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"Let's See If We've Been Missing Out!"

Affect, Reactivity, and the Middlebrow in Popular Music Podcasting

ABSTRACT Contemporary music analysis podcasts are engaged in an ongoing project of deconstructing pop songs and recoding them as valuable cultural objects. In this article, I understand podcasting as an extension of the popular music press and trace the affective strategies hosts use to elevate and evaluate pop songs new and old. I argue that music podcasts have seen a slow but steady departure from the conventions of critical distance and affectless, disembodied engagement to adopt an embodied, emotive response to the music that moves them. Drawing on theories of feminist affect, fan studies, and reactivity, I read the incorporation of fannish affect and the celebration of male creators' emotive response to pop music as a continuation of a middlebrow sensibility that informs the popular music press writ large. Popular music analysis podcasts, on their surface, are a project of taking pop music seriously. When we scratch this surface, however, what we find is a mixed bag of tactics that seek to affirm the majority white, majority male creators as uniquely positioned to analyze, evaluate, and respond to music, much of which they are encountering considerably after it has already achieved the success that codes these songs as "popular" in the first place.
KEYWORDS music podcasts, gender, music media, affect, middlebrow, reactivity

Podcasts are a medium uniquely suited to the analysis of music. Both audio mediums, the digital affordances of podcasts mean that hosts can easily integrate demos, stems, and interviews with musicians and producers alongside in-depth analysis of songs. And if the rampant popularity of song dissection and analysis podcasts is anything to go by, the hunger for this kind of musical analysis has only grown alongside the conventions and omnipresence of contemporary music podcasting. Podcasts such as *Dissect* (2016-present), *Song Exploder* (2014-present), and *Switched on Pop* (2014-present) have been reliably producing episodes since the mid-2010s, with several more prolific music podcasts even making the leap into other formats. *Song Exploder* partnered with Netflix to release two seasons' worth of video episodes breaking down the technical production and creative process behind a given song, while the hosts of *Switched on Pop* released a book with Oxford University Press detailing "sixteen studies of pop hits from 2000 to 2019."[1] Not only does contemporary music media continue to converge and produce new modes

1. Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding, *Switched on Pop: How Popular Music Works, and Why It Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.

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of engagement, the transmedial success of something like *Song Exploder*'s Netflix series or the *Switched on Pop* book gestures towards the possibility of understanding music podcasts as almost franchise-like—able to use their brand power to promote and ultimately sell musical expertise across a range of platforms that span the screen and the page alongside our headphones and Bluetooth speakers.

More than their unique technical affordances and transmedial reach, however, it is the affective impact of music podcasts—and podcasts more generally—that have helped solidify their taste-making and explanatory potential over the past decade. According to podcast scholar Hannah McGregor, the conventions of podcasting include an "attention to feeling" that has been notoriously and often rigorously professionalized out of other forms of music writing, whether academic or journalistic.[2] This attention to feeling shapes the editing, pacing, and sound that give texture to this thing we call a podcast, notes McGregor, and builds a degree of intimacy that is difficult to replicate in other, non-auditory mediums. In this article, I argue that the affective turn in mainstream music podcasting bolsters hosts' expertise and authority as they recode popular music for their audiences, tracing the ways in which the language and affect of fandom have been increasingly folded into mainstream music podcasting and questioning the spaces left over for subversive engagements with middlebrow music media and paratexts.

"TIDY" AND AFFECTLESS: PODCASTING HISTORIES MEET MUSIC CRITICISM

The role of the music podcast host mirrors and, in some ways, amplifies the taste-making power of the popular music critic throughout history. Alongside other conventions, podcasting inherited from its public radio predecessors a "pedagogic impulse"[3] that sees podcast hosts uniquely positioned to introduce, contextualize, and affirm the cultural value of particular songs and artists—a phenomenon that radio and podcast scholars have described as "piloted listening"[4] and "ride-along listening."[5] Hosts like Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding of *Switched on Pop* are explicit about these aims—a 2016 episode of the podcast titled "How to Listen to Music in 4 Easy Steps" distills the hosts' approach[6]—while others rely on their audiences' implicit willingness to "ride along" as they model a critical listening practice. Popular music podcasts work to place a song's sonic features within a broader context of musical references—a move that scholars like Amy Skjerseth argue can make podcasting an inclusive and accessible way to engage with music theory

2. Hannah McGregor, *A Sentimental Education* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2022), 88.

3. Ellis Jones and Jeremy Morris, "Competing Sounds? Podcasting and Popular Music," *Radio Journal* 20, no. 1 (April 2022): 10.

4. Brian Fauteux, "The Radio Host and Piloted Listening in the Digital Age: CBC Radio 3 and Its Online Listening Community," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 2 (January 2018): 338–61.

5. Amy Skjerseth, "Ride-Along Listening: Inclusive Modes of Musical Analysis in *Switched on Pop*," *Radio Journal* 20, no. 1 (April 2022): 33–48.

6. Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding, "50: How to Listen to Music in 4 Easy Steps," *Switched on Pop*, November 2, 2016, podcast, https://switchedonpop.com/episodes/50-how-to-listen-to-music-in-4-easy-steps; for an in-depth discussion of how the Switched On Method™ invokes "structural listening," see Byrd McDaniel, "*All Songs Considered*: The Persuasive Listening of Music Podcasts," *Twentieth-Century Music* 19, no. 3 (October 2022): 411–26.

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for non-musically trained audiences.[7] But as Skjerseth and others note, this explanatory mode also reifies many existing conventions of both popular music criticism and podcasting; namely, locating authority and expertise as the purview of educated, male intermediaries with a particular degree of access to the mainstream music press.

As Iain Chambers observed as early as 1985, "The idea of a 'thinking person's rock music' emerged in the late 1960s, at the same time as the professional rock critic 'appeared to legitimate the whole affair.'"[8] Like other areas of the industry, the look and feel of rock and popular music criticism underwent a significant shift as these genres were folded into the mainstream and began to be taken seriously. Many women and racialized writers were victims of the professionalization of music writing in the 1980s, when *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, and other leading music magazines "purged many of [their] quirkier writers" and popular music criticism went mainstream.[9] As so-called "straight" music journalism caught on, daily papers hired rock and popular music critics—a shift towards more evaluative and critical approaches to popular music that effectively displaced the "personality journalists" of previous decades. There was also an affective shift that came along with the establishment of the popular music critic. While the first wave of rock and popular music criticism had been largely built on the intense emotional and affective ties writers felt towards their subjects, this was quickly replaced by a "growing conformism of journalistic style"[10] in response to industrial rationalization and convergence across an increasingly competitive market for adult-oriented music writing. According to creative industries scholar Chris Atton, even distinctive writers and the so-called personality journalists of previous decades were newly obliged to write in a house style far removed from the highly personalized manner by which they came to prominence.[11] Standards of good writing and good music alike had become wholly male-defined, based in the "cool, detached appraisal" of rock and pop performance,[12] while so-called teenyboppers and others who fell outside the purview of masculinized expertise were often ridiculed for their emotional response to these same genres.

Early waves of podcasting furthered similarly gendered and affective conventions. Despite early DIY promises and the potential of podcasts as a "disruptive technology,"[13] podcasting quickly replicated existing patterns of taste-making, authority, and expertise found across the wider media ecosystem. Indeed, podcasting's proximity to white masculinity is so taken for granted that it's become a meme: "a group of white guys is called

7. Skjerseth, 34.

8. Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (St. Martin's Press, 1985), 84.

9. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers, eds. *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap* (Plexus Publishing, 1995), 16.

10. Dave Laing, "Anglo-American Music Journalism: Texts and Contexts," in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (Routledge, 2006), 334.

11. Chris Atton, "Writing about Listening: Alternative Discourses in Rock Journalism," *Popular Music* 28, no. 1 (January 2009): 53–67.

12. Helen Davies, "All Rock and Roll Is Homosocial: The Representation of Women in the British Rock Music Press," *Popular Music* 20, no. 3 (2001): 312.

13. Kenneth Barr, "Theorizing Music Streaming: Preliminary Investigations," *Scottish Music Review* 3 (2013).

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a podcast."[14] And if music criticism as a genre had become increasingly divorced from its affective, embodied roots, early podcasts were even more likely to represent banal engagements with culture. "There is a sense that podcasts represent something of a 'safe option,'" write Ellis Jones and Jeremy Morris in the introduction to a recent special issue of *Radio Journal*.[15] Less visceral than soundtracking one's day with music of any genre, they note, many podcasts "deflate" even the most disturbing and visceral content, such as true crime, until these same stories represent an appropriate backdrop for "a particularly adult numbness."[16] Podcaster Julia Barton notes that podcasters are "tidying people" tasked with simplifying and performing narrative/analysis for mass consumption,[17] while Nick Couldry uses the term "mediatization" to describe similarly how digital storytelling is characterized by "a distinctive 'media logic' that is consistently channeling narrative in one particular direction."[18] Whatever the language, it's clear that the streamlined logics of podcasts' framing devices—like the conventions of the print rock and popular music criticism to come before it—have had an overall homogenizing effect on the landscape of contemporary music podcasting.

The prevalence of this flattened affect and critical distance becomes especially troubling when one considers the pedagogic power of podcasts to teach us how to see the world and—in the case of music podcasts—how to listen to it. In Jennifer Lynn Stoever's writing on the sonic color line, she introduces the concept of "the listening ear."[19] Through the listening ear's surveillance, discipline, and interpretation, Stoever notes, "dominant listening practices accrue [and] the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line's norms."[20] This certainly references the cultural hegemony of so-called "NPR voice"—the slow, inoffensive, even-toned delivery of presenters like Ira Glass that has long characterized public radio.[21] But it

14. The earliest known instance of this joke was tweeted in 2015 by Twitter user Inkana and—as is the nature of viral memes—has been repeated, remixed, and repurposed across the internet countless times since. See "A Group of White Men is Called a Podcast," *Know Your Meme*. February 17, 2019, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/a-group-of-white-men-is-called-a-podcast.

15. Jones and Morris, 9.

16. Ibid., "A Particularly Adult Numbness" would also make an incredible punk band name.

17. In Jennifer Hyland Wang, "The Perils of Ladycasting," in *Saving New Sounds: Podcast Preservation and Historiography*, eds. Jeremy Morris and Eric Hoyt (University of Michigan Press, 2021): 51.

18. Nick Couldry, "Mediatization or Mediation? Alternative Understandings of the Emergent Space of Digital Storytelling," *New Media & Society* 10, no. 3 (June 2008): 382. At first glance, this type of "tidying" impulse seems at odds with McGregor's notion of podcasts' "attention to feeling." I note here that podcasts' mediated/curated intimacies are meant to invoke *particular* feelings in listeners, not at all at odds with the logics of sentimentality and the middlebrow I unpack in subsequent sections of this article.

19. Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Colour Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York University Press, 2016).

20. Ibid., 7.

21. Teddy Wayne, "'NPR Voice' Has Taken Over the Airwaves," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/25/fashion/npr-voice-has-taken-over-the-airwaves.html; Simon Scott and Chenjerai Kumanyika, "The Infinite Whiteness of Public Radio Voice," *NPR*, January 31, 2015, https://www.npr.org/2015/01/31/382851532/the-infite-whiteness-of-public-radio-voices; on the phenomenon of 'unmarked' radio voice and its ties to whiteness and settler colonialism, see Michael Follert, "Evocations of the Eerie: The Acousmatic Voice in Canadian Radio Drama," *Sound Studies* 9, no. 1 (2023) and a recent piece of my own, "Radio Country," *Flow Journal* 29, no. 5 (2023), flowjournal.org/2023/03/radio-country/.

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also refers to a larger practice of "tidying up"—to again borrow Barton's metaphor—of accents, vocal characteristics, and speech patterns not consistent with the industry standard of white, male authority. As Stoever notes, we already know what this 'plain' voice sounds like: "we've been listening to it our whole lives."[22] Shaped by public radio conventions, popular podcast hosts "refashion the sonic character of emphatic cadence into a tool"[23] for the delivery of information, and in doing so implicitly model how to engage.

On prolific, commercial music analysis podcasts like *Dissect* and *Switched on Pop*, the overall tone tends to consist of hosts (and, to a slightly lesser extent, guests) uncovering and explaining musical attributes of particular songs and artists—in other words, why and how music works. Male hosts calmly and competently provide listeners with the tools and trivia they need to appreciate these songs to their fullest extent, rarely departing from a notably measured, tidy, and—we can assume—scripted delivery.[24] Will Straw has written that record collecting provides "the raw materials around which the rituals of homosocial interaction take shape [. . .] each man finds, in the similarity of his points of reference to those of his peers, confirmation of a shared universe of critical judgment."[25] I want to make the case here that a particular style of music podcasting—we might think of them as the "major label" shows, as opposed to more indie, experimental, or grassroots music podcasts that often see less commercial viability and thus notably shorter lifespans[26]—are the newest iteration of this cycle. White masculine authority begets more white masculine authority, and podcast listeners are left with the implicit sense that the "correct" way to engage with music is via the kind of critical, detached, explanatory mode that has only recently been challenged by more emotive conventions.

PODCASTS AS MIDDLEBROW MEDIA AND PARATEXT

Before addressing the so-called affective turn in mainstream music podcasts, I want to offer some frameworks for thinking through the music analysis podcast as a cultural framing device. Music podcasts exist as paratexts; that is, they are texts that support and prepare audiences to encounter a musical text for the first time, or seek to offer additional meaning and interpretation that the listener encounters after initial exposure to the

22. Stoever, 9.

23. Jacob Mertens, Eric Hoyt, and Jeremy Wade Morris. "Drifting Voices: Studying Emotion and Pitch in Podcasting with Digital Tools." In *Saving New Sounds: Podcast Preservation and Historiography*, eds. Jeremy Morris and Eric Hoyt (University of Michigan Press, 2021): 157.

24. It is worth noting here that certain podcasts read as more 'edited' than others; *Song Exploder,* for instance, completely removes host Hrishikesh Hirway's questions so that it appears the artist is telling a cohesive story of the song's creation. This removal/obfuscation of the interview's mechanics and mess is reminiscent of oral history conventions, and—when skillfully done, as it is in *SE*—builds even more intimacy by inferring the artist is in conversation with listeners directly.

25. Will Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture," In Sheila Whiteley, ed., *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (Routledge, 1997): 5.

26. Even podcasts backed by major institutional supports are not exempt; as I write this, NPR has recently announced its largest round of layoffs since the 2008 recession, including the cancellation of *Louder Than a Riot* (2020-2023), which connects hip hop histories to systemic misogynoir and anti-Black violence.

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musical text—what Jonathan Gray refers to as "in medias res" paratexts.[27] Many major music analysis podcasts base their analysis on a mix of new releases and older, "classic" pop songs, making the function of reclaiming or reframing media a key attribute of these particular paratexts. We might consider these podcasts, then, a kind of reissue or rerelease—the digitally mediated, ephemeral counterpart to the CD and vinyl reissues that Andrew J. Bottomley argues are so central to classic rock and pop's cultural afterlives.[28] The reissue process, according to Bottomley, "necessarily decodes a text's past and recodes it for the present"—a process that simultaneously recirculates existing meanings from the past while also proffering new meanings that update or reframe the text for modern consumption. This process of decoding and recoding is rarely neutral, however, and the practice of revisiting music in this way often seeks to "append aura, author, and authenticity" to the text in question.[29] Musical paratexts help *construct* texts, producing "in public"[30] revisionist accounts of social, cultural, and political history that often hinge on the taste judgments of the people behind the liner notes, box sets, and—increasingly more ubiquitous and accessible than either—podcasts.

Understanding music podcasts as paratexts that seek to elevate or confer an artistic aura on pop songs also positions these reclamatory, nostalgic, and even occasionally reverential texts as part of a broader middlebrow orientation towards popular music. Some of the earliest frameworks we have for thinking through middlebrow taste cultures included music—the 1949 *Life* magazine article that coined the term associated single jukebox records with lowbrow taste, while music for middle- and highbrow consumers was associated with album sets that represented more omnivorous listening practices.[31] Literary scholars define the middlebrow as highly mediated culture; it relies on the legitimizing force of institutions like literary prizes, best-of lists, and reissues that promote forms of culture that are "broadly appealing but still somehow 'improving.'"[32] A key assumption behind music analysis podcasts is that learning about the technical production, authorial intention, or music theory behind why a song "works" leads to a deeper appreciation of the musical text—one can hardly think of a musical paratext equally as preoccupied with "improving" one's experience of music via pure, unadulterated mediation.

This wary engagement with the popular, bolstered by attempts to legitimize or mediate its value, is a cornerstone of popular music analysis podcasts like *Switched on Pop*. While the show's orientation towards an explicitly middlebrow sensibility has shifted over time, it's hard to view the hosts' exposition of pop's musical bona fides as anything other than a solidly middlebrow project, grounded as it is in the reverential, earnest, and frequently

27. Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York University Press, 2010): 35.

28. Andrew J. Bottomley, "Play It Again: Rock Music Reissues and the Production of the Past for the Present," *Popular Music and Society* 39, no. 2 (March 2016): 151–74.

29. Gray, 83.

30. Bottomley, 155.

31. Ballou, Elizabeth, "What's Hot and What's Not, According to 1949," *Bustle*, June 17, 2014, https://www.bustle.com/articles/28412-1949-life-magazine-declares-whats-highbrow-and-whats-lowbrow.

32. McGregor, 7.

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anxious affect we understand as middlebrow's core tenets. What is fascinating here is the *evolution* of the show's tone and framing of these impulses over its nine-year run. As recently as 2019, when hosts Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding released the accompanying book, the two framed the podcast's origin story through the lens of overcoming their own middlebrow snobbery. Not only that, but they trace their reevaluation of pop's merits to yet another piece of media that remediates and recodes—in this case, Owen Pallett's 2014 *Slate* article mapping the "ingenuity" of Katy Perry's 2010 single "Teenage Dream."[33] For the introduction of the book, the two recollect in slightly clunky third-person:

> Nate and Charlie were sharing the backseat, where they were often banished in order to quarantine their music geekery from innocent bystanders such as their spouses.[34] Both had read Owen's piece on "Teenage Dream" and were aflame with new respect for the musical integrity that animates even the bubbliest of bubblegum pop. [. . .] It may be commercial fluff, but the artistry behind the fluff was undeniable.[35]

This backseat conversation—described as "revelatory" by the two hosts[36]—sparked a morbid curiosity in the musical integrity and artistry behind other pop songs, and *Switched on Pop* was born. And while *Switched on Pop* models an increasingly enthusiastic engagement with pop's musical and artistic merits, I want to argue that the sensibility at the core of the podcast remains a textbook project of middlebrow elevation.

The hosts' newfound respect for pop is evident in many of their earliest episodes; I outline here the highlights of one such episode that exemplify some of the rhetorical modes Sloan and Harding use to balance their interest in legitimizing pop against their skepticism. Particularly in the show's earliest seasons, songwriter Harding serves as somewhat of an analog for the reluctant, music snob listener, while musicologist Sloan is tasked with making a case for a song or artist's merit. In a 2015 episode on boyband One Direction, Harding quips that he knows "exactly two things about them" and expresses shock that they have songs other than their 2011 single "What Makes You Beautiful."[37] The primary logic behind this kind of feigned ignorance is located in the age of 1D's assumed fanbase, with the episode description noting that "unless you're a preteen or the parent of one, like us you've probably never heard a second of their music." We can read this kind of adult revulsion towards teen music as the middlebrow adult expressing their superior taste through the derogation and rejection of lowbrow teen music, making Harding's mockery of 1D fans—not to mention the wholly inaccurate depiction of those fans as an exclusively preteen demographic—a fairly explicit strategy to suggest distance between two opposing taste cultures. When the hosts do identify an attribute of a song

33. Owen Pallett, "Skin Tight Jeans and Syncopation," *Slate*, March 25, 2014, https://slate.com/culture/2014/03/katy-perrys-teenage-dream-explaining-the-hit-using-music-theory.html.

34. The inference being, of course, that music theory is inherently uninteresting/unappealing to Sloan and Harding's female spouses and (we can infer) other "innocent bystanders" beyond the homosocial space of the two's budding friendship.

35. Sloan and Harding 2019, 3.

36. Ibid.

37. Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding, "15: One Direction: Our Modern Day Castrati," *Switched on Pop*, May 29, 2015, podcast, https://switchedonpop.com/episodes/15-one-direction-our-modern-day-castrati.

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that they enjoy, they also invoke distance. Harding comments that a drum fill sounds like "a thirteen-year-old girl losing her mind," and Sloan affirms that the drums are "seemingly out of another song."[38] While their delivery is couched in good-natured ribbing, even the episode's conclusion has an undercurrent of reluctance. Harding noticeably hesitates, and Sloan has to repeatedly state that the podcast is "a safe space" before the former will admit that he was impressed, despite "wanting to not like them." There is certainly a more generous interpretation of this episode that allows for the hosts to act as a bridging or mirroring device for an equally reluctant podcast listener, encouraging them to "ride along" as they argue for 1D's cultural value and be won over, along with Harding, by the episode's end. The repetitive and played-out denigration of younger girl fans, however, makes it difficult to read this (and other early episodes) as anything other than clumsy attempts at poptimism that, even by 2015, feel regressive.

While early seasons of *Switched on Pop* feel like a middlebrow fever dream upon relistening, it's obvious that by several years into the podcast Sloan and Harding had refined their tactics significantly. I use the word 'refine' here intentionally, since a major hallmark of *Switched on Pop* since it hit its stride has been the invention and invocation of musicological terms that attempt to link pop artists' creative decisions to western music theory. One particularly representative example of this is the podcast's repeated invocation of Taylor Swift's trademark "T-Drop," the three-note melodic motif that Sloan and Harding argue is present across all of the singer's albums. Analyzing an early example of the T-Drop in her 2008 single "You Belong With Me," the two hosts instruct listeners to join them at the close of the first chorus to break down the musical qualities of Swift's delivery:

> On the word "see," Swift makes use of melisma, the practice of singing multiple pitches for a single syllable of text, turning the monosyllabic "see" into the tripartite "see-eee-eee" . . . Let's focus on the three notes Swift sounds at this point in the song: B, A-sharp, and D-sharp. This pattern—descending a short distance, then descending a big drop—is one of the defining musical gestures of Swift's career, the secret signature stamped somewhere on every album she records.[39]

This pairing of western music theory with a more serious engagement with pop artist's authorship (not to mention the kitsch-cute naming conventions) becomes a hallmark of *Switched on Pop*'s approach in subsequent seasons, and largely to credit for the podcast's longevity and brand power. Sloan and Harding have garnered praise from the popular press and scholarly communities alike—together, the two have created "a reading experience that is as multidimensional as the songs they describe,"[40] built "a communal listening platform for close analysis of musical forms,"[41] and delivered "charmingly

38. Sloan and Harding 2015.

39. Sloan and Harding 2019, 22.

40. Hannah Giorgis, "Diving Into Pop Music's Hidden Depths," *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2019/12/switched-pop-unpacking-power-pop-music/603778/.

41. Skjerseth, 45.

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rigorous" dissections of pop songs far and wide.[42] But these same strategies also map onto Bottomley's framework for thinking through reissues, which he argues draw on authenticity, social history, and the idea of musical "genius" to retroactively create meaning and value for a popular text.[43] More implicit (and much more palatable) than the performance of outright revulsion and the "deployment" of western music theory "ammunition" needed to win over listeners in earlier seasons,[44] the overall goal of these framing devices are the same: connect contemporary pop artistry to western music theory canon, laud prolific artists like Swift as musical masterminds, and confer an aura of authenticity where one ostensibly did not previously exist.

AFFECT, REACTIVITY, CATHARSIS

If the core impulse of music analysis podcasts is to recirculate and recode pop songs, the longevity of the "major" shows doing so hinges on their ability to continuously appeal to wider and wider audiences. But how do popular music podcasts continue to garner and build upon this mass appeal, and what might this have to do with the gendered affects of fandom? I turn now to how major music podcasts' middlebrow project of recoding pop songs as valuable cultural material have necessitated an ever-expanding repertoire of affective strategies. Namely, I trace how these shows have seen a slow but steady departure from the conventions of critical distance and affectless, disembodied engagement to adopt instead an embodied, emotive response to the music that moves them.

The injection of affect into popular music podcasts is part of a broader move away from "plain voice" broadcasting writ large. According to a 2021 study that looks at patterns of pitch in podcasting, deviations from so-called NPR voice to convey excitement and emotion are becoming increasingly commonplace across podcasting more generally. In *Saving New Sounds: Podcast Preservation and Historiography*, the authors note that in contemporary podcasting, "fluctuations in pitch are used to create specific affective resonances [. . .] they are deployed for specific kinds of vocal performances and aesthetic effects."[45] Beyond questions of pitch, I want to also make the case that long-running music podcasts have seen a gradual adoption of fannish language and affect that reframes the middlebrow mission of such shows to reclaim and recode pop music as a journey of self-discovery and novelty.[46] To draw a neat parallel between this and an earlier example, a July 2022 *Switched on Pop* episode discussed the third solo album from Harry Styles, formerly of One Direction.[47] While certain strategies of earlier seasons

42. Alex Ross, "The Musicological Zest of 'Switched on Pop,'" *The New Yorker*, March 1, 2021. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/08/the-musicological-zest-of-switched-on-pop.

43. Bottomley, 159.

44. Actual language used in that same 2015 episode on One Direction (Sloan and Harding 2015).

45. Mertens et al., 173.

46. We can also see evidence of this affective (re)turn in music media more broadly with the distinctive voices of music journalists such as Rob Sheffield, longtime pop writer for *Rolling Stone*, and Zane Lowe, best known for his longform artist interviews via Apple Music.

47. Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding, "275: Harry Styles and the Sledgehammer Horns," *Switched on Pop*, July 12, 2022, podcast, https://switchedonpop.com/episodes/harry-styles-sledgehammer-harrys-house.

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endure—we see another piece of emergent kitsch-cute music theory with Harding's reference to a "Triple H:" a "high, harmonized *ha*"—there is also vocabulary here the two have clearly adopted from fans. Harding affirms that the album is "a bop," and Sloan earnestly apologizes that the episode is only dropping several months after the album itself, noting that he's "been sleeping on" *Harry's House*.[48] Using such slang cedes valuable "sonic space"[49] to the very fans that Sloan and Harding spent the earlier 1D episode distancing themselves from, and in doing so disrupts some of the self-seriousness of earlier seasons.

Recent seasons of *Switched on Pop* have also seen Sloan and Harding share the mic with an increasingly diverse cast of musical guests and co-hosts. Given that the popularity and brand power of popular music podcasts hinge on the perceived authenticity of their interpersonal rapport, it is particularly fascinating to consider how the rhetorical positioning of these guests and their interactivity with the hosts reflect the show's recent pivot towards fannish affect. In a January 2023 episode analyzing the sped-up remix phenomenon made popular by video-hosting platform TikTok, Sloan and Harding bring on one of the show's producers, Reanna Cruz, to lend their expertise.[50] Cruz is positioned as the expert in this case, connecting contemporary remix culture to scene histories from Jamaican dub music to DJ Screw's chopped-and-screwed remixes of the Houston hip hop scene of the early 1990s. As a younger, queerer interlocutor, Cruz calls attention to the generational and disciplinary tension between their own modes of engagement and those of the two hosts. At one point, they poke fun at Sloan as he reaches for a precedent in classical music ("Okay, musicology!"); they also name the limits of the hosts' knowledge, particularly when it comes to genre histories and conventions ("Nate, if you're too antiquated and you don't know, [chipmunk soul] is the pitching up of R&B and soul samples in hip hop"). Centering Cruz and their insight deprivileges academic/industry expertise and—to a certain extent—subverts the premise that there is a 'right' way of listening or knowing about pop music. That *Switched on Pop* continues to cede sonic space, pass the mic, and endorse diverse experts in response to critiques of earlier season's misogynist and elitist undertones is further testament to the podcast's ever-expanding repertoire and commitment to its own relevance.

The move away from straightforward analysis and towards affective reactions untempered by justification or music theory logics aligns these podcasts with another genre of prolific music paratext: the reaction video. Much like podcasts, music reaction videos often combine musicological analysis and affective response to "vicariously recaptur[e] primary experience."[51] The reaction video's appeal relies on the fact that the content

48. Ibid.

49. Raechel Tiffe and Melody Hoffmann, "Taking Up Sonic Space: Feminized Vocality and Podcasting as Resistance," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 1 (January 2017): 115–18.

50. Nate Sloan, Charlie Harding, and Reanna Cruz, "Too Fast? We're Curious: The Sped-Up Remix Phenomenon," *Switched on Pop*, January 10, 2023, podcast, https://switchedonpop.com/episodes/too-fast-were-curious-sped-up-songs.

51. Sam Anderson, "Watching People Watching People Watching," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/magazine/reaction-videos.html.

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creator is encountering the text for the very first time; in essence, you are watching someone discover a song or an artist that you may already be familiar with or a fan of. Music scholar Byrd McDaniel uses the term "reactivity" to explain the profitability and appeal of such videos,[52] which—much like prolific music podcasts—enjoy transmedial spread as they are shared across platforms like YouTube and TikTok, remixed and remediated, and generally exist as a prime example of what Henry Jenkins calls "spreadable media."[53] Music reaction video creators similarly rely on the incorporation of fannish slang, expressions of awe, and deferral to fannish expertise. HTHAZE, the stage name of Atlanta-based musician Hamilton Troy Hayes, titles his reaction videos to popular artists using an emphatic (and SEO-friendly) mix of upper- and lowercase letters. "PUNISHER by PHOEBE BRIDGERS gives me emotional damage," he promises in one,[54] while another announces that he is "ugly crying to GOOD RIDDANCE by gracie abrams."[55] Punctuated by pauses to look up lyrics and artist lore, Hayes makes a habit of deferring to the fans: "I'm not as smart as you guys, okay? Help me out here."[56] Viewers suggest albums and artists for future videos and repost Hayes' content, affirming his and other reaction video creator's affective response to pop music as an "asset or skill"[57] worth endorsing.

Rather than being an evolution or a pivot away from the middlebrow impulse to elevate pop music that more explicitly informed earlier waves of popular music podcasting, I read the incorporation of this fannish affect and the celebration of male creators' emotive response to pop music as a continuation of this same sensibility. The majority of popular music reaction videos from male creators are framed as acts of discovery, generosity, and giving a particular artist "a chance"—or, to once again quote Sloan and Harding, "Let's see if we've been missing out!"[58] McDaniel writes that reactivity enables "privileged creators to treat exploitive listening as a kind of virtuosic act of consumption," allowing a particular type of person (i.e. straight, white, cis, and male) to convert affect into a commodity even as that same valuation is denied to the queer, racialized, or female fans who often make up the fanbases of the popular artists being analyzed.[59] This consumption of difference is a key feature of the middlebrow. In an interview in which she discusses a 2017 episode of *This American Life* on fat activism, podcaster and activist Virgie Tovar notes that a central tenet of NPR programming is a kind of "white male voyeurism" that plays directly into middlebrow catharsis: the listener is encouraged to

52. Byrd McDaniel, "Popular Music Reaction Videos: Reactivity, Creator Labor, and the Performance of Listening Online," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 6 (June 2021): 1624–41.

53. Henry Jenkins, Joshua Green, and Sam Ford, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in Networked Culture* (New York University Press, 2013).

54. HTHAZE, "Punisher by Phoebe Bridgers Gives Me Emotional Damage," *YouTube*, January 24, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ybvO6602qI.

55. HTHAZE, "Ugly Crying to Good Riddance by Gracie Abrams *Album Reaction/Review*." *YouTube*, March 25, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BM50Yl5MVIc.

56. HTHAZE 2022.

57. McDaniel, 1625.

58. Sloan and Harding 2015.

59. McDaniel, 1639.

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engage with difference, and gets to feel good for listening and expanding their horizons without ever really being challenged to meaningfully shift their politics or taste cultures.[60] Popular music analysis podcasts and reaction videos, on their surface, are a project of taking pop music seriously. When we scratch this surface, however, what we find is a mixed bag of tactics that seek to affirm the majority white, majority male creators as uniquely positioned to analyze, evaluate, and respond to music, much of which they are encountering considerably *after* it has already achieved the success that codes it as "popular" in the first place.

Reactivity in musical paratexts is an undeniably gendered phenomenon, regardless of the hosts' gender. As podcasters Raechel Tiffe and Melody Hoffman note, women's voices in podcasting continue to be "policed *and* cherished"—policed when female podcasters and content creators use uptalk or vocal fry, valuable when this same affect, emotionality, and pitch is taken up by male content creators.[61] According to Heather Warren-Crow, cultural objects like reaction videos and podcasts demonstrate our societal fascination with "screaming like a girl" in a society where we understand embodiment or emotiveness as a key attribute of discursive girlhood, but rarely celebrate it until male content creators decide to channel it.[62] This paradox has even found its way into podcast scholarship; in one recent study on pitch and emotion, the celebratory case study for a podcast host becoming "unrestrained and passionate" is Marc Maron.[63] Podcast scholars—many of whom are themselves podcasters—have written repeatedly on the freedom that podcasting can represent for those of us rigorously professionalized by academia, journalism, and other fields that value objectivity and a critical distance from one's subject.[64] As McGregor reminds us, however, the occasionally self-congratulatory "permission to care" afforded by podcasting does little to disrupt existing power structures of gender, race, age, and class.[65] Rather, podcasters represent "approachable expert[s] who [are] teaching us to see the rest of the world as fundamentally legible according to our own emotional vocabularies—and who [might be] using that expertise and approachability to secure their own cultural power and financial gain."[66] The world of music analysis podcasts, structured as it is by patriarchal logics, is eager to reward the embodied, affective reactions of those critics who are able to leverage affect and reactivity for social capital and profit to a far greater extent than fans themselves.

60. Virgie Tovar and Hannah McGregor, "'I Needed to See the Politic Being Lived': Virgie Tovar on Fat Activism and Digital Platforms," *Atlantis* 38, no. 2 (March 2018): 147.

61. Tiffe and Hoffman, 118.

62. Heather Warren-Crow, "Screaming Like a Girl: Viral Video and the Work of Reaction," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 6 (2016): 1113–17.

63. As culture writer Kelsey Miller notes, women in broadcasting continue to find themselves "stuck between a rock and a high pitch"; see Kelsey Miller, "Why Do These Women's Voices Bother You So Much?" *Refinery29*, May 19, 2015, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2015/05/87351/female-podcast-voices-vocal-fry.

64. Tiffe and Hoffman; McGregor; again, this has precedent in fan studies where there has been ongoing conversation about the unique affordances and difficulties of enacting one's 'aca-fandom' since the term was first popularized by Matt Hills in *Fan Cultures,* Routledge, 2002.

65. McGregor, 77.

66. Ibid., 107.

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A SECRET THIRD THING: SPACES WITHIN AND AROUND MUSIC'S PARATEXTS

Popular music paratexts have real legitimating power. Like reissues and box sets, music podcasts and reaction videos represent an "archival consciousness"[67] that constructs the text as a cultural artifact worthy of one's attention, time, and—ultimately—reconsideration. But who is this power meant to be working on? If the majority of songs taken up on major music analysis podcasts have already been in circulation for months (and sometimes years) by the time hosts get to them, what is the relationship of existing fans to these efforts? Examples from one recent Reddit thread wherein Taylor Swift fans discussed the merit of reaction and song analysis videos run the gamut from repulsed by the excess of affect (vidders are framed as "overreacting," "cringey," and "annoying") to appreciative of it (one poster notes that certain vidders getting emotional "hit[s] harder" in light of their usual detached, objective analysis).[68] The vast majority of Swifties, however, seem to foster a quiet bemusement at the legions of male content creators who are just now taking Swift seriously. One comment notes that a reaction vid reminds her of an older brother figure "slowly becoming a huge Swiftie," noting that she wants to give him a hug; another remarks that it's "fun" to watch self-serious music fans be transformed by Swift's music over time. "It's funny to me that [reaction vidders] almost never know what the song's about," one comment quips, "Because [they're] too focused on production."[69]

The assumed or ideal listener for most podcasts is the engaged, hypercritical "super listener," often presumed male. The inverse archetype, outlined by Bottomley in emergent research on "mundane-casting," is a listener with much lower stakes, who might listen while multitasking, before bedtime, or in otherwise domestic spaces.[70] It seems to me that fans' engagement with musical analysis podcasts and reaction videos represents a third category of listener: one who still appreciates the value of musicological analysis and historical context, but also reacts with a kind of generosity and bemusement at the belated poptimism and subsequent musical discovery of male hosts and content creators.[71] Future research into reactivity and other forms of "digital liveness"[72] would do well to attend to these assumptions, and consider how the incorporation of fannish affect into popular music paratexts is understood by existing fans.

67. Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (University of California Press, 2006): 117.

68. "What Do You Think of Reaction Videos?" *Reddit*, November 24, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/TaylorSwift/comments/z361hw/what_do_you_think_of_reaction_videos/.

69. I would like to thank the incredibly generous peer review I received that pointed me towards recent scholarship on the ethics of citing social media posts from non-public figures and growing concerns around ethics in digital scholarship, including John W. Ayers et al., "Don't Quote Me: Reverse Identification of Research Participants in Social Media Studies," *Digital Medicine* 1 (2018) and the 2019 Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) report on digital research ethics.

70. Andrew J. Bottomley, "Mundane-Casting: Attention, Affect, and New Kinds of Podcast Listening" (presentation, Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Denver CO, April 2023).

71. I read this as particularly generous because, as McGregor points out, "being the subject of sentimental storytelling is like being chosen for a team in a schoolyard game: sure, it feels good to be included, but there's always the stinging reminder that someone else got to decide whether you were included or not" (2022), 109.

72. Philip Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (September 2012): 3–11.

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The professionalized adoption of fannish rhetoric and affect in music podcasting is, in many ways, a natural consequence of the increased visibility of fan communities and practices across social media in recent years; fan studies scholarship offers many productive insights into this turn. In particular, the obfuscation of hosts' labor as "work" echoes ongoing conversations in fannish and fan studies spaces on the difficulties in recognizing creative, fannish labor as legitimate or deserving of pay. According to Warren-Crow, the affective dimensions of those cultural objects that trade in reactivity "naturalize that subject's labor as visceral [and] instinctive [. . .] so spontaneous that it doesn't appear to be labor at all."[73] In fan studies, this is widely understood to contribute to the devaluation of feminized fan practices and gift economies; in the case of musical paratexts, it disguises such "spontaneous emissions"[74] as a straightforward extension of content creators' authenticity rather than a deliberate choice or departure. In his recent writing on podcasts, McDaniel observes that mainstream music podcasts and the modes of listening modelled therein frequently rely on the idea of a song as a self-contained object to the detriment of considering broader social and cultural terrain. Similarly, the future of studying music podcasts only serves to benefit from the inclusion of existing work from fan studies and gender studies that have already begun to attend to these questions of spontaneous creative labor and gendered affect.[75] In a post-poptimist era, familiarizing oneself with music analysis podcasts' middlebrow tactics—which includes the invocation of fannish language and affect I've argued for here—can highlight the spaces left behind for subversive engagements. In the midst of a widespread affective (re)turn in music media, we deserve more than mere permission to feel: we deserve to *revel* in it. ■

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73. Warren-Crow, 1116.

74. Ibid.

75. Alongside fan and gender studies, this ongoing conversation would also be benefit from the consideration of shows that willfully disrupt those institutional powers that confer middlebrow respectability (*Who Cares About the Rock Hall?*, 2018-present) as well as those that center the voices and expertise of marginalized fans and intermediaries (*Name 3 Songs*, 2020-present) rather than addressing them as an afterthought.

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