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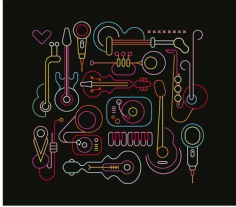
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## **The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis Expanding Approaches**

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### **Hearing Postmemory**

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## HEARING POSTMEMORY

Anne Frank in Neutral Milk Hotel's  
*In the Aeroplane over the Sea**Michael Spitzer*

Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane over the Sea* (henceforth *Aeroplane*) is a 1998 lo-fi album which oddly features Anne Frank.<sup>1</sup> It was the band's second and last album, and Neutral Milk Hotel broke up shortly after the departure of Jeff Mangum, its psychologically tortured lead singer and writer. Despite the unusual connection with Frank, the album seemed at the time of release to be an otherwise unexceptional contribution to 1990s indie rock, and it received a lukewarm reception. The story could have ended there, except that, upon its re-issue in 2005, *Aeroplane* was dramatically reassessed, Pitchfork awarding it a perfect 10 score (upgraded from its original 8.7) and fourth position in its list of 100 best albums of the 90s (above Pavement and Nirvana). The reforming of the band in 2013 in order to tour *Aeroplane* worldwide served only to enhance the prestige and mythology around the album. We are also coming to appreciate its formative influence upon post-millennial indie; for instance, it provided the template for Arcade Fire's *Funeral*, also with Merge Records.<sup>2</sup>

As a listener and analyst, I believe that *Aeroplane*'s aura is absolutely justified, despite there being next to no critical literature about it. Outside the internet community and the informative albeit anecdotal *33<sup>1/3</sup>* booklet by Kim Cooper,<sup>3</sup> there is, to date, only some insightful if all-too brief observations about the opening track by David Blake in *MTO*.<sup>4</sup> The major exception is an essay by the literary theorist, David Rando.<sup>5</sup> Although Rando deals only with the lyrics of *Aeroplane* and makes no attempt to engage with the music, he mounts a persuasive case for considering the album—an imaginative recollection of the Holocaust's most celebrated victim—in the context of Postmemory Theory. Postmemory is a new subdiscipline of Holocaust Studies, pioneered by the American gender theorist, Marianne Hirsch. Whilst Rando's essay points us in this direction, it was written before the publication of Hirsch's magnum opus, *The Generation of Postmemory*,<sup>6</sup> a chapter of which focuses on Frank. Hence there is much to build upon Rando's sketch for a sonic post-memory of Anne Frank. Yet the challenge posed by such a strange album is great on both musical and critical fronts. We lack an established analytical approach to deal with the often technically crude and roughly hewn aspects of the lo-fi tradition. And ethically and hermeneutically, how do we begin to make sense of a set of songs which project Mangum's multiply illicit sexual longings towards an historically dead young girl?

My analysis of *Aeroplane* treats the album as a whole, in the tradition of analytical studies of integrated song-cycles and piano “multi-pieces”.<sup>7</sup> The album is highly integrated: tracks are batched in three main keys; many follow on with no interruption, pivoting on common tones; they share harmonic and melodic fixations, not to mention poetic imagery and indeed the core concept. One may even ask whether the individual tracks can stand on their own. My approach is methodologically eclectic, and deliberately treats sound and noise as equal partners with pitch and harmony, in keeping with the lo-fi ethos. The ultimate aim is to explore how postmemory and music analysis might illuminate each other in the service of a blended historical-musical experience. Lo-fi is predisposed to memory on account of its deliberately primitive recording technology, what Timothy Taylor memorably terms “technostalgia”.<sup>8</sup>

### What Is Postmemory?

Postmemory considers the impact of history upon people who were born too late to have direct recollection of its events. It typically deals with the historical perception of children born to holocaust survivors. Historically separated from the war through a generational gap, these children are shaped by their parents’ memory; they are thus endowed with *secondary* memory. This aspect of separation is compounded when a person has no family connection with holocaust survivors, in which case they may have *affiliative* postmemory. *Aeroplane* is the outcome of Mangum’s affiliative postmemory of Frank. Mangum is not Jewish, and unlike millions of American school-children in the post-war period, he did not read *The Diary of A Young Girl*, Frank’s account of her years hiding in a secret Amsterdam annex to the family flat, until he was 27 in 1997. The experience shocked him to the core and triggered a psychological crisis, emotionally regulated by the writing of the album.<sup>9</sup> This fits perfectly with Hirsch’s thesis that, in postmemory, creative imagination substitutes for primary memory. *Aeroplane* imaginatively bridges the historical distance between 1945 and a testament which has lost much of its power through over-familiarity. Mangum restores some of the diary’s ability to shock by highlighting the sexual references that Anne’s father had excised from the first editions. The album exploits listener discomfort with the eroticism of the lyrics to alternately coax and block our identification with Frank, a process that Hirsch calls “heteropathic identification”, after Kaja Silverman.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike “idiopathic” identification, heteropathic memory avoids fully interiorizing the experiences of the Other. Why this should be necessary, Hirsch explains, is because no subject is easier to identify with than the image of the vulnerable child. The pathos and immediacy of this image pushes out space to think, hence heteropathic identification safeguards both the identity of the object and our freedom for critical reflection. According to Hirsch, this may happen through splitting our subjectivity into an adult and childish self.<sup>11</sup> Just as Frank was as much a witness as a victim, so do we witness and identify with her as a victim through our child persona. And this is exactly how *Aeroplane* opens with its first track, “The King of Carrot Flowers Part 1”, putting the listener in the position of a child within a surreally dark fairy-tale scenario. The lyrics address an unnamed companion lover (or possibly sibling), the ‘king of carrot flowers’, who builds a tower through the trees, as ‘holy rattlesnakes’ tumble from the sky. Later in the song, the listener-as-child is witness to a bizarre family trauma mixing vegetal cannibalism and incest. The mother impales the father with a fork; the father strews trash on the floor; and the young lovers explore “what each other’s bodies were for”.

In *Aeroplane*, sexual perversion is the main agent of heteropathic identification, taking “perversion” in Freud’s sense of deviating from copulation. As Rando suggests, Mangum’s lyrics follow both the “extension” and “lingering” axes of Freud’s theory.<sup>12</sup> They *extend* sexual interest through a carnivalesque cast of surrogates for Anne—assorted siblings and twins, a girl living in a trailer park, a “communist daughter”, a baby falling from a skyscraper, someone called “Goldaline”. And they titillate us by *lingering* on lurid imagery: a two-headed embryo in a jar; Siamese twins freezing to death in the snow and being eaten; a “piano filled with flames”; “cars careening from the clouds”. Perversion becomes a series of surreal linguistic conjunctions, many of which echo the famous example from the father of surrealism, the *Compte de Lautreamont*: “as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table”.<sup>13</sup> Mangum gives us: “the marriage of a dead dog [...] and a synthetic flying machine”; and “Semen stains the mountain tops”. Perversion is also the language’s flight from sense, where the songs begin relatively prosaically and gradually take off into fantasy. And perversion is ultimately about how fantasy and whimsy constantly deviate from the hard historical facts; *Aeroplane* takes its time before addressing Anne’s death directly, exactly midway through the album in track 6, “Holland, 1945”: “But then they buried her alive one evening in 1945”. The album shuttles both between fantasy and history and between the subjects and objects of memory.

Two regulative metaphors guide us through this forest of images, respectively blocking and coaxing identification. Memory of the historical Anne is arrested by the metaphor of flight, figuratively the flight from sense. And here, the aeroplane of the album title and title-track is absolutely germane. On the side of aiding memory is the metaphor of digestion. Hirsch offers a fascinating insight that child witnesses to child victims are often photographed in the act of eating.<sup>14</sup> In scenes from Mitzi Goldman’s 1996 film, *Hatred*, we see children chewing whilst they watch archival film footage of Nazi atrocities; and we see these cinematic images projected directly onto their skin, so that it looks like the children are also ingesting the horror. Goldman reports strange memories of attending a Jewish school in Australia, when on rainy days the children were shown Holocaust films at lunchtime:

The children on the screen feed on images of horror; they have to ingest them with lunch, but even more graphically, they are marked by them, bodily, as “Jewish” or as “Vietnamese”. They watch and, like the film’s narrator, they “feed on” images that do and do not impact on their present lives... Thus the child witness is merged with the victims she or he sees.<sup>15</sup>

There is also the familiar link between reflection and rumination. In *Aeroplane*, digestion is figured symbolically in the image of containment within a watery medium: within a womb’s amniotic fluid (the singer learns to swim inside his mother in “a garbage bin”); the two-headed boy pickled in a jar; most broadly, the “sea” which is the counter-pole to the album’s “aeroplane”. In “Oh Comely”, the album’s climactic song, and the point where Mangum digests both Anne’s story and his memories of the preceding seven tracks, digestion is thematized in the narrative. Evoking the dark tone of a Brothers Grimm fairy-tale, the singer addresses a girl called Goldaline, and predicts that their bodies will “fold and freeze together” and merge “inside some stranger’s stomach”. These lines achieve much psychological work in the album and are set to arguably its most affecting music. How are “flight” and “digestion” rendered sonically? The entry-points to the analysis are ostensibly

straight-forward. The album distributes its sounds from “high” to “low”, between sea and sky, but also between familiar and less identifiable sources; i.e., the grounded and the surreal—for instance, the homely guitar and the exotic zanzithophone.<sup>16</sup> And, secondly, the problematic of lo-fi indie is how to blend, i.e., “digest”, starkly heteronymous noises and timbres. Flight and digestion work partly against each other, partly turn into each other, in *Aeroplane*’s sonic flight path.

### Map of *Aeroplane*

An overview of the terrain will be useful before we look in detail at this flight path. Here is the track list with its keys:

|   |               |
|---|---------------|
| 1. “The King of Carrot Flowers Part 1”    | F major       |
| 2. “The King of Carrot Flowers Parts 2–3” | F major       |
| 3. “In the Aeroplane over the Sea”        | G major       |
| 4. “Two Headed Boy”                       | G major       |
| 5. “The Fool” (instrumental)              | D minor       |
| 6. “Holland, 1945”                        | G major       |
| 7. “Communist Daughter”                   | G major       |
| 8. “Oh Comely”                            | E major–minor |
| 9. “Ghost”                                | E major       |
| 10. “Untitled” (instrumental)             | E major       |
| 11. “Two Headed Boy Part Two”             | G# major      |

The tracks are generally grouped in three keys: F major, G major, and E major. There are two exceptions. “The Fool”, the first of the album’s two purely instrumental interludes, is in D minor, a dominant (minor) to the two G-major songs which frame it. The final song, “Two Headed Boy Part Two”, is in G# major: this is a deliberately wayward appendix to the album (as we shall see), a kind of tonal distortion. We might want to view F–G–E as an axial progression around E. However, F major plays no further role in the album after track 2, and it makes more musical sense to hear the album as gravitating towards E major, a far more natural key for the guitar. Indeed, this is another reason why “Oh Comely” emerges as a destination song for *Aeroplane*; it opens with Mangum strumming pure E major triads on his acoustic guitar for 9 bars (12 seconds) before he starts to sing, allowing this destination key to resonate. “Oh Comely” is also by far the longest song on the album, at 8’18” (the next longest is “Two Headed Boy Part Two” at five minutes; the majority take two or three minutes). “Oh Comely” is also the most formally complex song.

The band’s musical choices are opened up by an unusually eclectic group of instruments, and the use of the distortion techniques typical of lo-fi. Instruments and sound effects group into genres whose associations help shape the narrative. A primary opposition is between what one might term the “hard” and “soft” poles of indie. On the hard side, there is the standard rock group of electric guitar, bass guitar, and kit. Although NMH is not a folk band, its soft side appropriates instruments associated with folk music: plugged-in acoustic guitar, banjo, accordion, portable “wondering genie” organ, even a set of uilleann pipes, a form of Irish bag-pipe.

About half the tracks are essentially “soft”: nos. 1, 3, 4, 8, 11. Only a single track is fully “hard”, no. 6, which stands out from the album accordingly. Two tracks contain the hard idiom in part, and in contrasting ways which will be significant. Hardness enters half-way through track 2 (strictly speaking, half-way through “King of Carrot Flowers Part 2”, which is the first half of track 2). Here, it sounds like an aggressive displacement of the soft first part of the song, akin to the soft-loud alternation standardized by The Pixies (and taken up by Nirvana, early Radiohead, and countless later bands). Conversely, the hard idiom is layered gradually through track 9, creating the opposite effect of organic fusion. Overall, however, the hard-rock side of indie is represented surprisingly sparsely in *Aeroplane*, certainly as compared to its pervasive presence in their first album, *On Avery Island* (1996). Its highly selective and strategic placement here is an important reason why *Aeroplane*’s design is so clear compared to its somewhat muddled precursor.

A third group of instruments introduces the world of Salvation Army marching bands: trumpet, trombone, flugelhorn, euphonium, saxophone, and floor tom. They perform in the first instrumental interlude, “The Fool”, which is a jolly funeral march. But these instruments participate in many of the other tracks.

A fourth set is a complement of eccentric or unfamiliar instruments: the singing (bowed) saw and zanzithophone, but also borrowing the “folk” uilleann pipes. The ethereal, floating quality of the saw’s singing permeates many of the tracks, sometimes evoking the flight of the aeroplane.

Added to these is the quintessential dimension of “noise”, achieved through various performance and production techniques. As is characteristic of lo-fi, many of the instruments are performed on the outer edge of competence; the limited technique (including sometimes questionable intonation) contributes a sense of pathos and authenticity, as well as nostalgia. Noise is also produced by an instrument being played unconventionally: in track 2, bowing rather than plucking the banjo creates a howling sound; in track 3, the saw is bowed in such a way as to suggest the squeaky dissonances of free jazz.

Recording and production techniques make key contributions to the album’s soundscape, including, multiple-tracking, compression, and most importantly, distortion and fuzz. The fuzz in “one of the fuzziest records ever made”<sup>17</sup> was created not through distortion pedals or fuzztones but, according to producer Robert Schneider, by channeling the microphone through a Bellari RP-220 tube mic pre-amp “that would distort back on everything”.<sup>18</sup> Schneider also positioned the mic so that it caught the buzz intrinsic to an acoustic guitar. He put the sounds from all the instruments “through the mixing board and distorted the mic pre-amp on the console too, then pushed the tape really hard”.<sup>19</sup> A further contribution to noise is tape. Mangum, who previously to the album had experimented with *musique concrète*, introduces field recordings of natural sounds, as well as the white noise of a short-wave radio. The sound theorist Frances Dyson has drawn attention to the two faces of noise, alternately disruptive and recuperative.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, as tuned pitch was alphabetized and instrumentalized in the history of the West, noise was exiled as an agent of disruption, an interference to the message. On the other hand, and partly in reaction to that, noise acquired an aura of sensuous materiality, something to be recuperated. Noise in lo-fi toggles between these two poles: interrupting the “music”; imparting to the music both a warmth and a crackle of energy, aspects very much *part of* the music rather than interference to it. The flight path of *Aeroplane* works with this polarity, enlarging the scope of noise. The pitch or key of E can be “noisy” when it interrupts and displaces the axial pole of F. Noise is also hard, but not impossible, to digest.



## The Flight Path

The deceptive simplicity of *Aeroplane's* materials is more than compensated by a robust narrative trajectory. There are many threads to this narrative. The F–G–E axis is elaborated by a descending third-cycle, descending from the G: G–E–C–A. Although E is explicit as a key across tracks 8–10, C as both a pitch and a triad is profiled dramatically throughout “Oh Comely” (which is built on a harmonic ostinato of chords E and C), whilst the song actually concludes in A minor. This key is picked up again by the 12-bar-blues pattern of “Ghost”, with its built-in shifts between E and A major. One could even imagine G# major, the terminal key of the album, akin to a  $\hat{4}$ – $\hat{5}$  resolution of a suspended A against the implicit E. The third-cycle pulls *Aeroplane* steadily downwards, a descent appropriate to the gravitational incline of pathos.

The melodic contour of the songs also follows the gradual descent. Tracks 1–6 are based on falling scale patterns (Figure 27.1).<sup>2</sup> The melodies of 7 and 8 are circular and highly repetitive. Tracks 9–10, *Aeroplane's* emotional turning-point, ascend in triumph. Without us needing to adopt a fully Schenkerian approach, it is nonetheless striking that the opening tracks variously evade terminal (= end-of-song)  $\hat{3}$ – $\hat{2}$ – $\hat{1}$  scale-step resolutions,

Figure 27.1 displays ten musical excerpts (a) through (j) showing the opening melodic lines of various songs from the album *Aeroplane*. Each excerpt is presented in a single-staff musical notation with lyrics underneath. The excerpts illustrate different melodic patterns, including falling scale patterns and circular/repetitive motifs.

- (a) Track 1: "The King of Carrot Flowers Part 1" (Lyrics: When you were young you were the king of car-rot flow-ers.)
- (b) Track 1: "The King of Carrot Flowers Part 1" (Lyrics: I - love you Jesus - Chri)
- (c) Track 2: "The King of Carrot Flowers Part 2" (Lyrics: Up and o - ver - we go)
- (d) "The King of Carrot Flowers Part 3" (Lyrics: What a beau-ti-fal face I have found in this place that is circ - ling all 'round the sun.)
- (e) Track 3: "In the Aeroplane over the Sea" (Lyrics: Two head-ed bo-y All floa-ting in glass. The sun it has passed now it's)
- (f) Track 4: "Two Headed Boy" (Lyrics: The on-ly girl I ev-er loved, was born with ro-ses in her eyes.)
- (g) Track 6: "Holland, 1945" (Lyrics: Sweet comm-u-nist the comm-u-nist daugh-ter stand-ing in the sea-weed wa-ter se-men stains the mount-ain tops, se-men stains the mount-ain tops)
- (h) Track 7: "Communist Daughter" (Lyrics: Oh - co - me - ly I will be with you when you lose your breath)
- (i) Track 8: "Oh Comely" (Lyrics: Ghost, ghost, I know you live with-in me, feel as you, fly)
- (j) Track 9: "Ghost" (Lyrics: [None visible in image]
- (k) Track 10: "Untitled" (Lyrics: [None visible in image]

Figure 27.1 Song openings. (a) Track 1: “The King of Carrot Flowers Part 1” (b) Track 1: “The King of Carrot Flowers Part 1” (C) Track 2: “The King of Carrot Flowers Part 2” (d) “The King of Carrot Flowers Part 3” (e) Track 3: “In the Aeroplane over the Sea” (f) Track 4: “Two Headed Boy” (g) Track 6: “Holland, 1945” (h) Track 7: “Communist Daughter” (i) Track 8: “Oh Comely” (j) Track 9: “Ghost” (k) Track 10: “Untitled”

whilst the central songs are permeated with them. Moreover, the “triumph” of tracks 9 and 10 unfolds through their openings outlining repeated ascending progressions from  $\hat{1}$  to  $\hat{5}$ .

Underscoring the album’s tripartite narrative is a pattern of high, middle, and low drones or pedals. Track 1 ascends to a pedal on a high F (1’32”). Track 7 gradually evolves a pedal on B (0’40”), the mediant of G major and the dominant of the subsequent “Oh Comely” E major, where B is placed as the highest pitch of the guitar’s repeated E major chords. Finally, tracks 9 and 10 are built on low tonic pedals.

The tripartite narrative is also shaped by instrumental treatment. The instruments interact harmoniously in track 1; this harmony is rendered increasingly problematic by the admixture of other instrumental groups, beginning with the “hard” indie rock family in track 2. As we will see, the trajectory towards timbral dissonance climaxes in track 7, before being resolved in the heterophony of track 9, where the entire ensemble play in varied unisons against the pedal-point.

Considering the equal importance of pitch and “sound” (incorporating timbre and noise) in shaping the album, it is a moot question which comes first; i.e., whether the sound “underscores” the pitch progressions, or vice versa. This co-dependence is epitomized by the album’s successive guitar introductions, especially given the role of the guitar as a surrogate of Mangum’s persona. Let’s examine how this guitar sound changes across tracks 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 11 (Figure 27.2).

The four-bar intro to “King of Carrot Flowers Part 1” is a high-water mark. It is the only guitar intro which incorporates not only harmonic and rhythmic changes, but also melody (its riff prefigures the descending C–F line of the vocal’s melody). The way the guitar is recorded is particularly balanced and pure, probably due to the presence of both a neck mic (for articulation) and a hole mic (for resonance). The guitar intro to “In the Aeroplane over the Sea” performs and projects its chords and rhythm much more strongly than the melody. It is also recorded differently, with the likely addition of a third microphone, at some distance, blurring the articulation. “Two Headed Boy” returns to double mic’ing, but with the guitar intro impoverished musically to a single repeated tonic chord. Hence melody and harmony have been successively stripped out across tracks 1, 3, and 4. What it has left is duration, but this is itself reduced in track 6, “Holland, 1945”, where the acoustic intro is dismissed after one and a half bars by the “hard” rock band. In track 7, “Communist Daughter”, the guitar intro is boiled down even further to a single strummed chord. All of which renders the return of the guitar persona in “Oh Comely”, track 8, particularly dramatic, opening with the longest intro of the album, a full nine bars, and, indeed, resonating with the guitar’s more natural key of E major. On the other hand, it returns both here and in track 9, “Ghost”, in its impoverished, repeated-chord, form (no rhythm or harmonic change). Track 11 is interesting: after the weird prelude for processed musical saw, voice and



Figure 27.2 Liquidation of guitar introductions (a) “King of Carrot Flowers Part 1” (b) “In the Aeroplane over the Sea” (c) “Two Headed Boy” (d) “Holland, 1945” (e) “Communist Daughter” (f) “Oh Comely”



guitar enter simultaneously (0'13"), so that the intro is effectively *liquidated* – to project a meaning on that technical term even the Jewish Schoenberg would not have imagined. It is entirely consumed by the alien sounds of the saw, finalizing an album-long process of liquidation. Equally exotic is the guitar's tuning up by a semitone (guitars are normally tuned down, not up), re-working the G major materials from "Two Headed Boy Part 1" in G# major.

The plenitude and multi-tasking of the very first intro is in keeping with the "once upon a time", fairy-tale atmosphere of "King of Carrot Flowers Part1". Nevertheless, the album's path is not a one-way street, because the intro's decay happens in counterpoint to the gradual opening up of diverse timbres. In other words, if the initial four-bar introduction is as pristine and as perfect as a child—a world complete unto itself—then the album grows up by emptying out and redistributing this plenitude; or rather, by reconstituting it in more mature sounds and processes.

### The Songs

The first three songs, "The King of Carrot Flowers Parts 1–3", compressed seamlessly into tracks 1 and 2, comprise both a single unit, and an "overture" predicting the action in the rest of the album. The music finds all kinds of sonic analogues for the semantic flight of fancy conveyed by the lyrics and their unsettling shifts from mild whimsy to dark surrealism. Flight is suggested most directly through registral ascent. Mangum's register is as closely confined as a nursery tune for most of the opening track; at 1'29", he breaks from the strophic repetitions to leap upwards and reiterate tetrachord descents from an f<sup>1</sup> for a striking thirty seconds. This rise comes in the wake of the staggered entries of ever-brighter instruments across the song: after the guitar and vocals, we hear an accordion (0'46") and a zanzithophone (1'29") at the precise moment the voice starts its ascent. There is also a flight from the familiar (guitar) to the unfamiliar (zanzithophone). As Blake points out (after Mark Spicer), cumulative form usually *begins* with "a striking or unusual timbre" (as in "Neighborhood no.1" from Arcade Fire's *Funeral*)<sup>21</sup>, whereas this track does the reverse.<sup>22</sup>

Through tracks 1–2, flight can be discerned as changes within the quality of Mangum's voice and the instrumental treatment. In the opening song, Mangum's voice is double-tracked and panned into left and right channels as an aural equivalent for the "Two Headed Boy"—his main surrogate. Importantly, as we will see, the only other instance of double-tracking occurs at a crucial turning point of the climactic song, "Oh Comely".<sup>23</sup> In Part 2, Mangum's voice is single-tracked, but ranging from a reedy, high cantor-like religious wailing at the top extreme, to a warm baritone at the lower end, the two poles embraced by a single swooping phrase at the start of the song. Having opened up the two-octave registral space at the end of Part 1, Mangum thus bodies it out with the two vocal identities which will feature in the rest of the album. By introducing himself in track 1 as a "two headed" voice, Mangum prompts us to hear the change across track 2 as a kind of "vocal splitting".

The timbral events are equally arresting. There is a warmth to the instrumental blend in Part 1, aptly designated by Blake as "digestible".<sup>24</sup> At the start of Part 2, the low-F harmonium pedal, which had subtly underpinned the more dominant zanzithophone f<sup>2</sup> pedal at the apex of Part 1, is suddenly mixed far louder. At 0'6", it is overlaid by a distorted banjo plucking an ostinato rising triad. The sound of harmonium and banjo is as disconcerting as the religious turn the music has taken ("I love you Jesus Christ"), especially given that Christianity plays no further part in the album. One way of understanding

this conjunction is through Dyson’s creationist trope of the generation of noise from a fundamental, acoustic multiplication emanating from the simplicity of the Divine monochord;<sup>25</sup> in this respect, the track offers a snap-shot of the musical cosmos. The creation of noise is quickly accelerated by the interventions from 0’47”. Julian Koster switches from plucking his banjo to bowing it, creating great dissonance. This noise is compounded a moment later (0’49”) by a splash of cymbals and hi-hat, and highly distorted guitar and bass, the sound building until Mangum’s voice returns to *f* to complete his song. However, it is the song’s postlude which is sonically the most striking. From 1’17” to 1’35”, a trumpet sings a new melody, fending off “howling dog” noises from the bowed banjo (“The dogs dissolve and drain away”), the cacophony supported by distortions from guitar and bass (see Figure 27.3).

We have come a long way from the “digestible” sonorities of track 1. The *indigestible* “noise versus trumpet” split does not fit into Blake’s four-fold typology of timbral differentiation of “digestible”, “full”, “distorted”, and “homogeneous”. Only half of the soundscape is “full” (i.e., “filled with high volume and timbral complexity”)<sup>26</sup>; by contrast, the trumpet melody is clean and undistorted. The crux is that the listener’s attention is engaged by two kinds of soundscape simultaneously, “dirty” and “clean” music. The soundscape is bi-focal, or “split”; or, in Blake’s terms, a “heterogeneity of heterogeneity”. This bi-focality is more telling than the aggressively “full” hard-rock soundscape of the track’s finale, Part 3; a wall-of-sound which aptly captures the sense of being buffeted by the waves and nearly drowning (“Up and over we go through the wave and undertow. I will float until I learn how to swim”). The aeroplane’s ostensibly rising flight path has converged, paradoxically, with the sea, for this is a sonic image of the boys in the album’s cover art “not waving but drowning”.

Sonic bi-focality cuts into the album’s melodic and harmonic fabric via the pitch E. This is the pitch on which the bowed banjo enters at 0’47”, the turning-point from “soft to “hard” music in Part 2. Its dissonance is anticipated by the grating of Mangum’s high *e*<sup>2</sup> against the pedal *f* towards the end of Part 1. E is marked for consciousness as a growth-point for the *Aeroplane*’s tonal flight path. In other words, E major is a tonal surrogate for noise in the album, and the progressive tonicization of E shadows the proliferation of timbral noise (see Figure 27.4).

This is developed in all sorts of ways in the title-track, which launches the album’s central group of four songs in G major. “In the Aeroplane over the Sea” is both firmly rooted in G, and is outwardly the album’s most conventional song: (mostly) strophic, and with a stereotypical four-chord “Stand by Me” guitar riff, I–VI–IV–V (see Figures 27.1 and 27.2). However, E minor is prefigured by the riff’s initial I–VI progression. Second, the verses and the song itself conclude with descending fifth progressions to E (above guitar E minor chords), evading the tonic. Third and most notably, verse three breaks out of the strophic pattern with new material in E minor throughout (Figure 27.5a, b).



Figure 27.3 Postlude, “The King of Carrot Flowers Part 2”

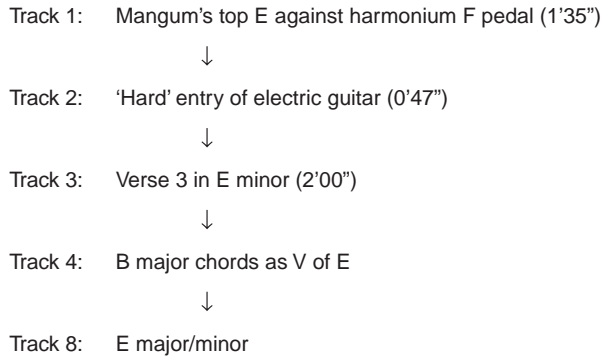


Figure 27.4 Tonicization of E

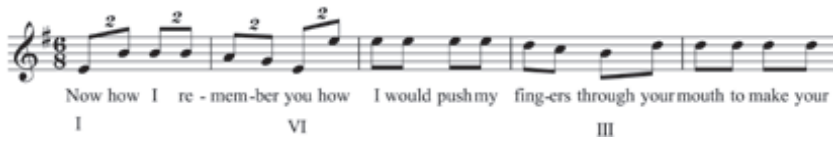


Figure 27.5a E minor episode, verse 3



Figure 27.5b E minor episode, verse 3

Metrically, the 6/8 triplet quavers change to duplet quavers. And the sky darkens with noise: the musical saw, played smoothly in verse 2 as a kind of “halo” or “penumbra” flying above Mangum’s pitches, is now bowed in such a way as to produce chaotic screeching sounds, sustained across a 15-second bridge into verse 4. The tonicisation of E minor thus coincides with the onset of noise in verse three. And this matches the darkening of the lyrics. Anne’s “beautiful face” of verse 1, and her “soft and sweet” voice in verse 2, both become far more problematic than suggested by the somewhat saccharine start of the song. In verse three, these images are mechanically distanced and estranged. The singer seems to address Anne directly and “remembers” her, and how he used to insert his fingers through her mouth to move her muscles, to render her voice “smooth and sweet”. The first stirrings of postmemory (“I remember you”) coincide with the estrangement—both verbal and sonic—of the very image Mangum is seeking to internalise, or “digest”. The fourth and final verse returns to strophic, tonal, and timbral order—attempting to digest the discordant elements—but the business of E is unfinished.

Whilst E minor arrives at a crucial point of “In the Aeroplane over the Sea”, it is not established as the tonic of a song until “Oh Comely”, five tracks later, the first of the three tracks in E.<sup>27</sup> Three songs in G major, plus “The Fool” in D minor, intervene before then. The deferral of E is signaled by the recurring G major—B major progression which begins

“Two Headed Boy Part 1” (Radiohead’s “Creep” (1992) does this too). The disruption caused by the unexpected tilts to the mediant major is soaked up by the two dramatic rests; however, B is never composed out as V of E. Instead, “Two Headed Boy” elevates interruption to the condition of a melodic idiom dominated by erratic repetition, quite distinct from the measured lyricism of the earlier tracks. Mangum’s vocal idiom now jerks from one clump of repeated melodic cells to another, conveying an impression of a singer making it up as he goes along, improvising. This throws the spotlight on the present tense of music, of song being thought in real time. The present-tense idiom of “Two Headed Boy” fits with its intimate focus on a delicate subject, a circus freak trapped in a jar, and unaccountably still alive, tapping on the glass. Mangum imagines him putting on his Sunday shoes, and dancing “around the room to accordion keys”; then building a radio to communicate through history to his “lover” (Anne), sitting “in the parlor with the moon across her face”. Sung close-mic’d in Mangum’s rich baritone register, the song is ultimately a self-portrait. Rando persuasively interprets the trans-historical radio as a metaphor for the entire album, the music reaching out through time to Anne Frank in 1945, and reaching back to connect with present-day listeners.<sup>28</sup> It is fitting, then, that when the camera’s lens zooms out of the close-up of “Two Headed Boy” (after his mock funeral in “The Fool”) to focus onto the historically distanced “Holland, 1945”, Mangum keeps the same melodic material: the two songs are essentially variations on the same thematic cells. The starting-point for “Holland” is the climactic passage from “Two Headed Boy”, where repeated stepwise descents from  $\hat{6}$  cede to repeated oscillations between  $\hat{3}$  and  $\hat{1}$  (Figure 27.6a, b).

In keeping with the historical focus of the lyrics (“But then they buried her alive one evening in 1945”), the song is distanced in many ways. As the first fully “hard” rock song of the album, it is the least personally engaging—far less so than “Two Headed Boy”. Mangum’s voice is mixed quite low, and the microphone is more distanced from his mouth, thinning the sound of his voice and picking up higher partials. This is also the highest start of any song, on high E. And, despite Mangum’s shouting, the volume is no greater than the soft baritone of “Two Headed Boy”. This is the paradox of compression, the leveling of dynamic range.<sup>29</sup> *Aeroplane* is an extremely compressed album, and this subverts sonic perspective. Compression heightens the effects of proximity, so that the perceived high volume of Mangum’s tender voice in “Two Headed Boy” is ascribed by the listener to closeness. The song is also close-mic’d, but compression *increases* the effect of proximity. Conversely, Mangum’s shouting in “Holland” is ascribed by the listener to distance: only when shouting is far away does it sound as loud as a voice singing tenderly close at hand. Ultimately,



Figure 27.6a Common thematic cells (a) “Two Head Boy”, from “and when all is breaking” (1’30”) (b) “Holland, 1945”, from “but then they buried her alive” (0’24”)



Figure 27.6b Common thematic cells (a) “Two Head Boy”, from “and when all is breaking” (1’30”) (b) “Holland, 1945”, from “but then they buried her alive” (0’24”)



Figure 27.7 “Communist Daughter” gridlock

compression helps Mangum split temporal perspective: between the present-tense of the repetitive melodic idiom, and the sonically distanced past.

Track 7, “Communist Daughter”, is the most fraught of all the songs. The strangest, and the shortest track on the album (1’57”), it is its *ne plus ultra* of contained noise. The sonic split is framed, on the one side, by Mangum’s lowest, softest, voice, singing an unyielding ostinato figure. On the other side, the soundscape is filled with a procession of quiet sound images, mixing white noise with field recordings. The noise suggests in turn: the breaks and horns of a car, with Doppler effect (“cars careening from the clouds”); twisting metal (“bridges burst and twist around”); crickets chirping; waves lapping on the shore (“standing on the sea-weed water”). At 1’40”, the noise crystallizes into a drone on B, supported by harmonium, growing into an urgent siren towards the close of the song, preparing to drop down to the E of “Oh Comely”. The dissonance of this voice/noise split (suggesting a focus divided across person and environment) is compounded by the melodic and harmonic gridlock (Figure 27.7). The texture comprises four loops: the voice’s repeated four-bar phrase; the guitar’s I–VI–IV–IV riff (truncating the tail of track 3’s “Stand by Me” progression; i.e., the expected V is displaced by the repeated IV); the guitar’s syncopated ♩. + ♩. + ♩ counter-rhythm; and, not least, the continuation of the preceding B/C/B/C ostinato against the melodic and harmonic grain. Mangum stands impassively before these many disjunctions; the surreal lyrics make no sense either (“Semen stains the mountain tops”). Who is the Communist daughter?

### “Oh Comely”

By far *Aeroplane*’s longest song at more than eight minutes, “O Comely” is actually three songs glued together, and thus a book-end to “King of Carrot Flowers Parts 1–3”. Its first part (up to 2’49”) identifies with Anne at her point of death. The singer describes how he will be with Anne at her last breath and final “meaningful memory”.

Although the long guitar introduction repeats resonant E major chords, the song’s vocal line is almost entirely in E minor, gravitating to G major at its highpoints. On entry, Mangum, lays down his G♯s on his guitar’s G♯s with a bittersweet twist on the traditional major/minor rock scale.<sup>30</sup> Key, meter, melody, and harmony all recall the “noisy” E minor third verse of the title-track, transfigured into lament. The marginal takes center-stage. The three-in-a bar pulse of “Oh Comely” parses into a slow hypermetrical 6/4 allargando of the 6/8 of “In the Aeroplane over the Sea”.<sup>31</sup> The melodic incipit is practically the same as in the E minor episode (see Figures 27.1 and 27.5). The bass also moves from E minor to C major, although “Oh Comely” fixates on it like a tolling bell. “Oh Comely” also remembers the opening track by pushing upwards to climaxes on a high g<sup>2</sup>, the melodic apex of the album.

The second part, or “song”, starts at 2’47” just after Mangum’s g<sup>2</sup> apex with a resumption of the E major guitar pulsations. The lyrics are the most perverted (in Freud’s sense) of the

album, swerving away from Anne both in their highly sexual content (“your father made fetuses with flesh licking ladies”), and in their identification with a surrogate girl from a “trailer-park”. The music is arrested, repeating an eight-bar major/minor formula a full six times (Figure 27.8).

The last iteration is lifted up an octave, segueing into a return of the build-up to the  $g^2$  apex which closed part 1, thereby cleverly suturing the two songs together. The song’s central section, from 4’38” stands out. This is the only other point, after track 1, where Mangum’s voice is double-tracked; his voice degrades into a wordless lament, circling repeatedly between  $\hat{1}$  and  $\hat{3}$  (Figure 27.9).

At 4’50”, his final note is captured and sustained technologically for 23 seconds, while Mangum repeats the song’s opening section in a third voice, centered in the soundscape between his left and right voices. It transpires that only Mangum’s “third voice” is adequate to address Frank’s horrifying history in a fully personalized idiom, much more close-up than had been possible in “Holland, 1945”. The words relate how Anne’s body was buried, together with her sister, mother and five hundred other families. Mangum wishes he could rescue her “in some sort of time machine”. The repetitions are much truncated, as Mangum lurches to a depressive breakdown with the words, “we know who our enemies are”.

The third song, starting at 5’57”, is based on a lost, unreleased song called “Goldaline”. Mangum’s lament becomes keener, creating the album’s most powerfully affecting moments. And yet the paradox is that he achieves this by taking two steps backwards. The first step is to shift to a new key, A minor.<sup>32</sup> Clinching the album’s connection between postmemory and digestion, the second step is to lavish all this pathos on an absurd, Brothers Grimm-like, tale of Goldaline and her Siamese twin freezing to death in the winter woods, and comforting themselves in the hope that they will achieve ultimate union by being eaten and digested “in some stranger’s stomach”. The song, like the previous one, is also in three parts (Figure 27.10a, b, c).



Figure 27.8 “Oh Comely”, from “Your father made fetuses” (2’52”)



Figure 27.9 “Oh Comely” (4’38”)



Figure 27.10 “Oh Comely,” part 3 (a) Wailing 1





Figure 27.10 “Oh Comely,” part 3 (b) “Goldaline”



Figure 27.10 “Oh Comely,” part 3 (c) Wailing 2

In part 1 (27.10a), Mangum wordlessly wails in descending scales, in unison with a trumpet. In part 2 (27.10b; from 6’43”) he sings the text. At 7’30”, the third part (27.10c), Mangum resumes his wailing, now joined by the full complement of brass (last heard in the funeral march of “The Fool”) sounding like a New Orleans procession for the dead. The tempo has accelerated from the 63 BPM of part 1 to 84.

The outer, wailing, parts of “Goldaline”—wordless and funereal—digest the texted inner section. Yet part of the material remains elusively indigestible. Whilst both parts are based on similar tonic and dominant scales, the inner section is double the length (4-bar, not 2-bar patterns); and sequenced as ascents from A rather than descents from E. This child’s-play counterpoint is the stuff of nursery canons (“London’s Burning”; “Frère Jacques”), and the addition of the full horn section in the coda introduces canonic imitations which melodically align the outer and inner sections. That is, the rising A and falling E scales are elided through overlapping horn imitations. Nevertheless, by sheer virtue of its double-length, the inner song can never be absorbed. It is literally too big to be digested. There is a sonic remainder.

The eight-minute edifice of “Oh Comely” succeeds both on its own terms of intricate song-craft, but also because it is so elaborately prepared through a preceding sequence of memories and ruptures. Before track 8, the album has planted ruptures of harmony, timbre, noise, and historical perspective. Also, the temporal distance between tracks 1 and 3 and track 8 enables the recollections of these earlier songs in “Oh Comely” to function as musical memories. However, what converts memory into *postmemory* is the sonic remainder, the resistance to the blend. The smooth blend of brass and vocal lament in the coda of “Goldaline” mends the album’s sonic ruptures in an aural analogue of “digestion”. Nevertheless, the “stepping-back”—away from the much-sought E tonality towards A minor; away from four-bar to two-bar rhythms; and away from Anne towards her strange surrogate—provides that degree of “non-appropriative identification” that Hirsch argues is fundamental to authentic postmemory.<sup>33</sup>

## Endings

The album has three more tracks to run. “Ghost”, a fantasy on the transmigration of souls, rockets up the full E major octave scale in exhilarating triumph, confirming E—the pitch

of “noise”—as the apparent destination of the album.<sup>34</sup> All four families of instruments (soft, hard, brass, and exotics) play together for the first time, in unison against the pedals. Even the distortion is framed palatably as the sound of rocket engines. But the triumph of the following, instrumental, march, with the uilleann pipes wailing in joy, sounds too childish to be taken at face value. Everything is thrown away by the “Two Headed Boy Part 2”, the final track. The key is distorted (G $\sharp$  major), the guitar intro abolished by the saw’s spooky microtones, Mangum’s melody is curiously vacant, and its last moment is heart-breaking. We hear him putting down his guitar and walking away, from both the album and his career, just after singing, “But don’t hate her when she gets up to leave”. In one sense, this moment of trans-gendered affiliation is the album’s most acutely “live” point of identification between Mangum and Frank. But in merging Frank’s abandonment of the boy with Mangum’s own footsteps out of music history—his abandonment of *us*—he is memorializing separation and loss rather than identity or return.

### Notes

- 1 This essay benefited from conversations with colleagues at the University of Liverpool, particularly Richard Worth and Andy Frizell.
- 2 See Michael Spitzer, “Moving Past the Feeling: Emotion in Arcade Fire’s *Funeral*,” *Popular Music* XXXVI, no. 2 (2017): 1–31.
- 3 Kim Cooper, *Neutral Milk Hotel’s The Aeroplane over the Sea* (33 1/3). (London: Continuum, 2004).
- 4 David Blake, “Timbre as Differentiation in Indie Music.” *Music Theory Online* XVIII, no. 2 (2012).
- 5 David Rando, “The Perverse in Historical Perception: Anne Frank and Neutral Milk Hotel in *The Aeroplane over the Sea*”. In *Resounding Pasts: Essays in Literature, Popular Music, and Cultural Memory*, ed. Drago Momcilovic (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars 2011), 311–31.
- 6 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- 7 See Arthur Komar, *Schumann: Dichterliebe* (*Norton Critical Scores*). (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971);
- 8 Timothy Taylor, *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology, and Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 96–114; see also Simon Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 9 Cooper, *Neutral Milk Hotel’s The Aeroplane over the Sea* (33 1/3), 42.
- 10 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 85.
- 11 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 163–73.
- 12 Rando, “The Perverse in Historical Perception”, 315.
- 13 Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Révolution*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 179.
- 14 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 164–65.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 The term Cooper dubbed the Casio digital horn (Cooper, *Neutral Milk Hotel’s The Aeroplane over the Sea*, 66).
- 17 Cooper, *Neutral Milk Hotel’s The Aeroplane over the Sea* (33 1/3).
- 18 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Frances Dyson, *The Tone of our Times: Sound, Sense, Economy, and Ecology*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 10.
- 21 Michael Spitzer, “Moving Past the Feeling: Emotion in Arcade Fire’s *Funeral*,” *Popular Music* XXXVI, no. 2 (2017): 1–31.
- 22 Blake, p. 8

- 23 By contrast to this selective pin-pointing, double-tracking is pervasive in *On Avery Island*, and accordingly less effective.
- 24 Blake, "Timbre as Differentiation in Indie Music," 8.
- 25 Dyson, *The Tone of our Times: Sound, Sense, Economy, and Ecology*, 21–28.
- 26 Blake, "Timbre as Differentiation in Indie Music," 6.
- 27 Strictly speaking, "Oh Comely" alternates between E major and minor.
- 28 Rando, "The Perverse in Historical Perception," 326.
- 29 Albin Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 108–13.
- 30 See Hendrix's "Purple Haze", in the same scale but to very different effect.
- 31 These are the only two songs not in 4/4 time.
- 32 No other song had ended in a different key.
- 33 Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 86.
- 34 Due to the 12-bar blues pattern, the tonic and dominant rising scales interlock in a circle: E to B, then A to upper E.