

Through Melody



I.

The fundamental elements sustaining life and evolution are time, place, oxygen, gravity, water, and music. Yes, music. Like the neurotransmitter dopamine, music is the drug of all cultures and arouses in the casual listener and the fully addicted one, evolutionary impulses that fortify health, longevity, language, love, expression, and memory.

Music tricks us into remembering its presence in our lives because its properties are manifest in melody, harmony, rhythm, noise, juxtaposition, and repetition—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual representations of music’s content. Melody is its greatest trick because melody, when utilized as a final value, awakens in us an aural notification of change and shocks us into new ways of listening. It is the immediate transaction the brain makes with music.

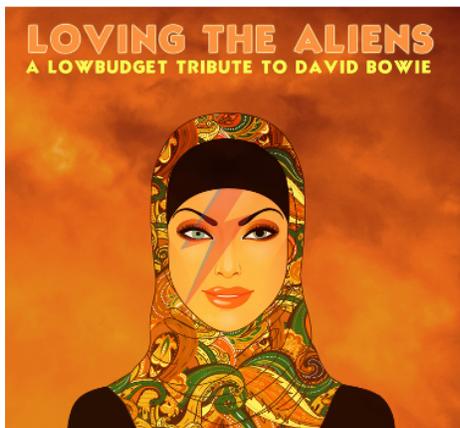
The best composers collect what has come before them, juggling elements according to their own preferences, and create new values by considering melody as the subversive way to invent something new. Naturally, we remember the new and often forget the old. We study history as a corrective, we embrace the new as that correction. In music, melody is the *through line* of that correction.

In drama, conceptualist Constantin Stanislavski taught that the *through line* was a way for actors to see the trajectory of their characters by knowing what constantly motivates that character. It is the very spine of the character’s history as it moves across time and stage. Arguably one of the most popular and memorable film series of all time, the middle three episodes (IV-VI) of *Star Wars*, reinforces the power of the *through line* as each character pursues his or her own *through line*. Luke Skywalker’s self-doubt and reluctance to embrace the kinds of “aw-shucks” heroics Hans Solo so easily embraces defines the richness of his character and has ennobled him throughout that trilogy. Forty years later we still want to know how and if the *through line* of his character remains intact.

In music the *through line melody* functions similarly as the thread that stitches together the musical elements, performance, atmosphere, and dynamics of the composition. Folk music hinges on melody entirely and is encased in oral traditions, delivered as simply as possible to serve memory. Classical music explores folk melodies in

complex movements and tempos, revealing virtuosity and immediacy, forcing memory to demand repeated listenings, as short notes integrate with longer notes to demand more neuro-integration on the part of the listener. Jazz returns to melody after improvisations that do not repeat themselves, and abandons memory as a fixed motif altogether in favor of the listener engaging suspense and his or her own imagination as to where a piece of music can go. Great pop music collects all of the above notions of music and either carefully or daringly organizes melodies back into short folk expressions of deceptive complexity. In all cases, except for the deliberate subversion of melody and harmony, melody is king.

II.



I had the good fortune to participate in Low Budget Records' recent tribute to David Bowie, called *Loving the Aliens*. I was struck by the performances and arrangements, which were so varied and interesting and reached across a catalogue that spanned more than fifty years. The whole affair reminded me of a time in music when record labels supported artists who explored several genres of music—from the traditional to the experimental—in one album. I'm skeptical that records like *Revolver*, *Blonde on Blonde*, or *Honky Dory* could be industry-supported today. The

eclecticism would frighten those in the industry whose imaginations only extend to cash and formula.

For my own efforts on the Bowie tribute, I chose two early compositions—"Kooks" (from *Honky Dory*) and "The Man Who Sold the World" (from its namesake album). This was from a period where I'd argue that Bowie was exercising the same compositional powers of his contemporaries, which are mostly informed by melodic writing. I could not resist tackling these two tunes. As I tried to come up with unique arrangements, I realized how seduced I was by each song's melody, and the best thing I could do without ruining the songs was to tweak some of the bass lines, add some percussion (with a lot of help from Keira Flynn-Carson), embroider the arrangements with *Bird Mancini*-Ruby Bird's mellifluous keyboards, and avoid anything that would subtract from the melodies of each song.

In retrospect, after listening to the entire two-CD set, none of the odd arrangements utilized by such an amazing menagerie of artists subtracted from Bowie's enduring melodies, especially the earlier stuff. Such is the power of melody as the *through line* that

makes music immortal, despite the efforts of artists who want to rearrange and adapt according to their own muses.

III.



The impetus for this article came from teaching a segment on film theory, which is based on Aristotle's Theory of Natural Phenomena. It's a pretty convincing theory, actually. Everything in the universe, concrete or abstract, is constituted in four stages: the Material, the Efficient, the Formal, and the Final.

The Material consists of the ingredients of something. In film it is the camera, the lighting, the story, the sound, the actors, the location, etc.

The Efficient is how these ingredients are used. The camera seeks distance and movement, the lighting seeks light and shadow, the written script seeks visual authorship and the spoken word, the film itself seeks editing, and so on.

The Formal allows for patterns, conventions, genres, styles and things familiar to inform the filmmakers that these materials and efficiencies have been used before and that the people who will see the film will recognize the familiar. In a Western film we know we will see cowboys, guns, Indians, saloons, etc. In a Detective movie, we will explore darker film tones, shady characters, social criticism, femme fatales, and so on. Every genre has its own pedigree of patterns and conventions.

It is in the Final, where things really matter.

The Final is Aristotle's idea about the value of the first three constituents. If the film has no value, it is unfinished, and therefore does not achieve Finality. For example, despite all of its ambition, expense, and special effects, James Cameron's *Avatar* fails the Aristotelian test because the story is clichéd. *Star Wars, Episodes I & II*, fail in the same way because George Lucas had his eye on marketing and not creating a complete film that, despite its visual spectacle, he could not shape the ingredients into an original value—that is, to a story worth remembering on a transcendent level. We remember *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, because there is no resolution, very little hope, and the audience has an emotional investment that has to be paid off in the next installment. In this sense an incomplete story makes for a complete film as it jars the audience away from the typical ending that ties everything together. *Empire* blows it all apart. That's a new value to the genre of science fiction; that's the reason why critics like it best, as do fans.

Music functions the same way with different ingredients, different ways of using these ingredients, relying on familiar patterns to assure composers, players, and listeners

that this music has stasis, but also pursues a value that makes it complete and adds something meaningful to the genre itself, even if it subverts expectations.

John Lennon once said that the Blues is the chair upon which all American music sits. He's right. But you could argue that Lennon contributed very little to the Blues idiom. It's because his and his fellow Beatles lived during a period where more formal genres were available to them to explore, to combine, to reconsider, to subvert, to recreate, to reimagine. They had more ingredients.

Their masterpiece, *Revolver*, is a testimony to the realization of this and to the full accomplishment of Aristotle's theory. Song after song uses conventional ingredients, explores them in new ways, and creates a value that transcends the music that came before it (even their own equally brilliant *Rubber Soul*), giving it a value that enriches the artist, the listener, (and the record company). By the time "Tomorrow Never Knows" comes, we are saturated with something different, something drenched in new ideas and new conceits, and are fully prepared for this collision of musical cultures and ancient texts.



When the show *Madmen* needed to measure how ready the main character, Don Draper, was to emerge from his cozy, old buddy-boy, sexist, 50's corporate American archetype, it took an outlier—his young French girlfriend, Megan—to jar him into the Age of Aquarius. How does she do it? She gifts him with *Revolver*, he plops down the needle on "Tomorrow Never Knows" (at a cost of \$250,000 in royalties!), and realizes he is unready to

change, for the music is too alien for him, suggesting that he is not ready to import a new value into his life, or to see anything outside of his claustrophobic routines of self-deceit. From there on in, and for the rest of the series until the last episodes, his failure to change dooms him to incompleteness. In the last episode, though, he invokes the Aquarian psyche ("Turn off your mind, relax, and float down stream—it is not dying..."), and drops out of society altogether, abandoning his mediocrity to find an open 'stream' that demands for him to reinvent himself or die. "Tomorrow Never Knows"—drawn by Lennon from *the Tibetan Book of the Dead*—somehow functions reincarnate in his memory, not literally, but suggestively. And this is what happens, or should happen, to music that aspires to meaning, to value, to that state where the artist and listener grow to evoke a new understanding of something.

When we are children we sing nursery rhymes to step inside a world of words and images, and the melody of the rhyme carries us forward to that visual world as it connects us in song to others—it socializes us—and we remember it because of the turn in melody.

The nursery rhyme evokes Aristotle's theory in its entirety. The best composers of melodies create nursery rhymes for adults.

IV.



Because traditional folk music belongs to the oral traditions of story telling, it depends on familiar elements, such as incremental repetition (verse/chorus/verse /chorus, etc.); stock epithets, such as references to personages ('fair maiden', 'brave soldier', etc.); and frames its lyric around love, loss, journey, struggle, fate, forest, nature, the gods, etc.).

Recorded music demanded more value, as it traded in repetition for change in order to engage the listener and the artist. This change,

this value, resides in the *through melody*.

While the Blues is the chair, melody partners with the rhythm to dance around the chair and make us remember the feelings we have while we dance. The science of music is certain that it is the melody that moves the spirit, if not the feet. When a blues player performs the predictable chord changes of its invention, he Formalizes the history of Black prayer and church ritual. We know it, we celebrate the performance, and as it sits permanent in our memory because of its patterns and conventions, for some of us the value may be just for that powerful moment.



When a song composer chances with the Blues form, he or she pulls us into a new world. Pick up a guitar or sit at your piano. Play an E7 for a few measures in 4/4, then an A7 for a few more, then back to the E7, then go to the B7 and then back to the E7. That I⁷-IV⁷-V⁷ configuration is the seat of a thousands songs and is the regal calling of the folkish state of American storytelling—from the old call-and-answer *ring shout* Gospels to any new

ascends with a change of heart ('...but as long as there are stars above you), staying put with two closely-hinged chords ('You never need to doubt it...'), then ascending one more chord (...I'll make you so sure about it.), then ascending one more step into the **chorus**, which immediately descends, as in the **intro**, but betrays the chords with a certainty not present in the stoic calling of the French horns. The entire cycle repeats itself until a quick **up tempo bridge** leads us into the honey baked, wordless harmonic vocals of all the Beach Boys, until the third verse and final chorus move into the **vocal round coda** that finishes this prayer to love and devotion, witnessed no less than by God itself.



Progressive pop has plenty of great examples of how the *through melody* shapes entire albums and even careers—too many to itemize here. But standout melodists like Wilson, Lennon, McCartney, Harrison, Randy Newman, Bowie, Regina Spektor, Tracy Bonham, Ray Davies, Jimmy Webb, Joni Mitchell, Motown's Holland-Dozier-Holland, Aimee Mann, Stevie Wonder, early Neil Young, Elliot Smith—they, and many more, embrace the *through melody* as the

prominent feature of delivery, dominating what other elements accessorize their songs.

VI.

So much music today is bland, claustrophobic, predictable, and noise without merit. And it is this way because pop composers play it safe. They avoid *the turn around* in a song because they are too lazy, too conditioned, a-musical, or too bent towards relying on formula instead of exploring the melodic possibilities of what they invent. In understanding how *through melody* becomes that *turn around*, composers would do well to remember its relationship to memory, which is the final value of living in a world of beauty, surprise, inspiration, and understanding.

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