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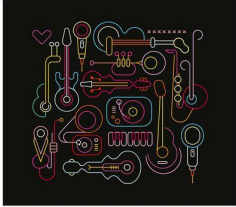
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The Routledge Companion to  
Popular Music Analysis:  
Expanding Approaches



Edited by Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, and John Brackett

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## 6

# A-HA'S "TAKE ON ME"

## Melody, Vocal Compulsion, and Rotoscoping

*Stan Hawkins and Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik*

### Introduction

1985 was a very special year in pop history, as much from a Norwegian as a British perspective. The Second British Invasion had commenced. Despite Madonna and Bruce Springsteen rising to stardom and Whitney Houston clinching her first number one single, with "Saving All My Love for You"—oh yes, and Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie pulling together the biggest names in pop music to record "We Are the World" for starving families in Ethiopia—Madonna was the only North American in the US Top Ten; non-Americans scored eight consecutive chart toppers, seven of which were British, the eighth Norwegian. A-ha marked this crucial point in Norwegian popular music history with the release of their song, "Take on Me." This came out in the same year as the duo, Bobbysocks, won Norway's first victory in the Eurovision Song Contest. A-ha symbolized an international turn for Norway in 1985. After the local success of a range of Norwegian-language artists at the start of the decade (e.g., Jannicke, The Kids, Beranek, Lars Kilevold), Norway's popular music scene was predicated upon collaborations with the UK music business. A-ha's move to London in search of success which they eventually achieved is emblematic of a set of unspoken rules that served to discipline Norwegian artists.<sup>1</sup> Today "Take on Me" is still loved by fans and audiences all over the world, which is borne out by a wealth of readily available covers, remixes and re-arrangements.

The origins of a-ha can be traced to Paul Waaktaar-Savoy's and Magne Furuholmen's late 1970s band, Bridges. Influenced by 1960s artists The Doors and Jimi Hendrix, Bridges marketed themselves as an anomaly, going "against the grain" in an era where punk was the big thing in Norwegian popular music.<sup>2</sup> However, with their self-released album, *Fakkeltog* (1980), the band would draw on a discernible new wave influence. Driven by an ambition to "make it" as an international act,<sup>3</sup> their attitude may be interpreted today as early evidence of a-ha working "always against the grain", not least by flaunting their ambitions in a way that was contrary to their background;<sup>4</sup> that a-ha moved to London to secure a recording contract with Warner Brothers distinguished them from their peers. Nonetheless, such an entrepreneurial move might also be deemed as a sign of the times, inviting an

interpretation of a-ha as young aspiring professionals in the 1980s who grabbed the opportunities that global mobility afforded them.

In the wake of their later recordings, a-ha has often been presented as the band that “never felt comfortable with the pop group machinery and attention”.<sup>5</sup> This does not necessarily tally with discussions of their early work, which deal with the band’s blind faith in their own talent and determination to become stars.<sup>6</sup> While this invites a critique of authenticity when it comes to “regular guys” from somewhere on the Nordic perimeter in the international pop capital of London, some held the view that they “could have been even greater if they had worked for it”.<sup>7</sup> Oddly enough, this adds a twist to the story of the Norwegian group’s rise to global stardom that is clearly in their favour, notably locking into discourses on Norwegian identity and belonging.

So, how “local”, then, were a-ha, and what was it in their sound that made them instantly distinguishable? As a marketable boy band, producing music that epitomized 1980s synth pop, a-ha was a product of their time; they were good-looking with a down-to-earth disposition and nonchalant attitude. Discussing their music cannot circumvent aspects of identity and of Norwegian-ness, where subjectivity became part and parcel of their wide-eyed faith in themselves and their resistance to the cynicism of the globalized music and media business. Their politics of representation, contingent on a *faux-naïve* mix of styles, combining leather jackets and torn jeans with synthesizers, also involved a penchant for cartoon-style music videos on the part of Waaktaar-Savoy and Furuholmen.<sup>8</sup> Contributing to their image, lead singer, Morten Harket’s charisma was distinguished by a touch of superficiality that, perhaps unnecessarily, invited cynicism from some audiences. Such a disposition was inspired by the aesthetics of the bands of the day. As well as being influenced by early synth pop bands such as Soft Cell and Visage, a-ha were inspired by their contemporaries, Depeche Mode, Pet Shop Boys, and other groups that mainly or exclusively used synthesizers. Timothy Warner suggests that these groups followed the lead from both Kraftwerk and disco music in the 1970s, benefiting from a sense in both musicians and fans that “the extensive use of such technology represented an appropriate way of making pop music”.<sup>9</sup> As part of the visual marketing of young male artists in the UK, a-ha would regularly appear alongside these bands in teenage, pop, and fashion magazines, thus playing a part in the production of a larger discourse on masculinities and music in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> As well as the British music press, it was the Nordic and Continental media that helped make the band marketable as both “local” and “global”—both Norwegian and British-sounding.<sup>11</sup> As such, they would strive for—and attain—a musicalized Englishness<sup>12</sup> that made them intelligible, and thus accessible, on a global level.

One might posit that Harket’s vocal costuming<sup>13</sup> fitted snugly with the bands mentioned above as well as trends in high-street fashion of the day, a testament to a voice that was nevertheless distinct and flexible. On several a-ha tracks, starting with “Train of Thought”, he would emulate David Bowie’s vocals in “Heroes”. Furthermore, his elongated e<sup>3</sup> falsetto cry, which helped make “Take on Me” famous, placed him alongside other white male artists who came to prominence in the 1980s, notably George Michael and Jimmy Somerville. Their use of falsetto enabled them to perform out what Susan McClary calls “soprano masculinities”,<sup>14</sup> and renegotiate masculine norms in pop music during this time.<sup>15</sup> Stylistically, Harket’s approach to singing bridged new wave and synth pop styles, situating a-ha firmly within an Anglo-American pop paradigm that made them intelligible for a sizeable part of the pop music market. With their music in mind, we will attempt to extrapolate a number of features in the music and performance that relate directly to their principles of melodic

construction and vocal compulsion. Our methods for analysing music and theorizing vocal compulsion build on a wealth of existing approaches found in popular music analysis, while our approach to audiovisual analysis, especially with attention to the techniques of rotoscoping, encompasses recent directions found in audiovisual studies.<sup>16</sup>

### Principles of Melodic Construction and Vocal Compulsion

It was the dazzling synthesizer hook that heralded the arrival of "Take on Me" in the international pop music industry (Figure 6.1). Over time this catchy melodic riff has become a signature in mainstream international pop, a symbol of a-ha's success and, moreover, an immense source of great national pride for the post-war generations of Norwegians. Pop tunes are memorable due to many intricate factors, as illustrated by the workings of melodic structuration and vocal compulsion in "Take on Me". In his chapter devoted to "delivery" in *Song Means*, Allan F. Moore asserts that popular musicology generally deems melody "as a function of harmony, and that harmony is therefore prior".<sup>17</sup> Often this entails principles of melodic structuration being side-stepped due to harmonic analysis. Undoubtedly, melodic analysis is a complicated task for the music analyst due to a wide range of musical properties. In our analysis of "Take on Me", we have considered:

- Pitching, physical effort, and expressive articulation
- Regulation of pitch movement and intervallic structures
- Timbre, rhythm, and pitch in melody
- Compositional working of melodic and harmonic material within the layout of structural units
- Rhythmic and melodic phrasing
- Choral interjections (call and response)
- Arrangement and instrumentation on melody (acoustic guitars, synthesizers and drum machine [LinnDrum])<sup>18</sup>

Formally, the fanfare in "Take on Me" serves as a structuring device, preparing the listener for the events to come; its euphoric quality engages instantly with the song's aesthetics and narrative. The diegetic role of the initial twelve bars (Figure 6.1) is an anticipatory one. Grounded



Figure 6.1 Fanfare from "Take on Me"

Table 6.1 Four-unit periodicity in “Take on Me”

Units	Measures	Upward intervallic mobility	Lyrics	Vocal Compulsion
1	4	Maj 7 <sup>th</sup> (A2 – G <sup>♯</sup> 3 – A3)	<i>Take on me</i>	light
2	4	Maj 6 <sup>th</sup> (A3 – E4 – F <sup>♯</sup> 4)	<i>Take me on</i>	medium
3	3	Min 6 <sup>th</sup> (C <sup>♯</sup> 4 – G <sup>♯</sup> 4 – A4)	<i>I’ll be gone</i>	intense
4	5	Min 3 <sup>rd</sup> (B4 – C <sup>♯</sup> 5 – B4 – A4 – E5)	<i>In a day or two</i>	elated

Table 6.2 Formal structure of “Take on Me”

Structure	Measures	Arrangement
Intro	4+8	Drums (4) + Keyboards/synth bass (8)
Synth fanfare	12	Synth hook (12)
Verse 1	12	Lead vocal + band
Chorus 1	16	Lead vocal + vocal backing + band
Verse 2	12	Lead vocal + band
Chorus 2	16	Lead vocal + vocal backing + band
Interlude	12+4	Instrumental + synth hook break
Verse 3	12	Lead vocal + vocal backing + band
Chorus 3	16 (to fade)	Lead vocal + vocal backing + band

in B minor, the entire passage establishes a Dorian flavour (with the home key in A major). It is with the onset of the fanfare’s jubilant entry that the curtain lifts on the song (Figure 6.1). Consisting of three phrases, the melody is almost identical on each repeat, with slight variations, such as the subtle vocal interjection on measures two and three of the second phrase and the chord changes from the first two phrases to the third phrase (Bm–E–A–D<sup>maj7</sup>–C<sup>♯</sup>m to Bm–E–Bm<sup>7</sup>–E<sup>9</sup>). The final resolution from Bm<sup>7</sup> to E<sup>9</sup> includes a plagal cadence (IV–I), leading effortlessly into the verse. Similarly, the final four measure phrase of the verse is harmonically preparatory for the chorus through its ending on an E chord.

The relatively long introduction, comprising the first twelve measures and fanfare (Figure 6.1 and Table 6.2) heightens anticipation of the lead vocalist. From his first sung pitch, Harket’s vocal performance<sup>19</sup> energizes the entire track. Much of this can be attributed to the organization of melodies that are in continual flux due to dynamics, timbre, and register. His impassioned manner of singing functions as a prime carrier of mood and meaning. One might describe the vocal part of the song as an “oratorical performance”, shaped by shifting planes of rising and falling intervals that strive towards a long sustained high-pitch in falsetto. Richard Middleton has insisted that oratorical performances involve the “molding of verbal intonations in time and pitch-space”.<sup>20</sup> The “musico-gestural” articulation found in melody and vocal delivery is fused with “rational and affective meanings”,<sup>21</sup> by the support of the physiological body. The compulsion behind Harket’s vocal delivery in “Take on Me” demonstrates this superbly.

In contrast to the twelve-bar verse, the sixteen-bar chorus is regulated by a set of four melodic units with contrasting intervallic variations (Table 6.1). It is in this section that the overall tension in the song escalates; much of this is a result of the physical exertion required

to move up more than two and a half octaves vocally within a short space of time. Via a series of intervallic leaps—major seventh, major sixth, minor sixth, and a minor third—a singer is challenged by such a task. This induces a tension that helps draw into the song aspects of persona and lyrical content.

With reference to Table 6.1, the fourth (and final) unit of this chorus comes across as cunning due to its irregular five measure duration. As we interpret it, this suggests a break from the preceding three bars, where an anacrusic gesture acts as a launching pad to the high falsetto  $e^3$ , the destination pitch (see Figure 6.2). Such a function increases the musical and narrative levels of anticipation. Throughout, the romantic narrative is cradled within the details of melodic material, aiding the protagonist on his journey. Overall, the structure, comprising twelve measure verses (which comprise the same chord progressions as the synth hook) and sixteen measure choruses is complemented by an instrumental intro passage, a twelve-bar middle section, and four bar synth hook break (Table 6.2).

Commencing in a comfortable baritone register, Harket's vocal register is confined to one octave in the verse, with a slight exertion in executing two major sixth intervallic leaps (bb. 2–3, 3–4, and 6–7). Tricky to pull off in a fast tempo, these intervallic leaps are lightly syncopated, responding to the staccato figurations of the fanfare melody (Figure 6.1). Effortless yet elated, his delivery is nonchalant and mediated through the rich vocal timbre and register. Physiologically, singing is shaped by the cavity of the body; in the verse Harket's vocal sound is transmitted primarily from the throat, while in the chorus it is more chest-based (on the initial lower sustained pitches). Further shifts to a nasal tone act as a transition into a long, sustained, delicate falsetto pitch. Vocal costuming of this ilk paints a richness in contrast and mood, all necessary for mediating the narrative. This occurs within the relatively short space of the song's duration (3'45''), which exhibits Harket's timbral and textural control as virtuosic, disclosing a highly personalized sonic signature. Rooted in 1980s synth pop and new wave aesthetics, his manipulation of melodic material shapes our impressions of a-ha's identity. Moreover, it is his degree of compulsion that becomes an instantly

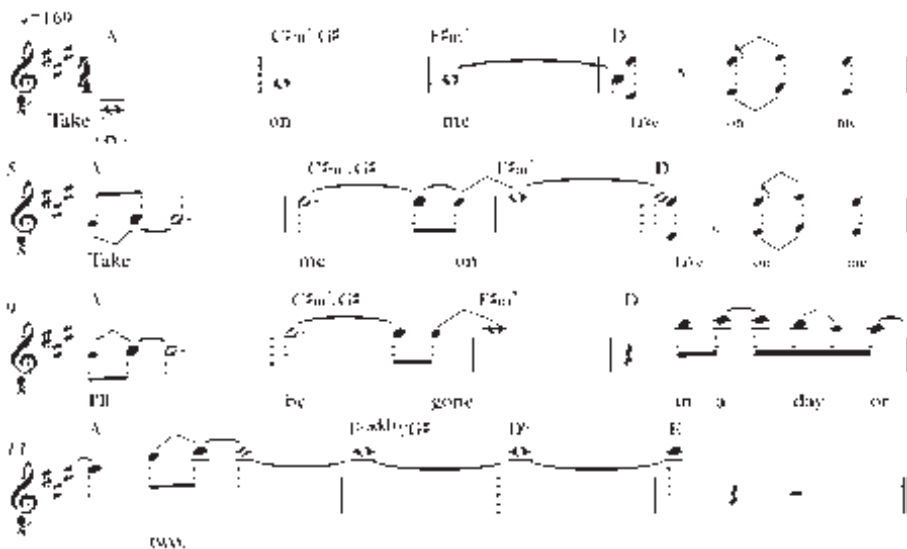


Figure 6.2 Melody, Lyrics, and Chords in "Take on Me"

recognisable vocal signature. This is, as suggested, a result of the intervallic mobility in the lead vocal part which increases tension as things build up to the climactic point and arrival on the pitch  $e^3$ . The move up to this high pitch is unexpected and dramatic. His phrasing in the build-up involves moving between registers, requiring different types of vocal exertion, borne out by the falsetto arrival point, which is rendered sonorous yet fragile, mitigating a sense of anguish and longing. For any singer, employing falsetto involves a sense of straining, with no guarantee of ever hitting the designated or intended pitch. Harket navigates such a task expertly in the first instance with a slide via  $d^3$  (Figure 6.2). Cushioned by shifting chords on each measure (A–E<sup>add 4</sup>/G–D<sup>6</sup>–E), with a heavy reverb in the production, the  $e^3$  pitch is delivered with a gentle vibrato, making it all the more affected. There are altogether three repeats of the chorus, with the falsetto pitch nuanced differently each time. Whereas in the first two choruses, the note is preceded by  $a^2$ , making the final interval a fifth, in the third and final chorus, Harket delivers an  $e^2$  pitch before landing on the final note—a leap that ends triumphantly in finite resolution. Well, that is for the time being!

Falsetto can be as elusive as anticipatory, governed by fluctuations in tempo, rhythm, and metre, all of which shape a song's aesthetics and narrative. Exemplifying this, "Take on Me" is recorded at a fast tempo (169 bpm), establishing excitement from the outset. Following the fanfare synth melody introduction (Figure 6.1), the voice enters in a baritone register, conveying an attitude that is assuring and confident. It only takes twelve bars to change the mood completely with the arrival of the chorus. Here the speed of melodic delivery is altered to dramatic effect, with an employment of long sustained notes that systematically rise (Table 6.1). In stark contrast to the verse, the contours seem more elongated with larger intervallic movement. Following the chorus, further alterations in speed and material occur during a frenzied four-bar instrumental passage (at the end of the interlude – Table 6.2), delivered with a virtuosic flurry of fast keyboard riffs by keyboardist Magne ('Mags') Furuholmen. This not only heightens the anticipation, but also impresses pyrotechnically by showing off the new and trendy sounds of the day. In many ways, this section signals a surprise, with its departure from the home key and an oscillation between the mediant (C# minor) and flattened leading-note chord, G major. This diminished fifth interval, a tritone, tinges the passage with a sinister effect, not least in the video's narrative, which we will return to later. While this does not constitute a conventional modulation, it involves a temporary shift into a new centre and marks a strong departure from the home key of A major.<sup>22</sup> Such relatively sophisticated compositional devices are common in Western classical and popular music for inducing mood changes through the unstable property of the tritone. In effect, the abrupt diversion from the home key via a tritone chordal oscillation functions as an expressive vehicle for returning us to the familiar terrain of the home-key in preparation for the final lap.

A pop song allows little time to capture a listener's attention. In "Take on Me" the time-scale of melodic articulation is enthralling. Astutely, the melodies form the canvas for the protagonist's journey, which starts cautiously, "talking away, I don't know what I'm to say, I'll say it anyway", and then building up to a more affirmative stance, "I'll be gone in a day or two". It is at this point of arrival in the song that melody is reinforced by the halving of the beat on the words "I'll be gone", carried by the drums, anticipating the entry of the four-bar epic arrival point on the sustained  $e^3$ , "in a day or two". It is on the final word of the phrase, "two", that this climactic falsetto pitch is reached with an unleashing of emotions. During the final repetitions of the refrain, the last word changes from two to one: "I'll be gone in a day", as the cadence resolves to the verse on the tonic (I). This resolution

not only offers respite, but also creates intrigue in the overall composition. Gino Stefani has theorized such melodic constructions, insisting that melodies constitute an "autonomous part" of a composition and therefore warrant an equal degree of scrutiny as harmony and chord layouts.<sup>23</sup> In our analytic findings, we have concluded similarly, discovering that melodic autonomy is a result of vocal compulsion, albeit supported by the rest of the band. Now legendary, the falsetto pitch in "Take on Me" was once described by Sylvia Patterson in *NME* as the "greatest falsetto in the history of pop ever".<sup>24</sup> We tend to agree.

Ultimately, Harket's vocal compulsion is in itself a principle device for exhibiting emotion and marking out a-ha's sonic signature. From this we would suggest that his vocality connotes desire through a degree of virtuosic exuberance. Pitching his falsetto on such a sustained pitch is rife with innuendo; the protagonist's turmoil lies in deciding whether to move away from his girlfriend in a day or two, which is manifested in the sonic properties of the voice. Falsetto becomes a poignant proponent of melodic delivery, with Harket's trembling, flute-like timbre on the e<sup>3</sup> also disclosing a vulnerability when it comes to masculinity. Physically, there is temporary muscular relief in the physiological process of achieving a high pitch in a single utterance. This has a powerful bearing on the song's aesthetics, underpinned by the threat of emasculation in a soprano or counter-tenor register.<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding all elements at risk, Harket's strategy is to strike at the heart of the listener and win through. It is the combination of melody and vocal compulsion that enables him to reach out with a physical intimacy that is acutely real but also illusory. Aesthetically, the falsetto could be read as a gentle version of the Norwegian nation's veritable scream; a psychotic device suffusing Harket sonically with Edvard Munch's masterpiece, visually, some ninety years later!

### Lyrical Signification in "Take on Me"

Lyrics are integral to melodic structuration and vocal delivery, and so we turn our attention to the verbal workings and implications for melody. Historically, "Take on Me" bridges the gap between the Anglo-Saxon/British pop music industry and Scandinavian popular music. Originally released by Warner in 1984 and produced by Tony Mansfield, the final version of the song was produced by Alan Tarney and released as a single in the autumn of 1985. The single was released four weeks after the video, as a calculated step towards securing a-ha's breakthrough.<sup>26</sup> Given the band's 1982 demo recording, the song's pathway was a gradual one. It would retain its original chord progressions and the synthesizer hook, although in Mansfield's version the production was more sophisticated, with a less dense soundscape. Conversely, Tarney's version was even more skeletal, with less "wet" treatment of the synth sounds in favour of an even stronger sense of *space* in the recording.<sup>27</sup>

Originally titled, "Lesson One", the chord progressions and synthesizer theme were assembled together with most of the lyrics.<sup>28</sup> There were also early traits of musical comedy, with Harket interjecting a cry similar to a rooster's cock-a-doodle-doo in place of a lyric line. Equally comical is Furuholmen's synthesizer break in Tarney's version, where his "Flight of the Bumblebee" pastiche initially appears in the mid-section (1'59"–2'33"), and also occurs intermittently during the final verse. While suggesting something musically humorous, it also adds a sense of naivety to the song.

In this section, we further consider vocal compulsion in conjunction with a range of lyrical properties. An apt starting point for such consideration is Dai Griffiths' theory of the anti-lyric.<sup>29</sup> As with "Lesson One", the lyrics in "Take on Me" are structured around a series



of catchphrases rather than any conventionally coherent narrative. In particular, the oxymoron, “we’re talking away, I don’t know what I’m to say,” and nonsensical turns of phrase, “I’m odds and ends, but that’s me”, supply an element of quirkiness to a pervasive sense of innocence; at the same time, this use of noncommittal phrases adds a certain lightness to the lyrics. What is more, the abundance of phrases that resemble everyday sayings (“It’s no better to be safe than sorry”) suggests a familiarity with English colloquialisms and idioms that few Norwegian bands would have been aware of at the time; this was partly as a result of the band being UK residents.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to Griffiths’ description of lyrics that arise from initial “babbling sounds”,<sup>31</sup> the phrases in “Take on Me” seem to emerge out of a cornucopia of Anglophone turns of phrase, indeed with a confidence that emanates from the mastery of a language that is not one’s native tongue. All this is offset by the clumsiness or even comedy of the song’s title. A fleeting glance of the phrase, “take on me”, indicates difficulties in translation, not least a stereotypical Scandinavian heavy-handedness in the use of English.<sup>32</sup> Yet, the title is indicative of a greater complexity and lends itself to two possible readings. On the one hand, “Take on Me” recalls the 1978 hit “Take A Chance on Me” by ABBA, placing a-ha in a genealogy of internationally successful Nordic bands. On the other hand, the song’s title suggests ironic intent, illuminating not only the strategy behind the lyrics, but also the likelihood of an ironic reading, which cannot be overlooked.<sup>33</sup> Despite these two possibilities, the catchphrase alone, “take on me”, is diffuse. That this phrase would become the song’s title, verifies the phenomenon of “anti-lyrics”,<sup>34</sup> which end up as mere accumulations of slogans. With the transformation from “Lesson One” to “Take on Me”, this might well be the purpose of the title and not an unintended effect.

The lyrics in “Take on Me” exemplify how Norwegian musicians learn not only to write lyrics, but also emphasize “authenticity” by mimicking or even faking a high level of command of English. It is against this background, that we could interpret the lyrics as a send-up of the seriousness of a range of a-ha’s Norwegian predecessors. In the 1980s, Norwegian artists such as Beranek, The Monroes, Casino Steel (in a duo with Gary Holton), and Creation worked with UK producers and musicians, effecting a counter-reaction to supposedly narrow-minded local music-making. This generated a degree, albeit modest, of international success with English lyrics as a marker of quality.<sup>35</sup> The role of English as indicative of a globalized standard recalls the notion of the platinum triangle of Anglophone countries as the centre and the Nordic countries as a periphery.<sup>36</sup> Alternatively, the transnational music of the time bespeaks a mobility of Norwegian popular music, best exemplified by the case of a-ha.

In lieu of such mobility, Norwegian artists have tended to emphasize English-language lyrics as a vehicle for aspiration and success, especially at local or regional level. A notable example is the 1980s teen-pop group Drama. Demonstrating the importance of and attention to English-language lyrics in Norwegian popular music, Drama’s lyrics (for the most part co-written with their producer/manager Audun Tylden) were chock-full of English maxims, colloquialisms, and turns of phrase. While this is not that far removed from “Take on Me”, with hindsight it becomes more obvious that Drama’s self-conscious attempt at adding gravity to pop lyrics indeed lacked the element of humour that a-ha managed to convey.

Griffiths’ contention is that the more song lyrics move away from traditional poetry and resemble prose (without actually becoming prose), the more they can be labelled anti-lyrics.<sup>37</sup> Central to this is a consideration of verbal space, defined as “the pop song’s basic compromise: the words agree to work within the spaces of tonal music’s phrases, and the potential expressive intensity of music’s melody is held back for the sake of the clarity of

verbal communication".<sup>38</sup> At issue is not necessarily how we define space, but "how the words occupy it, the relative density within and between each line".<sup>39</sup> Ostensibly, a-ha deviated from this by emphasizing the expressive intensity of melody over the clarity of verbal communication; this is true insofar as the catchphrase "take on me" is redundant. Then again, without the clarity of this phrase, the song would certainly be less catchy, as evidenced when we compare "Take on Me" to "Lesson One", the song from which it originates. Moreover, vocal compulsion literally embodies the phrase, making it intimate and internal, something Nina Eidsheim has explored in her theory of sound as a universal connection of entities.<sup>40</sup>

Although building on "Lesson One", the lyrics to "Take on Me" are distinct in significant ways. While several phrases are discernible in both songs ("Slowly learning that life is okay, Say after me, Ain't no better to be safe than sorry; needless to say, I'm odds and ends, Today is another day to find you, I'll be coming for your love, OK"), the chorus to "Take on Me" signals a departure from the didactic "lesson" in an attempt to establish meaning through wisdom, instead venturing into an airy pop territory where meaning is less clearly stated and more open to interpretation. In "Lesson One", the quest for meaning makes the band cram the chorus full of words, filling the verbal space and increasing the density of the lyric lines:

*All's good that starts well and moves with the sun*

By contrast, the verbal space in "Take on Me" is exposed, with the lyrics condensed into short monosyllabic words:

*Take on me, Take me on, I'll be gone, In a day or two*

This offers Harket recourse to concentrate on the melody, heightening its intensity by the intricacies of compulsion. Enhancing the expressivity, as well as highlighting the minimalism of the lyrics, the melodic articulation reinforces a sense of restraint and control, allowing tension to build as much in the spaces between the notes as in the actual notes themselves. Other significant elements include the sole word of the fourth line of the chorus, "two". This appears slightly after the first half-beat, thus creating a sense of anticipation just before Harket hits the epic falsetto note. There is also the matter of the backing vocals that provide a layer of texture in the song, but do not get in the way of Harket's lead vocals.

Employing Griffiths' method for addressing words in verbal spaces of songs, Figure 6.3 illustrates how the chorus of "Lesson One", parsed into horizontal lines and divided vertically into pillars, has a syllabic density that easily draws the listener's attention to the words. By contrast, the verbal space of "Take on Me" is less crowded, and arguably less dependent on any meaning in the lyrics (Figure 6.4): rather, the words function more as stepping stones for Harket to build up the vocal melody. Hence, the chorus of "Take on Me" gives a clear indication that the lyrics are no less significant even if they are "simple" or even silly.

Attending to the function of rhyme, Griffiths has devised a tripartite model for analyzing pop lyrics that expose full rhyme, near rhyme, and deliberate non-rhyme in a rhymed setting.<sup>41</sup> We discern all three in "Take on Me," and while the song is replete with rhyming words such as "say, away, OK", there is an almost mischievous irregularity in the rhymed lines. The first verse exemplifies this well. Lyrical flow in the first four lines is sustained by the two occurrences of "day" in the fourth line rather than the "you" that ends the line.

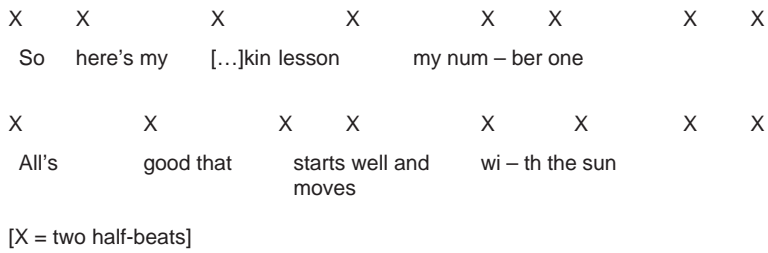


Figure 6.3 A-ha: “Lesson One” (chorus)

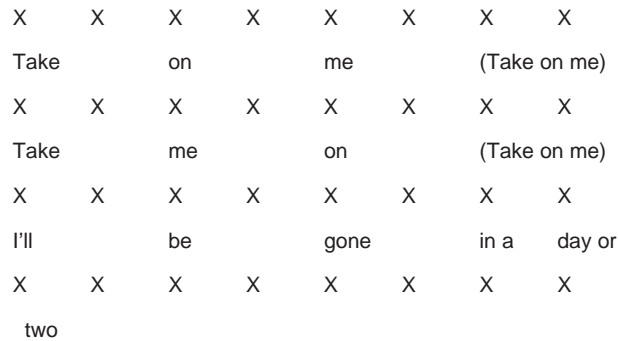


Figure 6.4 A-ha: “Take on Me” (chorus)

The rhyming is re-affirmed in the following line, yet fractured again with the addition of an inane, “OK”, in the final line, making the lyric sound as if the final word has been added on a whim, for the sole purpose of creating a rhyme. This implies a ploy to reinforce the notion of the lyrics as an accumulation of catchphrases. Moreover, it points to a degree of gaiety that is indicative of the band’s humorous demeanour.

A virtual absence of rhyming in the chorus makes it all the more compelling than the verse. Starting with “take on me”, the line that follows signals a breakdown into a mere play of words: while “take me on” is intelligible, it comes across as twice removed from any meaning. In fact, the occurrence of “two” at the end of the final line creates a sense of deliberate anti-rhyme. Again, the occurrence of an anti-lyric is suggested in opposition to words that are expected to be meaningful and rhyme sonorously: “Where in lyric one is following closely the progression of the right-hand side of the line, in anti-lyric one listens out for the striking detail, the unexpected word”.<sup>42</sup> Yet, when removed from musical context, the entire sequence of words in the chorus feels “unexpected” and, for that matter, partially unintelligible. Hence, by remaining outside the context for a moment longer, an element of aberration occurs as a non-Anglophone band attempts an English lyric and fails miserably; but for all we know this may be deliberate!

All this returns us to the issue of lyrics and their meaning. Any idea that the title “Take on Me” is incomprehensible to Anglophone listeners—a notion that likely sustains the centre-periphery dynamics of English-language popular music—needs to be scrutinized in the wake of the song’s popularity. After all, it became a-ha’s biggest hit, reaching the Number One spot on Billboard’s Hot 100 hit list in the US (and Number Two in the UK charts). Equally important, the song was an Anglo-American production, with two British producers (Tony Mansfield and Alan Tarney), as well as a-ha’s British management (Terry Slater

and John Ratcliff) and their American go-between (Jeff Ayeroff), all of whom cleared the song for release.<sup>43</sup> These individuals were behind building the a-ha mythology, a telling reminder that the band's breakthrough was Anglo-American and not Norwegian. Thus, we might well surmise about the prevention of a-ha from writing lyrics that were at times clumsy or meaningless in English. That said, the success of the song and a-ha's continued popularity have rendered any such speculation redundant; what is more, the lyrics continue to be open to scrutiny on a larger scale (with ongoing debates in social media).<sup>44</sup> As with many pop songs, "Take on Me" is a monologue; it is a narrative about romance and being young; it is a narrative about ambitions to make it in the music industry.

### **Rotoscoping, Structuration and Narrative Linearity in the Video for "Take on Me"**

The video's narrative involves a young girl (played by Bunty Bailey) sitting in a cafe flicking through a comic book about motorcycle sidecar racing where the male hero is chased by two opponents. At the point where he wins the race, the hero comes alive, winking at the girl and beckoning her into his world as she is transformed into a pencil-sketched form (0'57"–1'16"). Set within a boy-meets-girl romance story, the video depicts the protagonists traversing real and fictional spaces. The visuals are enlivened by the music's upbeat tempo and melodic poignancy, establishing an emotional overlay, aided by the jumpy visuals and superficial storyline. At one point, the protagonists are confronted by two villains, who shatter a looking glass portal with a pipe wrench (2'14"). It is here in the plot that the girl is trapped in the unfolding comic book drama. Coming to her rescue, the hero rips open a paper wall to create a space through which she can escape. It is at this moment the two villains descend on him (2'41") (Figure 6.5). Back in the real world, retrieving her crunched



Figure 6.5 Escaping through the Ripped Wall



Figure 6.6 Forlorn yet Victorious

up comic book from a bin, the girl discovers her hero unconscious and weeps. At this point the hero wakes and struggles to exit the frames of the comic book (3'21"–3'33"). The split between reality and fiction is symbolic of his endeavours to become human while throwing himself successively between two walls. The video culminates with the girl running towards him as he lies on the floor, smiling up at her (3'32") (Figure 6.6).

As with many pop hits, the video for "Take on Me" made the song legendary, as verified by Furuholmen during an interview with *Rolling Stone* in 2010: "The song has a super catchy riff, but it is a song that you have to hear a few times. And I don't think it would've been given the time of the day without the enormous impact of the video."<sup>45</sup> This prompts two points of reflection: first, the links between melody and imagery, and, second, the characteristics that constitute narrative linearity. This music video, the first of its kind to employ such techniques of rotoscoping, entailed pencil-tracing over each frame of the footage to create a sense of an "alive animation". Over 3000 rotoscoped frames helped create the video's surreal feel. What first strikes one is the rhythmic mobility in the visuals, which complement all the melodic figurations by intricate edits and jump cuts. Added to this are a host of different effects that contribute to the visual spectacle, such as lighting, texture, camera shots, editing, and coloration (the video is primarily monochrome, beige and brown coloration). The clever use of animation draws attention to the details of the music material, establishing a high level of interest throughout. As a result, directionality is attained by the rapid turnover of visual frames in their correlation with musical events as defined by interval movement, pitches, chords, textures, temporal contrasts and instrumental arrangement. In general, the lead vocal part works independently, underscoring the lyrical content and creating impressions of the young male and female protagonists. Remarkably, vocal presence remains mainly "behind the scene", creating a distance between the artist himself and the persona represented in the narrative. In addition, the melodic material, in all its diversity, serves as a continuum. Casting the voice to the background affects how we see things; sound is taken for granted significantly more than visual imagery.<sup>46</sup> To clarify further: we seldom see Harket singing, a point we dwell on later. Thus, the fusion of visual and sonic stimuli throughout has much to do with the sensory role of music as continuum.

Evidently, the director approached the storyline linearly in the form of a comic strip theme; this provided leeway for him to interpret the song on his own premises. The action-filled,

fictional narrative portrays Harket as a comic book figure who weaves his way in and out of reality. The *mise-en-scène*, made vivid by rotoscoping, glamorizes the handsome hero in relation to the somewhat quirky, ravishing female, who is projected as stable yet vulnerable. In terms of gender representation, things are not that clear-cut because the hero appears to be fragile or even perhaps naïve. This is best exemplified in the moments of vulnerability, such as the sequences where Harket is chased, threatened, and beaten up (2'15"–3'15"). Aesthetically, though, the hand-drawn animation and live footage hyperbolizes gender stereotypes. In one sense, the video promotes a good-looking boy band that is bent on making it in the pop music industry. Additionally, it engages with specific points of identification that involve desire mixed with uncertainty. This is implemented by melodic sculpting. Harket's vocal compulsion becomes a powerful response to the banal storyline via an array of signifiers, targeting the viewer's voyeuristic demands. The video works contrapuntally with the melodic material in ways that provide its continuum. While we have glimpses of the other band members performing in brief scenes, Harket is only portrayed "live" in a few scenes (although we hear and imagine him through every melodic utterance).<sup>47</sup> Much of the appeal lies in the fusion between the deceptively sophisticated camerawork, editing, rotoscoping, and the general arrangement of musical material, all of which are seamed together visually by close-up, mid, high angle and reverse shots. Many of the details are enhanced by the dynamics of lighting, which accentuate the contours, contrasts, shadows, and movements to an exaggerated degree. Visual effects have a major bearing on how we experience the music, and "Take on Me" abounds with intertexts. One case in point is when Harket starts throwing himself against the walls of the comic book's page, managing to enter the real world by becoming human and uniting with the girl. This very scene was inspired by the 1980 film, *Altered States*, directed by Ken Russell, which in retrospect has hilarious connotations. The film revolves around a Harvard scientist who conducts an experiment on himself by taking a hallucinatory drug in an isolation chamber. The result is unfortunate and causes him to regress genetically!

How a pop video unfolds is an intricate matter. This is because music also tells the story through a wide range of devices which we have exposed earlier in this chapter. Our memory of the video is conditional on Harket's singing which fuses the imagery and frame shots. The staging of a romantic love story contingent on a simple storyline raises many questions of reception and performativity: which audience is targeted, how and to what end? Young adult viewers in the 1980s certainly aspired to vastly different ideals than their counterparts today. Given the video's huge popularity, its mode of address tells us much about the Anglo-American music industry, MTV, and the pop-loving audiences of the 1980s. Idealizing heterosexual romance, the narrative targets a primarily young adult audience. With its launch, a-ha would be on display for the first time for a mass audience (with audiences in the USA assuming they were a British band). Since the conception of music videos, the star persona of artists and their bands has always been a major part of all mainstream pop videos, across genres. The *mise-en-scène* in "Take on Me" epitomizes a causal yet stylish demeanour. In many ways, the attitude-on-display typifies the new wave videos of the time. Most of all, it brought home the discord of idealized love and romantic expectations that besets many young people. This is depicted menacingly in the final scenes of the video when the hero looks upwards at his sweetheart, at which point the voice is absent as the music has the final say in the form of a cadential resolution (Figure 6.6). Articulating the tensions of norms by the originality of its rotoscoping, the "Take on Me" video is a reminder that the active engagement of viewing and listening gets us to partake in meaningful ways. Always this is contingent on the intersection of a bewildering range of other discourses and texts. This unique video pushes to the fore the

seductive spectacle of viewing a performer in countless different guises, while removing us from our everyday surrounds and planting us elsewhere.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, we have considered the phenomenon of a smash hit that put Norway on the international circuit for the first time. What was it in a-ha's song, "Take on Me", that made it successful? What was the relationship between the song and the video? And, how was attitude and narrativity conveyed through melody and vocal compulsion? The melodic delivery transports a multitude of expressions that are predicated upon ingenious processes of compositional working. As a prime agent in music composition, melodies blend seamlessly with the voice to produce a specific aesthetic. The lead singer's responsibility is to be true to the persona portrayed in a song or video, something Harket demonstrates in a performance that is forcible. In our analysis we found that lyrics and narrativity are paramount to understanding the appeal of the song and video, which involves a consideration on gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Harket's performance is beguiling and passionate; it is also an ironic marker of the notoriously heteronormative profession of pop music, where his own construction of masculinity becomes fallible in terms of its normality. This is sufficient to sustain the factors necessary for international success in an Anglo-American music industry.

Singing illuminates the physical presence of a performer in alluring ways. Drawing us into the personal details of artistic agency, Harket's compulsive vocalicity bridges the distinction between fiction and reality in the video, enabling us to construct in our minds impressions of the band a-ha. Ontologically, the link between melody and visual representation is a very special one; it documents a recorded event that is framed by its contextual surroundings. Pondering over vocal compulsion also leads to thoughts about authenticity in a performance. Always crucial in music interpretation is the relationship between delivery, listening and viewing and how it mediates ideas of authenticity in pop performances; the pleasure of hearing while seeing Harket leap from fantasy into reality is integral to this process. Perhaps the underlying thrill of audio-visual perception is in the ways an artist embodies a performance situation through the constantly shifting details of melodic expression. Through a variety of analytic methods we have endeavoured to show how a close reading of such an epic pop track can throw a light on a wealth of features that have ensured the track's longevity. These features are operationalized in striking as well as subtle ways, through the melody and vocal compulsion as well as the music video, and through the identity politics of the band members and attendant discourses on authenticity, belonging, space and place. Taken together, they broaden the scope of our analysis of a-ha's music and, as we suggest, help us understand the song's impact. For sure, "Take on Me" is a communicative event that documents the symbolic status of a Norwegian band who made a significant contribution to pop music.

### Notes

Part of this material was presented at a keynote presentation by Stan Hawkins at an a-ha conference and exhibition under the aegis of the National Library in Oslo and the Music Information Centre Norway, 20 October 2010. The authors would like to express their gratitude to Per Elias Drablos for assistance with the transcriptions.

- 1 A case in point is the band Titanic, who enjoyed international success with their 1971 single, "Sultana". Their career trajectory resembles that of a-ha in that they were based abroad, in

- Germany and France, and that they were signed to a major label and catered to an international market. See Per Kristian Olsen, Asbjørn Bakke, and Sigrid Hvidsten, *Norsk rocks historie: Fra Rocke-Pelle til Hank von Helvete* (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2009), 100; Jan Eggum, Bård Ose, and Siren Steen, *Norsk Pop & Rock Leksikon: Populærmusikk i hundre år* (Oslo: Vega Forlag, 2005), 525–527; and Willy Bakken [Willy B], *Norge i rock, beat & blues del 1: 1955–1971* (Oslo: Erik Sandberg AS, 1983), 95–100. In a 1983 interview, the band stated with some disillusionment that international success was entirely contingent on having a singer who mastered “perfect English” (Bakken, *Norge i rock, beat & blues del 1*, 96). This is an early example of how the idea of “good English” becomes hegemonic for non-Anglophone artists, and that the allegedly only way to achieve the goal of international success is through the mastery of language. Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik, “The Right to Perform: Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites*, Anglo-Centrism, and Popular Music,” paper presented at *Studying Music: An International Conference in Honour of Simon Frith*, University of Edinburgh, 10–12 April 2014.
- 2 Olsen, Bakke, and Hvidsten, *Norsk rocks historie*, 163.
  - 3 Håkon Harket and Henning Kramer Dahl, *Så blåser det på jorden: A-ha i nærbilder* (Oslo: Aventura Forlag, 1986); Annelise Furuholmen Nøkleby, *Boken om a-ha: Veien til topps, Magnes mor forteller* (Oslo: Filetab Support Services, 1985); and Tor Marcussen, “*We want the world and we want it now ...*”: *Boka om a-ha* (Oslo: Schibsted, 1985).
  - 4 Jan Omdahl, *The Swing of Things* (Oslo: Forlaget Press, 2004); and Jan Omdahl, *A-ha: The Swing of Things 1985-2010* (Oslo: Forlaget Press, 2010).
  - 5 Olsen, Bakke, and Hvidsten, *Norsk rocks historie*, 163; also see Omdahl, *A-ha: The Swing of Things 1985-2010*, *passim*.
  - 6 Marcussen, “*We want the world and we want it now ...*”: *Boka om a-ha*; Nøkleby, *Boken om a-ha: Veien til topps*; and Harket and Kramer Dahl, *Så blåser det på jorden: A-ha i nærbilder*.
  - 7 Omdahl, *The Swing of Things*, 90–91.
  - 8 In this respect, the music video for “Take on Me” may be read together with the other high-profile music videos made for a-ha at the time: “The Sun Always Shines on T.V.” (1985) and “Train of Thought” (1986). Notably, all three videos make use of rotoscoping. What is more, the videos are thematically linked: the video for “The Sun ...” opens with what is effectively a conclusion to the story in “Take on Me”, and the final image in the video for “The Sun ...” is identical to the opening image in the video for “Train of Thought”. As such, the trilogy of videos invites a reading as a triptych or a frieze of a-ha’s pop life.
  - 9 Timothy Warner, *Pop Music—Technology and Creativity: Trevor Horn and the Digital Revolution* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 92.
  - 10 Stan Hawkins, *Settling the Pop Score: Pop Texts and Identity Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Stan Hawkins, “On Male Queering in Mainstream Pop,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga, 279–94 (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); and Stan Hawkins, *The British Pop Dandy: Masculinity, Popular Music and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
  - 11 Notable publications that regularly featured a-ha in the mid-to-late 1980s included the West German pop magazines *Bravo* and *Popcorn* and the Swedish magazine *Okej*. Thanks to extended distribution networks, these magazines were also available to Norwegian readers, thus also informing a-ha’s domestic audience of the international status of the band.
  - 12 Nabeel Zuberi, *Sounds English: Transnational Popular Music* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
  - 13 We borrow this from Frith, who employs this metaphor to liken the “putting on voices” to that of changing costumes in the act of singing. Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 198.
  - 14 McClary points to the influence of Black American culture on popular music, with gospel as a notable case. Writing about Aretha Franklin as an influence on “gospel falsettists”, she suggests that, “Aretha invests everything she touches with the spiritual zeal she developed in the worship service.” See Susan McClary, “Soprano Masculinities,” in *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and New Musicology*, ed. Philip Purvis, 33–50 (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 36. This is possibly also valid for Morten Harket’s singing style. Drawing



- on strong notions of authenticity, the popular story about Harket is that he is an autodidact who figured out how to sing in a falsetto voice “all by himself.” Nøkleby, *Boken om a-ha: Veien til topps. Magnes mor forteller*, n.p. [14]). However, when we consider the fact that Harket has a background in Ten Sing and gospel, notably having played/sung the role of Judas in a gospel musical in 1980 (Harket and Kramer Dahl, *Så blåser det på jorden: A-ha i nærbilder*, 43; Omdahl, *The Swing of Things*, 20), Harket’s use of falsetto in “Take on Me” is favourably opened to interpretation in the light of McClary’s theory.
- 15 Hawkins, *The British Pop Dandy: Masculinity, Popular Music and Culture*.
  - 16 See John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman, and Carol Vernallis, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
  - 17 Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 91.
  - 18 This was a popular drum machine, marketed in 1982, which had a profound impact on the course of pop music, mainly due to its high-quality drum samples played by Art Wood, a close friend of the designer, Roger Linn.
  - 19 A useful starting point for our melodic analysis are Moore’s “four positional aspects”—register, cavity, heard attitude (to rhythm), and heard attitude (to pitch). Moore, *Song Means*, 102–103. We build on this to include additional aspects of subjectivity, such as gender, nationality, and style.
  - 20 Richard Middleton, “Popular Music Analysis and Musicology: Bridging the Gap,” in *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music*, ed. Richard Middleton, 119 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
  - 21 Ibid.
  - 22 See Griffiths’ study (2015) of elevated modulations and his four models (tonic-to-tonic juxtaposition, dominant-to-tonic juxtaposition, dominant-dominant juxtaposition, and tonic-dominant transformation).
  - 23 Gino Stefani, “Melody: A Popular Perspective,” *Popular Music* 6, no. 1 (1987): 21–35. For a more in-depth analysis of melody as an entity of delivery, see Moore, *Song Means*, 91–118.
  - 24 Sylvia Patterson, Undated. “A-Ha: Summer moved on.” *NME.com*. Accessed April 4, 2017.
  - 25 McClary, “Soprano Masculinities”; Freya Jarman, “High Notes, High Drama: Musical Climaxes and Gender Politics in Tenor Heroes and Broadway Women,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Stan Hawkins, 137–51 (London and New York: Routledge 2017).
  - 26 Harket and Kramer Dahl, *Så blåser det på jorden: A-ha i nærbilder*, 132.
  - 27 The term “wet” characterizes a signal on a recording which has undergone effect processing, as opposed to a “dry” (raw, untreated) signal. Hawkins, *Settling the Pop Score: Pop Texts and Identity Politics*, 198.
  - 28 “Lesson One” was released in 2015 as part of the bonus material on Warner Music Group’s 30th anniversary deluxe reissue of a-ha’s debut album, *Hunting High and Low*.
  - 29 Dai Griffiths, “From Lyric to Anti-Lyric: Analyzing the Words in a Pop Song,” in *Analyzing Popular Music*, ed. Allan F. Moore, 39–59 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
  - 30 This awareness has been vital for a-ha’s lyrics on a broader scale. Waaktaar-Savoy sheds light on the title “Take on Me” with his observation that English everyday parlance has had a bearing on his writing: “I can write songs such as “Hunting High and Low” or “Train of Thought”, and I have English people telling me that those are good and unusual titles. Even though they themselves use such phrases all the time ... “Take on somebody” means to pick up on someone, give someone your attention ... “Take on me” almost becomes “Look, here I am”. Marcussen, “*We want the world and we want it now ...*”: *Boka om a-ha*, 59 (our translation). The outsider’s perspective is of importance here, both as a marker of confidence with the foreign language and as a subtle indication of Waaktaar-Savoy’s heightened alertness to the workings of that language.
  - 31 Griffiths, “From Lyric to Anti-Lyric: Analyzing the Words in a Pop Song,” 48.

- 32 Frith, in a rather opaque statement, suggests that because rock musical conventions “reflect – or at least gesture at – patterns of Anglo-American speech”, these musical conventions “may not be appropriate for other languages.” Frith, *Performing Rites*, 175. The discourse that is being produced concerning popular music as a globally accessible platform may seem to take for granted that everyone speaks English, and that this language is transparent and thereby value-free. However, when viewed as tool for success, it becomes evident that English as a globalized language is never neutral, but a marker of distinction that transports with it values and assumptions. Hence what we call the paradox of authenticity, where non-Anglophone (here: Norwegian) artists not only choose to sing in a language other than their native tongue to furnish their music with an international appeal, but also internalize the above-mentioned demands for “perfect English”. In the light of this, the title “Take on Me” would certainly have been perceived as a source of embarrassment by many. Omdahl exemplifies this by eschewing any explanation of the song title, instead adopting a more apologetic stance: “It might not be pop lyrics’ finest moment ... [But] it worked, and part of the charm resides precisely in the ambiguity of the language”. Omdahl, *The Swing of Things*, 26 (our translation). For an extended discussion of the complex function of English in a context of Norwegian popular music, see Ålvik, “The Right to Perform: Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites*, Anglo-Centrism, and Popular Music.”
- 33 Notions of humour and playfulness are evident throughout a-ha’s catalogue, from the understated lyrics and jovial sound effects of “Maybe, Maybe” on *Scoundrel Days* (1986) to Norwegian DJ/musician Kygo’s faux-“Caribbean” remix of “Take on Me” for the compilation album *Time and Again: The Ultimate a-ha* (2016).
- 34 Griffiths, “From Lyric to Anti-Lyric: Analyzing the Words in a Pop Song,” 42.
- 35 Olsen, Bakke, and Hvidsten, *Norsk rocks historie*, 160.
- 36 Dave Laing, “Rock Anxieties and New Music Networks,” in *Back to Reality?: Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, ed. Angela McRobbie, 116–32 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).
- 37 Griffiths, “From Lyric to Anti-Lyric: Analyzing the Words in a Pop Song,” 42.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Notably, Nina Eidsheim offers an insightful study through a vibrational theory of music where the voice as a sound source often becomes all the more powerful through language (*Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice*. [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015]).
- 41 Griffiths, “From Lyric to Anti-Lyric: Analyzing the Words in a Pop Song,” 50–51.
- 42 *Ibid.* 55.
- 43 The collaborative background for the various versions of “Take on Me” reminds us that popular music is always a product of the efforts of more than one individual artist or band. This recalls Lori Burns’ point that, “there are often more creative personalities in play than are immediately apparent on any given recording.” Lori Burns, “Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock Artists, 1993–95,” in *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*, ed. Mark Spicer and John Covach, 155 (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010). See also Stan Hawkins’ observation that performance is “an outcome of collaborative effort” but that the focus is often “primarily on the artist in the role of lead singer”, *The British Pop Dandy*, 39. Even at this early stage in their career, their circle of collaborators would certainly have helped a-ha maintain a level of quality control, allowing “Take on Me” to pass the test.
- 44 Cf. <https://ell.stackexchange.com/questions/51437/what-does-take-on-me-mean-in-a-has-song>. Accessed November 29, 2017.
- 45 Daniel Kreps, “The Secret History of a-ha’s Smash ‘Take on Me,’” *Rolling Stone*, 14 May 2010. [www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-secret-history-of-a-has-smash-take-on-me-20100514](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-secret-history-of-a-has-smash-take-on-me-20100514). Accessed April 19, 2017. “Take on Me” debuted on the US Billboard chart at 91, the first Norwegian act to ever make it into the US charts. It was the animator, Michael Patterson, that introduced Warner Brothers’ Senior Vice President Jeff Ayeroff to the director, Steve Barron, who was behind Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” music video. Taking four months, the “Take on

Me” video cost approximately \$200,000, making a-ha stars. Awards came in abundance, with the video receiving eight MTV awards in 1986, including the MTV Video Music Awards for Best New Artist, Best Direction, Best Concept Video, and Viewer’s Choice.

- 46 This point is theorized well in Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981).
- 47 The only sequence where we actually see Harket singing is in the second verse, where Harket and Bunty Bailey gaze at each other from opposite sides of the screen (1’24”–1’49”). The moment where Harket sings the line, “Say after me” (1’27”–1’29”) is worthy of attention as he moves from real person to cartoon, indicating how his character in the video is able to transition between dimensions and appearances.

### Further Reading

- Griffiths, Dai. “Elevating Form and Elevating Modulation.” *Popular Music* XXXIV, no. 1 (2015): 22–44.
- Hawkins, Stan, and John Richardson. “Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation.” *Popular Music and Society* 30, no. 5 (2007): 605–29.