

# Rebel Girls and Singing Boys: Performing Music and Gender in the Teen Movie

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Midway through the 1986 teen movie *Pretty in Pink* comes a strikingly memorable scene. The film's main character, Andie (Molly Ringwald), sits nonchalantly in the local record store where she works. Adorned with posters of mid-1980s post-punk groups like New Order and The Smiths, the store represents Andie's strong alternative music identity. In this particular scene, however, Andie's boss places a recording of Otis Redding's "Try a Little Tenderness" on the turntable, instantly transforming the mood. From out of nowhere, Andie's best friend, the overly-dramatic Duckie (Jon Cryer), bursts into the store and for the next two minutes proceeds to lip sync, dance, and gyrate his way through the climactic second half of Redding's 1966 soul classic. It is an enraptured, exuberant performance, almost as if he is physically possessed by the music. Andie, the object of Duckie's affections, however, is clearly unimpressed. Soon after his musical display, the deflated Duckie sadly learns that Andie's romantic longings lie elsewhere. His thinly masked musical cry for affection and tenderness has been in vain.

As unique and unforgettable as this scene is, the gendered dichotomy that it presents between females as musical connoisseurs and males as emotional performers is far from rare within the teen movie genre of the mid-1980s to early 2000s. From *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987) to *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) and *Juno* (2007), again and again we see female characters positioned as social outsiders via their devotion to alternative musical tastes. Likewise, in films as varied as *American Pie* (1999), *She's All That* (1999) and *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), teenage boys repeatedly assume the roles of dynamic performers. By breaking out into song, and often dance, adolescent males attempt to overcome social challenges. These recurring tropes raise important questions about the teen movie genre and its use of popular music. How and why does the teen movie divide its musical scores along gendered lines? What do these musical differences tell us about the contrast between female and male adolescence? What is the significance of the "Rebel Girl" within the history of the teen movie,<sup>2</sup> and how are we to interpret the teen boy who bursts into song onscreen?

My goal in this article is to dig more deeply into these questions by viewing the teen movie's soundtrack through the lenses of gender identity, musical genre, and the cinematic conventions of popular song scoring. As a "coming of age" film, the teen movie deals specifically with the gendered

rites of passage that mark the symbolic transition from adolescence to adulthood. Music in these films can thus help underscore a character's social transformation. Regardless of how the music guides our understanding of these characters, popular song functions differently for boys than for girls. If we commonly find boys performing their gender in spontaneous moments of public music spectacle—what I call a form of “karaoke masculinity”—girls are more likely to maintain a consistent outsider musical identity. A female character like the rebel girl is granted a stability through her musical connoisseurship, only to meet with various threats and tests as she navigates her way through the teenager's turbulent social world.

I begin this exploration by presenting a brief historical overview of the teen movie genre's birth in the mid-1950s and its musical scoring practices. From there I describe the changes that occurred in the early 1980s which ultimately served to redefine the teen movie. Specifically, this new wave of teen movies began to portray adolescence in a way that resembles anthropologist Victor Turner's description of the “liminal journey,” a socially defined process marked by rites of passage towards adulthood. Director and producer John Hughes is often credited with popularizing this narrative story structure, and from his very first teen movie feature, *Sixteen Candles* (1984), he deployed music as a way of enhancing character development, particularly along lines of gender, age, taste, and performance. Through a consideration of Hughes's influential 1980s films, and selected close readings of post-Hughes teen movies from the 1990s and 2000s, I demonstrate how the musical scores augment these tales of male and female teenage life. Paralleling the rise of punk, post-punk, alternative, and riot grrrl, we find strong, empowered girls in these films using music to sustain bravely independent female identities amid the trials of adolescence. At the same time, it is the filmic genre's less developed male characters, the “Duckies” of the teen movie world, for whom music more noticeably functions as a ritual act towards adult masculinity. Seen in this light, the teen movie offers a window through which we can examine the function of popular music in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century film, as well as the gendered adolescent roles of this period.

### Jukebox Musicals and Compilation Scores

As numerous studies and surveys have described, the teen movie genre as we know it today has its most prominent roots in the mid-1950s (Lewis 1992; Doherty 2002; Shary 2002; Tropiano 2006). While there were films, such as Mickey Rooney's *Andy Hardy* series, that starred youths prior to the 1950s, these movies were directed at and enjoyed by a general audience of adults

and young family members. The 1950s American movie landscape, however, underwent a “juvenilization” (Doherty 2002), in which the booming US teenage population emerged as a distinct sociological and subcultural class. Filmmakers, well aware of this growing demographic, with its own leisure income and high media profile, relentlessly pursued the burgeoning adolescent marketplace. The “teenpics” (Doherty 2002) that emerged during this time were produced for teens, about teens, and with teenage actors as the main characters. The teenpic was an enormously varied genre, and it appeared under many different manifestations. Teenpics ran the gamut from themes of juvenile delinquency (1956’s *Hot Rod Girl*) and sensationalist horror (1957’s *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*) to fun, frolic, and romance in beach movies (1959’s *Gidget*).

Rock ’n’ Roll was an integral component of these early teen movies. No other cultural marker epitomized the rebellion, youthful energy, and consumerist passions of the 1950s teenager as directly as this new musical style. This association was first captured most powerfully in the 1955 juvenile delinquency drama *Blackboard Jungle*, which featured Bill Haley & the Comets’ 1954 single “(We’re Gonna) Rock Around the Clock” playing over the opening credits. The film became a center of controversy when it was met with dancing and rioting young audiences, and newspaper headlines proclaiming the music’s potential societal dangers. Savvy filmmakers took note and soon began eagerly incorporating rock ’n’ roll music into their productions, not only as an instant signifier of the adolescent lifestyle, but also as a marketing tool for specific artists and their recordings. Many of these films, such as the 1956 quickie cash-in *Rock Around the Clock*, took the form of what are commonly referred to as “jukebox musicals,” a direct descendent of the 1930s “backstage musical.”<sup>3</sup> Like its predecessor, the plot of the jukebox musical revolves around the problems, pitfalls, and ultimate triumph of putting on a show for an onscreen (and consequently off-screen as well) audience. The music is most frequently diegetic—that is, it emanates from an onscreen source and is therefore audible to onscreen characters. Songs in these films rarely advance the plot or enhance characterization; rather, the onscreen events typically stand as flimsy excuses for moving from one musical performance or dance sequence to another. In the 1950s rock ’n’ roll teenpic, the film is rather transparently a vehicle for the music.

By the mid-1960s, the rock ’n’ roll teenpic had largely run its course and films specifically about adolescents had fallen out of favor. The genre’s decline coincided with an increased media interest in the college-aged counterculture. Accordingly, depictions of youth on screen began to slant towards more mature, twenty-something oriented features like *The Graduate* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969). Both these films drew critical acclaim and were

wildly influential, not only for their depictions of generational alienation, but also for their transformation of popular music scoring practices. The Simon and Garfunkel songs that accompany *The Graduate*, for example, appear not simply for promotional purposes nor as stylistic markers, but rather to serve the film's narrative development. The moody folk rock strains of "The Sounds of Silence" convey Benjamin Braddock's (Dustin Hoffman) sense of isolation and disillusionment. They provide a glimpse into his thoughts and motivations, acting, as Todd Berliner and Philip Furia (2002) have suggested, as an "internal song." Likewise, in *Easy Rider* Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild" expresses the restless, rebellious mindset that fuels Wyatt's (Peter Fonda) and Billy's (Dennis Hooper) exploratory cross-country journey via motorcycle. Unlike the music of the teenpics, the popular songs in these films are nondiegetic, and subconsciously underscore onscreen mood and character actions.

Film scholar Jeff Smith (1998) has labeled these types of popular music soundtracks that emerged at the end of the 1960s as "compilation scores." Composed of pre-recorded songs, these scores introduced a new set of musical conventions that would have a profound effect on trailblazing "New Hollywood" 1970s filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, and George Lucas. In their hands popular songs were now embraced for their rich array of associational properties. They employed songs that audiences would easily connect with specific historical and social contexts, and that would open onto what Anahid Kassabian (2001) has termed "affiliating identifications." The Little Italy locale of Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), for example, is augmented by a mixture of opera and classic rock 'n' roll songs, while the music of Hank Williams helps establish the 1950s small town Texas setting of Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971). Filmmakers also increasingly relied upon lyrics and song titles to "speak for" characters or comment on a film's action. In Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973), the 1956 doo wop song "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" not only evokes the film's retro nostalgia, but also underscores one character's first amorous glimpse of a mysterious blonde. Paired with the visible signs of youth fashion, pop and rock songs could denote a variety of subcultural identities. Leather jackets and pompadours accompanied by rockabilly instantly identify a 1950s delinquent. Psychedelic music and tie dye evokes hippies. As such, the songs in these soundtracks function as more than just marketing tools; they are intimately woven with the movie's characters and narrative impulses.

## The New Teen Movie Genre

The teen movie lay largely dormant throughout much of the 1970s, but by the decade's end it enjoyed a strong resurgence. As Timothy Shary (2002) has argued, this surge in popularity can be attributed in part to the development and rise of the suburban shopping mall, which not only served as a prominent setting *within* many early 1980s teen movies, but also provided the site of the new multiplex theaters that attracted teen film audiences in droves. Like their cinematic predecessors from the late 1950s and early 1960s, these movies were made for young people and about young people, yet they differed dramatically from mid-century teenpics in their portrayal of teenage life. Where the rock 'n' roll teenpic took a light-hearted, quasi-anthropological view of teen culture, treating young people and their music almost as if they were a distinctly different race than adults,<sup>4</sup> the new teen film presented a more nuanced portrait of adolescent angst and the sometimes funny, often painful transition into the adult world. Much of the drama and humor in this first wave of early 1980s teen movies centered on the uncertainties and discoveries of teenage sex life, and the loss of one's virginity. Taking their cues from the frank onscreen treatments of sexuality that had revolutionized the 1970s cinema landscape, the teen film most commonly took the shape of an R-rated "sex quest" narrative. Films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *The Last American Virgin* (1982) highlighted the awkwardness of sexual encounters, and the emotional and physical consequences, including abortion, that teenagers could face.

By the mid-1980s the teen movie had begun to drift away from its obsession with teen sexuality towards a more sanitized focus on romance and the everyday complications of the teenage years. It is certainly no coincidence that this shift coincided with the first public recognitions of AIDS as a national health risk. The change was no doubt also largely guided by the Motion Picture Association of America's 1984 institution of the PG-13 rating. In this new moral climate, writer/director/producer John Hughes emerged with a series of popular films—*Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Weird Science* (1985), *Pretty In Pink* (1986), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987)—which redefined the tenor of the teen movie. Where previous teen movies had often veered towards titillation and exploitation, Hughes treated his characters with empathy. He probed the adolescent experience in great depth, introducing character

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stereotypes and opposing social cliques such as *The Breakfast Club*'s "brain," "juvenile delinquent," "basket case," "princess," and "jock," only to reveal the depth beneath these caricatures. As Roz Kaveney has written, "Hughes took teenagers seriously and this seriousness manifests in the way that their problems and traumas are often complex back stories rather than mere givens" (2006:45–46). He presented a variety of characters with which young audiences could identify.

Hughes developed his characters along distinct musical lines that differed in numerous ways from the teen movie's earlier 1950s antecedents. Following the innovative lead of his New Hollywood predecessors, Hughes used a mix of diegetic and nondiegetic popular songs to demarcate boundaries of age and social status. In *Sixteen Candles*, the heroine's snotty younger brother is constantly seen with his Walkman headphones blaring heavy metal and hard rock songs, an unmistakable sign of his juvenile demeanor. In *Pretty in Pink*, Andie's older record store boss is associated with both the warm nostalgia of her generational past (The Association's 1966 hit "Cherish"), as well as the bland conformity of her adulthood (Barry Manilow's 1978 disco hit "Copacabana"). Hughes's more comedic films, like *Sixteen Candles*, often employ nondiegetic music for ironic humorous effects, as with the spindly freshman Geek (Anthony Michael Hall) whose entrances are repeatedly scored with the swaggering, masculine themes from *Dragnet* and *Peter Gunn*. His more dramatic films, like *Pretty in Pink*, occasionally use the nondiegetic "internal scoring" of contemporary songs to add insight into the characters. Duckie's desperate lovelorn pining is amplified by the Smiths' "Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want" (1984), and New Order's dramatic, melancholy instrumental "Elegia" (1985) signals Andie's conflicted emotions and her growing sense of romantic and societal isolation.

While all of Hughes's films also contain liberal doses of composed underscoring, from a musical standpoint it is undoubtedly the popular songs that were most crucial in ensuring his films' success. One of the strongest factors in this success was the emergence of MTV in the early 1980s, which prompted movie and music companies to cross-promote their products not only through radio singles and album soundtracks, but also through music videos that often featured the artist edited together with select scenes from the film. Effectively acting as movie trailers, the video for a song like The Psychedelic Furs' "Pretty in Pink" promoted the film while helping propel the teen movie soundtrack up the charts. By the middle of the decade, soundtrack releases for films like *Footloose* (1984) and *Vision Quest* (1985), as well as *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink*, had all cracked the U.S. *Billboard* Top 20, solidifying the connection between teen movies and popular music. Given the reality of this synergistic relationship, it is tempting

to view the presence of popular music in the teen movie primarily from an economic standpoint, as the result of sound marketing strategies.<sup>5</sup> As I will argue throughout the remainder of this article, however, the music of the teen movie reflects more than just the decisions of film company executives and music supervisors. Rather, music in these films serves both to underscore primary narrative functions and a particular ideological view of adolescence as a time of transition.

At heart, the Hughes teen movie and the many films that subsequently followed his model are tales of social transformation. They relate stories of young people and the struggles that they face on the path towards adulthood. In this respect these teen movies draw on the popular perception of adolescence as a “troubled” time, one wracked by turmoil as teens fumble to forge an identity that will signal their growth and a newfound stability. As various historians of youth studies have pointed out, such characterizations have accompanied the concept of adolescence since its earliest introduction into American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Kett 1977; Lesko 2001). One of the first and most influential studies, G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence* (1904), romanticized youth as a period of “upheaval” and “storm and stress” that warranted careful monitoring and control. Since that time, adolescents have routinely been seen as residing in an “awkward age” (Kett 1977) on the fringes of their societal potential. The accomplishment of the Hughes teen movie was to both dramatize and humanize this construction of the teenage experience as one of flux and transformation.

If earlier teen movies had perpetuated a view of teenagers as members of some fascinating and mysterious “tribe,” Hughes and other teen movie directors shifted this anthropological tone towards a more nuanced narrative framework. Perhaps recognizing that teenagers are commonly depicted as dwelling in a “border zone” or on the “threshold” (Lesko 2001),<sup>6</sup> they placed their teenage characters in a series of turbulent situations to emphasize their procession through a distinct “rites of passages” (van Gennep 1960) or, to borrow Turner’s terminology, a “liminal” period of transition. The concept of liminality is one that Turner developed out of his field studies in central Africa, where he observed the activities of *liminal entities*, or “threshold people . . . betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, and ceremonial” (1969:95). As with Arnold van Gennep’s earlier research on initiation rites, Turner recognized the move from ambiguous liminality to a more defined social role as one accomplished through a ritual process stretched across three stages, which he labeled separation, margin (Limen or “Threshold”), and aggregation:

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The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a “state”), or from both. During the intervening “liminal” period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) are ambiguous; he [sic] passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and “structural” type. (Turner 1969:94–95)

The typical Hughes teen movie storyline deploys its teenage characters within a similar tripartite progression from crisis to climactic conclusion, one that also follows the conventional narrative structure of the three-act film paradigm (Field 1979): Act I (set up), Act II (confrontation), and Act III (resolution). In the Hughes narrative arc, an initial crisis occurs (a “separation”), often in the form of romantic frustration, a struggle with adult authority, or class frictions. The characters enter a “margin” and must each endure some type of ritual trial (whether it be the denunciations of their peers, physical confrontation, or public humiliation) in order to realize their chosen goals and cross over into the realm of adulthood. A formal group gathering occurs—most usually, the high school prom—in which they must prove themselves to their peers as a testament of their newfound maturity and social status. At this point of “reaggregation,” the film ends with the main characters gaining a certain degree of independence and respect, tokens of their symbolic entry into the adult world.

To be sure, such representations in the teen movie draw the teenage transformative experience in broad strokes rooted in heightened fantasies and cultural myths rather than any distinct realism. As Ray Raphael (1988) argues in his study of male initiation rites, however, such exaggerated portrayals have long captivated us because they relieve the journey from American adolescence into adulthood of some of its ambiguous mystery. The transition to adulthood is measured in so many different ways, ranging from the physical (an increase in strength) and the physiological (the growth of facial hair) to the legal (the drinking age) and the economic (securing a job), that there is no singular experience that can account for one’s transformation. It is precisely for this reason that the anthropological stories of West Africa, New Guinea, and other cultures—in which boys achieve manhood through trials of starvation, humiliation, torture, and even genital mutilation—hold such a powerful and visceral allure. We are drawn to these rituals because



they frame the rites of passage in definitive, dramatic terms. The “initiation as drama” (Raphael 1988:12) dispels uncertainties about the process. The representation of the teenager as a *liminal entity* couches the adolescent to adult transformation in compelling, easy to grasp terms.

Repeatedly throughout its three acts, the Hughes teen movie draws on popular music, particularly in its diegetic forms, to propel the film’s liminal entities through their dramatic teenage transformations. In the first act, Hughes introduces his characters in personal settings like the teenage bedroom or car, where a song playing on a stereo or radio serves as a marker of that character’s taste and identity. In the second act, the characters are thrust into more ambiguous and potentially marginalizing settings, such as the socially charged space of the teen house party, where the loud, insistent music blasting from some unseen stereo drowns out conversation and encourages libidinous bodily encounters. Lastly, the third act concludes with a gathering such as the prom, where the music of a live band or DJ unifies the teenage community through the rituals of dance and public display. In each of these instances, the film’s compilation score augments characterization and conveys details of settings and place that advance the narrative’s liminal journey. In the two sections that follow, I examine in more detail the ways in which the teen movie uses music to denote adolescence as a period of liminal transformation. As we will see, these movies deploy their soundtracks and social dramas along specifically gendered lines.

## Rebel Girls

Of all Hughes’s contributions to the teen movie genre, one of the most notable was that he centered many of his films on female, rather than male protagonists, investing them with a strong sense of rebellion. The role of the “Rebel Girl” was not without precedent in the teen movie. 1950s exploitation films like *Teenage Crime Wave* (1955) and *Unwed Mother* (1958), for example, featured female rebels as deviant delinquents who flaunted societal and legal conventions. Such films drew on the moral panics surrounding the new youth subculture, and the sobering possibilities that teenage girls might rebel against the family and be lost to the dangerous lure of the street. The Rebel Girl that emerged through the 1980s Hughes teen movie, however, is decidedly different. Portrayed within the safe white suburban environment of homes and schools, her rebellion is directed not against the parental structure, but rather against the social hierarchies and pressures of her peers.

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**Figure 1:** The “rebel girl” in her musical milieu. Andie at work in the record store (*Pretty in Pink*, 1986). © 1986 Paramount Pictures. Used by permission.



The character of Andie in *Pretty in Pink* presents the fullest realization of the Hughes Rebel Girl as an outsider within her own teenage milieu. The daughter of a single unemployed father, Andie is literally a girl from the wrong side of the tracks attending a high school full of wealthy students. Rich girls taunt her in gym class, and the villainous Steff (James Spader) attempts to bribe her into compromising her virtue. Hughes underscores Andie’s alienated status not only through her job at the local independent record store, but through various other musical cues as well. Her bedroom is filled with the sounds of alternative artists like Suzanne Vega, and she is also portrayed as an active consumer, attending shadowy nightclubs to hear live underground music. This sense of exploration and personal autonomy extends to her eccentric homemade retro “punk-flapper” clothing (Corliss 1986:67), which serves as a striking DIY (“do-it-yourself”) visual analogue to her musical interests. Taken as a whole, Andie’s strong sense of personal style and cultivated musical tastes place her as an “Other” in the midst of feminine conformity, while simultaneously suggesting that in some ways she already is a more fully developed and refined adult than her spoiled, affluent high school contemporaries.

Molly Ringwald was without question the most iconic of the 1980s teen movie stars, landing on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1986 with the release of *Pretty in Pink*. Two decades later, the roles that she played, especially that of Andie, remain a tremendous influence on the generation of teenagers to

whom Hughes directed his teen movie creations (Clarke 2007; Lee 2007). When that same generation began to enter the ranks of the young Hollywood filmmakers in the late 1990s, it is little surprise that they continued to draw inspiration from both Ringwald and Hughes. As Kirsten Smith, screenwriter for such youth-oriented films as *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *Legally Blonde* (2001), and *She's the Man* (2006), explains, Hughes's distinct combination of alternative music and rebellious female characters made a lasting and profound impression on her:

I distinctly remember the soundtrack for *Pretty in Pink* as being a major turning point for me. The music in that movie—Echo and the Bunnymen, the Smiths, Psychedelic Furs—was so cool and so far off the Top Forty dial that it made me change the kind of girl that I was. I wanted to be like Molly Ringwald, driving a Karmann Ghia and listening to New Order and Suzanne Vega. John Hughes did a great job of bringing an off-beat, new wave vibe to his movies. (Kubernik 2006:289)

The most obvious of Andie's descendents appears in Smith's *10 Things I Hate About You* in the character of the caustic high school senior Kat (Julia Stiles). Kat's rebellion is couched in much more overtly feminist terms than Andie's. She reads Sylvia Plath, dresses in black and combat green clothing, and rails against "the oppressive patriarchal values that dictate our education." Like Andie, however, her identity is inseparable from her musical taste, which is demonstrated through her allegiance to female indie and punk-oriented artists, and her desire to start her own band. In this respect, Kat's character is very much a token of her 1990s era, when the media turned attention towards the activities of the feminist punk "riot grrrl" movement, and routinely heralded the growing numbers of "women in rock" as a seismic shift in the popular music landscape. Indeed, as Smith has explained, she conceived of Kat's character at a time when she was listening to underground riot grrrl groups like Bratmobile, Sleater-Kinney, and Bikini Kill. Given this background, Kat would appear to stand rather unambiguously as a marker of alternative independence poised against a suffocating commercial mainstream culture.

At the same time, the film's distinction between the alternative and the mainstream is more muddled than Kat's basic character sketch would suggest, and this is reflected especially in the movie's soundtrack. While Smith developed Kat's character out of an appreciation for the riot grrrl movement, even going so far as to send a compilation of appropriate songs to the music division handling the film's score at Walt Disney studios, her suggestions were all rejected, mostly for their "lo-fi quality" (Kubernik 2006:288). The music supervisors opted, instead, for a more polished, and safe, collection of

major label recording artists. Letters to Cleo, the female-fronted group that portrays Kat's favorite band in the film, is a perfect example. While they are meant to represent Kat's underground rock tastes, the Boston-based band's sound is an accessible amalgam of post-grunge and power pop, one that earned them a mid-1990s record deal with Warner Brothers. By the time of *10 Things I Hate About You*, Letters to Cleo had been road tested for a mainstream teen audience, having been featured on the soundtracks for the teen TV soap opera *Melrose Place* and the 1996 teen horror movie *The Craft*. As an example of "alternative rock," Letters to Cleo was precisely the type of major label band that made alternative such a confusing and contentious term throughout the 1990s, and begged the obvious question: "alternative to what"? (Frank 1995). As we will see in the analysis of *10 Things I Hate About You* that follows, while the storyline paints an unwavering portrait of Kat as a rebellious music connoisseur, the tensions between the alternative and the mainstream, both musically and socially, render her symbolic liminal journey to adulthood problematic.

Like the majority of recent teen movies, *10 Things* stretches Kat's liminal drama across the familiar three-act plot structure popularized in Hughes's films. Also, like many post-Hughes films from the late 1990s, it adds a new intertextual narrative wrinkle, as it presents Kat's transformation as a modern updating of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.<sup>7</sup> As the "shrew," Kat is defined by her utter disinterest in romance, while her younger sister Bianca (Larisa Oleynik) is yearning to discover the world of boys. The girls' overly protective father has forbidden Bianca to go on dates, but faced with her persistent pleading, he agrees to lift his restrictions, *only* if Kat starts dating first. This sets in motion a series of events where two of Bianca's potential suitors hire a mysterious juvenile delinquent, Patrick Verona (Heath Ledger), to entice Kat to go on a date. Despite her strong initial resistance, Kat (predictably) begins to fall for him and finds herself thrust into a liminal position as she begins to embrace the romantic emotions she had previously sworn off. Viewing the film's plot as a representation of Turner's three stages, *10 Things* charts Kat's *separation* from her initial independent, or alternative, state into an unfamiliar *margin* of conventional romance and relationships, and her subsequent *aggregation* and passage back into societal stability.

*10 Things* establishes Kat's independence in its very first scene, underscoring her alternative outsider status through definitive musical means. The camera focuses in on a carload of carefree high school girls, bouncing and singing along to the Barenaked Ladies' chart-topping hit single "One Week." Kat pulls up alongside them, her car stereo blaring Joan Jett's raucous early '80s anthem, "Bad Reputation." This act of public sonic warfare, waged both against the school's mainstream crowd and a ubiquitous popular song, em-

phasizes Kat's isolation from the conservative teenage social realm. Though Kat does not utter a single word in the scene, Jett's song instantly identifies her as a rebel, fusing Kat's character with a long history of alternative and punk female-centered bands. Jett, who had been labeled the "original grrrl" (Vincentelli 1994) in the alternative music press for her production work and mentoring of groups like Bikini Kill, provides a potentially strong foundation for Kat's feminist musical identity.

The film's first act adds further nuance to this public depiction of rebellion as we learn more about Kat through the privacy of her domestic surroundings, in particular her bedroom. As Alison Bain (2003) shows in her analysis of teenage girls and spatial representations in the teen movie, the adolescent female bedroom is a common filmic trope, presented as an intimate "place of retreat." It is a space that holds the secrets of the teenage girl's true inner self. In *10 Things* the bedroom reveals the depths of Kat's music fandom, as her walls, adorned with the appropriate posters of underground riot grrrl-related bands like Seven Year Bitch and The Gits, position her as a knowledgeable, informed music connoisseur. When one of Bianca's hopeful suitors probes Kat's bedroom in search of revealing clues, he discovers her collection of ticket stubs from the various concerts she has attended. As he later explains to Patrick, to engage with the real Kat, one must master her deep-rooted love of "angry girl music of the indie rock persuasion." The connection is made clear. To know Kat, one must know her musical taste.

In the film's second act, which represents Turner's "margin" period, Kat meets with the uncertainty of new social situations, and these potential upheavals are accompanied by decisive shifts in the musical soundtrack. One pivotal sequence of events in particular illustrates in bold detail the line separating Kat's alternative values from the mainstream she has assiduously avoided. Patrick, having learned from his informants of Kat's musical predilections, sets out to find her at a local club, where Letters to Cleo is playing live. As Patrick enters the venue he is met by a steady stream of young females whose aggressive, defiant stares establish the club's space as one bracketed away from an oppressive, male social realm. The energy of the live music and the joyous participation of the dancing female crowd serve to authenticate Kat's alternative identity. Patrick eventually spots Kat amidst the sea of bodies, enraptured by the mood and the music, and when she breaks away from the dance floor to get some water she finds him at the bar. Armed with his newfound knowledge of Kat's tastes, Patrick casually mentions to her that the live band is OK, but they are clearly "no Bikini Kill or The Raincoats" (another icon of female post-punk music). Hooked by his bait, Kat lowers her guard and eventually agrees to accompany Patrick later that night to a massive house party.

The transition from the space of the club to that of the house party is significant, for it represents with one sweeping motion Kat's separation from her alternative identity into the unfamiliar "margin" territory of mainstream youth consumption. Unlike the club's unified alternative communal female space or the solitary "place of retreat" that the girl's bedroom affords, the house party is a place both simultaneously private and public, where peer groups solidify and factions clash, and where the popular crowd usually reaffirms its superior social standing. It is also a highly charged exploratory liminal space (Bain 2003), where the combination of alcohol, a loss of inhibitions, and the seclusion of sectioned off bedrooms offers the possibility of crossing social boundaries. This scene shift to the house party in *10 Things* is marked by a dramatic change in music, as the soundtrack switches from its predominantly alternative and modern rock score to a sequence of songs composed of late 1970s and 1980s R&B, funk, and rap selections from Cameo, George Clinton, Salt-N-Pepa, and the SOS Band. The symbolic racialized function of this music is fairly transparent, as its association with sexually liberated African American bodies serves to usher the movie's white teen characters into a space rife with carnal possibilities.

Kat's entrance into this liminal space proves to be tumultuous. Disgusted by her environment and emboldened by a swift series of drinks, an inebriated Kat soon finds herself on display as she engages in a table dance to the thumping strains of the Notorious B.I.G.'s rap hit "Hypnotized." Urged on by the crowd, Kat abandons her strong feminist principles for the gyrating maneuvers of a strip club dancer, fully accommodating the camera's probing male gaze. Her suggestive body language highlights not only the erotic undercurrents that historically have accompanied much female performance, but also the potential dangers of what such sexual allure might attract—rape, pregnancy, or in the case of a white woman bumping and grinding to a black hip-hop song, miscegenation. Kat is spared any such fate, however, when she hits her head on a chandelier and is knocked unconscious, only to be rescued by Patrick. Her dangerous exhibitionist diversion into the mainstream of pornographic entertainment proves to be short lived.

Kat's impromptu performance and her graceless exit illustrate the sharp divide between public female and male performances in the teen movie. When the teen boy performs, it is an ecstatic moment of transcendence. For the teen girl, however, her bodily objectification serves as a cautionary societal reminder that the flaunting of white teen female sexuality is a transgressive act deserving of punishment and shame. On another more functional level within the film, the sequence of events acts as a simple strategic plot device to further Kat's initial separation and suggest a potential

union with Patrick. The R&B and hip hop score pushes Kat in an uncertain, potentially catastrophic direction, but as Patrick takes her away from the party, we leave behind that musical element, and Patrick engages Kat's rebel girl rock identity. This is reinforced on the car ride home when Letters to Cleo suddenly appears on Patrick's car stereo and Kat confesses to him her desire to start a rock band. In general, the placement and contrast of musical styles like rock and hip-hop in teen movies like *10 Things* reinforces divisions of space and cultural values that the teen characters must navigate in their liminal journey.

The link between music, space, and gendered identity is especially significant to the teen movie's third act conclusion, which sees a shift from the second act's house party to the more formal, adult-sanctioned space of the prom. As the last threshold before high school graduation, the prom, and its accompanying music, is heavily laden with significance. As sociologist Amy Best (2000) aptly describes the prom, it is a predominantly "feminine space," one that foregrounds the fashioning and display of female bodies. It symbolizes the teen girl's imminent emergence into adulthood, and as such parallels the third and final step in Turner's rites of passage, what he labels "aggregation" or "reincorporation." On the one hand, the presence of two female-fronted alternative rock groups, Save Ferris and Letters to Cleo, as the prom's musical entertainment seems to suggest that Kat's feminist values and independent musical tastes have won out. Kat's music has infiltrated the prom's formal space, serving as a bridge into the adult world. On the other hand, Save Ferris, like Letters to Cleo, was another late-1990s band with major label connections (Epic Records). Their version of alternative was thus one subsumed within the mainstream, and fairly far removed from Kat's purported riot grrrl roots.

The conflict inherent in these musical representations bleeds over into the equally problematic post-prom developments that signify even more fully Kat's reincorporation. It would appear, for example, when Kat is finally accepted to attend college at Sarah Lawrence, that she will be leaving the film's west-coast Seattle setting for an east-coast feminist utopia. Here, we assume, she will enter an independent adult role, fulfilling the promises of her teenage aspirations. But this resolution is trumped by the movie's closing scene, in which Patrick presents Kat with an electric guitar. While the gesture implies that Kat's adolescent dreams of rebellious musical creativity will become an adult reality, it also suggests that such ambitions can only be realized through her relationship with Patrick. Ultimately, Kat's liminal transformation hinges upon weak dichotomies that blur the lines between the alternative and the mainstream, and independence and intimacy.

Regardless of the compromises that defuse some of Kat's power, the significance of the rebel girl should not be underestimated. While characters like Kat and Andie have become an accepted part of the teen movie genre over the past two decades, it is easy to forget just how radical a departure their alternative music personas were from the pre-1980s portrait of female adolescence. As Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber pointed out in their pioneering 1976 study, "Girls and Subcultures," girls at that time were part of a bedroom culture largely confined to the domestic sphere, where their virtue could be shielded and their marriageability ensured.<sup>8</sup> Unlike their male counterparts, whose street subcultures and public displays attracted the scrutiny of sociologists, girls and their ritual music activities were "present but invisible" (McRobbie and Garber 1976). The irony is that studies have repeatedly shown that adolescent girls not only listen to considerably more music than adolescent boys (Coleman 1961; Christenson and Roberts 1998; Roberts and Foehr 2004), but also use the bedroom as a site of active music-making and media production as well (Kearney 2007). Even so, girls' engagement with popular music has been generally, and wrongfully, dismissed, cast under the mass culture derogative of the "teenybopper" label. In this regard, the image of the teen movie rebel girl, raised on the audacious sounds and fashions of punk, alternative, and riot grrrl stands as a laudable corrective. By introducing the public rebellion of the street into the sanctity of the white suburban middle class home, the rebel girl invests the female adolescent with a striking degree of agency and autonomy. Her adventurous musical tastes symbolically threaten society's efforts at containing the teenage girl.

Most of all, the rebel girl represents a progressive female identity. Read against the common view of female adolescence that paints the path towards adulthood in terms of a physical maturation and sexualization, the rebel girl enacts a different set of terms. She thwarts the male gaze, renouncing the uncomfortable mix of eroticized infantilization that renders so many filmic adolescent girls as passive "pretty babies" (Nash 2006). Instead, the rebel girl finds her voice, her identity through her mastery of the traditionally male dominated realm of music collecting.<sup>9</sup> Her musical knowledge speaks for her individuality. And while the soundtrack scoring of her musical taste, as we have seen with Kat, is subject to the synergistic impulses and commercial designs typical of any Hollywood studio music division, that fact should not blunt the message that the rebel girl sends. She carves a positive, empowering space in which girls wield their authority as refined musical connoisseurs.

At the same time, from the perspective of the liminal framework it is significant that the teen movie does not highlight her acquisition of this musical knowledge as a transformational device. Rather, her advanced



musical tastes are already firmly established as a defining feature of her character when we first meet her. If the rebel girl is to grow and change, then it will most likely be through her pursuit of romance, or her assumption, literally or symbolically, of an appropriate social role such as that of mother, daughter, or girlfriend. It is this disjunction that makes the character of the rebel girl at times so unsatisfying. She is empowered through her musical agency, but her identity formation is bound to the teen movie's romantic conventions. So, when Andie unites with her romantic interest at the end of *Pretty in Pink*, or when Kat breaks down crying in public over Patrick near the end of *10 Things*, it feels as if the rebel girl has been compromised. The overriding message is that her identity and sense of self can only be validated through her relationship to another (significant) masculine other. As we will see in the next section, while the teen movie's approach to male adolescence is no less stereotyped, the act of liminal transformation for teenage boys engages the popular music score in decidedly more spectacular and performative ways.

### Singing Boys

Unlike the rebel girl, who both begins and ends the Hughes and post-Hughes teen movie as an intelligent, assertive, and relatively fully formed character, the adolescent boys in these films are portrayed as immature and insecure figures. They are ill prepared, both for the adult world that awaits them, and for the emotional responsibilities of a romantic relationship. If the teen movie boy is to enter into the adult social order, this move will necessitate a drastic and dynamic transformation. He will need to confront and transcend the stereotype with which he is stamped at the movie's onset—that of the nerd, the jock, the juvenile delinquent—to assume a more acceptable, mature masculinity.

As we have already seen with the example of Duckie in *Pretty in Pink*, the teen movie suggests that such transformations might be accomplished symbolically through the public spectacle of musical performance. These performances are crucial, for they tap into a hidden reservoir of talent and native skill that otherwise lies dormant in the teen boy's characterization. We witness, along with them, their discovery of an innate musical ability. This act of performance is revelatory in part because the teen movie male is a relatively enigmatic character. Whereas we typically encounter the female rebel girl listening to diegetic music in the private sanctuary of her bedroom or participating in the public sphere of concerts and live shows, rarely do we see a teen boy at home, or in a place defined as his own distinct personal space. As such, it is also uncommon to see him actively engaging with music.

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**Figure 2:** The nerd transformed. William surfs the crowd (*Can't Hardly Wait*, 1998), "CAN'T HARDLY WAIT" © 1998 Global Entertainment Productions GmbH & Co., Film KG and SPE German Finance Co. Inc., All Rights Reserved, Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.



We have little sense of what constitutes his musical taste. In this context, the spectacle of his music performance stands as an initiation rite, a way of signifying his entry into and mastery over a risky, uncharted territory.

Of all the teen movie male identities, the nerd is the one whose masculine *lack* is most obviously foregrounded, and consequently most ripe for change. *Can't Hardly Wait* (1998) plays upon these possibilities in memorable fashion, crystallizing the nerd's transformation in one deliberately spectacular moment of musical performance. The scene is set up carefully. Throughout the film's first half, which transpires over the course of a single graduation night party rife with liminal possibilities, we witness the stereotypical nerd William (Charlie Korsmo) demonstrating a virtual litany of the nerd's most defining traits. He is a socially inept, desexualized character, one whose overly demonstrative intellect is used to compensate for his diminished physical presence. As the party progresses, however, and the alcohol begins to flow, William starts to loosen up. By the time the opening riff of Guns N' Roses' 1989 hard rock classic "Paradise City" is heard playing, he is poised to move beyond his nerdish state. William grabs a microphone and plunges in, singing along with Axl Rose. While he struggles awkwardly through the song's first refrains, before long a cheering makeshift audience gathers around him and the house party space transforms into a stadium rock setting, complete with a "stage," crowd surfing, and flashing lights. William rips apart his polo shirt to reveal a white tank top and he poses triumphantly to the enthusiastic

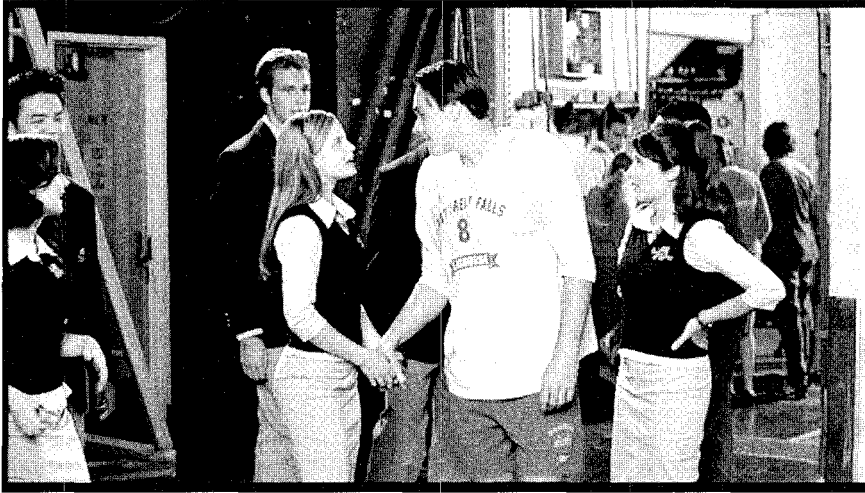
approval of a throng of screaming girls. A transference of masculine power occurs through William's adoption of Rose's voice and gestures, as the Guns N' Roses song literally overtakes his body. The hard rock karaoke masculinity of "Paradise City" serves to fill that which the nerd most obviously lacks—a strong physical presence, an embodiment.

While William's transformation highlights in humorous fashion the ironic distance separating the nerd from the rock star, it also suggests that the rock star's hyper masculinity is an accessible form of knowledge. It is a gendered performance that can be learned. William admits as much when he excitedly explains, before leaping into his performance, that he knows "Paradise City" because "a guy I tutored in math used to make me listen to it." Manhood as such looms as a rite of passage handed down from men (such as William's presumably more physically masculine and domineering pupil) to boys like William. It is mostly by mimicking the actions and achievements of established male role models that boys come to know *how* to be men. Seen in this light, one can understand why the teen movie filmmaker would let the sounds and words of older, canonical popular songs and their singers inhabit the bodies of teenage boys. A well-known song like "Paradise City" essentially comes pre-coded, bolstered by a set of recognizable musical genre associations. As a prototypical hard rock and heavy metal anthem, its "vocal extremes, guitar power chords, distortion, and sheer volume" (Walser 1993:108–9) articulate a form of power, a version of desirable masculinity to which a boy can aspire. In the context of the teen movie, the song and its performance serve as a convenient shorthand that frames the measures of manhood in easy to grasp terms.

Even more than this, William's performance taps into the fluidity of the rock star trope itself, a site through which men leave behind their private personal identities to assume a public, staged personality. The rock star is perhaps the ultimate symbol of individual attainment through the systems of industrialized leisure, and as such in Turner's schema falls into the category of the liminoid (1982). As distinguished from the prescribed rituals of the liminal, participants enter into the liminoid freely, and thus enjoy a greater sense of malleability and room to play. "Paradise City" is in many ways an unbridled celebration of the liminoid's transformative possibilities, an ode to the means through which another William, the troubled Indiana teenager William Bruce Rose, metamorphosed into the swaggering LA rock star Axl Rose. As Robert Walser points out, the song's chorus, in which Rose begs to be transported ("take me down"), draws on the ecstatic vocal style of the black gospel choir, and its double-time finale pushes his straining voice towards euphoric transcendence (1993:168–69). As Rose's voice emerges powerfully through the collective energy of the imagined live performance, so William's

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Figure 3: Oz's liminal journey through song. From jock . . . © 1999 Universal Pictures. Used by permission.



manhood is verified through public display and his playful rite of passage. Staged within the communal power of the house party/rock music concert, with its carnivalesque crowd surfing and frenzied audience, William's hard rock connoisseurship suggests that even as marginalized a figure as the nerd can move, however fleetingly, into a fully integrated social identity.

Not all of the teen movie's male transformations from adolescence to adulthood are as brazenly symbolic as William's spectacular performance in *Can't Hardly Wait*. The liminal journey that the male jock must travel in these films, for example, typically is more gradually paced across the duration of the movie. His position is particularly tricky. From the perspective of the teen world, the jock enjoys an unparalleled social status, perched atop the school's social hierarchy. He is popular, physically accomplished, and secure in his abilities. At the same time, viewed from the adult world, his boorish, brutish physicality, aggression, and objectifying views of women makes him an equally abject figure (Stephens 2003:126). If he is to grow and cross over into adulthood, those traits must be sublimated.

The character of Oz (Chris Klein) from *American Pie* (1999) illustrates an especially nuanced redemption through music of the jock persona and his progression from adolescence to adulthood. Oz is one of a group of four frustrated high school seniors who make a pact that they will have sex by prom night, convinced that this initiation rite will serve to validate their manhood. While the film's basic plot hearkens back to the early-1980s R-rated male sex quest teen movie, its sympathetic portrayal of youthful adolescence is cut from the post-Hughes cloth. Each of the boys embarks

**Figure 4:** . . . to jazz choir. The adolescent's reincorporation as an adult in *American Pie* (1999). © 1999 Universal Pictures. Used by permission.



upon routes of personal discovery that reveal to them the complexity of heterosexual relationships and female sexuality. For Oz, this occurs early on, when on a date with an older college woman, he casually implores her to “suck me, beautiful.” Unsurprisingly, she rebukes his fumbling and crude attempt at intimacy, but not before imparting some advice: he needs to become more sensitive to women’s needs. Oz sets his journey from abjection to subjectivity in motion when he decides to join the school’s jazz vocal choir. Oz fully embraces the act of musical performance, and with this new sensitivity in hand he comes to see the opposite sex as more than just passive bait waiting to ignite the male libido.

Oz’s transformation is most of all highlighted by the dramatic shift in musical genres that accompany his integration into the choir. Whereas the film’s first act finds Oz and his friends supported by a contemporary late 1990s melodic punk rock soundtrack, the jazz choir draws him into a performing repertory of 1960s and 1970s pop songs and ballads such as “Do You Believe in Magic?” and “How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You).” On the one hand, much like the nerd’s hard rock karaoke, the movie plays the contradictions inherent in this musical and social collision for laughs. The sight of the stereotypical jock suddenly transported into a saccharine world of pop balladeering humorously underscores the drastic measures he must take in order to systematically dismantle his coarse masculinity. On the other hand, the move from the juvenile masculine hardness of the punk rock score to the choir’s emphasis on songs of subtle romance and sentimentality signifies that Oz has taken a major step towards acquiring the trappings of a more emotionally mature and considerate adult. The performing group itself

also represents a considerable departure from his cloistered circle of white male friends. Not only is the group co-ed, but with its mixed membership of whites, African Americans, and Asian Americans it functions as a multi-racial and multi-cultural ensemble. In this respect, Oz has not simply discovered a new outlet for his previously untapped singing skills; he has relocated into an idealized diverse community, one whose harmonious social arrangement is mirrored in their close vocal harmonizing.

The most significant path for Oz's transformation lies not simply in the group workings of the choir, however, but in the realization of his own individual voice. In a key moment during rehearsal, Oz continues singing through a break in the music and instinctively bursts into a solo improvisatory scat. Eyes closed in emotional contemplation, his uninhibited expression taps into a deep reserve of soulful, musical blackness, one that has long stood for whites as a paragon of the masculine authenticity and depth of feeling that they ostensibly lack. Oz's impromptu gesture draws the approval of the choir's black director, who through her position of power symbolically passes on to him the racialized gift of her musical culture. As Krin Gabbard (2004) has pointed out, there is a long history of such relationships throughout the history of cinema. "White Hollywood" films for many decades have perpetuated a type of minstrelsy "black magic," employing the voices of African Americans to imbue their white on-screen actors with affective qualities, so they can express their most intimate feelings. In Oz's case the implication is that the rituals of black male musical performance, of jazz improvisation, can offer a white teen like himself a liberating power, a sense of confident "romance and gravitas" (Gabbard 2004:6).<sup>10</sup> It soon has its desired effect as he wins the affections of one of the choir's members, the refined and sensitive Heather (Mena Suvari).

As with any teen movie male character who disrupts the social balance, Oz must answer to his peers for his actions. In *American Pie* it is Oz's friend and fellow jock lacrosse player, the irredeemably vulgar Stifler (Seann William Scott), who reacts most forcefully to Oz's newfound vocal talents with the blunt pronouncement: "you're gay." Like the teenage boys who populate the pages of C.J. Pascoe's fascinating study on high school masculinity and sexuality, *Dude, You're a Fag* (2007), Stifler polices the homosocial order with a ruthless genderphobia, disciplining "fag" activities and imploring the four sex pact members to "get some balls." His comments by implication serve as an indictment of Oz's entry into the world of romantic ballads, soft rock and lite jazz, and the threat that these "feminized" musical genres pose to the group's masculine gender identity. Stifler's fears, in many respects, echo the gendered epithets that rock critics for decades have hurled in disdain at the "weak" and "wimpy" realm of pop, soft rock and singer-songwriters (McLeod 2002). Just as the dynamics of Stifler's jock world demand that he label and denounce "fags," lest the physical intimacy of the male sports team

boil over from homosocial bonding into homoerotic same-sex desire, so the critics protect and preserve the authenticity of rock's masculine fraternal order through their condemnation of a feminizing musical "Other." From this perspective, Oz's embrace of a smooth, Middle-of-the-Road (MOR) vocal balladeering style looms as a dangerous, transgressive act.

As much as these musical genres represent a feminizing threat to Oz's circle of male friends, they also symbolize his potential reincorporation into a new adult realm. This is especially evident when examining the layered genre history behind the song that he performs as a duet with Heather, "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved by You)." For many, the first version that will come to mind is James Taylor's 1975 Top Ten hit single. As one of the leaders of the early 1970s singer-songwriter movement, Taylor was among those artists who first signaled rock's transition from its raucous countercultural identity to a more mellowed, mature medium. In this context, Taylor's relaxed vocal style became synonymous with a new white middle class male vulnerability and sensitivity. By the time of "How Sweet It Is" Taylor had also become an Adult Contemporary staple, a musically middle-aged alliance that propelled him even further from the juvenilia of rock and into material more suitable for wedding receptions and the harmony of romantic bliss.<sup>11</sup>

The original rendition of "How Sweet It Is," a Top Ten hit for Marvin Gaye in 1964, is equally important to understanding Oz's transformation. Like much of Motown's music from the early 1960s, Gaye's single was an emblem of the label's vision of African American upward mobility. The song's smooth, polished arrangement and Gaye's soulful, emotionally charged romantic incantations conjures images of sharp suits, sophisticated dance steps, and adult respectability. Motown was famed for its "finishing school," complete with an etiquette instructor who turned the rough and raw teenage talent from the Detroit ghetto into well-mannered adult performers. In this respect, the process behind the label's gleaming product virtually thematizes Oz's acquisition of a new identity. Taken together, these two adult musical models—the white adult maturity of Taylor and the "black magic" of Gaye's Motown—signify the impressive distance that Oz has traveled on his liminal journey from the jock persona towards a more progressive masculinity.

For all the significant weight that Oz's musical adventures carry as a representation of his new adult development, his reincorporation in the end must also resolve the ironic dissonances of his identity. Ultimately, Oz must choose between the camaraderie of his jock allegiances and the choir's more socially progressive sphere. *American Pie's* third act predictably distills Oz's conflict: the last game of the lacrosse season and the jazz choir's final concert are scheduled for the same day. Oz initially decides to play in the game, but after an epiphany deserts his teammates at halftime and makes it to the concert just in time to salvage his new identity and duet with Heather. As with *10 Things I Hate About You*, it is hard not to see the conclusion as

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a compromise. While Oz's performance at the concert certainly legitimizes his transformation, he is never truly part of the choir. Oz arrives at the concert clad in his lacrosse uniform, a reminder that his masculinity is more hardened, and accomplished, than that of the choir's normal male cohort. The film even plays this discrepancy for laughs, as Oz's last minute appearance insures that Heather will not be forced to duet with one of the choir's more humorously "feminized" and ineffectual male singers. In the end, Oz's character never truly breaks free from the film's dominant heteronormative perspective. His social disruption is undoubtedly transgressive, but its impact is muted at best.

On the whole, the transformations through music that both Oz in *American Pie* and William in *Can't Hardly Wait* undergo stand as a bold reminder of how intimately masculinity and spectacle are bound within the cinema (Neale 1983). Men are constantly performing their gender in public, in full view. By no means is this limited to the teen movie. There are countless films in which adult males, trapped in abjection or a state of suspended adolescence, engage in musical performance in order to enact a change. The singing male is an endlessly renewable convention. Many of these instances draw on the tropes of romantic courtship, as in 1989's *Parenthood*, when the overly uptight Nathan (Rick Moranis), in an attempt to save his failing marriage, surprises his wife at work and serenades her in front of her high school classroom with The Carpenters' 1970 hit single "Close To You." In other cases, adult men embrace music as a means of forging an entirely new identity. In 2006's *Stranger Than Fiction*, for example, the regimented and robotic IRS employee Harold Crick (Will Ferrell) undergoes a broad "humanizing" transformation in part by realizing his longtime dream of learning the guitar. His odyssey culminates in an untutored, heartfelt performance of Wreckless Eric's 1978 power pop classic "Whole Wide World" that wins over the adult "rebel girl" object of his desires.

What is striking about all of the aforementioned examples is the degree of agency that they demonstrate. A cinematic teen boy or adult male cast into the margins freely chooses a way out of the morass through the spectacle of musical performance. In this regard, the male's liminal journey from adolescence to adulthood stresses a *becoming*, as opposed to the rebel girl's comparatively static sense of *being*. Such representations suggest a freedom of play with which males can engage and construct their gender. At the same time, these performative gestures are carefully regulated. They are always enacted within the context of an adoring, approving female response, assuring that the teen boy's entrance into the adult world will preserve a heteronormative order. In the end, even though the teen boy's transformation is more dynamic and redemptive than that of the rebel girl, the portrayal of their liminal journeys must adhere to the teen movie's rigid romantic designs. For all its suggestive powers, the music can only take them so far.



## Conclusion

Ever since its explosive emergence in the mid-1950s and its rebirth at the dawn of the 1980s, the American teen movie has been intimately associated with the sounds of popular music. In many respects the popular music that one encounters in a teen movie functions much as it does in most any other type of film. A popular song, and its specific style and range of cultural and historical associations, can be used to help establish settings and amplify dramatic situations. It also provides a convenient means for sketching a character's defining features and traits. This is especially significant to the teen movie, which typically emphasizes the social hierarchies—the divisions between “jocks and burnouts” (Eckert, 1989) and “freaks, geeks, and cool kids” (Milner, 2004)—that regulate the high school experience. Whether punctuating the jock's aggressive masculinity with the sounds of hard rock, or using “alternative” styles to connote a social outsider, the teen movie strategically deploys the codes and conventions of musical genres in ways that help an audience “read” the film's characters.

As this article has argued, these musical characterizations are mapped along discrete gendered lines. A particularly powerful example is that of the rebel girl. As a dedicated music connoisseur aligned with contemporary alternative styles, she challenges the common portrayal of the female adolescent as a gullible consumer and an unwitting victim of the mass culture industry. The teen movie rebel girl is shown to have discriminating musical tastes; she is invested with a high degree of what Sarah Thornton (1996) has referred to as “subcultural capital.” While the presence of a strong female character like Kat in *10 Things I Hate About You* is to be applauded, she is unfortunately stuck in a compromised position. She is bolstered by the liberatory powers of a rebellious musical stance, but because she must also carry the brunt of the teen movie's soundtrack, she is forced to conform to the film's obvious commercial designs. Lodged in a collapsed alternative/mainstream, her representation is affirming yet hollow.

More than this, though, the “rebel girl” is problematic for the way in which her character must bend to the teen movie's narrative designs. As a film genre whose plot hinges on the symbolic transition from adolescence to adulthood, we constantly encounter teens in uncertain and vulnerable states as they search for their identity. In its most basic form, the teen movie perpetuates the popular perception of adolescence as a liminal “coming of age” period, where the teenager's rites of passage swell in importance and take center stage. The teen movie lays out for us in exaggerated detail the transformations of girls to women and boys to men. Introduced into such a setting, the rebel girl walks a delicate, uneasy line. Her strong musical individuality serves as an anchor of her identity throughout, but begins to wane in importance as her transformation is realized through the pursuit

of a romantic relationship. Such caricatures revel in the “hip” possibilities of adolescent feminism at the same time as they undercut the rebel girl’s autonomy by assigning her the adult role of “the girlfriend.”

The teen movie generally treats its male characters in a different fashion. Where the teen girl is often a central protagonist, one who dwells equally in domestic and public spaces, the teen movie male tends to be a more broadly drawn, and predominantly public, figure. Unlike the rebel girl whose identity is strongly tied to a rich variety of diegetic music sources—whether it be the bedroom stereo murmuring in the background, the radio blaring from a car, or the live music at a club—the teen movie male is a more musically enigmatic and pliable character. Defined not as a dedicated music fan or consumer, the male nerd or jock instead is more likely to be found simply bursting into song. The teen male’s *acquisition* of music through this act of spontaneous performance is particularly symbolic for it signals a dramatic change and growth in his character. In the case of a nerd like William in *Can’t Hardly Wait*, when he launches into “Paradise City,” he is provided with a rugged masculinity and desirability that suggests a spectacular, idealized adult role.

Such moments of “karaoke masculinity,” which invoke a familiar repertory of established popular songs, are paradigmatic within the teen movie. Certainly filmmakers have been drawn to these scenes for the ironic comic potential that they offer. But considered within the teen movie’s liminal designs, there are other reasons why we commonly find the sounds and words of older songs placed in the mouths of adolescent boys. An established popular song communicates through its history and genre associations an accepted form of masculine identity. In a sense it has already articulated what the teen male wishes to say or become, in a way immediately recognizable to the audience. And in the case of Axl Rose’s snaky stadium rock dancing or James Taylor’s mellowed sentiments, it comes with an entire array of bodily gestures symbolic of an iconic form of adult masculinity. As with the rebel girl, however, these transformations are carefully regulated within the teen movie’s generic romantic conventions. For all the teen male’s transgressive possibilities, his performance most always is defined through an onscreen female audience that preserves the film’s heteronormative designs.

More than two decades after John Hughes popularized the particular social transformations and musical scoring practices that have become standard features of the contemporary teen movie, the genre continues to thrive and flourish. There is little mystery as to why the teen movie has had such a lasting appeal. Adolescence, as a recognized period of youthful development, has captivated adults since the late nineteenth century, and fueled by media representations, marketing frenzies, and a “juvenilization”

of American culture, its symbolic importance in the lifecycle has only grown in prominence over time. Characterized as the last threshold before adulthood, adolescence has been portrayed as a time of uncertainty and volatility where identity formation is in a state of flux. The teen movie reduces the complexities of the adolescent experience to a series of stock dramatic initiation rites. It positions the teenager as a liminal entity, one whose rites of passage ensure a stable adult socialization. The teen movie's popular music soundtrack does more than merely accompany the film's ritual settings. It serves as a means through which the teen movie characters can establish and perform their identities, and it does so in a way that both challenges and reinscribes common cultural myths about the gendered differences between female and male adolescence.

### Notes

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1. The label "post-punk" refers to those bands, such as New Order and The Smiths, who emerged in the early 1980s on the heels of the original mid-1970s British punk movement. By the mid-1980s one would also have found such bands labeled as modern rock, college rock, or alternative, all of which connoted the music's non-mainstream stance.

2. I borrow the label "Rebel Girl" from a 1992 Bikini Kill song of the same name.

3. Smith (1998:157) uses the "jukebox musical" label to describe these mid-1950s rock 'n' roll films. In recent years theater critics have appropriated the "jukebox musical" label to categorize stage productions such as *Mamma Mia* and *Movin' Out* that base their plots and dramatic action around the back catalogs of popular recording artists like ABBA and Billy Joel.

4. In some cases late 1950s/early 1960s filmmakers even introduced the "anthropological" view of teenage culture as a specific plot device. The narrative of *Beach Party* (1963), for example, revolves around an astonished professor observing teenage mating rituals from afar.

5. Certainly, there are teen movies where the music soundtrack bears the noticeable stamp of industry insider relationships and decisions. A particularly notorious example is *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), a movie for which Irving Azoff served as both its co-producer and music supervisor. Azoff took his dual positions as an opportunity to pad the film with acts from his Front Lines Production artist management firm (Denisoff and Romanowski 1991:327–32). While music from Azoff clients like Stevie Nicks, Jimmy Buffett, Don Henley, and Timothy B. Schmidt offered a convenient soundtrack solution, their relaxed adult rock sounds seem jarringly out of place with the movie's teenaged characters, especially when heard juxtaposed against the movie's memorable, and more appropriate, new wave contributions from the likes of The Go-Go's and The Cars.

6. Lesko's comparison of adolescence to a "border zone" makes a clear nod towards anthropology. She takes the idea from Donna Haraway's study of primates (1989), where border zones signify the "imagined end points of adult and child, male and female, sexual and asexual, rational and emotional, civilized and savage, and productive and unproductive" (Lesko 2001:50). The concept of adolescence, like Haraway's primates, is cast in "evolutionary" terms, as a stage through which one must progress.

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7. As Davis (2006) points out, within a roughly twenty month period in 1999 and 2000 at least half a dozen teen movies appeared that derived their plots from literary classics, including re-workings of *Pygmalion* (*She's All That*) and *As You Like It* (*Never Been Kissed*). They were not the first teen films to do so. Earlier in the decade, 1995's *Clueless* presented an updated version of Jane Austen's *Emma*, while 1996 saw the release of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*.
8. As Mary Celeste Kearney (2007) points out in her critique of McRobbie and Garber's article, this portrayal of the girl's bedroom as a safe haven is problematic. It ignores both the intrusive power that parents may wield over that space, as well as the reality that girls may be subject to sexual abuse in their bedrooms.
9. Numerous scholars have observed that record collecting is a particularly male gendered activity, with very few female participants. See, for example, Straw (1997) and Shuker (2004).
10. Black music does not always work as a form of "magic" in the teen movie, however. It can also be used to mark white teen males as *inauthentic*. In *She's All That* (1999) the filmmakers provide the loutish, narcissistic Brock Hudson (Matthew Lillard) with an ironic theme song, Rick James's 1981 funk hit "Give It to Me Baby," that connotes an iconic and "authentic" black male sexuality. During the movie's requisite teen house party, Hudson solicits the DJ to change the music to the James song so that he can perform a solo dance to it in the center of the room. Lillard's comically awful performance—a bizarre mélange of fractured breakdancing and improvisatory cocky posturing—demonstrates the gap between Hudson's hollow bravado and the assured fleshly masculinity that "Give It to Me Baby" infers.
11. I label Taylor as a 1970s "Adult Contemporary" artist with the understanding that this is a retroactive designation. There was no such *Billboard* category until 1979, when it replaced the "Easy Listening" chart, on which Taylor had placed several hit singles throughout the decade.

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