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# Constructing artist identity in song

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## Abstract

This is an exploration into the way original songwriting artists construct public-facing identity in their songs. Based upon a portfolio of three commercial albums, the thesis develops a model with which to anatomize those song variables with bearing on the public impression of the original artist. Key variables emerged through observations of inflection points contributing to identity formation, and analysis is structured by Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991). This is a social identity theory that suggests individuals in social situations seek a balance between drives to assimilate and drives to differentiate. The theory was later adapted and utilised by product designers balancing typicality and novelty in consumer products. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory in this study is explored as a viable framework for understanding aspects of similarity and difference activated in song, as well as a tool for understanding assimilation and distinction in relation to peers, audiences and industry gatekeepers. A model emerges of a range of creative choices negotiated by artists seeking to project commercial identity through the medium of original song.

## The original artist

Performers who write their own songs exist in many noble forms, from hobbyists to superstars. However, when a performer chooses to pursue a professional career in original song, s/he crosses a vital threshold. As romantic and expressive as creative processes may have been, beyond this point market forces are likely to determine that act's commerce. Popular Music's industry selects few and discards many, and artists compete within the attention economy for reach, impact and sales. There are many facets to an original artist's public identity in a multi-media world, yet songs remain at the heart of that composite. This study examines the elements with which identity is communicated through song productions.

Identity is a concept freighted with loaded, often tendentious concepts. It can simultaneously infer race, nationality, religion, sexuality, age, class, wealth, education, politics, taste, authenticity, originality, intersectionality and more. However, this study is concerned specifically with choices negotiated in the writing, performance and production of mastered song. If a song production model can develop an inventory of identifying musical and linguistic variables within an artist's control, then this might provide a novel view of the operations of identity in product. Original artists are in the business of performing mediated versions of themselves for durable, long-term market engagement. What follows is concerned with the materials songwriters, producers and artists activate in the process of building and maintaining those careers.

The challenge for teachers and scholars is to frame original song in a way that helps performers initiate then sustain careers. A conceptual structure offering a framework for this task is Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991). This is a social identity theory deployed by sociologists, consumer researchers and product designers. If songs seek to elicit emotional responses in order to generate commerce, then social psychology might also offer a perspective on songs as they strive to connect artist, audience and culture.

## Similarity and difference: from identity theory to product

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) initially arose from Marilyn Brewer's (ibid) empirical research. The work established that there exists a universal dynamic in play within human relationships, balancing countervailing drives constructing an individual's identity within social situations. These drives are twofold: motivations seeking

assimilation and motivations seeking distinctiveness. They function to balance characteristics establishing inclusion with characteristics signalling differentiation. A social situation in which an individual is too different will activate attributes seeking inclusion. Conversely, any social situation that tends towards de-individuation will activate counteracting drives to emphasise differentiation. Individuals seek to fit in and stand out at the same time, to various degrees in various situations. These motives seek an *optimal* balance, structuring a regulatory equilibrium described as Brewer's *social self*, as illustrated in Figure 1:

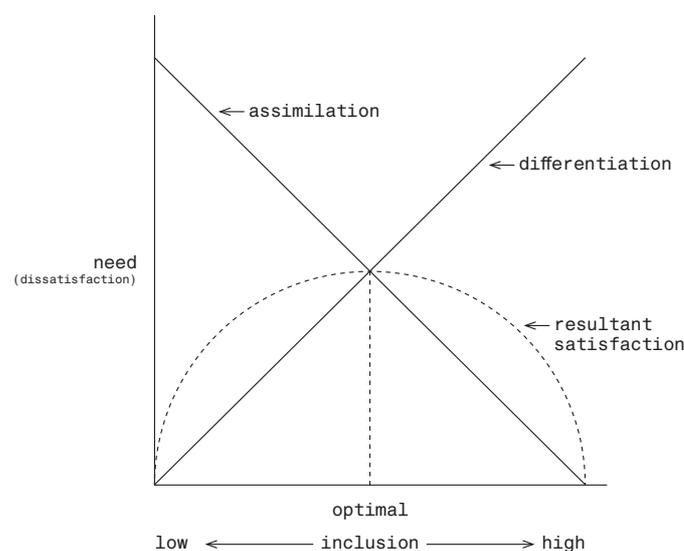


Figure 1: The optimal distinctiveness model (Brewer, 1991 p.477)

Distinctiveness depends on the inclusiveness of social groupings (the X axis above). Various social identities activate varying blends, and contemporary life see individuals managing various identities at home, work and play. ODT suggests individuals' strongest, most committed social identities are found within those groups that provide opportunities for optimal balance.

### Design and marketing

ODT 's principles can be seen manifest in both contemporary design and consumption choices. Berger's *Invisible influence* (2016) suggests optimal distinctiveness drives consumption behaviors and the product designs anticipating them. In the 2000s, TiVo

television recorders (that were essentially hard-drives), were introduced in cabinets resembling familiar DVD players, just as the Apple's 1999 iMac repackaged computer technology into objects resembling decorative furniture. In doing so Apple re-energized the personal computer boom of the late 2000s with features rendering the iMac more familiar and less utilitarian than beige computer towers. In a study examining UK political affiliations and political party membership Abrams (1994) concluded that minority political parties attract more commitment than larger, more inclusive parties because they provide opportunity for optimality to flourish. Abrams' later (2009) study of youth self-expression through musical preferences established that teenagers prefer musical styles that are moderately popular, i.e. not too obscure and not too popular. This explains the oft-noted phenomena whereby teenagers reject previously beloved bands once that band achieves mainstream popularity.

Typicality and novelty in consumer preferences are explored by Hekkert, Snelders and Van Wieringen (2003). Because a typical product is rarely new and, conversely, a novel product is rarely typical, the positive effects of both features seem incompatible. Yet consumers seem to prefer novel designs, as long as that novelty avoids violating typicality. He *et al.* (2010) demonstrated that consumers acquire and display possessions to achieve or maintain social identity. As predicted by ODT, consumers who perceived themselves as being indistinct tend to acquire distinctive products, whereas individuals with high personal distinctiveness seek more normative choices. Desire for distinction-activating products is consistent across various consumer items, including the motivation to pay more for limited-edition products. Chan, Berger and Van Boven (2012) established that consumers often pursue assimilation and differentiation within a single choice: while a brand establishes belonging, a limited edition version can pronounce difference.

### Similarity and difference in a single product

With success largely determined by product sales, artist identities are similar to corporations in that their identity is manifest in their products. Yet these are not expressions of the social motivations of the individuals who staff the companies. MIT academic Zuckerman (2016) also trained ODT's focus away from the behavior of individuals and onto products and services. For corporations, optimal identity is driven first by their product's need to be assimilated within the shop-floor, an inclusive situation from where it can project uniqueness to attract the favour of consumers. Zuckerman proposes an ODT adaption in what he calls a *two-stage valuation theory*

(Urban, Weinberg and Hauser, 1996; Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001). This sees similarity and difference combined within the one product. In this view, a product's conformity satisfies the need for categorization within the appropriate section of marketplace, physical or virtual. Novelty and difference then improve a commodity's candidature for consumer selection from within category. This is a model that bridges ODT's social psychology into commercial product design. It proposes the unique qualities of a product will attract market selection only if competencies of conformity are simultaneously manifest. Similarly, original recording artists strive to signal cultural, media and retail terrains appropriate to their demographic, genre and style whilst simultaneously communicating their most attractive unique qualities.

### Levels of self-representation

Brewer and Gardner (1996), and Brewer and Roccas (2001) developed foundational ODT to suggest social identity can be understood as optimality sought on three intersubjective levels of self-representation. These are activated on levels defined as *the individual self*, *the relational self* and *the collective self* (p.83) as below:

Table 1 Levels of self-representation, Brewer and Roccas (2001)

Opposing drives & levels of self-representation		
Motivational pole		
Levels of Self	Separation	Assimilation
Individual	Uniqueness	Similarity
Relational	Autonomy	Intimacy/interdependence
Collective	Differentiation	Inclusion/belonging

In this model, an *individual self* identity sees ODT operating at the level of family, peers and culture. Assimilation is established by observing home culture expectations, whilst differentiating through the expression of a *constellation of traits and characteristics* (ibid). The *relational self* is more intimate, developed through personalized bonds of attachment relating to significant others. These relationships are dyadic and generate shared self-concepts with overt mutuality. This *relational self* relies upon reflected appraisal and is driven by motives to protect or enhance the other by maintaining the relationship itself. At the third, and most public level of self-representation, *the collective self* manifests in relation to social groups such as clubs, societies, gangs, guilds and institutions. Self-representations are activated, as ODT would predict, in a manner determined by the degree of inclusivity or exclusivity within given social situations.

## Optimal distinctiveness and the socio-economics of song

This idea of different levels of activation provides this approach with a transposable framework with which to model the socio-economic ecology within which original artists operate. Brewer's model transposes elegantly onto a model that sees artists, their audience and industry as three intersubjective artistic, social and commercial dimensions. It proposes that an original artist identity strives to optimality in relation to:

- 1) *Peers and precedents* (the individual artist)
- 2) *Audience* (the relational artist)
- 3) *Gatekeepers* (the collective artist)

These levels, or domains of interaction, can be seen as follows:

### a) **The individual level: similar to, though different from, peers and precedents**

Here the artist establishes cultural, technical and musical competencies in equilibrium with unique qualities of talent, discipline and flair. Artists rarely invent entirely new forms of song (although some do), and are likely to align with particular cultures and sub-cultures. Assimilation is achieved through the expression of genre and style competencies, discourses and conventions. Category conformity needs to be established, so that unique traits and characteristics can strive to differentiate to an optimal degree. Idiolectic artistry, flair and innovation are the talents an artist mobilizes to differentiate from home cultures of peers and canonic precedents.

### b) **The relational level: similar to, though different from, audience**

An artist/fan relationship is a one-to-one relationship, enjoyed privately (DeNora, 2006) then multiplied (Lewis, 1992). As this one-to-one relationship replicates, larger fan-bases emerge. Yet the original artist survives by establishing and maintaining a relationship with that audience of one, and that listener needs to be anticipated and accommodated by song. West (2016) suggests that successful songwriting must establish two crucial connections: a meaningful resonance between the song and the songwriter, and an emotional resonance between the song and the listener. In satisfying an audience's appetites, the artist is, to an extent, representative of that audience to the extent that they speak to that audience's tastes and values. The artist needs to be sufficiently similar to their audience in their manifest preferences, yet different for the unique talent and their unusually mobile, often international, lifestyle and outlook. The artist's livelihood is dependent upon songs cohering with an audience's personal and

cultural investments, and within the artist–audience relationship, demographic, aesthetic and ethical commonalities engage audiences and generate fandom.

**c) The collective level: Similar to, though different from, canonical artists**

An artist's reach and visibility are in many ways determined by performance opportunities afforded by field operatives. Gatekeepers (in this thesis, arbiters within the music, press and broadcast industries) consist of individuals familiar with a culture's rules and vocabulary, who use this knowledge to filter supply and select for inclusion. Whilst 21<sup>st</sup> Century Internet promotion is increasingly prominent, nevertheless industry operatives remain powerful actors evaluating and directing attention and capital. In doing so they determine, to a great extent, those artistes permitted circulation within high profile media and wider culture. These include A&R officers, live agents, music publishers, managers, radio and TV producers, journalists, bloggers, critics and pundits. They make editorial decisions, shape tastes and opinions, and in the case of broadcast and live agents, grant access to performance opportunities. Cultural expectations and artist uniqueness seek optimality as field operatives balance similarity expectations of their outlet with the need for fresh content and new artists.

**Songwriting practice viewed through ODT's lens**

Seeking to understand identity in songwriting, over an eight-year period I wrote, co-wrote, performed and produced six albums. However, only three of these albums generated sales, reviews, and tour audiences sufficient to legitimise their candidature for study as sites of ODT in play. For reference, the songs discussed below can be streamed here:

[Carl Barât on Spotify](#)

[Carl Barât and The Jackals on Spotify](#)

[CousteauX on Spotify](#)

Practitioner-Based Enquiry (PBE) is a research methodology that privileges practitioner insight within professional situations. Murray and Lawrence (2013) argue for PBE's ability to offer potent insight by situating professionals deep within industrial situations in order to produce artefacts and reporting from a specialist's perspective. Using Analytical Autoethnography (Andersen, 2006) principles and Grounded Theory's (Charmaz, 2014) approach to emergent data, process observations documented those songwriting choices with the potential to inflect performer identity. These were then coded and collated into recurring themes across the selection of songs. Finally process

observations were cross-referenced with industry responses. For clarity, the research design underpinning this thesis was as illustrated below:

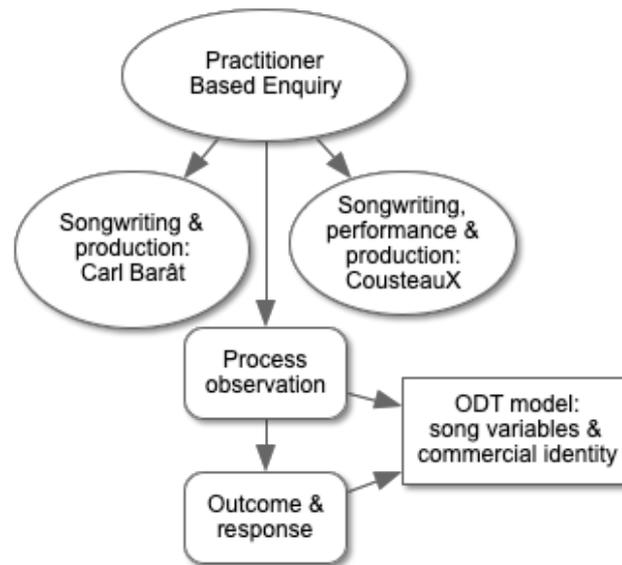


Figure 2: Research design

The variables that emerged may only be applicable to this portfolio's Alternative Rock sub-genre. What follows is not intended to be a universal anatomy of song; these are simply the points at which creative choices with bearing upon the performer's identity were witnessed during these particular projects. Zuckerman's ODT variation suggest that some elements will convey genre and style similarity, whilst others will project artistic difference. Deploying this organising principle we are presented with a way of apprehending song elements as working parts within a generative dynamic. What follows is a diagnostic of constituent elements encountered as choices in the song production processes

## Identifying variables observed in practice

### Texture

A track's sonic characteristic is its leading phenomenological edge, and a familiar song can be recognized by humans within 100 milliseconds (Jagiello *et al* 2019). This immediate impression is formed by sound texture formed by arrangement and production choices. Tagg (2015) refers to this dimension as the *synchronic* 'now sound' or vertical structure of music, which gets carried along by the *diachronic*, horizontal extensions of rhythm, melody and harmony. An act's palette of sounds is its earliest identifying dimension: a song's texture carries significant information about an act's demographic and genre/style.

Camilleri (2010) speaks of the spectral dimension in which mix engineers and producers work with dynamics of *saturation*, both in frequency range and overtones. Saturation is useful shorthand for aggressive, harmonics – tending towards distortion - that contrast with warm, smooth, mellow timbres. A track’s drums, operating at the level of pure texture, will communicate a vital component of to the overall sonic impression. Some drum arrangements are aggressive, compressed and forceful, and others are open, organic and smooth. In Alternative Rock, electric guitars and amplifier artifacts often supply saturation characteristics. Tracks may possess high-saturation qualities of Metal, Emo and Hard Rock or low-saturation characteristics of Folk, Singer-Songwriter and Chillout. Arrangement textures vary within genre and style constraints, as saturation dynamics work – with immediate effect - to signal artist identity from a track’s sonic palette.

## Tempo

There exists scant literature about tempo as a vector of meaning. The nearest is Hevner’s (1937) work which surveyed piano music audiences for impressions of meaning in both pitch and tempo. Qualities of slow and fast music were described here as the following:

*Table 2: Characteristics of tempo from Hevner (ibid)*

Slow	Fast
dignified, solemn sad, heavy dreamy, sentimental serene, gentle	graceful, sparkling happy, bright exciting, elated vigorous, majestic

These descriptors still roundly apply to operations of tempo in Popular Music. Decades later, Ball (2011) conducted international studies that confirmed emotional responses are consistent across cultural divides: happy or joyous music is always faster, and slower tempos universally convey sadness, reflection or calm. Levitin (ibid) concurs and also suggests a form of neurophysiological analogue in the ‘gait’ at which the music walks, runs or sprints by the listener. A songwriter’s identifying choices in this dimension are commonly threefold: slow, medium or fast. Fast tempos tend to a power a sense of urgency, kinetic energy and exuberance. Slow tempos tend to underpin a reflective, contemplative and patient qualities. Mid tempos, unsurprisingly, allow for aspects of both. Tempos are often chosen with a sense of the type response seek from

audiences in terms of dance and kinetic movement. Significant information about the kind of experience offered by an artist is communicated by a track's temporal dimension, and at an energetic level tempo conveys information about an act's kinetic excitement or contemplative reflection.

### Harmonic Contour

Like geographical contours on an ordinance survey map, chord progressions provide a song with harmonic forms either clustered or extended. Fast-repeating chord loops are short harmonic sentences circulating frequently, like whorls mapping mountainous terrain. Chords that circulate rapidly do not tend to convey an emotional narrative themselves. These high-contour constructions instead tend to support emotional communication situated elsewhere in a track's other constituent elements such as groove, arrangement and performance. In contrast *low-contour* harmonic structures can communicate emotional information through their construction alone: a pre-verbal narrative of sorts exists in their sequence. These are those complex, undulating, longer sequences typical of Tin Pan Alley in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Tawa, 2010), and contrast with influences with emphasis on rhythm and energy typical of Rhythm n' Blues and its funky legacies. Moore (2015) refers to these two types of harmonic constructions as 'open ended' (high contour) and 'period structure' (low contour), although this thesis' preferred *contour* offers a simple visual analogue. Whilst high and low contour constructions differ in the way they locate a song's emotional expression, there are of course endless variations. Many songs contrast low and high contour constructions within different song sections. A song composer is usually aware of what kind of harmonic structure they wish to create: to loop and stack, or to extend and complexify. This is a powerful identifying element signaling towards genre, style and demographic. from a song's chordal dimension.

### Vocal Costume

By the time a vocal enters a song, significant genre/style markers are likely to have been established. The sound of the voice will often cohere with expectations conditioned by genre. Describing vocal expectations germane to various genres, Tagg (2015) introduces the concept of the *vocal costume*, which describes the way singing itself signals specific genre/styles. Amongst others, vocalist may adopt the costume of a Soul singer, Rapper, Metal screamer, Rock belter, Diva, Jazz hipster, Folk singer, Rock balladeer, or Musical Theatre actor. Production teams will often strive for a range of vocal approaches across an album, and it is common for singers to try on different costumes within a single

album (such as Paul McCartney on The Beatles' White Album), although other acts work within singular costume. Tagg's concept is a useful one, as it understands vocal tone in alignment with the other signals of genre and style. Fans of Dread Zeppelin (a reggae band with an Elvis-impersonating singer (Dread Zeppelin, 2020) may differ, but nevertheless at a pre-verbal level, vocal costume is another variable contributing to a sense of genre and style similarity.

### Genre Lyric Values

Popular songs express commonly held values and speak for the millions who treasure them (Chase cited in Tawa, 1990, p.87).

Song lyrics often communicate ethical, moral and inter-personal values, and these are often in alignment with broader genre conventions. Original song artists supply significant cultural materials to their audiences (DeNora 2000; Kotarba et al., 2009, Kotarba, 2013), expressing ideals of intimacy, personal politics and desire (Kutulas, 2003). Hitlin (2003) believes that an individual's identity is revealed through their value commitments, or what he defines as *conceptions of the desirable* (p.121). We invite controversy when ascribing values to entire musical movements, however some broad generalities might reasonably be made, such as the following:

- Punk Rock: Oppositional, iconoclastic, confrontational
- Disco: Ornate, camp, celebratory
- Reggae: Post-colonial, emancipatory, internationalist
- Singer-Songwriter: Reflective, poetic, amatory
- Indie Rock: Post-modern, metropolitan, hedonistic
- Hip Hop: Individualistic, critical, resistant
- Metal: Mythological, martial, supernatural

Original artists load their songs with palpable emotional investment: this is how song's passions are energised. Allowing for intentional deviation, song lyrics are usually read as indications, or analogues at least, of an artist's preferences: ethical, interpersonal and aesthetic. Culture, sub-culture and genre all condition a genre's dimensions of the desirable, and these expectations are transgressed only rarely. There are few right-wing Indie bands.

## Modality

This concept of *modality* comes from Critical Discourse Analysis and draws on the work of Machin (2010), Machin and Mayr (2012). It is a measure of the way veracity is represented in media. Modality measures the extent to which language or image commits to truthful or realistic representation. Modality *texturizes* the identities (Fairclough 2003) of politicians, artists and pundits alike. What people commit to, and what they indicate a cautious stance toward will each express a measure of modality. Singer-songwriters of the 1970s such as James Taylor often sang what seemed to be biographical songs expressing a high degree of modality, just as early Eminem mined his personal life candidly for material. In contrast, 1970s Steely Dan wrote mostly low modality, third-person character songs. Adele's songs seem to suggest private-life verisimilitude, whereas David Bowie's songs often expressed low-modality artifice described as *authentically inauthentic* by Weisethaunet and Lindberg (2010). Modality in songwriting is as a measure of the degree to which artists infer veritable biography, or alternatively the degree to which they work with characters, ciphers and allegory. It allows us to move beyond debates about authenticity to instead nuance a view of the biographical or fantastic tools within an artist's command.

## Mode of Address

Joni Mitchell's lyrics are celebrated through analysis by Whitesell (2008) who transposes from poetry theory a linguistic dimension that frames songs in terms of their inferred listeners and timeframes. Fundamentals about how the song is to be understood are activated, and signal whether the song is private reflection, active drama or narrated story. The situation of the listener, and the song's timeframe are each established by text operating in four distinct modes:

- ***Lyric mode***: First-person (often time neutral)
- ***Dramatic mode***: Second-person (often present tense)
- ***Narrative mode***: Third-person (often past tense)
- ***Political mode***: Second-person plural (often present tense)

The first of these modes, the lyric mode, infers no audience at all. Like a soliloquy, it resembles private, internal thought and is sung to nobody in particular, as in 'Yesterday' by The Beatles. The *dramatic mode* is the balladeers choice in which the lyric directly addresses an intimate friend, or someone in particular. This involves the listener as if they were either involved in the drama, as in 'Someone Like You' by Adele, or witnessing

the drama, as in 'Delilah' by Tom Jones. The *narrative mode* is the storyteller's "let me tell you a story" orientation; relaying stories of other people, such as 'The Killing of Goergie' by Rod Stewart, usually set in the past. The *political mode* is rarer, and assumes a crowd singing to itself in real time, as in 'Give Peace a Chance' by John Lennon. Broadly speaking these modes can be seen to declare artist identity as being, for the duration of the song:

- Lyric Mode: introspective, reflective
  - the confessional, ruminative artist
- Dramatic Mode: amatory, romantic
  - the love-song balladeer
- Narrative Mode: storytelling, observational
  - the storyteller, author of characters
- Political Mode: communal, participatory
  - the social activist or tribal voice

Seasoned songwriters shift effortlessly between modes, and occasionally combine modes within a single song, such as in *Waterloo Sunset* by The Kinks. For the most part, however, songs tend to remain in a single mode, once established. Modes of address are a subtle, yet significant identifying variable serving to convey the kind of passions about which the writer is concerned.

### Value Orientation

In the same way that Brewer and Roccas (*ibid*) see identity as activated on personal, relational and collective levels, so too lyrics tend to orientate on one of three social levels, establishing the domain of human experience in which a song is invested. If we consider Punk Rock and New Wave sub-genres of the late 1970s, we might agree that these were broadly defined by oppositional, iconoclastic and confrontational genre values. Yet while Joy Division and The Cure expressed reflective, personal introspection, The Buzzcocks often sang love songs about interpersonal relationships, whilst The Clash voiced their take on collective, political ideologies. Song by song, value orientations may shift, and it is common for these to vary across an album. Simplification into three levels of focus (personal, relational and collective) provides us with a serviceable framework with which to describe the social domain in which a song's lyrical concerns are active.

## Arrangement Features

In the opening six bars of 'This Charming Man' by The Smiths, the unique compositional flourish of Johnny Marr's guitar is the song's salient feature. Stepping forward from the up-tempo Indie Rock textures of the music Marr's lively, tuneful performance generates a powerful identifying element. Songs such as the 'Careless Whisper' by Wham! with its sax breaks, or the synth sections in Billie Eilish's 'Bad Guy', exemplify the power of arrangement features to stand-in for the lead voice in a track, often performing the role of a secondary song hook. They are powerful identifying gestures for both song and artist, especially when performed, as in the case of The Smiths or Queen, by a key member of the act. CousteauX use a fluglehorn for its secondary hooks, and lead guitarists have a long history of imprinting a Rock band's uniqueness onto a mastered track. These are highlighted, emphatic instrumental or vocal moments in song with the power to intensify the signature presence of the artist.

## Songfulness and the idiolectic voice

It is through the voice that star personalities are constructed...  
because it is to the voice to which we immediately respond.  
(Frith, 1987, p.143)

Because an acapella version can identify a song's performer and convey much of a song's meaning, we must then accept that a song's lead vocal exists in a super-ordinate relationship to other song variables. When sung, words and melody combine to create an experience of what Barthes describes as proximity to the 'grain' of the voice (Barthes, 1977). Barthes believes there is an intimate quality to the recorded voice that brings the listener into a palpable, almost erotic relationship with the sung moment. This point is taken up by Frith's '*celebration of the materiality of the body*' (Frith, 1998, p.191), a quality present within the passions of what he calls '*the voluptuous pleasure of the song's signifier-sounds*'. Kramer (2002) speaks of this fusion of voice, word and melody when describing the way in which songwriters create words within melodies in a manner that deliberately enhances the pleasurable sounds produced by a singer. He defines this quality as *songfulness* and suggests songs aspire to a synergy that fuses lyric, voice and melody thus:

...as a corporeal medium, voice addresses itself in its sensuous and vibratory fullness to the body of the listener, thereby offering both material pleasure and an incitement to fantasy. These effects all depend on the ability of the singing voice to envelope or suffuse both melody and text so that their independent existence is obscured (p. 54).

At this point, lyric occupies melody's arc, and both wrap together inside the corporeal presence of the vocalist's delivery. Through the agency of singing, words and music are transformed into a meaningful experience that neither component can make independently. The pleasures of performance lead the listener into an experience of what is arguably most valuable of popular music commodities: *the idiolectic voice*. For the purposes of this model, this should be read to mean the unique, valenced qualities of a singer's instrument. To possess a voice that sounds like nobody else is a powerful advantage in Alternative Rock, and canonical singers are often those with uniquely identifiable vocal sounds. Exceptions do also thrive in popular music. Facsimile voices abound in Eurovision, Pop Idol and K-Pop and these situations require a degree of homogeneity as ODT's price for their high-profile broadcast assimilation. Some idiolectic voices are more agreeable than others, and vocal tones with attractive, appealing and persuasive tones remain Popular Song's foremost asset, as well as its most unique identifying element.

### Identifying variables within song

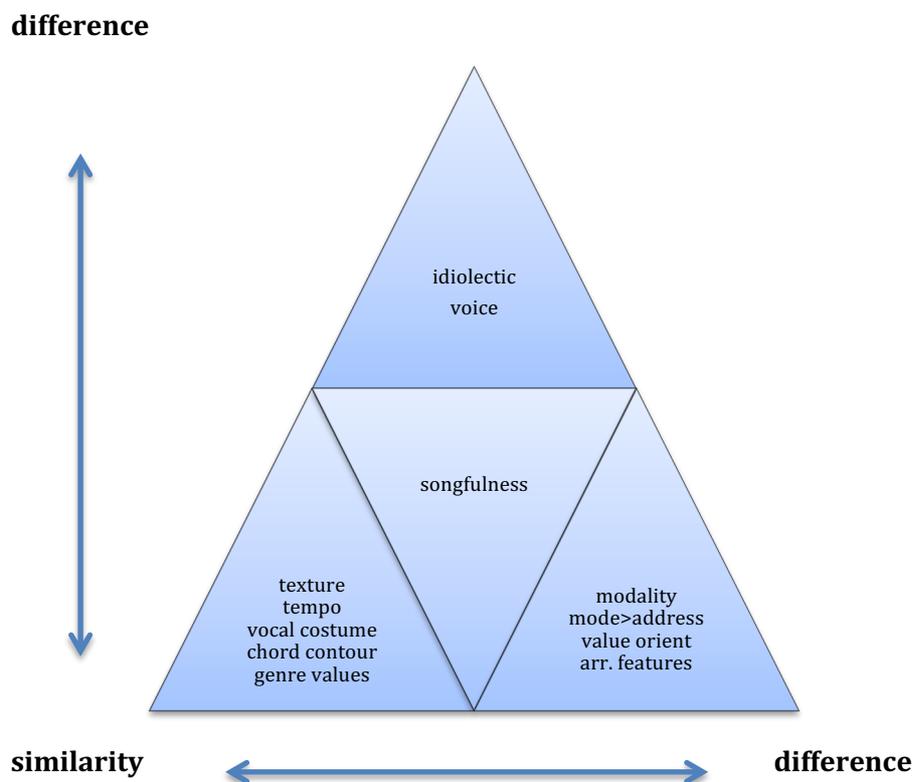


Figure 3: ODT applied to song production variables

Figure 3 compiles the above inventory of songwriting choices and suggests how they may configure within Zuckerman’s ODT framework. Tables 4, 5 and 6 (below) demonstrate this model with overview impressions of this thesis’ album materials. These provide a generalised, thumbnail overview that, however broad, sufficiently illustrate this proposed framework. Sub-genre and style information is sourced from AllMusic.com, the platform that currently informs genre and style definitions referred to by digital shop-fronts such as iTunes, Tidal and Spotify.

Table 3: *Carl Barât (2010) – Chamber Pop, Indie Rock, Britpop (allmusic.com)*

Theatrical crooning & Indie tones with London accent	
Similar to Chamber Pop, Indie, Britpop	Carl Barât characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low to medium saturation, orchestral, soft rock drums &amp; clean guitars</li> <li>• Slow to medium tempi</li> <li>• Low contour chords</li> <li>• Theatrical &amp; Hard Rock vocal costumes</li> <li>• Hedonistic polyamorous themes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low modality</li> <li>• Dramatic &amp; lyric mode of address</li> <li>• Personal &amp; interpersonal orientation</li> <li>• Romantic orchestral gestures, slide guitar/brass figures</li> </ul>

Table 4: *Let it reign (2015)- Garage Punk, Alternative Indie (allmusic.com)*

Hard Rock belting & Indie tones with London accent	
Similar to Garage Punk, Alt. Indie	Carl Barât & The Jackals characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High saturation Punk guitars, bass and drums</li> <li>• Fast tempi</li> <li>• High contour chords</li> <li>• Punk Rock, Indie Rock vocal costumes</li> <li>• Critical, socialist, activist themes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High modality</li> <li>• Political &amp; lyric mode of address</li> <li>• Collective value orientation</li> <li>• Surf guitar motifs, gang vocals</li> </ul>

Table 5: *CousteauX (2017) - Chamber Pop, Alternative Rock, Sadcore (allmusic.com)*

Crooning, rangy baritone with trans-Atlantic Irish accent	
Similar to Chamber Pop, Alt. Rock, Sadcore	CousteauX characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low to medium saturation, orchestral &amp; jazzy soundtrack arrangements</li> <li>• Slow tempi</li> <li>• Low contour chords</li> <li>• Crooning &amp; balladic vocal costumes</li> <li>• Romantic polyamorous themes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low modality</li> <li>• Dramatic &amp; lyric mode of address</li> <li>• Interpersonal value orientation</li> <li>• Fluehorn figures, baritone guitar figures</li> </ul>

Anatomising song elements in this manner is best deployed from song to song, but nevertheless these album generalities demonstrate the serviceable model of ODT in action. Once mastered and released, then songs become perhaps a crucial component of artist's public self-representation, interacting from that point onwards with the socio-economic ecologies of Popular Music.

### Optimal self-representations

Communicated from original song, similarity and difference elements combine to project an impression of the artist, and can be viewed as activated on three intersubjective levels, as established by Brewer & Roccas, and adapted for this model.

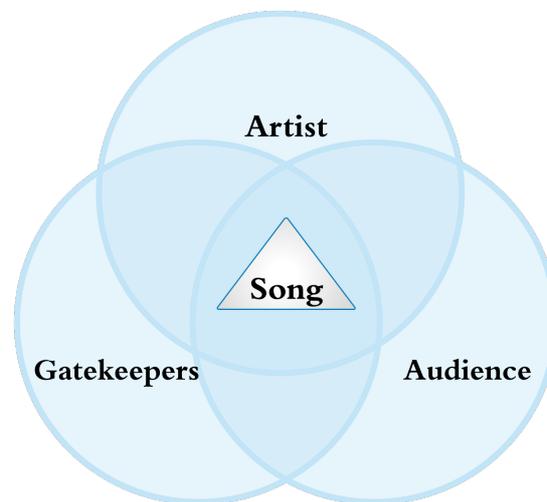


Figure 4: Optimality and the original artist

### Carl Barat: Peers & Precedents

Carl Barat's first solo album was an attempt to bring his iconic UK Indie identity to the mainstream. Previously known for The Libertines and Dirty Pretty Things in the 2000s, his was a form of tuneful, spiky British punk rock. The brief was to work with both the tunefulness and the sentimental aspects of his music in an effort to introduce Barat to a wider audience. Critics found similarities with Serge Gainsbourg, Kevin Rowland, The Jam, Madness, The Divine Comedy, and Last Shadow Puppets. Dimensions of difference emerged in the chanson-like, low-modality character stories with ornate explorations of intimacy and interpersonal complexity. Dramatic strings, slide guitars and brass parts supplied the standout musical motifs. Later, in response to polarized reactions Barat re-

emerged with an album that rejected these experiments with a return to fast, direct, high-contour Punk Rock. This bore a greater similarity with his Libertines work, as did the return to high-modality verisimilitude. Critics reported resonances with The Clash and Iggy Pop whilst fresh to the formula were Barât's overtly leftist, Orwellian allegories mixed with nostalgic Edwardian themes.

### Carl Barât: Gatekeepers

Zane Lowe's BBC1 'hottest record of the week' endorsement (Lowe, 2010) saw a key UK tastemaker begin an inclusion pattern that saw Barât momentarily straddle the mainstream substantially. The addition to BBC's Radio 2 playlist, Album of The Week in The Independent (Gill, 2010) recommendation, and four-star reviews in Mojo (Stubbs, 2010) and Metro UK (Halder, 2010) amongst others, saw Barât's first solo album roundly achieve its aim of bringing him to the attention of a mainstream audience. Yet whilst those opportunities opened up, Indie Rock mainstays NME (Haynes, 2010) and The Guardian (Dean, 2010) were disdainful, signifying that the experiment had alienated his core culture. Aware a choice was to be made, Barât's follow-up *Let it Reign* was acutely subversive and NME (Beaumont, 2015), The Guardian (Sullivan, 2015) and XFM lauded Barât's return to his Indie/Punk roots. Barât's instinct to reconsolidate his core fanbase with familiarity was stronger than his desire to pursue difference for fresh audiences. For Carl Barât, optimality was strained and then re-established, as his music strayed from then returned to, an authentic reflection of his core sub-culture.

### Carl Barât: Audience

Barât's core Gen-X audience is strongest in the UK, and comprised of individuals aged 16 to 24 when The Libertines had their #1 album in 2004. By the time portfolio songs were released these people were 25+ years of age, metropolitan, educated, literate, critical and liberal. Barât's songs aspire to a romantic, hedonistic, overtly poetic, humanist, overtly British blend, and his first solo album experiment was an attempt to translate these qualities for an audience that had matured. Accordingly, the album was slower, more romantic, conflicted and theatrical; experimenting with fictional song characters and ballads. Whilst this album brought Barât to a new audience that took him to #4 on the BBC UK Independent Chart, it was not universally well received by his core fans: the songs were arguably too different and not similar enough to Barât's Libertines work. His follow-up album reasserted sonic and stylistic markers similar to his previous work whilst repositioning Barât as activist and social critic. Across these two albums we witness optimality disrupted by the novel gestures of a new direction, and later

corrected with an album that aligned with his audience's ethical and aesthetic values. Carl Barât and The Jackals have since toured the UK and Europe extensively as well as Russia and China, where their fans share similar demographics and predilections as their UK base.

### **CousteauX: Peers & Precedents**

CousteauX is a 2017 reboot of an act that, in the 2000s, achieved international mainstream radio play, critical appraisal and physical sales. Its reboot sought to update their earlier *Chamber Pop* and *Sophisti-Pop* (allmusic.com, 2019) sound with rougher, darker Alternative Rock sensibilities. The aim was to eschew the mellowing attributes of maturation, and instead explore a darker sensibility. Reviewers heard similarity to David Bowie, Scott Walker and Burt Bacharach whilst noting demi-monde qualities reminiscent of Nick Cave, Mark Lanegan and Lana Del Rey. The salient distinction in this act is in the way it combines the agile baritone of singer Liam McKahey with harmonically rich torch songs overtly exploring complicated, adult, amatory themes. There is a seamy, nocturnal quality to this music and an intense, dark melancholy Lorca (1935) refers to as *duende*, and Portuguese Fadistas embrace as *saudade*: the bittersweet presence of loss in love and life.

### **CousteauX: Gatekeepers**

CousteauX's comeback album was signed to Chris Blackwell's Blue Mountain Music, and this gatekeeper funded its promotional campaign in the UK, Italy and the USA. The instinct to darken our heritage aesthetic was welcomed emphatically by music journalists, webzines and bloggers. The album was awarded Editor's Choice in AllMusic.com (AllMusic.com 2017), Best Album of 2017 in Music Republic (Redley, 2017), Best Albums of 2017 (Zuel, 2017) (BlowUp 2017), Album of The Month in BlowUp Italy (Babando, C. 2017), 4 stars in Mojo (Harrison, 2017), 8 /10 Record Collector (Butcher, 2017), 10/10 in Eyezine Italy (Accio, 2017), 5/5 Music Republic (Redley 2010), Fall albums to be thankful for (Culture Sonar, 2017) amongst others. It was Song of The Day on the iconic KCRW in LA and spot played in Italy and on the NPR network in the USA. Spot plays in the UK were also achieved on BBC Radio 2, BBC 6Music, Absolute Radio and BFBS Forces Radio. So, whilst the album's identity achieved effective optimality with music magazines and webzines, crucially it failed to get playlisted at BBC2, BBC 6Music nor added to AAA radio in the USA or commercial networks in Italy. So whilst CousteauX made substantive critical impact, it failed to achieve rotation at radio or playlisting on Spotify. ODT would conclude that journalists,

writers and bloggers found echoes of canonical acts sufficiently balanced with the band's unique qualities. ODT would also conclude also that radio programmers found this familiar enough for spot plays, but too different for assimilation into playlists.

### **CousteauX: Audience**

Facebook statistics indicate CousteauX followers are largely between the ages of 35-55, are 55 to 45% male to female, and are distributed across 34 countries (Facebook, 2020). Cousteau's appeal in the 2000s was to late-boomers and Gen-X music aficionados, and these demographics seem to correlate. 2017 saw CousteauX play sold-out 350-capacity venues including The Blue Note in Milan, the 100 Club in London, and Villa de Arcotes in Porto. Like the band members themselves, the audiences we encountered were often fans of those occasions where rock musicians such as David Bowie, Scott Walker or Nick Cave attempt Torch Song and Chanson. To the extent that we share this specific set of tastes, CousteauX remain representative of their audience. From what we can ascertain, we seem to be also representative in terms of our age and broader preferences for edgy, cinema, literature and art. We are different only in the sense that we are semi-professional musicians privileged with the luxury of selling sufficient original music to perform to rooms full of fans internationally; yet that is difference enough for this formula to maintain its modest power.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst this thesis is limited by its available releases, nevertheless it demonstrates that the application of ODT to original songs facilitates a serviceable, constituent view of artist identity. Every genre will have its own set of variables, and every style will have its own Goldilocks Zone somewhere between typicality and novelty. It may be no more than a constructive thought experiment to entertain the existence of generative tension between the familiar and the new in original songs. However, many of the great artists we love offered something fresh whilst conforming to precedent to a familiar degree. An act in thrall to the past will seem overly derivative, yet radical innovation may render it too strange. Popular Music builds upon its heritage whilst seeking nourishment from its pioneers. The trick is to fit in and stand out at the same time.

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