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Accidents, hooks and theory

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Abstract

Records often include accidents. I suggest this tells us something about the flexibility of musical practices and the limits of theories. Musical 'hooks' provide useful test-cases because the hook is normally considered the least accidental part of a song. We imagine it emerging fully formed in a moment of inspiration – the catchy phrase that comes into a songwriter's head – or at least of calculation: 'I'll see your vibraphone and raise you a mellotron'. But hooks sometimes incorporate accidents or happen accidentally. If hooks are less than completely determinate, then every aspect of the popular record must be subject to contingency. I argue for theories – and views of musical practices – which begin with the recognition that accidents happen.

Whether we know it or not, we've all heard accidents on records. We may have read stories about records that turned out the way they did as the result of accidents. In what ways do accidents matter to the musical practices of which they form a part? How might they influence our theories? My responses will turn on the fact that records sometimes *trade on* these accidents – that musical hooks can incorporate accidents or happen accidentally. I'll move from several reminders that accidents appear on records to some examples of hooks. The 'accidental hooks' in particular will help to reveal that hooks on the whole are accidental: there's an irreducible level of accident in the variety, nature and function of hooks. I'll then try to suggest what it means that hooks are accidental. I will claim that a respect for the accidental encourages us to position ourselves more as amateur naturalists, focusing on plurality and disunity, than as scientists searching for rules, master narratives and essential structures. We will still want to theorise, but we may linger in the underbrush of particulars and delay the leap that theory demands.

Accidents and mistakes might have no place in an idealist's world, but as things are they inhabit our practices and haunt our theories. They're both part and not quite part of what we do. Studying them contributes to what John Austin called 'the long-term project of classifying and clarifying all possible ways and varieties of *not exactly doing things*, which has to be carried through if we are ever to understand properly what doing things is' (Austin 1970, p. 271, italics in original).[1] Mistakes stand in a clear relation to theory, because theories actually target them. A mistake can show the difference between what a theory says is the right way to do something and what it calls the wrong way; it engages a theory's capacity for judgement. Accidents relate to theories more obliquely. An accident can have a positive or negative effect, an effect that's hard to evaluate, or no effect at all; more importantly the theory can't really address it. Accidents are what theories have to leave out. While a mistake is someone doing something incorrectly, an accident just *befalls*. It happens but might not have happened. It results unpredictably from a multiplicity of possible causes rather than as the inevitable outcome of a single cause. And

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accidents can easily go unnoticed, which suggests that finding and acknowledging them should be the first step.

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Al Green's (1972) ballad 'Simply Beautiful' helped get me thinking about the role of accidents in recorded popular music. Its chorus begins with the phrase 'what about the way you love me'; an overdubbed track with Green's voice enters the texture about halfway through this line. Then the accident happens. This second vocal track presents the phrase 'and the way you love me' at the same time as the original vocal track (which remains a bit louder) has Green singing the phrase 'and the way you *squeeze* me' to the same melody (1:40–1:43). I think this is an accident rather than a mistake; if it *is* a mistake, then who made it – Al Green no. 1, Al Green no. 2, the engineer, or the producer? The multiplicity of causes makes me call it an accident. Why is this moment strange? The song asserts the primacy of the voice, which is traditional for soul, but it works hard to create a sense of intimacy, restraint and patience that characterises Green's singing and makes his records stand out from other approaches of the 1970s (even as it embodies something typical about 1970s masculinity). The arrangement is designed to sound rather transparent, perhaps almost artless, in order to train attention on Green's voice and make space for his subtle *ad libs*. The entrance of the strings forty seconds in might be a bit of a surprise, but the strings are employed in a conventional way that doesn't compromise the voice's pre-eminence. So (first) why does this song include obvious vocal overdubbing, if it's trying to sound simple, direct, natural, restrained, etc.? And (second) if you're going to rely on the technology of the recording studio to create the overdubbing, why do you not use that same technology to *fix the problem*? One might be tempted to hear this moment as reasserting the immediacy of the record despite its evident use of studio artifice. (It doesn't seem to matter to such a hearing whether this accident was left on the record intentionally or not.)

I mentioned that we sometimes learn about the accidental causes of particular moments on records. We might hear such moments differently once we know the story, but we wouldn't have guessed this accidental cause from listening alone. The title track of Marvin Gaye's (1971) crucial album *What's Going On* provides a couple of good instances. While you couldn't tell from simply hearing it, the alto saxophone line that enters after the introduction of the famous party voices was a happy accident – something the saxophonist played to warm up without realising that the mic was on and the tape was rolling. Gaye hadn't decided on the right introduction for the song, but when he heard Eli Fountain casually improvise that line before the session had begun, he knew he'd gotten something he could use. Later, about forty-five seconds in, you begin to hear two simultaneous lead voices, an arrangement gambit that also came about by accident. This is similar to the situation in Green's 'Simply Beautiful', except that here Gaye sings one of the lead vocal tracks fairly 'straight' and the other more *ad lib*. He had recorded two quite different lead vocals and wasn't sure which to use or whether to use parts of one and parts of the other. These two vocal parts were on separate tracks, of course, and Gaye asked the recording engineer to play back the multitrack tape so that he could switch between the two vocal tracks for comparison. The engineer, however, accidentally put it over the speakers in mono so that both vocal tracks came through at the same time. Gaye liked what he heard and decided to keep it that way on the record.[2] This dual lead

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voice texture became a recurring feature of his style, important in both creating Gaye's complex musical self and establishing continuities between his approach and earlier African-American musical practices.

Gaye's willingness to let accidents work for him tells us a lot, especially given his battles with Motown boss Berry Gordy over – precisely – artistic control. Accidents like this, that don't *sound* accidental, can help establish another basic point. Recorded popular music shows vividly that accidents in general are radically context-dependent: something may be accidental with respect to discourse A, but determinate with respect to discourses B or C. To take a hypothetical example, a five-second slice of guitar solo can be accidental with respect to the player soloing (discourse A) – she's surprised by an overwhelming burst of feedback – but an arranger may use this moment's rhythmic content as a motive or underscore its pitch content harmonically; a producer can cut and splice it; a song's lyrics can announce it. (Thus it becomes determinate with respect to discourses B, C or D.)

James Brown's 'I Got the Feelin'' contains two accidents of different kinds. One has to do with the voice, and is easy to notice. The other accident is of a different sort. This song illustrates very well how recorded music works. Imagine trying to render it as sheet music, you know, vocal melody with piano accompaniment and guitar chords upstairs. What would it look like? You'd have almost nothing there. The song is constructed out of many interlocking parts, none of which presents a full-blown melody that stays in the foreground. And while the voice appears centre stage, it often *ad libs* and sometimes just punctuates the instrumental parts or drops out altogether. This approach allows different instruments to come to the fore. The snare drum, for example, plays an almost melodic role in counterpoint to the voice. Indeed a large proportion of this record's information comes from the rhythm section – from the interaction among these instruments and the feel they create. The song's groove carries at least as much weight as do its lyrics and melodic material. If you're thinking about the parameters of traditional music theory, you'd have to say that the song achieves much of its particularity in the domains of timbre and texture. The snare drum's melodic character derives in part from the range of timbres the drummer gets out of it. Timbral variety – far beyond the possibilities of conventional notation – marks Brown's vocal style as well (Brackett 2000, pp. 134–7, 146–7).

The first of the accidents I'll mention in this song works on one level as an example of timbral variety. This is the one I suggested is easy to notice: the fact that Brown's voice fades in and out during the break (when he sings 'baby, baby, baby') because he doesn't maintain his position relative to the microphone. Brown may move around like this accidentally or purposely – or mistakenly, you could say – but the effect derives from the accidental qualities of microphones. A mic is designed to pick up as much as it can within certain frequencies and within a specific radius. It aims for a consistent sound. But it presupposes that the sound source has a fixed position. If the sound source moves, the mic won't deliver a consistent signal. Brown seems to bob and weave with the microphone. This effect of fading out, in and out again may sound like a mistake, but it does valuable work. It serves as a timbral enrichment of Brown's 'baby, baby, baby' – another example of the timbral play that makes each individual element capable of repaying attention. This sonic effect also encourages us to visualise Brown's movement onstage, even as we understand that this record is in important ways a creation of the studio. So even if it is an accident (or mistake) it still functions as a reminder that Brown was 'the hardest working man in show business', a tireless stage performer who used movement to get a song across.

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Another accident might be the snare drum hit that appears in isolation at 0:46. This represents the kind of happy accident that has become important in the era of turntablism and digital sampling. Obviously James Brown didn't put the snare drum there by itself so that thirty years later some DJ or producer could come along and use it. It's an accident in that sense. And consider the accidental qualities of that drum hit itself: its characteristics derive from a multiplicity of sources – the drummer's touch, the place where he strikes the drum head, the stick, the instrument, the room, the mic, the mic *placement*, the equalisation, and so on. While the technologies of instrument construction and recording have become more sophisticated, for some musicians and listeners, today's drums don't sound better. The drum hit stands as an accident of history that cannot be replicated exactly in the studio. The very fact that it sounds old may also work in its favour. For some listeners it will sound quite definitely like a snare drum *from a James Brown record*, and as such will stand as a kind of shorthand for his grooves, his style, and more generally soul and funk of the late 1960s through early 1970s.

For years now, DJs and producers have been combing obscure records for potential samples. Once a samplicious moment has been discovered, the record it appears on gains value in proportion to its obscurity. The James Brown song presents a different sort of case. Any hip-hop producer would have heard this song a thousand times, so it's a question not of finding something new, but of hearing that familiar drum hit *as* a sample. Anyone who has tried looking for samples will tell you it requires a kind of listening against the grain: you're listening for things the musicians might not have considered significant, things that for most people wouldn't stand out in the song's context. You're relying on the fact that these fortunate accidents happen.

I want to say something more about the nature of accidents generally and to do so I'm going to turn to several passages in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.[3] Accidents may have attracted Aristotle because they gave him a way to conceptualise the difference between a thing's *essential* properties and its other attributes. He divides being – what an object's existence consists in – into *essential* being and *accidental* being. While essential being denotes the properties of a thing that are necessary to its nature or definition and are most often true of it, accidental being covers attributes that are the case *sometimes* but not essentially or for the most part. So for Aristotle redness is an accident of a cat, since cats have red fur sometimes but not most of the time and not by definition, while four-footedness would be essential. Aristotle could add that a cat is an accident of red, since if you define *red* you don't need to mention anything about *cats*, even though redness is sometimes embodied by cats.

Aristotle's examples of accidents sound sometimes familiar, sometimes a little odd. When he says 'Arriving in Aegina was an accident for a man, if he arrived not because he set out to arrive there but because he was carried out of his course by a storm or was captured by pirates', we know what he's talking about. The first example he provides is of a person digging a hole for a plant and finding buried treasure; it reminds us that there are happy accidents as well as bad ones. (This example also resonates with the sorts of sampling I mentioned in connection with the James Brown record.) In both examples, nothing you can learn about the practices you're engaging in – navigation, planting – will explain what caused the accident: there are too many factors involved that have nothing to do with navigation or planting. Aristotle's main point is that there is no *definite cause* of an accident, but only a *chance cause*; this may be what gets him interested in accidents as a conceptual way to shear off what is not essential to being.

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When you start looking at what Aristotle removes from consideration by calling it accidental, you see why accidents are useful for thinking about music and other artistic practices. It's the indefiniteness of accidental being that makes Aristotle say 'there can be no investigation of it' – 'no science, be it practical or theoretical, takes the trouble to consider it'. See how he continues:

> [T]he builder who is building a house is not producing at the same time the attributes that are accidental to the house once built, for these are infinite; for nothing prevents the house built from being pleasant to some men, harmful to some others, useful to still others, and distinct so to speak from any other thing, but the art of building produces none of these attributes. (1026b, 6–10)

Now the accidental qualities he enumerates are crucial to aesthetic experience – we (still) care that a particular artwork is 'distinct . . . from any other thing'. So, again, your response to a given piece – emotional, physical, intellectual – is for Aristotle beyond investigation. The definition of accidental being Aristotle provides in the *Metaphysics* covers many things that characterise our forms of life.

Aristotle held that an object's particular qualities were irreducible, literally *unknowable* by science. These attributes – what may be true of one cat but not generally of Cat – constitute his so-called accidental being. It may sound like Aristotle cops out by introducing a category only to dismiss it as an area of investigation. But in the passage under discussion his point is simply that there *is* this category that lies beyond investigation, and that we need to acknowledge that fact when we investigate. Aristotle tries to prevent us from getting overconfident about theory and its techniques; he reminds us, here as elsewhere, that there are real limits to the applicability of tools like definition, proof and demonstration.[4] And he clearly thinks that accidental being *must* exist – it's not a hypothetical category he invents just in case something doesn't fit in the future.[5] Aristotle shows he's very aware that we can successfully use a definition without requiring or even entertaining the thought that all of its components will hold for every object that is said to fit it. This sceptical view of science will help us when we try to get serious about the nature of musical hooks, especially those that incorporate accidents or happen accidentally.

Hooks can interest us in this context because they work (or don't) for reasons that Aristotle would consider beyond theory's grasp. Even saying whether something constitutes a hook – let alone defining what the hook 'is' – can become a problematic affair, as we'll see: when a normative concept manages to function without our having a clear picture of its inner workings, it will likely possess ragged edges. The original notion of the hook was reserved for the vocal phrase that set the song's main lyric – often the title phrase but in any case the most prominent part of the song's refrain. This phrase was normally the catchiest, most singable element of the song. (I'm talking sheet music era here.) With the increasing importance of records, the hook's definition broadens to include, among other things, the presence of an unusual instrument or other sound, some particular aspect of the vocal performance, and the use of material derived from another genre. (If you're listening to an R&B song and you suddenly hear something that sounds like baroque music, it's probably going to work as a hook, even if the instruments haven't changed.) Neither does the hook need to happen momentarily: it can be a dialect or idiolect, a sound, an instrument, an arrangement touch or production technique that runs throughout the song. Recorded popular music also drives home the fact that songs don't have just 'a' hook – they have several, or a few handfuls, with different roles and degrees of importance. Put

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simply, a hook is a memorable feature or aspect, something that stands out in a song, something that distinguishes the song from others of its kind.

Many recent songs contain hooks of traditional sorts, however. When 'Heard It All Before' by Sunshine Anderson (2001) became a hit in 2001, its chorus struck me as having a hook in this classical mode. The style and production values of the song sound perfectly contemporary but the main hook is of a sort that a tin-pan alley songwriter would recognise as such. This main hook stands out not only because it presents the song's title phrase right at the beginning of the chorus, but because every other element of the song snaps to attention at this moment. The arrangement gets bigger as more instruments and vocal parts enter; it's preceded by a bit of a pause and extended by a thick keyboard pad that decays very slowly, giving the sense of the hook's energy as gradually subsiding while the song continues. Although this hook is part of the chorus, it stands out from the rest of the chorus for the reasons I've indicated and also because the vocal line is otherwise less strongly profiled. The fact that this hookline is a common spoken phrase gives it even more weight.

It may seem funny to talk about hooks in relation to accidents. After all, the hook is typically considered the most determinate aspect of a song, its reason for existing. As such, the hook is the song's locus of intentionality and control. The Sunshine Anderson example demonstrates this conception of the hook; it's a non-accidental hook. But the creation of hooks doesn't always proceed so reliably: songwriters hit on things accidentally, and they can't predict what will work as a hook for audiences. This is especially true of recorded popular music, but not exclusively so.[6] Precisely because they pre-exist recorded music, the accidental hooks that arise when good songwriters fool around on their instruments deserve consideration. One example might come from Brian McKnight's (1997) 'Anytime', which was very successful in 1998. Like 'Heard It All Before', this song still seems fairly up-to-date; but McKnight's piano-based songwriting yields an effect that would be just as clear if you were to see the song in sheet music form. The hook that interests me is the presentation of a particular chord, the final chord in a short progression that runs throughout the song. It's so much richer than anything else in the progression that it allows the song's arrangement to build toward it, and pause when it's articulated, each time it comes around. I'm calling this chord a hook because of the way it stands out as special in the context of the song – the song contains neither a truly catchy vocal melody nor any sufficiently distinctive timbral feature that equals this chord's impact.[7] The chord in question is hardly without precedent; it's a flavour of flat-II (or flat-VI, depending on what one hears as the tonic) that's familiar to jazz pianists and not unknown in soul and pop songs. But in the song's harmonic context this chord sounds like something McKnight hit on accidentally while messing around on the piano. It represents the kind of accidental hook that composers hope for when they sit down at the piano and just play.

These two hooks show that tin-pan alley songwriting practices hang on well after recordings become the dominant commodity form in which popular music is consumed. The recorded era brings forth a range of new timbral hooks, however. I could adduce any number of guitar examples – distortion, feedback and other effects – that emerge when musicians hear accidental qualities as desirable characteristics. But I will turn to a keyboard example that demonstrates how timbral hooks, based on accidental qualities, can have an influence on other domains, especially that of form: the opening of 'What'd I Say' (1959A), which was Ray Charles's first big crossover hit. The sound of the electric piano clearly functions as a hook; this was new

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in 1959. But this use of the instrument goes against the grain of its original purpose. Nobody at that time thought the electric piano sounded any good. It was designed to serve as a lighter, more portable, more durable, better in tune, more easily amplified version of the piano. Musicians used it for rehearsals or touring when a real piano wasn't available. Before Ray Charles, no one chose it over the acoustic piano for reasons of timbre (Charles and Ritz 2004, p. 196). Charles heard the accidental qualities of this instrument and decided to make them a feature.

This electric piano possesses accidental qualities that actually *sound like* accidents: some notes seem to decay more quickly than others; you hear distortion when certain kinds of chord are played; the bass register sometimes sounds a bit spongy.[8] So it's as if he has to make a case for this instrument's timbre. Thus, after introducing this unusual sound at the song's opening, Charles stays with it for a long time before bringing in the voice. The introduction has the effect of saying, 'Listen to the *sound* it makes. It's not a *bad acoustic* piano sound, it's a *good electric* piano sound'. It's also prudent formal economy: having found buried treasure in this electric piano, he doesn't just give you this new timbre as a hook for seven seconds and then continue on with a regular song. Charles allows the combination of his keyboard playing on this new instrument, a great latin-influenced drum beat, and a discreet bass to stand by themselves for forty-eight seconds.[9] This surprisingly long instrumental expanse shows you that Charles understood how much this new sound was worth. And when the voice enters, it has to earn its keep; the vocal entrance doesn't function rhetorically like 'OK, introduction's finished, now we can get started' – it's more like 'let me prove that I belong here too'.

The song's opening instrumental section establishes a sense of scale: you know that this song has to be longer than normal. (Indeed the song extends beyond five minutes.) The long build-up also serves to balance a dramatic breakdown that happens halfway in – an equally prominent hook. The song seems to end suddenly before erupting in a chaos of voices, including that of Charles, who might be heard as trying to calm things down. This breakdown and the section that follows, which presents just lead voice, background voices and drums, is another of those moments that may have arisen by accident. According to one story, Ray Charles's band had to deal with a power outage onstage, and instead of just giving up until the lights and the p.a. came back on, Charles sang some ad-libs, without amplification, of course, and got the background vocalists to imitate him in call-and-response form.[10] The drums could also be heard without amplification and continued keeping the beat. The more common version of this story traces the call-and-response texture – and indeed the song's main groove – to Charles's improvising after running out of material at the end of a long night; this is what he himself refers to as the 'accidental birth' of the song (Charles and Ritz 2004, pp. 190–1). In this version the breakdown was a staged accident designed in the studio (Jackson 2004, p. 11). Either way, the groove and the call-and-response texture worked so well that Charles made this developing song a regular feature of the next few shows. The call-and-response was embellished to include exchanges of some naasty moans and groans. (That's 'naasty' with two 'a's, not 'nasty'.) Remember, again, that this was 1959. So there was a lot of buzz about this unnamed, naasty, largely improvised thing that would happen during these shows. It made sense to incorporate this material on his next record, but the breakdown that provokes the call-and-response wouldn't have worked within a typical two and a half- to three-minute single. Considered in this light, the electric piano's accidental qualities provide a solution to the problem of how to include this breakdown and the

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call-and-response: the instrument's timbral distinctiveness provides glue and helps create an argument for the song's form and mix of elements. This example should make clear that accidents don't just create momentary effects: they can have a profound influence on the larger form and even on the institutional structures of marketing and reception.

The drum hit from 'I Got the Feelin'' shows the way that particularities endure, even when technologically superseded. It matters that this snare drum hit is 'distinct from any other thing', paraphrasing Aristotle again. Charles's timbral hook and the formal possibilities it allowed him required a *rehearing* of the electric piano; faults in the electric piano's sound, ideally to be eliminated, became positive features. A recent development has taken a similar approach to an unlikely sound source – the surface noise and pops of records. The use of these accidental sounds relies partly upon our understanding them as coming out of the past and as resulting from wear and tear. We're encountering an older technology and an object that shows signs of use. I don't want to say record noises create nostalgia, necessarily – that's too strong – but they do demand some acknowledgement of their connotative power.

Maxwell's 1996 album, *Urban Hang Suite*, stripes prominent surface noise across the entirety of its opening track, 'The Urban Theme'. The sampled surface noise here works more or less like it would on an old record. It exists on top of the music; it's not really part of the music. You notice the surface noise less as the amplitude of the instruments increases, particularly at the high frequencies where the surface noise resides, but you can always hear it in the background. Isn't it odd that that surface noise has acquired a positive valence? An artist or producer or engineer from back in the day wouldn't think fondly of surface noise on their records. They'd be like 'why did we spend so much time making this thing if it's just gonna get scratched up?' But Maxwell uses surface noise to help create the feel of an early-1980s soul record – as heard today. The noise helps to demonstrate that he's 'old school' and calls attention to the old-school values of the performance, songwriting, arrangement and production.

Like Sunshine Anderson, Maxwell counts as somewhat left of centre in today's R&B. Nevertheless, his music remains what you would call 'commercial'. Other musicians have employed record noise in a more thoroughgoing and experimental fashion. The German techno artist Thomas Brinkmann often uses record noise on tracks designed for the dancefloor. His 'feran2' (2001) is a particularly nice example. You might think initially that surface noise has just accrued on some poor 12–inch single, but then you notice you're hearing a short loop of sampled scratches and pops. Grounding the surface noise are some loops of processed drums. The drums are enough to *tell you* what kind of song it is – dance music – but they're not sufficient to *constitute* the whole song. The rest of the song bears this out, as new layers enter and depart, forming a variety of groupings that combine drum samples with an astonishing collection of record noises (and later some minimal synth parts). Many of Brinkmann's dance tracks work this way. Even though most of the sound sources can be record noise, the songs set themselves up as dance music: rhythm arrangements suggest the traditional bass drum, snare drum and hi-hat, while rhythmic features like a 4/4 metre, four-measure units, hard syncopations and four-on-the-floor (often using actual bass drum samples) facilitate the construction of dance music's stratified textures with layers coming in and out.

Sometimes record noise is used as raw material, but in a manner that acknowledges the connotations I mentioned in connection with the Maxwell song. Jan Jelinek

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is another artist working in German electronic dance music, but some of his work appears to be designed more for close listening than for use on the dancefloor. A song like 'moiré (piano and organ)' (2002) presents a mixture of sound sources, including record noise of various kinds. More than Brinkmann's, Jelinek's use of crackles, pops and scratches reflects the kind of nostalgia that Maxwell wishes to create. The carefully constructed soundscape of this song suggests that the sounds on an old record have been fragmented and reassembled in such a way as simultaneously to preserve and transcend the original distinction between information and noise, or intentional and accidental sounds. The song preserves this distinction by employing instrumental samples that both separate themselves from the noises and also sound like they might derive from the same scratchy records; you never lose the image of an old record that has acquired a layer of noise. But the record transcends this distinction by subjecting all of the sound sources to the same kinds of treatment – filtering, spatialisation, fades in and out, and other digital signal processing. Every sound functions as material to be used. The record noises become abstract at one level but remain connected to the pathos of ageing technology.

This song introduces a productive tension between the precise way the record seems to be crafted, particularly in regard to showcasing its unusual sounds, and the accidental, noisy quality of some of the sounds themselves. This song and Brinkmann's (2001) 'feran2' show a convergence between the musical practices of pop hook-making and modernism's fascination with accidents, a fascination I haven't yet touched on. The dialectic of control and accident has informed the practices of modernist artists in every medium. An accident might happen while a painter is working on a canvas, but she may want to say that this accident is a truer expression of her artistic self than the elements she has control over. She may see such accidents as the voice of the unconscious. So she allows this accident to dictate the painting's progress. Brinkmann's approach places him in this modernist tradition, no less because he remains committed to the dancefloor. While he can sample any sound he wishes, he will sometimes restrict himself to a particular kind of source – only record noises, or CD skips, or soul music samples. Like the experimental film-makers who scratched images onto blank strips of film in the 1950s and 1960s, Brinkmann has gone so far as to carve his own grooves into records by hand, knowing, of course, that that doesn't exactly put music on them. One of his songs, 'yvette', begins with a loop of someone – him? – saying 'use your faults, use your defects' with a German accent. That CD skips have provided material for Brinkmann, Jelinek and others demonstrates something else about accidents – that they can't be stopped. Many consumers thought that digital technology would put an end to the accidents of analogue recording. Perhaps it did, but a new set of accidents arose in the digital environment. There's always an accident waiting to happen, even when we don't know when and in what form it will come. No matter how much a practice or a theory can determine, certain things will remain beyond control or beneath consideration.

My final hook example makes this point in a different way. In the competitive world of mid-1950s pop, exotic styles and new sources of hooks were doggedly sought out. No one really knew what audiences would respond to, or what the shift to records as the main form of popular music consumption said about listeners' tastes. A hook could happen by accident, without the artist's realising that this element of the record might function as a hook. Such hooks differ from those I've discussed so far; they mostly resemble the James Brown drum hit. Each of the elements I'm calling hooks in the other songs *drew the musician's attention*. The hook may have come about

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accidentally, but by the time the record was released the artist had *consciously made use of this element*. I want to introduce an example of a truly accidental hook from a song by Perez Prado, a latin bandleader who had a series of hits featuring interesting mixtures of styles. One of the most commercially successful was his 1954 recording of 'Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White'. The song itself was an old tin-pan alley composition; Prado's version places second on *Billboard*'s list of top hits of the 1950s, after Elvis Presley's 'Hound Dog'/'Love Me Tender'. The trumpet carries the main melody, presenting some way-out lip glissandi that are surely calculated to function as a hook. But there's also someone going 'ugh'. This strange cry can be heard on many of Prado's records and is Prado himself shouting 'dilo!' – 'say it!' – to his musicians. It's a type of sound that Latin bandleaders make and probably nothing Prado thought much about. But at a certain point it started to function as a hook. 'What is he saying?' 'What does it mean?' 'Is it supposed to be rhythmic?' 'Is he crazy?' Audiences were intrigued. (The liner note to his 1956 album *Mambo by the King* attempts to explain away this cry by making the rather bold claim that it's *part of* the mambo.[11]) By 1958 RCA releases a Prado album that's actually entitled *Dilo (ugh!)*. It includes notes that deal with these questions, written by some sort of 1950s wag. Despite their sarcastic tone, these notes record the transformation of Prado's cry from a bandleader's trick to a hook successful with pop audiences.[12] Many hooks have arisen with less intent, as when a singer's accent serves as a hook even though she's just minding her own business, going about singing in her usual way.

* * *

The hooks I've covered form a heterogeneous group. If you want to deny that some of them are hooks, that's good. Think about the fact that we would each hear these songs in different ways. It's not just the question of whether something is or isn't a hook, or even of whether you'd buy the song or not. It's how memorable or good or different or useful the 'hook' is; it's how much you think it stands out from the rest of the song, and why. We won't even agree on the *questions* to ask. You may not like my emphasis on hooks – what about the song's message, its mood, its sense of style, its overall sound and feel? We can take any of these songs and we'll each have our own opinions about how these 'hooks' work and about whether they're the most important aspects of their respective songs. Beyond these opinions will be a lot of things we hear but can't put into words. (And beneath them, as it were, all sorts of stuff we hear without knowing we hear it.) The forms our knowledge would take – if we were actually to go through all of these songs together – would remain pretty complicated and messy.

Remember that Aristotle's definition of accident covers everything having to do with affect, taste, fashion, audience response, feeling, etc. And musical hooks clearly rely on precisely those things, which is why they're always subject to different evaluations by different people at different times. How should we investigate the hook? There are aspects of music susceptible to psychophysical description, but the Pavlovian flavour of the 'hook' concept shouldn't encourage us to look into the brain for data to create a science of hooks. Associating hooks with a particular brain state wouldn't solve the problem of what the hook *is*. The only data we'd get would be of the form 'mental state M observed at timepoint T while song S was played'. So what's the actual *hook*? (Is a hook just a time-slice, and not a *feature* or *aspect* of what occurs right before M is observed? If it is, of what length is it? What is 'right before', exactly?) Any attempt to define what the hook 'really is' will run into similar problems if it

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seeks to say what *all* hooks must do or contain. It isn't just the scientistic language that's the problem in a cognitive-science-of-hooks experiment. It's the dream of finding a feature or set of features held in common by all hooks, of discovering an infallible means to distinguish them from the things that *aren't* hooks.[13] But a careful study of hooks won't reveal a common thread. You won't do any better with ethnography or music theory if you're trying to find some special property that all hooks share.[14]

To repeat, the common thread picture requires a feature or features the presence of which in some hook-candidate guarantees its being a hook, and the absence of which guarantees its *not* being a hook. This common thread picture hangs together quite precariously, however, and will come undone once we think about it for a moment. Let's say we have a hook – like the Sunshine Anderson example – and we try to enumerate all of the features or qualities that make it a hook. But then a second hook comes along, and it lacks one of those qualities: it doesn't contain a melody, vocal or otherwise. We don't doubt it's a hook – it's just missing one of the features that made our first case a hook. So that missing feature, the melody, can't be part of the common thread. Next we hear hook number three, which may exhibit the feature missing from hook number two, a melody, but which lacks *another* of the features that defined hook number one: this hook occurs at the beginning of the song, say, rather than in the chorus. Therefore *that* feature – that particular position in the song's form – cannot be part of the common thread. And hook number four contains a melody and appears in the chorus but has *fewer* instruments and *softer* dynamics. It's easy to see how this argument works.

The no-common-thread argument shows in another way what Aristotle's definition of accident served to reveal about the heterogeneity of hooks: (i) that the differences among hooks outstrip the similarities, (ii) that the diversity of hooks will only increase, which makes it unwise to bet against *any* feature's working as a hook in the future, and (iii) that a description of a hook's constitution won't suffice to tell you how, when or for whom it will work. Remember: Aristotle's notion of accidental qualities covers affect, taste, audience response, and so on – without which the concept of musical hooks couldn't exist. The second point, about the diversification of hooks and the proliferation of new features, requires special emphasis because it suggests what the study of hooks would look like in the absence of a common thread. Essentially it means that we'll want to embrace the oddball examples rather than dismiss them from consideration. It would seem that if a feature can be identified or isolated for observation, it can be parlayed into a hook in a future song. One might almost say that any feature – anything that qualifies as an 'it' to be attended to, anything about which you can say 'listen to this' – can become a *featured* feature. (Sampling shows this in an obvious way with respect to time-slices, but the point applies more generally.) Each novel hook-candidate creates potentially new problems of identification; you'd need to hear a hook-candidate in the song's context, taking into account the song's genre (and, if you like, the social settings in which it is heard and the things people say about it) in order to determine whether it is a hook. It would not be enough merely to check its constitutive features against those of past hooks.[15]

Looking carefully at the elements of a hook remains useful, all the more if we deny the existence of a common set of elements. Take any hook and list its qualities. (I'll say more in a moment about the fact that hooks must be defined in multiple dimensions.) Let's say you are struck by one of these qualities, call it Q. Even if you're not yet convinced by the no-common-thread argument, think of hooks in other songs

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until you find one that *lacks* Q. So far, you have at least one hook that has Q and one that lacks Q. Now the very fact that Q is not shared by all hooks can encourage you to consider the hooks that *do* have Q. What kind of group do they form? Do the songs they're part of tend to cluster by genre, period or place of origin? Does Q tend to travel in a pack with other qualities? If so, what are they and what, if anything, seems to bind them together? Where Q is present, does it seem to play a consistent role? Does it seem to be the dominant feature? Such an investigation will yield useful results, whether Q is 'use of an instrument in the extreme high register', or 'stuttering', or 'occurrence just before the fadeout', or 'use of food metaphors', or anything else. You can perform the same operation on all of the hooks in a *single* song, in order to get a sense of the relations among them. We can begin to see how meanings accrue when individual elements start to cluster together. (This investigation leads us toward a consideration of genres; you might almost picture genres as dynamic constellations of these elements interacting with groups of features in the larger cultural context. In this particular theoretical mood we'd be apt to consider the placement of songs and artists within a genre as deriving from particular immanent features and not as bestowed from somewhere beyond. Take, for example, a record company's 'file under' denomination for a CD, a song's appearance on a certain radio station's playlist, an artist's declaration of allegiance to a genre: each of these would constitute no more or less than a *feature*. They'd be understood to operate at the same hierarchical level and require the same sorts of support from other features as a line in the lyrics, a choice of instrument, an image in the CD booklet, the singer's hairstyle in the video, and so on.)

We need to retain and respect the variety of things we call hooks or hear as hooks, and not seek to reduce it. Indeed, ethnographic data might help us resist the temptation to trade in this complexity for a set of common features: it's more than likely such data would reveal a variety of ways that people talk about what they hear and a great range of things that can count as or work as a hook – and perhaps no common features. And isn't it interesting that we *can't* develop universal formulas for catchiness, memorability and distinctiveness? There are just too many factors involved. Perhaps this suggests we should be amateur naturalists and not scientists, emphasising differences over similarities. Or think of the entomologists in Costa Rica: even though they're scientists, and not dilettantes or connoisseurs, they're out looking for differences. A common thread does run through insects, of course, but the process remains the same when investigating hooks: you accept a degree of consistency and focus on the differences. Consistency provides the backdrop against which variety is measured, but variety picks up the cheque.

This approach may sound more like empiricism than theory – more like looking at things than determining how they work – but it is what William James called 'radical empiricism': radical empiricism, according to James, can exclude from consideration nothing that *is* experienced and should incorporate nothing that *isn't* experienced. It doesn't deny the possibility of finding conjunctions among things experienced or shy away from creating hierarchies, but it insists on establishing these relations by taking 'everything that comes without disfavour'. Furthermore, the relations that *are* experienced '*must be accounted as ''real'' as anything else in the system*'. (James 1976, p. 22, italics in original) So you don't simply posit some glue that holds things together, but once you *find* a bond, you treat it as just as solid and integral to the system as the objects themselves. Note that these bonds exist on the same plane as the objects they connect: they're not operating from above or beyond – they're imminent features, just like the objects are. Further, the disjunctions are as real as the

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conjunctions. If we don't perceive a link among certain objects in the system, we shouldn't assume that a connection lies beneath the surface.

With respect to hooks, then, a preponderance of connections among a particular set of features, say 'suddenly fuller arrangement', 'short melody with narrow ambitus', 'lyric that derives from a common expression', 'position at the beginning of the chorus' and 'voice's rhythm underscored by instruments', counts as *solid*, a relationship as real as the features it links together; contingent on all sorts of other things, yes, likely to change over time, yes again, but not arbitrary or coincidental. This doesn't mean these five features will appear together all of the time, but it does entail that when this established relation *fails* to hold we ought to take notice. When a hook has only three of these five properties, for example, we'll need to consider what happened to the others. A connection among features can certainly come about by accident, but if it becomes part of a genre's practices it's no less solid for all that.

This way of thinking reminds us that hooks are defined in multiple dimensions. A flat-VI chord *isn't* 'a hook', for example.[16] There are hooks that *present* flat-VI, in which flat-VI is the dominant feature. But we don't want to say that flat-VI serves as a hook *without reference to other features* necessary to the fulfilment of this function. We'll need to pay special attention to those features that help place this song in one genre or another (or, as it were, *outside* of some genre). In short, flat-VI must be instantiated, embodied – it has to be presented in a certain rhythm, at a certain point in the song's form, via particular sound sources. It requires the definition that a song's harmonic, melodic, textural, rhythmic and formal vocabulary can provide, and the way it is shaped through production, mixing and mastering. Even the catchy melody of tin-pan alley works this way: it's not just a string of pitches, but a rhythmic sequence, a chord succession, and a handful of words with both semantic and sonic content. If hooks are multidimensional they're even more complicated and varied than the no-common-thread picture implied: not only is there no single feature that all hooks share, an *individual* hook may have *several* features vying for attention. (Is it the processed violin sound, or its pitch-content, or its relation to the groove, that makes this gesture a hook? Sometimes one can't choose.)

A respect for this variety and multidimensionality will influence our study of recorded songs in several ways:

(1) It will encourage us to spend more time listening to a record before we feel like we've exhausted its contents; we'll be less likely to collapse the distinction between text and context, because we'll see how the text *shapes* our understanding of its context. Putting it another way, a text's meanings are fluid, ever-expanding, and fragile as well. These meanings are the product of the text's interaction with its contexts. But the text itself – the record, here – is *fixed* in a non-trivial sense.[17] The record's *meanings* are never finished: any part or aspect of the record can produce a 'magic moment'. The fixity of the *record itself* makes it distinct from its context, however. It literally cannot blend in. We're left with the fact of the record, so we might as well make the most of it. This says something about how we'll approach *context* as well. We'll need to connect our discussions of context to specific croppings out: we won't allow ourselves the luxury of referring to something 'going on at the time' unless we have concrete evidence of this something's impinging upon a particular text. Since these eruptions of the context are as discrete as the texts themselves, however, they too become capable of being treated as texts.

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(2) Any feature exceeds the definition that a single meaning can provide. (A string bend is never *merely* a 'blues inflection', for example.)
(3) As I've suggested, we won't be so quick to posit rules that don't actually appear in the text or the context.
(4) We won't apply a notion, like base and superstructure, wherein pop songs are said to be overdetermined by their modes of production and distribution to the point that they share all the qualities that really matter.
(5) [or you could call this (4a)] We won't restrict the differences among songs to a kind of standard deviation, nor will we limit *a priori* the function of these differences to momentary or ornamental effects.

Songs do differ from one another in major ways. You could easily perform the no-common-thread experiment on top-100 songs and see this for yourself. What are the best candidates for the *pop song's* common thread? Singing? A clear beat? Conventional instrumentation? A catchy melody? Lyrics its audience can understand? A certain level of polish? A standard song-form? Observance of time constraints? Some kind of expressiveness? Sentiments shared by artist and audience? The pop charts will provide exceptions to each of these would-be 'rules'. Acknowledging these exceptions places us at a crossroads: we can dismiss those songs as anomalies, novelties, random occurrences, or we can say hey, maybe these exceptions add up to something important. The question becomes the purely pragmatic one of which approach will tell us more about the popular song.

Accidents will help us cultivate a respect for differences once we see that their effects aren't just superficial or incidental. I've been trying to say that we shouldn't associate accidents simply with subtle inflections (in the realm of performance), late changes (in the realm of production), and surprising connections with events (in the realm of audience response): as the Ray Charles song showed, accidents can influence larger structures, the entire soundscape and – at an institutional level as well as an aesthetic one – what counts as a (pop) song. It's useful to talk about accidents, but we should remember that the accidents in our stories are no more accidental than anything else is. We focus on them because they create effects and establish relations within the song and in the larger context; most everything else just kind of happens, and nobody notices it because it's always happening.[18] But everything else is accidental too: *every* aspect of the pop song is multiply and incompletely determined.

What would the study of popular music look like if the differences among songs were to drive our investigations, if we allow variety to pick up the cheque? It would be messy, as I've said, which would serve to raise doubts about how well we understand popular songs. As we'd continue to investigate, we'd notice that these doubts would run deep in certain places but leave some of our beliefs untouched.[19] We could focus on those areas where our feeling of doubt is greatest while not neglecting the fact that some things *aren't* subject to doubt. (Wittgenstein reminds us that one doesn't – can't – doubt *everything*, and that '(My) doubts form a system'.[20]) We would thus develop a kind of sceptical method or system of doubts. This would mean acknowledging the things we don't know and systematising them in the sense of seeing how they relate, what they add up to. For example, we don't understand the role of voices on popular records; we tend to picture them as indispensable when empirically they're not. At the same time we're often happier saying a song has been influenced by current events than we are asserting its connections with *other songs*.[21] Do these two reasons for doubt – vocal-centric assumptions, emphasis on extra-musical

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connections over musical ones – relate at all? They might: perhaps we're linking subjectivity, seriousness, vocality, and musical personality or 'voice' in unrigorous ways. A sceptical method would begin by questioning the questions we ask about songs, and would seek to retain a flexible sense of what our investigations investigate. We won't always know what shape these investigations will take.

I have tried to reach a perspective from which everything looks accidental – the ordinary moments, the magic moments, everything. I think there's value in this feeling of vertigo, this realisation that causality or determination is precarious and incomplete. I'm asking what it means to *start* our investigations this way. It's not only that 'anything can happen'. It's wonderful anything *does*. If we allow the accidental to undermine our models of cause-and-effect we may attend more carefully to the behaviour of musicians, and all who participate in a record and its reception, as they improvise, speculate, plan, guess, get angry, joke about and otherwise react to whatever happens. Logically, of course, we cannot say everything's accidental: the concept of 'accident' presupposes a complementary class of 'non-accidents'. But while the feeling that everything is accidental shouldn't last forever, it can remain long enough to teach us several vital points. One is that nothing unifies the class of 'non-accidents': there's no necessary connection among 'things we intended', 'essential things', and 'things that have a single, definite cause', for example. If the things that *aren't* accidental don't enjoy any special relation, then our cultural practices are truly patchworks, no matter how top-down their administrative structures. This makes the surprises possible. We're also encouraged to remember that accidents happen within human customs and institutions, including genres: nothing can be accidental (or non-accidental) irrespective of context. We recall as well that if accidents can't be stopped, then theories and concepts must have limits: the more a theory or conceptual scheme seeks to encompass, the more vengeful the return of anything it excludes.[22] Only by acknowledging – and valuing – that which does not fit and that which exists only potentially can a theory respond to the accidents of practice.

Endnotes

1. Austin (1970) explores the differences between doing something accidentally and doing it mistakenly in 'A plea for excuses', especially pp. 191–3; 'Three ways of spilling ink' (pp. 272–87) is also helpful on these questions.
2. Both accidents are described in Edmonds (2001).
3. *Metaphysics*, 1025a, 14–36; 1064b, p. 14 – 1065b, p. 4. I'm using Hippocrates Apostle's translation (Apostle 1979).
4. *Metaphysics* on demonstration: 1006a, 5–28.
5. We know this because of that innocent-sounding 'most' you may have noticed he includes in the definition of essential being. Recall that essential being denotes the properties of a thing that are necessary to its nature or definition and are *most often* true of it; he doesn't try to say that essential being consists *only* of properties that are *always* true of the thing. You could express this difference as what remains when you subtract 'most' from 'all': it has to equal '*some*'. Once you refuse to say '*all* examples have property p', you're admitting that some examples *don't* have property p. They must therefore exhibit the property *not-p*. If p is an essential property, then not-p must not be an essential property. If it is not an essential property of, say, cats, but does hold in *n* per cent of cats, it is (in Aristotle's conceptual vocabulary) an accident of these cats. Therefore, there is a non-negligible *n* per cent of cases that exhibit accidental properties but nevertheless fit the definition of cat. Accidental being must exist, represented by this *n* per cent.
6. Gary Burns briefly mentions hooks created by the inclusion of 'apparent accident[s]', but he considers such accidents only as one of the 'devices . . . used to give an impression of spontaneity' (Burns 1987, p. 15). My definition of accident is weaker (that is, more inclusive) than Burns's, but my definition of hook is stronger, as will be shown below.
7. The progression works as follows: Bm-D/G-Em-Cmaj13. The contrast between the final chord on C-natural and the rest of the progression is strengthened by a melodic figure (in the piano's right hand over the first two chords) that presents C-sharp. It's worth noting that this

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chord contains only white notes – indeed it includes every note in the C-major scale. This suggests a further connection between the accidental quality of this gesture and its ability to work as a hook: the tactile satisfaction of playing white-note collections on the keyboard *regardless of the local harmonic context*. Harmonically this chord creates a surprise but *physically* it feels 'natural' or 'right'. The sense of simultaneous fulfilment and surprise operates on another level as well. Because McKnight uses passing-tones in the bass, and the progression divides rhythmically into two equal parts, the bass line's succession E-D-C-natural rhymes with its succession B-A-G (especially given the chords above): both descend by whole-steps and they're a fifth apart. This rhyme may create a subtle sort of satisfaction even as it turns away from the expected C-sharp.

8. One might also consider the accidental qualities of the keyboard itself. Marcus Belgrave, Charles's trumpeter at the time, told me in a 19 May 2005 phone conversation that the repeated-sixteenth-note figure (in the left hand, initiating the instrumental chorus that follows the first vocal choruses) came about when Charles was testing some sticking keys on his electric piano.
9. A six-and-a-half-minute version released in 1964, which extends the instrumental introduction to two minutes and fifteen seconds, has become the song's canonical form, partly because it represents the way the band actually recorded the song, but also since it's the only version in true stereo; this is the version that appears on CD re-releases. For my purposes it makes better sense to use the original album (1959_A) and single (1959_B) releases because they were the versions that sold well and gained the song its reputation. And as should be clear from my emphasis on *records* here, I would not want automatically to privilege 'the way they actually played it'. The single version, which was released first, splits the song into Parts I and II; it's otherwise the same as the original album cut.
10. I've been unable to trace the source of this story. Belgrave (see note 8 above) said that while there may indeed have been a power failure at some point on this tour – he couldn't quite remember – it played no role in 'What'd I Say'.
11. 'On first hearing, the mambo sounds like nothing on earth to Yankee ears. But Prado defines it as ''a three-movement dance step to 4-beat rhythm''. It's characterised by an unusual use of the trumpet section and by the rhythmic, guttural sounds Prado makes to urge his musicians on'. So RCA's liner-note hack is telling us that Prado's just employing a convention of the genre. Maybe this writer hopes you'll believe that Prado is perfectly sane, it's just the *mambo* that's crazy.
12. After explaining the meaning and essential function of Prado's 'urgent, bellicose grunts', Watson Wylie allows himself a little shtick: 'Not the least intriguing aspect of Prado's musical war cry is how he manages to make ''Dilo!'' sound like ''Ugh!''. The exact technique is his own secret, but it would appear to the analytic ear that he accomplishes the transition by removing the vowels and the consonants from the word before exhaling'. More important for our purposes is Wylie's claim that 'Prado's ''Dilo'' is more than a conductor's tool . . . it becomes part of the number. It provides accents, it produces a shock that bursts a pool of calmness, and it sets the emotional tone . . .'.
13. My argument for preserving a sense of *fallibility* in theoretical enquiry draws on Hilary Putnam (1999). Putnam's recent work has been important to this project.
14. Wittgenstein's influential argument against the existence of a common thread with respect to games appears in *Philosophical Investigations* (1968), §§ 65–7.
15. Past hooks *do* provide a frame – I'm not saying the emergence of new hooks is indeterminate; careful study of past hooks is indispensable for understanding diachronic change.
16. Here I'm arguing for a stronger (more multidimensional) definition of the hook than what Gary Burns (1987) provides (see note 6).
17. The record is a crystallisation of many moments and processes, underdetermined by human intentions. It presents a broken surface. It's therefore what would be called an 'open text' rather than a 'closed work' (which is not to deny that some records can function, or comport themselves, like closed works). But the record is a snapshot that freezes things where they are. To be clear, this way of talking compels me to say that remixes and sometimes remasterings and even repressings constitute *different* texts.
18. I'm paraphrasing Friedrich Schlegel's *Athenaeum Fragment* no. 218: 'It's always a strange, rather suspicious feeling when one thinks one knows that such and such is going to happen. And yet it's really just as strange that one should know that such and such is as it is – which no one ever notices because it always happens' (Schlegel 1991, p. 47).
19. It would be hard, for example, to doubt the association between a singing (or rapping or speaking) voice and the presentation of sentiment (or irony). (But we'd feel much less secure in our understandings of how a song's other features complicate this association – again we'd need to think about genres.)
20. See *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1972), §§ 115–27. The quotation is from § 126.
21. Everybody says UK punk reflected inflation and high unemployment, but hardly anyone wants to suggest its connections with the musical practices of disco, even though many punk artists made the disco/dance turn between 1978 and 1981.
22. This Nietzschean point has been made explicit by Theodor Adorno (1997, p. 75) and William Connolly (1991, p. 25).

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