2013

An original composition, Symphony No. 1, "Eustace the Monk" and compositional techniques used to elicit musical humor

Samuel Howard Stokes
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AN ORIGINAL COMPOSITION, SYMPHONY NO. 1, "EUSTACE THE MONK"
AND
COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES USED TO ELICIT MUSICAL HUMOR

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Music

by

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ABSTRACT

Part I – “Symphony No. 1 – ‘Eustace the Monk’” is based on a figure from medieval legend. Although Eustace Busket is a historically documented person that lived c.1170-1217, the exact details of his life are shrouded in legend. Many of the details of the legend of Eustace were passed down through the anonymous *Li Romans de Witasse Le Moine*. The legendary tale of Eustace, who is reported to have learned black magic from the devil, became a Benedictine monk in order to corrupt the monastery, and later became a mercenary pirate, is the subject matter of this five-movement dramatic symphony.

Part II – “Compositional Techniques Used to Elicit Musical Humor” employs an analytical approach to music adapted from various theories of humor. One of the primary theories adapted in this approach is Victor Raskin’s General Theory of Verbal Humor. Other theories adapted for this dissertation include superiority theory, incongruity theory, and computational-neural theory. The second part identifies specific musical humor devices used in the songs of "Weird Al" Yankovic.
PART I
AN ORIGINAL COMPOSITION, SYMPHONY NO. 1, "EUSTACE THE MONK"

PROGRAM NOTES

Symphony No. 1 – Eustace the Monk is based on the medieval legend of Eustace Busket. Although Eustace Busket is a historically documented person that lived c.1170-1217, the exact details of his life are shrouded in legend. Many of the details of the legend of Eustace were passed down through the anonymous Li Romans de Witasse Le Moine.¹ Eustace is an outlaw in the tradition of medieval outlaws including Fouke FitzWarin and the very popular Robin Hood. Unlike Robin Hood, whose underhanded deeds were justified for serving the greater good, Eustace was self-serving and sinister. His powers of magic were reportedly taught to him by the devil himself. Also unlike Robin Hood, Eustace Busket stands the test of historical scrutiny. Whereas it is doubtful that Robin Hood legends are based on any one real person, Eustace Busket’s existence is well-documented, particularly in his later naval campaigns. However, the real difficulty lies in separating the man from the legend, as many aspects of his life are undoubtedly exaggerated. This Symphony depicts the legend of Eustace the Monk for the richness of its storytelling without concern for historical accuracy. This retelling draws on a translation of the original text, but is retold in this composer’s own manner.²

Symphony No. 1, "Eustace the Monk" uses the following instrumentation: two flutes (Flute 1 doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets in Bb, two bassoons, four French horns in F, two trumpets in Bb, two trombones, one tuba, four percussionists (glockenspiel, xylophone,  


snare drum, bass drum, tambourine, claves, suspended cymbal, and four timpani), violins 1 and 2, viola, cello, contrabass.

The following program notes summarize the story depicted in each of the five movements as told by the composer:

I. Eustace Learns Black Magic from the Devil in Toledo, Spain

Eustace Busket was born in the Boulogne, France in 1170. In his teenage years, he traveled to Toledo, Spain to study black magic. Eustace descended into a deep cavern where he learned black magic from the devil himself.

II. Eustace Becomes a Monk at St. Saumer’s Abbey

After learning black magic in Toledo, the devil sent Eustace to St. Saumer’s Abbey. There he became a Benedictine monk. Little by little, Eustace corrupted the abbey so that the order of daily rituals was disrupted. Before leaving the abbey, Eustace took the holy relics and gambled them away at the local pub.

III. Count Renaud's Betrayal; Eustace's Vengeance

After leaving the abbey, Eustace became the seneschal and bailiff for Count Renaud of Boulogne, France. After some time, the Count accused Eustace of mishandling the funds with which he had been entrusted and outlawed Eustace. Sensing betrayal, Eustace struck back with a furious vengeance setting fire to both of the Count's mills before retreating into the forest.

IV. Eustace Puts out to Sea

After causing much trouble with his outlaw band in the forests of Boulogne, Eustace and his band put off to sea to begin a life of piracy. Abandoning his allegiance to France, Eustace became friendly with King John of England and became a mercenary serving England.
However, Eustace's primary allegiance was to himself, and he betrayed England and became friendly with Prince Louis de France when the opportunity for personal gain presented itself.

V. The Battle of Sandwich

Infuriated by Eustace's betrayal, the King of England sent his fleet to capture and execute Eustace. They searched the seas but were unable to locate Eustace, because he was using black magic to make his ship invisible while he was transporting artillery for the French Army. However, the English fleet now had Stephen Crabtree, an old acquaintance of Eustace, to whom Eustace had taught the secrets of black magic. Stephen used Eustace's magic against him, making his ship visible to the English Navy. Because of the weight of the artillery Eustace was transporting, his ship was unable to outrun the fleet and was captured. Stephen Crabtree boarded Eustace's vessel and beheaded him with a sword.
I.
I.
II. Eustace Becomes a Monk at St. Saumer's Abbey
II.

Fl. 1

Fl. 2

Ob. 1

Ob. 2

B♭ Cl. 1

B♭ Cl. 2

Bsn. 2

Bsn. 2

Bsn. 2

Hn. 3–4

Hn. 1–2

B♭ Tpt. 1

B♭ Tpt. 2

Tbn. 1

Tbn. 2

Tuba

Perc. 1

Perc. 2

Perc. 3

Timp.

Vla. 1

Vla. 1

Vla. 1

Vc.

Ch.
III. Count Renaud's Betrayal; Eustace's Vengeance

Grazioso

Flute 1/Piccolo

Flute 2

Oboe 1

Oboe 2

Clarinet in B

Clarinet in B

Flute 1/Piccolo

Horn in F 3-4

Horn in F 1-2

Percussion 3

Percussion 2

Trombone 2

Trombone 1

Bassoon 1

Bassoon 2

Timpani

Violin 2

Violin 1

Viola

Cello

Contrabass
IV. Eustace Puts out to Sea

Misterioso

Flute 1/Piccolo

Flute 2

Oboe 1

Oboe 2

Clarinet in B

Clarinet in B

Flute 1/Piccolo

Horn in F 3-4

Horn in F 1-2

Percussion 1

Percussion 2

Percussion 3

Trombone 1

Trombone 2

Tuba

Percussion 1

Percussion 2

Percussion 3

Timpani

Misterioso

Violin 1

Violin 1

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

Trumpet in B

Horn in F 3-4

Clarinet in B

Oboe 1

Flute 2

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

Trumpet in B

Clarinet in B

Oboe 1

Flute 2

Misterioso

Violin 1

Violin 1

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

Trumpet in B

Clarinet in B

Oboe 1

Flute 2

Misterioso

Violin 1

Violin 1

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

Trumpet in B

Clarinet in B

Oboe 1

Flute 2

Misterioso

Violin 1

Violin 1

Viola

Cello

Contrabass
IV.
IV.
IV.
IV.
V. The Battle of Sandwich
\begin{music}
\begin{staff}
\end{music}
Con fuoco

V.

Fl. 1/Picc.
Bn. 2
Tpt. 2
Tbn. 1
Tuba
Bsn. 1
Ob. 1
Cl. 2
Fl. 2
Vln. I
Vla.
Vc.

Tempo

=120
PART II  
COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES USED TO ELICIT MUSICAL HUMOR

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

There are numerous examples of music throughout history and across world cultures that have been written to evoke humor in one way or another. However, exactly how music is able to transmit humor is still a matter of speculation. Whereas theories of humor exist in the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and verbal semantics, very few music scholars have attempted to develop theories of musical humor.

The difficulty in developing a theory of musical humor, in part, lies in the fact that the semantics of music are often so abstract and subject to multiple interpretations that is difficult to explain musical humor in the same way that semantic theories attempt to explain verbal humor. Although many theorists have used rhetorical analogies to explain musical structure and form, the subtle elements of humor, such as the word play and timing required to elicit a humorous response, are difficult to relate in terms of rhetorical analogies.

The disparity among existing theories of humor further complicates the issue. Several competing theories assert different core reasons for why humans participate in humor acts and exhibit humorous responses. For example, superiority theory claims that a humor response is evoked when the participant feels that the object of humor is some way inferior. On the other hand, incongruity theory suggests that all humor arises out of the disagreement or incompatibility of two or more elements in the humor act. I assert that several different theories of humor can logically coexist, because different theories can be more useful for explaining different types of humor that correspond to various situations.
The variety of manifestations of humor responses also makes it difficult to quantify humor. Humor is commonly associated with laughter, but this is not always the case. Some humor is appreciated for its cleverness or satire, but does not necessarily evoke a significant laughter response. Also, the degree to which a certain stimulus evokes a humor response is highly personal to the hearer.

To explain the disparity in humor responses to the same stimulus, I use an illustration provided by linguist Victor Raskin. The illustration comes in the form of a pseudo-mathematical formula, as shown in Figure 1 below.

\[
HU (S, H, ST, E, P, SI, SO) = X
\]

**HU = The humor act**

**S = The speaker**

**H = The hearer**

**ST = The stimulus**

**E = Experience**

**P = Psychology**

**SI = The situation**

**SO = The society**

Figure 1 – Victor Raskin’s humor formula

X is the result of the humor act. \( X = F \) if the humor act was perceived as funny and \( X = U \) if it is perceived to be unfunny. Of course, there is a range between \( F \) and \( U \) that allows for a spectrum of various responses to the humor act, but there is no definite mathematical method for quantifying exactly where each individual response lies on the spectrum. The illustration is, however, useful in showing that the humor act itself can elicit practically any response in the
range between F and U, based on the speaker, hearer, stimulus, experience, psychology, situation, and society. It is not just what the speaker says, but it is the context and the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, as well as the relationship of the hearer to the subject matter of the humor act. For the purpose of the research presented here, Raskin's formula will be used as a basic template to aid in explaining humorous responses evoked by different musical works.

In the context of musical humor, the term "speaker" (S) may represent the composer or the performer. Whereas the performer directly transmits the musical humor to the hearer (H), the humor itself may be the intended result of the composer. When a composer intends musical humor in a work, the composer must notate the music in such a way that the performer can express and communicate the composer's intended musical incongruity. In this way the performer is simply the medium for the composer's humorous expression. On the other hand, a flat performance can destroy the humorous intent of the performance, whereas an excellent performance can enhance the composer's humorous intent and draw a larger humorous response than expected from the audience. Also, a performer's interpretation can draw a humor response, whether or not the composer intended one. A musical performance interpretation that is drastically incongruous with standard performance practice may potentially draw a humor response for its novelty or as the object of ridicule. A humor response may also be elicited by physical humor that is incongruous with the audience's expectations.

One challenge in analyzing musical humor is the separation of the humor of text from the humor of the music in the case of vocal music. While it is true that humor in vocal text may not always correspond with musical elements that are inherently funny, the interaction between text

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and music is significant in the transmission of humor, such as in opera buffa. Music theorists have spent more time focusing on humor in purely instrumental works, such as those of Haydn, and spent less time on vocal music, since it may seem that much of the humor is transmitted through the text. I believe that the purely textual humor and the purely musical humor can be parsed reasonably well by most musically trained listeners. At any rate, in instances in which they may be more difficult to parse, it is likely that both types of humor are coexisting simultaneously.

This document will consider musical examples from the Western art music tradition and 20th and 21st century popular songs. The musical examples that come from the tradition of Western art music will be shown in full. Popular songs of the 20th and 21st centuries will be shown in lead sheet format in which the vocal parts are shown in treble clef, transposing down one octave for male vocals, with chord symbols written above the vocal line. Excerpts from popular songs will also include an indication of the track time where the excerpt begins. All music examples are transcribed by this author.

Finally, I will include a note about definitions of humor terms, which otherwise could be the source of much confusion, since many of these terms are used by different authors interchangeably, or with different connotations. I do not intend to attempt an analysis of how various humor terms should apply to different types of humor according to etymology or historical usage. The primary purpose of this dissertation is to show how humor in music is perceived according to various established theories of psychology and semantics. The various meanings of "humor" versus "wit," for instance, according to historical era, geographical region, as well as the particular situations to which they most appropriately apply is not of primary concern to this study. Gretchen Wheelock does provide a thorough analysis of such terms as
used in Europe in the 18th century in her book, but since this paper includes musical examples from many times and places, a discussion of the changing meanings of these terms is beyond the scope of what this paper will encompass. 4

This paper will consistently use the following definitions for these terms:

Humor – using words, actions, sounds, or artistic elements in an incongruous manner in order to amuse. Humor is often associated with laughter, but laughter is not required for all humorous acts.

Wit – use of humor in a clever and usually subtle way. For example, a pie in the face may be humorous, but it is not witty, since it is neither clever nor subtle. Wordplay in the comedies of Shakespeare that are subtle enough to be missed at first hearing, and understood upon reflection, qualifies as wit.

Satire – the use of humor to comment indirectly on issues that are perceived as being relatively important and not funny in and of themselves. Satire may or may not be intended to produce laughter.

Parody – the use of humor to directly imitate something else, often a work of music, art, or poetry. The intent of parody varies, but may poke fun at the original work of art, be used as a satire, or for various other purposes.

Funny – the word "funny" describes something that is perceived as humorous, which may or may not provoke laughter. In this paper, "funny" will be used synonymously with "humorous."

In the late 17th century, laughter was being demonized by philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes of England as being a loathsome aspect of human nature. However, in the 18th century, the Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson refuted Hobbes when he "put forth what became the key term in the evolving theory of comic – laughter, he argued, is the response to a perception of incongruity." In Hutcheson's own words, "the cause of laughter, is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea."

Incongruity is one of the easiest theories to perceive and to apply in the understanding of all types of humor. As the name implies, incongruity theory states that humor is derived from the perception of incongruous elements. Many types of verbal humor exhibit very obvious incongruities. For example, a pun is an incongruity between two different interpretations of a homonym or homophone. Other jokes are humorous because of an apparent misunderstanding between the speaker and one of the characters in the joke, the environment, the situation, or the expectations that are set up by the joke.

Incongruity, in and of itself, is not sufficient to completely explain a humor response. Although the great majority of humor theories point to incongruity as being a vital element of humor, the correlation between incongruity and humor should never be confused for causation. The confusion may be caused because so many examples of humor stem directly from an

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6 Francis Hutcheson. *Reflections Upon Laughter, and Remarks Upon the Fable of the Bees... Carefully Corrected* (Glasgow: Printed by R. Urie, for D. Baxter, 1750), 19.
incongruity, but it is also true that incongruities do not always evoke a humor response. For example, if someone were driving a car and had to suddenly stop because a fallen tree is blocking the road ahead, the driver is likely to recognize immediately the incongruity in the situation, but under most circumstances, would not find the situation humorous. Whereas, recognizing the importance of incongruity as an element that is common in many various types of humor, there are certainly other conditions that are necessary for an incongruity to be perceived as humorous.

In order to accept incongruity as a valid humor theory, the conditions whereby an incongruity may be understood as humorous must be established. Neil Schaeffer describes incongruity as when "we see two things which do not belong together, yet which we accept at least in this case as going together in some way. That is, when we notice something as incongruous, we also simultaneously understand it to be in some minor way congruous." Following from this argument, it is logical to expect that musical humor will succeed on some level if incongruity is introduced in such a way that the music is not disrupted so much that the incongruous element could not be somehow accepted as congruous to the music in some manner.

Using Victor Raskin's formula, it can be deduced that incongruities may be based on experience, psychology, situation, society, or combinations of these elements. Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G major, II is an excellent example of how all of these four elements can be combined in one instance of musical humor (see Figure 2). The first eight-measure phrase features only the string section playing very simple tonic and dominant arpeggios with a light staccato articulation at a piano dynamic level and ending on a half cadence. The second eight-measure phrase is a varied repetition of the first phrase. However, the second phrase is at the softer pianissimo dynamic level and the violin II, viola, and cello change to pizzicato. At the end

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Figure 2 - Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G major "Surprise," II, mm. 1-16
of the phrase in m. 16, all of the instruments in the ensemble play a sudden fortissimo G major triad on the second beat, with all string instruments performing arco.

This sudden incongruity is quite stark because it comprises an incongruity on several levels. From a purely psychological standpoint, the fortissimo chord represents a suddenly loud sound in an otherwise tranquil background. There is an immediate fight-or-flight response stemming from the fear of this unexpected and seemingly incongruous loud sound. There is normally a startle reflex associated with this, which causes a sudden increase in mental alertness along with an elevated heart rate. After a moment, when the mind realizes that the sound is from a benign source, the body calms and there is a sense of physical and mental release.

The fortissimo chord is also incongruous to the audience's experience, at least on the first listening. Sudden stark changes of dynamics were not common in European music of the classical style period, which makes the event also incongruous with the situation and society in which the symphony was originally presented.

However, on repeated listening, the same audience member would likely perceive less humor in the fortissimo chord because the single element of experience will have changed. Whereas all other elements in the formula will have remained the same, the specific hearing of this piece will provide the listener with the expectation of this incongruous moment upon future hearings. This is large part of why jokes tend to be funniest on the first hearing, and are likely to evoke lesser humor response when repeated.

The analysis above shows how various elements of Raskin's formula are affected by the same musical incongruity. The question remains as to whether the incongruous element can in some way still be considered congruous to its musical context. Whereas the sudden dynamic change and concurrent thickening of instrumentation on beat 2 of m. 16 is incongruous, this
event is congruous in several other ways. At the end of the first phrase in m. 8, the strings end on a B on beat 2, just as all of the instruments end on B in m. 16. The tempo has remained the same and there is no indication of a key change. Even the eventual entrance of the other instruments would have been expected, perhaps from the title of "Symphony" alone, or from the presence of the players in a live performance. Even the sudden accent on a weak beat would have been a plausible compositional choice, employed for the sake of variety. So it can be seen that most of what occurs on beat 2 of m. 16 is, in fact, congruous. The only incongruous element is the extreme change in dynamics.

The *fortissimo* chord in m. 16 of Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G major, II is an incredibly iconic moment of musical humor, and interestingly, its humor can be partially explained, or at the very least easily conforms to explanations using a variety of different humor theories. Therefore, it will be briefly mentioned in regards to all of the humor theories presented in this chapter in order to explore different perspectives on the humor response that it evokes. Similarly, Victor Raskin's theory of verbal semantics will be employed throughout this chapter to illustrate how the manipulation of the various elements in the formula may help explain the humor effects that are attributed to each theory.

Another example of a musical incongruity is Devo's song "Beautiful World" from their 1981 album, *New Traditionalists*, an album title which already suggests a logical incongruity. The song declares from the beginning, "It's a beautiful world we live in, a sweet romantic place. Beautiful people everywhere…"8 The music features a moderately fast tempo and a Mixolydian melody, which seems to reflect this perception of happiness and excitement. The song's chorus (shown in Figure 3) states that "It's a beautiful world for you…" implying that the singer is

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sharing the optimistic feelings of the person to whom he is singing. The third iteration of "It's a beautiful world" is spoken, which adds dramatic emphasis to the phrase and musical variety.

![Figure 3 – Devo, "Beautiful World," chorus excerpt (0:48).](image)

Most of the 3:33 track maintains this optimistic, almost maudlin, character. The illusion is finally broken at 2:53, when the words "It's not for me" are spoken emphatically, appended to the end of the chorus (see Figure 4). This moment represents a stark incongruity to everything which has preceded it, as it was presumed that the singer was sharing the optimism of the person to whom he is singing, but the reality is that the singer likely shares none of this optimism. This is musically incongruous as this appended line is spoken and because it was not appended to either of the previous choruses. However, it does remain congruous to the music because it does not disrupt the rhythmic flow; in fact, it emphasizes the periodicity of the song by concluding on the first beat of the measure with the return of the tonic B7 chord (keeping in mind that the song's chords suggest B Mixolydian fairly consistently throughout). This is not the first time that words have been spoken in rhythm rather than sung, so in this way, it is not incongruous, however, the tone he uses is incongruous. In the choruses, "It's a beautiful world" is spoken in a way that affirms the text, which is sung twice before it is spoken. By contrast, "It's not for me," is spoken in a tone of indignation, negating the validity of all the preceding text. Thus it can be seen that while the incongruity of the moment can be perceived as humorous, most elements of the music remain congruous.

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9 Ibid.
In both the Haydn and the Devo examples, which are separated by time, distance, intended audience and numerous other factors, the observable phenomenon of incongruity can be found. In both instances, there is "the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea" as Hutcheson describes, as well as some element of congruity in the incongruity as described by Schaeffer.

Superiority Theory

Superiority Theory is one of the earliest documented theories of humor. Several ancient Greek philosophers described aspects of what is now called superiority theory. Plato speaks about "the disposition of our minds in the acting of the comedies, - that even here there is a mixture of pain and pleasure." Indeed, the viewing of comedies in the time of Plato bears a striking resemblance to the viewing of comedies in the present time, in that audiences find humor in watching characters enduring uncomfortable and stressful situations. Plato goes on to describe that "when we laugh at what is ridiculous in friends, in introducing the element of pleasure into envy, we do in effect blend together this pleasure with pain." Darwin's theories on laughter suggest a biological representation of superiority in laughter. He observes that "the upper teeth
are always exposed during laughter," in a manner strikingly similar to an aggressive posture of animals when they bare their teeth.\textsuperscript{13}

Superiority Theory describes humor that is evoked when one perceives oneself as being in some way superior to the person performing the humor act. For example, when a slapstick comedian slips on a banana peel and does a forward somersault, this may evoke laughter to the observer of this humor event. The superiority theory claims that this laughter is caused by the perception that the one who slipped and fell is in some way inferior, perhaps for being clumsy or awkward.

In musical humor, superiority theory applies most readily to comic opera. Many of the characters in comic opera have an amusing flaw, or perhaps several. Part of the reason that the audience laughs is the sense the characters are in some way inferior to them, and this perhaps provides relief to the audience members by absolving them of their own personal character flaws.

Although the caricaturist nature of the characters in comic opera is an obvious example of superiority theory, it does little to explain how the music itself creates musical humor. In order to explain this, one must consider it in connection with other theories of humor, particularly incongruity theory.

Another way that superiority theory is exhibited through music is through sarcasm and satire. This may readily be seen in Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony. The style of previous works by Shostakovich had led him to be denounced by the state. Because of this, he wrote the Fifth Symphony in an exaggerated conservative style as a biting satire. He was praised in \textit{Pravda} for this, from whence came the symphony’s subtitle, "A Soviet Artist's Response to Just Criticism,"

but in reality, it was a composition of unrelenting sarcasm. The state did not understand the meaning, but the oppressed people did.

Interestingly, when considering Victor Raskin's formula, $HU(S,H,ST,E,P,SI,SO) = X$, the state and the oppressed people were living in the same society (SO), but experience (E) and situation (SI) were considerably different, evoking entirely different understandings to the same piece of music. However, the overwhelming success of the work owes to both responses – on the one hand the interpretation by the state as a wonderful piece in an approved artistic style, and on the other hand the interpretation by the people as an underhanded biting satire.

Another way that Superiority Theory applies to music is when a performance or composition is considered by the listener to be sufficiently poor as to be the subject of ridicule. Whereas Mozart's "A Musical Joke," IV, is filled with examples of various types of humor, the most striking moment of humor in the piece is in the final three measures (see Figure 5). Even for one with only a fleeting understanding of music would readily identify that something has gone horribly awry. The final Presto movement is in F major and the last section of the piece serves to affirm F as tonic blatantly and quite redundantly until the amazing blunder that occurs in the last three measures. Mozart chooses to end the piece simultaneously in five different keys. The French horns end in the expected F major, but the Violin I ends in G major, the Violin II in A major, the violas in Eb Major, and the Cello in Bb Major. Each instrument ends with a perfectly acceptable conclusion in its own key, but the unexpected clash of five competing tonalities is completely at odds with expectations. According to Wheelock, "the ultimate target of this travesty is not simply inept playing, but bad musicianship on all levels of competence and

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taste – most especially bad composing.” However, Wheelock also affirms that Mozart’s contemporary audience would have understood that this was Mozart composing in the guise of an incompetent composer. Nevertheless, the humor response that would be evoked from this incompetence can be explained as the audience feeling superior to this persona of an inept composer.

Figure 5 – Mozart, K. 522, "A Musical Joke," IV, mm. 456-458.

On the other hand, this type of humor response can also be evoked through the actual perception that the performer is inferior in some way. This can be evidenced by the incredible popularity of Rebecca Black's song "Friday." The music video, which was released in 2011, reached 100 million views on YouTube within only three months of its debut. Whereas a view count of this magnitude is typical of videos for songs that are in the Billboard top ten, it was virtually unheard of for an unknown artist such as Rebecca Black. However, the sheer popularity of the song was mostly not based on people's respect for her artistic integrity, but on relentless mockery of its bland music, vapid text, and incongruous elements of the video. The

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15 Wheelock, 7.
song was lambasted and almost immediately lampooned by several people including Conan O’Brian, Jimmy Fallon, and Richard Cheese. The point of its inclusion here is not to add to the lambasting but to consider how an unknown artist was capable of creating such a phenomenal stir with such a banal song.

Figure 6 - "Friday" chorus excerpt (beginning at 0:44)\textsuperscript{16}

There are several things that make the song "Friday" very simplistic, although being simplistic is not a sufficient explanation as to why the song is so highly ridiculed. A number of musical works that are considered simple in one way or another are nonetheless accepted into the musical canon. Examples include, Bach's two-part inventions, some of Chopin's simpler Preludes, and Satie's "Gymnopedie." Even though these works are simple in one way or another, they are considered valuable works because of the elegance of their construction. The song "Friday" is simplistic in harmony as it is dominated by a four measure progression of the chords B, G#m, E, and F# (see Figure 6). This is not sufficient explanation for its ridicule, since numerous popular songs are based on I, vi, IV, V progressions. The melody has many extended stationary passages, which also appears in a significant amount of popular music. The rhythm is not complicated, but it does contain a fair amount of syncopation, which is at odds with the scansion of the text, and therefore sounds awkward in certain instances, such as the second syllable of the word "forward" in the third measure of the chorus (see Figure 6), which occurs on the fourth beat and is therefore metrically accented more strongly than the first syllable on the previous eighth note. Also the Perfect fifth ascending leaps on the two iterations of the word

"weekend" in the fourth measure of the chorus is an awkward match for the word, which would normally be inflected down in pitch on the second syllable when spoken.

The text of "Friday" is extremely simplistic and describes the basic routine of a young girl going to school and celebrating the coming of Friday as the start of the weekend. The chorus simply celebrates the coming of Friday, but possibly the most banal portion of the text is the vocal interlude (2:04-2:32), in which Black describes the days of the weekend individually. This interlude also contains examples of awkward mismatches of the music with the textual scansion.

Superiority Theory partially explains why Rebecca Black's "Friday" video has gone "viral" – a term that describes a sudden and rapid sharing of and consumption of media by viewers via the internet, spreading and multiplying in the manner of a virus. It probably also partially explains how Psy's "Gangnam Style" video skyrocketed in just over five months and became the first YouTube video to reach one billion views. However, Superiority Theory is only part of the explanation for "viral" videos of this type, and certainly further research on what makes a video viral is a ripe subject for future research.

One other way in which Superiority Theory may be applied to music may be exemplified by the previously shown example of Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G major, II. Whereas the surprise of the "Surprise" Symphony will have worn off after the first listening, it is interesting to note how those who are "in the know," still get a slightly sadistic pleasure out of watching other unwitting listeners hear the symphony for the first time. In fact, one might imagine that the composer and the original performers got much more enjoyment out of the audience's response to the surprise moment, than the audience did at the time. In turn, members of the audience at the premiere likewise may have found it humorous when future audiences were subject to the

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same trick that had drawn them in. For this reason, those who are "in the know" about the upcoming practical joke may have a slight feeling of superiority over the unsuspecting victims, evoking a different kind of humor response in them in future hearings.

Computational-Neural Theory

The computational-neural theory of humor, describes the way in which timing factors into the successful reception of a humor act. The theory states that when a joke is well-timed, the hearer’s brain will simultaneously perceive two opposing incongruous elements. The humorous response of the hearer is brought on by "a specific malfunction in the processing of information, conditioned by the necessity of a quick deletion from the consciousness of a false version." The humor is perceived when the brain realizes the incongruity and marks one version as incorrect and the other as correct. In verbal humor, jokes are often analyzed as comprising a setup and a punch line. The setup is used to provide key information about the situation and characters in the joke. There is usually a pause followed by a punch line, which normally provides some sort of incongruity that is perceived as humorous. The pause allows the brain to think of a logical response, which is then perceived simultaneously with the incongruous punch line.

Using an old standard joke as an example, this is a way in which the joke’s timing would likely fail to evoke a humor response: "Cows wear bells because their horns don't work." If the joke is presented in this way, it may still evoke some humor, because the hearer will understand that there is an incongruity between two possible definitions of "horns" in the sentence (either as

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a biological structure on the cow's head or as a musical instrument). A more successful presentation of this joke is: "Why do cows wear bells?" followed by a slight pause and then, "because their horns don't work." In this presentation, the hearer has a small amount of time, provided by the pause, in order to formulate a logical answer to the question, such as, "cows wear bells so the farmer can easily keep track of their locations in the field." However, when the punch line, "because their horns don't work" is heard at the same time that the brain is formulating the correct answer, the brain must consider both at the same time and choose which is correct, and a more robust humor response is likely.

According to Raskin's formula, experience (E) has a definite impact on humor. Although several of the elements of Raskin's formula, such as psychology (P), situation (SI), and society (SO), are combined together to set up an expectation, the expectations of musical outcomes are based on experience. Repeated exposure to certain musical formulas serve to solidify these expectations. Once experience has created an expectation, then this expectation can be perceived simultaneously with the actual experience of the incongruity in order to evoke a humor response explainable by the Computational-Neural Theory of humor.

In the case of Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G major, II (see Figure 2), a strong expectation for a pianissimo half-cadence is prepared. The harmonic and periodic structure expectation can be explained as a result of situation and society, through the experience of a variety of music in the Classical style period. However, on a much more immediate level, the audience hears an exact repetition of the same melodic material at a lower volume level. Therefore, even without knowledge of the musical style, a strong expectation is prepared for the entire eight measure phrase to be reiterated at the softer dynamic level. When the fortissimo note in m. 16 is played, an expected pianissimo note played only by the strings is mentally perceived.
at the same time that the incongruous *fortissimo* attack is heard. Therefore, a humor response in this passage may also be evoked by the simultaneous perception of the incongruous with that which would have been considered congruous.

**Darwinian Theory and Relief Theory**

In Darwinian Theory, laughter is considered to be a defense mechanism. It has been noted that laughing is accompanied by the baring of one's teeth, which is an aggressive posture.\(^{19}\)

Since assuming such an aggressive posture is a survival mechanism, it is logical to consider at least some aspect of humor as a biological mechanism. Interestingly, musical humor that taps into biological responses tends to create humor independent of stylistic expectations. Whereas they often achieve humor by way of surprise, which often does violate stylistic expectations, the surprise may also be equally powerful to someone that is unfamiliar with the music style.

The opening of the second movement of Haydn's Symphony no. 94 (see Figure 2), appropriately referred to as the "Surprise" Symphony, is an archetypical example of this type of humor. The opening contains a simple exercise of I and V\(^7\) arpeggios in C major. The simple rhythm, the slow tempo, and the *piano* dynamic, make mm. 1-8 seem to be a completely innocuous musical phrase. Even the *tenuto* markings on the quarter notes of the melody stunt any sense of forward motion in the piece by subtly disrupting the metric flow. The second phrase in mm. 9-16, begin as an even more benign varied repetition of the first phrase, with a *pianissimo* dynamic and *pizzicato* in all strings except for the first violins. In m. 16, where the repeated melody again arrives at a half cadence, there is an unexpected *fortissimo* G played by the full ensemble on beat 2, a particularly weak metrical position. Stylistically, this is certainly

\(^{19}\) Darwin, 202.
an unusual and incongruous choice. However, even for one that is not knowledgeable of the style, this dramatic event is quite unexpected as it is stark contrast to the preceding material.

After the body's tension is elevated because of the startling surprise, the body feels a sense of relief afterwards as the tension subsides. According to Relief Theory, "laughter is seen as a venting of nervous energy."20 In the Haydn example, it is likely that if a laughter response is evoked, that the event would be perceived as humorous in retrospect. However, laughter is not inextricably bound with humor and should not be mistaken as being synonymous, as will be further discussed in the next section.

Laughter and Humor

Laughter is inherently linked with humor, although it has been observed by the likes of Charles Darwin as well as Victor Raskin, that laughter does not always involve humor, nor does humor always involve laughter.

Darwin describes the link between humor and laughter, stating that, "The imagination is sometimes said to be tickled by a ludicrous idea; and this so-called tickling of the mind is curiously analogous with that of the body."21 Darwin goes on to describe how both humans and apes respond with laughter to being physically tickled. This physical tickling produces laughter that is not related to humor, but the concept of being tickled with an idea gets to the very heart of humor. Darwin describes ideas that may cause laughter as, "Something incongruous or


unaccountable, exciting surprise and some sense of superiority in the laughor, who must be in a happy frame of mind, seems to be the commonest cause."\textsuperscript{22}

According to Darwinian Theory, laughter is often used as a defense mechanism, such as in the case of nervous laughter. In this instance, laughter is used as a passive form of aggression directed towards a perceived threat. Darwin theorizes that this is why humans bare their teeth when laughing.

Wheelock uses Mozart's \textit{Musikalischer Spaß} ("Musical Joke") as an unmistakable example of musical humor, not only because its humor was so readily recognized to have been dubbed the "musical joke," but that the stylistic incongruities are composed in such a way that "it unfailingly provokes laughter."\textsuperscript{23}

Generally speaking laughter typically is associated with music in two different ways. It occurs when the audience recognizes the humor communicated by the composer or performer and responds to it with the intended and expected response. Another way in which laughter may arise as a result of listening to music is when the listener perceives the composition or the performance to be sufficiently poor as to laugh in ridicule of its ineptitude. Certainly this unintended evocation of laughter is potentially equally to or more powerful than an intended humor response. This type of laughter can be most closely associated with Superiority Theory in humor.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 198.

\textsuperscript{23} Wheelock, 8.
Analytical Approaches

A number of theorists and musicologists have suggested ways in which emotions may be transmitted through music. Sometimes these approaches are criticized for their subjectivity, since the results cannot be consistently replicated. This is certainly true, as a piece of music that makes one person feel happy, may make another person sad or angry. Even the same person can have variable responses to the same piece of music over time. Even though Raskin's formula objectively accounts for the various elements that play into the variable responses, such as psychology, experience, situation, and society, there is still no certain method for calculating or accurately predicting the size of an individual's humor response. There are simply far too many variables, many of which cannot be measured or even known, that would be required to definitively objectify such an equation.

Furthermore, since music scholars tend to avoid ascribing compositional intent in the absence of exceedingly clear evidence, the question of how the composer wanted the hearer to feel is often left unanswered. Therefore, the majority of the existing analyses of musical humor deal with composers whose humorous intent is well-documented, with a considerable amount centering on the music of Haydn. Of course, the existence of documented evidence of humorous intent is a reasonable place to begin such a study, and certainly some excellent work has been done in this area. However, the absence of documentation, or indeed the supposed absence of humorous intent by the composer, should not preclude music scholarship from considering how and why an audience may experience a humorous response to a piece of music, even if it is believed that the composer or performer did not intend for it to be humorous.

Regardless of the criticism that analyses of musical emotion and meaning sometimes receive, there has definitely been some significant work in the fields of music theory and musicology to consider how best to identify and interpret meaning in musical works. Presented
in this section are some of the analytical modes that are the most useful for identifying and analyzing elements of musical humor.

Semiotic analysis is one method that holds promise in interpreting musical humor. Umberto Eco's semiotic theory involves the encoding of information in the form of signs, which must be decoded by an interpretant to be understood. The very existence of humor in the abstract format of musical sounds suggest that the humor must be encoded into the music in some way in which the hearer is able to translate, on some level, the meaning of certain musical signs. Umberto Eco’s *Theory of Semiotics* describes how certain musical signs have been employed in such a way that they can be easily decoded by an interpretant to elicit a general concept, such as a feeling or mood, or a much more specific meaning, as in the case of an army trumpet signal.\(^\text{24}\) Although Eco specifically mentions musical sounds as signals, it was Eero Tarasti that founded the field of musical semiotics. Through the process of parsing the elements of a piece of music into semiotic segments, it is possible that certain signals could be found for musical humor. Of course, as with all semiotic analyses, the results would most likely be very specific to the piece, but it is also possible that certain generalizations could be made according to geographical region, time era, or specific composer.

Following from musical semiotics are the areas of musical topics, gestures, and tropes. This field of research has been pioneered by music theorists such as Kofi Agawu, Robert Hatten, Raymond Monelle, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Anthony Newcomb, Roland Barthes, and of course, Eero Tarasti. The study of musical topics, gestures, and tropes is another important way in which theorists can derive meaning from music and help develop an understanding of musical humor.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the humor of the music of "Weird Al" Yankovic will be explored in terms of compositional devices. In “Music-Engendered Laughter: An Analysis of Humor Devices in PDQ Bach,” David Huron identifies several musical humor devices.\textsuperscript{25} Certainly some of these categories also apply directly to the devices of musical humor employed by Yankovic. Some of the devices listed by Huron will be used directly, whereas others will be altered to show more directly how they apply to Yankovic’s music. Other devices that are more specific to Yankovic will be added to the list. Yankovic's musical humor devices will be illustrated through the use of numerous examples from his studio albums.

CHAPTER 3
ALFRED MATTHEW YANKOVIC

General Biography

"Weird Al" Yankovic is the most well-known musical parody artist of his generation. To date, Yankovic has sold over twelve million albums, more than any other comedy performer in history. "Weird Al" first came to national attention via the Dr. Demento Show, a nationally syndicated radio program that featured humorous songs. In 1979, right after The Knack released the hit single "My Sharona," Yankovic recorded the parody song "My Bologna" in the men’s restroom across the hall from the campus radio station where "Weird Al" got his nickname as a campus DJ. Yankovic chanced to meet The Knack after a show and introduced himself as the writer of "My Bologna," whereupon the lead singer Doug Fieger suggested to Capitol Records that the parody be released as a single.

Yankovic has had a series of ups and downs in his career. Since he seemed to some to be a "flash in the pan" gimmick artist, he has constantly had to prove himself to the general public. With a spell of good fortune through the 1980s, Yankovic received six Grammy nominations, winning two. However, in the 1990s Yankovic only received one Grammy nomination: in 1992 for Best Comedy Album with Off the Deep End. Most of the rest of the 1990s would see releases of compilation albums of Yankovic's previous successes. Not until 2003 would Yankovic again be recognized by the Grammy awards when he took home the Grammy for Best Comedy Album with Poodle Hat, an album that did not even achieve gold record status in terms of sales. Yankovic again enjoyed a wonderful success in 2006, with the release of the album Straight Outta Lynwood, which received two Grammy awards and found a place in the top ten albums on the Billboard Pop Albums Chart, entering at #10 and becoming Yankovic's first top ten album. After this unprecedented success, Yankovic held out from releasing another full-
length studio album too soon, although he and his band continued their incredibly active touring schedule in the following years. In 2009, Yankovic released an EP entitled *Internet Leaks*, with only five songs. Although the EP was nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Comedy Album, Yankovic was waiting for the opportune moment to release his next full-length album. When Lady Gaga entered the pop music scene, Yankovic knew that she was the right artist for him to parody to ensure that his next album would be a success. Yankovic's 2011 album *Alpocolypse* included the single "Perform this Way," which was a parody of Lady Gaga's "Born this Way." The album was also nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Comedy album and it became Yankovic's second top ten album, charting at #9.

**Genera of Humorous Songs**

Yankovic typically writes in three genera of songs: song parodies, style parodies, and polka medleys (See Appendix A for a complete breakdown of song categories and sub-categories). A song parody is defined as a parody of a pre-existing song – the musical accompaniment is maintained, although it may be rearranged or reorchestrated, while the lyrics are changed to something humorous. The parody lyrics may originate from a simple rhyme of the original lyrics such as in the song "My Bologna" (parody of "My Sharona"). At other times, the songs are referential to the original artist or song, such as "It's Still Billy Joel to Me" (parody of "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me" by Billy Joel) and "Achy Breaky Song" (a scathing parody of "Achy Breaky Heart" by Billy Ray Cyrus). However, sometimes the parody has little to do with the original song, such as the "The Brady Bunch" (parody of "The Safety Dance"), which only seems to be related to the original song in the syllable count of the title lyric.
A style parody differs in that it is not a direct parody of a pre-existing song, but rather a song that emulates the style of a certain band or genre. When emulating the sound of a certain band, Yankovic generally uses the same instrumentation, distribution of vocal parts, imitates the style and timbre of the vocalists, and emulates the form, harmonic and melodic structure, etc. in order to sound like something that could have been written and performed by the original band. The song "Mr. Popeil," a style parody of the B–52's, is a very clear example of this, with the distinctive inflection of the speak-singing male vocalist and the two shrill female vocalists. An example of a non-specific style parody is the song "Good Enough for Now," which is a song written in the style of a country love ballad.

In Yankovic's polka medleys he strings excerpts of several popular songs together in the style of a polka. In most cases, the tempo is much faster than the original recordings of the songs, and the instrumentation (with accordion as the lead instrument) and the arrangement (sometimes including alterations to the original melody) are significantly different. Most of the humor of these medleys stem from the utter incongruity of the polka performance style to that of the original recordings.

In each genus of songs, Yankovic uses a number of different devices to create musical humor. While certain devices may appear in any of these genera of songs, some devices are more prevalent in one than in the others.

Humor Devices

In "Music-Engendered Laughter: An Analysis of Humor Devices in PDQ Bach," David Huron identifies the following musical humor devices: incongruous sounds, mixed genres, drifting tonality, metric disruptions, implausible delays, excessive repetition, incompetence cues,
incongruous quotations, and misquotation. Yankovic can also be observed to use many of these same devices in his music, and I have identified the following additional musical humor devices in the music of Yankovic: musical/textual incongruities, exaggeration of stylistic elements, departure from stylistic elements, and rewriting cadences. These elements will be outlined in more detail below.

Certain styles of music are inextricably related to certain cultures in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and ideology. When the text of a song does not fit the expectations of the culture to which a certain style of music is attached, a humor response can be elicited through a musical/textual incongruity (MTI). An MTI is most likely to occur in a style parody, which reproduces as closely as possible the musical elements of a particular style or artist. When the musical elements of a particular style are perceived, any listener with enough knowledge of the style will immediately have certain expectations for the ideologies most typically associated with performers of that style. When the text does not reflect those ideologies, or indeed reflects the opposite, an MTI is the result.

Another device of musical humor that Yankovic employs is the exaggeration of stylistic elements (ESE). This involves overusing a stylistic device or increasing the magnitude or emphasis of a certain stylistic device beyond the norms of the style. This is most commonly employed in a style parody or an artist-referential or song-referential parody. In either case, a hearer that is knowledgeable of the style or artist will have certain expectations regarding musical structures and surface features. When the typical features of a style are exaggerated in a caricatural manner, an ESE will result.

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26 Huron, 700-704.
While Exaggeration of Stylistic Elements can be used as a device for musical humor, likewise a departure from stylistic elements (DSE) can be equally effective. These can also occur in a style parody or an artist-referential or song-referential parody, but can also occur in parodies that are neither artist-referential nor song-referential. Polka medleys also employ the departure from stylistic elements essentially throughout, since the primary incongruity of polka medleys is in the odd mixture of the polka style with rock and popular songs. Any time that the expected elements of an indicated style or omitted or elements that are foreign to the style are included, a DSE occurs.

Standing out as a significant subcategory of the Departure from Stylistic Elements, Yankovic often rewrites the final cadences of the song excerpts in his polka medleys in a way that is not consistent with the original song, specifically by ending with major-scale based polka-style clichés. Often these rewritten cadences make the excerpts tonally closed by using a typical melodic motion from dominant to tonic. They often feel inappropriate when the original version of the song excerpt does not end in a traditionally conclusive manner. The unresolved phrase endings used in popular music presumably lend to a general feeling of angst and dramatic weight, but the alteration of these phrase endings to give them tonal closure, often with perfect authentic cadences, thwarts this expectation.

The following sections will illustrate through specific examples how Yankovic specifically employs these four different musical humor devices while also noting where Huron's classifications occur.
Musical/Textual Incongruity

On Yankovic's first album, he uses MTI in the song "Buckingham Blues," which as the title implies, is in a blues style (though not in the typical 12-bar form). Blues music is a style of African-American origin that is primarily used to express feelings of sadness. Yankovic's lyrics about Prince Charles and Lady Diana in the song "Buckingham Blues" (1:24) sarcastically relates the life of royalty, a completely different socioeconomic environment than a typical blues would choose as its subject matter:

"Bein' heir to the throne, well it must be awful hard

Gotta pose for pictures out on the front yard

And Lady Di, well she must have it pretty rough

Gotta hang around the house all day makin' babies and stuff."  

"White and Nerdy" is another song in which Yankovic utilizes MTI. This song is a parody of the rap song "Ridin'" by Chamillionaire, which glorifies the lifestyle of a rebellious young African-American. Yankovic's parody lyrics, on the other hand, glorify the lifestyle of a nerdy white person while retaining the same musical accompaniment and performance style. The song makes reference to a number of things that nerds enjoy, such as computer programming, Dungeons and Dragons games, and Star Trek, and make slight references to how the narrator falls short of the sort of lifestyle that rap often depicts with lines such, "My rims never spin, to the contrary. You'll find that they're quite stationary."

The song "Buy Me a Condo" exemplifies the use of MTI where a stark difference in ideologies is concerned. This original Yankovic song is written and performed in the reggae style of Bob Marley (who is referenced in the text of the song), while the lyrics, which glorify

the acquisition of wealth in Western culture, are completely at odds with the philosophy of the
Rastafarian movement, which is inextricably bound with the reggae style. The following lyrics
from "Buy Me a Condo" (0:17) describe a typical "yuppie" lifestyle, a decidedly non-Rastafarian
way of life:

"Gonna buy me a condo.
Gonna buy me a Cuisinart.
Get de wall-to-wall carpeting.
Get de wallet full o' credit cards."

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The song "Drivin' a Truck" is a style parody of country and western music, most
particularly of the country musician W. C. McCall, who composed a number of truck driving
songs, which he sings with a deep low-pitched voice. Yankovic's "Truck Drivin' Song" is in a
typical classic country and western style. Country and western music often emphasizes
traditional views of masculinity; however, Yankovic's style parody contains drastic MTIs when
he describes himself driving a truck wearing high heels, pink angora sweater, lipstick, mascara,
panties, feather boas, and other items that are traditionally worn by females.

"I'm drivin' a truck. Drivin' a big 'ol truck.
Pedal to the metal, hope I don't run out of luck.
Rollin' down the highway until the break of dawn.
Drivin' a truck with my high heels on."

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Exaggeration of Stylistic Elements

Yankovic uses ESE in the song "Smells like Nirvana" an artist-referential song parody of Nirvana's "Smells like Teen Spirit." The song lyrics poke fun at Nirvana’s vocal style for being too difficult to understand. Yankovic uses ESE by screaming certain parts in a way that makes them difficult to understand. He also exaggerates the mumbled singing style with nonsense words in the line, "It's hard to bargle nawdle zouss with all these marbles in my mouth."

Another example of an ESE is in the style parody "Generic Blues," which employs many of the standard elements of blues music. While there are many ESE examples in this song, the most blatant is in the guitar solo, in which the last eight measures consist entirely of two-notes moving back and forth. While it is stylistically acceptable in blues music to use a considerable amount of repetition of melodic figures, this repetition of two notes throughout eight measures of a twelve-measure solo is well beyond the norms of the style (see Figure 7). In addition to being an ESE, this also qualifies as "excessive repetition," by Huron's categorization.

![Figure 7 – Measures 5-12 of the guitar solo in “Generic Blues” (3:14)](image-url)


In the polka medley entitled "Polka Power," Yankovic uses an ESE in his rendition of Third Eye Blind's "Semi-Charmed Life." The original song is known for its distinct melodic Major tenth leap at the end of the refrain. In the original key of C, the melodic leap is from the sounding pitch G₃ to B₄ on the word "goodbye." The high note B₄ is slightly shrill in tone – this timbre is further emphasized by the abrupt change of vocal register. Yankovic's version (see Figure 8) is performed a Major second higher in the key of D Major, meaning that this distinctive leap is between the notes A₃ and C#₄. Although the choice of key is more likely a result of avoiding key changes in the polka medley, the result is an even more extreme upper range for the song. Yankovic exaggerates the high note by singing it with a shriller vocal timbre. This extreme high note is comically reinforced with the sound of shattering glass, presumably as a result of the note's harsh, shrill timbre.

Figure 8 – "Semi-Charmed Life" from Yankovic's "Polka Power" (2:45)

Another ESE occurs in Yankovic's song fragment "Let Me Be Your Hog," which is in a hard rock style. In hard rock, it is not uncommon to have lyric repetition, and for the object of the singer's affection to be referred to as "baby." Screaming vocal timbres are also common in this style of music. Yankovic exaggerates both of these elements in "Let Me Be Your Hog" as shown in Figure 9. The word "baby" is sung or screamed twelve times in a row, before the song fragment abruptly ends with the sound of a record needle being disengaged. The screaming tone of "baby," the last eight times, is extremely shrill and pushed through the falsetto register, which

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makes the vocal timbre sound more exaggerated than the chest voice screaming timbre that is
more typical of hard rock.

![Musical notation]

Figure 9 – Yankovic, "Let Me Be Your Hog" (0:09)

Departure from Stylistic Elements

In the song parodies on all of his albums (except for his first album), Yankovic and his
band generally go to great lengths to sound as close to original song as possible, even down to
using the same guitar pedals and synthesized sounds. Therefore, virtually any musical change
from the original recording is a purposeful DSE.

While most of Yankovic's song parodies and style parodies employ the same
instrumentation as the original song or style, Yankovic often completely changes the
instrumentation of the songs that he excerpts in his polka medleys. While the original songs may
have been driven by electric guitars, the polka versions are driven by the accordion, along with
tuba, clarinets, muted trumpets, and a drumset playing a repeated bass-snare pattern throughout
most of the medleys. Yankovic also uses sound effects in a number of songs to emphasize
certain lyrics (Huron refers to this as "incongruous sounds").

Although the accordion has been a prominent instrument in Europe as well as in North
and South America, in popular culture of the United States, the accordion has come to be
denigrated and berated as a noisy, unpleasant sounding instrument that is only used for the

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36 Alfred Yankovic, "Let Me Be Your Hog." "Weird Al" Yankovic UHF/Original Motion Picture Soundtrack and
campiest of music. Yankovic's biographer Nathan Rabin aptly describes it thusly: "If the electric
guitar is the ultimate rock-and-roll babe magnet, the accordion is its antithesis." Yankovic,
who has been playing the accordion since he was a child, is a master at the instrument, and uses
it to its full potential to thwart the conventions of popular styles of music.

Another noteworthy example of a DSE brought on by an incongruous instrumentation is
in the song "This is the Life," which is in a Tin Pan Alley style, using a tinny piano sound,
clarinets, and muted trumpets along with a shuffle rhythm with swing eighth notes and
occasionally reference ragtime music with syncopated straight eight note passages. Immediately
following a clarinet and trumpet duet, a distortion electric guitar suddenly takes over with the
solo shown in Figure 10. This DSE follows the expectation that humor from incongruity retains
some congruous elements. The tempo and the accompaniment from the rhythm section remains
the same during this solo, and the pattern of chord changes has been heard previously in the
song. Also, the syncopated pattern of three eighth notes (D, B, A) heard at the beginning of the
guitar solo is a standard ragtime pattern. In the second measure, this sense of ragtime is thwarted
with the F-natural, a "blue" third, which denies the previous ragtime feel and replaces it with a
rock-blues feel. The rapid triplet figures in the third and fourth measures are entirely composed
of the notes of the D blues scale.

![Figure 10 – Guitar solo from "This is the Life" (1:08)](image)


38 Yankovic, "This is the Life," *Dare to Be Stupid*, New York: Volcano Entertainment, 1985.
In addition to changes of instrumentation, Yankovic also departs from the stylistic elements of the original songs in terms of tempo, which is generally much faster in his polka medleys than in the original. Therefore, Yankovic will often take slow tender songs and turn them into absurd fast tempo polkas.

Yankovic will also remove stylistic flavoring from songs in his polka medleys by "straightening" syncopated rhythms, or by altering pitches in blues or minor melodies to convert them to major. Figure 11 below shows the refrain of Rihanna’s "Pon de Replay" originally in F# minor followed by Yankovic's version of it from the medley "Polkarama!" in which he performs it in E major and eliminates the melisma on the first "Mister."

![Figure 11 – Refrain from "Pon de Replay." Original Rihanna version (1:17) above, Yankovic version from "Polkarama!" (3:10) below.]

In all genera of Yankovic's songs he often sings with a slightly exaggerated tone, occasionally squeaking at the ends of words and phrases. This is sometimes used even when he is intentionally mimicking the sound of the original recording artist's voice. In other cases, Yankovic intentionally departs from the original vocal style, sometimes purpose achieving the completely opposite effect with his vocal timbre.

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The strongest example of this technique may be heard in the song "Girls Just Want to Have Lunch," a parody of the Cyndi Lauper song "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." The original song, which had a very feminine theme, featured Cyndi Lauper singing in her characteristic high and shrill voice. In Yankovic's version, he purposely sings gruffly in a lower register, amidst the unpleasant sounds of food ingestion and digestion.

Figure 12 – "What's Love Got to Do with It" chorus excerpt. Tina Turner version (0:53) above, Yankovic version from "Hooked on Polkas" (1:29) below.

Another example of this is Yankovic's version of "What's Love Got to Do with It," by Tina Turner (see Figure 12). In contrast with Tina Turner's soulful rendition, Yankovic sings in a dark, gruff tone. This is accompanied with other DSEs such as the much faster tempo (which is typical of his polka medleys) and the very blocky rhythms, which eliminate the syncopation found the original version.

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Rewriting Cadences

Rewriting cadences is a device that Yankovic uses exclusively in his polka medleys, primarily for two reasons. First, by definition, for the cadences to be rewritten, they must be altered from preexisting tune, so this immediately eliminates any original works, including style parodies. Second, Yankovic generally strives to recreate the sound of the original recording as closely as possible in the case of song parodies, but in the polka medleys, Yankovic allows himself great leeway in altering musical elements to recreate them in polka style.

In fact, much of popular music does not cadence in the traditional sense. Although there are often moments of relative repose at the end of vocal phrases, the actual length of formal phrases is often arrived at through the regular periodicity rather than harmonic repose. Of course, there is a wide variety of different types of popular music and likewise there are numerous ways in which formal phrase structure can be outlined by the musical surface features. The usual lack of harmonic repose in certain styles of popular music lends to a feeling of seriousness and earnestness about the text, which is being expressed. However, in Yankovic's polka medleys, the lack of clear harmonic repose at the ends of phrases is replaced with the much "campier" option of ending phrases with very conclusive harmonic cadences, often Perfect Authentic Cadences.

Yankovic's rewritten final cadence for the Foo Fighter's "I'll Stick Around" in his polka medley "The Alternative Polka" is a clear example of a cadence that is rewritten from a repetitive rock/blues between tonic and subtonic to a traditional major scale based motion from dominant to tonic (see Figure 13). The lyrics, which are as much shouted as sung, are filled with bitterness and resentment, for which the unresolved nature of the harmony is a fitting match. However, Yankovic’s version ends with a very conclusive Perfect Authentic Cadence. The dramatic
weight of the four statements of this two-measure unit is lost as the harmony in Yankovic's
version relents and returns home to tonic.

\[\text{Figure 13 – Excerpt from "I'll Stick Around." Original Foo Fighters version (1:31)
above,}^{43}\text{ Yankovic version from "The Alternative Polka" (3:18) below.}^{44}\]

Another example of a rewritten cadence is System of a Down's song "Chop Suey!" (see
Figure 14). Although it is not always the case with Yankovic's polka medleys, this song is
presented by Yankovic in the same key as the original recording. Yankovic's chords are slightly
simplified, most likely in order to keep a polka style bass line, which ordinarily leaps back and
forth between the root and fifth of the chord. There are also some slight differences in the notes
of the back-up vocals, which may have been altered for practical reasons, or were simply copied
imprecisely. The replacement of the quarter note vocal attacks in mm. 2-4 and 7-8 of the
original version with long notes, is most likely a practical concern brought on by the incredibly
fast tempo of Yankovic's version. Regardless of these differences, the most striking digression
that Yankovic makes from the original tune is the outlandish final cadence that he appends to the

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phrase. In the original System of a Down recording, the phrase ends with a long high G, in a shouting timbre. Yankovic, on the other hand, ends the phrase with a simple outlining of a G major triad with an added 6th, repeating the word "die" in a rapid and jocular manner. Whereas the original song ends this phrase on a conclusive tonic G minor chord, Yankovic's version suddenly ends the phrase with a Perfect Authentic Cadence in G major, a stark incongruity with the dramatic weight of the phrase "I cry when angels deserve to die."

Figure 14 – Excerpt from "Chop Suey!" System of a Down's original version above (1:09). Yankovic's version from "Angry White Boy Polka" (1:05) below.

Eddie Murphy's original recording of the song "Party All the Time," is in the key of C# minor. The text Murphy's song reflects the feelings of longing and betrayal that the singer feels about the girl he loves because although he shows his love in many ways, she still chooses to party every night, flirting with other men. The minor key reflects this sad mood, and the end of the phrase in the eighth measure of the example ends on tonic, but the motion from G#m to C#m, in other words v to i, is not very conclusive in the traditional sense because of the lack of a leading tone (see Figure 15).

Yankovic's version has several notable differences. There is an incongruous sound in m. 4 with the party whistle. Whereas the sound of the party whistle has an inherent connection to the text of the song, it is unlikely that this sort of sound would be heard at the type of party described in the text of this song. The vocal harmonies in Yankovic's version are thicker, with three parts instead of two. This does not immediately create musical humor, but it does set up the fuller harmony for the cadence in mm. 7-8 of the Yankovic example, in which the phrase not only ends with a Perfect Authentic Cadence, but it actually ends in G major instead of G minor. The extension in the tenth measure only serves to reinforce the carefree frivolousness in the tone of Yankovic's version, which is completely incongruous with the text, therefore also involving an MTI.

![Musical notation of Yankovic's version](image1)

Figure 15 – "Party All the Time" chorus excerpt. Eddie Murphy's above (1:19). Yankovic's version from "Polka Party!" below (1:09).

Another example of an incredibly absurd rewritten cadence, is Yankovic's version of the Jimi Hendrix song, "Hey, Joe" (see Figure 16). The song's text, which is about Joe's plans to commit homicide as revenge for his wife's infidelity, is presented at the very slow metronome


marking of 88 beats per minute in the original Hendrix recording. Although the song uses major chords, the chain of plagal motions – C-G-D-A-E, or bVI-bIII-bVII-IV-I, leave the music circling around until a tonic is found, which is only evidenced by the longer duration of the E harmonies and the placement at the ends of the four-measure phrases.

Figure 16 – Refrain from "Hey Joe." Jimi Hendrix (0:42) above; Yankovic version from "Polkas on 45" (1:58) below.\(^{49}\)

The Yankovic version contains several significant differences. First of all, the tempo is nearly double that of the original version, at breakneck pace of 160 beats per minute. The rhythm of the vocal melody is simplified, which is likely partly because of the much faster tempo, but also trivializes the text, which is presented in a more natural speech pattern in the Hendrix version, rather than being driven solely by the song's meter. Forcing the text into the strict rhythm of Yankovic's version robs it of its somber mood. Yankovic's shouted and spoken lines also take the listener out of the supposed mood of seriousness, and the comical gunshot sound effect is an incongruous sound, for although it fits the literal meaning of the text, it is out of place in a stylistic sense in this song. Additionally the chain of plagal motions has been removed and replaced with a much more basic V-IV-I motion. Although the plagal motion from

\(^{49}\) Billy Roberts, "Hey Joe," The Jimi Hendrix Experience (Musical group), Polydor, 1966.

IV-I is retained, the harmonic direction is more clearly goal-oriented to F. In m. 10 of Yankovic's version, the order of the chords are reversed so that instead of V leading to IV, the chords proceed from IV to V to I, implying a clear pre-dominant to dominant to tonic motion, and ending with an imperfect authentic cadence. Where the plagal meandering of the original song reflects Joe's struggle with his homicidal rage, the much more conclusive cadence at the end of Yankovic's version completely thwarts this with its stable harmonic repose.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

Although few humorous musicians have come close to the enormous success that "Weird Al" Yankovic has had in recomposing popular music, there will always be comedians ready to create parodies of all sorts for as long as popular music exists. Since the humor devices detailed in Chapter 3 are by no means exclusively used by Yankovic, the classification of these devices of musical humor will hopefully prove useful in further comparative research of the composition styles of various other humorous musicians. However, I also hope that this paper has elucidated the unique way in which Yankovic utilizes these devices of musical humor in his songs.

This dissertation has advocated foremost for the application of various existing theories of humor from psychological, sociological, practical, music analytical, and music composition perspectives. In order to continue the work of the research present here, there are several different necessary avenues, which will be described in the following paragraphs.

There is a need for subject testing with large and diverse groups to gauge the variety of personal reactions that different people have to various musical humor stimuli. In addition to drawing conclusions based on statistical and demographic data, it is important to collect specific verbal responses from subjects, explaining exactly how and why they believe that a certain music stimulus is humorous. Although such self-reporting will not always be able to entirely reflect the underlying causes of a subject's humor response, collecting a wide variety of self-reported responses is likely to uncover certain trends that can be the basis for future exploration into the subject of musical humor.

Another curious element in musical humor as well as humor in general is the ability of an example of humor to be re-experienced and retain its humor value, or at least to retain its ability to evoke some sort humor response. According to the computation-neural theory of humor, the
incongruous must be simultaneously experienced with that which would have been perceived as congruous. On repeat experiences, the anticipation of the known incongruity negates the possibility for this simultaneous perception of the expected congruity with the actually occurring incongruity. Therefore, it would seem that the computational-neural theory is only part of the explanation as to why a joke can get "old" and lose some or all of its value to evoke a humor response, or perhaps the one experiencing the repeated humor response is experiencing the memory of the original response, or responding in a different way. In either case, it is certainly an area that could benefit from further consideration.

In the section on Superiority Theory, I suggest that the incredible "viral" popularity of such YouTube videos such as Rebecca Black's "Friday" and Psy's "Gangnam Style" are in part related to the natural tendency to laugh at something that is considered inferior. There is still much research to be done on how a song or video becomes "viral" and in what way humor contributes to its popularity. Superiority Theory only partially explains why these two songs are so ripe for relentless lampooning; there are certainly many other factors that contribute to the incredible popularity of such songs that are thoroughly enjoyed by the public, although not taken particularly seriously. However, it is because of the extreme popularity of these songs that they should absolutely be taken seriously. With the amazing power of mass media, a "viral" video has incredible potential to great good or great harm. In the case of free file sharing services such as YouTube, the playing field, although not entirely level, is level enough to allow previous unknowns such as Rebecca Black and Justin Bieber to skyrocket in popularity with videos that were produced on a shoe-string budget, particularly in comparison to the content produced by the large recording studios. While it is unknown whether one could ever formally systemize a fully reliable method of making a video go "viral," it is important to reflect on what elements are
common among the ones that have, what role humor plays in this, and to consider the effect that a "viral" video has on individuals as well as the population as a whole.

There are, additionally, a number of new types of musical humor that have only become possible through the use of modern technology. Auto-Tune technology has made it possible for computer users to remap the frequencies of recorded sound to specific scales or modes. Therefore, it is possible to take a commercial song recording and alter it by computer so that a song in a major key can be changed to minor, or a song in a minor key can be changed to major. Whereas it has always been possible for a musician to perform an existing song in a different mode, it is now possible to take a recording that is embedded in the public consciousness, and alter it in this manner. This dissertation has already explored how change of mode is an incongruity that evoke musical humor, but this new level of altering existing recordings in this way, is worthy of further research. Another Auto-Tuning method of musical humor involves taking recordings of spoken words and Auto-Tuning the words and syllables to conform to the contour of a newly composed melody. In addition to several websites making musical versions of newscasts and speeches by the President, the Public Broadcasting System has produced several music videos using spoken clips from Reading Rainbow, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, and The Joy of Painting.

Musical mash-ups are another avenue of musical humor that merits future research. Mash-ups involve the use of multiple recordings of different songs that are manipulated by computer and often fragmented and reassembled into new musical wholes. Whereas musical pastiche has been in existence for some time, it again comes down to the existence of specific recordings of songs in the collective consciousness. To hear exact copies of musical sounds from known recordings is inherently more symbolic than merely recreating a musical motive on
an acoustic musical instrument. This type of musical pastiche certainly transcends previous historical examples of pastiche and is worthy of further consideration. Although many of the general theories of humor seem to apply universally to music of the past and present, there is a need to understand what effect that modern technology can have upon these humor theories.

This dissertation has made a close examination of how and why humor works particular in the music of Yankovic, but humor exists in such wide variety, there is still much work to do in order to understand how and why humor works in numerous other contexts. It is important for the enormous corpus of existing humorous musical material to be studied in greater detail so that the academic community can have a clearer picture of what musical humor is and how it can be best understood. This dissertation serves the purpose of analyzing a successful and currently active musical humorist – as it is important for humor to be understood in the context of the society from which it originates, there is no time better than the present to gain the proper perspective for understanding and analyzing new musical humor. It is also important to gain a thorough understanding of current trends in musical humor in order to form a basis from which to understand what new forms of musical humor that technology and the ever-changing global societies will produce.
REFERENCES


"This is the Life," Dare to Be Stupid. New York: Volcano Entertainment, 1985.


APPENDIX A

Genera of Songs by Yankovic

• **Song Parody** – original lyrics written for a pre-existing song.
  Artist-referential Song Parody (A song parody in which the lyrics refer to the artist that composed or performed it).

  Song-referential Song Parody (A song parody in which the lyrics refer to the original song).

  Syllabic-based Song Parody (A song parody in which the lyrics are unrelated to the original song except in that the syllable count of the hook is appropriate for the parody lyrics).

• **Style Parody** – original song composed in the style of a specific artist or genre.
  Artist-specific Style Parody (original song composed in the style of a specific artist).

  Song-Specific Style Parody (original song composed in the style of a specific song).

  Nonspecific Style Parodies (A style parody that emulates a particular genre but not any artist in particular).

• **Polka Cover Version** – a popular song that is arranged and performed as a polka.
  Medleys – a medley of song excerpts arranged and performed as a polka.

• **Original Songs** – original humorous songs by Yankovic that don’t specifically emulate a specific artist, style, or genre.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Album Title</th>
<th>Year of Release</th>
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<td>&quot;Weird Al&quot; Yankovic in 3-D</td>
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<td>Dare to Be Stupid</td>
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<td>UHF - Original Motion Picture Soundtrack and Other Stuff</td>
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# APPENDIX C

**Songs Included in Polkas by "Weird Al" Yankovic**

"Polkas on 45" (*In 3-D*, 1983)

- "Jocko Homo" by Devo
- "Smoke on the Water" by Deep Purple
- "Sex (I'm A...)") by Berlin
- "Hey Jude" by The Beatles
- "L.A. Woman" by The Doors
- "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" by Iron Butterfly
- "Hey Joe" by Jimi Hendrix
- "Burning Down the House" by Talking Heads
- "Hot Blooded" by Foreigner
- "Every Breath You Take" by The Police
- "Should I Stay or Should I Go" by The Clash
- "Jumpin' Jack Flash" by The Rolling Stones
- "My Generation" by The Who

"Hooked on Polkas" (*Dare to Be Stupid*, 1985)

- "12th Street Rag" by Euday L. Bowman
- "State of Shock" by The Jacksons with Mick Jagger
- "Sharp Dressed Man" by ZZ Top
- "What's Love Got to Do With It?" by Tina Turner
- "Method of Modern Love" by Hall & Oates
- "Owner of a Lonely Heart" by Yes
- "We're Not Gonna Take It" by Twisted Sister
- "99 Luftbaloons" by Nena
- "Footloose" by Kenny Loggins
- "The Reflex" by Duran Duran
- "Metal Health (Bang Your Head)" by Quiet Riot
- "Relax" by Frankie Goes To Hollywood

"Polka Party!!" (*Polka Party!!*, 1986)

- "Sledgehammer" by Peter Gabriel
- "Sussudio" by Phil Collins
- "Party All the Time" by Eddie Murphy
- "Say You, Say Me" by Lionel Richie
- "Freeway of Love" by Aretha Franklin
- "What You Need" by INXS
- "Harlem Shuffle" by The Rolling Stones
- "Venus" by Shocking Blue
- "Nasty" by Janet Jackson
- "Rock Me Amadeus" by Falco
- "Shout" by Tears for Fears
- "Papa Don't Preach" by Madonna
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<th>&quot;The Hot Rocks Polka&quot; <em>(UHF, 1989)</em></th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;It's Only Rock 'n Roll (But I Like It)&quot; by Rolling Stones</td>
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<td>&quot;Under My Thumb&quot; by Rolling Stones</td>
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<td>&quot;(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction&quot; by Rolling Stones</td>
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<td>&quot;Cradle of Love&quot; by Billy Idol</td>
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<td>&quot;Love Shack&quot; by The B-52's</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Bohemian Rhapsody&quot; by Queen</td>
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"Loser" by Beck
"Sex Type Thing" by Stone Temple Pilots
"All I Want to Do" by Sheryl Crow
"Closer" by Nine Inch Nails
"Bang and Blame" by REM
"You Oughta Know" by Alanis Morissette
"Bullet with Butterfly Wings" by Smashing Pumpkins
"My Friends" by Red Hot Chili Peppers
"I'll Stick Around" by Foo Fighters
"Black Hole Sun" by Soundgarden
"Basket Case" by Green Day

"Polka Power!" (*Running with Scissors*, 1999)

"Wannabe" by the Spice Girls
"Flagpole Sitta" by Harvey Danger
"Ghetto Supastar (That Is What You Are)" by Pras
"Everybody (Backstreet's Back)" by the Backstreet Boys
"'Walkin' on the Sun" by Smash Mouth
"Intergalactic" by the Beastie Boys
"Tubthumping" by Chumbawamba
"Ray of Light" by Madonna
"Push" by Matchbox Twenty
"Semi-Charmed Life" by Third Eye Blind
"The Dope Show" by Marilyn Manson
"MMMBop" by Hanson
"Sex and Candy" by Marcy Playground
"Closing Time" by Semisonic
"W.A.Y. Moby Polka" by "Weird Al" Yankovic


"Last Resort" by Papa Roach
"Chop Suey!" by System of a Down
"Get Free" by The Vines
"Hate To Say I Told You So" by The Hives
"Fell in Love with a Girl" by The White Stripes
"Last Nite" by The Strokes
"Down with the Sickness" by Disturbed
"Renegades of Funk" by Rage Against the Machine
"My Way" by Limp Bizkit
"Outside" by Staind
"Bawitdaba" by Kid Rock
"Youth of the Nation" by P.O.D.
"The Real Slim Shady" by Eminem
"Polkarama!" *(Straight Outta Lynwood, 2006)*

"The Chicken Dance" by Werner Thomas,
"Let's Get It Started" by The Black Eyed Peas,
"Take Me Out" by Franz Ferdinand,
"Beverly Hills" by Weezer,
"Speed of Sound" by Coldplay,
"Float On" by Modest Mouse,
"Feel Good Inc." by Gorillaz,
"Don't Cha" by The Pussycat Dolls,
"Somebody Told Me" by The Killers,
"Slither" by Velvet Revolver,
"Candy Shop" by 50 Cent,
"Drop It Like It's Hot" by Snoop Dogg,
"Pon de Replay" by Rihanna,
"Gold Digger" by Kanye West, and
"The Nina Bobina Polka" by "Weird Al" Yankovic

"Polka Face" *(Alpocalypse, 2010)*

"Poker Face" by Lady Gaga
"Womanizer" by Britney Spears
"Right Round" by Flo Rida
"Day 'n' Nite" by Kid Cudi
"Need You Now" by Lady Antebellum
"Baby" by Justin Bieber
"So What" by Pink
"I Kissed a Girl" by Katy Perry
"Fireflies" by Owl City
"Blame It" by Jamie Foxx
"Replay" by Iyaz
"Down" by Jay Sean
"Break Your Heart" by Taio Cruz
"Tik Tok" by Ke$ha
VITA

Samuel Stokes received his Bachelor of Music in Jazz-Commercial Music and Master of Arts in Music Theory and Composition from the University of Central Missouri in 2002 and 2005, respectively. He also holds a Master of Music degree in Music Theory from The Florida State University, 2006.

Stokes has composed several musicals including Dracula, which was performed by the Central Missouri Repertory Company in 2003 and subsequently became the subject of his Master's thesis. He also composed A Tale of Two Heroes, a children's musical, which won the Playwriting for Young Audiences Competition at the University of Central Missouri and was produced as part of the Performing Arts Series in 2005.

Stokes has also composed a number of humorous songs. His songs "Jolly Old St. Nicholas – Change Your Ways!," "Hoopy Frood," "You Talk Entirely Far Too Much," "Ode to Spot," "Binders Full of Women," "I Have a Bad Feeling About This," and "Here We Come A-Wassailing (The American Edition)," have all been played on The Dr. Demento Show. Stokes' humorous songs have also been played on A-Log on the Airwaves, Ben's Wacky Radio, I Still Get Demented, and Mad Music.