

## Humor in Music

Frank Zappa once asked, via album title, “Does humor belong in music?” The iconoclastic musician surely believed this was a rhetorical question, to be answered with an emphatic “YES!” After all, pop music and comedy have coexisted for centuries, for as long as there has been a so-called “popular music.” Zappa’s potty-mouthed provocations, Weird Al Yankovic’s fun-loving parodies, and Blowfly’s X-rated proto-rap songs have continued a tradition that goes back centuries.

From this vantage point, there is definitely room for humor in music. However, “serious” or avant-garde music is another story, a place that appears to be an inhospitable environment for cultivating laughter (with the notable exception of classical music court jester P.D.Q. Bach). If we follow this stereotype, we should assume that an aficionado’s answer to Zappa’s query would be a resounding and condescending “no.” However, this compilation demonstrates that it is a false assumption, illustrating through numerous examples that the sound of (art) music can be quite funny.

Ever since Sigmund Freud published *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the study of humor has largely been confined to psychology. Scholars of music and media have rarely broached this subject, though other disciplines, such as philosophy, have tried. Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that one could write a serious philosophical work composed of nothing but jokes—because jokes magnify the fundamental paradoxes that constitute our language and logic systems. Murray S. Davis explains in his book *What’s So Funny?* that Wittgenstein’s “Viennese contemporary Freud also thought jokes, like dreams, use methods of inference that are rejected by logic.”<sup>1</sup>

In the same way that a joke (conveyed with words) can disrupt the linguistic systems that structure our daily lives, musical jokes (like the ones found on this compact disc) work similarly. A song may sound “funny”—both funny *ha ha*, and funny *strange*—when it disrupts expected tempos, mixes musical genres, uses excessive repetition, abruptly shifts keys, delays an anticipated resolution, and so on.

Before Freud or Wittgenstein, in the late eighteenth century, Kant wrote in his *Critique of Judgment* that, “Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”<sup>2</sup> Kant argued that incongruous ideas, words, or sounds provoke laughter, though he didn’t follow up on this line of thought in any sustained way. From Kant’s kernel of wisdom emerged “incongruity theory,” which explains humor as reaction stemming from the surprise of the unexpected.<sup>3</sup> It has dominated theories of humor in cognitive psychology, as have relief theory and superiority theory. Relief theory assumes that the release of laughter stems from the need to reduce physiological tension, resulting in the release of nervous energy. Superiority theory, on the other hand, is much older than modern psychology, and it frames humor as primarily having an emotional function.

As Plato and Aristotle argued, something later expanded upon by Thomas Hobbes, people feel a humorous release by ridiculing someone they see as lesser or who deviates from social norms.<sup>4</sup> Superiority theory might be applied to explain people's reaction to what they consider "bad" music—unintentionally funny music that prompts laughter, even though the original composer or performer did not intend that reaction. Take, for instance, *War to End All Wars*, a 2000 album by Swedish guitar virtuoso Yngwie J. Malmsteen. "Prophet of Doom," the album's first song, opens with a blast of rumbling double bass drums and a caterwauling guitars firing off rocket-fueled solos that just sound, well, *funny*, at least for someone who doesn't fetish high-speed heavy metal fretwork.

"Prophet of doom/ the end is coming soon," go the goofily growled lyrics—which are echoed by the exclamation, "Of Doom! Of Doom! Of Doom!" It's an absurd song, as is "Arpeggios From Hell," an instrumental that is *truly filled with arpeggios from hell*. The five minute and thirty second track is stuffed with as much ludicrous virtuoso gobbledygook as the combined discographies of prog-rock pioneers Yes, Genesis, and Emerson, Lake, & Palmer. All in less than six minutes. Because Malmsteen is the perennial butt of jokes in the worldwide music community, perhaps superiority theory has a ring of truth. However, I don't really buy that explanation. To me, the source of amusement can be found in the Swede's incongruous melding of classical music techniques, heavy metal thunder, surreally speedy guitar riffing, and utter seriousness—as if he were carrying the weight of the world on his guitar strap.

Music that doesn't try to be funny, but is, often produces its humor through the unexpected juxtaposition of genres. Take William Shatner, a classic example. In an utterly earnest move at the time, Shatner attempted to capitalize on the popularity of *Star Trek* by releasing his first full-length LP, 1968's *Transformed Man*. A head-scratching tour de force, it consisted of Shakespearian monologues mixed with dramatic readings of then-current pop hits like The Beatles' "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" and Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" (the latter of which ended with Shatner screaming in an echo chamber "MR. TAMBOURINE MAN!!!"). This mixture of high and low popular culture—combined with his completely sincere, melodramatic takes on frivolous pop songs like "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds"—still baffles today (as does his rendition of Elton John's "Rocket Man" performed by three chroma-keyed Shatners at the 1978 Sci-Fi Film Awards).

For our purposes—studying sound—the most useful perspective I have found is incongruity theory. Media psychologists Buijzen and Valkenburg explain that, according to this theory, "it is the violation of an expected pattern that provokes humor in the mind of the receiver."<sup>5</sup> Instead of locating the function of laughter in the physiological (relief theory) or emotional (superiority theory), incongruity theory emphasizes cognition. Buijzen and Valkenburg explain that experiencing humor requires the ability to recognize and process improbable sounds or out-of-place acts. They write, "Absurdity, nonsense, and surprise are vital themes in humor covered by this theory."<sup>6</sup> Or, as Murray S. Davis puts it, humor's epicenter can be located in an "*incongruous* element that shatters an expectation system into nothing."<sup>7</sup>

Because music is constituted by a system, or several systems, we can apply similar lessons about language, logic, and humor to the realm of sound art. Paul Lowry's version of the jazz standard "I Got Rhythm," from this compilation, appropriates horn honks, machine gun fire, alarm clocks, and other bizarre sounds in the service of rhythm and melody. In doing so, Lowry violates our expectations of instrumentation and timbre in quite unpredictable and bewildering ways. The same is true of the recent phenomena of mash-ups, which are simple homemade digital collages that mix the vocals from one pop song with the instrumentation of another.

One classic example is "Smells Like Teen Booty," a smirky track that hammers Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" into "Bootilicious," by Destiny's Child. Everything is business as usual when Nirvana kicks off with that familiar riff, until you hear the voices of Destiny's Child coo, "Kelly, can you handle this? Michelle, can you handle this? Beyoncé, can you handle this? ... Wooooooooooo!" It's a marriage made in hell, and it sounds heavenly. One of the underlying motivations of bedroom computer composers who make mash-ups is to undermine the arbitrary hierarchies of taste that rule pop music. Those hierarchies are often gendered, with the "raw," "real" rock representing the masculine and the "soft," "plastic" pop representing the feminine.

By blurring high and low pop culture (Nirvana representing the high and Destiny's Child the low), these mash-ups humorously demolish the elitist pop cultural hierarchy that rock critics and music collecting snobs perpetuate. With mash-ups, Nirvana and Destiny's Child can sit comfortably at the same cafeteria table, perhaps showing holier-than-thou arbiters of cool that legitimate pleasures can be found in both varieties of popular music. Or, if not, it at least holds the potential to provoke laughter. "I think mixing Busta Rhymes with a House tune will make people dance," says Jonny Wilson, a member of the British mash-up group Eclectic Method. "But mixing Britney Spears with NWA [Niggas Wit Attitude] will make people dance *and* laugh."

"The simplest way for humorists to wrench rationality is to *reverse* the traditional ways it has joined things," writes Murray S. Davis, an observation that can easily be applied to music that *sounds* comical. "If reason requires us to connect things one way, the humorist will reconnect them the opposite way."<sup>8</sup> An example of this is Rank Sinatra's take on "Take On Me," one of my personal favorites from this collection. It begins as a faithful keyboard-driven cover of the 1980s hit by A-Ha—blipity bleeps and all—but its pop charms are quickly subverted by the distorted death metal vocals that intrude on the proceedings.

These examples highlight how musical humor is most definitely contextual; for instance, if you aren't familiar with the original two songs that form a new mash-up, the comedy will probably be lost on you. We are also reminded of the importance of context by the sarcastic and satirical blog, Stuff White People Like—which is dedicated to explaining, and skewering, "White people culture." Striking a mock-anthropological tone, the blog's author writes, "One of the more interesting things about White people is that they love singing comedians...[W]hen you have jokes that aren't that great and music that isn't

that great, you can mix them together and create something that will entertain White people.” The author cites Weird Al Yankovic, Tenacious D, *Flight of the Conchords*, and Adam Sandler—though one could easily go back to the Smothers Brothers, or even earlier to Vaudeville.

Parody is a form of musical appropriation whose humor often erupts from the collision of genres, like when the foul-mouthed rap group 2 Live Crew covered Roy Orbison’s white bread 1960s pop hit “Oh, Pretty Woman.” A slightly more obscure example is Clarence Reid, better known in the 1970s as an outrageous masked Black man called Blowfly. On his 1971 debut, he took Otis Redding’s posthumous hit “(Sittin’ On) the Dock of the Bay” and rendered it as—you guessed it—“Shittin’ On the Dock of the Bay.” This strategy was nothing new; spontaneous lyrical parody has been part of the folk song tradition for centuries. For instance, the classic bawdy ballad “How the Money Rolls In,” was set to the music of “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean.” The lyrics for “How the Money Rolls In,” developed and tweaked by several anonymous singers over the ages, were a bit more edgy than in the song’s original incarnation. (Sung to the tune of “Bonnie”: “Grandmother makes cheap prophylactics/ She punctures the end with a pin/ Grandfather performs the abortions/ My god, how the money rolls in!”<sup>9</sup>)

Murray S. Davis observes, “humorists also ply their trade by interpolating an element congruous with the other elements of one system into another system where it is *less* congruous or even incongruous.”<sup>10</sup> So, even though the lyrics of 2 Live Crew’s “Pretty Woman” aren’t very funny, the disconnect caused by hearing Orbison’s tune (which is nearly syncopation-free) used in a rap song is nevertheless amusing. Davis continues, “Comics need find only one element that ambiguously connects two seemingly different systems to raise a laugh” (like turning the word “sitting” into “shitting”).<sup>11</sup>

As I suggested earlier, sound art complicates the simplistic equation *serious music* = *humorlessness* as much as it blurs the line between “pop” and “art.” This is true of sound collage composer John Oswald, also represented in this collection. Similarly, the 1950s novelty sound collage recordings of Bill Buchanan and Dickie Goodman illustrate how avant-garde techniques can be deployed in the service of humor. In their 1956 hit “The Flying Saucer,” Buchanan & Goodman composed this “break in” record on a reel-to-reel magnetic tape recorder.

They crafted a skit about an alien invasion—as told through then-current rock ’n’ roll hits that were spliced together into an absurd aural narrative. Imitating the tone of contemporary radio news broadcasts, but with a twist, Buchanan & Goodman create a jarring, goofy world of sound. “Radio Announcer: The flying saucer has landed again. Washington: The Secretary of Defense has just said...” Then Fats Domino cuts in, singing, “Ain’t that a shame.” Elvis appears, as do many others. It works because, at least on the first listen, one’s expectation is heightened during those split seconds before each song/punch line breaks into the news report.

Anticipation, subversion, confusion, laughter. That pretty much sums up the experience of much of the recorded songs and sounds found on this compilation.

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Iowa City, March 2008

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Murray S. (1993). *What's So Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, Immanuel. (1951). *Critique of Judgement*. 1793. Trans. J. H. Bernhard. New York: Hafner Press, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> Davis.

<sup>4</sup> Buijzen, Moniek & Valkenburg, Patti M. (2004). "Developing a Typology of Humor in Audiovisual Media." *Media Psychology*, 6, 147-167.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Buijzen and Valkenburg, p. 148.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Davis, p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> Brand, Oscar. (1962). *The Ballad Mongers: Rise of the Modern Folk Song*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls; Cray, Ed. *The Erotic Muse: American Bawdy Songs*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign, IL, 1992, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, p. 21.