nineteenth century Classical and Romantic era musics). 'Not Now,' 'Jesus Saves, I Spend' and 'Marrow' each employ simple 3/4 or 4/4 time signatures but fill them with irregular syncopations. The syncopations employed are not of the blues variety, with the intent to create a groove focused on accentuating the back-beat; they are the kind of syncopations which create pronounced metrical disturbance. Her identity as an indie artist likely highlights the metrical disturbances and differentiating compositional techniques, as she is considered both with and against a history of antagonism. *Pitchfork* reviews her first record: "at every turn *Marry Me* takes the more challenging route of twisting already twisted structures and unusual instrumentation to make them sound perfectly natural."²⁴² In spite of using complex forms, her writing often has a straightforwardness to it. 'Actor Out Of Work' uses only two chords, following a simple structure and lasting a mere two minutes.²⁴³

Her lyrical themes reflect an indie character: the socially awkward wallflower. 'Now Now' deals with childhood bullying issues singing, "I'm not your mother's favourite dog/I'm not the carpet you walk on." The chorus features a chorus of young children nagging, "You don't mean that say you're sorry." These unresolved childhood

²⁴¹ While most of her vocal melodies mirror this metaphor of disruption, certain tracks (e.g. 'Laughing with a Mouth of Blood') feature fairly straightforward melodies: focusing on conjunct motion and lacking in syncopation.

²⁴² Joshua Klein, "St. Vincent: Marry Me | Album Reviews | Pitchfork." *Pitchfork*. July 27, 2007.

²⁴³ The structure is: verse-verse- turnaround-verse- turnaround-verse. Interestingly, the two chords most used are I and a vi, not a standard I-IV blues progression.

issues resonate with indie's nostalgia for a childish state of sexual naiveté. 'Marry Me' conveys a sense of pathos where she tells her partner her greatest strengths will be revealed when she is not there, "Marry me, John, marry me, John, I'll be so good to you/ You won't realize I'm gone." In 'The Party' she is the guest who stays too late, transfixed on minute details creating a social awkwardness: "I licked the ice cube from your empty glass/So we stayed much too late till they're cleaning the ashtrays," and "I sit transfixed by a hole in your T-shirt/I've said much too much in the trying to speak up." The language used in her lyrics sometimes conveys an over-intellectualism articulating social-awkwardness through a quasi-autism. In 'What Me Worry' she sings "Love is just a bloodmatch to see who endures lash after last with panache." Sean O'Neal, writing for *The A.V. Club*, explains:

"much like the lilt of Disney-soundtrack sweetness that occasionally colors her spiky, baroque pop songs, or the way she transforms an otherwise-somber mood with a wry lyrical twist...That playful, push-and-pull dichotomy between light and dark defined Clark's previous albums (2007's *Marry Me* and 2009's *Actor*)."²⁴⁴

St. Vincent uses a dry, ironic wit to colour her bright orchestral pop with the scathing intellectualism characteristic of the indie ethos.

Strange Mercy (2011)/KROKODIL b/w²⁴⁵ GROT (2012)

Emily Dolan's (2010) exploration of indie-pop argues that the genre utilizes a nostalgic aesthetic distancing, describable as kitsch, employing forgotten sounds which are abstracted from their social background:

²⁴⁴ Sean O'Neal, "Interview: St. Vincent." *The A.V. Club*. September 15, 2011.

²⁴⁵ 'B/w' stands for 'backed with.' This KROKODIL b/w GROT was a special single released for Record Store Day 2012.

Kitsch, a positive, redemptive kitsch – pervades indie music, from its consumption to its production. Thus, we can recast what it means when a song or band is co-opted by the mainstream: it loses its aura, not of authenticity, but of sentiment.²⁴⁶

Continuing a tradition of over-intellectualization, indie's use of kitsch:

reiterates the importance of 'authenticity' while also hinting at authenticity's constructed nature....it depends upon, and simultaneously deconstructs the concepts of authenticity and truth, while its sound world borrows in equal measure the perceived 'rawness' of punk and the compelling sweetness and catchiness of mainstream pop.²⁴⁷

St. Vincent's shift to a resuscitated eighties synth-punk style can be viewed both as an attempt to convey a kitsch nostalgia, but also as a means through which she can convey a continuous history with synth-punk and celebrate its significance within the post-punk/indie community. As previously mentioned, indie must be nostalgic without being revivalist, approaching these resuscitations with the forward-looking sensibility of the avant-garde.²⁴⁸ Also, transplanting the music into a new social context creates new significations for its internal characteristics (e.g. the issues with a 'new male sensibility' may not reappear outside of the eighties). St. Vincent must approach the idea of authenticity with a postmodern pastiche, loaded with irony and cynicism. As St. Vincent explains in an interview with CNN:

Obviously you have to mine the past for music and influences and everything like that. But I actually came to the conclusion that it's a somewhat cynical view to be nostalgic, because it assumes that the past is better than the present or the future and I don't necessarily believe that's true.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ Emily I. Dolan, "'...this little ukelele tells the truth': indie pop and kitsch authenticity," *Popular Music* 29:3 (2010): 466.

²⁴⁷ Dolan, "ukelele," 458.

²⁴⁸ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 49.

²⁴⁹ "Performing is a 'Mixing Console to your Personality,'" video clip, CNN.

Thus the sound is recycled, but it must maintain a contemporary aesthetic – best articulated as an aura or sentiment.

This kitsch is most audible through the use of vintage synthesizer sounds. For her third record, St. Vincent's sonic imprint began to better resonate with popular tropes of 'technophobia' in indie rock scholarship. After composing her second album through MIDI, directly into her Digital Audio Workshop (in her case, GarageBand), she went on a "technological detox"²⁵⁰ and wrote the record directly on her guitar. Her guitar, subsequently, became a much more prominent voice in the record. Reflecting on her previous touring experience, St. Vincent says,

There's a lot of technology on stage. I was realizing that I was spending so much time looking down at my pedalboard and making sure I hit the right buttons at the right time, instead of, actually, performing for people.²⁵¹

Here she articulates an inability to reconcile the goals of technology with the goals of musical performance.²⁵² The new record left orchestral timbres behind; her touring band reflected this change featuring a synth player, a Mini-Moog bassist and a drummer (along with herself). She even acknowledges that "with this record, I thought: *"Okay, I'm gonna take it back to just the simplest form"*."²⁵³ – the implication being that simplicity and directness are inhibited by certain technologies.

²⁵⁰ Greg Kot, "St. Vincent Renews Her Music With 'Technological Detox'," *Chicago Tribune Arts & Entertainment*, September 29, 2011.

²⁵¹ "St. Vincent Tour Videos // 14," video clip, YouTube.

²⁵² Though, her solution was to have her keyboardist perform all of her pedal switches via an external MIDI controller – using more technology to try and do away with technology.

²⁵³ Graves, "Interview: Annie Clark."

Most interesting, though, is the unique ability for St. Vincent to simultaneously enact a 'technophobic nostalgia' and the 'robotic' futurism of new wave. The combination of the synthesizer with her rigid presentation still bears the overall affect of detaching the physicality from her electronic instrument. To further reinforce the 'robotic' element of new wave, St. Vincent relied heavily on drum machines to create this record. 'Chloe In The Afternoon,' 'Cruel,' and 'Hysterical Strength' all seem to feature unambiguously electronic drums (judging by the texture and the amount of repetition). The remaining tracks, even if they do not feature a drum machine, have a distinctly electronic flavour. There is excessive repetition and an abstention from fills, playing the drums as a machine would – (seemingly) preprogrammed. Only 'Dilettante' contains drum fills; the fills are awkwardly spacious, thwarting the way a human drummer would think. In her live performances, the drummer performs on a drum kit that combines acoustic and electric drums, keeping these synthesized timbres. As such, the futuristic discursive properties of eighties synth-punk are enacted and imbued with the 'retro' signification of the imagery and timbres.

Also to the benefit of indie disciplining, song construction also became more simplistic in St. Vincent's later work. 'KROKODIL' contains only two chords accompanied by various mechanical oscillations and other noisy contributions. The track that comes closest to experimental sound art might be the sample of her own voice in GROT, which is repeated as an ostinato behind the song: this creates interesting polyrhythms when audible, though, due to the intense volume of the instruments in the

track, it is hard to hear the sample when it is not foregrounded in the mix.²⁵⁴ In this period her writing avoids heavy syncopation. In 'Strange Mercy' there is a slight 64th note hiccup programmed into the electronic drums at constant but irregular intervals,²⁵⁵ though it seems this would be better characterized as a programmed amateurism since it is the only instrument which performs the gesture. She still uses chord progressions which differ from the I-IV-V motions and repetition of blues structures. For example, the pre-verse of 'Cruel' uses chromaticism²⁵⁶ and the vocal melody of the bridge is through-composed. Odd accents are almost completely eliminated as well: the closest example would be 'Chloe In The Afternoon' where the riff begins on the and of one, creating a slightly destabilizing effect along with the syncopated drum beat. Even though guitar solos seem to be more prominent in this phase of her career, in her live work she rarely extends guitar solos beyond their duration on the recording. Lyrically, she still has a tendency to integrate awkwardly intellectual word choices. For instance, in 'Year of the Tiger' she sings "I had to be the best of the bourgeoisie/And my kingdom for a cup of coffee."

The intellectualism in song construction is still somewhat present, beyond the previously mentioned carryovers in 'KROKODIL' and 'Chloe In The Afternoon.' The accompaniment to the synthesizer solo in the 'Surgeon' outro slowly destabilizes from a static tonality, creating a debilitatingly experimental effect. As *Luddite Stereo* reviews: "the noise freak out at the end of "surgeon"...sounds like a synthesizer output fed through

²⁵⁴ It is only foregrounded in the very beginning and end of the track.

²⁵⁵ It occurs every three phrases in a song constructed on four phrases sections. This hiccup is repeated live by a human drummer.

²⁵⁶ Not of the blues variety.

an exploding oscilloscope.”²⁵⁷ While this is occurring, the synthesizer creates rapid oscillations to distort its ability to convey a discrete pitch. ‘Northern Lights’ includes a noisy and slightly atonal guitar solo and a manic theremin solo in which it is difficult to decipher any discrete pitches (she did not hold her hand in a static position to create a discrete pitch, she waved her hand in front of the instrument to create noise).

Her lyrics are still written from the perspective of the awkward wallflower. Her writing process for the third record included a “loneliness experiment”²⁵⁸ where she eliminated cell phones and other means of contact from her immediate surroundings. She immersed herself in a recording studio in Seattle, a city where she did not live. As such, many of her lyrics took a pronounced emphasis on alienation. In ‘Dilettante’ she sings “You’re like the party I heard through a wall/I’m always watching you through a keyhole,” as an outsider observing the spectacle. In ‘Strange Mercy’ she sings, “Oh little one, I’ll tell you good news that I don’t believe/If it would help you sleep, strange mercy,” speaking to the futility of trying to cheer up a depressed listener but her impulse to ‘lie’ anyway. This empathizes with the depressed, outcast main character. In an interview with *Pitchfork*, she further entrenches her image as desexualized and over-intellectualized,

Pitchfork: ...you also write freely about sex.

AC: [laughs] Oh! [looks down] I’m Southern!

Pitchfork: [laughs] It’s funny that you’re being shy about it because the songs are so frank, in a way. A line like “I spent the summer on my back” can be read...

AC: Oh, that sounds like sex, doesn’t it?

Pitchfork: Is it not supposed to be heard that way?

²⁵⁷ “Strange Mercy - St. Vincent - album review.” *Luddite Stereo*. September 12, 2011.

²⁵⁸ Kot, “Technological Detox.”

AC: It sure can be that. It can also mean depression, but it's open to interpretation.²⁵⁹

Pitchfork is referring to the first line of 'Surgeon,' which Annie recognizes the possibility of a sexual interpretation, but suggests a perspective which is more melancholic. The combination of 'roboticism,' anxious and desexualized whiteness, kitsch nostalgia and implied simplicity/amateurism create a disciplined 'indie' imprint on St. Vincent's later work.

Indie as Resistance

St. Vincent, speaking with label-mate Merrill Garbus (fellow female singer-songwriter in the tUnE-yArDs), has the following conversation:

Merrill: Just that moment of making music when maybe the first audience of people is like *sour face* 'uhhhhh I hate this,' and not being afraid to do that because it still means that it's furthering music in general. There's a lot of ugliness that I put intentionally in my voice or in my vocal takes in the studio that I want to just keep there. And I think about that a lot, both with what we were talking about in terms of adding, you know, far out stuff into music that's essentially pop music.

Annie: Ya, pop music, totally. Ugliness is confrontational in a way that's really kinda satisfying, like, as you were saying, once you get past the 'ugh this is sour, I don't like the taste of this, and you're like oh, shit, I want more,' like there's something about it, I'm not sure, just to invite a little of that chaos in is really powerful.²⁶⁰

These two indie performers exchange words which effectively summarize the indie ethos.

They are creating pop songs with some sort of 'ugliness' that is 'confrontational,' as a means of 'furthering music.' These artists borrow structures from 'pop music' while

finding ways to encode and convey the absence of 'pop music' disciplining. In this case,

²⁵⁹ Petrusich, "Interviews: St. Vincent."

²⁶⁰ "St. Vincent & tUnE-yArDs In Conversation – Back & Forth #01," video clip, accessed March 26, 2013, YouTube.

this lack of disciplining is attached to the ugliness that Merrill places in her vocal takes, the ugliness that St. Vincent finds so satisfying. This resistance is readable by pop music fans, those who find it confrontational and react negatively, and by indie fans, those who find it confrontational and react positively. As such, indie's resistance is both one that differentiates and one that consolidates.

These two artists, importantly, describe their music as pop music, invoking the indie affiliation with pop music as opposed to rock music and its authenticities. *Coup De Main's* interview introduces Clark by writing "...and I have it on very good authority that she watched the first half of Taylor Swift's *Vector Arena* Sunday show...before rushing away to play her own show."²⁶¹ Her appreciation of 'low-art' liberates her from the constraints of rock's authenticities – similar to Warhol and the Velvet Underground attacking the 'regressive hypothesis.' As is suggested by Frith, 'pop' and 'rock' are not only genre indicators; they are ideologically loaded categories which are often invoked in opposition to one another. As such, St. Vincent's 'confrontational pop music' not only uses pop music as a means of highlighting the elements of her music which may be read as resistance, pop music itself is a method by which indie artists may articulate a resistance of Bannister's rock aesthetic.

Summary

This chapter has followed two different artists' processes of subjectification, where they have located and relocated their 'independence' in different places. Indie, as a movement interested in 'independence,' has an embedded resistance to disciplining

²⁶¹ Graves, "Interview: Annie Clark."

oneself to become its ideal subject. As such, it acts as a counter-power by carving out that which is 'not-mainstream.' In doing so, it self-identifies as being smaller, intimate and oppositional, connoting a lack of economic power. Conversely, it identifies what is larger, distancing and popular, wielding great economic power. The (imagined) mainstream is not impervious to the constraints of romantic authenticity (as exemplified by Leach's analysis of the Spice Girls). A counter-power cultivated by a 'mainstream' then creates its own possibility to articulate a useful resistance. As such, "resistance can be made effective, in a sense, by the very power which has opposed it; for instance, by forging a group of skilled workers and bringing them together, disciplinary techniques create the possibility of large strikes."²⁶² This kind of resistance is representative of the description of the White Stripes signing by Warner records, although, the White Stripes early work certainly feels more like a well-disciplined indie group. St. Vincent's career moved between two different, authentic indie subjects. Each helping define what was 'mainstream' by deciding what was 'not-mainstream.' While this chapter has engaged in a deep study of both the White Stripes and St. Vincent, the following chapter will seek to further situate and locate these artists based on their guitar playing.

²⁶² Brent L. Pickett, "Foucault and the Politics of Resistance," *Polity* 28:4 (1996): 459.

Chapter Three: Guitar Heros and Anti-Heros,

Indie Guitar Gear and Identity Negotiation

The previous chapter explored indie as a discursive practice, in which multiple components are absorbed and negotiated by a spectator with a vested interest in determining what is indie. A similar process is undertaken by guitarists in assigning the prestigious distinction of ‘guitar-hero.’ In “The Cultural Contradictions of the Guitar Hero,” Steve Waksman unpacks the dual lineages of guitar hero mythology. Within one lineage resides a history of increasing virtuosity (speed, control, technique, precision), birthed through the blues, feeding into and culminating in the ‘new virtuosity’ of eighties heavy metal (pioneered by Eddie Van Halen). The opposing lineage follows punk’s amateurism as a deconstruction of the virtuoso, continuing its legacy through the development of indie. Virtuosity appears as obviously central to guitar heroics – designating the fastest, strongest, most controlled players. The immediacy of punk-rock is also valued through Romanticism’s balancing of a folk aesthetic with that of high art. “Both depend on an idea of purity of autonomy from the mass or commercial mainstream as a measure of value. High cultural autonomy is reimagined as folk authenticity.”²⁶³ High art’s valuation of virtuosity as the pinnacle of achievement is asterisked, through the integration of folk authenticity, as a valuation of “*innovative* virtuosity.”²⁶⁴ This creates the backdrop for the hyper-valuation of Eddie Van Halen, representative of both

²⁶³ Bannister, *White Boys*, 27.

²⁶⁴ Steve Waksman, “Into the Arenas: Edward Van Halen and the Cultural Contradictions of the Guitar Hero,” in *Guitar Cultures*, eds. Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe (New York: Oxford, 2001), 124.

narratives, who altered the way rock guitar was played through a pronounced and novel technical mastery.

The guitar-hero is a classification of great prestige, a force in creating truthful knowledge about becoming a guitar subject. As such, the guitar hero is not only characterized by innovation, they also foster “a certain standardization of instrumental technique as patterns of influence [that] are enacted through emulation or outright imitation.”²⁶⁵ In this way, they become figures of considerable power. In “The Subject and Power,” Foucault begins to articulate a theory of power.²⁶⁶ This essay utilizes a few key concepts that I would like to transfer onto the study of the guitar. First, a *capacity* is “a power that stems from aptitudes directly inherent in the body or relayed by external instruments.”²⁶⁷ Second, there are *systems of communication* which “transmit information by means of a language, a system of signs, or any other symbolic medium.”²⁶⁸ An obviously relevant system of communication is notation (tablature for most guitarists). *Power relations* are set in place through surveillance, internal processes, and reward/punishment systems.²⁶⁹ As guitar pedagogy is not confined to enclosed quarters, it is difficult to map these attributes directly onto the guitar. Thus, I will explore these through their reification in trade magazine discourse. Capacities, systems of communication and power relations all feature *goal-directed activities*; as such, they are welded together in

²⁶⁵ Waksman, “Guitar Hero,” 124.

²⁶⁶ This ‘theory’ is met with skepticism (referring to it as a ‘conceptualization’) as a true *theory* would require objectification irreconcilable with analytical work (Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 127).

²⁶⁷ Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 135.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 136.

the creation of *disciplines*.²⁷⁰ Guitar, qua discipline, is a complex negotiation of goal-directed capacities (e.g. speed exercises), systems of communication (e.g. instructional books, trade magazines) and power relations (e.g. masculinities), wherein those who best conform to its most valued attributes may become guitar heroes.

I would like to explore these concepts as they are tied up with the moral propositions and discursive elements embedded in the *apparatus*. The apparatus is the strategic enactment of a “heterogenous set of discourses, institutions, forms, regulations, laws, statements or moral propositions”²⁷¹ in response to a particular problem. The cumulative technological apparatuses, known as *gear*,²⁷² are employed as negotiators of identity as they are attached to cultural histories through usage. Most importantly, they enact discourses (histories of usage by players and genres), regulations (certain capacities will be enabled or problematized by the physical limitations of instruments) and moral propositions (usually related to genre). A guitarist’s gear is one of the most important negotiators of identity, immediately conveying a knowledge of, and a potential to be included in, a history of guitar-heroics. Indicative of such, Waksman’s exploration of Van Halen explores “[h]ow this counterpoint between personal innovation and cultural standardization [within the cultural figure of the guitar-hero] has taken shape around the career of Edward Van Halen and can perhaps best be observed through the running

²⁷⁰ Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 136.

²⁷¹ Legg, “Apparatus,” 130.

²⁷² Mostly electric guitars, amplifiers, guitar pedals but also picks, strings, cables etc.

concern with the guitarist's choice of instrument."²⁷³ This chapter will explore two anti-heroes, and in doing such will offer a perspective on non-ideal equipment.

SPIN, a culture magazine largely covering indie music, created a list of the '100 Greatest Guitarists of All-Time.'²⁷⁴ In accordance with indie's discourse of differentiation from rock heroics, *SPIN* introduces their list writing:

Traditionally, the "guitarist guitarist" timeline begins with Robert Johnson magically conjuring up the blues, nears perfection with Eric Clapton mutating it beatifically, and then ultimately reaches a boomer-baiting Rock and Roll Hall of Fame apotheosis with the free-spirited Jimi Hendrix shooting it into space like feedback-laden fireworks. For this list, we veer towards the alternative canon that kicks in with the Velvet Underground trying to erase that form entirely, making guitar solos gauche and using instruments as sadomasochistic tools for hammering out sheets of white heat.

As you will see, our list embraces outsiders, trailblazers, outliers, and Eugene Chadbourne playing a rake. We don't worship "guitar gods."²⁷⁵

The list is somewhat comical in its mockery of guitar-heroics. It places Electronic Dance Music giant, Skrillex, at #100, explaining that he creates more aggressive riffs than any guitarist. It also places Run DMC's turntablist, Jam Master Jay, at #10, explaining that he "manipulated the work of other guitarists"²⁷⁶ which had an influence on Tom Morello, Korn and other hip-hop influenced rock acts. *SPIN*'s indie (alternative) canon follows the history presented in the first chapter, starting with The Velvet Underground, aimed at deconstructing and challenging the prejudices of the guitar-hero canon. Both Jack White

²⁷³ Waksman, "Guitar Hero," 124.

²⁷⁴ As explored by Carys Wyn Jones (2008), this kind of 'listology' comes across as strongly ideological, exposing the dual romantic narratives and their influence on seemingly neutral adjectives like 'greatness.' These ideologically-loaded adjectives are littered across guitar-hero listology as well.

²⁷⁵ *SPIN* Staff, "SPIN's 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time," May 3, 2012.

²⁷⁶ *SPIN* Staff, "SPIN's 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time 10-2," May 3, 2012.

and St. Vincent appear on *SPIN*'s list. Jack White, however, appears on lists by *Rolling Stone* and *Guitar World* – publications that do not share the same deconstructionist impulse. As such, their identities within the continuum of guitar-hero and guitar-anti-hero are complex, yet retain a similar dynamic to their affiliation with indie. The following case studies will investigate the identities of these two guitarists along the guitar-hero continuum with a special focus on the role of their gear in negotiating their identities. Similar to the previous chapter, the role of counter-powers within a web of power-relations will be investigated as indie seeks to carve out both musical and ideological resistances.

Jack White: “A Less-Than-Obvious Extension of the Guitar-God Tradition”

Introducing their interview with the guitarist, *Guitar Player* writes, “Jack White is no Shredmeister, and he’s not the most melodic guitarist on the planet, either. Yet despite being a less-than-obvious extension of the guitar-god tradition, this scrapper from Detroit has become the heavyweight champion of rock guitar over the past decade.”²⁷⁷ The two implications being that: a. Jack White is not an obvious extension of the guitar-hero tradition and b. the tradition has, nonetheless, extended to fit him. This chapter investigates why promoters of the guitar-hero tradition would be apprehensive to include Jack White, as well as why they would be inclined to bend the rules. This will largely be an exploration of Jack White’s affiliation with a blues tradition, and his differentiation from other blues-based guitar-heroes.

²⁷⁷ Leslie, “Jack White Megasonic!: On The Sound That Drive The White Stripes, Raconteurs & Dead Weather,” *Guitar Player* August 2010 (San Bruno: The Music Player Network, 2010), 66.

In a 2003 interview with *Guitar Player*, Jack White's first cover story for a guitar magazine, he says,

I've always been torn by [playing the blues]. The blues is from such a different time period of culture than where I'm from. Being a white kid from Detroit who was born in the '70s is a long way from being born black in Mississippi in the '20s. I'm always worried that playing the blues is going to be misconstrued as me trying to cultivate an image, or that it's going to come across as fake. We completely avoided the blues on *White Blood Cells* on purpose.²⁷⁸

Jack White maintains the historical apprehension punk and indie expressed with blues rock – the macho-posturing-rock-star figure. Jack White even went as far as eliminating blues from the band's breakthrough record (eliminating blues, slide guitar, guitar solos and covers). But, the blues seems to have followed his identity through his anti-heroics; his insistence on a folk-esque minimalism and the creation of urban mythology (e.g. the 'rule of three' and Meg as his 'big sister') situate him within the Mississippi Deltas legacy. *SPIN*'s insistence that Jack 'breaks down and juices up the blues' will be the recurring theme through which rock and indie guitarists simultaneously claim him as their hero and anti-hero.

Anti-Hero: 'Start Breaking Down'

The history of guitar heroics is difficult to separate from the blues, as is Jack White's guitar playing. However, a careful inquiry into Jack White's blues roots will notice a significant divergence from the normative genealogy of guitar heroics. In the mid-sixties, rock and roll began to integrate a new language, describing its musicians as 'artists.' The integration of this discourse marks the beginnings of, what Middleton

²⁷⁸ Darrin Fox, "White Heat: The White Stripes 21st Century Blues," *Guitar Player*, June 2003 (San Mateo: The Music Player Group, 2003), 69-70.

(1990) calls, 'progressive rock.' Progressive rock, and its lexicon of 'innovation' and 'mastery,' resonates well with that of 'heroics.' Accordingly, the centrality of the electric guitar to the 'progressive rock' movement created a high point for the emergence of guitar-heroes. One strand of Middleton's 'progressive rock' was a development from Chicago's electrified blues of the forties and fifties (migrated by way of the Mississippi Delta). The use of a folk medium (the blues) authenticated an emergent virtuosity (extended solos) which resonated with the high-art ideals of technical mastery.

The building of extended forms over drones or very simple harmonic progressions (often two alternating chords) or riffs was, of course, to become a staple of hard rock and 'heavy metal' music, and encouraged the development of virtuosic soloists, especially guitarists...achieved through 'professional' mastery of instrument technique...[a music that is] at least compatible with the traditions of bourgeois art.²⁷⁹

The capacity to articulate an extended guitar solo is what separates the era of guitar heroes from their British invasion and rock and roll predecessors. The prototypical lineage, as indicated by *SPIN*'s introduction, selects Middleton's key figure Eric Clapton (Cream) as the receptor of (delta blues musician) Robert Johnson's mythic abilities.

Robert Johnson was a uniquely gifted guitarist, whose "small hands, with very long and slender fingers...allowed him to access some amazing chords and extended intervals."²⁸⁰ Robert Johnson is one influence on Jack White's playing. The White Stripes covered one of his songs in their recorded career, "Stop Breaking Down." In the original version, Johnson fingerpicks though the changes, sustaining a rhythm while singing and playing a guitar melody (with difficult bends and chromaticisms). *Guitar World* writes an

²⁷⁹ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1990), 29.

²⁸⁰ Guitar Edge Staff, *100 Greatest Guitar Players of All Time*, Nov 15, 2007, 11.

anecdote which, indicative of the larger consensus in guitar discourse, displays Robert Johnson as the most technically gifted of the Delta guitarists. It is said that Johnson borrowed one of Son House's songs, 'My Black Mama,' rerecording it under the name 'Walking Blues.' Johnson's version was a "more syncopated three-chord piece with inventive vocal flourishes and touches of ambitious arrangement."²⁸¹ Indicating an immediate difference between Johnson and White's guitar playing, the White Stripes version of "Stop Breaking Down" employs a 'bottleneck slide' instead of Johnson's fingerstyle.²⁸² Jack's use of the slide harkens to a greater influence of his than Johnson, Johnson's hero Son House.

In the film, *It Might Get Loud*, Jack White praises Son House's 'Grinnin In Your Face' as his favourite song. The song's arrangement only features Son House's voice and hand claps. Jack White explains, "it didn't matter that he was clapping off time, it didn't matter that there were no instruments being played. All that mattered was the attitude of the song." In multiple guitar magazine interviews, Jack recounts his affection for House's 'Grinnin In Your Face' and 'John The Revelator,' both a capella tracks. In a *Guitar World* interview, the interviewer (in a moment of surprising honesty) admits that "The guitar magazines tend to emphasize technique over having a vision,"²⁸³ to which Jack replies "I am impressed with Son House when he plays the "wrong" note. Somehow it's more

²⁸¹ Brad Tolinski, "Get Behind Me Satan," *Guitar World*, February 2006 (San Francisco: Future Network USA, 2006), 75.

²⁸² Quite a few of Robert Johnson's songs feature slide work, this is not necessarily a distinguishing factor from Johnson's work. However, given Jack White's preference for Son House, as well as Jack's characterization of House's work (how it influenced him), this becomes a point of differentiation.

²⁸³ Christopher Scapalleti, "The House That Jack Built," *Guitar World*, May 2004 (United States: Future US, Inc., 2004), 150.

meaningful to me when I hear him miss a note and hit the neck of his guitar with his slide.”²⁸⁴ Son House, to Jack White, represents a kind of anti-virtuosity. The capacity to articulate notes with clarity and precision are not only eschewed by White, he further suggests a moral proposition that one ought not be engaged in such enterprises.

This ‘anti-virtuosity’ is aided by House’s bottleneck slide-work. Slides are often played in ‘open tunings.’²⁸⁵ House’s guitar work makes use of un-fretted chords and other capacities which are simplified by the alternate tuning. Though, this ignores the difficulties involved in manipulating the slide itself. *Guitar World* prods Jack’s assertion of his status as a ‘primitive’ guitar player, arguing that he “frequently plays with a slide and that certainly requires some technique.”²⁸⁶ Jack sidesteps answering the question; in this way, Jack’s use of the slide is heavy-laden with ideological propositions (of which he is quite protective). The use of the slide may be viewed as an apparatus embedded with particular regulations, moral propositions and discourses, though its status as a counter-power works along a continuum wherein ‘measurable gaps’ would separate and accommodate House’s anti-virtuosity as a hyper-valuation of folk authenticity – even if his identity is woven with a moral imperative not to pursue such ends.

The enacted set of regulations, moral propositions and discourses by Jack’s two slide guitars reinforces the identity of his slide work as ‘anti-virtuosic.’ The one which is used most often is Jack White’s Kay hollowbody, tuned in open A.²⁸⁷ *Guitarist*, listing

²⁸⁴ Tolinski, “Satan,” 60.

²⁸⁵ The inability for the slide to contort itself requires that full chords be sounded by barring across the frets, thus the guitar must be tuned to accommodate the sounding of a chordal triad with its open strings.

²⁸⁶ Scapalleti, “Jack Built,” 150.

²⁸⁷ See Appendix B for visuals to all of Jack White’s gear.

Jack White's equipment, offers full names for his other guitars. For example, the 1965 JB Hutto Montgomery Airline is listed with year, maker and model. The listing for Jack's Kay simply reads "Kay hollowbody,"²⁸⁸ indicating the guitar's obscurity and lack of cultural capital. "Of the huge Chicago-based guitar power-houses, only Kay approached the size and influence of Harmony on the lower to middle ranges of the mass market,"²⁸⁹ creating inexpensive guitars to capitalize on the emerging market. The guitar is considerably battered, with a crack on one of the f-holes along with half the pick-guard missing. The guitar sports a bland (even ugly) paint job. Prior to uncovering the f-hole, a paper bag was used to help alleviate unwanted feedback. The guitar has visibly been struggled with and still remains a struggle to play.

Jack received the guitar as payment for helping his brother's wife move a refrigerator into her St. Vincent De Paul store (a thrift shop). During the 70s and the 80s, when the inexpensive guitar market was lost to Asian importers, the company was forced to continually migrate to developing countries to maintain their cost-efficiency.²⁹⁰ To reinforce the lack of cultural capital associated with the instrument, the guitar is considerably big. Compared to the thin-line hollowbodies that became popular for their smaller necks and bodies, facilitating quicker movements, the guitar does not facilitate ease of use. Jack White often speaks of his guitar playing as an 'attack' or a 'struggle.' This guitar is not an easy one to play with any virtuosity, given its dimensions and its battered character. Its 'battered' character is not simply some visible wood peeking

²⁸⁸ Guitarist, "Jack White."

²⁸⁹ Tony Bacon, *Electric Guitars: The Illustrated Encyclopedia*, (San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, 2000), 214.

²⁹⁰ Bacon, *Guitar Encyclopedia*, 223.

through a paint-job, excessive feedback becomes an obstacle for guitar heroics. As an apparatus, there is a clearly identified set of discursive and ethical propositions which are paired with physical regulations on playing, combining to enact a rich amount of sedimented knowledges associated with the guitar.

Jack White also has an “old red hollowbody from the first White Stripes album and a lot of White Stripes tours. It’s a no-name Japanese guitar, some people think it’s a Crestwood, some people think it’s a Domino.”²⁹¹ *Guitarist* magazine identifies the guitar as a Crestwood Astral II, but the brand name seems to be a non-factor for Jack White. His reasoning for keeping the guitar is that it “gives great feedback.”²⁹² I would further emphasize the paint job (old *red* hollowbody), fitting the White Stripes’ colour scheme (his main guitar is red, he paints all of his instruments, amplifiers and pedals either red, white or black). The guitar is tuned to open-E.²⁹³ This guitar is, more so, a silent contributor, as it is rarely used. Jack White’s identity as anti-hero is, nonetheless, tied to this preference for apparatuses that hold less cultural-capital. They have no significant history to which they link Jack White; he admits “I would never buy a brand new guitar off the rack. I always want something that has some *soul* to it.”²⁹⁴ Though, these apparatuses do attach him to a history of differentiation – that of indie rock.

²⁹¹ *Guitarist*, “Jack White.”

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ It is used for “Let’s Build A Home” and “I Fought Piranas” – given the fluidity of the White Stripes’ setlists, it is not uncommon to go multiple shows, even tours without playing either of these songs. Since performing the numbers would require him to grab a different guitar, breaking his natural flow between snippets of songs, this becomes especially prudent.

²⁹⁴ Fox, “White Heat,” 70.

This complex balancing of innovation and standardization manifests best through Jack's main guitar. In the August 2010 *Guitar Player* interview, looking back on his history with the White Stripes, Jack says,

...the idea behind using the Ward's Airline in the White Stripes was to prove that you don't need a brand new guitar to have character, to have tone, and to be able to play what you want to play. You can do it with a piece of plastic, or a piece of wood. You see, you can buy a bunch of fancy equipment, but if you don't have "it" inside you from the get-go, you're not going to impress anybody.²⁹⁵

The Montgomery Ward Airline is made of plastic instead of wood, a clear sign of 'trash.' Montgomery Ward is another department store brand, emphasizing that the instruments Jack employs are found outside of the guitar-world – the freestanding guitar stores wherein guitar discourse is an active participant in marking cultural insiders and outsiders. The guitar is red, (re)iterating the importance of colour over tone (visual aesthetic being more important than attributes which contribute to the masterful articulation of guitar capacities). *Guitar World* says "[the guitar is] certainly not built for comfort or speed."²⁹⁶ Jack agrees and adds "...If I wanted to play it safe I'd go out and get a brand-new Stratocaster or something like that."²⁹⁷

Playing that guitar makes me feel like I have to take something that's broken and make it work," he says. "It's hollow, it's made of plastic, and it feels like it's going to fall apart. The front pickup is broken, but the treble pickup has an amazing bite. I've never had it refretted or anything. It's pretty much the way I found it, except for new tuners."²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ Leslie, "Megasonic!," 70.

²⁹⁶ Scapalleti, "Jack Built," 150.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Fox, "White Heat," 72.

In this interview, White even admits the guitar is partially broken. Even though Jack's blues identity resonates throughout his identity as a guitarist, his equipment takes 'Stop Breaking Down' and turns it into 'Start Breaking Down.' He draws a genealogical line through an alternative canon of delta blues, passing the guitar down to punk and indie. Jack's instruments are key negotiators in maintaining his acceptance within the community of anti-heroes.

Hero?: Icky Thumps and Whammy Bumps

While Jack White's choice of guitars offer him an 'empty history to fill in,' a question arises as to how he chose to fill in this history. Here the blues becomes significant once again, particularly its histories with soloing, masculinities and loudness. These three attributes all come together in the guitar solo. *Guitar World's* "100 Greatest Solos of All Time" readers poll is introduced by:

To the rock guitarist, the solo is many things – the electric orgasm, the essence of all existence, the best way to impress sleek women. Not only do we love to play solos, we love to hear 'em.²⁹⁹

The 'mastery of technique' is not only technical with regards to instruments, it is masculinized sexual mastery capable of domination. Both *Guitar Player* and *Guitar World* interviews, covering the band during their transition from the 'White Blood Cells' record to the *Elephant* record, paid special attention to the return of guitar solos. This is no doubt an effect of dropping the solo entirely from their third release and then bringing it back for their fourth with fervor. *Elephant's* seven-minute 'Ball and Biscuit' contains multiple guitar solos encompassing more than half the track's duration. Jack White's

²⁹⁹ Kitts, Jeff (ed.), *The Complete History of Guitar World: 30 Years of Music, Magic & Six-String Mayhem*, (Montclair: Future US, Inc., 2010), 201.

emergence as a guitar-hero is intrinsically tied to this history of soloing and the blues.

Since he chose to adopt apparatuses that did not contain the potential to signify the mastery of technique, he must invest new apparatuses with this potency.

The electric guitar is largely a male dominated domain. Mary Ann Clawson (1999) argues that the foundations of band formation and experimentation occur in a period of adolescence marked by gender segregated social groups.

Being a boy served, in these early years, as a form of social and cultural capital. Girls lacked access to an entitlement that seemed to be assumed by boys: the cultural authority to initiate band formation. Nor were girls viewed by male acquaintances as appropriate candidates for recruitment into bands.³⁰⁰

Boys are apprehensive to include girls in early ensembles as it appears as an affront to the collective masculine identity of the enterprise; girls are apprehensive to ask for inclusion due to the segregated nature of socialization. Jack White experimented with many all-male groups in his early adolescence.³⁰¹ The White Stripes was the first to introduce a female member. Meg did not pick up the drums until she married Jack (two years before the release of the first White Stripes record). As would be expected of a novice instrumentalist, her playing is very rudimentary, complicating her ability to receive an invitation into a band. In a *Guitar World* interview, Jack asserts that “What [Meg] does is just so simple and child-like, you couldn’t take a male drummer and ask him to do that, he wouldn’t be able to do it.”³⁰² By appearing as the leader, the virtuoso, the veteran, all related to his role as the patriarch, Jack’s masculinity is fortified. Jack White’s masculine

³⁰⁰ Mary Ann Clawson, “Masculinity and Skill Acquisition,” *Popular Music* 18:1 (1999), 111.

³⁰¹ When the White Stripes began, Jack White was already playing guitar in two other local bands.

³⁰² Scapalleti, “Jack Built,” 149.

(heterosexual) identity is, to some degree, maintained by Meg's presence in the ensemble – inasmuch as her presence complicates the collective masculine identity of the group.

In a *Guitar World* interview, Jack White laments that reports of his Grammy performance focused on his ugliness or his lack of fashion sense.³⁰³ With his shrill falsetto and penchant for 'wrong notes,' he complicated his ability to be identified as a sexual icon in his early work. In his later career, Jack 'buffed up' – and his gear followed suit. In his 2007 *Guitar World* interview, the release of the latest White Stripes album was coloured by the release of *Broken Boy Soldiers*, his all-male rock quartet side project. With the Raconteurs, Jack played completely different guitars, including expensive custom guitars from the Gretsch company. The interview introduces Jack with the following preamble:

White is better known for playing lightweight, cheap plastic junk guitars. (At least they were cheap when they first came out.) ... But lately, White has been playing more uptown axes. In addition to this custom [Gretsch] Triple Jet, he has recently acquired an ultra-rare Gretsch White Penguin, reportedly valued at \$80,000.

All this might seem to contradict White's down-and-out garage rock roots. But then the man thrives on contradictions, dualities and seemingly irreconcilable opposites.³⁰⁴

Through the interview, Jack stresses that he used the same guitars he always had on the new White Stripes record. There is a small exception: though they were scarcely used, a couple of Fender Telecasters were used for certain solos.³⁰⁵ The Telecaster is one of the

³⁰³ Scapalleti, "Jack Built," 151.

³⁰⁴ Alan Di Perna, "Jack The Ripper," *Guitar World*, August 2007 (United States: Future US, Inc., 2007), 80.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

three most idealized instruments in electric guitar history.³⁰⁶ Jack's emergence as a guitar hero, and its accompanying masculinization, was mirrored by a taste for apparatuses embedded with the discursive and ethical propositions (and enabling the capacities) associated with the heroic figures of blues-rock. This is particularly evident by the switch to expensive Gretsch guitars in his all-male quartet. Jack's insistence on using the same old, cheap equipment for the White Stripes (particularly salient in live conditions) invokes a conscious effort to continue the dormant feminist imperative of the White Stripes.

Along with masculinity, the guitar solo has a special history with 'loudness.' In the electrified Chicago blues tradition, noisy conditions at the taverns necessitated the integration of loud amplifiers – though, it soon became an object of desire for its facilitation of flamboyant guitar heroics.³⁰⁷ Buddy Guy, one of the most prominent Chicago blues guitarists, recounts the 'guitar battles' within which guitarists competitively use virtuosity, stage tricks and loudness to be 'the best.' Paul and Beth Garon argue the rise of amplification and loudness in Chicago blues clubs reflect "an aesthetic and political recognition of the conditions of ghetto life, conditions in which the performers had to "put out" to be noticed."³⁰⁸ Guy is famously attached to the Fender Bassman, one of the many blues guitarists to idealize Fender's fifties and sixties output. Returning to Middleton's central figure in blues and 'progressive rock,' Eric Clapton has his own relationship with the instrument. On the *John Mayall's Bluesbreakers with Eric*

³⁰⁶ Along with the Fender Stratocaster and the Gibson Les Paul.

³⁰⁷ Waksman, *Instruments*, 122.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

Clapton record, he used an upstart British company's (Marshall amplifiers) Bassman knockoff to create the new high-volume blues-rock that would be translated into Cream. Marshall's separation of the amplifier head from the speakers led to this loudness being amplified, literally and figuratively, when multiple speaker cabinets were 'stacked' to exponentially increase volume. These 'stacks,' particularly Marshall's, became signs of noise/power that, historically, became attached to masculinity through their dominance in 'cock rock' or heavy metal. This, no doubt, was partly facilitated by hard rock's move into arenas, making louder amplifiers necessary. Indie's preference for small, intimate location was matched with small, intimate amplifiers.

The loud blues combo amps, with a singular speaker cabinet, became occupiers of a middle-ground. They are frozen in time. In the mid-sixties, they signified the masculinity, dominance and technological mastery that were indicative of the emergent trend towards loudness. Currently they maintain these connotations while also activating a narrative of nostalgia, resonating with the blues' emotional spontaneity and folk authenticity.

Jack White used a fifty-watt amplifier made by, department store brand, Silvertone for the first couple White Stripes records, running it simultaneously with a Fender Twin Reverb. By White Blood Cells, he found a 100-watt Silvertone 6x10 (six ten-inch speakers), and upgraded. He has difficulty finding these amplifiers because they are vintage and considerably obscure. He uses the Silvertone for the overdriven sound and the Fender for its sludgy reverb. Silvertone was created by the Sears, Roebuck Co. to capitalize on the guitar fad in the sixties, much like Airline and Kay. These amplifiers are

extremely large for an indie act. Running two of them simultaneously definitely creates a sound of similar power to rock acts, and the White Stripes play shows of similar scale. Though, the use of ten-inch speakers, instead of the head-cabinet standard twelve-inch speakers, would create a pronounced emphasis on a jangly high-end. The single-coil pickups on his Airline³⁰⁹ add to indie narratives of smallness and retro jangle. Through his amplifiers (again, qua apparatuses), Jack White has been able to capitalize on the new possibility for simultaneously signifying the contradicting narratives of loudness and nostalgic intimacy – combining a discursive retro tendency, physical regulations on volume and moral propositions regarding intimacy.

Thus far, Jack White has invested his empty signifiers with some complicated histories, indicating the potency for the requisite masculinity and loudness of the guitar-hero tradition while simultaneously pulling away from the tradition. His soloing style echoes this trend, suggesting an alternative virtuosity, undermining both that of Van Halen and the retro blues-rockers. In 2004, *Guitar World* immediately jumped at the chance to place the White Stripes at the beginning of ‘rock and roll’ movement, to be contrasted with contemporary releases by Metallica, Ozzy Osbourne, Staind and Linkin Park.³¹⁰ While not elevating one over the other, *Guitar World* knew that the White Stripes (along with The Strokes, The Hives and The Darkness) would not be well represented as important guitar figures when compared to the speed and precision of heavy metal’s ‘new virtuosity.’ The immediate inclination is to harken back to Eric Clapton and his

³⁰⁹ The pickups resemble the vintage Gibson PAF humbuckers in appearance, however they are actually single coils in large encasings (Hunter, *Star Guitars* [Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 2010], 271).

³¹⁰ Scapalleti, “Jack Built,” 73.

contemporaries, when music was bluesier (read: simpler). Yet, both 2004 and 2006 *Guitar World* interviews mention Jack's controversial comments in a 2002 *Guitar World* interview (Jack White did not receive the cover story in this issue), where he suggested that Stevie Ray Vaughan and Johnny Lang, contemporary blues musicians, were overrated as virtuosos. Recognizing the controversy, Jack attempts to distance himself from the comments, but does not retract them. He felt that, "it's very easy to play solos in the blues and to become very proficient in a superficial way very quickly."³¹¹ The blues, being a simple medium, offer simple soloing strategies. Performing a blues in G requires the use of the G blues scale, of which there is a considerable lexicon of rock clichés for possible ways to express yourself. Stevie Ray Vaughan's 'Texas Flood' is often referred to as a blues lead guitar 'textbook,' for this very reason. Jack White distances himself from this blues scale 'superficiality.' His alternative virtuosity is best highlighted by the DigiTech Whammy pedal.

The DigiTech Whammy pedal is an odd inclusion in Jack's 'retro' leanings, being the only guitar pedal which absolutely requires the real-time sampling of digital technology to create its foot-controlled pitch-shifting effects. The pedal is used to create the bass sounds used in 'Seven Nation Army' and 'Hardest Button To Button,' but it is more often used as a soloing vehicle. To *Guitar Player*, Jack explains "I use that pedal because when I was in The Go [one of Jack's early bands before The White Stripes], I'd watch other bands, and I'd get upset when a solo didn't jump above the band."³¹² Suggesting an immediate simplicity to his use, he echoes these sentiments for *Guitar*

³¹¹ Scapalleti, "Jack Built," 150-1.

³¹² Fox, "White Heat," 74.

World, “I never liked using the pedal for fourths and fifths. Actually, I wanted to get them to build me one that had just “high octave” and “low octave” settings, ‘cause sometimes I bump it with my foot and end up somewhere in thirds.”³¹³ The use of the Whammy pedal becomes a point of differentiation for Jack White from the virtuosity of blues-purist, integrating another empty signifier to bestow with narratives of masculinity and loudness – particularly for its role in taking his solos ‘over the band,’ reinforcing his role as the patriarch. Looking at the tablature for the *Icky Thump* guitar solo (Appendix D), one can see that the use of the pedal has been given its own system of notation, representing the technique required for its use. Jack plays with it: the pluses and zeros represent different pedal positions (toe up and toe down) and, at one point, it is written that he only presses the pedal down halfway. The system of communication (tablature) requires amendment to accommodate the dissemination of a proper pedagogy in disciplining oneself to emulate his soloing style. Combined with odd rests and intricate bends (measure 7 contains three bends, one a full step, one three quarters of a step and one a quarter of a step), Jack’s blues scales take on an audible and visual alterity.

The whammy did not have a completely empty history, Tom Morello of Rage Against The Machine was an avid user of the pedal. Morello is often represented within guitar discourse as an experimentalist, creating ‘noise-charts’ to find interesting sounds that led him to look at the guitar as a “whole new instrument.”³¹⁴ In the same interview, he confesses that he “was basically the DJ in the band.”³¹⁵ This experimental

³¹³ Scapelliti, “Jack Built,” 150.

³¹⁴ Patrick Doyle, “Science of Blowing Minds,” *Rolling Stone Presents The 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time*, 94.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

pyrotechnics, with its long, epic glissandos, is at home with Rage Against The Machine – who by no means considered themselves a retro blues band. The emphasis of effects is antithetical to the folk minimalism that pervades Jack’s blues ethos. As such, the presence of the Whammy presents a significant challenge to his blues identity. He then, discursively, counteracts the relevance of the effect.

The use of effects is a scary thing. I would never recommend it. I try to stay very far away from them. All I ever use is a Big Muff and the octave effects I’ve mentioned. I have a little MXR Micro Amp, too. But I’ve never used phase, chorus or any kind of rack mount stuff. In that whole world, I wouldn’t even know where to plug in.³¹⁶

The pedal isn’t going to give you your tone or attitude. It’s about the way you attack your instrument, not the way a company makes a sound effect. It’s just a sound effect.³¹⁷

This is continuous with a ‘mouldy fig’ mentality that has pervaded blues discourse, emphasizing emotional spontaneity over mediation. Returning to our dual narratives of virtuosity in Romanticism, the blues is considered a simple form and must represent the immediacy of the folk narrative. The mediation (education, practice, rehearsal) involved in the virtuoso narrative is better represented by heavy metal’s (notable³¹⁸) complexity in technique and execution. While Waksman (1999) explores how black blues musicians have been technological innovators, the discourse remains largely unchanged. Combined with slavish allegiance to minimalism in the rest of his work, and the ‘punk rock’ usage of the pedal (avoiding non-octave intervals), Jack White’s minor technological

³¹⁶ Di Perno, “Ripper,” 89-90.

³¹⁷ Guitarist, “Jack White,” 214.

³¹⁸ See Charles Keil’s (2005, “Motion and Feeling Through Music”) separation of embodied meaning from engendered feeling for further information. Virtuosity has a historical entanglement with its visual mode of representation, sheet music.

adventurism can be explained away through the moral propositions invested in the Whammy as an apparatus.

The blues scale as a point of departure, along with the ambiguous blues-backing and prerequisite notions of masculinity and loudness, allow for Jack White's alternate virtuosity to be viewed both as alien to the history of guitar heroics, but also as extending a means through which the guitar-hero tradition may embrace it. Jack White's alternate virtuosity reached a climax with the 'Icky Thump' solo. This climax was accompanied by a disambiguation of his masculinity within the Raconteurs. A fusion of horizons occurred later in his career, where new fans of Jack White as guitar hero were able to look back on his career as an innovative but acceptable challenge. The *Icky Thump* tour kept Jack true to his original anti-hero status. The film, *Under The Great White Northern Lights*, represents these trends. The band's two person instrumentation forces Jack into playing more rhythm and limiting solos, separating him from the Chicago Blues tradition of extended solos over two chord vamps. Yet, the reluctant hero became a hero nonetheless. In his first interviews, he admitted that he did not get many offers to do guitar magazine interviews and willfully avoided the ones that he did.³¹⁹ He adds that he did not want to play the guitar because 'everyone else on the block did.'³²⁰ Eventually, this reluctance was (semi-)detached from an indie's deconstruction of the guitar hero canon and (semi-)attached onto a rockist impulse towards independence and an irreverence for authority figures and commercial pursuits. I use 'semi-' attached or detached because the interpretation would depend on the audience's vested interest (Are they amalgamating or

³¹⁹ Fox, "White Heat," 74.

³²⁰ Scapalleti, "Jack Built," 150.

distancing Jack from their preferred standpoint? Is that standpoint one praising the hero or the anti-hero?). Conceivably, he can ambiguously display an allegiance to both, simultaneously – even in the same act. Jack converses with Jimmy Page in *Guitar World*, one of the most often cited guitar heroes by the magazine, about producing records:

Page: That's it, isn't it? Who needs someone else getting in the way of the process? Even if you're wrong...

White: ...at least it's my mistake.

Page: Actually, I should say, even if you're not right. We must always remember, Jack, *the artist is never wrong!* [laughs]³²¹

Here we find two guitarists, one a decided guitar-hero and one in the process of being mythologized as such. '*The artist is never wrong*' is interestingly multivalent, representing both the independence of the innovative guitar-hero, exerting a gravitational pull towards their own work, and indie's proclivity for anti-heroics, creating and supporting their aberrations. Both are 'mistakes,' but a complex history determines which mistakes alter the overall discursive formation in order to reimagine them as innovations.

Anti-Hero Heroics: The Gravitational Pull

Waksman (2001) explores how Eddie Van Halen built his own guitar, representing a history of masculinity and technological tinkering. The instruments' modifications were then standardized as the 'superstrat' prototype – becoming a standard for the influx of hard rock and metal guitar players in the eighties. This culminated with Van Halen designing a production-model guitar, defining the impulse for centralizing power around the innovative 'mistakes' of the guitar-heroes. Jack White has never endorsed a product³²² but, in the wake of his success, vintage Airline guitars experienced exponential inflation

³²¹ Tolinski, "Satan," 112.

³²² Though, he admits, this is partly due to his favourite companies, largely, no longer being in existence.

in price. Eastwood Guitars eventually purchased the Airline company to reissue the model. In 2004, only a year after the band had garnered considerable attention, Jack White was already noticing the inflation in the guitar's value:

White: "I got my first [Montgomery Ward Airliner] from Jack Oblivian. Jack Yarber is his name, and he's is a band called the Oblivians, from Memphis. He was playing in Detroit, and I went backstage. He said, "Hey, look at this guitar that I got." And he opened the case, and I was like, "Oh, man! That's amazing! That's..."

Guitar World:...my color!"

White: [laughs] Yeah! "And it's plastic. I love it so much!" And he said, "It's for sale. I wanna get an Airline with *three pickups*." I had, like, 200 bucks or something...[laughs]. Can't get 'em for 200 bucks anymore!." ³²³

Yarber himself bought the guitar secondhand from a Missouri music store in 1994 for \$200.³²⁴ But this identity became problematized through the White Stripes' career as Jack White became a centralizing force. He invested a potency into his apparatuses to become authentic rock and roll instruments. In the 2007 *Guitar World* interview, Jack admits "we were scared of sounding too polished or having to fight through modernity to sound real. But we've done a few albums now, and I thought I might know enough about the whole process to use the right equipment and get away with it."³²⁵ This idea of 'getting away with it' becomes possible once his gear is able to communicate their signs through a sedimented mythological and significant history. Throughout this blatant disregard of the apparatus, the transferability of Jack's virtuosity into the guitar-hero context reinforces that '*the artist is always right*.' Jack White adopts apparatuses that have a relatively

³²³ Scapelliti, "Jack Built," 150.

³²⁴ True, *Mutant*, 59-60.

³²⁵ Di Perna, "Ripper," 82.

empty history, and has bestowed in them a complex history that remains a less-than-obvious extension, yet an extension nonetheless, of the guitar-hero tradition.

St. Vincent: “Complex Yet Liberating”

As was investigated in the previous case study, St. Vincent’s institutional affiliations and the scope of her success strongly convey her ‘indie-ness.’ That said, her playing will be judged based on its ability to conform to a standard for indie authenticity, and does so, though, not without difficulty. The guiding trope will be ‘complex yet liberating,’ a quote taken from her only guitar magazine interview. ‘Complex yet liberating’ characterizes the technical mastery which she clearly exhibits, decidedly antithetical to indie identity (as indicated by scholarship), and the redemptive ‘liberation’ which rebalances her identity, as one supporting an abstract ‘independence.’ The magazine article introduces St. Vincent as follows,

It’s pretty rare for a bona fide guitar-nut – we’re talking Berklee College of Music-level guitar-a-holic – to rack up interviews on NPR rave reviews from indie music mags like *NME* and *Pitchfork*, and guest appearances on the IFC’s hit comedy *Portlandia*. But Annie Clark, the singer/guitarist who performs under the name St. Vincent, isn’t your typical guitar geek. In fact she’s sort of a guitar hero for people who hate the whole idea of guitar-hero worship.³²⁶

St. Vincent is a guitar-hero for anti-heroes, in many ways. She expresses an abstract continuity with the genealogical tradition of the guitar hero, even though she overtly despises and visually/sonically disrupts these discursive histories. This connection is largely made through the capacities for intricate finger-picking and complex chordal arrangements, though she downplays the role of schooling in learning these capacities.³²⁷

³²⁶ Shawn Hammond, “All Star Drop Out,” *Premier Guitar*, Nov 2011, 123.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

While female guitar heroes (e.g. Jennifer Batten, Orianthi) are not unheard of in recent years, they often display a pronounced virtuosity to gain recognition, beyond the requirements of their male counterparts, of which St. Vincent has little interest. She has a refined taste in boutique vintage gear, yet her tastes attract her to gear of low cultural value. Finally, while her use of technology is not over-the-top, the ‘robotic’ image of the new-wave is at odds with the electric guitar’s image as ‘primitive’ technology. Thus, St. Vincent becomes a guitar-hero amongst anti-heroes – a guitar-hero for anti-heroes, capable of resonating with both histories. Encapsulating almost all of these tropes, *SPIN*’s entry for St. Vincent in their ‘Greatest Guitarist’ list writes,

The tricky little lead lines with which she peppers St. Vincent’s already impressively broad catalog hint at Annie Clark’s almost casual mastery, but her true genius lies in the way she treats the guitar as a dynamic sound source rather than a static instrument. In her hands, and within a tautly complex compositional framework, the guitar sounds limitless, capable of screaming, squalling, soaring, and crying – as if Hendrix were sitting in with a downtown art-rock band.³²⁸

SPIN name checks ubiquitous guitar-god Jimi Hendrix, noting her emulation of his sonic adventurism within a ‘tautly complex compositional framework,’ yet couching this adventurism as a ‘casual’ mastery of the guitar marked by its resistance to guitar disciplining (treating it as a ‘dynamic sound source’ as opposed to a ‘static instrument’). ‘Complex yet liberating,’ ‘Hendrix in a downtown art-rock band,’ St. Vincent represents a tugging at the heartstrings of guitar-heroics – a worthy emissary who chooses to be an outsider.

³²⁸ *SPIN*, “100 Greatest.”

“...I’m just kidding”

St. Vincent, performing at the All Points West festival in 2009, teases the first few notes of Jimi Hendrix’s famous Woodstock rendition of the ‘Star Spangled Banner.’ She stops herself, says “...I’m just kidding,” followed by audience laughter, and continues with a solo guitar rendition of the Beatles’ ‘Dig A Pony.’³²⁹ One strand of Middleton’s ‘progressive rock’ follows the late-sixties use of the recording studio as a new means through which sonic exploration can integrate an orchestral palette, allowing for a fluid integration of the high-art lexicon by adopting its instruments and compositional methods.³³⁰ While Middleton’s key figure in this exploration is the Beatles, Waksman (1999) explores this history through Jimi Hendrix. Hendrix’s use of electronic sound, particularly through the use of stompboxes (particularly the Vox Wah-Wah pedal, Roger Mayer Fuzz Face and Octavia), expanded the capacities and aptitudes of the electric guitarist and, consequently, rock music.³³¹ While his timbral palette was not ‘orchestral,’ in a way that was immediately continuous with high-art instrumentation and compositional methods, his manipulation of guitar signal (picked notes) and noise (feedback) is representative of the *innovative virtuosity* that characterizes the guitar hero. The other half of Waksman’s chapter explores the phallogentric nature of Hendrix’s virtuosity, exploiting the mythic black male sexuality through an aggressively suggestive performance style – holding the guitar as protruding from between his legs, ‘ejaculating’ lighter fluid before setting his guitars in flames and other gestures. Waksman ties his

³²⁹ “St. Vincent - Dig A Pony - Live @ All Points West Festival 8/1/09 in HD,” video clip, YouTube.

³³⁰ Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 28.

³³¹ Waksman, *Instruments*, 182-4.

virtuosity to these movements, arguing “Hendrix’s bodily motions were never a thing unto themselves, but were always tied to musical effects.”³³² As such, Hendrix invested his apparatuses with an innovative noisiness that is intrinsically tied to a history of rock masculinities.

The *SPIN* article ties St. Vincent to Hendrix’s sonic adventurism, but she cannot adopt his sexualized performance while remaining ‘indie.’ In her performance, St. Vincent acknowledges her schooling in the traditions of guitar heroics and the various capacities for expression with the instrument. She refers to her first guitar influences as “Probably the really obvious ones,”³³³ listing Hendrix, The Doors, Jethro Tull and placing special emphasis on her love of Steely Dan. Elsewhere in the article she also expresses a love for Iron Maiden. Her Berklee School of Music background would suggest her competence in the advanced guitar techniques employed by many of these artists. She offers guitar tips in her article, explaining how tuning the guitar down a whole step helps maintain proper intonation while performing dive-bombs.³³⁴ Her single note melodic motifs, particularly the main riff to ‘Your Lips Are Red’ express control over her instrument (without evoking the individualism of the extended guitar solo). She often employs advanced, jazz-influenced, finger-style techniques in her accompaniments. These are best heard on ‘Human Racing,’ ‘Paris Is Burning’ and ‘Save Me From What I Want.’ In her performance of ‘Dig A Pony,’ aside from name-checking the Beatles on her list of influences, St. Vincent masterfully navigates the riff’s slides and hammer-ons,

³³² Waksman, *Instruments*, 203.

³³³ Hammond, “All-Star Dropout,” 123.

³³⁴ Playing a note and depressing the whammy bar to its the fullest extent.

additionally using the guitar to echo the point of climactic tension in the vocal, ‘because.’ She even adds a guitar solo, drenched in fuzz, filled with bends and rising thirds and sixths played as double-stops. Her guitars, pedals and amplifiers strategically enact a set of capacities and discursive propositions to tie her within a history of guitar heroics.

Her rendition of ‘Dig A Pony,’ in spite of her added guitar flourishes, still takes the form of a deconstruction by subverting normative guitar capacities. The first time she hits the E chord,³³⁵ she intentionally gives it an awkward, off-time, rake instead of strumming within the expected meter. She ends that musical measure with a slide up to a random note that is followed by a pull-off to the open string, with a reckless disregard of the consequent tonality. Such disruptions are similar to Hendrix’s adventures in sonic texture, but they are invested with an indie ethical imperative towards alterity as they are articulated from St. Vincent’s highly rested guitar (mid-torso), and taken as stemming from her awkwardly rigid body mannerisms. One exchange with *Premier Guitar* is highly representative of this balancing between technique (complexity) and intuition (liberation),

Because your music is very indie, it’s kind of surprising that you studied in a formal guitar program. Do you still think in terms of theory when you play?

Not really. If I needed to communicate with somebody – like, “No, I’m sorry, this chord is actually an Ebm(b9) chord” – I could tell them that.

But you’re not worrying about stuff like, “Oh, *this* scale can’t go with that chord ...”

No, it’s all by intuition and all by ear.³³⁶

This exchange is complicated by a hermeneutic disjunction between the sixties and the present. As explored by Lucy Green (*How Popular Musicians Learn*, 2002), popular

³³⁵ While it is an E shape, the chord sounds as a D chord because her guitar is tuned a whole step down.

³³⁶ Hammond, “All-Star Dropout,” 124.

musicians like Hendrix and the Beatles largely learned by ear through informal practices. As the rock music and the electric guitar began to be conceived as less dangerous, after generations who grew up with the instrument became parents, the instrument underwent a period of institutionalization within which programs like The Berklee College of Music, as well as trade magazines, could create an infrastructure to support a more formalized set of practices. This infrastructure, in being the business of educating young guitarists in becoming ‘great’ guitarists, latched onto the narratives of guitar heroics. While it is difficult to teach ‘innovation,’ it is fairly easy to teach theory and technique – the methodology is, largely, isolatable and repeatable. As such, there is a particular stress on technique in schools. Reflecting on her time at the college, St. Vincent confesses,

I think I got a bit more knowledge of harmony – or at least I could put names to the harmonies that I already had in my ears. But the way in which an institution can teach art is not necessarily the way I like to experience art....A lot of people can get caught up in getting the best scores on a guitar exam, and they can be technically very good guitar players or instrumentalists, but there’s a difference between athleticism and artistry.³³⁷

Athleticism requires a technical mastery of the complex physical capacities to perform at a high level, artistry is indicative of resistance and indie’s independence. This is the balancing of her ability to play ‘Dig A Pony’ with the appropriate technical mastery, yet the addition of ‘intuitive’ fills – fills that would not enter into normative guitar discourse because they do not signify capacities that are directed at technical mastery.

On her guitar playing, St. Vincent says “I wouldn’t say I’m a very technical player, though. I’m more intuitive -- it’s always more about chasing an abstraction”³³⁸;

³³⁷ Hammond, “All-Star Dropout,” 123.

³³⁸ Petrusich, “Interview: St. Vincent.”

this abstraction is often sounded as a noisy amateurism. Amateurism is foregrounded in her use of atonalism in her guitar solos, exemplified by ‘Marrow,’ ‘Now Now’ and ‘Northern Lights.’³³⁹ When her solos dissolve into noise, it uses the guitar solo as a vehicle to convey a lack of control over the instrument instead of an intensified control. This evokes a similar moral imperative on praising ‘wrong notes’ that was suggested by Jack White’s emulation of Son House. The guitar solo is a central and key element of guitar heroics. St. Vincent’s topsy-turvy approach to the central negotiator in guitar heroics is a key to her status as a guitar hero for anti-heroes as well as a guitar hero amongst anti-heroes.

Your Lips Are Red

Given the history of the guitar solo as a masculinized sexual mastery, St. Vincent’s gender would seem to preclude her from that status of guitar hero. Hendrix’s hyper-phallocentrism, given St. Vincent’s confessed ‘demure’ appearance, should be an obvious turn off to the instrument. Yet, St. Vincent seems uninhibited by rock’s masculinities. She tells *Premier Guitar*,

Rather than talking in really tricky generalizations that get really hairy, really fast, I just know my experience – which is that I *loved* Iron Maiden. I still love Iron Maiden. I just loved *guitar*, and I never really was made aware of the fact that some people think it’s an anomaly for a woman to really play guitar.³⁴⁰

Embedded within this quote are dual claims. First, guitar appreciation can be abstracted from its gendered history and, second, that she identifies as a woman playing the guitar. The first claim undergirds a ‘masculinization’ of her persona and the second carves out a

³³⁹ Atonalism is used more frequently in her live solos (when they vary from the recorded original).

³⁴⁰ Hammond, “All-Star Dropout,” 130.

specific area for feminist rebellion, a ‘feminization’ of her persona. The masculinized traits that she adopts signify her ability to master the guitar’s complexities, while the feminized traits reinforce her exteriority to its history.

Mavis Bayton’s (1997) assertion that the lack of female guitar heroes is responsible for women’s exclusion from the guitar community is problematized by female guitarists’ admiration of male guitarists. Clawson’s (“Masculinity and Skill Acquisition,” 1999) exploration of band experimentation in years of gender-segregated social interaction provides a stronger explanation as to why women lack the social and cultural capital to be invited into the band. Nonetheless, women still have been invited into the band, at least occasionally, carving out spots for female participation. A popular spot for female participation is as vocalist, reinforcing a gendered exclusion in that the voice is conceived of as emanating from the body instead of the manipulation of technology.³⁴¹ This reinforces a patriarchal epistemology of mind-body dualism, reserving intellectual (objective) domination of the world’s tools for men and sensual, (subjective) emotive production for women. Elsewhere, Clawson explores the pronounced participation of women as bassists in alternative rock groups as a gendered division of labor.

By invoking the physicality of bass playing, some respondents assimilated [the bass] to the more acceptably feminine work for singing. Bass playing is portrayed as the product of a physical and emotional responsiveness that is countered to the implicitly masculine qualities of intellect, technique, and mastery.³⁴²

³⁴¹ Bannister, *White Boys*, 30.

³⁴² Mary Ann Clawson, “Why Women Play The Bass,” *Gender and Society* 13:2 (1999), 206.

Additionally, women (as bassists) take on less desired jobs by not assuming a lead instrument, becoming a subordinate member in the band.³⁴³

Against this background, Robin M. James (2009) argues that women's exploration beyond these roles can be seen as a 'hacking' of 'the master's tools' in dismantling 'the master's house' – patriarchal epistemology. Citing Norma Coates' grappling with her love of 'cock rock,' James writes,

Norma Coates expresses here an ethical and aesthetic quandary we might term a "feminist guilty pleasure": liking something one knows one just shouldn't like, since one considers its politics problematic if not disgusting....when appropriately hacked, the master's tools in certain situations and under certain criteria might even be very effect tools for feminist, anti-racist work.³⁴⁴

She argues for using non-ideal theory, suggesting that theoretical concepts (which are considered to play a role in maintaining a patriarchal epistemology) are created with the assumption of a particular usage; the appropriation of these concepts for alternative aims changes the nature of the concepts themselves. She further adds, by "not engaging these particular elements of hegemonic discourse further marginalizes and disempowers one, because it situates one so far from the (however problematic) mainstream that one is incapable of making meaningful inroads in it."³⁴⁵ What this entails with regards to the guitar, is that the guitar, while not in the hands of 'the master,' is no longer one of 'the master's tools.'

³⁴³ Clawson, "Bass," 207. The guitarist is considered to be more integral to the band's sound and, consequently, is offered a larger stake in authorship of material.

³⁴⁴ Robin M. James, "Autonomy, Universality, and Playing the Guitar: On the Politics and Aesthetics of Contemporary Feminist Deployments of the "Master's Tools"," *Hypatia* 24:2 (2009), 78.

³⁴⁵ James, "Masters Tools," 81.

James' example is Peaches, a female guitarist who engages in a stage performance resonating very closely with rock's masculinities, often with some 'gender-bending' – adopting some (albeit effeminate) glam-rock masculinities. As such, she represents a history of women adopting the role of virtuoso as non-ideal representatives. Accordingly, Peaches' adoption of the Les Paul, as her main instrument, strategically enacts a discursive history and the moral propositions associated with guitar heroics, hacking them to include a non-ideal participant. St. Vincent acknowledges that "I think the idea of women being virtuosos at an instrument is really not new at all. If you look at classical music, there are tons and tons of really technical, virtuosic women."³⁴⁶ Yet, her feminine persona complicates her ability to be masculinized by her virtuosity. As Lucy Green argues, the more attractive a woman is, the more her technical competence will be questioned.³⁴⁷ While St. Vincent considers herself demure, she does not complicate her femininity to a degree similar to Peaches.

St. Vincent occupies a difficult position with regards to her technical competence, noting that her pedalboard was made by Mike Vegas (not by herself) in her *Premier Guitar* interview. She also takes a backseat in an *Eventide* youtube video exploration of her rig, while a male member of the *Eventide* staff shows the additional operations of her pedalboard.³⁴⁸ This is contrasted by her interview in *Coup De Main*, where she is eager to

³⁴⁶ Hammond, "All-Star Dropout," 128.

³⁴⁷ Bannister, *White Boys*, 31.

³⁴⁸ "Annie Clark of St. Vincent / Eventide Stompboxes / Part 1 of 2," video clip, YouTube.

educate the writer who is “fairly clueless about the way pedals work”³⁴⁹ with a diagram and full explanation of her entire unit.

St. Vincent’s adoption of a position of authorship, a lead instrument, along with her hacking of the ‘master’s tools,’ is marked by her identity as anti-hero through her unavoidable femininity. In *Stereogum*’s ‘Gummy Awards,’ St. Vincent was voted by readers as the ‘top indie rock crush.’³⁵⁰ Given her femininity, her lack of coverage in guitar magazines is unsurprising. *Guitar World*’s 300th issue admits that the magazine’s two female cover stories garnered poor sales.³⁵¹ As St. Vincent tells *Premier Guitar*, “Obviously it’s not that women are at a handicap with motor skills ... it must be a cultural thing.”³⁵² Her femininity grapples with the masculinization embedded in the apparatuses of guitar heroics, highlighting the difference in the gear she chooses to adopt.

A Refined Sense of Rubbish

The dichotomies of ‘innovative virtuosity,’ or ‘complex liberation,’ underwrite and resonate in St. Vincent’s gear selection. Her gear selection is highly informed (in an area which is seldom covered). She is very aware and open to sharing her tools of the trade. The tools range between a garage-aesthetic, similar to Jack White, and a recent trend towards boutique gear. Andy Bennett, in *U.K. ‘Indie Guitar’ Culture* (2001), argues that indie gear selection complements its image by “avoiding obviously high-tech

³⁴⁹ Graves, “Interview: Annie Clark A.K.A. St. Vincent on ‘Strange Mercy.’”

³⁵⁰ Stereogum, “Top 20 Indie-Rock Crushes of 2012.” December 13, 2012.

³⁵¹ Chris Gill, “300,” *Guitar World*, May 2008 (San Francisco: Future US, Inc., 2008), 33.

³⁵² Hammond, “All-Star Dropout,” 130.

features such as locking tremolo units or amplifiers with digital displays.”³⁵³ His example is his battered Fender Stratocaster, representing ‘simple’ design and an ‘original’ guitar, along with a Marshall fifty-watt combo amplifier, representing intimacy. This assessment is problematic: as previously interrogated with Jack White, avoiding a locking-tremolo, performing on a retro and highly idealized Fender Stratocaster through the similarly idealized early Marshall combo amp, can be equally representative of a blues aesthetic. Thus, a garage aesthetic, if it is meant to create a sense of ‘othering’ and ‘anti-heroics’ must carefully avoid idealized instruments. Further, as indie displays a proclivity to ideologically negate its own clichés, some indie guitarists have successfully integrated guitars with locking tremolo units (e.g. Sleigh Bells). While St. Vincent does not use a locking tremolo, she uses her whammy bar to create dive-bombs.³⁵⁴ Her pedal board also includes multiple pedals with high-tech digital displays, including a MIDI synchronization system. Her technological immersion serves as a point of othering from the canonic impulse in guitar heroics to emphasize emotional spontaneity, downplaying the role of technology (as exemplified by Jack White). St. Vincent’s identity, strategically enacted through her gear, articulates the complexity of boutique guitar culture while emphasizing her resistance through the integration of non-idealized instruments and a pronounced reliance on synthetic timbres. As such her apparatuses are invested with a host of contradictory discursive and ethical propositions, fitted to their unique capacities.

³⁵³ Andy Bennett, “‘Plug In and Play!’: UK ‘Indie Guitar’ Culture,” in *Guitar Cultures*, eds. Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe (New York: Oxford, 2001), 50.

³⁵⁴ She uses thick .012 gauge strings to help balance intonation during this gesture, avoiding the associations of the locking tremolo with Van Halen’s ‘new virtuosity’ (Hammond, “All-Star Dropout,” 125).

In her interview, St. Vincent expresses an intricate knowledge of her instruments.³⁵⁵ Her Harmony Bobkat H15 is from 1967, the model which featured two gold-foil pickups. Harmony is known, among guitarists, as “one of the largest mass-manufacturers of bargain and midrange guitars.”³⁵⁶ The *2012 Vintage Guitars Buyers Guide* prices a 1968 model of the guitar at \$400-\$500 (depending on condition), barely half the price of a brand new midlevel Fender or Gibson instrument.³⁵⁷ She also has a sixties era Silvertone 1488 Silhouette. Silvertone, the maker of Jack White’s amplifiers, was purchased and distributed by Sears after it divested itself of Harmony guitars in the 40s.³⁵⁸ The *Buyer’s Guide* prices this guitar at \$350-\$425. It is also possible that, if the guitar was manufactured after 1965, that this guitar was a Japanese import instead of an American model.³⁵⁹ St. Vincent’s use of these oddball guitars is described as “part practical, part aesthetic.”³⁶⁰ She is a small person and requires the lighter guitars. Additionally she loves the “amazing vibrato bar that’s super sensitive – you can dive bomb on it and it will stay in tune.”³⁶¹ While she does not mention this as an aesthetic consideration, the guitars convey a toy-ish aesthetic. As with Jack White’s guitars, they sport dissimilar body shapes from idealized guitar models: the Stratocaster, Telecaster

³⁵⁵ See Appendix C for visuals of all St. Vincent’s gear.

³⁵⁶ Bacon, *Guitar Encyclopedia*, 190.

³⁵⁷ Alan Greenwood and Gil Hembree, *The Official Vintage Guitar Magazine Price Guide 2012*, (Bismark: Vintage Guitar Books, 2011) 170.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 277.

³⁵⁹ Bacon, *Guitar Encyclopedia*, 282.

³⁶⁰ Hammond, “All-Star,” 124-5.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

and the Les Paul. St. Vincent's guitars represent a boutique approach to a 'trash' aesthetic, a refined sense of rubbish fit for the heroic anti-hero.

St. Vincent has a third guitar which she uses a considerable amount. The Hagstrom Super Swede was the company's most popular model. Essentially a Les-Paul clone, the guitar was offered from 1973 to 1982.³⁶² Hagstrom is a Swedish guitar manufacturer; while not carrying the negative connotation of cheap Asian imports, non-American instruments are still stigmatized. It is largely agreed that the Beatles and the British Invasion were responsible for the guitar boom in America, with sales doubled in the year following their first Ed Sullivan appearance.³⁶³ British guitarists, attempting to copy their favourite American rock and rollers, were unable to purchase American-made instruments due to a post-World War II trade embargo on imported luxury items.³⁶⁴ The Beatles were proud of their first 'real instruments' when they finally purchased the American made Rickenbackers. The guitar boom, combined with the 'progressive rock' movement, created guitar heroes out of these musicians who fetishized the American originals. As such, nearly all the major guitar companies have been American – Gibson, Fender, Gretsch. St. Vincent's '79 Super Swede, according to the *Buyer's Guide* ranges in price from \$925-\$1,150.³⁶⁵ Its functionality as a Les Paul copy increases its worth, although a '79 Gibson Les Paul still ranges in value from \$2,200 to \$2,700.³⁶⁶ Thus, the

³⁶² Bacon, *Guitar Encyclopedia*, 188.

³⁶³ Waksman, *Instruments*, 1.

³⁶⁴ Michael Heatley, "Wired for Sound," in *Guitar & Bass Classics: Great British Electric Guitar Bible*. (Carshalton: Anthem Publishing, 2012), 19.

³⁶⁵ Greenwood and Hembree, *Buyer's Guide*, 167.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

Hagstrom is an apparatus invested with some of the significant histories of guitar-heroics, albeit via a (somewhat devalued) differentiation.³⁶⁷

While not signifying a 'devaluation' per se, St. Vincent's live rig now includes a TRVR little boy – a hand-wired replica of Fender's '65 Deluxe Reverb. The use of a boutique brand may be viewed as bypassing the idealized Fender brand-name and its associated history with blues-rock masculinities. Though, there is an alternative 'boutique' knowledge being enacted that reinforces a patriarchal epistemology. 'Boutique' knowledge values the obscure, expensive and difficult to access. In doing so, it reinforces the high-art, low-art divide – re/creating the discursive valuation of 'authenticity' over 'artifice,' valuing the hand-wired, near-replica of the original over the machine-manufactured, 'commercialized' version. To reinforce this valuation of originals, she uses a vintage '70s Fender Princeton in the studio. Additionally, in the *Premier Guitar* interview she expresses that the

best distortion still is overdriving a tube amp, or – in the studio – going straight into the console and getting board distortion. That's a very satisfying distortion. But if you're touring and you need to be practical and you have to have a lot of different colors in your guitar palette, you probably shouldn't just bring, like, a Fender tweed amp or a great overdrive sound – that's just not going to happen.³⁶⁸

This privileging of the 'direct' connection from guitar to amp (or console) leads towards a discussion of 'technophobia' in guitar culture.

³⁶⁷ St. Vincent has a Gibson SG which was used during the first two records, largely dropped in *Strange Mercy*. This guitar also articulates an attraction to idealized instruments.

³⁶⁸ Hammond, "All-Star," 128.

St. Vincent's, in her words, "*bonkers* pedalboard"³⁶⁹ best reflects the complicated role of 'technophobia' in guitar culture. The perceived 'primitivism' of the guitar places a strong emphasis on an unobstructed signal path from fingers to sonic output. As evidence of this, all the amplifiers mentioned thus-far operate on vacuum tube technology which, apart from its use in guitar amps, has become an obsolete technology since the world of audio converted to transistor and, later, digital technologies. But guitarists place a great emphasis on the selection of their gear. As such, I believe the common assertion of 'technophobia' in guitar culture is better explained as an 'impulse towards canonism.'

The guitarists of the sixties and the seventies are the focus of guitar-hero canonism. It is of no coincidence that Fender and Gibson, the two most storied guitar-makers, had largely stopped making guitar models of lasting significance by the late sixties.³⁷⁰ Of the sixty-three amplifiers included in *Amped: The Illustrated History of the World's Greatest Amplifiers*, only twelve were manufactured after the sixties, five of those (nearly half) were introduced in the seventies. Guitar-heroes of the sixties and seventies were, largely, using contemporary equipment. Guitars and amplifiers, as technologies, are thus attached to a canonic history of rock.

Pedals, on the other hand, without a considerable visual presence and, often, without sufficient sonic presence, are difficult to canonize. Jimi Hendrix made it sonically and visually obvious when his pedals were being used. The Edge's (U2) use of delay was unescapable, sonically. It was clear that the notes that emanated from his

³⁶⁹ Hammond, "All-Star," 126.

³⁷⁰ Fender's demise is usually attributed to the CBS purchase in 1965 which increased production output and diminished resources available to check each model. Gibson made a similar shift in the 70s following Norlin's purchase of the company in 1969.

amplifier were not all played by his fingers. However, many classifications of pedals do not create the same sonic imprint; compression, equalization and overdrive leave little audible imprint that can be separated from the sound emanating from the visual icons of fingers, guitars and amplifiers. The processes of canonization have largely dissociated guitarists from many of the effects that they used.

St. Vincent's two Eventide pedals create an inescapable sonic presence (akin to Edge's use of delay), which have been left out of a canonic history. Her Eventide Space is a reverb modeling pedal. Reverb is a common feature, particularly on Fender amplifiers, and due to their compact nature and low manufacturing costs, many popular amplifiers contain an 'on-board' spring reverb. This is the reverb heard on the White Stripes, it is also the sludgy, lo-fi reverb that Bannister argues indie bands implement to hide amateurism and fill in space in minimalistic ensembles.³⁷¹ But St. Vincent requires neither of these remedies; her use of Eventide's Space pedal applies complex algorithms to create moving textures. The 'Blackhole' preset heard in St. Vincent's 'Champagne Year' creates a reverb with a pronounced sustain to create a feeling of weightlessness as if one is floating through the space, with added pitch modulation to create additional motion. While perhaps underlining the alienation of the social subject in indie rock (alone in the vast depths of outer space), the complexity of the reverb algorithm is consistent with St. Vincent's background of significant schooling. Thus, the Eventide Space also represents a kind of guitar heroics for anti-guitar heroes.

³⁷¹ Bannister, *White Boys*, 78. I would add that the use of reverb creates the sense of a larger space which can reinforce lyrical tropes of alienation (being alone in a big room).

St. Vincent values her Eventide pedals for their role in streamlining her pedalboard,

[I]n my former years, I was traveling with a pedalboard that was huge. It had Moogerfoogers and I was controlling them with expression pedals, and I had two or three distortions, and this and that and the other, but I've come around to having a fuzz and a distortion, and then a lot of flexibility in a couple other pedals. The Eventide pedals are really great for that.³⁷²

Her Eventide Pitchfactor's pitch-shifted delay can be heard on 'Just The Same But Brand New.' The synthesizer emulation can be heard on the live outro of 'Surgeon,' when St. Vincent plays the synth solo on guitar. Her "complex-yet-liberating MIDI-controlled pedalboard"³⁷³ definitely creates some complex sounds which are 'out-of-the-ordinary' in guitar culture. Though, I would argue that the overemphasis on her pedalboard stems from the new wave roots of her music. The sense of the *menschmachine* inherited from Kraftwerk, underlying the robot-human hybrid Devo characters, incites listeners to over-attribute the technological immersion of these groups. As such, even a non-guitar publication like *Coup De Main* will ask her about her use of technology (particularly her pedalboard). Particularly in St. Vincent's later work, when she adopted an overtly new-wave sonic imprint (in addition to the sociological continuity), the focus on a 'complex-yet-liberating' pedalboard is a discursive translation of her new-wave identity. As apparatuses, the Eventide pedals are invested with and enact a challenge to many of the moral and discursive foundations of conventional guitar discipline. The complexity and virtuosity of her background needs to spun as an attempt at 'liberating' the guitar for her playing to be representative of indie subjectification. The complexity is also

³⁷² Hammond, "All-Star," 128.

³⁷³ Ibid., 123.

overemphasized as a means of situating her within indie, marking her difference. She cannot be Jimi Hendrix, she has to be Jimi Hendrix sitting in with a downtown art-rock band.

Postscript: Electric Guitars and Musicology

It is my contention that a key deficiency in popular music scholarship has been the inability to discuss electric guitarists in a manner with which they understand themselves.³⁷⁴ In failing to do so, important factors in musical and cultural decision-making have been ignored. The goal of this thesis has been to investigate the intricacies (particularly the depth) of guitar-decision-making. As such, I understand the ‘analytical’ nature of my work. However, the advancement of an appropriate framework for discussing the impact of the electric guitar ought be considered, in itself, a ‘theoretical’ occupation. In this postscript, I would like to accumulate, expound and clarify this theoretical occupation – exploring how one becomes a guitar subject, viewed through a Foucaultian lens of normalization, docility and resistance. Electric guitarists need to reexamine areas of theoretical interest to popular music studies in order to accumulate a sufficient literature for cultural outsiders to engage in their own studies with guitar-perspectives. As such, we can meaningfully address the role of the performer³⁷⁵ – a key figure in the creation of any music – in the manner within which they understand themselves.

³⁷⁴ I have discussed the works of Steve Waksman. In addition to dealing directly with the guitar, *This Ain't The Summer of Love* (2009) engages in a lengthy discussion of the splintering of guitar virtuosity as representing the common roots and the fracturing futures of punk and metal during the 1980s. William Echard's *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* (2005) explores Neil Young's complex and layered career through many different guitar lenses, including his unique hand movements which combine elements of lead and rhythm playing into his rhythm guitar work, the use of noise as both noise and code in his soloing style, as well as the quality of his amplifier distortion. Andrew Cope's *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal* (2010) explores the blues-based guitar technique of Jimmy Page and the modal, renaissance orientation of Tony Iommi as indicative of their fractured identities as hard rock and heavy metal. I do not want to suggest that my goals are wholly absent from scholarship, rather they are underrepresented.

³⁷⁵ There is also potential for discussing the comparably invisible contributors to the music process – mixing engineers, mastering engineers, etc.

My theoretical framework has borrowed from and been inspired by Foucault, though I have often defined his terms in ways which are considerably more specific than he would have intended. Through a process of experimentation, I have investigated how his tools could prove useful for studying the guitar. This is perhaps not wholly different from Foucault's approach in his own work. As Foucault was a typically evasive writer, he often ignores his own conceptual tools during his case studies' exposition – for example, it is not until chapter four of *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, where Foucault lays out an analytics of power through which we ought to understand desire and sexuality. Additionally, he introduces many of his most famous coinages in his final interviews³⁷⁶ as a means of organizing his previous works. The inexplicit use of his terminology is further complicated by the broad focuses of his studies (discipline, punishment, sexuality, desire), which can, often, lend a particular indeterminacy to his work. Mostly due to its brief history, the study of the electric guitar has considerably more defined parameters than, say, the role of the virtuoso in Western musical culture – wherein the 'apparatus' might need to be defined in a much looser fashion (to cover many instruments and styles). As such, this chapter will seek to review and clarify where I have set up the parameters of my study.

I have treated the 'apparatus' as the most central term in my theoretical framework. Its productive role *organizes* capacities, aptitudes and moral propositions and *is organized by* power, truth and knowledge. Stephen Legg defines the apparatus as:

[A] thoroughly heterogenous set of discourses, institutions, forms, regulations, laws, statements or moral propositions...These formations function in response

³⁷⁶ Foucault died prematurely from AIDS and was working on new material nearing his death, so it is possible that later works may have made more explicit use of terminology from late interviews.

to a specific urgency in a strategic manner, inscribed in a play of power but also linked to certain limits of knowledge.³⁷⁷

It is Legg's contention that there is a continuity between the 'apparatus' and Deleuze's 'assemblage.' He argues the two operate as a dialectic: Foucault tends to use the apparatus in unearthing accumulated and sedimented knowledges, whereas Deleuze employs the assemblage to analyze misunderstanding, resistance and flight.³⁷⁸ Legg's evaluation of the apparatus is undoubtedly reinforced by Foucault's interest in philology and the nature of his works as the explorations of sedimented (historical) knowledges. Jack White's Airline, in becoming iconically associated with the musician and his body of work, has built up a wealth of accumulated knowledges which are enacted through its usage. As such, even indie apparatuses may exhibit a variance in the magnitude of their sedimented histories. It is my contention that each piece of gear is accompanied by discourses, regulations and moral propositions which are enacted strategically by players adopting the equipment as negotiator of identity. For instance, my Fender Stratocaster contains discursive elements (shared cultural histories and associations with players, genres), regulations (e.g. a whammy bar which allows for detuning though, in the absence of locking tuners, is unfit to perform dive bombs) and moral propositions (e.g. 'moldy fig' mentalities and associations with blues music). The use of a Fender Stratocaster becomes a strategic response to an urgent need for identity.

As evidenced by chapter three, this identity can be characteristically normative or alternative. The ability for apparatuses to create both 'docile' (productively passive) and

³⁷⁷ Legg, "Apparatus," 130.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 131.

‘resisting’ (productively antagonistic) subjects emerges from Foucault’s theory of power. The resisting subject is more obviously engaged with power; power is, often, associated with a forceful stifling (related to its theoretical origins in political literature). The influence of power on the docile subject is more nuanced. In the early-1970s, Foucault was interested in the “direct targets of power and repression,”³⁷⁹ privileging a definition of power mostly congruent to the political notion of power. He modified his position in the mid-seventies to argue that resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.³⁸⁰ It is possible (and likely) that power will produce that which resists it, strategically organizing these ‘counter-powers’ to work within an underlying narrative.³⁸¹ For example, if we view the gear of Jack White and St. Vincent as carrying a ‘garage-esque’ identity, then we are recognizing it within the world of amateurist endeavors. It is then situated by the moral and ideological associations which accompany amateurist performance within the narrative of the guitar-hero like simplicity, non-seriousness and a lack of professionalism. These apparatuses are resisting power in the sense that they are glorifying an identity which resists a ‘norm’ (e.g. it is made of cheap plastic, lacks use in important repertoire); at the same time, these ‘resisting’ apparatuses are shaped by power, identifying their resistance as a devaluation (cultural and monetary). Hence, Foucault uses the term ‘counter-power’ to express their utility within power as well as their oppositional identity. As such, in discussing the transgressive subject, Foucault suggests

³⁷⁹ Pickett, “Resistance,” 452.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 458.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 458-9.

the term 'practices of freedom' over 'practices of liberation.'³⁸² The indie artist asserts a stance that signifies freedom, but they are not liberated from power relations – they are still situated by its internal organization.

A major contribution of Foucault's late work is the characterization of the docile subject as a powerful subject. The docile subject is a subject empowered by discipline:

[D]iscipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and it turns it into a relation of strict subjection.³⁸³

The docile subject will view guitar techniques (hammer-ons, note-bending, sweep picking) as aptitudes or capacities of which subjects may achieve different degrees of mastery. This gradation of mastery reifies a 'normal' by matching it with a gradation of power. As Foucault writes,

In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another.³⁸⁴

Guitar playing is composed of normative capacities which assess, compile and categorize subjects based on their mastery.³⁸⁵ These 'measurable gaps' allow for gradual increasing of one's hold on power ('in economic terms of utility'), simultaneously accompanied by

³⁸² Foucault, "Concern For The Self," 26.

³⁸³ Foucault, *Discipline*, 138.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁸⁵ Strategic mastery, in that 'mastery' is an ideological category which negotiates moral propositions regarding high and low culture.

the diminishing of self-determination ('in political terms of obedience'). As such, one can execute their picking hand technique with more accuracy ('more' becoming identifiable through these 'gaps'), gaining their power by refining their abilities to only create intended sounds (avoid unwanted feedback), without questioning the underlying assumption that accuracy is the indication of masterful playing. Jack White's lack of control in 'Aluminum' becomes useful difference in signifying a 'novice' approach, or the intricate fingering in St. Vincent's 'Human Racing' becomes a standard of excellence.

This narrative of a normal, along with its measurable gaps, manifests saliently in 'greatest guitarist lists' and guitar trade magazines. The 'normal' underlying the narrative of guitar-heroics borrows greatly from a history of virtuosity in Western classical music. Robert Walser, in exploring this topic (within the context of heavy metal), argues that "[a]long with virtuosity, the reigning values of metal guitar include a valorization of balance, planning and originality, [and] a conservatory-style fetishization of technique,"³⁸⁶ which is reinforced by pedagogical texts that deal "exclusively with pitch and form, the traditional concerns of musicological analysis."³⁸⁷ This fetishization of 'technique' borrows from an assumption that 'if you can play it fast, then you can play it slower too' – a conflation of speed with difficulty influenced by the 'pitch and form' focus of musicological texts (difficulty is best understood when notated). Trade magazines reinforce this attitude; the July 2008 issue of *Guitar World* features a "50 Fastest Guitarists" list as its cover story, even introducing a 'notes per second' clocking

³⁸⁶ Walser, "Highbrow, Lowbrow and Voodoo Aesthetics," 241.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 240.

project.³⁸⁸ To exhibit the centrality of metal guitar playing within guitar culture, in the latest *Guitar World Reader's Poll*, the voters heavily favored heavy metal (see Appendix E for a full list) – coinciding with St. Vincent's dreaded archetype of the 'athlete.' As there are few measurable gaps for increasing one's hold on power (metal is largely concerned with playing very complex parts as loudly, accurately and quickly as possible), metal is often considered the apotheoses of guitar discipline within trade magazine culture.³⁸⁹ Though, there is also an important strand of including 'influential' figures, who are creators of central guitar capacities:³⁹⁰ it is recognized that the standards for virtuosity on influential figures are less stringent, as late practitioners have to push the boundaries of virtuosity in order to be canonized (e.g. Robert Johnson as an original, leading to Eric Clapton). The combination of these two strands are brought together in an article by Shawn Hammond (editor of *Premier Guitar*),

We guitarists are kind of bitches. Seriously—have you taken a look at what we say about each other online? Hell, even many of us who are secure or well-mannered enough to not let internet anonymity turn us into jerkwads are often still thinking jerky thoughts. But I guess that's just how it is these days. I mean, it's not like you don't see that where guitar playing isn't part of the picture—although it does seem that bassists are less prone to tearing each other down.

I guess it all comes down to the evolution of the whole “guitar god” thing. As with everything cool, someone (or in this case, a bunch of someones) blazes a trail, then comes the bandwagon effect, then inevitable burnout, formula forming, and the numbing, beating to death of what once ruled. Thus began the

³⁸⁸ Gill, “Blinded By Science,” 83.

³⁸⁹ As well, often included are jazz guitarists who employ similarly intricate and virtuosic parts, though often eschew the loudness central to metal guitar.

³⁹⁰ The valuation of 'originality' in Walser's analysis of heavy metal (appropriated from Western Classical Music) and guitar canonism is related to their convergent histories originating in modernism. For more information see Jones (2008) or Bannister (2006).

Post Guitar God era, which started anytime within the past 20 years ... or hasn't begun at all and never will, depending on your viewpoint.³⁹¹

Praise is reserved for the 'guitar-god' (or hero) and the 'trail blazers' that helped start the bandwagon. Difference is treated with a scathing tongue.

One of the few new entrants into the guitar-god canon has been Jack White, he has asserted a consistent place in 'top guitarist lists' and was even grouped with Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin and The Edge of U2 in a documentary about the guitar. When amalgamating Jack White into this guitar-hero tradition, trade magazines were baffled by his indignant attitude towards discipline. Jack White's *Guitar World* cover stories often ask him to review and explain his comments when he referred to Stevie Ray Vaughan as an 'overrated virtuoso.' He offers a few different (but related) explanations. I have already quoted the 2004 interview where he critiqued the 'superficial mastery' which is enabled by the simplicity of blues scales.³⁹² In 2006 he adds that "I'm not impressed with somebody playing a blues scale at a blinding speed, but I am impressed with Son House when he plays the 'wrong' note."³⁹³ He is expressing a distaste with the normative capacities of the guitar-hero narrative.

SPIN's 'greatest guitarist' list attempts to invert/subvert this narrative by placing a premium on the anti-hero. Though, by self-identifying as an inversion of the 'normal,' they reinforce their identity as a counter-power – propping up the guitar hero as a figure of unquestionable greatness by rejecting it wholesale. Interestingly, Jack White (as a deconstructionist and a canonical figure) ranks highly on both *SPIN* and anti-

³⁹¹ Hammond, "7 Guitarists You'll Hate Me for Loving."

³⁹² Scapelliti, "House That Jack Built," 150-1.

³⁹³ Tolinski, "Get Behind," 60.

deconstructionist lists. St. Vincent, a guitar-hero caught in an anti-hero's body (playing an anti-hero's music), is eliminated from the lists where she would rank highly and is devalued on the list where she is included (she is #93 on *SPIN*). As such, this web of power relations is a constant backdrop to the negotiation of guitar-identity.

The trade magazine is a central monitoring mechanism through which the gaze reifies the internal mechanisms of power. Foucault explores this gaze as it manifests in the architecture of the panopticon (prisons), military camps and the École. He writes,

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible.³⁹⁴

While guitar study does not have an *architectural* observational mechanism, it does have a multitude of diffuse observers. These observers may be teachers, other guitarists, potential sexual partners and even audience members (without guitar knowledge) who, nonetheless, recognize and value of speed and accuracy. As was made evident by the trade magazine, observers may also be inanimate objects (album covers and promotional photos are other examples). As these observers appear in a diffuse and random manner, guitar subjects begin to monitor themselves. Subjects discipline themselves as an anticipatory gesture, preparing for future displays of mastery. Foucault argues that, as power descends through the hierarchy (from the prison warden to the inmates), it becomes more anonymous. The gaze can, and often is enacted by subjects on themselves and on other subjects.³⁹⁵ Regardless of whether one is considered to be the 'disciplined'

³⁹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline*, 170-1.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

more than the ‘discipliner,’ related to the subject’s relative position in a hierarchy, they take it as a primary interest to ensure the productivity of all subjects. Everyone is in constant navigation of power relations as the gaze reaches increasing anonymity. Here, Foucault’s Nietzschean influence is brought to the forefront – it is assumed that the will to power is inescapable (as power relations are equally omnipresent).

Foucault is considerably less brash than Nietzsche. As such, Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ (as it is conceived of in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) would not be easily mapped on to Foucault. A Foucaultian ‘will to power’ is more aptly described as a subject’s desire to speak true knowledge (which is assumed to be a universal quality). The docile subject’s desire to increase their power is enacted through disciplining – a more disciplined subject will show less ‘measurable gaps’ from which they may gain more power. The resisting subject’s use of a ‘counter-power’ evidently suggests their desire to speak true knowledge, attempting to replace one conception of ‘true knowledge’ with another.

One of the central themes in chapter one was the death and rebirth of indie. As a discourse of resistance, there was a careful balancing of indie as counter-power and indie as a discipline. As a discipline, there emerged the possibility to be a docile indie subject. Because ‘independence’ is always a central tenet of indie culture, the idea of docility is met with disdain (as it is associated with the ‘mainstream’). The resultant balancing of resistance and disciplining was taken as being the underlying negotiation of indie culture. Chapter two followed this negotiation in action. The balancing of ‘resistance through docility’ and ‘resistance through counter-powers’ was set against the relative opacity of each artists’ institutional affiliations. The White Stripes and St. Vincent were then able to

contribute to an indie discipline, gaining power through continuing indie narratives, and challenge standardization, gaining power through activism and antagonism.

Chapter three contextualized these two powers (through docility and resistance) within the normalizing force of the guitar-hero. Jack White and St. Vincent's negotiation of their indie identity was mirrored by their appropriation or eschewal of normative guitar capacities. These capacities were paired with moral propositions, as they are organized by guitar gear (as apparatuses). Though, in retrospect, the apparatus seems more like a necessary conduit than the most important figure of this study.

Future extensions of this project ought to adopt a path similar to Foucault's final works. His work gradually left the study of 'ideas' to focus on the deployment of the body. In describing resistance in Foucault's late period, Pickett writes "[t]he body itself is the object of power, and prisons, even model ones, are focused upon the body and its functions. This is expressed in tranquilizers, forced isolation, and other penal practices. Revolt against such practices takes place at the same level."³⁹⁶ Similarly, extending the study of guitar (as a discipline) will require a reframing of the issue. We must concentrate on the formation of the body prior to understanding how that body has, strategically and productively, enabled guitar as a discipline. Resistance is now always attached to obviously transgressive apparatuses: for example, Andy Bennett's exploration of indie and the electric guitar takes a beaten up Stratocaster as his exemplary instrument – which has become problematic with the popularity of 'vintage' instruments and 'vintage looks.' But the virtuoso displays one consistent feature – the body. While the deployment of the

³⁹⁶ Pickett, "Resistance," 460.

body may vary between flamboyance or a detached, professorial approach, each virtuoso has a body they have put to use. In examining the body, this story may be extended, expounded and situated within a larger history.

Appendix A: Little Room Vocals

Score

Little Room Vocals

Swing! ♩ = ♩³ ♩

Voice

I Well you're in your litt - le - room _____ and you're

3 work - ing on some - thing good _____

IV

5 but if it's rea - lly good _____ you're

7 go - nna need a big - ger room _____ and

I

9 when you're in the big - ger room _____ you

11 might not know what to do _____ you

IV

13 might have to think of how you got star - ted

15 sit - ting in your lit - tle room _____

I

the 16 bars repeat with Jack
vocally improvising on

Appendix B: Pictures of Jack White's Gear

JB Hutto Montgomery Airline

Kay Hollowbody

Crestwood Astral II

Silvertone 6x10s (maple leaf added for their final tour of Canada)

Pedalboard (in order): a red tuner/ mute box, Boss TU-2 Tuner, MXR Micro Amp, Digitech Whammy, an Electro-Harmonix Big Muff (painted red) and the Electro-Harmonix POG.

Note: Jack also has a smaller board (subtracting a few pedals) by the drums at his second microphone.

Fender Deluxe Reverbs

Appendix C: Pictures of St. Vincent's Gear

Harmony Bobkat

Silvertone 1488

Hagstrom Super Swede

TRVR Little Boy

Pedalboard: Volume/
Expression pedal, Mini
Effect Gizmo, Mastermind
Switch bank, Korg
Pitchblack Tuner,
Eventide Space, Eventide
Pitchfactor, Boss Super
Shifter, Death By Audio
Interstellar Overdrive,
Z Vex Mastodon.

Appendix D: Icky Thump Guitar Tablature

"ICKY THUMP"

The Pedals That Make The Tone

Who's using who what should we do Well you can't be a pimp and a prostitute too
 Left alone I hit myself with a stone want home and learned how to clean up after myself

2nd time, go back to [5]

E5 D5 (E5)

30 (repeat previous two bars)

[H] (3:08)

E5
 Gtr. 1 plays Rhy. Fill 2 (see bar 16)
 Otr. 2 (elec. whammy dist. and Whammy pedal set to modulate two octaves up)

32 (synth break)

34

Whammy notation:
 + = heel down, o = toe down

[I] Guitar Solo (3:13)

D5 (E5) E5
 Gtr. 1 plays Rhy. Fig. 1 five times (see bar 3)
 (w/Whammy pedal set to one octave up)

Otr. 2

36

*Press pedal approx. halfway.

E5 D5 (E5) E5

38

D5 (E5) D5 (E5)

41

[J] Outro (3:30)

E5 D5 (E5) G5 (E5)

43

Otr. 1

G5 (E5) G5 (E5) D5 E5 D5 E5 (E5)

47

play 3 times and fade

Appendix E: Guitar World 2012 Reader's Poll

100. Wes Montgomery	65. Pete Townsend	30. Chet Atkins
99. John 5	64. Albert Lee	29. Billy Gibbons
98. Derek Trucks	63. John McLaughlin	28. Eric Clapton
97. Tosin Abasi	62. Chuck Schuldiner	27. Frank Zappa
96. Mark Knopfler	61. Steve Howe	26. Vernon Red
95. Jack White	60. John Lee Hooker	25. George Harrison
94. Albert King	59. Son House	24. Buddy Guy
93. Gary Rossington	58. Steve Lukather	23. Paul Gilbert
92. Ace Frehley	57. Tom Morello	22. Slash
91. T-Bone Walker	56. Lindsay Buckingham	21. Angus Young
90. Robin Trower	55. B.B. King	20. Ritchie Blackmore
89. Kenny Wayne Shepherd	54. Jerry Garcia	19. James Hetfield
88. Neil Young	53. Rick Nielsen	18. Zakk Wylde
87. Synyster Gates	52. Joe Walsh	17. John Petrucci
86. Peter Dinklage	51. Allan Holdsworth	16. Robert Johnson
85. Jeff Hanneman	50. Dave Murray	15. Duane Allman
84. Malcolm Young	49. Alexei Laiho	14. Les Paul
83. Glenn Tipton	48. Joe Bonamassa	13. David Gilmour
82. Robert Fripp	47. Eric Johnson	12. Dave Mustaine
81. Nuno Bettencourt	46. Jason Becker	11. Randy Rhoads
80. K.K. Downing	45. John Frusciante	10. Steve Vai
79. Gary Moore	44. Chuck Berry	9. Dimebag Darrell
78. Chris Broderick	43. Yngwie Malmsteen	8. Stevie Ray Vaughan
77. Andy Summers	42. Carlos Santana	7. Tony Iommi
76. Al Di Meola	41. Michael Schenker	6. Jimmy Page
75. Joe Perry	40. Keith Richards	5. Joe Satriani
74. Ted Nugent	39. Jeff Beck	4. Jimi Hendrix
73. Rory Gallagher	38. Buckethead	3. Alex Lifeson
72. Steve Morse	37. Jerry Cantrell	2. Brian May
71. Jeff Loomis	36. Kirk Hammett	1. Eddie Van Halen
70. Michael Angelo Batio	35. Warren Haynes	
69. Kerry King	34. Mark Tremonti	
68. George Lynch	33. Mark Morton	
67. Johnny Winter	32. Django Reinhardt	
66. Alex Skolnick	31. Dickey Betts	

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