Laura Nyro, Against the Grain: Career, Genre, and Queer Aesthetics

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Abstract

My dissertation studies the American songwriter-performer Laura Nyro (1947-1997), considering how she navigated her career and approaching her music through the lenses of genre theory and queer aesthetics. While covers of her early songs scaled the charts, Nyro remained largely on the sidelines. Musicians including Elton John and Rickie Lee Jones cite her as an influence, and her albums drew critical praise, yet this praise was accompanied by reservations about the perceived excesses of her aesthetic and her wide range of stylistic influences that was received as unfocused. Nyro herself was elusive, declining televised appearances and largely retreating from the music business after the first years of her career. Although there are belated signs of recognition of her artistry and influence, she remains largely at the margins of pop music history. Attending to her life and career decisions, the hybrid mix of genres that she draws together in her music, and the queer sensibility I perceive in her idiosyncratic aesthetic, I consider the factors that contributed to her outsider position and the outcomes of her career and artistic priorities.

Nyro's assertion of creative control and pursuit of a personal vision of artistic and overall success frame my discussion of her interactions with the music industry. Her artistic choices reflect deep involvement with multiple genres of music, including soul, singer-songwriter, girl group, gospel, and blues. I explore how this composite of parts that are in some ways incommensurate posed a challenge to critics attempting to parse and categorise her music, and theorise how such a hybrid may be better understood. Nyro's music, while exhibiting the influence of pop music styles and conventions, also deviates markedly from these points of inspiration, showcasing her own individual style. In light of Nyro's queer sexuality, I propose understanding this dialogue with and departures from familiar referents as reflecting a queer aesthetic sensibility, and critically consider her cross-racial stylistic investment in Black musical genres and in Orientalism in relation to queer identity. Overall, I argue that the qualities that contributed to Nyro's marginal position are, through a different lens, a rich source of value in her music.

Résumé

Cette thèse porte sur l'auteure-compositrice-interprète américaine Laura Nyro (1947-1997), s'attardant à la manière dont elle a mené sa carrière et considérant sa musique en fonction de la théorie des genres et de l'esthétique queer. Même si des reprises de ses premières chansons ont atteint les palmarès, Nyro a obtenu peu de visibilité. Certes, des musiciens comme Elton John et Rickie Lee Jones la citent parmi leurs influences, et ses albums ont obtenu la faveur de la critique, mais cette appréciation a toujours été accompagnée de réticences à propos d'excès présumés dans son esthétique et de sa vaste gamme d'influences stylistiques, perçue comme un manque de direction. Nyro elle-même est restée difficile à saisir, refusant des apparitions à la télévision et évoluant largement en retrait de l'industrie musicale après les premières années de sa carrière. Malgré une certaine reconnaissance tardive de son sens artistique et de son influence, elle demeure largement en marge de l'histoire de la musique populaire. En m'attardant à sa vie et à ses décisions professionnelles, au mélange hétéroclite de genres qu'elle invoque dans sa musique et à sa sensibilité queer, j'explore les facteurs ayant contribué à la maintenir à l'écart ainsi que les conséquences sur sa carrière et ses priorités artistiques.

Ma discussion des relations entre Nyro et l'industrie musicale s'articule autour de sa volonté d'exercer le plein contrôle créatif sur sa musique et sa quête d'une vision personnelle du succès artistique et général. Ses choix artistiques reflètent un engagement profond avec plusieurs genres, dont la musique soul, la chanson d'auteur(e), les girl groups, le gospel et le blues. J'explore en quoi ce mélange d'éléments aux aspects parfois contradictoires a constitué un défi pour les critiques souhaitant analyser et catégoriser sa musique, et j'explique comment un tel assemblage hybride pourrait être mieux compris. La musique de Nyro, bien qu'empreinte des styles et des conventions de la musique populaire, s'en démarque aussi considérablement, illustrant son propre style individuel. À la lumière de la sexualité queer de Nyro, je propose de voir cette façon d'entrer en dialogue avec des référents familiers tout en s'en éloignant comme le reflet d'une sensibilité esthétique queer. J'explore aussi d'un point de vue critique son intérêt pour les genres musicaux afro-américains et l'orientalisme en lien avec l'identité queer. Plus largement, je soutiens que les éléments ayant contribué à marginaliser Nyro constituent, lorsque considérés autrement, une grande source de valeur dans sa musique.

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Discography and Abbreviations

Albums by Laura Nyro, with abbreviations where applicable:

MTAND	More Than a New Discovery	Verve/Folkways	1967
	re-issued as The First Songs	*Verve/Folkways*	*1968*
	re-issued as The First Songs	*Columbia*	*1972*
Eli	Eli and the Thirteenth Confession	Columbia	1968
NYT	New York Tendaberry	Columbia	1969
CATBOS	Christmas and the Beads of Sweat	Columbia	1970
GTAM	Gonna Take a Miracle	Columbia	1971
	Smile	Columbia	1976
SOL	Season of Lights...Laura Nyro in Concert	Columbia	1977
	Nested	Columbia	1978
MS	Mother's Spiritual	Columbia	1984
LATBL	Laura Nyro Live at the Bottom Line	Cypress Records	1989
WTD&LTL	Walk the Dog & Light the Light	Columbia	1993

Posthumous Releases

	Live from Mountain Stage	Blue Plate Music	2000
AITD	Angel in the Dark	Rounder Records	2001
	Live/The Loom's Desire *(rec. 1993-1994)*	Rounder Records	2002
	An Evening With Laura Nyro (Live in Japan 1994)	Universal	2003
	(selections also released as Live in Japan)	*EMI Special Markets*	*2003*
	Spread Your Wings and Fly: Live at the Fillmore East, May 30, 1971	Legacy, Columbia	2004
	Live At Carnegie Hall (The Classic 1976 Radio Broadcast)	All Access	2012
	The Nights Before Christmas (New York Broadcast 1970)	Unicorn Records	2020
	Go Find the Moon: The Audition Tape	Omnivore Recordings	2021

Chapter 1: Introduction

By all accounts, Laura Nyro enraptured her audiences, delivering riveting performances and inspiring devotion among many fans who would follow her entire career. Reading some critics' descriptions of the quasi-religious transcendence they experienced at her concerts, one would be forgiven for questioning her status as a mere mortal. Reporting on a 1971 performance, Ian Dove wrote for *Billboard* that "it was a surprise to see her walk off the stage rather than levitate."[1] Mark David Dashev struggled to reconcile this type of impression with Nyro's humanity, opining in the *Freep* that she had produced "one of the most ambitious and satisfying records in the history of recorded music" and reflecting that her music "is so much a part of us that we resent the sobering awareness that a person, not unlike ourselves, is responsible for it....A person made that music. What does she eat for breakfast? Does she stick Que Tips in her ears?"[2] Beyond Nyro's performances and artistic persona, her songs enjoyed remarkable success in their own right. In one week in November 1969, three Nyro-penned songs held places in the Billboard Top 10, via covers by Blood, Sweat and Tears ("And When I Die"), the 5th Dimension ("Wedding Bell Blues"), and Three Dog Night ("Eli's Coming"), bringing her passionate soul-, Broadway-, girl group-, and gospel-influenced writing to a wide audience. Her impact as a songwriter has endured, leaving a mark on her peers and musicians in the next generation. Artists including Elton John, Joni Mitchell, Rickie Lee Jones, Todd Rundgren, Billy Childs, and Suzanne Vega have sung her praises and cited her as an influence. More than a decade after Nyro's death, Elton John remarked, "I idolized her. She was the first person, songwriting-wise, that there were no

[1] Ian Dove, "Jeremy Storch, Laura Nyro, Westbury Music Fair, Long Island," *Billboard*, May 8, 1971, 32.
[2] Mark David Dashev, "Magic at Troubadour," *Los Angeles Free Press*, June 6, 1969, 44.

rules....The soul, the passion, just the out-and-out audacity of the way her rhythmic and melody changes come was like nothing I'd ever heard before."[3]

Yet despite these testaments to Nyro's artistic impact, she remains much less known than the many figures she inspired and influenced. While cover versions of her songs succeeded on the charts, Nyro's own recordings never reached such heights, and her only single to even enter the charts, notching a lowly #92 on the *Billboard* top 100, was somewhat ironically a cover of the Goffin/King number "Up on the Roof." Her name is not a de rigueur inclusion on best-of album and artist roundups as are those of her peers like Joni Mitchell, Carole King, and Bob Dylan, though she is occasionally included in a lower-ranking slot.[4] Though there are signs of belated recognition such as her 2012 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, she still remains an outsider to a greater degree than the rapturous accounts of her performances and the scope of her influence would suggest. Why, despite the impact she had, does Nyro remain in many ways on the sidelines? What about her music or the arc of her career worked against the potential for stardom and a place in music history?

At the start of Nyro's career, a number of events suggested she could break through to stardom. Her first commercial dealing was the sale of one of her songs, "And When I Die," to Peter, Paul & Mary; she performed at Monterey Pop, the 1967 festival that catapulted fellow musicians Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix to fame; she worked with manager and emerging industry titan David Geffen; she was personally signed to Columbia Records by president Clive

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[3] Elton John in Dave Russell, dir., "Sir Elton John," *Spectacle: Elvis Costello With...*, season 1, episode 1, Sundance TV, 2008.

[4] For instance, she is excluded from *Rolling Stone*'s "The 100 Greatest Songwriters of All Time" (https://www.rollingstone.com/interactive/lists-100-greatest-songwriters/) and their "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time" (*Rolling Stone*, September 15, 2021, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-songs-of-all-time-1224767/), though her album *New York Tendaberry* makes #82 on NPR's "The 150 Greatest Albums Made By Women" (https://www.npr.org/2017/07/24/538357708/turning-the-tables-150-greatest-albums-made-by-women-page-7) and #63 on *Pitchfork*'s "200 Best Albums of the 1960s" (https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/the-200-best-albums-of-the-1960s/?page=7).

Davis; and a range of successful performers covered her songs. But Nyro's artistic goals did not line up with the requirements of stardom, and she was not to be swayed by those hoping to nudge her towards commercial appeal, even as she steadfastly pursued a career as a musician. Nyro began pursuing her professional career as a teenager, approaching publishers already with many self-penned songs in hand. When she went to audition for Bobby Darin, the pop singer and songwriter who also co-owned a music publishing and production company, even though she had songs at the ready, Darin asked her to go home and write something like the early 1960s pop ballad hit "What Kind of Fool Am I." Nyro returned to play him this song with a pointed revision, as "What Kind of Fool Are You."[5] She did not make a deal with Darin, and took her music elsewhere. She ultimately signed with Artie Mogull for MGM's Verve/Folkways label, leaving after one album for a long-term contract with Columbia Records. Yet after a run of five albums from 1967 to 1971, Nyro dramatically slowed the pace of her career. Despite being expected to fulfill a renewed five-year, five-album contract with Columbia, she took multi-year gaps between albums for the remainder of her career. She released only four further studio albums and two concert albums, spread out over the period from 1976 to 1993, and was recording for a further album (released posthumously) when she died in 1997. Rather than focusing on producing studio albums, during this period in her life Nyro relocated from New York City to Danbury, Connecticut, travelled extensively, had a child, and built a life with her long-term partner, painter Maria Desiderio, while continuing to work by writing music and performing on a smaller scale. Nyro did not covet the role of pop star, and instead defended her personal and creative autonomy as well as her privacy, opting to work at a slower pace than that expected of a star and to invest instead in her own life outside of the industry while continuing to make music on her own terms.

[5] Michele Kort, *Soul Picnic: The Music and Passion of Laura Nyro* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002), 22-23.

Nyro's choices concerning her career only partially account for her marginal position, though, and I turn to her music to interrogate what in its nature kept it to the sidelines while also drawing admiration of peers and a small but devoted audience. A few telling signs can be found, curiously enough, in commentary surrounding her induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Some critics were irked by the inclusion of musicians who are primarily identified with genres other than rock; for instance, the *Daily Beast*'s Jamie Reno declared "There's something very wrong with a world in which Laura Nyro is enshrined, but KISS is once again overlooked."[6] As *PopMatters* critic Dave Whitaker put it, the Hall has many inductees "who, while potentially deserving of induction in Halls of fame for soul, R&B, gospel, doo-wop, rap/hip-hop, and jazz, don't fit under the banner of rock music."[7] But the question of which other Hall of Fame Nyro might find a place in has anything but a straightforward answer. The text accompanying Nyro's induction indeed begins, "What kind of music did Laura Nyro make?" The text's author, Jim Farber, proceeds to list a handful of the styles Nyro drew from, asking if her music was "jazz? R&B? Theater music? Art song? Motown pop? Girl-group pastiche? Or something from the classical world?"[8] Even a larger selection of genre labels than this would not on its own offer a satisfactory answer. Because Nyro's music draws together aspects of such a wide range of genres, there is not a clear generic "home" for it, nor does it get drawn into the pantheon of any particular tradition under the wide pop music umbrella. Such hybridity also denies the shorthand that genre offers in communicating about music. Not only is there no simple descriptor to refer to her music, but there is an absence of the guiding frameworks communicated by genre labels which suggest what can be expected in a type of music and how listeners might best approach it.

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[6] Jamie Reno, "Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Sucks!" *Daily Beast*, April 12, 2012, https://www.thedailybeast.com/rock-and-roll-hall-of-fame-sucks.
[7] Dave Whitaker, "Rock and Roll Hall of Fame or Shame?" *PopMatters*, October 31, 2011, https://www.popmatters.com/150034-rock-and-roll-hall-of-fame-or-shame-2495933455.html.
[8] Jim Farber, "Laura Nyro" https://www.rockhall.com/sites/default/files/2019-11/Laura%20Nyro_2012.pdf.

As I will illustrate, these issues posed a challenge for marketing departments and critics in locating and communicating about her music, and continue to work against the possibility of canonisation.

In addition to the question of genre, Nyro's particular stylistic sensibility proved to be an item of some contention. While others had chart hits with a number of her early songs, Farber writes of their success as being made possible by the "more conventional styles of other artists" that "smuggle[d] her work into the mainstream."[9] This sentiment is echoed by producer/arranger Felix Cavaliere, who observed that "All they did was, they took all those little nuances out," and in doing so made Nyro's songs "more palatable to the program directors." Cavaliere stresses, "Seriously, that's all they did, because her voice was fine. It was certainly good enough to be on the radio."[10] *Vulture*'s Bill Wyman, writing about the artists inducted throughout the Hall's history, commented on Nyro, "I'm glad the hall is open to oddballs like her. But Bill the Grumpy Critic notes that again this is a second-tier person with an amen corner among the Boomers on the nominating committee while more important and influential bands are ignored."[11] Farber also nods to this "oddball" quality in his overview of Nyro, but much more favourably than Wyman, describing her music as "eccentric" and "lovable and strange." Nyro's music engages with pop conventions but transforms them, playing with song form and adding in her expressive handling of tempo and meter alongside lyrics that can be impressionistic and abstract. These qualities that Wyman and Farber allude to are central to Nyro's compositional sensibility and performing style, and while they may have hindered her uptake by mainstream outlets, they are admired by her fans; these are the "audac[ious]...rhythmic and melody changes" that so inspired Elton John.

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[9] Ibid.
[10] David Barnett, "Rock Hall Inductees Offer Two Takes On New York Attitude" *NPR*, April 6, 2012, https://www.npr.org/2012/04/06/149934061/rock-hall-inductees-offer-two-takes-on-new-york-attitude.
[11] Bill Wyman, "All 221 Artists in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Ranked From Best to Worst," *Vulture*, March 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/rock-and-roll-hall-of-fame-artists-ranked-from-best-to-worst.html.

While their assessments differ, the terms used—"oddball" and "eccentric"—are bound up with the discourse of queerness. Given Nyro's fluid queer sexuality, I investigate how a queer aesthetic manifests in her music, suggesting how these qualities may be appreciated rather than bemoaned as the excesses that barred her from stardom.

In the chapters to come I will be addressing Nyro's life and music, and will here offer two brief glimpses of the beginnings of Nyro's career and adulthood that illustrate her dance with conventional paths. Nyro grew up in the Bronx, where she sang in harmony groups that gathered on street corners and began writing her own music as a teenager. As Michele Kort details in her extensively researched biography, Nyro's father, who worked as a piano tuner, spoke of his daughter's musical ability to people working in the industry as he tended to their pianos, hoping to spark their interest. He succeeded in convincing Artie Mogull to listen to her play. This led to a deal with MGM's Verve/Folkways label when Nyro was only 19, and marked the beginning of a lifelong if sporadic career. Nyro had recorded one album for the label, her 1967 debut *More Than a New Discovery* (*MTAND*), when she encountered the up-and-coming industry figure David Geffen who became her manager. Geffen facilitated Nyro's exit from Verve/Folkways and subsequent signing with Columbia Records as part of their growing roster of pop and rock artists aimed towards emerging youth audiences.

This entree to her career was a fairly unsurprising path of woodshedding, talent, and industry connections. Nyro's growth into adulthood, however, was marked by a mighty battle. As she recounted to William Kloman for the *New York Times*, the young Nyro spent nine hours fending off half-rat, half-man monsters that came forth from the walls. She emerged victorious, and described this as "the day I became a woman," saying, "I won the struggle for myself. I

stopped being a loser and became a winner instead."[12] Such imagery was the product of an acid trip, though Nyro was by no means a regular user. While she does not explicitly detail this episode in her lyrics, her broader journey to adulthood is, she states, reflected in her second album, 1968's *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* (*Eli*), which in vivid but abstract lyrics invokes love, heartbreak, drugs, and struggles between God and the Devil. Her drug-induced battle against the rat/man monsters is not the sort of activity often associated with adult maturity, but here, as she would throughout her life, Nyro set her own goalposts, and in a setting that could be taken as recreational misadventure, she perceived deep symbolic resonance. Hers is not a formulaic coming-of-age story, though it bears references to many familiar figures and experiences. For Nyro, it was serious, meaningful, and enacted according to her own ideas of what it meant to grow up, reflecting her idiosyncratic sensibility and personal take on mythical forces of good and evil.

This combination of engaging with norms while fulfilling her own distinct and personally meaningful path, unconcerned about at times appearing strange to onlookers, is characteristic of Nyro's life. In her career and oeuvre, she was entangled with the mainstream without fully entering into it. She was never entirely an outsider, in her career finding favour with industry giants Clive Davis and David Geffen, and in her music with an ear for the pop sounds of Motown and Broadway central to her writing. In all cases, though, she opted to engage with these forces from a position very much her own, filtering them through her own sense of purpose and style.

In my study of Nyro, I focus on her career and life as she navigated the music industry, her genre hybridity and its impact on reception, and the queer aesthetic sensibility I perceive in

[12] William Kloman, "Laura Nyro: She's the Hippest—And Maybe the Hottest?" *New York Times*, October 6 1968, D32.

her music. In all three domains lie factors that contributed to Nyro's marginal position in pop music history. But these very factors form a significant part of what audiences, and Nyro herself, valued. Nyro's career path turned away from any stardom that might have come her way, and in reflecting upon the choices she made and the alternative priorities she brought to bear, I reconsider what success may look like, highlighting Nyro's perspective on her life choices and contemplating the value systems underlying the decisions she made. I then turn to the genre hybridity of her music, as critical reception of her work demonstrates that this hybridity proved to be somewhat confounding to critics, even if they held a positive opinion of her music. I survey this reception in order to better grasp the challenges that genre posed in communicating about her music, and delve deeper into the meanings and assumptions that Nyro brings into dialogue through the genres she brings together. Finally, I address the aesthetic sensibilities of her music —qualities that some critics found excessive—through the lens of queer aesthetics. This perspective offers a reappraisal of her musical style, offering a lens through which to better understand her lyrics, stylistic affinities, and approach to song form.

Industry, Career, and Life

I first turn my attention to Nyro's career in Chapter 2, providing context for my discussions of her music and offering insight into how she navigated the music industry. I focus on two main aspects of her career, namely her pursuit of artistic control and her aversion to the career norms and expectations of stardom held by the industry. Nyro held a strong commitment to her artistic vision, and I explore how she achieved the results she desired over the course of her career. While she had a stable position in Columbia Records' roster, her contract with them has been given outsized importance in relation to artistic control, and its actual stipulations remain

unknown. I look instead to Nyro's actions in performance and the studio, as well as her views regarding commercialism and artistic concessions. In gathering moments from her career that demonstrate her assertiveness and conviction, I highlight her active approach to creative control and the broad scope of her artistic concerns.

In tandem with my focus on her artistic decision-making, I explore Nyro's choices regarding her career path and life. Throughout her career, Nyro largely declined television appearances and similar promotional opportunities. More broadly, she resisted being a star, avoiding the spotlight, releasing albums infrequently, and opting for a life removed from industry hubs and activities. In examining Nyro's views of the industry and choices regarding her career, I aim to add to our understanding of her as an artist in relation to the norms of the industry, highlighting her role as an architect of her own life often in opposition to what would typically be expected of a pop artist.

Michele Kort's biography of Nyro, while not an academic work, is an invaluable resource that I draw upon throughout my project.[13] Kort's substantial documentary research and extensive interviews with friends, family, and colleagues of Nyro paint a rich picture of her life. Nyro began her career during a time of significant changes for women and for the music industry, as cultural shifts associated with the second-wave feminist movement bolstered women's positions in many previously male-dominated environments including aspects of the music business. In seeking to contextualise Nyro's choices and the options available to her, I look to histories of her contemporaries as well as accounts of the industry, including both non-academic and scholarly works. Sheila Weller, in *Girls Like Us*,[14] addresses the lives, careers, and times of Carole King, Joni Mitchell, and Carly Simon. Alongside the interviews that supply

[13] Kort, *Soul Picnic*.
[14] Sheila Weller, *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon--And the Journey of a Generation* (New York: Atria Books, 2008).

biographical sketches, Weller illustrates the cultural context of the late 1960s that saw increasing independence for women and growing feminist consciousness. In doing so, Weller highlights the efforts made by the musicians in question to determine their own career paths and lives, while illustrating the backdrop of the times that saw women more broadly navigating newly-won opportunities and the decisions, triumphs, and sacrifices that followed. Although Weller does not devote attention to Nyro, she does address the cultural moment of Nyro's early career and the experiences of fellow women musicians that can serve as points of comparison. Christa Bentley, who turns her attention more broadly to how political consciousness manifests in the music of singer-songwriters in Los Angeles at the time, also highlights the agency of women singer-songwriters in dictating the terms of their careers and shaping the sounds of their albums in the studio.[15] This latter facet is especially relevant to my discussion of Nyro's career. James E. Perone addresses King and her music in particular.[16] His study adds focus to the particular concerns of her songwriting, performing, and album-making, locating her efforts alongside the growing role of women as musicians taking on greater authorship on their albums. While King and Nyro were in many ways in different positions, in terms of both commercial success and family life, they share other facets of experience and identity, both being Jewish women who grew up in New York City a few years apart. Owing to these parallels, King's decisions regarding her career and music offer a point of comparison for Nyro. Even though there are parallels between King and Nyro, there are also many ways in which their paths diverge. A study of Nyro's career offers an illustration of how she navigated a career in music while prioritising her art and values, finding a path through and around the industry system, and, in particular

[15] Christa Bentley, "Los Angeles Troubadours: The Politics of the Singer-Songwriter Movement, 1968-1975" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016).
[16] James E. Perone, *The Words and Music of Carole King* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2006).

contrast to King, establishing a family and home life as a queer woman, contributing a model for the career of a queer woman musician in the latter twentieth century.

The record industry, as Nyro as her contemporaries found it, was undergoing a period of substantial change as LP records overtook singles and rock and 'underground' music was surging with a college-aged audience. R. Serge Denisoff's substantial study of the American music industry, *Solid Gold*, published in 1975, reflects the period in which Nyro's career began.[17] Denisoff engages extensively with chart trends and financial realities of the industry, while also drawing on interviews with numerous industry figures whose perspectives he uses to illuminate the data. While the changing nature of the industry undoubtedly made it more hospitable to an artist like Nyro, it retained business practices and a focus on sales and chart success that often clashed with her non-commercial ambitions. Such perspectives are also brought out in non-academic sources concerning prominent industry figures in Nyro's orbit. Susan Lacy's documentary about David Geffen, who served as Nyro's manager in the early years of her career, provides an account of his career including his work with Nyro, and features commentary from numerous peers and musicians on his various labels.[18] Clive Davis's memoir recounts his rise to and time as president of Columbia Records, allowing some insight into his decision-making and priorities in that role, which included signing Nyro and working to keep her on the label after her initial contract.[19]

Although Nyro was tightly connected to Geffen and Davis at the start of her career, her priorities were not aligned with theirs, as she did not aspire to stardom, and indeed retreated from the spotlight. In considering Nyro's rejection of the commercialism of the music industry, I am mindful of how other pop musicians, especially in the rock era, positioned themselves as artists

[17] R. Serge Denisoff, *Solid Gold: The Popular Record Industry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1975).
[18] Susan Lacy, dir., *Inventing David Geffen* (Eagle Rock Entertainment and WNET Channel 13 New York, 2012).
[19] Clive Davis with James Willwerth, *Clive: Inside the Record Business* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1975).

in contrast to a corporate mentality. Jon Stratton highlights this paradigm in his discussion of Romantic ideology in pop music, making it clear that such tendencies are typically not a threat to the industry, and quite to the contrast, are a key part of its mythologising that in fact spurs continued sales.[20]

While keeping Stratton's observations in mind, I contemplate the particular ways in which Nyro's attitudes differed from those of the industry, particularly her passionate belief in feminism and women's culture. To engage with these concerns, I bring the alternative label Olivia Records into the frame of discussion, as it represents a counterpoint to the mainstream industry, one more aligned with Nyro's values. While Nyro did not move to any such label, its connection to women's rights struggles and lesbian community-building make it a pertinent part of the landscape of her career and political priorities. In her article on the history of Olivia Records, Bonnie Morris explores the deep connections between movement ideologies and the intentions of the label, which stood in contrast to the capitalist prerogatives of major labels.[21] Morris's account highlights the grassroots nature of the endeavour and its small financial scale, bolstered by the commitment of higher-profile artists to fundraising. In addition, Morris addresses ways in which the collective behind the label sought to pursue intersectional feminism and challenges they faced therein. Altogether, Morris illustrates how the collective behind Olivia Records sought to translate their principles into actions such as repertoire, personnel, and finances in the context of a music label. These decisions resonate with Nyro's concerns and highlight the women's culture that she aligned herself with even though she remained on Columbia.

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[20] Jon Stratton, "Capitalism and Romantic Ideology in the Record Business," *Popular Music* 3 (1983): 143-156.
[21] Bonnie Morris, "Olivia Records: The Production of a Movement," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 3 (2015): 290-304.

In this way, Nyro's position is one of contradictions, which presents its own challenges for study. Her public statements and her personal writings suggest her feminist views were deeply held, but they also make clear the value she placed on her music and reaching her audience, which a big label facilitated. In considering her career choices in tandem with her espoused values, I reflect upon how she balanced these priorities and navigated the choices available to her. While Nyro did not pursue an alternative path through Olivia Records, she did pursue an alternative approach to her career within the industry system. However, I have found no literature concerning alternative value systems and ideas of success such as those Nyro espoused in relation to musicians in the mainstream industry. Considering the nature of Nyro's priorities, I find that the framework offered by Herbert Marcuse, via José Esteban Muñoz, is more illuminating of her alternative configuration of work and life.[22] Marcuse distinguishes capitalist production-driven control of workers' time, which he terms the performance principle, from other possible mandates for the organisation of life that are issued from needs or pleasure, which he calls reality and pleasure principles. This framework offers a way to understand how work and life are structured in a capitalist society and presents alternative structuring priorities that emphasise pleasure rather than production. Focusing on larger organising principles rather than assuming particular psychological motivations, this theory allows for an interpretation of the life structure Nyro carved out in rejecting a pop star trajectory and instead prioritising her art and personal life. While this type of discussion is lacking in scholarship on pop musicians' careers, Nyro is certainly not the only artist to navigate the tensions between values and industry demands nor the only one to retreat from stardom. The lens of value frameworks offers one approach to these sorts of choices, allowing musicians' careers to be evaluated through different

[22] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), in José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

metrics of success and worth, rather than simply a failure in or abandonment of traditional models.

Genre

In Chapter 3, I interrogate the role of genre in Nyro's music and its reception. The generic complexity of her music—an amalgam including soul, singer-songwriter, Broadway, blues, and girl group—evidently posed a challenge to record companies and critics accustomed to employing genre frameworks as parsing tools. Surveying reviews and advertisements for her music, I investigate how genre affected understanding of and communication about Nyro's music. I am particularly interested in how these genres interrelate, and how in some regards they are incommensurable. As they differ in significant ways, such as the types of listening that one might do, or in the meaningfulness one expects to find, these genres do not neatly form a composite. Because of the heavy lifting that genre does in suggesting what we as listeners can expect from a musical experience and what sense we make of it, I read reception of Nyro's music with attention to how these conflicting expectations manifest. I suggest that her genre hybridity generated confusion around labels and led to uncertainty of how to receive Nyro's music and who it should be marketed to. Genre is no less crucial in the shaping of legacies and canons in popular music, and my discussion to this end engages with retrospectives written late in Nyro's career or after her passing. I suggest that Nyro's impact is obscured in accounts of popular music in part because it cannot be located firmly in any one genre's canon.

Genre categories are foundational to how popular music is discussed, sold, and received, serving as labels in record stores and formats of radio stations. Yet the commonplace usage of genre categories belies their complexity, as it is far from self-evident what defines a

genre, who decides what a genre's boundaries are, and how new genres emerge, let alone who the audience will be for any given genre of music. Nyro's music presents a wide variety of genre cues in the sounds, song forms, and lyrics she writes, as well as in the image projected by the albums' physical design and Nyro's presence in concerts and interviews. As Franco Fabbri outlines in his foundational work on genre in popular music, genre is not just determined by how music sounds, but rather is constituted by a range of other factors alongside aural stylistic features. He proposes that the way musicians and listeners appear, act, and conduct business are contributing factors to a music's genre.[23] Specifically, his framework delineates semiotic, behavioural, sociological, economic, and juridical domains of rules at play for any given genre. However, he suggests, these components may vary in relative importance across genres, so in one genre, sound may indeed be the most crucial factor, but in another, it may be the visual aesthetic. These observations are essential to my engagement with genre as I consider these various factors beyond musical style in the generic mixture that Nyro's music presents.

To understand the marketing and reception of Nyro's music, with the insights facilitated by Fabbri's delineation of the multiple factors that contribute to genre, I look specifically to studies of genre that address the North American context and music industry in particular. Simon Frith discusses the operation and construction of genre in the music business in the United States as well as Britain and Canada, offering insight into the use of genre by record companies that illuminates my discussion of advertisements for Nyro's albums. Frith distinguishes between record companies, radio stations, and retailers, who, he argues, all bring different approaches and assumptions to genre formation.[24] He argues that record companies aim to identify the market for the music they sell, while radio stations often aim to match music to broad market segments, and

[23] Franco Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications," in *Popular Music Perspectives*, ed. David Horn and Philip Tagg (London: IASPM, 1982), 52-81.
[24] Simon Frith, "Genre Rules," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 75-95.

stores aim at ease of navigation while being more attuned to shifts in listener expectations and understandings. Key to this model is the industry's projection of an ideal listener and the idea of what music means to them. This latter concept is of particular use in my consideration of advertisements published in support of Nyro's albums and singles. Keeping Fabbri's understanding of the scope of genre in mind, Frith states, "In deciding to label a music or a musician in a particular way, record companies are saying something about both what people like and why they like it; the musical label acts as a condensed sociological and ideological argument."[25] As I interrogate advertising for Nyro's music, I consider what assumptions about listenership in this vein are being made by the companies promoting it.

While I am interested in the decisions made by marketing departments and critics that involve substantial simplifications and assumptions in associating presumed audiences and genres, the question of the actual relationships between audience and musical genres remains more complex and thorny. Fabbri identifies the existence of musical communities that can form around music, but does not assume that the relationship between music and audience is homological, or that musical communities are otherwise simply coextensive with preexisting social categories. Instead, he suggests that it is important to examine the connections with and distinctions from such existing social groups in each case. Other theorists have since offered specific conceptual models for understanding how listeners and music are linked. David Hesmondhalgh invokes the idea of articulation to understand the relationship between a pre-existing community or identity and a musical genre.[26] In formulating this perspective, Hesmondhalgh critiques and rejects notions of scenes and subcultures that other scholars have proposed. Instead, Hesmondhalgh pursues a more flexible framework that allows for different

[25] Ibid., 85-86.
[26] David Hesmondhalgh, "Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above," *Journal of Youth Studies* 8 (2005): 21-40.

modes of relating to music and different strengths of connection felt by listeners. The concept of articulation, drawn from Stuart Hall, encapsulates this outlook, and is applied by Hesmondhalgh to propose that listeners and musics can be connected in many different ways. This insight is an important corrective to the working assumptions about audiences often made in the process of marketing music that risk being uncritically adopted as natural and inevitable. While my inquiry largely focuses on the assumptions made by the industry, Hesmondhalgh's intervention points to the much more complex web of audience-music relationships that exists in practice, and serves as a backdrop for my considerations of audience and racial coding.

The richly detailed case studies combined with theoretical perspectives on genre in David Brackett's book-length exploration of the subject further illuminates the question of the relationship between genre and audience, and offers both context and conceptual models for my work.[27] Brackett's attention to the role of race throughout the history of the U.S. record industry and the racial coding of genres is especially illuminating in how music has been marketed to segments of society and the assumptions that underpin such tactics. As one of the genre categories relevant to Nyro—the singer-songwriter—was still emerging at the start of her career, Brackett's account of the formation of soul as a genre category is a particularly instructive example for my project. While I do not offer a full account of the singer-songwriter's history, my brief survey takes direction from Brackett's work in attending to the shifting discourse regarding the music in question.

In light of Nyro's frequent, if ill-fitting, labelling as a singer-songwriter, I draw on studies of this genre and related concerns to interrogate the ways in which her music fits and diverges from it. While it has not been given the same sort of sustained scholarly attention that

[27] David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

other genres have, many aspects of the genre are addressed in the relatively recent *Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*. In this volume, David Shumway presents a history of the genre, finding its establishment circa 1970.[28] While I suggest its emergence over the years prior must be taken into account, its hazy status at the start of Nyro's career is significant in terms of reception through generic frameworks.

A significant feature of the singer-songwriter genre is the personal authenticity it projects, which was a selling point for the music. Authenticity is not unique to this genre, but it is often constructed in different terms. In studying advertisements for Nyro's albums, I attend to the types of authenticity that are being promoted. Also in the *Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, Rupert Till's consideration of authenticity offers insights into key aspects of its function the genre.[29] As he outlines, authenticity plays a significant role in how the genre operates, and is found in a sense of intimacy and honesty, often involving self-revelation on the part of the audience. In some other genres, however, authenticity can be too readily discounted or overlooked, particularly in cases where the music, such as that aimed at teenage girls, is deemed merely commercial. Allan Moore's formulation of modes of authenticity, which seeks to extend the conversation of authenticity to genres that are typically excluded, is a particularly useful tool for discussing the intersection of different genres, as it allows for their different relationships to authenticity to be discussed within a shared framework.[30]

While the singer-songwriter genre is an important part of the generic landscape of Nyro's music, it is far from alone, and I concern myself primarily with the admixture of genres she invokes. Although there are studies of crossover, typically between mainstream pop and one

[28] David R. Shumway, "The Emergence of the Singer-Songwriter," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 11-20.
[29] Rupert Till, "Singer-Songwriter Authenticity, The Unconscious and Emotions (feat. Adele's 'Someone Like You')," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, ed. Katharine Williams and Justin Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 291-304.
[30] Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 209-223.

other genre, there is minimal literature concerning greater hybridity. For an artist like Nyro, who was not in the position of crossing from one genre into the mainstream pop market, models drawn from studies of crossover, highlighting the ways in which music may cater to markets on either side, are not sufficient in addressing the issues posed by the combination of genres in her music. In engaging with multiple genres, Nyro's music does not simply form a bridge between them. Such realities require further attention in genre studies. One consideration of this topic is found in Fabian Holt's book-length study of genre in popular music, although his case studies remain limited to music that is based in two genres.[31] Even so, he presents them as musics that straddle the two genres, partaking equally in each, rather than acting as crossovers. While these case studies are brief, his identification of this domain as needing theorisation through metaphorical thinking is significant. I take inspiration from Holt's observations in drawing on metaphor to make sense of Nyro's generic hybridity.

Building on Holt's provocation, I introduce Foucault's notion of the heterotopia as a way to theorise the generic location of Nyro's music. The heterotopia, in Foucault's formulation, brings together the incommensurate. As Foucault explains, a heterotopia assembles objects that cannot be parsed through the same framework as they are of different orders (such as imaginary and real creatures), underpinned by different structures and logics.[32] This fundamental difference is a challenge to our typical ways of sorting and understanding information, and thus requires new conceptual tools, offering in return new perspectives on the components of the heterotopia and the structures through which we would typically understand them independently. When brought to bear on genre, it provides a vehicle for reflecting upon how genre operates and how we may listen anew to the same music in light of these understandings.

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[31] Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
[32] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

Queer Aesthetics

Beyond Nyro's remarkable generic hybridity, her music stands out for its aesthetic idiosyncrasy. In Chapter 4, I consider how these qualities, as well as more direct themes and references, can be understood to reflect a queer aesthetic sensibility in her music. Direct queer themes arise particularly in Nyro's later lyrics, but beyond such rather clear-cut content, I delve into aesthetic considerations and investments that extend throughout her oeuvre. This is by no means a straightforward path of inquiry, as there is no standard mold for queer artistic expression. Rather, I draw on insights from scholarship that has identified relevant tendencies and strategies. Dwelling on the earlier part of her oeuvre, I focus on two aspects of her songwriting, namely, her impressionistic, obfuscating lyrics that are paired with emotionally intense music and her idiosyncratic approach to song form that engages with pop tropes yet profoundly departs from them.

In proposing that these qualities are linked to her queer sexual orientation, I turn to the growing field of queer music scholarship that deals with this relationship of artistic expression to sexual subjectivity. While studies concerning queer topics in music were few and far between until the 1990s, since that time, as queer musicology took shape as a sub-field, articles and books published each year have numbered in double digits.[33] Much of the groundwork for this area of study was laid by feminist literary scholars who interrogated the relationship between gender and expression, including Julia Kristeva, who identified stylistic differences that she postulated were associated with women's identity or marginalised position, and Hélène Cixous, who proposed that there can be a distinct *écriture feminine* in writing the body and self that distinguishes

[33] I refer to the Cumulative LGBTQ Music Bibliography compiled and updated by Jacob Sagrans, Keith Wace, and Lloyd Whitesell, https://ams-lgbtq.squarespace.com/s/LGBTQ-Bibliography-2019.docx, in observing the growth in publications over this period.

women's writing when fully in tune with their gendered experience, though in her view this remained strictly aspirational.[34] Notably, Elaine Showalter attends to the domains in which women's experiences—shaped by repression in a patriarchal society—are manifest in their writing.[35] Such outlines of repression, or ghosts as Showalter calls them, have been central also to queer aesthetic criticism. Like the repression Showalter identifies as leaving an indelible mark on women's writing, common aspects of queer experience, such as the act of passing or the dynamic of the closet, have been the focus of many studies of queer aesthetic expression. Such considerations are central to Philip Brett's pathbreaking discussion of piano duets, which deftly draws together aspects of gay sensibility and experience with analysis of moments in the compositions in question, and illustrates how queer theory and music analysis can be brought together. Brett does not seek to claim an absolute truth of meaning but rather a queer interpretation that responds to the notes and the biography of the composer. In responding to those who "want to find authority in the notes and decide that their form of immanent criticism is science," he argues that "criticism is radical in musicology because it is personal and has no authority whatsoever," championing diverse interpretations against eternal truths.[36]

This vein of scholarship substantially informs my approach to Nyro's music as I identify queer sensibility expressed indirectly in aesthetic tendencies while not claiming a 'correct' interpretation. Yet the particular lenses of the closet and passing are neither wholly appropriate nor irrelevant to Nyro, who came of age not long before Stonewall and later immersed herself in womyn's culture, and opted for privacy regarding her personal life but without projecting a false image of herself to pass. I draw on insights based in these perspectives

[34] Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1977); Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-893.
[35] Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* (1981): 179-205.
[36] Philip Brett, "Piano Four-Hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire," *19th Century Music* 21, no. 2 (1997): 171.

while also looking to considerations of other qualities of queer experience that may manifest aesthetically. Other angles of queer aesthetic criticism have focused on more positive experiences and expressive strategies, celebrating challenges to normative structures, physical pleasure, and identifying instances of utopianism and queer world-making.[37] These modes of inquiry also inform my approach to Nyro, particularly with regard to her song form, and certainly future studies of her music could engage with them in other regards. Crucially, as Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell observe, while there are common formative queer experiences, the ways in which composers have expressed queer themes are unique, and, they insist, inquiry into these manifestations must be attuned to the unique approaches taken by each figure.[38] There is not, then, a set of particular compositional features to be sought out in music by queer composers, but rather an array of creative responses to shared life experiences and affects. This understanding of how common themes emerge in different ways amongst the works of queer composers informs my approach to Nyro's music, as I look not for a specific set of features but rather for distinct sensibilities in her music.

While this means that it is not possible to simply transfer findings pertaining to other artists to Nyro's music, such studies provide insights that, through a degree of abstraction, inform and inspire my outlook. In the absence of particular compositional decisions to look for as markers of queer expression, deviant or otherwise marked qualities in music are frequently the focus of queer aesthetic inquiry, as such departures are regarded as requiring explanation. A number of marked features of Nyro's music draw my attention, particularly with regard to her

[37] E.g. Jennifer Rycenga, "Endless Caresses: Queer Exuberance in Large-Scale Form in Rock," in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006), 235-248; Martha Mockus, *Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Francesca T. Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

[38] Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell, "Introduction: Secret Passages," in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 1-24.

lyrics and song form, and I look to explorations of these domains in the music of other queer artists to inform my interpretation.

Lyrics are a central focus of Fred Maus's considerations of queerness in REM and the Pet Shop Boys.[39] Drawing on biography to inform his analysis of music, Fred Maus illuminates how REM's obfuscating and muddled lyrics exhibit queer expressive strategies. Despite differences between REM's and Nyro's style of lyrics and vocal delivery, the common strategy of obfuscation makes them a useful point of comparison. In a similar vein, Nadine Hubbs finds the use of obtuse text, and its potential to keep queer themes unnoticed by heterosexual audiences, in Gertrude Stein's libretto for *Four Saints in Three Acts*.[40] Hubbs describes how Stein's writing came off as inscrutable to straight audiences (including censors), yet was replete with queer content discernible by those in the know. While Stein's obtuse writing, when queerly parsed, can yield specific meanings and referents in a way Nyro's lyrics do not, it stands as an additional example of obscuring textual meaning as a tendency of queer lyrics. Maus also builds upon his insight concerning queerly obscure lyrics to address how music can interact with text to form a queer aesthetic configuration. I find his observation of the conjunction of evasive lyrics with glamorous, sensuous sound in the music of the Pet Shop Boys to be a compelling and relevant example for considering Nyro's music, which features her highly expressive vocals and piano.

In contemplating how Nyro's song forms may be understood as reflecting a queer aesthetic sensibility, I look to Jennifer Rycenga's discussion of queer hearings of pop song form.[41] While Rycenga's project deals with music by straight musicians and thus does not propose a queer expressive approach to song form, she reflects upon qualities that nonetheless

[39] Fred Everett Maus, "Intimacy and Distance: On Stipe's Queerness," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 18, no. 2 (August 2006): 191-214; "Glamour and Evasion: The Fabulous Ambivalence of the Pet Shop Boys," *Popular Music* 20, no. 3 (2001): 379-393.
[40] Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 19-26.
[41] Rycenga, "Endless Caresses."

resonate with gay and lesbian existence. She finds marked expansiveness in the large-scale rock forms of the band Yes, which she connects to the abundance characterising same-sex behaviour in nature. Her identification of the possibilities of pop song form to express divergent sexual subjectivities is a significant contribution that I take as a jumping-off point for my own inquiries. Poundie Burstein also addresses form as a site of sexual and gender expression in art music. Burstein finds Schubert's compositions to be constructed via expansion, rather than the organic fragmentation of Beethoven that is held as normative, and argues that the gendered and sexual connotations of Schubert's approach—feminine and non-aggressive, in contrast to the energetic, masculine associations of Beethoven—have led to the composer's music being denigrated.[42] This illustration of how sexuality and gender coding can be found in the domain of form, and have seeped into reception, is a valuable example for the study of queer artists' music. In light of the formal unconventionality of Nyro's songs, both Rycenga's and Burstein's interpretations offer possibilities for approaching Nyro's songwriting in terms of queerness.

Issues of race and erotic investments occupy a significant focus on this chapter. Nyro's music demonstrates a strong affinity for Black popular music, as her style is heavily informed by soul and girl group music as well as blues. Drawing on the work of Patricia Juliana Smith and Annie J. Randall, who have both contemplated this affiliation in relation to fellow queer musician Dusty Springfield,[43] I unpack these racially-coded investments that Nyro's music exhibits. As these scholars argue, the cultural associations made with Black music in terms of sexual expressivity, as well as the image of many Black female musicians as taking charge of

[42] Poundie Burstein, "Lyricism, Structure, and Gender in Schubert's G Major String Quartet," *The Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997): 51-63.
[43] Patricia Juliana Smith, "'You Don't Have to Say You Love Me': The Camp Masquerades of Dusty Springfield," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 105-126; Annie Janeiro Randall, *Dusty!: Queen of the Postmods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

their art and careers, may be taken up by white queer women as venues for their own expression and sources of inspiration.

A number of Nyro's songs also display Orientalist qualities. Music and art made by white Western queer artists has a long history of preoccupation with Orientalism, and Nyro's music is no exception. Building on scholarship concerning lesbian authors whose works display an investment in the East, I identify moments in Nyro's music that fuse Orientalism with eroticism, and consider the implications of a queerness expressed in forms that buttress Western imperialism.

While Orientalism is by no means exclusively the province of queer subjects, it is a recurring theme in the works of white gay composers, as Brett has illuminated. Interrogating the Orientalism found in Britten's operas as well as that of a number of other white Western gay male composers,[44] Brett finds that Orientalism appears in a range of forms, but often acts as a cipher for gay sexuality. While there is not a similar body of scholarship concerning queer female composers, there are a number of studies of authors engaged in Sapphic Orientalism and primitivism that I draw on for insight into the particular dynamics of queer women's Orientalism, particularly with regard to East Asia. Robin Hackett engages with multiple authors from the early twentieth century whose work invests erotic energy in racially othered figures, identifying how primitivism is bound up with lesbian desire.[45] Simone Knewitz and Cecilia Rosenow both analyse the work of poet Amy Lowell who held a fascination with Japanese culture. Knewitz identifies how Lowell attends to the feminine via the Orient in her poetry, arguing that the norms of Orientalism in which the East is feminised and fetishised rendered it a ready ground for Western lesbian erotic expression, and illuminating how Lowell's gender factored into her self-

[44] Philip Brett, "Queer Musical Orientalism," *ECHO* 9/1 (2009).
[45] Robin Hackett, "Sapphic Primitivism in Modern Fiction: Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show*, and Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*" (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2000).

positioning.[46] Similarly, Rosenow highlights Lowell's use of Japanese poetic genres to present sensual descriptions of women that reinforce Orientalist tropes.[47] In bringing these perspectives to bear on Nyro's music, I hope to not only identify fraught aspects of her oeuvre but also to probe its layered meanings and locate her within broader patterns of queer artists' recourse to the Orient for self-expression.

These three domains, I suggest, have profoundly shaped Nyro's place in popular music. In her career decisions, her straddling of genre affiliations, and the queer qualities of her music, Nyro established herself outside of the centres of pop music, yet remained in dialogue with them. These qualities rendered Nyro difficult to locate and parse, and with her reticence towards fame combined with challenges her music posed to reception, she remains a rather liminal figure in narratives of popular music. Yet I suggest that these same features contribute significantly to the value of her music, and argue that her distinct artistic character is shaped by the very features that effected her outsider status. More broadly, I encourage the use of alternative frameworks to better understand and appreciate Nyro and other artists who exist in the margins of popular music.

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[46] Simone Knewitz, "Poetics of an Enclosed Garden: The Orient in Amy Lowell's *Pictures of the Floating World*," in *Orient and Orientalisms in US-American Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Sabine Sielke and Christian Kloeckner, 167-187 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

[47] Cecilia Rosenow, "'Two Speak Together': Amy Lowell's Lesbian Poetry and Pictures of the Floating World," in "Pictures of the Floating World: American Modernist Poetry and Cultural Translations of Japan" (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2002).

Chapter 2: Industry, Career, and Life

Press photographs of a Columbia Records event show Laura Nyro looking decidedly glum, eyes downcast, while company suits and fellow musicians smile for the camera.[1] This scene in a sense encapsulates Nyro's relationship with the music industry: she is out of step with its expectations, is unwilling to put on a face for the sake of publicity, yet is nonetheless in attendance, perhaps hoping to encounter some good music (the event featured a performance), and in any case, is participating as tacitly required to work within the industry that is facilitating her music-making.

The labels Nyro was signed to, first Verve/Folkways (MGM) and soon after Columbia, were faced with an artist whose songs easily charted—when performed by other artists—but whose own recordings, made to Nyro's vision and often at substantial cost, did not. For Nyro, success was defined first by artistic achievement and personal satisfaction, while for the labels that released her music, success was found primarily in sales and profit. While these aims do not need to conflict in practice, for Nyro, they did often generate friction, as labels attempted to promote material that was not crafted for mass sales and Nyro fought to get the artistic outcomes she desired. These issues are deeply intertwined with genre and aesthetics, which will be the focus of the subsequent chapters. Nyro pursued her artistic vision despite the resistance she met with in the industry, and demonstrated clearly that her priorities did not lie in commercial success or stardom but rather in artistic and personal fulfillment and self-definition. As her experiences of conflict with the music business were sharpened into critiques, both of it and of industry more broadly, Nyro navigated its structures to continue making music while investing in a life outside of it.

[1] "This Is The Scene," *Cash Box*, February 10, 1968, 44.

Drawing together illustrative moments from the first years of Nyro's career, I will illustrate her conflicted position with regard to the music industry and highlight her pursuit of her artistic priorities. These moments show Nyro's will to exert agency over her music and career, which became increasingly possible for her to achieve over the course of her life, in part owing to her changing role and status in the industry. I will then address broader themes concerning Nyro's relationship to the music industry through reference to her statements and actions in the years following her contract renewal with Columbia. Her decisions reveal priorities and a vision that looks outside the structuring values of the music business, and a broader critical stance informed by her ethics and feminism.

Self-definition and misrecognition

Born Laura Nigro, Nyro adopted her stage name as a teenager before she ventured into her professional career. Beyond suggesting a conviction that she would have a career in which to use this name, this choice illustrates Nyro's insistence upon defining herself. Nyro was certainly not the only performer to take this course; Carole King, for example, chose her surname out of a phone book while still a teenager, angling at something that would have a good ring as a stage name, even though like Nyro she had yet to begin her career.[2] In contrast to the familiar "King," "Nyro" is a name she invented, and one she evidently saw as suiting her more than those already in existence. Yet her choice of spelling left it often mispronounced as "nigh-ro" and prompting continual clarification ("pronounced like the emperor") in articles about her. This encapsulates her sensibility more broadly, as she made choices that were true to her artistic sensibilities but which were likely to be misapprehended.

[2] Weller, *Girls Like Us*, 9.

For instance, at the start of her career with MGM's Verve/Folkways label, Nyro reflected in an interview with *Down Beat*, "I was miscast. They projected me as being the 'Teenybopper Queen,' because I was 18 at the time."[3] Illustrative of this is MGM's marketing for her first album (*MTAND*), which focused on singles, and included three songs given their own full-page ads in major publications while the album itself was featured only in the small advertisement in *Billboard*. Even this album advertisement called attention back to singles included therein rather than emphasising the album as whole. As Serge Denisoff discusses, 45s had been the province of teenagers in the 1950s and into the 1960s, though by this time, LPs were gaining prominence among youth, becoming associated with music of the counterculture, gaining a gravitas not accorded to 45s and their teenybopper audience.[4] Combined with the air of novelty accorded to Nyro's singles in the advertisements run by MGM, it is clear that their vision of her as a potentially commercial teen artist did not line up with what she sought to do in a more serious, artistic vein.

Playing "And When I Die"

The first song Nyro launched into the professional market was "And When I Die," which she sold to Peter, Paul & Mary. The recordings of this song by the group and by Nyro, and later by Blood, Sweat & Tears, are revealing of Nyro's stance in the industry. Peter, Paul & Mary released their cover in August of 1966, the same month that Nyro was signed to her first contract by Artie Mogull to record with MGM's Verve/Folkways label. Nyro's ambition and desire to have her music heard is clear; while she could perhaps have received more substantial financial returns on the song (she sold it for $5000) had she sought better-guided negotiations, she

[3] Chris Albertson, "Laura Nyro: From the Heart," *Down Beat*, April 2, 1970, https://stomp-off.blogspot.com/2010/03/my-1970-interview-with-laura-nyro.html.
[4] Denisoff, *Solid Gold*, 176-177.

prioritised the dissemination of her writing. Nyro's songs would continue to find a wider audience through other artists who covered them, and Blood, Sweat & Tears' cover of "And When I Die" in 1969, which reached #2 on the Billboard chart, symbolises the peak moment of commercial success for her songs in this manner. These more radio-friendly covers seemed to many of Nyro's fans to be a flattening of her music that diminished the intensity and idiosyncrasies of her recordings. This prompted journalists to inquire if Nyro shared this sentiment, but Nyro appreciated that others were recording her songs, and said she was pleased with most cover versions, describing them as "sweet pop" like "ice cream soda"[5] (a phrase she used for this topic throughout her career).

The recordings of "And When I Die" are nonetheless telling of the situation Nyro faced upon entering the music business. While Nyro performed a metrically straightened version of it for Mogull in a recorded audition, her performance heard on the television program *Critique* in 1968 featured her signature shifts of meter (there with frequent shifts from 4/4 to 2/4) and tempo. This idiosyncratic version appears to be closer to how she originally envisioned it, as traces can be heard in Peter, Paul and Mary's cover of the song, made prior to Nyro's studio recording and thus based off her performance rather than the album product. On the album, however, these notable features of Nyro's style are absent, as is her piano playing. Herb Bernstein, who wrote arrangements for the album, recalled to Michele Kort,

> With Laura, when she first came to me, she was very artsy-fartsy. If you heard Wedding Bell Blues the way she first played it for me, you wouldn't believe it was the same song....I said, Look, I'm as artistic as the next person, but you have to think of the commerciality of these things. If you're gonna change tempo every 30 seconds, you're gonna lose the average listener.[6]

[5] Laura Nyro, interview with Ed Sciaky, *The Sunday Night Alternative*, WMMR, Philadelphia: December 10, 1989, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCq9ch5q4N0.
[6] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 29-30.

Bernstein had previously worked on Norma Tanega's "Walkin' My Cat Named Dog," and while that song became a hit, Bernstein lamented Tanega's idiosyncratic writing which he reined in for the record, similar to his approach to Nyro.[7]

Bernstein, along with producer Milt Okun, who was involved with the album, also brought in a professional pianist to replace Nyro's playing. Okun suggests that Nyro was nervous about playing piano, but also notes that he believed her playing—with changes of feel and tempo—would be more of a challenge to fit with the arrangements.[8] While Nyro may have been uncertain about her playing as this was her first studio experience, Bernstein's sense of controlling the arrangements, and of having a superior notion of how the songs should sound, is evident in his comments. As the industry changed in this period, the idea of artists taking on greater authority over their albums was emerging, but it was still common for studio producers and arrangers to take on much of the responsibility for the sound of an album, with artists at times not even hearing the final result prior to release. As Kort notes, it was uncommon for women to even perform instruments on their own recordings at this time. But Nyro's performance on *Critique*, and on the demos she recorded for Mogull,[9] show her to be a fully competent accompanist in performing her own music. Bernstein and Okun's wish to have the piano playing sound as they envisioned it facilitated the writing and recording of arrangements through the removal of meter and tempo changes, though it significantly removed Nyro's style from her own album. Mogull maintained that *MTAND* was Nyro's best work even following her subsequent releases on Columbia, believing the interventions made by him and the other label staff to have been improvements to the raw material of Nyro's music.

[7] Ibid., 29.
[8] Ibid., 30.
[9] These recordings were recently (September 2021) released as *Go Find the Moon: The Audition Tape*.

New to the studio process, and without explicit artistic control over her work, Nyro seems to have regarded this as a necessary compromise that allowed her to record and distribute her music. Indeed, women musicians who played their own accompaniment were few, so Nyro being cast as a singer rather than singer-performer was in line with norms of the time. Taking on the combination of writing, playing, and performing was notable particularly for female musicians. James E. Perone observes that, at that time, women instrumentalists in rock were largely anonymous session players rather than frontwomen, and those in folk were known more for their singing than for their playing, which took a secondary role. While he overlooks Black blues and soul musicians such as Memphis Minnie, Nina Simone, and Barbara Lynn in this snapshot, Perone makes a valid point in highlighting the newer phenomenon of white women singer/songwriter/instrumentalists, and in linking this demonstration of authorial and musical competence to feminist concerns. He argues that taking on these various roles is a statement in itself, suggesting in relation to Carole King that her "three-pronged work: as a singer, songwriter, and instrumentalist...may be the most important piece in securing *Tapestry*'s place as a work of the women's movement."[10] Two years prior to Carole King's solo efforts, Nyro herself ardently pursued this approach after her first album. Her experience with Bernstein did not dissuade her from writing for her own playing, and subsequently, with greater artistic control following a move to Columbia Records, Nyro played piano and oversaw arrangements for the rest of her career. She foregrounded her regained role as pianist, as Kort observes, by prominently stating "Accompanying herself on the piano" on her albums[11] (a declaration that commonly adorned the labels of Vanguard artists' albums—with "guitar" rather than "piano"—but was not standard at Columbia or elsewhere).

[10] Perone, *The Words and Music of Carole King*, 41.
[11] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 30.

Monterey according to Nyro

In the summer of 1967, following the release of *MTAND*, Nyro performed at the Monterey Pop Festival. For many of the acts there, Monterey produced legendary performances and catapulted performers to stardom, with notable appearances by Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. Nyro's performance, by contrast, was unenthusiastically received by the audience and alternately overlooked or panned by critics. For the rest of her career, she maintained that she was booed, a claim that she and at least one paper made, though when the footage was revisited decades later this was disproved. Nevertheless, her performance was not received with anything near the adulation of others on the bill. Recalling her experience two years later, she stated, "It was like the essence of failure." Nyro elaborated, "The musicians couldn't play my charts. There was so little rehearsal time."[12] This unfortunate circumstance meant that, despite the high caliber of musicians in the backing band, they appear oblivious to Nyro's tempo and gestures to slow down their rushed performance.

Yet there was more to Nyro's failure than an ill-prepared ensemble. One factor is genre-related, as Nyro's Motown-inspired show was out of step with the rock-centric aesthetic of the festival. Another is aesthetic. At Verve/Folkways, Nyro's image as well as her music was overseen by established industry figures, and rather than choosing how to present herself, she was, for instance, put in a wedding dress for the promotional images accompanying "Wedding Bell Blues," which she resented. But for Monterey, Nyro was granted latitude to prepare her act independently. Nyro gathered backing singers and designed an outfit to wear, taking her role as performer seriously and considering the visual as well as musical aspects of the show. Yet when she got to Monterey, she found her style to be out of place: "Everyone else was dressed sort of

[12] Harry Clein, "Laura Nyro: Rock Madonna from the Bronx," *Coast FM & Fine Arts* 10, no. 10 (October 1969): 23.

hippyish. I had this long black dress with this gigantic wing which was all wired."[13] Her costume design was seen as failed and kooky,[14] much as her everyday sense of style was looked upon with mild horror by some of those around her. Artie Mogull said he was "horrified" by her performance, concerned that he "was being embarrassed," having "always prided [himself] on having good taste."[15] Mogull regretted that he allowed Nyro to prepare her act without his guidance, and in addition to his sense of embarrassment, was likely concerned about Nyro's chances at commercial success if she was to take the reins for any future work.

One other perspective on Nyro's Monterey appearance is sparked by her reflections on the event. Interestingly, after lamenting the shortcomings of her backing band, Nyro invites another outlook, saying, "The truth was I was fantastic and ahead of my time." She immediately pivots to say, "No, that's not true. Monterey was a failure for me. Like a crucifixion."[16] Yet D. A. Pennebaker, the filmmaker behind *Monterey Pop*, later reflected that Nyro "was really *ahead* of everyone else."[17] Nyro's appearance at Monterey left her upset and avoidant of such festival performances in the years that followed. But, perhaps indeed recognising that her art was out of step with the rock culture rather than a product of a failed vision, it did not make her doubt her aesthetic sensibilities, and rather than shying away from the agency and independence she had been allowed for this performance, she sought out broader artistic control and discretion for her future albums.

[13] Ibid.
[14] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 42.
[15] "A. Mogull Speaks Out," *Record World*, May 29, 1971, 48.
[16] Clein, "Laura Nyro: Rock Madonna from the Bronx," 23.
[17] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 43.

Columbia – asserting artistic control

Nyro moved to Columbia Records shortly after her appearance at Monterey in 1967, bolstered by David Geffen in his new role as her agent and manager, who facilitated legal action to extract her from her contract with Verve/Folkways. With Columbia, Nyro took full advantage of the latitude she was allowed. Signed personally by then-president Clive Davis initially to a four-album contract, Nyro had a fair amount of security in her position on the label roster. Kort suggests that Nyro's artistic control was enshrined in her contract, but it is not clear to what extent this was the case. Kort cites attorney Alan Bomser, who was privy to the contract negotiations, as claiming this was granted in Nyro's contract.[18] However, Bomser did not recall specific terms of the contract, and the degree to which her control was actually legally enshrined remains uncertain, as the contract itself is not available for inspection. What is well documented, though, is Nyro's commitment to her artistic vision, and the achievement of artistic control, whether supported by her contract or hard-won by Nyro and those advocating for her. Following her negative experiences with Verve/Folkways, Nyro asserted herself and ensured her albums sounded—and looked and smelled—as she wanted them to.

A multisensory experience

For her first album with Columbia, *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, Nyro elected to go further than the look of the album, extending her artistic vision and control beyond even the newly-broadened horizons of album artists. She conceived of the album as a multisensory experience, and desired that the lyric sheet be printed with scented ink. *Record World* announced that it was "the first album in disk history that attacks three of your five senses—hearing fine sounds, seeing some of the most colorful and sensuous lyrics used in polished rock yet, and smelling the essence

[18] Ibid., 49.

—her perfume—that floats out of the lyric sheet."[19] This was not a novelty for promotion, but rather an integral part of the album experience as Nyro viewed it. David Geffen recalls that he played a role in achieving this, referring to her desire for perfumed lyrics, and saying "anything she wanted I wanted to get for her."[20] Yet Nyro herself advocated for the scent to continue being part of the album's production beyond the initial print run. As Clive Davis recalls, "One day I got an urgent call from Laura saying that she'd picked up a few copies of the album to send out to friends, and she couldn't smell a thing! I called the factory; they had indeed stopped putting in perfume. To keep Laura happy, I asked them to start again."[21] Nyro did not hesitate in going directly to Davis, the president of Columbia Records, with her request, seeking the most effective way to ensure the album continued to be produced according to her stipulations.

Designing her albums

As pop music moved into the realm of "art" in the latter 1960s, taking on a more serious register, the visual design of albums increasingly became of interest to musicians, and took on an increasing importance in the overall aesthetic appeal and marketing of music. The Beatles' *Revolver* is a notable departure to this end, as they sought out an artist to design its cover. Particularly for new, unproven artists, however, any form of artistic control over musical aspects of their work was rare at this time, and even established acts were routinely subject to their label's directives. Facets outside of the music, such as album cover design, were almost always left to the company. A handful of artists were beginning to buck this trend in the mid to late 1960s, though being involved in album cover design remained remarkable into the 1970s. In a 1973 feature on "The Look of Music" in *Billboard*, Ron Tepper writes, "As little as four years

[19] Carl LaFong, "Notes from the Underground," *Record World,* May 25, 1968, 13.
[20] Lacy, dir., *Inventing David Geffen*.
[21] Davis, *Clive: Inside the Record Business*, 99.

ago, record company sales/merchandising personnel would cringe at the thought of leaving an album cover design entirely in the hands of an art director without the benefit of 'sales guidance.'"[22] Yet by the early 1970s, as he explains (quoting MGM's Saul Saget), "the company's influence has diminished and the [musical] artist has stepped in with his influence."[23] Some artists took this a step further in applying their own artistic skills to illustrate their own covers. Joni Mitchell, who had contemplated a career in visual art before turning to music, illustrated many of her own album covers. Nyro did not illustrate her own covers, but was no less interested in the appearance of her albums and brought forth her opinions on photographs and design.

Nyro's influence can be seen in the cover of *New York Tendaberry* (*NYT*), or more precisely, both versions of it. Counter to Columbia's norms—their vice president in charge of packaging, John Berg, boasted that "Ninety-Five per cent of our work is internal. We seldom use any outside photos and most of our design is inside as well"[24]—Nyro opted for images taken by outside photographers. While she had been persuaded to move away from her initial concept (a picture of Nyro surrounded by ducks, or kissing a duck with ducklings around her feet[25]), she had selected a photograph of the view of New York City through her apartment, taken by Stephen Paley, to grace the cover. Yet after the print run had already begun, she changed her mind, and moved the Paley photo to the lyric booklet in favour of a photo of her by David Gahr for the front (though some of the original run were accidentally issued).[26]

Nyro's readiness to scrap a work in progress, regardless of sunk costs, was not unique to this situation, and I will highlight similar instances in her recording process. Indeed, the cover of

[22] Ron Tepper, "Graphically the Art in Records is Exciting, Alert and Ever Changing," *Billboard*, October 27, 1973, LM-1.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., LM-8.
[25] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 71.
[26] Ibid., 81.

NYT reflects not only the breadth of artistic control she asserted throughout her career but also her assertive and sometimes rash attitude towards achieving the results she wanted. Her design efforts on later albums include *Smile*, *Nested*, and *Mother's Spiritual* (*MS*). Nyro created mock-ups for the cover of *Smile*,[27] though subsequently opted to use a photograph taken by a friend instead. For *Nested*, as Andy Uryevick recalls, Nyro "was very interested in typography," describing that chosen for this album as "flowy, flourishy, but rough," as Nyro "always liked type with a hand-written flow to it," and noting that she demanded, against Columbia's wishes, that her name be placed at the bottom rather than the top (as was preferred for marketing purposes).[28] And for *MS*, she sought out artwork by women artists to showcase in the booklet, tying in with the themes of women's movement culture that the album tapped into.

Pursuing her musical vision on *New York Tendaberry*

Nyro took rather drastic steps to achieve her musical vision on *NYT* as well. In recording the album, she found herself artistically at odds with the arranger initially tasked with the project. Unlike her experience with *MTAND*, however, Nyro had considerable ability to affect the outcome, and she opted to take consequential decisions that delayed the project and incurred considerable costs. Arrangements had been written and recorded for the album, but Nyro was unhappy with the results. Despite the amount of time and effort already invested, she entirely discarded the arrangements, and called in Jimmy Haskell to take over as arranger under her guidance. And even though she allowed Bones Howe's arrangement of "Save the Country" to be made for single release, she refused to use this version on the album.[29] An additional single of the

[27] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 2, folder 10, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.
[28] Michele Kort papers, box 12, folder: Nyro, Miscellaneous, Sophia Smith Collection, SSC-MS-00769, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass. Used with permission.
[29] Bones Howe's version also appears on the compilation album, *Stoned Soul Picnic*, that Nyro oversaw. Its inclusion was once again a concession; she wrote in a notebook, "The single Save the Country artistically doesn't belong with

song was released with a condensed version of Haskell's album arrangement instead of Howe's. There is no record of how this came to be, but Nyro's resistance to Howe's version suggests she may have advocated for the arrangement she preferred to be released as well.

This re-start for the album resulted in a substantial delay, taking ten months to record and racking up many studio hours.[30] Recording the arrangements followed a lengthy process of recording just Nyro's vocals and piano, taking three or four nights per song as engineer Roy Halee recalls.[31] Studio time, as Denisoff discusses, was a precious commodity, and one that was hard to justify extending for anything less than best-selling artists. As he observes, "The artist's desire to use the studio for 'just a few more' hours in order to create the 'perfect sound' generally runs counter to the wishes of the staff producer who has another act coming in or the accounting-department executive who is totally concerned with keeping costs down."[32] *Eli*, too, was made with much more investment than Columbia would have liked; its producer/arranger Charlie Calello comments that more than twice the norm at the time was spent. For Calello, this led to the end of his tenure at Columbia; as he recalls, "I got a call from Walter Dean, who was in charge of business affairs, and he said that this was outrageous, that I was spending all the company's money, and how could I do this for an artist that no one knows of?"[33] Denisoff invokes Paul Simon as an example of an artist who was granted this kind of indulgence, referring to Simon's comment to Jon Landau that "a lot of times I don't do anything but sit in a studio for an hour or so...I like the studio to be a home, to be comfortable, and then I think, 'I'm talking to this guy, and if I talk...for two hours that costs $300.'"[34] The recording of *NYT*, incidentally,

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the rest of the group but the market [sic] dept insisted," Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 1, folder 7, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

[30] Maggie Paley, "The Funky Madonna of New York Soul," *Life*, January 30, 1970, 46.

[31] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 72.

[32] Denisoff, *Solid Gold*, 147.

[33] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 57.

[34] Paul Simon, quoted in Denisoff, *Solid Gold*, 162.

came into direct conflict with Simon's studio time; after Clive Davis' direction for Nyro to vacate the studio in order to accommodate Simon and Garfunkel, Geffen had Lee Housekeeper tell Davis that *Life* Magazine was in the studio and Nyro was upset and complaining in their presence, and Davis quickly reversed his decision.[35]

Nyro's actions regarding *NYT* took on a degree of notoriety. In a brief entry on Nyro in a history of Columbia, this incident garnered attention, and Gary Marmorstein noted, "The wasted cost was perceived as self-indulgent by old timers like Mitch Miller."[36] A producer, writing an anonymous letter to the editor, cited Nyro as exemplifying the perils of artists expanding their duties beyond performing. While he mistakenly credits Nyro as the sole producer of the album, he laments that *NYT* "ended up costing $150,000 for a record that could have been made for ten grand." He goes on, "There is a big distance between playing your ax and marketing a saleable finished product, but most artists refuse to understand, with the result that record companies have to put up with their incompetence in the studio, which costs Time and Money."[37]

Taking on production duties was still a rarity at that time, though it was becoming more common. Few performers took up this task with the gusto that Brian Wilson did in producing the Beach Boys, but some did continue to produce their own works, and others tested the waters by producing an individual album (for instance, the Rolling Stones in 1967, Ian Tyson in 1968, and Gale Garnett in 1969) or even one or two songs (as Bobbie Gentry did, coincidentally, with her 1970 cover of Nyro's "Wedding Bell Blues"). These ventures participate in the growing sense of authorship and serious artistry growing around rock and singer-songwriter music at the time. The anonymous letter-writer cited above was still operating from a perspective wherein studio

[35] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 73-74.
[36] Gary Marmorstein, *The Label: The Story of Columbia Records* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), 418.
[37] Anonymous Record Producer, "Letters," *The East Village Other*, March 3, 1970, 16.

producers were the default, as was the case through most of the 1960s, though he was begrudgingly acknowledging this increase in self-production that would continue to grow over the 1970s.

This trend was coloured by familiar gender disparities, with female artists facing greater doubt over their abilities to master skills such as production and arranging, but a growing number of women took on such tasks nonetheless. Carole King stands as an early example of wide-ranging involvement in album-making even before she began her solo performance career. Notably, as Perone comments, King's involvement on Little Eva's 1962 record *The Lllllloco-Motion* "appears to be the first time in the American commercial recording industry that a woman was given writing, arranging, and conducting credit on an album."[38] When she was recording her own albums nearly a decade later, as Sheila Weller describes, "In the sessions, Carole would unself-consciously exert control—her enthusiasm and confidence simply took over…she'd proffer her arrangement, instruct in key and phrasing, play drums or piano, and sing backup."[39] Dusty Springfield, while not officially in the role of producer, "was, for all intents and purposes, the actual producer who was responsible for [her albums'] sound," as Annie J. Randall writes, quoting Springfield as saying "I never took any credit….But I did the whole bloody lot myself."[40] Joni Mitchell also took on production duties for her albums beginning with her second release, 1969's *Clouds*.

Nyro, alongside Mitchell, King, and Springfield, exemplifies this trend of artists becoming more thoroughly involved in their albums by overseeing aspects including production and arrangements. Nyro found a middle ground for herself. She opted not to take on production duties alone, but instead to co-produce her albums or select outside producers with whom to

[38] Perone, *The Words and Music of Carole King*, 6.
[39] Weller, *Girls Like Us*, 110.
[40] Randall, *Dusty!*, 27.

collaborate. This allowed her to exercise the control she sought over her work, directing the project according to her wishes and on her own schedule, while receiving contributions she valued from particular producers.

Resisting commercialism

To get the results she desired, in addition to taking on large-scale duties like production, sometimes Nyro was more blunt. Beyond pursuing particular sounds, she also made it clear what she was avoiding. After recording a take of her cover of the Goffin/King-penned "Up on the Roof" for her third Columbia album, *Christmas and the Beads of Sweat* (*CATBOS*), one of the personnel remarked that it sounded commercial, a characteristic that, in their view, meant it held promise. Nyro, however, considered this anathema and erased the take, saying playfully, "*Now* which one do you like?"[41] Nyro's contrarian attitude was shared by Joni Mitchell, who later in her career remarked, "I believe a total unwillingness to cooperate is what is necessary to be an artist—not for perverse reasons, but to protect your vision. The considerations of a corporation, especially now, have nothing to do with art or music."[42] While others were more amenable to change than Nyro, this attitude reflects the sense of artistic authority held by the singer-songwriter. Felix Cavaliere, who produced the album, reflected on the process of making *CATBOS* that for Nyro "every note, everything on that album, was her private property. We would literally have to bargain with her for our ideas, because she would not change a thing." He continued, "she would stop and get real slow and dreamy, then pick it up again! However she felt, that's where it went. Well, good-bye radio."[43] While Cavaliere largely accepted that Nyro's decisions meant widespread success was unlikely (though he and arranger Arif Mardin did

[41] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 112.
[42] Robert Hilburn, "An art born of pain, an artist in happy exile," *Los Angeles Times*, September 5, 2004, accessed from https://www.jonimitchell.com/library/print.cfm?id=1177.
[43] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 112.

persuade Nyro to accept some of their ideas), the distinction between their outlooks is clear. Nyro may have had other reasons for disliking the take in question, but her objection to commercialism is made evident here. This is an added dimension to the friction between Nyro and those she interacted with in the industry. Prior to this point, conflicts of opinion had been expressed in terms of commitment to her artistic vision, with the detriment to commercial appeal seeming to arise as a secondary effect. Here, both factors appear equally implicated.

In a twist of irony, "Up On the Roof" became the only single of Nyro's to chart in the top 100. Yet this happened seemingly in spite of Nyro, who also could not be persuaded to change the album title despite concern that it would not sell well after the Christmas sales period. This concern is reflected in the full-page ad run for *CATBOS* in Billboard which proclaims, "Laura Nyro is a very special talent whose beautiful and soulful music is for everyone," adding a reassurance that the album itself was not limited to holiday enjoyment but instead "is a feeling for 365 days."[44] A full-page ad for the single "When I Was a Freeport and You Were the Main Drag" echoes this angle, referring to the album as a whole as having "songs for every day of the year."[45] This approach to encouraging sales was perhaps more necessary at that time, as the ad was run in January. Nyro's resistance to having her music changed or curtailed for the sake of mass appeal and, by extension, sales, grew to a broader resentment and critique of the role of money in the music industry, and she would maintain and sharpen this outlook throughout her career.

[44] Columbia Records advertisement for *Christmas and the Beads of Sweat*, *Billboard*, December 12, 1970, 5.
[45] Columbia Records advertisement for "When I Was a Freeport and You Were the Main Drag," *Billboard*, January 16, 1971, 5.

Splitting from Geffen

Following *CATBOS*, while *Gonna Take a Miracle* (*GTAM*) was being developed, Nyro faced a consequential choice that would impact her career, and her decision reflects her agency over business matters as well as her priorities. Geffen, who was her manager, agent, and close friend, launched his own label, Asylum, in 1971. This significant undertaking was announced in major trade publications which stated that Nyro, along with other artists including Joni Mitchell and Jackson Browne, would feature in the label's initial roster. From Geffen's perspective, his career was built around Nyro, as he recalls:

> When we were looking for a manager for Laura, she said to me, why don't you manage me, and eventually I thought, do I really believe she could be one of the biggest stars in the world, should I give up my career at this point in my life, where I'm doing so well, and put all my marbles in Laura's basket? And I woke up one morning and I thought, if you really believe it, go for it. I think everybody thought I was crazy but I quit my job and I started a management company in which I was managing one client, Laura Nyro.[46]

In light of this, when he launched his own label, he assumed this enterprising pairing would continue, and described the situation thus: "I had supported all of Laura's dreams, and my dream was to start a record company and I wanted Laura to be the first artist on the label."[47] While Geffen states that Nyro had initially agreed to be on his new label, she had not in fact left Columbia, and was taken aback when informed of these developments. She believed that staying with Columbia would serve her better, and decided to remain. Nyro and Geffen severed ties after this rift. From Nyro's perspective, Columbia had supported her, affording her artistic freedom, and she also valued her connection with Clive Davis who was still serving as president.

Columbia did well in this deal; the deal involved CBS stocks being paid to Nyro for her publishing company while her new five-year artist contract was included without substantial payment, and while details are scant, Clive Davis stated that the figure was much less than had

[46] Lacy, dir., *Inventing David Geffen*.
[47] Ibid.

been reported in trade publications at the time.[48] Columbia secured returns from Nyro's earlier, commercially successful work without risking investment on her forthcoming efforts; Clive Davis understood this clearly, commenting, "we were not only getting a long-term recording artist agreement with no risk money advanced, but we were purchasing a publishing company that already had earned over half a million dollars and would automatically continue to earn substantial income as an annuity from past copyrights."[49] This deal had been negotiated with Geffen, with the contract dated November of 1970, prior to his launch of Asylum but certainly while plans for this label were underway. The sale of Nyro's publishing company left Geffen half of the rather substantial profits. Nyro's new recording contract, meanwhile, required five albums containing at least fifty-one of her own compositions in the five year period,[50] and the CBS stock owed to Nyro for her publishing would be partially released upon completion of each album. Given Nyro's closeness to Geffen as a friend, her decision to remain with Columbia held profound personal ramifications, and was not one she took lightly. In Nyro's eyes, Geffen had damaged their friendship by not keeping her up to speed with his plans nor consulting her regarding her desire to join his label, so her decision likely reflected this breach of trust as much as her comfort with Columbia.

Asylum did become a successful label for numerous singer-songwriters, with artists gaining immediate recognition and sustaining long careers. Geffen clearly felt that Nyro would have been better off staying with him, suggesting that after leaving, she was unsuccessful, in contrast to how he viewed himself. While he felt betrayed by her, his perception of her as unsuccessful served as a leveling tool, as he stated quite bluntly to Kort, "Our *lives* were the

[48] Mitchell Fink, "Clive Davis: Candid Talk (II)" *Record World*, November 4, 1972, 14.
[49] Davis, *Clive: Inside the Record Business*, 100-101.
[50] "Laura Nyro," Sony Music Entertainment Records Series I: CBS Subseries A: Artist Contract Cards, 1936-1986, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

answer to it all. She knew it, and I knew it."[51] But he and Nyro were operating with different visions of what it meant to be successful. While Clive Davis suggests Nyro was conflicted about her desires, as her actions did not align with her declaration upon her initial audition that she wanted to be a star like Barbra Streisand, Tom King reveals in his biography of Geffen that this was a line that Geffen had coached Nyro to say.[52] Geffen also made his aspirations for Nyro's stardom clear, even while he acknowledged that Nyro likely did not share in this vision, as Kort quotes him saying, "I wanted her to be the biggest star in the world. That was my dream for her. I don't know whether that was *her* ambition, but it was *my* ambition."[53] While sharpened by bitterness around Nyro's departure, Geffen's outlook arises from his view of success that involves high sales and chart-topping records. Nyro's actions up to that point already indicated that her priorities were elsewhere, and indeed that altering her work for a chance at the charts ran counter to her idea of success as an artist. Over the rest of her life, Nyro's divergence from the path Geffen envisioned became more pronounced, as did her articulation of what she valued and prioritised.

Stepping back

Following her split from Geffen and the release of *GTAM* in 1971, Nyro stepped back from recording for five years. Long hiatuses were uncommon for musicians at the time; even Joni Mitchell's first "retirement" the following year only resulted in one year without a new album release, though at the end of the 1970s Carole King would retreat to Idaho for a decade.[54] Nyro pivoted away not only from her career but also from her life in New York City, moving out of her

[51] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 151.
[52] Tom King, *The Operator: David Geffen Builds, Buys, and Sells the New Hollywood* (Broadway Books, 2001): 81.
[53] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 47.
[54] Weller, *Girls Like Us*, 501.

Manhattan penthouse and leaving behind Columbia's studios, opting to travel the world and seek a home in quieter environs.

Nyro's friend Kay Crow recounted an episode from Nyro's search for a rural house that expresses Nyro's desire for a fundamentally different lifestyle. In 1973, Crow accompanied Nyro to look at a property she was considering buying in rural Vermont, whereupon Nyro told the seller (whom Crow described as straight-laced and thought was a retired sheriff) that she was looking for somewhere "with a stream where I can wash my hair in the summer, and a donkey to take me to the market to get my vegetables." Throughout the conversation with the seller, Nyro was playing with fuzzy hand-puppets purchased at the airport. Crow recalled, "This man thought we were whacked. He said, 'I'll be right back,' and we found out later that he went next door to run a credit check on her. She was eccentric, she was a dreamer, but it was all reality for her."[55]

A shift in perspective: Nyro's view of the industry

Nyro's retreat to a more rural setting was mirrored in the trajectory of her career more generally. Her contract renewal seems to mark a shift in her outlook towards the music industry and the function of her career. Kort notes that the terms of the renewal affected Nyro's attitude towards songwriting, as she felt uncomfortable with essentially having already been paid for the songs. (Although the money in the form of company shares was released to Nyro in parts upon completion of each album, she could have opted instead to receive the full amount up front if she subjected herself to a medical exam, which she considered a violation and declined.) She developed an overarching critique of the music industry and the broader economic system it participates in. After her split with Geffen and contract renewal with Columbia, themes of money and the music industry arose in her lyrics. In "Money" (*Smile*), she offers a biting take on her

[55] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 153.

experience with the music business, declaring, "I feel like a pawn/in my own world/I found the system/+ I lost the pearl/It's breaking me down." While particular individuals (including Geffen, as well as Clive Davis, facing allegations including the payola scandal around his 1973 ouster from Columbia[56]) may have served as inspiration, her commentary is directed towards the "system" as a whole. Yet though she expressed these harsh critiques of the music industry, she continued to engage with it throughout her life.

She did not conform to Columbia's mandates, however. Most notably, she flagrantly violated the temporal terms of her renewed contract, taking two decades instead of five years to produce five albums, one of which, *Season of Lights* (*SOL*), was a live concert recording rather than an album of new material as stipulated. In a change from the intense succession of albums she made at the start of her career, she released these albums only sporadically, leaving multi-year gaps in between. Instead of rapidly producing albums, she traveled, married and divorced, and devoted time to her home life with her child and partner. She also explored meditation and feminist goddess theology, as well as political concerns including the animal rights movement. When she did engage in recording or touring, these concerns were integrated into her lyrics and commentary.

Throughout her life, Nyro avoided the routine activities associated with bolstering a star's career, and this tendency was only enhanced in the latter part of her life. She largely declined to do television appearances, and consequently, very little footage exists of her performing. She also disliked interviews; the photograph David Gahr took that ended up as the cover of *NYT* was from a session that nearly did not happen, despite Gahr's established pedigree photographing musicians of the folk revival. As he recounts, Nyro "had cancelled an appointment to be interviewed but my magazine forgot to inform me, so I stood in her vestibule

[56] Ben Fong-Torres, "Clive Davis Ousted; Payola Coverup Charged," *Rolling Stone*, July 5, 1973.

for like an hour urging and arguing with her to keep the photographic part of the appointment.… She relented long enough to let me in."[57] Luckily for Nyro, the brief session that ensued produced high-quality photographs including the one she later chose for the album cover. Nyro shared this reticence with Carole King, who was notoriously avoidant of interviews. As Christa Bentley notes, King made decisions such as turning down a cover story with *Life* magazine, to the chagrin of label publicists, that allowed her to maintain her private life.[58] While the notion that King was solely a "housewife" and not also a working musician was incorrect, as Bentley observes, her publicist Pat Luce told a journalist, "Believe me, there's nothing I'd like better than to get her to talk with someone. But her No. 1 concern is being a housewife."[59] For artists whose music was associated with self-revelation, like King, and Nyro to a degree, making oneself available for interviews and thus for broader public consumption was part of enhancing the artistic persona that audiences sought out and identified with; others such as Carly Simon and James Taylor were much more active in this regard. In avoiding interviews, King and Nyro were also shutting out a component of the star-making process, but were willingly making this trade-off for their personal lives outside of the public eye. King, however, was bolstered by the phenomenal commercial success of *Tapestry*, which made her an icon in popular music; Nyro, by contrast, remained more of a cult figure.

In between 1971's *GTAM* and 1976's *Smile*, Nyro pulled back even further, and did not engage in publicity or other activities to maintain a professional profile. Numerous critics came to refer to her as a "recluse" by the end of this period. Journalists speculated, making comments such as this from Lita Eliscu in *Phonograph Record*: "Those five years away raise questions—

[57] David Gahr, "Career and Sessions Essay," https://www.davidgahr.com/about-david-gahr/career-and-sessions-essay/.
[58] Bentley, "Los Angeles Troubadours," 183.
[59] Tom Zito, "The Silent Side of Carole King," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, May 24, 1973, C1, cited in Bentley, "Los Angeles Troubadours," 184.

rumors explaining Laura's inactivity range from her artistic laziness, a happy marriage (now dissolved) to a fling with Oriental culture."[60] Nyro pushed back on the notion of her absence in the public sphere being akin to dead time, however, and made it clear that her life continued meaningfully outside of the studio and concert hall, even if she preferred to keep the details to herself. Responding to a 1976 article by Sheila Weller, "Laura Nyro: Out of Seclusion," Nyro wrote in a letter to the editor, "As for the title of the article—seclusion from what? I do have a life other than on a vinyl record."[61] By substantially disengaging from the activities that would spur commercial success, and from the industry generally, Nyro insisted on value being found more in time spent with her loved ones or enjoying art and in making music on her own terms than in the financial returns of the business of music.

When Nyro did allow press in, she established boundaries. Journalist Michael Watts outlined instructions he had been given for a 1976 interview with Nyro: "There must be no mention of where she lived, for her fans might bother her, and on no account could a tape recorder be used. She abhorred tape machines, it appeared. On the other hand, he [promoter Sid Bernstein] did not want her misquoted, as this had often been the case."[62] This concern of misrepresentation existed alongside desire for a large measure of privacy; what Nyro elected to say to the press she wanted faithfully relayed, even as she did not want it taped. She bristled at being misquoted and miscast, as is evident in the letter to the editor she wrote to *Ms.* magazine in response to Sheila Weller's article. In it, she corrects particular points—"my mother, besides being a housewife, held jobs most of her life; I am not forming an all-woman band...and other quotes attributed to me are also incorrect"—and conveys the broader impact of these

[60] Lita Eliscu, "Laura Nyro: Five Years of Silence," *Phonograph Record*, January 1976, https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/laura-nyro-five-years-of-silence.
[61] Laura Nyro, letter to the editor, *Ms.*, March 1976, 4.
[62] Michael Watts, "Laura Nyro: In From the Cold," *Melody Maker*, 1976, https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/laura-nyro-in-from-the-cold.

accumulated errors, stating, "My main problem with the article is that I cannot recognize myself in it."[63] This was not her only such response; following a particularly negative review of *MS* by Georgia Christgau, Nyro composed a letter back to the *Village Voice*, stating in part,

> Christgau should have the experience of having her work reviewed by someone like herself—a journalist who would not only maliciously review her work but who would ignorantly review Christgau's relationship to her own children, to her own money, to her own feminism, and to her own sexuality....I consider her article—disguised as a music review—plain ornery, and I discredit any references she made about my life as she does not know me or the spirit of my music.[64]

Nyro's readiness to respond to what she felt to be a misrepresentation demonstrates both her concern and agency regarding her professional image.

Nyro's resistance to interviews had as much to do with what she did want to say as what she did not. A few months after declining the interview connected to Gahr's photo session, Nyro granted an interview to Chris Albertson of *Down Beat*. As Albertson recalled, "I had heard that she turned down interviews from major magazines, including *Time*, so I wondered why she agreed to see me. 'I like *Down Beat*,' she told me, 'because it doesn't care whether or not I had a blueberry muffin for breakfast.'"[65] She preferred to talk about her music, which *Down Beat* focused on. In subsequent years, she increasingly also wished to speak about political issues that preoccupied her. "Laura still hates interviews, fears the misinformation and the criticism, but wants very much to share with people some of what she has come to see clearly," Carman Moore commented in an interview following the release of *Smile*. He specifies, "As cynicism is rampant in the hip press these days, few editors, I tell her, will let me quote her at length on U.S. cruelty to [Indigenous people], on the ineptness of this government, or on feminism."[66] This sentiment

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[63] Nyro, letter to the editor, *Ms.*, 4.
[64] Laura Nyro, letter to the editor, *Village Voice* (ca. April 1984), Michele Kort papers, box 11, folder: Nyro, Chapter 15, Sophia Smith Collection, SSC-MS-00769, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass.
[65] Chris Albertson, "Laura Nyro: A 1969 Interview," March 21, 2010, https://stomp-off.blogspot.com/2010/03/my-1970-interview-with-laura-nyro.html.
[66] Carman Moore, "Laura Nyro Comes Back (Yay!)," *The Village Voice*, March 1, 1976.

was not restricted to interviews; when Nyro was approached to be included in a set of pop music trading cards, the person behind the project, Paul Politi, explained Nyro's refusal: "She seemed to think that, with Vietnam and the general depressed, chaotic state of the country hanging over everybody's heads, that kids should be doing something more important than trading cards."[67] While she allowed a number of longer interviews later in her career, she routinely made it clear that feminism was a priority for her, and took the opportunity for an in-depth interview focused on her understanding of the topic in the feminist magazine *Woman of Power* in 1985.

At the same time, while she talked at greater length in later interviews, she was circumspect about her family life. She avoided any comment about her partner Maria Desiderio (while names of previous male partners had been more freely shared; prior to Desiderio, Nyro was not known to have had relationships with women) or details about her son. Richard Cromelin, interviewing Nyro in 1988 for the *Los Angeles Times*, described her as being *"*purposely vague when the subject of her personal life is brought up." When asked about her family, Nyro stated, "It's me and my son. We are the foundation. And my dog. Let's put it that way. And then we have others whom we love and who participate in our lives….I think right now I'll just express it that way." Cromelin noted that Nyro did not think herself a private person, though. "'I think that I share a lot,' she said. 'I mean, I go out and I sing. I do not sing superficial music....And I feel at a certain point I like to draw boundaries....I feel that other people in my life have a right to their privacy too."[68] At that time, Nyro's career would have undoubtedly suffered from the public revelation of her queerness and same-sex partnership as well as the risk of intrusive, homophobic commentary impinging on her and her family's

[67] Harold Bronson, "The Great Trading Card Boom...Or Why You Never Ate the Bubblegum," *Los Angeles Free Press*, August 2, 1974, 14.
[68] Richard Cromelin, "Laura Nyro Returns for a Soulful Connection," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-08-11-ca-335-story.html.

wellbeing. She firmly upheld the boundaries she established, maintaining her necessary privacy while finding other topics of conversation to explore in interviews.

Beyond resisting the types of interviews and televised appearances expected of a popular artist, Nyro took steps throughout the latter part of her career that distanced her from the industry practically as well, learning skills and acquiring infrastructure to take on more aspects of record-making herself. Throughout her career, Nyro took an interest in all aspects of making her records such as production and visual design as I discussed above, and increasingly developed technical skills to this end. More substantially, Nyro's construction of a home studio, "The Cauldron," in the early 1980s gave her independence from Columbia's studio spaces. As notebook pages filled with detailed step-by-step instructions show, she learned how to make her own demo recordings, including multitracking to record harmonies and the use of effects such as reverb.[69] While Nyro continued to work with professional producers and technicians, she took steps to increase her ability to independently work on her music and assert control over many aspects of the resulting albums.

Despite this increased independence, she still had to contend with the mandates of major record companies, as can be seen surrounding the release and distribution of her 1989 album *Live at the Bottom Line* (*LATBL*). Columbia refused to release the album, seemingly because they did not believe it would be profitable. Kort describes Columbia's reluctance to issue the album and the agreement for a one-off partnership with another company for this project, resulting in a deal with Cypress Records. However, not reflected in Kort's account is that Nyro's battle to release the album continued against A&M. An undated letter she wrote to "Herb" (presumably Herb Alpert, who co-founded the label) demonstrates Nyro's persistence and the

[69] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 2, folder 2, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

importance she placed on releasing her music to a wider audience; the distribution channels of the industry were of use to her, even as she critiqued its drive for profit. By the time of the letter, she had already pursued the advised business route with lawyers, without success and at substantial expense. As Nyro explains to Alpert, the record had initially been supported by Cypress, but following the purchase of Cypress by A&M, distribution and promotion ceased. A&M was not interested in promoting the album, and yet was still requesting a million dollars from Nyro to reclaim it to distribute herself. Nyro frames her request in personal terms as a musician who cares deeply about her work. She begins, "Artist to artist, I am writing to you from the heart. I've already taken the advised business route and what I have to show for it is a very cold feeling and thousands of dollars worth of lawyer bills." She describes the album as a "dear child," "inspired by love," that she recorded with her own funds and produced herself, but that with the end of its distribution its "young life was then cut short," resulting in the likely scenario of "a funeral," the overall situation leaving her "heartbroken beyond words."[70]

This handwritten letter exemplifies Nyro's sensibility regarding her music and the impacts she felt from conflicts with the industry. She valued the distribution offered by a label, noting that she felt "very satisf[ied]" by the "small but very positive response from [her] audience" that the album had already received. And though she was unlikely to generate a new peak of interest or substantial sales for the label, she maintained a devoted audience who reliably continued to purchase her albums (*Billboard*, for instance, had advised in their review of *SOL*: "Dealers: Nyro's following is large and extremely devoted"[71]). While she was willing to distribute it on her own, reaching her audience was important to Nyro, and she was prepared to

[70] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 1, folder 1, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.
[71] "Billboard's Top Album Picks: Laura Nyro—Season of Lights," *Billboard*, June 25, 1977, 72.

work through the "cold feeling" given by the industry to avail herself of its distribution networks, though it was clear this was far from ideal for her.

Nyro's commitment to her album in the face of label disinterest and stonewalling is notable, though she was not alone in standing up to such pressures. A significant example can be found earlier in the decade, when Neil Young faced a lawsuit from Geffen over an album that Geffen contended was uncharacteristic of Young's musical style and thus uncommercial. Young eventually succeeded as Geffen relented and dropped the suit, and the album, *Everybody's Rockin'*, was released. In stark contrast to Nyro's heartfelt statements regarding *LATBL*, Young later told *Mojo*, "Did people really think I put that out thinking it was the greatest fuckin' thing I'd ever recorded? Obviously I'm aware it's not" (though at the same time he maintained it was as good as *Tonight's the Night*). But he still defended its role in his oeuvre, saying "Without doing that, I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing now. If I build something up, I have to systematically tear it right down before people decide, *Oh that's how we can define him*."[72] Even though Young was more flippant about his record, for both him and Nyro, these challenges also contribute to their personas as authentic artists. Young expressed his priorities in contradistinction to those of Geffen, saying, "I don't care if I sell any records, I've sold a lot of records...I was sued for being myself, which made everybody think 'oh god he's so brave.' That was my little moment of, wow, I have integrity, 'cause I'm sued for being an artist."[73] Nyro did not publicise her fight to get *LATBL* distributed, but a press release for the album quotes Nyro as saying her decision to make the record was "pure and inspired"[74] as it brought her back to her musical roots, drawing on a similar discourse of artistic integrity.

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[72] Nick Kent, "I Build Something Up, I Tear It Right Down," *Mojo*, December 1995, accessed from https://files.thrasherswheat.org/tfa/mojointerview1295pt2.htm.
[73] Lacy, dir., *Inventing David Geffen*.
[74] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 3, folder 10, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

The notion of the musician taking on corporate interests for the sake of their art, as Nyro and Young both did, can be taken to evoke Romantic notions of the artist as removed from, and struggling against, society in pursuit of something more authentic and pure. Far from being an anomalous challenger to the industry of pop music, Jon Stratton suggests, this figure is fundamental to it. He suggests that artists set themselves off from the industry as unique individuals, producing a dialectical opposition that ends up serving the capitalist practice of the industry by creating new and exciting products that are perceived as distinctive and authentic and generate mass sales on this appeal.[75] Instead of combating the industry, the Romantic pop musician in fact is a central part of its machinery. This is particularly evident in the ideology surrounding rock music that grew in the late 1960s; Simon Frith observes how the ideology of rock was "explicitly anti-commercial, even when commercialism meant pleasing an audience of youth," with musicians who were presented as "creators, freed from commercial constraints in their innovations and experiments."[76] A less cynical gloss on Stratton's argument is put forward by Richard Middleton, who identifies in this dialectic spaces that the system cannot fully close off, providing possibilities for resistance and transformation.[77]

While Stratton's insight into how such attitudes often bolster the industry's business is significant, for Nyro, who was never a top seller, that perspective becomes rather tenuous regarding the latter part of her career, as even many of her earlier, more commercially successful albums were out of print.[78] Additionally, Nyro's revelation of the impact she felt from the industry—as she sings in "Money" (*Smile*), "it's breaking me down"—does not share the type of

[75] Stratton, "Capitalism and Romantic Ideology in the Record Business," 144-145.
[76] Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock* (London: Constable, 1978), 166, 168.
[77] Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 39.
[78] Dan Backman asked her if Columbia would release her older albums in a box set, and she noted that this was possible if her new album was successful, lamenting, "It doesn't thrill me that half of my records are out of print." Michele Kort papers, box 12, folder: Nyro, Miscellaneous, Sophia Smith Collection, SSC-MS-00769, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass. Used with permission.

heroic individualism of a lone artist taking on a corporate behemoth that colours much of the opposition to the industry voiced by rock artists. The resistance of two labels to distributing *LATBL* suggests they did not anticipate turning a profit from Nyro's Romantic leanings, though her early hit compositions still held some power. As her agent Steve Martin described to Kort, when Nyro opened for Bob Dylan in 1991 and performed "The Descent of Luna Rosé," he figured much of the audience thought, "Who is this odd woman up there singing songs about her period? But when Laura would do one of her hits they'd go, 'Oh, yeah.'" However, she played very few such familiar songs, to the chagrin of her manager at the time.[79]

Yet the dialectical tensions that Stratton and Middleton observe often get simplified to a duality between notions of pure art and commerce, which plays into the notion of the Romantic artist and the re-entrenchment of the industry that Stratton identifies. Indeed, such simplification surfaces in discussions of Nyro; for example, Kort quotes Nyro's friend Barbara Greenstein declaring that Nyro "was not a business-minded person," but rather "she was very pure as an artist."[80] Nyro's own remarks on her musical process play into this as well. Such an image suggests that she did not concern herself with the business details of her career. Quite to the contrary, Nyro took an active interest in the decisions that would affect her art, and advocated for the aspects most important to her, as well as keeping track of mundane details of her career. She made records of tour venues and fees, publishing royalties, and budgeted expenses such as taxes and insurance; while she consulted a financial adviser, she was also engaged with monitoring her own finances. Even though she may not have found this a particularly appealing task, she did not remove herself from it. Rather than standing in opposition to a sense of being an artist, aspects of "business" are a fundamental part of the "working musician" she saw herself to be.[81] This

[79] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 235.
[80] Barbara Greenstein quoted in Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 47.
[81] Richard Knight Jr., Interview with Laura Nyro, June 18, 1994, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cy4cKgq7zK4.

engagement with the business matters of her career, even though she was averse to the corporate mentality of the record industry, pulls Nyro away from the oversimplified notion of the Romantic artist.

In taking on business matters, Nyro's manner was not limited to the personal and heartfelt approach she took with *LATBL*. She could also be more confrontational when necessary, as a letter from her friend Lee Housekeeper suggests. Housekeeper wrote (likely in the 1990s, as it is printed from Housekeeper's personal computer) to Nyro following a business encounter,

> How focused you were before the CBS meeting. What you told me about deciding who you were and what was right and the fact that with apparent calm determination you walked alone onto the 11th floor of Blackrock to face the 'Boys Club' and get it straight. No interpreters to explain what happened later or go back and forth in endless negotiations and 'Reductions'. There has been many a man yours truly included that would not have had the clarity, presence of mind and frankly the guts to be willing to go in all alone and put everything on the line.[82]

In taking on these challenges, Nyro assumes the roles of Romantic artist taking on the corporate structure as well as the working musician who is comfortable with the business aspects of her career. Even though she straddled these roles and felt comfortable engaging directly with her label, she still held disdain for the harsh, business-minded nature of the music industry.

This impersonal and cold quality of the industry led her to comment in a 1993 interview with journalist Dan Backman, "sometimes I feel like I belong in another profession....It doesn't do that much for me, you know, I don't relate to it in a big way. I would rather just read poetry or take a walk with my dog."[83] In an interview with Richard Knight a year later, she identified the capitalist system as being at the root of the problems she found in the industry, commenting, "I think capitalism has done its thing. Gone to its ultimate point in the music business....I feel that

[82] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 1, folder 1, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.
[83] Michele Kort papers, box 12, folder: Nyro, Miscellaneous, Sophia Smith Collection, SSC-MS-00769, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass. Used with permission.

often music is expected to serve the business. That ultimately can happen with capitalism, and that's what's happening."[84]

Nyro articulated these concerns in her lyrics as well, tying her experiences in the music business to broader economic and social institutions. In "Money" (*Smile*), she draws parallels between the music industry and other capitalist production systems more broadly, referring to "the city machine/where industries/fill the fish/full of mercury/(It's tax-free)." Along similar lines, in "American Dreamer" (*Nested*) Nyro speaks to the failings of the American dream in relation to the music industry as well as marriage, linking the two as being caused by the same larger system that ensnares people into its economic model. She emphasises false promises and deceit, alluding to the industry: "The manager smiled/He said, 'We're gonna straighten this mess'/He had a picture of Spot and Jane on his desk/So I signed his strange contract with the transparent lines," and brings marriage into the same frame, saying "Autumn's child is catchin' hell/For having been too naive to tell/Property rights from chapel bells/There's nothing we can do/We could not get there in time/It's too late, she signed on the dotted line." Although gender and environmental issues could be considered in some degree of isolation from other aspects of the industry such as its prioritisation of profits, Nyro understood these facets as fundamentally intertwined in the structure of the industry and American society at large.

Although she expressed these comprehensive critiques, Nyro did not pursue an alternative to the corporate music industry. Alternatives did exist; Olivia Records, the label formed by women for women's music, creating a space for lesbian singer-songwriters, was started in 1973, and other like-minded ventures also emerged around this time. Olivia's stated vision lined up with sentiments Nyro expressed. In an early public text published in *Paid My*

[84] Richard Knight Jr., Interview with Laura Nyro.

Dues,[85] they wrote in part, "We are interested in high quality music that is not oppressive to women...We believe that women must become as independent as possible from the male-supremist [sic] economic system, and in order to do that we must provide jobs for each other at living wages."[86] Specifically, they sought to challenge the sort of corporate structure that Nyro disdained in the mainstream industry, as one of their founding members stated: "We made Olivia Records into a corporation, though we had no intention of running it in any traditional corporate way. We spent almost a year trying to create new and alternative structures, including collectivity, women being paid based upon need."[87] Yet Olivia Records did not have anywhere near the funds or distribution capacity of a label like Columbia, and other similar ventures had even less. With an international fan base, this distribution capacity was vitally important for Nyro. Near the end of her life, Nyro did indicate that she would not be continuing with Columbia, saying she was looking for a situation that was "a little more intimate, a little more alternative,"[88] but did not see further albums through before her passing, so it is unclear what other routes she may have taken.

Even though Nyro remained affiliated with Columbia and thus in the gears of the industry she critiqued, she made other decisions concerning her music and career that reflected her values. These include "dedicating" her 1988 tour to the animal rights movement and raising awareness about cruelty towards animals, and opting to compose the title track for the 1985 documentary *Broken Rainbow* concerning the forced relocation of the Navajo, while she had declined a financially lucrative offer for another film because she deemed its violent themes

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[85] *Paid My Dues* was a non-profit feminist publication for discussion of women's music, with a focus on lesbian music, launched in 1974.
[86] "Olivia," in *Paid My Dues* (1974), 18, quoted in Morris, "Olivia Records," 295.
[87] Judy Dlugacz, "If It Weren't for the Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records," in *HOT WIRE: The Journal of Music and Culture* (July 1988): 29, quoted in Morris, "Olivia Records," 297.
[88] Richard Knight Jr., Interview with Laura Nyro.

likely to draw ire from the feminist movement.[89] She also participated in feminist initiatives, for instance performing a concert for a "Women in Music" series in 1988 benefiting the City of Cambridge Commission on the Status of Women[90] and a Women's History Month concert at a community college in 1990.[91] In an interview with the magazine *Woman of Power*, Nyro stated, "People who feel compassion for the earth are hungry for something else. To me, feminism is that something else. It's the empowerment of women, and it's an ideology that loves the earth."[92]

In her later years, alongside continuing feminist themes, Nyro developed her articulation of herself and her priorities as an artist expressed in her lyrics, interview comments, and personal writings. While she had not regularly released albums, she sought to stress that she had not stopped working as a musician, expressing slight frustration that such a notion persisted. Specifically, though, she viewed herself as a "working musician,"[93] gigging on weekends and getting her child to school during the week. This image was important to portray in her view, evidenced also by her notes regarding a draft booklet for the *Stoned Soul Picnic* compilation album wherein she states the need for photos showing her "older and working."[94] In songs on *Angel in the Dark* (*AITD*), she also highlighted her lineage to her grandfather, describing him as a worker with revolutionary dreams in "Triple Goddess Twilight": "My grandfather painted houses on a ladder in the sky/He was working class, urbane, streetwise/Said, We can change the world, girl, love will inspire/Told me this through whiskey and revolutionary fire." She casts herself in similar terms in "Serious Playground": "I make my living building homes/I make them

[89] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 234.
[90] Michele Kort papers, box 11, folder: Nyro, Chapter 16, Sophia Smith Collection, SSC-MS-00769, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass.
[91] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 3, folder 5, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.
[92] "Notes from an Interview on 'Envisioning a Feminist World'," *Woman of Power* no. 2 (Summer 1985), 34.
[93] Richard Knight Jr., Interview with Laura Nyro.
[94] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 3, folder 6, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

out of music with my imagination/Sound architectural tools I use." While Nyro's framing of herself as a working musician obscures the fact that her living was significantly supported by royalties and her deal with Columbia, it is telling to see how she positioned herself in relation to her work and to the music industry.

As I noted above, Nyro's discomfort with her position in relation to Columbia was sparked by the sense that she was required to write and record five albums of songs that she had essentially already been paid for. While the substance of her activities, and the fact that she was paid for her music, did not change, this sense of working under contract to Columbia's dictates did not sit well with her. Given the significance of this change in context, taken alongside her critiques of the industry, I suggest that insight may be gained into Nyro's self-positioning through theories of labour. The notion of freely chosen as opposed to coerced work has a long history in Marxist scholarship, as does the distinction between work and play which can become hazy in the context of the arts. The idea that work performed under some system of control is categorically different than that performed otherwise is elaborated by political theorist Herbert Marcuse, who distinguishes the dictates of the "performance principle" from the necessary work under the "reality principle" and the Eros and play of the "pleasure principle."[95] Nyro's reality was undoubtedly far from that of a factory worker, often the prototypical "worker" in such theories, whose labour is measured by the hour and is performed in often inflexible, demanding, and potentially unsafe conditions. Yet the distinction of working experiences with and without forms of coercion can illuminate Nyro's shift in attitude in response to her perception of her work and the music industry. This sensibility is captured in "Money" (*Smile*), where Nyro laments that "you don't wake/you don't shake/you just make the sound/go round + round +

[95] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 134-135.

round/+ round," suggesting that a musician's role in the industry is more akin to supplying grist to a mill than one of producing art of feeling or meaning.

Nyro's retreat from the pressures of the industry can be regarded as a refusal of the performance principle, under which, Marcuse explains, people "do not live their own lives but perform preestablished functions. While they work, they do not fulfill their own needs and faculties but live in alienation."[96] Recoiling from the notion of producing art "for" Columbia—a kind of alienation—she pursued projects that satisfied her (*LATBL*, which Columbia would not support, is exemplary of this impulse), though they also, belatedly, fulfilled her contractual obligation.

Two notes hastily scrawled by Nyro capture other aspects of her refusal of industry expectations and the performance principle. One is in response (presumably in preparation for a phone call or letter to follow) to a note from Blumenauer who had informed her of a TV opportunity. She wrote simply, "Jeff – TV – NO."[97] Nyro's reticence to do television appearances certainly went against the wishes of those promoting her, but aside from a few early performances, she avoided such appearances throughout her career. Elsewhere, she objected with a dose of humour written along the edge of a coffee filter, "Email – mega bite me – why do you need it."[98]

Instead of prioritising the deadlines and requirements of her contract, Nyro sought out "a softer kind of lifestyle" more in line with the pleasure principle, and continuing to write music and play occasionally in small venues as a "working musician" as a form of labour—the reality principle—she was satisfied to perform. In setting her own terms, she took back a large measure

[96] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 45, quoted in Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 134-135.
[97] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 1 folder 1, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.
[98] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 2 folder 2, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

of self-direction and maintained the deep personal ownership—likened to parenthood—she felt over her music. In setting her own pacing and writing music that was decidedly not aimed at the charts, she significantly recouped her art as a process for herself. Her approach to the pacing of her career and the balance she sought between elements of her life is, in this shift in governing principles, also a reclamation of time. In Marcuse's model, the performance principle is enacted through a control of workers' time, regulating not only the work itself but the balance to be found with their pursuit of pleasure and reality principles. Nyro took setting her own time for her professional work to something of an extreme, with an explicit focus on dedicating time to the other aspects of her life. As Nyro redirected her time and energy to fulfill her own desires and goals, she did also, eventually, fulfill her obligations to Columbia, but did so in such a manner that it appeared almost incidental. Marcuse's framework allows this shift in activities to be understood as a difference in guiding principles, and also points to the broader potential for transformation along these lines on a societal level.

In voicing critiques of the industry, Nyro positions herself against the system, caught within it but striving to be free. Nyro, however, operated independently and from a place of security and privilege in order to be able to effect this shift in priorities for her life. Although she did hold the obligations contained in her contract to Columbia, she was assured of financial security through it, and her sporadic album work was tolerated. Had she wished a swift departure from the label, she certainly would not have been the first artist to break off or violate a contract, or to dash off albums quickly to fulfill an obligation (as, for example, Van Morrison had done to depart Bang Records in the late 1960s) before pursuing her work in a better environment. Her desire to cast herself as a working musician, and broadly as a worker, may downplay the very direct struggles faced by many workers (or overplay her own), and her actions regarding her

career did not pave the way for others to follow suit. Certainly, this opens her to criticisms of bourgeois bohemianism, or, in Bourdieu's terms,[99] amassing symbolic capital through the potential cachet of her stance against industry norms while operating from a place of financial security gained through her engagement within it. Yet, while she had already accrued monetary returns from her music, she did not pursue the publicity for her opinions or self-positioning that would allow her star persona to grow as a result, nor did she indirectly accrue extra monetary rewards from her critical stances, as she largely maintained but did not grow her fan base or sales figures. But certainly, while decrying the industry in her lyrics, she did not appear to dwell on the contradictions of her role in voicing these critiques while being supported by the spoils of participating in the music business.

In this regard, Joni Mitchell stands as an illuminating point of comparison. Mitchell, unlike Nyro, never claimed the priorities and visions of feminism—quite to the contrary, she has maintained that she is not a feminist—nor did she put much stock in the ideals of the 1960s counterculture, although she sporadically lent her talents to a handful of political issues.[100] Yet in other ways, her views towards the business side of her career put her in dialogue with Nyro. While remaining on major labels, Mitchell, like Nyro, also put artistic concerns ahead of commercial success, most notably in pursuing jazz influences in the latter 1970s despite waning sales. Although she does not directly address the topic of the music industry often in her song lyrics, a notable example can be found in "For the Roses" (1972). There, she sings of an artist subject to the industry going from "pour[ing] your simple sorrow to the soundhole and your knee" to playing for "people who have slices of you from the company," who "toss around your latest golden egg." But she also observes her own role in this system, reflecting in the following

[99] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production: Or, The Economic World Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 29-73 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).
[100] For example, Mitchell performed at the Amchitka concert that helped launched Greenpeace, and in support of AIM activist Leonard Peltier.

verse, "I guess I seem ungrateful/With my teeth sunk in the hand/That brings me things/I really can't give up just yet." Mitchell's acknowledgement of her dependence on the industry is something Nyro only did implicitly through choosing to remain affiliated with Columbia. Moreover, noting songs like "For Free" (1970) and "Furry Sings the Blues" (1976), where Mitchell compares her comfortable position to musicians on the other side of the wealth divide, Eric Lott comments that the themes of her lyrics in the 1970s were "underwritten by a clear-eyed emphasis on cold, hard cash" and that she "was from the start able to offer withering critiques of her own willing place in the pop cash nexus."[101] But, as Lott stresses, this was an articulation of the place Mitchell could strategically occupy within the system, and not taken by Mitchell as an impetus to try to make changes to the conditions or structures around her.

Even so, Mitchell's self-critical awareness is notable within the mainstream music environment at the time. Other artists of the decade—particularly in rock—spoke out specifically against their own labels (such as the Sex Pistols' "E.M.I.," Nick Lowe's "I Love My Label," and Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Workin' for MCA") or critiqued the industry's prioritisation of money and disregard for artists more broadly (for instance, Nick Lowe's "They Called It Rock"), but while lodging these complaints, did not turn this critical lens upon themselves or link their outlook on the music industry to broader political concerns, nor did they seek to extricate themselves beyond moving to another label. This kind of critical pose falls along the lines of the Romantic pop musician that Stratton discusses, not generating any real friction against the industry, and potentially boosting the artists' own image and perceived authenticity, which are themselves forms of symbolic capital. Certainly, opting out of the major labels at that time had much more consequential impacts than it would in later years, as the independent labels that existed at the

[101] Eric Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 150.

time had very limited resources and distribution capacity (Olivia Records, discussed above, is a case in point), and artists who chose that route had to accept these limitations to their careers. Mitchell's rather cynical outlook on the world, while perhaps facilitating the critical eye she turned upon herself, did not spur an impulse to pursue or actively support alternatives to the industry system, and also contributes to the sort of Romantic authenticity discussed above. Neither Mitchell or Nyro exited the major label music business, though Nyro made conscious choices to restrict and direct her participation within it, not going so far as to become esteemed in the independent or alternative music world, but, returning to Middleton, creating spaces for herself within the industry environment that could not be fully closed off.

By the later years of Nyro's career in the 1990s, artists who held objections towards the mainstream industry or otherwise sought an alternative path were increasingly able to pursue a viable career outside of it. Notable among them is Ani DiFranco, who founded her own label from the outset of her career, releasing all of her albums in this manner. Like Nyro, her critiques of the industry were not held in isolation, and broader political commentary permeates her work. Aimee Mann, despite beginning with Geffen's label, formed her own label to escape this environment following negative experiences. Nyro, having critiqued the industry and resisted performing to its expectations, and having held her own publishing company in the early years of her career, is a transitional figure between the industry-dominated sphere and the independent paths that later artists have been able to chart.

By the rubric of the industry, Nyro's opting out of the expected career track as a major label artist and pursuing her own priorities may be considered a failure; indeed, Geffen essentially regards her career after their split as such, with his productivity and wealth to show as success by contrast. But for Nyro, her path was only a failure in others' terms, as she cultivated a

meaningful life and career for herself. She explicitly rejected dominant definitions of success and of "making it." In a 1994 interview with Richard Knight, when asked about the early years of her career, a period that Knight describes by saying "You [were] it, you [were] the top," Nyro intervenes in the framing to say "First of all, in my mind, I'm still it! It depends on what you mean by it." When Knight clarifies that he means commercial rather than artistic success, Nyro states, "I very much value a personal sense of success. To me, success is a feeling of well-being. And I think you can be incredibly famous and whatever, and not be in touch with your joy. That's not success to me."[102]

Instead of fulfilling industry obligations, she wrote as she was motivated to, setting up a home studio and learning how to make her own demo records to work outside of the confines of the industry studio setting, and rather than maintaining a star profile, she chose to have a child and to cultivate a home away from the bustle of the city with her partner, and delving into feminist thought to envision a better world. Nyro's version of success, instead of being defined by productivity or awards, was constituted by her own sense of artistic satisfaction, maintaining her personal life with family and friends, and in engaging with ethical principles of feminism and animal rights through reflection, lifestyle choices, and highlighting these topics to her audience. In reading these choices through Marcuse's framework, rather than a "lack" of productivity and success under the performance principle—which reflects a system structured to extract and value a discrete facet of a person's activity—her success as realised through attention to this range of domains in her life can be better appreciated. Acknowledging the reality and pleasure principles as guiding Nyro's path provides a more comprehensive outlook, rather than her success as a musician being judged by commercial metrics and taken synecdochically to represent her overall success.

[102] Richard Knight Jr., Interview with Laura Nyro.

Nyro's life nonetheless sits in a degree of tension. She did not fully reject participation in the music industry, as it offered a way for her to make a living through music and distribute her albums to a wider audience, yet she regarded its commercial nature with distaste. Rather than regarding the music industry as exceptional in this regard, however, she understood it as part of broader systems in society, and within the industry and in her life more broadly balanced engagement and refusal, voicing general critique while identifying and pursuing what she desired. Her approach pulled her away from many of the activities that could have bolstered her stature in the popular music world, and she suffered the costs of this in instances such as not finding support for *LATBL* and her earlier albums going out of print. However, despite these setbacks, she did not change course, but instead continued to advocate for her music and for a way of life in line with her values and priorities. Her choices regarding her career undoubtedly pulled her towards the sidelines to an extent. But, as suggested by the greater profiles maintained by other artists who have also taken stands against aspects of the industry, this alone is not a decisive blow to an artist's career. As I suggest in the following chapters, the generic complexity of her music and her queer aesthetic sensibility both played a significant role in the overall reception of Nyro and her place in pop music history.

Chapter 3: Genre

Nyro's music abounds with genre cues, drawing together traditions including soul, girl group, singer-songwriter, gospel, and Broadway. Driving soul riffs with forceful horn sections are placed beside stark emotive piano and vocal numbers, as is smooth jazz with Japanese koto. Nyro invokes a range of genres not only within the same album but even within individual songs, as her songwriting fuses multiple influences without one dominating her aesthetic. For critics reviewing her music, the task of first describing it—something usually achieved through genre labels, referencing a familiar cluster of styles and attitude—was unusually complicated. Many resorted to listing off a handful of the genres she invoked, while some abandoned this effort altogether. Record companies, too, recognised that they could not promote Nyro as "the sound" of any one genre. Her first label, by then renamed to Verve/Forecast, attempted to make the most of this with an ad proclaiming, "Professional pigeonholers have described Laura Nyro as 'pop-blues-jazz-rock-soul with a dash-of-folk and a dollop-of-gospel.' Nonsense. Because Nyro is Nyro. A loner. An innovator. An unabashed original."[1] But while recognising the problem, marketing departments were no closer to targeting their promotion to a particular audience or guiding potential listeners in their approach to Nyro's music.

Rather than providing a frame through which to view Nyro's music, genre labels fragment it, offering windows into discrete facets. The perspectives they offer are not false but are incomplete, and aggregating them in a list like that offered parodically by Verve-Folkways results in a collection of features that resist assembling into a coherent whole. For listeners, this is reflected in the conflicting responses Nyro's music provokes; as songwriter Suzanne Vega reflects, "Her music could be like jazz, or like gospel, with the feel of Broadway show tunes

[1] Verve/Forecast advertisement for Janis Ian and Laura Nyro, *GQ Scene* (Fall 1967), 25.

thrown in, or the dissonance of Satie or Berg or Debussy. It wasn't like anything else I'd ever heard. It made you feel happy and wise and sad all at once."[2] Indeed, listening to her music, one may find one's engagement oscillating between light-hearted entertainment and serious contemplation, and even being pulled to approach it both ways simultaneously. In addition to informing listeners' experience of an album, genre labels play an important role in sales and promotion, including charts and record store categories. They also help construct histories and pantheons of revered musicians, which are typically grouped within fields of genre. Despite Nyro's adoption of many genres, only occasionally is she granted a small place on the outskirts of histories of the singer-songwriter.

In reflecting upon Nyro's music and surveying the critical responses it garnered, I aim to illuminate the different and at times conflicting cues imparted by the amalgam of genres she incorporates. The genres she participates in not only represent different sounds and styles, but also disparate constructions of authenticity and artistic value, which in combination confound the interpretive schemas that individual genre labels offer to listeners. It is clear that this generic hybridity was a source of difficulty for critics in understanding and communicating about her albums, and I seek to unpack how this affected reception of her albums. I also consider how this plays into the place—or lack thereof—that Nyro is granted in popular music histories and pantheons.

Context

The 1960s saw a proliferation of popular music styles reaching the mainstream, with the emergence of rock and psychedelic music as well as the blurring of pop and R&B. By the start of the decade, the rock and roll era had subsided with the deaths or retreats of major figures

[2] Suzanne Vega, "The Poetry and Passion of Laura Nyro," *Musician* (August 1997): 21.

alongside the spectre of the payola scandal.[3] Throughout the following years, girl groups rose to popularity, as well as surf rock groups, most notably the Beach Boys. As Keir Keightley notes, this period also included significant experimentation in studio techniques.[4] Folk music also experienced another revival, with new performers from urban centres joining traditional musicians at festivals across America, and local audiences and performers—often college students—holding coffeehouses and hootenannies. Soon after, the British Invasion transformed the popular music scene, itself drawing heavily on American R&B including girl groups. American R&B hubs Motown and Stax thrived, too, becoming known for their distinctive Detroit and Memphis sounds. As David Brackett discusses, while some of the music from these centres succeeded predominantly on the R&B charts, there was also much that crossed over into the pop sphere.[5] The genre of soul was emerging, and even while the label for this genre was in flux, as Annie J. Randall writes, this music "was widely understood to be 'newly black and newly bold," bringing gospel influences to the fore of this new aesthetic and eventually adopting a label generated by Black cultural producers.[6] As mainstream pop incorporated some of the sounds of R&B, white artists performing R&B-style music sparked debates around the legitimacy and authenticity of this "blue-eyed soul." Outside of R&B, a blend of genres occurred with folk-rock—as Brackett comments, a thoroughly white-identified genre[7]—which combined folk music's focus on message lyrics with the beat and electrification of rock. Towards the end of the decade, alongside the growth of rock music, notable shifts occurred including the growing

[3] David Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 131.
[4] Keir Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 117.
[5] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 256-257.
[6] Randall, *Dusty!*, 42-44.
[7] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 259.

dominance of the LP over the single and the seriousness that accrued to popular music, previously dismissed as largely teenage entertainment rather than art.

While Nyro does not notably engage with rock, folk, or psychedelia, many other genres implicated in these shifts in popular music—both the "before" and "after"—are found in her music. She is now often referred to as a singer-songwriter, an appellation that existed as a functional description but was not fully established as a genre when she began her career. Nonetheless, the discourse that gave rise to the singer-songwriter as a genre was forming at this time, and in many ways stands in contrast to the discourses associated with other genres Nyro is implicated in, such as girl group music. Nyro's participation in multiple genres holds their conflicting associations in tension, and these tensions will be a focus of this chapter.

My approach to musical genre is informed by perspectives that take into account multiple sites of genre construction in and around music. As Franco Fabbri illustrates, genre is constructed from multiple aspects of the process of making and presenting music, not solely from aural features. He outlines five domains in which genre is formed: formal and technical rules, semiotic rules, behaviour rules, social and ideological rules, and economic and juridical rules.[8] With aural, stylistic aspects falling under the first category, it is clear in Fabbri's theory that much more than this affects how genre is formed, and that actors beyond the performing musicians have a role in this process. My discussion will largely focus on features of genre that fall under the category of social and ideological rules, as I attend to discourse, demographic affiliations, and ideological notions concerning the meaning and use of genres, though I will also touch on other aspects. I also approach the subject of genre with the understanding that, as Brackett indicates, music can participate in a genre without belonging to it in a stable manner.[9]

[8] Fabbri, "A Theory of Musical Genres," 52-57.
[9] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 3.

For Nyro's music, this understanding is particularly critical, and allows for understanding her music as engaging with many genres without being classified as belonging to them.

Generic affiliations

Nyro's music strongly invokes aspects of girl group, Brill Building, soul, Broadway, gospel music, and singer-songwriter. Other genres surface at moments in her oeuvre, though I will not focus on them owing to their more limited presence and emergence after she was established. These include smooth jazz, which is part of the sound Nyro creates on *Smile* in harmony and arrangement, and womyn's music, which can be understood as a point of reference for *MS*, drawing upon the politicised lyrics expressing feminist concerns and a relatively simpler, more direct aesthetic. While I do not wish to downplay the presence of those generic allegiances, I will concentrate on the genres that Nyro drew together from the outset of her career, and that as such informed foundational critical characterisations of her music as a whole. In addition to outlining the presence of these genres in her music, I will address the singer-songwriter at greater length in order to establish the context for this affiliation, as it was a genre still in formation at the time Nyro started her career. Rather than taking it for granted as a stable point of reference, I will explore its emergence and the way it was discussed by music critics and journalists in the later 1960s.

Nyro's love of girl group music of the 1960s shows clearly in her engagement with the genre. Nyro both covers girl group song and draws on related stylistic features throughout her oeuvre. She frequently employs backing vocals, harmonies, and vocal doublings characteristic of the genre, performed herself through multitracking. Through this use of relatively new technology, beginning on *Eli*, Nyro audibly recreates the girl group vocal aesthetic despite being

the sole vocal performer. Rather than mechanically duplicate a track for a fuller sound, Nyro recorded the doubled parts separately, resulting in what appears to be an intentional "participatory discrepancy," to borrow Charles Keil's[10] term for the differences in pitch and rhythm between players engaged in collective music-making, in the pitches of the doubled vocals, which mirrors the sound of girl group doublings. The way her albums are mixed enhances the illusion of multiple voices, as the backing vocal tracks are spaced across the stereo field to make it sound as if they are singing from different places in the room. While this use of stereo is not itself typical of the genre (Phil Spector, producer of the Ronettes, notably insisted on exclusively mono recordings), in the absence of other performers it simulates a polyvocal, homosocial group instead of a singular identity that could arise from a lone vocalist. Covers of girl group songs also appear throughout Nyro's oeuvre, most notably on her fifth album, *GTAM*. This album sees her teamed with Labelle (formerly Patti Labelle and the Bluebelles) covering Motown songs largely performed by girl groups, and highlights her affiliation with the genre.

Music of the Brill Building, some of which overlaps with the category of girl group, is another strong presence in Nyro's palette. This can be seen directly in that Nyro's only single to reach the charts was the Goffin/King penned "Up on the Roof," and in other songs Nyro performed including "Natural Woman" and Bacharach/David's "Walk On By." In her songwriting, Nyro adopted features common to this tradition, most obviously elements of song form carried over from Tin Pan Alley, as introductory verses and 32-bar AABA structures are found in her writing ("Woman's Blues" from *Eli* and "I Never Meant to Hurt You" from *MTAND* are examples respectively of these features). *MTAND* in particular exhibits similarities with Brill Building material in both its love ballads and uptempo numbers that have relatively simple, direct lyrics suited to express emotion in conjunction with harmonic sophistication. Nyro never

[10] Charles Keil, "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music," *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (1987): 275.

emulated the division of labour standard to the Brill Building, though, strongly preferring to retain authorship and artistic control herself.

A prominent point of reference for critics of her early albums, soul plays a major role in Nyro's sound. Her early albums feature horn arrangements characteristic of the genre, and her singing often evokes this genre's style. In addition to "Eli's Comin'," the uptempo soul sound of which became a hit for Three Dog Night, an exemplary track is "Woman's Blues" from *Eli*. Many characteristic features of soul are present here, including a repeating riff-based bass line, horn shots, and Nyro's vocal delivery which embraces a full-voiced, powerful "soul shouter" style. Other components, such as lyrics, pull away from soul and towards her own more idiosyncratic poetic style (particularly in somewhat more abstract ways of phrasing or expressing what she is saying, such as "I got a job/on the chamber's walls of heartache" and "another one too/Three four five seven you'll never get to heaven/Don't talk wonder/cause God broke thunder above"), but the overall aural impression highlights the presence of soul among Nyro's influences. Soul-derived horn arrangements and especially vocals appear elsewhere throughout Nyro's work. In terms of material, *GTAM* also includes soul selections from Motown, such as Marvin Gaye's "The Bells," first recorded by The Originals, as does *AITD*, for instance Smokey Robinson's "Ooo Baby Baby." Notably, *GTAM* also charted on Billboard's R&B charts, reaching #41 (compared to #46 on the pop charts).

Nyro's Broadway inspiration is clearly announced at the start of *Eli* with the bombastic "Luckie," sounding much like a big, brassy showtune but for its more frequent changes in meter. Broadway music came into Nyro's life early via her mother, whose record collection included recordings of musicals.[11] Nyro's sense of dramatic songwriting often takes the sound of big band Broadway numbers. While "Luckie" carries this sensibility more or less throughout, Nyro also

[11] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 6.

weaves it into songs that feature other styles, like "When I Was a Freeport and You Were the Main Drag." The lyrics do not always participate in Broadway style alongside the sound; while parts of "Luckie" may not sound entirely out of place, other songs' lyrics venture further away from a show tune in their abstractness.

Gospel also plays a significant role particularly in Nyro's early music. Certainly, despite the proliferation of religious thematics (God and the Devil are recurring presences in Nyro's imagery), her songs cannot be considered to conform to the typical lyric content of gospel. The revision of the lyrics for a single version of "Stoney End" because of their perceived offensiveness to Christian listeners testifies to this.[12] To the ears of critics less concerned with biblical bona fides though, Nyro's gospel influence comes through strongly, beginning with her early hit "And When I Die." Beyond aural inspiration, Nyro cites the gospel hymn "Down by the Riverside" in her "Save the Country" (borrowing the refrain of "lay that burden down, ain't gonna study war no more").

Background: The Singer-Songwriter

While the singer-songwriter genre is a relevant point of reference for Nyro's music, and one that arises often in discussion of her work, it is necessary to briefly trace the genre's emergence to establish the presence it had when Nyro's career began in the late 1960s. At that point in time, "singer-songwriter" was not quite yet understood as a genre. While critics were picking up on new trends that would become identified with this genre, "singer-songwriter" only slowly became the name given to artists who demonstrated these qualities. Even though this did not fully transpire until close to 1970, the genre's qualities were pointed out in commentary since the

[12] The original lyric, which did appear on the album, is "I was raised on the good book Jesus/'til I read between the lines," but it was revised to "And I was raised on the golden rules/'Til the love of a winsome Johnny/Taught me love was made for fools" for the single.

middle of the decade. The increasing clarity of this cluster of features in the intervening years, though, suggests there was an incipient sense of the genre, if somewhat nebulous, in the years before 1970 that later cohered into the singer-songwriter genre. A full study of the discursive origins of the singer-songwriter has not been undertaken, but from surveying the trade publications *Billboard*, *Sing Out!*, *Cash Box*, and *Rolling Stone*, I will offer preliminary findings as to the development of discourse around the genre, identifying shifts in how artists who performed their own music were discussed and how other factors distinguished some of these artists as belonging to a distinct sphere of musical activity. According to David Shumway, the term "singer-songwriter" did not solidify as a genre category until 1970.[13] Shumway is overly dismissive of the early stages of genre formation, though. Robert Strachan and Marion Leonard give more attention to the mid-1960s, but somewhat prematurely narrow their focus of discussion to folk-related artists and consider only the term "singer-songwriter" to the exclusion of other descriptors circulating in the discourse.[14] As genres do not abruptly appear fully formed, but rather emerge through transformations of previous genres and shifts in discourse, it is crucial to consider the shifts that occur before a genre is declared. Indeed, for a genre to be named, a fairly coherent idea of what it is has to be circulating already in discourse. The terms that become genre labels may perform other functions in this nascent phase, as Brackett illustrates with regard to soul music.[15] In the case of the singer-songwriter genre, as I explore below, the years in the mid-1960s prior to its crystallisation hold constitutive discursive threads, as well as others that later came to be excluded from the genre's purview. This period is of particular relevance to

[13] Shumway, "The Emergence of the Singer-Songwriter," 11.
[14] Robert Strachan and Marion Leonard, "Singer-Songwriter," *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World Volume II: Performance and Production*, ed. John Shepherd, David Horn, Dave Laing, Paul Oliver, and Peter Wicke (New York: Continuum, 2003), 198.
[15] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 268-271.

understanding how Nyro's music was received, as her first three albums were released from 1967-1969.

While the term "singer-songwriter" predates the 1960s, in these cases it appears to denote a practice rather than an aesthetic, simply indicating that one person is responsible for both the composition and performance of their material, not necessarily possessing a distinct sensibility. But shifts in musical practice and reception appear in the 1960s. A 1963 article in the folk music periodical *Sing Out!* highlights "a whole new school of topical songwriter-performers that has emerged in America this past year or so," referring to artists including Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Mark Spoelstra, Len Chandler, Tom Paxton, and Peter La Farge, whose music is "of a surprisingly high artistic quality, and according to some critics may be superior as music and poetry to anything of this nature we have witnessed before."[16] Despite this strong proclamation, the genre concept of the singer-songwriter had not yet fully cohered into a stable set of traits and relevant musicians communicated by the genre label, and would remain in flux in the years that followed, although its component parts were already being observed. For instance, in 1965, a compilation album titled *The Singer Songwriter* suggests, via the range of artists represented, that the term did not necessarily signify any real difference from other existing genres, serving to draw attention to the fact that the musicians on the album (such as Richard Farina) had written their own songs but not evidently disrupting their affiliation with the genre of folk. Nonetheless, it represents the idea of authorship being used as an angle for promotion, indicating that this was seen as a selling point. Indeed, by the mid-1960s, there was a marked increase of interest in songwriters—whether this role was filled by the same artist as performed the music or not—which was less evident in years prior. While certain prolific popular songwriters' names were previously known and discussed, it was not the norm to indicate the writer or writers in trade

[16] Gordon Friesen, "Something New Has Been Added," *Sing Out!* 13, no. 4 (October-November 1963): 12-13.

publications like *Billboard* and *Cash Box*, as the performer was the focus for sales. *Sing Out!*, the folk music publication founded by musicians including Pete Seeger, was already much more interested in writers, suggesting a generic difference between folk and commercial traditions and/or the different mandates of these publications. Over the course of the 1960s, more attention was paid to songwriters in *Billboard* in particular, signalled in the publication's move in June 1966 to include songwriter credits in their pop singles charts and reflected in their general approach to discussing authorship, such as the language of original and cover versions of songs.

As far as terminology goes, "singer-songwriter" was far from the only term used to refer to musicians who performed their own material. In surveying *Billboard*'s publications of the 1960s, I found over forty distinct yet similar phrases used to identify this dual functionality. Common among them are "composer-performer," "artist-writer," "composer-artist," and "composer-singer," as well as frequent references to an artist performing their own material without a label attached. Fewer terms are found in other publications (particularly *Rolling Stone*, which largely avoids language that labels artists), but *Cash Box* offers many of the same terms, suggesting circulation of common phrases and the lack of a single, agreed-upon term. These terms are applied across genres to an extent; however, they are largely not applied to soul and R&B or to rock, being mostly used to refer to pop or folk artists, and to a lesser extent to country. Critics' interest in identifying that artists both wrote and performed their material appears to have grown over the decade, with a steady increase in use of this array of terms from year to year.

Aside from labels, a shift in discourse can be seen initially in reviews of Bob Dylan's music, with a new attention paid to lyrics and meaning. The phenomenon of young artists with something to say writing their own material caught the attention of music journalists, and was seen to be a potential selling point. In 1966, an ad for Dylan proclaimed, "First it was folk. Then

folk-rock. Now: a completely original bag so new it doesn't even have a name. Yet."[17] While it did not yet have a defined label, this constellation of features—a musician who writes and performs their own material, often featuring guitar, lyrics considered poetic and serious in commenting on politics or the human condition, and folk-influenced musical style—was growing in coherence. With these qualities identified, others writing in similar veins were discussed in terms then ready at hand. Dylan's lyrics, with political relevance in his "message songs"[18] and the wider social commentary of his lyrics[19] (a common theme of mid-1960s reception) and with the more introspective tone of the "folk poet"[20] (a quality that critics seemed increasingly interested in regarding more performers over the decade, but also noted at the outset of his career) provoked commentary for their reflective quality. Starting in the mid-1960s, remarks upon "poetry,"[21] "sincerity" or "introspection,"[22] and artists having something to say (both topical and otherwise)[23] abound in descriptions of musicians we now consider singer-songwriters. In addition to Dylan, artists including Buffy Sainte-Marie, Leonard Cohen, Janis Ian, Simon and Garfunkel, and Tim Buckley are addressed in this discursive vein.[24] While the trend of artists

[17] Columbia Records advertisement for Bob Dylan, *Billboard*, April 2, 1966, 43.
[18] E.g. "Dylan's Columbia albums are loaded with message, protest and satire songs" (Eliot Tiegel, "West Coast Clamors for Dylan Tunes," *Billboard*, September 4, 1965, 47).
[19] E.g. "Dylan's original words on social comment made up for what he might lack in voice" (G.L., "Things Spotty Under Foggy Dew," *Billboard*, June 8, 1963, 10).
[20] E.g. Barry Kittleson, "Folk Poet Dylan Weaves a Spell," *Billboard*, April 27, 1963, 12.
[21] E.g. "Poetry in song is the key to Eric Anders[e]n's work" ("Album Reviews: Folk: *More Hits from Tin Can Alley*, Eric Andersen," *Billboard*, April 27, 1968, 44); "She has the makings of one of this generation's greatest poets" (Hank Fox, "Janis Ian's Messages: How To Succeed by Being Grim," *Billboard*, December 23, 1967, 16).
[22] E.g. "[Jim] Bouie's talent lies in his sincerity and originality, which do not fit neatly into the commercial musical sound of today" ("Vagabond Singer Creates Excitement," *Billboard*, March 26, 1966, 48); "The 10 songs, all written by Buckley, deal with the writer's introspective view of himself and society" ("Album Reviews: Folk: *Goodbye and Hello*, Tim Buckley," *Billboard*, September 30, 1967, 40).
[23] E.g. "His repertoire also included topical comments about New York's recent blackout, civil rights problems and war" (Claude Hall, "Paxton Puts On Polished Stint At Town Hall," *Billboard*, March 5, 1966, 48); "A truly outstanding collection of songs from the pen of Paul Simon, with each song offering its own non-sermonizing message" ("Album Reviews: Pop: *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*, Simon and Garfunkel," *Billboard*, November 5, 1966, 92).
[24] E.g. "she is essentially a poet who sings. With the exception of a plea for the American Indian and a bitter protest against war, she deals with personal themes rather than social conditions" (Aaron Sternfield, "Buffy Sainte-Marie Gives Out With Swinging Poetry," *Billboard*, November 11, 1967, 22); "Poet Leonard Cohen has taken a cue from Bob Dylan, the folk-poet laureate. Sporting a breathy monotone, Cohen drones his poetry-put-to-music" ("Album Reviews: Pop: *Leonard Cohen*, Leonard Cohen," *Billboard*, February 3, 1968, 76); "Vietnam, poverty and loneliness

having a message emerged initially in the context of the politically-minded music of the folk revival, as Simon Frith has observed, this type of authenticity became "individualised" in the writing of folk-rock artists.[25] Dylan spanned this transition, and in the mid-1960s became known as the "chief prognosticator" of folk-rock, with his music then perceived as "cerebral and complex."[26] Artists such as Cohen and Rod McKuen, known first as poets, fell easily under this rubric as their poetic lyrics were regarded as already more sensitive and contemplative than the lyrics of chart hits. The notion of confession arose in relation to songs that communicate personal experiences; for instance, a 1965 article in *Sing Out!* describes one of Dylan's songs as being "as though he were speaking to a Father Confessor on Sunday, relating every incident of a highly personal affair."[27]

The importance of this lyrical subject matter can be seen in the general exclusion of certain artists from the genre as the discourse developed. Neil Diamond, for instance, was occasionally referred to in some of these same hyphenated terms (e.g. "singer-performer"[28]), but was also described differently (e.g. "hit writer and a chart artist"[29]) and his music was discussed without implications of poetic introspection. Despite some shared labelling terminology between the singer-songwriter genre and artists like Diamond as well as those in other genres including country, which grew out of the broader interest in musicians performing their own material,

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—[Janis Ian] sang them all—each with the same pessimistic view towards destruction. She sang of love, yet the air was fraught with death....She has the makings of one of this generation's greatest poets" (Hank Fox, "Janis Ian's Messages: How To Succeed by Being Grim," *Billboard*, December 23, 1967, 16); "Simon & Garfunkel, more observers than objects of observation. Columbia Records' young poets quietly, potently, carried their myriad lyrical impressions and accusations clear to the top of the amphitheater" ("Talent on Stage: Simon & Garfunkel, Lovin' Spoonful," *Cash Box*, August 12, 1967, 30); "Buckley's thoughts drift by, stopping only momentarily to gaze on reflective waters" ("Album Reviews: Pop: *Happy Sad*, Tim Buckley," *Billboard*, April 19, 1969, 30).

[25] Simon Frith, "'The Magic That Can Set You Free': The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community," *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 164.

[26] Tiegel, "West Coast Clamors for Dylan Tunes," 47.

[27] Josh Dunson, "Topical Singers," *Sing Out!* 15, no. 1 (March 1965): 75.

[28] *Billboard*, May 4, 1968, 49.

[29] "Mgrs. Collection Men: Diamond," *Billboard*, December 3, 1966, 31.

a distinction can be seen in the attention paid to contemplative approaches to lyrics. Additionally, the strong connection between folk and the singer-songwriter genre can be seen in terms such as "folk poet" assigned to such artists and especially in the attention given to this topic in *Sing Out!*

As this discourse took shape in the mid-to-late 1960s, the artist's lyrics were valued as communicating their own very personal outlook on the world, which had its most honest expression in their own performance. This distinction between original recordings and cover versions was more pronounced and more laden with value than in other branches of popular music, privileging the perceived authenticity of the original artist's recording; ads like "Nobody sings Dylan like Dylan"[30] were an oft-used marketing strategy. (Columbia continued this strategy with Nyro, with an ad declaring, "Suddenly everybody wants to sing Laura Nyro, but... Laura Sings Laura Best!")[31] Additionally, songs became longer, stretching well past the limits of standard single length for radio play, and the college-age listeners were expected to pay attention to the lyrics, which afforded contemplation rather than inviting audiences to dance. When audiences for these artists are described, they are often portrayed as college crowds who listen attentively. By 1968, Reprise was advertising albums via an excerpt of the lyrics, as seen in promotions for Joni Mitchell and David Blue.[32]

Nyro was soon brought into the fold. Hubert Saal, writing for *Newsweek* in 1969, highlighted a "new current" of such musicians penning personal and observational lyrics.[33] His article grouped Nyro with Joni Mitchell, Lottie Golden, Melanie, and Elyse Weinberg. Nyro's music was perceived to have meaning in a way that afforded a connection to the singer-

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[30] For example, Columbia Records advertisements, *Billboard*, September 18, 1965, 5; *Billboard*, December 25, 1965, 5; *Billboard*, August 27, 1966, 55.
[31] Columbia Records advertisement for Laura Nyro (undated; ca. 1968 as it features the cover photo from *Eli*), Michele Kort papers, box 11, folder: Top Ten Chapter 7, Sophia Smith Collection, SSC-MS-00769, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass.
[32] Reprise Records advertisements for Joni Mitchell and David Blue, *Rolling Stone*, May 11, 1968, 5, 9.
[33] Hubert Saal, "The Girls–Letting Go," *Newsweek*, July 14, 1969, 68.

songwriter genre. Advertisements also stressed this quality; for instance, *Eli* was promoted with a full page ad stating "She lived it. She wrote it. She sings it."[34] This statement plays up the aspect of personal authenticity which was common to the genre, with other artists lauded for their communication in music of their individual perspectives on life.

As it was still an emerging genre, the boundaries of the singer-songwriter were not fully defined at the start of Nyro's career, and it mapped slightly different musical territories in its incipient stages. However, the sense of grouping new popular music based on original material with lyrical import was clearly present. This nebulous grouping allowed for Nyro to be in some ways connected to the discourse of the emerging singer-songwriter genre, even though she did not fit its later more narrow prototype. Additionally, many of the artists who came to be central to the genre, such as Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, and by that point also Carole King, were based in the Los Angeles scene around Laurel Canyon and the Troubadour, while Nyro remained on the east coast. Being geographically removed, and not being a folk troubadour, she was not at this new genre's centre, but the notions of personal expression and seriousness that were key to the its formation were also important to how Nyro was promoted and received. As such, it constitutes an important point of reference for her music.

Overlaps and tensions

It goes without saying that these genres have different aural profiles, varying in feel, instrumentation, singing style, and harmony, among other parameters. A long history of musical cross-pollination, however, has shown that such separations, while no less meaningful, are traversable; "stylistic intertextuality," as Middleton puts it, is a common phenomenon in covers

[34] Columbia Records advertisement for *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, *Billboard*, April 6, 1968, 5.

and crossovers that illustrates the dialogue readily possible between styles of music.[35] However, other aspects of these genres stand in firmer opposition to one another. Quite practically, even before sound is considered, the norms for the distribution of artistic labour—a component of Fabbri's social and ideological rules—vary from genre to genre. For instance, at the Brill Building, the tasks involved were divided up amongst many actors, as lyrics and music would be composed by different writers, the song would be matched with a singing group, arranged by another party, and finally produced. At the other end of the spectrum, the singer-songwriter genre normalised the thorough involvement of the artist, who would at a minimum write lyrics and music and perform the material, often contributing also to arranging (where applicable) and producing, and in the cases of Nyro and Joni Mitchell, designing the album's visual appearance. In many ways, the singer-songwriter genre is more of an outlier, as it shares more with other traditions like rock in terms of notions of artistry and seriousness than the other traditions in Nyro's palette. I will address five sites of tension that I identified through building on Fabbri's theorisation of the sites in which genre is constructed alongside the challenges evident in marketing efforts and reception of Nyro's music: meaningfulness/meaninglessness, commercial craft/art, the role of authenticity, audience, and race.

Meaning

The genres Nyro's music participates in have differing relationships to meaning; they mean in different ways to different audiences, but more significantly, are not viewed as being equally in possession of meaning. As highlighted above, the presence of lyrics perceived to be meaningful was a defining feature of the singer-songwriter genre. Artists in this genre were often regarded as

[35] Richard Middleton, "Introduction: Locating the Popular Music Text," in *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.

having unique insights into the human condition and the world at large, and these perspectives were shared in their poetic lyrics. In Fabbri's terms, such music prioritises the poetic branch of semiotic rules, and is regarded as an object of art to be contemplated. In contrast to the discourse of meaningfulness and insight produced around singer-songwriter music, girl group music has been widely received as lightweight, artificial, and manufactured, devoid of deeper meaning. As Jacqueline Warwick comments, in contrast to male-coded music, "music that adheres to conventional harmonic language, accessible hooks and lyrics, sweet-sounding voices and instruments, and an emphasis on the ensemble rather than the soloist is treated summarily (sometimes even vindictively) as trifling and immaterial."[36] Girl group performers were often treated as interchangeable, with different singers performing under the same group name often without attention given to such shifts. In a related phenomenon, the actual singers would not necessarily be those pictured on the album covers. Certainly, some groups and performers were known individually, such as Diana Ross and the Supremes and Ronnie Spector, but this is less typical of the genre. This downplaying and even erasing of individuality contributes to the notion of girl group music as a mass-produced, disingenuous commodity. Girl group music is not presented or typically read as a meaningful, genuine communication from artist to listener; instead, it has often been considered bubblegum pop meant for entertainment rather than to be taken seriously as an artistic communication.

However, Warwick persuasively presents girl group music as an instance of prefabricated mass culture that girls can and do make their own. Girls listening to the music will find their own meanings and meaningfulness, she argues, and in this way its artificiality is re-produced by young female listeners as a kind of reality.[37] Certainly, complications to the

[36] Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 6.
[37] Ibid., 113.

narrative of girl group music as complacent, prefabricated culture are relevant to Nyro's engagement with the genre. Nyro's description of pop hits she covers as "teenage primal heartbeat songs of my youth" (as stated in her performance captured on *Live in Japan*; a similar statement appears in the liner notes of *Walk the Dog & Light the Light* - *WTD&LTL*) reveals her reception of them as profoundly emotional, regardless of whatever inauthenticity may have been assumed of them, and her sincere performances invite us to feel these songs with her as honest, meaningful expressions of emotion.

Additionally, as Will Stos illustrates, building on observations made by Warwick, amongst the body of material written for (and in some cases, by) girl groups are songs that challenge the norms set for young women, straying from acceptable themes or proposing rebellion.[38] While these were not the dominant manifestations of the genre, as Stos acknowledges, they nonetheless demonstrate both the potential for non-conformity in the genre and the expression of dissenting views on gender norms. Thus, where Nyro diverges from the norms of girl group music in foregrounding her authorial role and in writing lyrics that reflect her own deeply personal feelings, it is not necessary to see this as a mark of separation from the genre, but rather can be viewed in relation to these atypical instances that challenge the dominant ideology of the genre while still retaining membership.

Notwithstanding these nuanced views of the genre, the dominant frames of reception for girl groups do not place a premium on meaningfulness, instead emphasising a particular sound, catchiness, and appeal to a young female audience. This stands in contrast to the singer-songwriter genre, wherein meaning is a defining and necessary feature. Marketing of Nyro's music illustrates these diverging pulls. One ad suggests a lightweight theme of teen romance as it

[38] Will Stos, "Bouffants, Beehives, and Breaking Gender Norms: Rethinking 'Girl Group' Music of the 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 2 (2012): 119.

proclaims, "That 'Wedding Bell Blues' gal has lost another man and found another hit!"[39] and another suggests women will relate to her music: "Laura Nyro gets right to the heart of every woman who ever got 'taken' by a Flim Flam Man."[40] The ad for "Wedding Bell Blues" suggests triviality and novelty in its image of Nyro (looking very unhappy about the situation) in a wedding dress, recalling the images of glamour and fantasies of adulthood that characterise the girl group image[41] while undercutting potential seriousness with the rather flippant text. This notion is bolstered by its reference to her as a "young girl," but complicated by the suggestion that the selling point is authenticity, describing her as a musician "who sings and writes songs with a groovy conviction." Even so, it pairs this with a tone of novelty, saying "You'll believe in her as 'We do.'"[42]

By contrast, an ad for "Save the Country" takes up the trend of printing lyrics that was elsewhere employed for promoting singer-songwriters.[43] "Save the Country," however, is among Nyro's most pop-oriented songs, and the surrounding tracks on *NYT* would have offered themselves as stronger candidates for promotion based on poetic lyrics. These ads seem to suggest a quandary of genre in navigating the role of meaning for Nyro's music. Will her songs sell because they are meaningful or because they are catchy pop material? Ads from Verve for Nyro's first album tend more towards promoting her as a potential chart artist and those from Columbia to promoting meaningfulness, but each contain elements of both strategies. Columbia, as I outlined previously, did much more to allow Nyro to pursue her artistic aims, and did not count as much on her chart success. While it is not surprising that a label would hope for their

[39] Verve/Folkways advertisement for "Goodbye Joe," *Cash Box*, February 25, 1967, 39.
[40] Verve/Folkways advertisement for "Flim Flam Man," *Cash Box*, April 22, 1967, 57.
[41] Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 60.
[42] Verve/Folkways advertisement for "Wedding Bell Blues," *Cash Box*, September 22, 1966, 35.
[43] Columbia Records advertisement for "Save the Country," *Billboard*, June 29, 1968, 5.

artists to chart well, the gestures towards girl group style in Nyro's music alongside introspection are what make this an interesting case with no clear generic marketing path to pursue.

Craft/Art

A related site of tension between the genres Nyro engages with emerges in connection to commercialism and the discourses of craft versus art. The notion of craft can be seen in relation to music of Tin Pan Alley and the Brill Building, wherein songwriters are typically understood to produce songs that will sell well on the sheet music or radio market. Those composing the music are seen primarily as "songsmiths" who tailor their work for pop appeal, aiming to score chart success. The Brill Building, Ian Inglis notes, was "an archetypal example of 'vertical integration,'" holding offices of everyone from publishers to managers as well as composers and promoters, and as such "has been rather glibly described as a 'production line' or 'songwriting factory.'"[44] Composers who worked there often reinforced this image, recalling their workday routine of writing songs in a row of small cubicles. Yet, as Inglis observes, this can obscure the creativity and artistry that was part of the music-making in this context. Additionally, as John Covach documents the Beatles' increasing innovation around or departures from AABA song form over the course of their career, he remarks, "If the *AABA* form is marked as the preferred form of the professional songwriter—the Brill Building craftsperson—then the move away from that formal design at precisely the time in which musicians were drifting toward an image of themselves as artists makes a good deal of sense."[45] Yet as his analysis highlights, AABA form

[44] Ian Inglis, "'Some Kind of Wonderful': The Creative Legacy of the Brill Building," *American Music* 21, no. 2 (2003): 218.
[45] John Covach, "From 'Craft' to 'Art': Formal Structure in the Music of the Beatles," in *Reading the Beatles: Cultural Studies, Literary Criticism, and the Fab Four*, ed. Kenneth Womack and Todd F. Davis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 40.

can be brought into more experimental compositional contexts, reflecting a dialectic between craft and art traditions.

Notions of craft also come into play regarding Motown, and John Sheinbaum calls attention to the racial dynamics at play in Motown's portrayal as an "assembly line" with musicians as "craftspeople" in contrast to the attributions of "art" and "genius" authorship to white rock musicians. And he points specifically to descriptions like that in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll* which describes Motown as "mechanical" and "like a well-tuned Porsche," an allusion to automobiles which "serves both to ground the company in its Detroit-based origins and to reinforce the notion that the music, however fine, is a machinelike commercial product."[46] Within this outlook, artists who asserted authorship and control over their music, like Smokey Robinson and Stevie Wonder, are painted as exceptions to the rule. As Inglis and Sheinbaum illuminate, the "assembly line" discourse leaves out the artistry at play and in the case of Motown has participated in racialised discourses that dismiss Black artistry. While the reality was more complex, and I join Inglis and Sheinbaum in critiques of these oversimplifications, I am attending to this idea of "craft" for its status as the prevailing discourse regarding the Brill Building and Motown, standing in contrast to the discourse of "art" attached to rock and, of greater relevance to Nyro, the singer-songwriter genre.

These distinctions can be understood through Bourdieu's theorisation of the systems of value he terms symbolic and economic capital. In addition to economic value, Bourdieu observes, value may accrue in the form of prestige and the recognition of something as an object of art. Considering the literary field, Bourdieu observes that opposition has tended to manifest between these forms of value; that which receives economic returns through widespread sales is

[46] John J. Sheinbaum, "'Think About What You're Trying To Do To Me': Rock Historiography and the Construction of a Race-Based Dialectic," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, ed. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 113-114.

typically not granted the exclusive prestige of symbolic value, as "authors who manage to secure 'high-society' successes and bourgeois consecration are opposed to those who are condemned to so-called 'popular' success."[47] In this framework, we can understand the drive towards continual production of hit singles as prioritising economic value. By contrast, the value placed on artistry in the singer-songwriter genre, without regard for (and at times to the detriment of) sales, can be understood as the prioritisation of symbolic value.

While the same object may be accorded both symbolic and economic capital, as demonstrated in popular music of the time such as the Beatles' later albums, these paradigms are often opposed in music just as they are in literature, with music that takes artistic departures being far from assured of commercial success. For Columbia, Nyro's role in their roster was largely one of conferring symbolic capital; the artistic integrity she represented was of use to them in attracting other artists who wished to receive the label's commitment to their own expressive work rather than be pressured to craft chart hits. But the prominence in Nyro's music of genres that stress economic capital of chart success and singles sales complicates that designation, and the chart success of a number of her early songs in the hands of other musicians demonstrates their potential for economic success.

How are the contrasting priorities of symbolic and economic value reconciled? Relatively lighthearted material comprises some of Nyro's output, with songs like "Stoned Soul Picnic" (*Eli*) and "California Shoeshine Boys" (*MTAND*) easily appreciated for their craft. Indeed, Nyro's ability to craft a song was remarked upon by Clive Davis, who commented that Nyro's performances did not conform to the norms for chart success, but her songwriting held that potential, and her albums "became—in effect—demonstration records for other artists."[48]

[47] Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," 46.
[48] Davis, *Clive: Inside the Record Business*, 99.

Because of this, Nyro's other role for Columbia (particularly following their purchase of her publishing company) was as a writer of songs that were hits for others. This view of Nyro as a superior songwriter whose music was best performed by other recording artists offers one way to approach her music, prioritising the economic logic of singles sales and airplay. The chart success enjoyed by "Eli's Comin'," "Stoney End," and "Wedding Bell Blues" brought economic returns for Columbia and Nyro (once her publishing rights had been restored to her from her first contract with Mogull and Verve/Folkways), and offered a basis for valuing Nyro's ability to write a hit song. Additionally, these economic returns provided a foundation from which to venture into financially risky artistry; as Bourdieu observes, economic backing is necessary for the pursuit of symbolic capital.[49]

Certainly, being first brought to the charts by another, more established artist does not prevent later being recognised for original recordings. Dylan, for one, was brought to the airwaves via Peter, Paul & Mary. They were also the first to record one of Nyro's songs, taking on "And When I Die," later popularised by Blood, Sweat & Tears. In Nyro's performance of this song when left to play it as she wished, for instance as recorded for the PBS television program *Critique* in 1968, she opts for frequent metrical shifts, often adding bars of 2/4 in the otherwise 4/4 song. In this song that is otherwise suited to commercial chart success, Nyro's performance pulls away from the regularity that is conventional to hit songs, maintaining idiosyncrasies that detract from its commercial potential. Owing to this departure, her performance is better suited to appreciation in the domain of symbolic value for her individual artistry. That some prominent critics saw Nyro's performances as a drawback to otherwise successful songwriting points to this tension in her work, as her performances participate in a more highly individual, artistic aesthetic, countering the expectations that arise from the strong aspects of craft in her

[49] Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," 67-68.

songwriting. Combining her artistic departures with songwriting informed by craft-focused traditions, Nyro asks us to take seriously the content of what is otherwise dismissed as bubblegum pop useful for sales rather than artistic merit.

Nyro's self-presentation through her albums offers another window onto this issue. Features of the album covers for *Eli* and *NYT* merit particular attention as they constituted her introduction to her record-buying audience (*MTAND* was produced before Nyro had full creative control, and as such reflects the wishes of the label), though her later albums are of interest as well. On *Eli*, the cover notably withholds information; neither Nyro's name nor the album title appear (though these details were added for later pressings), while a photo of Nyro, eyes downcast, fills the space in front of an empty, dark background. This goes against the common practice of putting the artist's name on the front and especially at the top to aid in spotting the record while flipping through bins. Instead of clarity, the mysteriousness of the nameless image invites audiences to question who this figure on the front might be, and perhaps to wonder what else is being withheld that may be discovered within. On the back of the album, a handful of significant credits appear in small font, wherein Nyro credits herself as a producer alongside Charlie Calello, as well as indicating her authorship as writer, composer, and performer. In relation to the emerging singer-songwriter genre, Nyro stresses her authorial role, foregrounding her songwriting before her performance.

On *NYT*, while Nyro's name and the title do appear on the front, the back cover includes another sliver of intrigue. The lines "Where is the night luster? Past my trials" appear handwritten near the bottom. Anyone who then listens to the album will discover that these are lyrics from one of its songs, "Sweet Lovin Baby," but they are initially detached and mysterious, and moreover, discovering the source does not necessarily illuminate their meaning. The

inclusion of these lyrics on the back cover evoke notions of poetry and hidden meaning, and align the album with the singer-songwriter genre.

GTAM, Nyro's most thorough participation in girl group and Motown music, features Nyro on the front and the members of Labelle pictured on the back. Below the credits on the back cover, given prominence through the space around it and its own use of indentation to give it shape, is the text "Nights/in New York/running down steps/into the echoes of the train station/to sing...". Unlike the lyrics on the back of *NYT*, this is not sourced from a song (though this would have to be confirmed by listening, as unlike *Eli* and *NYT* the lyrics are not printed). Rather, it alludes to Nyro's participation in spontaneous music-making in New York, and can serve to authenticate her as a performer of this material. But it also creates a remove from the genre in question, as in its poetic description of musical impulse and unmediated performance it runs counter to the norm of produced and manufactured girl groups.

Nyro opted for a more intimate appearance on *Smile* and the albums that followed, with two Polaroid-style photos of her (one out of focus) placed to slightly overlap as if set down casually, and the lyrics handwritten with a short poem and some decorative drawing on the back. This enhances the sense of the album being her personal creation, with the words literally penned by her in an aesthetic that suggests an unmediated presentation. *Nested* and *MS* are similarly intimate, although the latter also features art by contemporary female artists, invoking a broader creative sphere.

Owing to the co-presence of these fairly opposed systems of value in the genres Nyro draws upon, the tasks of marketing and receiving her music are not straightforward. It is evident in advertisements and reviews that industry personnel and critics struggled with what to do with the imbrication of art and meaningfulness with craft and "meaningless" pop in her music.

Retrospective designation of Nyro as a singer-songwriter suggests that, looking back on her oeuvre, the sense of meaningfulness and artistry has come to dominate reception (although hyphenated lists of genre terms persist as well). But this framing does not prepare listeners to appreciate Nyro singing girl group songs like "I Met Him On a Sunday" or "Jimmy Mack" that tell relatable, uncomplicated love narratives and do not involve surprising harmonic or metric decisions, which reflect a significant aspect of her musical persona and prioritise different systems of value. I will return to this dilemma in greater depth below.

Authenticity

What it means to be authentic(ated) in these genres is also meaningfully varied. Not only do the criteria differ but so too do the types of authenticity at play. Following many scholars engaging with these ideas, I do not suggest that authenticity is to be found independently within music, but rather can be observed as a process of authentication involving the audience. While one may readily postulate criteria employed for the authentication of soul or singer-songwriter music, the same may be less apparent for genres such as girl group music; indeed, terms like "authenticity," "original," and "truth" are not central to the discourse in such cases. But Simon Frith suggests that popular music, broadly speaking, offers sites of identification, and that the examination of different genres will reveal "the different ways in which music works to give people an identity, to place them in different social groups."[50] Even so, his discussion turns to the production of authenticity in rock as opposed to the value placed on artifice in other traditions. Allan Moore's theorisation of modes of authenticity, however, allows for different manifestations of authenticity

[50] Simon Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 264-265.

across genres to be accounted for, and I will draw on this model to frame my discussion alongside insights from other scholars.

As I discussed above, the singer-songwriter genre values the expression of the artist's personal thoughts through their own voice. This type of authenticity, in which the artist is true to themself and communicates directly to the audience, falls under the banner of first-person authenticity in Moore's framework.[51] For the singer-songwriter, this is often framed in terms of confessionalism. In this regard, performers whose songwriting can be seen to be autobiographical and who create a sense of closeness in their live performances and recordings are authenticated by their audiences. For Nyro, first-person authenticity appears most clearly in her admissions that *Eli* is revealing of her life—saying, for instance, "When this album is finished, my mother is going to know exactly where I've been,"[52] suggesting that her lyrics reflect and are true to her own experiences. But the notion of autobiographical truth is more complicated. Despite her comments suggesting that *Eli* was an account of her exploits, it is not always possible to identify what might correspond to her life nor what the often impressionistic lyrics might mean. In addition, Nyro poses herself as "witness to the confession" in the credits for *Eli*. This cryptic credit subverts the expected dynamic wherein the audience witnesses the artist's confession as a religious or judicial authority would in other forms of confession. If Nyro is the witness, is she still the one issuing the confession? Through this framing, she challenges the idea of confessional songwriting, since she plays the roles of both confessor and confessant, leaving her role and that of the audience unclear. The titular "Confession," too, plays with the concept of confession. After having proclaimed "I love my lovething/Super ride inside my lovething," Nyro continues to the declaration, "Oh I hate my winsome lover/Tell him I've had

[51] Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," 214.
[52] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 62.

others at my breast/But tell him he has held my heart/And only now am I a virgin, I confess." Nyro's "confession" subverts norms of what subject matter is confessed (virginity is not something typically considered warranting confession) as well as the notion of virginity, which in her revelations appears to be the result, rather than the absence, of sexual exploration.

Even as Nyro's approach to confession and self-revelation impedes a sense of narrative truth-telling expected in the genre, she establishes first-person authenticity in other ways. Significantly, the emotional immediacy of her performance offers a sense that whatever she is singing about she feels; the dramatic contrasts in her singing, from near-whispers to full-voice belts, suggest rapid emotional fluctuation. Her live performances generated intimacy in often having just her and her piano on stage, and with the audience's attention guided to her rather than incorporating other aspects of "show" like lights, colours, and pyrotechnics. The effect of her lyrics may produce a sense of emotional truth that, while not as directly legible as that of her peers, provides a sense of her private feelings as she offers windows into her "drawn blinds blues," heartbreaks, and loves. Her actions outside of the music itself also support a sense of her as being true to herself, with her pursuit of her artistic vision as well as flourishes of personality such as taking a horse-drawn carriage to the studio reflecting an idiosyncratic individuality. Her later albums also contain lyric content that can be more clearly tied to her lived experiences. On *MS*, for example, Nyro reflects on aging and love, and expresses the challenges of parenting an "elf on speed" as a tired new mother, corresponding to friends' comments that the mismatch of personality and energy levels between Nyro and her son proved a struggle. These more direct revelations invite authentication in the first-person modes favoured in the singer-songwriter genre. Additionally, the mellower sound she favoured at that point was more in line with the norms of the singer-songwriter genre, with her singing closer to an intimate, conversational style.

In these ways, Nyro's music invites first-person authenticity while also subverting some of the norms associated with it.

Girl group music, as I noted above, does not typically employ first-person authentication, and is indeed perceived as rather inauthentic through the rockist outlook maintained by many critics in the latter 1960s and 1970s who, as Moore (drawing on Richard Walser) comments, "equated commercial mediation with ideological compromise."[53] However, as Warwick observes, this music is received by girls and re-produced within their own lives as relevant and meaningful. Such meaningfulness for the listener is described by Moore as second-person authenticity, since regardless of the truth it may or may not be perceived to hold for the performing artist, it reflects truths of the listener's experience. Even though it is not at odds with —and indeed complements—first-person authenticity, when it is the primary mode, the music in question is often dismissed as inauthentic. Once again, as Warwick discusses, instances of girl group music that challenge assumptions regarding "inauthenticity," through songs composed by the girls themselves about figures in their own lives, or by the girls playing complex percussion parts themselves, for instance, complicate the reality, though without disrupting the overarching narrative.[54] Yet by highlighting both the perceptions of the artist's realness and of the material's relatability, music that audiences forge personal meanings for can be understood in a framework of authenticity alongside that which has traditionally occupied this place via first-person modes. This mode of authentication, while foregrounded in genres like girl group, is also found in relation to music considered mainly for its first-person authenticity; audiences seek the confessions of the singer-songwriter not only because they communicate the artist's emotions but also, and perhaps mostly, because they reflect those of the listener. For singer-songwriter music

[53] Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," 218.
[54] Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 43.

as much as girl group music, listeners forge personal meaning by relating the music to their own experiences and feelings.

In terms of reception, however, these modes are often opposed and are associated with different audiences and modes of listening. This poses an issue for Nyro's music, as what is commonly perceived as authentic and inauthentic types of music are mixed. Promotional strategies can be seen to draw on both modes. Verve/Folkways' ad for "Flim Flam Man" suggests female listeners will find second-person authenticity in the song, as Nyro "gets right to the soul of every woman who ever got taken by a Flim Flam Man."[55] The mixing of first- and second-person authenticity is suggested in Columbia's advertising of *Eli*, that, as stated above, proclaims "She lived it. She wrote it. She sings it.", but perhaps motivated by the obscurity of Nyro's lyrics goes on to say *"*She doesn't explain anything. She fills you with experience."[56] which, it implies, is both Nyro's and subsequently yours as the listener.

Again, though, as with the sense of meaning imparted to Nyro's abstruse lyrics by performance, her heightened performances of girl group and Brill Building songs work to generate a sense of first-person authenticity even with material that she did not write and that indeed largely comes out of a "song factory" writing model. This transformative effect is suggested by the *Detroit Free Press*'s Terry Lawson, who argues that, alongside James Taylor, "Nyro...opened hippie ears to the true, tender beauty in top 40 songs such as 'Up on the Roof'."[57] I would propose understanding this as a two-stage process, wherein Nyro as a listener of this repertoire engaged fully in second-person authentication and subsequently, upon performing these songs, conveys a sense of what has for her become first-person authenticity in her performance. In exceeding these genres' norms of dynamic contrast, tempo fluctuation, and vocal

[55] Verve/Folkways advertisement for "Flim Flam Man."
[56] Columbia Records advertisement for *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*.
[57] Terry Lawson, "Hit Parade: Remastered Album Releases Prove Carole King's Songs Stand the Test of Time," *Detroit Free Press,* May 30, 1999, 4E.

power, Nyro conveys an individualised approach to the repertoire, with her idiolect defining the overall aesthetic and bringing it in line with her own material.

Nyro's incorporation of soul music invokes further facets of authenticity. In the 1960s, as soul itself was newly consolidated as a genre, the number of prominent white artists working in this style prompted use of the moniker "blue-eyed soul." This situation sparked debates about genre and radio station airplay that hinged on authenticity. This type of authenticity, attached to the race and cultural background of performers, is captured by Moore's category of third-person authenticity. In this mode of authenticity, authentication occurs through reference to something external, such as a culture or performing tradition. While the source of the authentic is thus located outside the artist, the stronger their perceived connection to the culture or tradition in question, the more authentic their performance is deemed to be. The development of soul music in Black musical communities and its strong connection to race politics placed white performers outside this sphere of authenticity, but, like Moore suggests, white artists have pursued this type of authentication through dedicated study and homage. In any case, much of this music was popular, and R&B stations grappled with the decision of programming white soul artists. One station, WWRL in New York, was reported to have programmed The Beatles' "Yesterday" "because general manager Frank Ward feels that Paul McCartney puts a lot of soul into the song"[58] (although the commercial boon of the song may in reality have had more of an effect than any perceived "soul"). Commercial value aside, acts like The Righteous Brothers disrupted this notion of the articulation of race and genre as underpinning soul authenticity; WOL director Rudy Runnels commented, "The records these artists are turning out is a concrete bit of proof that some white artists have soul."[59] The fact that station directors felt the need to make these

[58] Claude Hall, "R&B Stations Open Airplay Gates to 'Blue-Eyed Soulists'," *Billboard*, October 9, 1965, 1.
[59] Ibid., 49.

comments demonstrates the process of authentication for white artists not taken for granted in this genre. The ability to communicate a sense of "soul" and to adequately perform what is generally regarded as a Black cultural genre was key for white soul artists, and the affirmations that some of these musicians received highlights the audience's role in the process of authentication.

In response to the strong presence of soul in Nyro's music, especially on *Eli*, she was often described as a soul artist. *NYT* was reviewed under the heading of "soul" in the *Boston Globe*, though this decision is not explained or elaborated upon in the review.[60] Brian Van der Horst of the *New York Free Press* described Nyro as a "New York woman who sings soul," claiming that "it's her bag, and she does it better than the competition," and that she "will do for soul what Elvis did for blues, what Dylan did for folk and what Paul Butterfield has done for rhythm and blues."[61] The comparison to Elvis and Paul Butterfield evokes the popularisation of a Black genre by white artists, and while suggesting commercial success, it does not signal authenticity. This is also, of course, fraught with issues of privilege and power in culture; as Mark Anthony Neal notes, white artists covering songs by Black musicians almost always receive greater sales figures, and these covers are often the source of their mainstream success (for example, Eric Clapton and Pat Boone), though Neal suggests Nyro's more broad musical interests pull her away from this role.[62] But Hubert Saal's description of her music in *Newsweek* as "black-voiced" soul[63] offers a different take on this question. Where the term "blue-eyed soul" calls attention to the performer's whiteness via physical description, and implicitly suggests that their authentication is not automatic, "black-voiced" can be understood as focusing on a

[60] L. A. von Getchell, review of *New York Tendaberry*, *Boston Globe*, November 7, 1969, 19.
[61] Quoted in Columbia Records advertisement for "Save the Country."
[62] Mark Anthony Neal, "White Chocolate Soul: Teena Marie and Lewis Taylor," *Popular Music* 24, no. 3 (2005): 370, 376.
[63] Saal, "The Girls–Letting Go," 69.

conferred authenticity, even while indicating that the performer is not Black. For *GTAM*, Columbia claimed third-person authenticity by linking Nyro to R&B writers, saying in their ad for the album, "Before Laura wrote her classic hits for anyone else, people like Smokey Robinson, Phil Spector, Curtis Mayfield and Marvin Gaye wrote some for her....[*GTAM*]'s the soul of all the songs that Laura gave to everyone else."[64] Nyro's success on R&B charts as well as pop charts with *GTAM* suggests that her performance of soul and Motown music was granted some degree of third-person authenticity by both white and Black listeners.

All three types of authenticity can work together. As Rupert Till highlights, the singer-songwriter genre can invite all three.[65] But the common perceptions of authenticity or inauthenticity as inhering to the different genres Nyro participated in leaves a tension in terms of which cues to follow in receiving her music. Advertising and commentary for Nyro's music engaged in multiple modes of authentication, if at different moments, opening multiple lines of approach for potential listeners but also leaving an inchoate picture of what was to be found there.

Audience

The genres Nyro engages with are associated with different audience bases. As Frith notes, for record companies, the question of genre is crucial insofar as it "integrates an inquiry about the music (what does it sound like) with an inquiry about the market (who will buy it)."[66] The notion of an audience for marketing purposes is often fairly general and necessarily broad, and while this question may be approached with greater specificity than a marketing executive might do so, it speaks to the notion that different musics are "for" different people, that some segments of the

[64] Columbia Records advertisement for *Gonna Take a Miracle*, *Billboard*, December 4, 1971, 5.
[65] Till, "Singer-Songwriter Authenticity," 298.
[66] Frith, "Genre Rules," 76.

population will buy a particular artist's work and others will not. Even though at times certain audience bases are assumed to be natural and inevitable for a given music, as David Hesmondhalgh demonstrates, the notion of articulation developed by Stuart Hall is a useful lens through which to view the link between music and audience. By understanding a demographic group as associated with a music via articulation, this connection can be understood as flexible and not inevitable; as Hall expresses, articulation "is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time."[67] As Brackett details, homological as well as imaginary relationships between artist and audience have both proven significant in music consumption.[68] One music may be articulated with multiple audiences and in different ways; imaginary and homological links may both be at play, and music may also work to construct a community around it not bound by a particular demographic.

In spite of such complexities, associations with a particular demographic—often homological in nature—may loom large in common notions of a genre. Whether these associations are reflective of the actual audience base is somewhat beside the point, as they nonetheless shape what the genre means in the broader cultural sphere. As Brackett writes, "categories of music and people are neither true nor false, but rather 'ideological' in that they speak to a shared, tacit understanding about which differences are meaningful as well as to how these differences are meaningful."[69] The qualities associated with the presumed audience may adhere to the music and vice versa, with associations such as masculine, feminine, juvenile, or foreign moving easily between music and presumed audience, and contributing to overall evaluations of the genre.

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[67] Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues* (1996), 141, quoted in Hesmondhalgh, "Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above," 33.
[68] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 19-20.
[69] Ibid., 53.

The genres invoked by Nyro are associated in this way with a variety of audiences, some of which are seen as mutually exclusive, and moreover, result in conflicting attitudes towards the music in question. Nyro's actual audience, often composed of college students, may have found themselves attached to her music in different ways—perhaps even at the same time—through this plurality. But the audiences discursively associated with the genres she employs are harder to reconcile. The presumed fan-base for girl group music, teenaged girls, is also tied to the dismissive view often held of the genre. The categories of girl group music and teen girls identify meaningful ideological differences by highlighting gender and age, with female and youth both holding connotations of insignificance in dominant discourse, serving to dismiss the music because of its presumed audience and vice versa. Accounts of 1960s youth culture have often privileged a male experience, which, as Warwick comments, "typically posits girls as reactionary, passive devotees, in marked contrast to the innovative and rebellious boys whose music they are privileged to enjoy."[70] This stands in contrast to the presumed audience for the singer-songwriter, which is represented by the contemplative college student. This latter group is associated with intellectual engagement, middle-class status, and (in the late 1960s) typically whiteness. By association, the music may be presumed to be worthy of contemplation, and something to be taken seriously rather than dismissed for being "merely" for the entertainment of girls. Soul music, by the late 1960s, occupied a complicated position in relation to audience. The proliferation of crossover successes between R&B and pop charts throughout the decade and the trend of "blue-eyed soul" artists made it clear that race was not necessarily a defining element of artist or audience. Nonetheless, soul carried an understanding that it was a music of African-American culture, even as others performed and consumed it, and this was even more the case with gospel. In contrast to the "first love" songs of girl groups, soul was seen as expressing more

[70] Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 5.

mature emotions and appealing to an adult audience.[71] With such associations, these genres held opposed connotations and suggested distinct audience bases, leaving it unclear what audience would be expected to form around Nyro's music that combined them.

Race

Despite the blurring of the line between pop and R&B as well as the participation of white and Black musicians in both categories, race remained a strong ideological component of genre, whether or not this was explicitly discussed. For soul music, as noted above, the connection to Black culture and the civil rights struggle was part of the discourse of the genre; Black performers were the norm, while white artists were the exception. Girl group music, as Brackett observes, was created largely by Jewish writers and Black performers, but white artists also had success;[72] race was not treated as a definitional aspect of the music, even as it intersected with the economics and labour practices in a way that often disadvantaged the young, Black, female performers. The singer-songwriter genre also did not bring race explicitly into its definition, but featured predominantly white artists (Buffy Sainte-Marie a notable exception), with artists of colour often left on the genre's margins or excluded entirely.

While not consistently addressed by critics, the themes of crossing racial boundaries and of racial mixing arise in some responses to Nyro's music. Nyro herself is often described in terms that evoke a non-white, racialised other, with attention called frequently to her long, dark hair. After pointing out Nyro's hair and Bronx roots, Bruce Sylvester remarked in the *Boston Globe* that "Carole King and Paul Simon also write with a New York flavor, but they cannot approach Laura's raw Puerto Rican emotionality."[73] These comments demonstrate the racist

[71] Bill Gavin, quoted in Andrew Flory, *I Hear a Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 72.
[72] Brackett, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 132.
[73] Bruce Sylvester, "Laura Nyro's Hub Legion Cheers Bronx Madonna," *Boston Globe*, March 21, 1972, 18.

formula attributing emotionality to Hispanic people, which Sylvester was satisfied to apply to Nyro (who was of Italian and Jewish background, not Puerto Rican) as explanation for her intense expressiveness. For some, her appearance reflected the racial ambivalence of her music; Richard Williams wrote in *Melody Maker* that Nyro looks in one moment "like a Spanish prince's consort painted, maybe, by Velasquez," yet her appearance shifts: "She turns slightly, and you think of some of the women in Chaucer."[74]

For a number of critics, Nyro had "soul," but this held varied connections to urban and rural spaces. William Kloman, who used the term "city-soul" to describe her sound, found that "When she sings the blues, it is an apartment house wail, untouched by the levee or the plantation,"[75] while Saal suggested, "For a city chick, Laura sings like a country girl—and a black one at that. She loves upbeat blues, and she's a shrill, shouting soul singer, who holds nothing back."[76] While they arrive at opposite sides, both Kloman and Saal are navigating the dual racial affiliations they perceive in her music, as the urban environment in this formulation takes on a degree of whiteness in contrast to the rural "levee or the plantation." Ritchie York addressed this theme in generic terms, writing, "Some might call her a folk singer, but the title would be misleading. When she plunks her heavy left hand into the blues chords, it is very clear Miss Nyro has an immediate understanding of the blues which is probably the reason her songs have guts and meaning."[77] Jon Landau framed this issue most directly, commenting that Nyro's music constitutes a "mixed marriage of diverse styles," comparing her to both Bacharach/David and Curtis Mayfield to illustrate this comment,[78] implying without overtly stating that her music is a product of miscegenation (and it is worth noting that in the US, laws against miscegenation

[74] Richard Williams, "Laura Nyro: Lady Laura," *Melody Maker*, May 15, 1971, https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/laura-nyro-lady-laura.
[75] Kloman, "Laura Nyro: She's the Hippest—and Maybe the Hottest?," D32.
[76] Saal, "The Girls–Letting Go," 68.
[77] Ritchie York, "Laura Nyro's Soul Charisma," *The Globe and Mail*, November 18, 1969, 15.
[78] Jon Landau, review of *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, *Rolling Stone*, September 28, 1968, 29.

had only been ruled unconstitutional the year prior).[79] These responses to Nyro and her music reflect the issues of race playing out in the sociopolitical field in the 1960s as well as how they are woven into questions of musical genre. The racial mixing suggested by Nyro's generic hybridity, with the addition of her racially ambiguous physical features, produced a tension in its uncertain affiliation. While the blurring of R&B and pop earlier in the 1960s engaged similar questions of racial identity and belonging as they map on to music, as Brackett has interrogated, in that instance, the definitions of "white" and "black" music were in doubt, while in Nyro's case there appears to have been more uncertainty regarding her location in relation to relatively more defined racialised genres of music. And unlike "blue-eyed soul," Nyro was not simply a white artist performing in a Black-identified genre, as she drew substantially on white-coded genres as well; Landau's evocation of the "mixed marriage" points to this dynamic that finds Nyro in between categories. These issues are deeply tied to questions of authenticity and the attribution of generic affiliation.

Contemporary reception

While Nyro was never a superstar, her music attracted considerable critical attention, particularly in the years following her move to Columbia Records. Many critics praised her music, while some found it either repetitive or some version of "too much," like critic Pete Johnson who suggested that Nyro would find greater success only "if she were willing to confine her talent to one direction,"[80] or others who deplored her intense performances. But regardless of critical

[79] Alongside Landau's somewhat ambiguous usage, I wish to note Stefanie K. Dunning's observations on the different valence of miscegenation in white and Black discourses, rather than strictly existing as a spectre: "In the context of white identity, miscegenation can only undo. In the context of black identity, miscegenation creates," as narratives of the subject "dramatiz[e] racial threat to whiteness, but also [act] as devices for reimagining blackness," in *Queer in Black and White: Interraciality, Same Sex Desire, and Contemporary African American Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 15-16.
[80] Pete Johnson, *FM & Fine Arts*, quoted in Columbia Records advertisement for "Save the Country."

judgment, commentators shared a bewilderment as to how to encapsulate Nyro's sound in generic terms. I will survey album and concert reviews to illustrate what generic frameworks were invoked and discuss issues of reception that arise.

As Hans Robert Jauss argues, the way in which a work is received is shaped by the expectations of the audience, established through their previous experiences with other works.[81] For the case of Nyro's music, in addition to familiarity with the genres she invokes, the concept of crossover is a key part of the field of experience that listeners would draw upon. By Nyro's debut in the latter 1960s, crossover was an established phenomenon, and trade publications would often highlight the crossover potential of records they reviewed. The disappearance for over a year of *Billboard*'s R&B chart—from November 30, 1963 to January 30, 1965—is tied up in issues of crossover and the complexity of this category with regard to race and identity. As David Brackett illuminates, in *Billboard*'s 1963 charts prior to this suspension, while few Black R&B artists were listed in their mainstream pop chart, many white pop artists were included in their R&B chart, resulting in a muddled view of this field of music.[82] While R&B did not cease existing as a category outside of *Billboard*, and other publications such as *Cash Box* retained a clearer view, as Brackett notes, many elements of R&B did overlap with mainstream pop even as the two arenas maintained their distinction.[83] Particularly in the soul/pop domains, then, crossover was a familiar phenomenon by the early 1960s. Some country artists also enjoyed occasional play in the pop domain through this period, though these two realms remained rather more distinct than did soul and pop.

In close proximity to crossover, and with greater bearing on Nyro's music, is the notion of music between genres or those that are a mixture of multiple genres. In the mid-1960s, folk

[81] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 22-23.
[82] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 240.
[83] Ibid., 243.

and rock were bridged in the genre of folk-rock, a hybrid genre with listeners drawn in from both sides of the divide. The participation of multiple musicians and bands (most prominently The Byrds and Sonny & Cher) in this type of music allowed for it to be discussed as an entity unto itself rather than a one-off initiative by an individual artist. The discourse around this new genre highlighted the contributions of each source—the thoughtful lyrics of folk and the more exciting, forceful beat of rock—which were brought together in a way that made the most of each aspect. Folk-rock was also tied to themes of protest, building on the social commentary common to folk music. This was an especially salient aspect in the eyes of critics, as it expressed the zeitgeist of anti-war sentiments held by youth. This combination, while bringing together influences from what had been distinct musical traditions, did not effect a demographic mixture; while differentiated by age, with folk also incorporating performers of older generations as rock focused on youth, as Keir Keightley observes,[84] both the folk revival and rock were associated largely with white, young, urban, predominantly male performers. Nonetheless, it offered an example of blended genres not long before Nyro's career began. In particular, it demonstrated a blend in which poetic, thoughtful lyrics could be presented in a musical style previously not known for such textual content. It is perhaps because of this conjunction of poetic lyrics and livelier beat under the auspices of a "folk"-related genre that Nyro was at times referred to as a folk musician upon her debut, if only sparingly under the banner of folk-rock, as in *Billboard*'s description of "Save the Country" as possessing a "folk rock dance beat."[85] For instance, Ernie Santosuosso of the *Boston Globe* referred to her as a "folk-singer" and "something new in folk."[86]

[84] Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 122.
[85] "Special Merit Spotlight," *Billboard*, July 13, 1968, 70.
[86] Ernie Santosuosso, "She's Something Else: Laura Nyro," *Boston Globe*, March 12, 1967, B60.

Despite the hybrid model of folk-rock, critics initially demonstrated an impulse to categorise Nyro's music under one generic heading, but still often inserted other descriptors. The same Boston Globe article that called her a "folk-singer" acknowledged her self-description as "polished soul," while the *Los Angeles Times*'s Pete Johnson placed folk alongside gospel, rock'n'roll, and jazz as the styles heard in her music.[87] By the release of *Eli* the following year, her music was increasingly being considered under the umbrella of soul, such that Robb Baker of the *Chicago Tribune* felt the need to push back on this angle, writing of her "wide-ranging" musical tastes, arguing that "her debt to 'soul' is exaggerated by certain of her admirers....Her heritages from the gospel (both southern white and Negro), blues (country and city) and folk fields are equally important."[88] Still, he terms her a "singer-composer," while *Billboard* opted to describe her as a "new generation singer-composer" and *Cash Box* used the term "songstress/composer," placing her in the neighbourhood of the still nebulous but folk-aligned emerging genre of the singer-songwriter even while they point to her varied influences.[89]

Following the release of *NYT*, acknowledging a diversity of styles became a common theme in critical characterisations of her music. William Kloman in the *New York Times* remarked on the challenge her music posed to critics in terms of description, writing that reviewers of *Eli* "obviously had trouble fitting Laura into existing categories," and that her music "has been called rock, jazz, soul and classical."[90] The following year, Pete Johnson writing for the *Los Angeles Times* gestured to these varied affiliations, commenting that "at one moment she is the most soulful of blues singers, at another a gutsy rock'n'roller, at another a silken siren."[91] Another of the *Los Angeles Times*' articles largely abandons such attempts altogether, with

[87] Pete Johnson, "New Album From a Talented Tyro," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1967, C33.
[88] Robb Baker, "The Sound: Music and Radio: For Young Listeners," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1968, S20.
[89] "Album Reviews: Pop: *Eli & the Thirteenth Confession*, Laura Nyro," *Billboard*, April 13, 1968, 61; "CashBox Album Reviews: Pop Best Bets: *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, Laura Nyro," *Cash Box*, April 20, 1968, 61.
[90] Kloman, "Laura Nyro: She's the Hippest—and Maybe the Hottest?," D32.
[91] Pete Johnson, "Laura Nyro at Troubadour," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1969, A6.

Robert Hilburn stating that her songs "carry a style and feeling that is almost totally apart from everything else being done these days on the pop music scene."[92] The *Detroit Free Press* in their initial review of *NYT* avoids genre terms altogether, referring to Nyro simply as a "song writer" and the album as "high calibre" with "complex" songs.[93] (For their second review, run two days later and equally concise, Bob Talbert opts for "pop-folk singer," "contemporary song-writer," and "poet of the people."[94]) In 1970, Robb Baker wrote in the *Chicago Tribune* that "it's as if she is performing in a musical vacuum: there are absolutely no points of reference possible. She is a completely magnificent artist, and most of the magnificence is originality."[95] References to folk, poetry, singer-songwriter (under various synonyms), soul, gospel, blues, rock, and jazz persisted in various publications as well.

So, while folk-rock may have been an available model of generic hybridity for critics, it evidently did not suffice to construct a description of Nyro's music. The range of styles audible in her music continued to surface individually or in combination in critical commentary, but no consistent descriptor emerged, let alone a new genre label. As Holt advises, "Genre is always collective, musically and socially (a person can have his or her own style, but not genre). Conventions and expectations are established through acts of repetition performed by a group of people."[96] As this makes clear, Nyro could not alone forge a new genre; others would have to follow suit with a similar approach. Nyro's music offers an overabundance of generic citations without one acting as a fundamental reference, and no other performers were writing and performing in the same mix of traditions to collectively signal a new genre.

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[92] Robert Hilburn, "Laura Nyro's Sound of the City," *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 1969, C67.
[93] "Record Reviews – Laura Nyro – *New York Tendaberry*," *Detroit Free Press*, October 31, 1969, 6-C.
[94] Bob Talbert, "Record Reviews: Laura Nyro's New York Tendaberry," *Detroit Free Press*, November 2, 1969, 9-C.
[95] Robb Baker, "With Robb Baker: Hail, Laura Nyro!" *Chicago Tribune*, February 24, 1970, B2.
[96] Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, 3.

Robert Hilburn, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, pointed to the challenges of audience reception associated with this generic multiplicity, commenting, "Though she is fully accepted by today's folk and rock audiences, Miss Nyro's music, which reflect [*sic*] jazz and gospel roots as well as folk and rock, makes one search back to the days of George Gershwin to find composers with an ability to put such splendor and cross currents into a song."[97] In stating this notion on another occasion, he added Leonard Bernstein to the potential comparisons, "as opposed to the dominant rock style of the day."[98] This echoes Pete Johnson's comments regarding *MTAND* that the "rock crowd was too hidebound by the group syndrome to pick up on it and it was a bit too hip to cause waves on the easy listening stations."[99] These comments suggest that her music fit only awkwardly with audiences of the day, and that Nyro was in a sense a temporal misfit as well, somehow out-of-time even as she was the "hippest." While the breakdown of actual audiences is of course far more complex than the references to "folk" and "rock" crowds suggests, this nonetheless reflects some aspects of the horizon of expectations of the time, even if folk and rock exist more solidly as schemas than as distinct physical collections of artists and listeners. The implications of this statement are that Nyro's music, combining more generic influences than audiences had been previously familiar with, did not have a clear market segment of its own but instead drew in listeners, if uneasily, from various domains.

Theorising music across genres

Nyro's music, resting in and between multiple genres, did not line up with the genre-based frameworks that critics typically draw on. Their struggles to identify her music did not diminish the enthusiasm and praise many of them held for it, but despite positive responses, it remains

[97] Robert Hilburn, "Laura Nyro Sings," *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1970, E1.
[98] Robert Hilburn, "Laura Nyro in Concert at UCLA," *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1970, D17.
[99] Pete Johnson, "Laura Nyro Makes a Change," *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1968, D40.

difficult to locate Nyro in the broader field of popular music. In an academic vein, too, few tools exist to discuss music such as Nyro's. One approach is modelled by Holt, who theorises music between genres, considering a number of case studies in which music exists in a borderland between two generic identities. He proposes to create models "structured by continuums and plural narratives rather than dichotomies, [and that] embrace polymorphous semantic textures rather than distinct categories" (although his choice of case studies that rest between two clear points of reference seems to work against that intention). Music between genres, he suggests, "questions the ways categories organize and control social space, and it tells us that there are parts of reality that can better be reached via poetic metaphor than via cool reason and systematic control."[100]

Holt does not pursue this line of thinking to any particular metaphorical paths or tools, however. His brief case studies highlight various artists and musical moments that extend beyond the bounds of one genre, generally straddling two, but focus on accounting for these dual allegiances rather than proposing theoretical tools to understand them. In considering how Nyro's music occupies a space between yet tied to multiple genres, I suggest that the concept of heterotopia, as advanced by Foucault, is a particularly apt framework for understanding this sort of generic plurality. Foucault borrows the term heterotopia from medicine, where it refers to tissue grown in unexpected places, to describe spaces outside the ordinary that bring into question accepted systems of order and knowledge. While scholars have taken up the term most intently in geography and cultural studies, focusing on the notion of resistance that Foucault ascribes to heterotopia in order to discuss particular spaces, it has also been adopted, albeit much less widely, in the domain of literary studies to address issues of voice and genre. I continue this latter, smaller history of use by bringing heterotopia to bear on notions of musical genre.

[100] Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, 179.

My adoption of the term is drawn primarily from Foucault's initial explanation found in *The Order of Things*[101] and less on his second, and more contradictory, take on it in his lecture "Of Different Spaces,"[102] which has provided more of the foundation for its use in the discourse of physical sites of resistance. I will refer also to Kelvin T. Knight's discussion of the term which identifies the importance of literary analysis for Foucault's development of the concept. As Foucault explains in *The Order of Things*, he was provoked by a passage from the writer Jorge Luis Borges to theorise a space for the incommensurate. Borges, in an essay concerning systems of knowledge organisation (a recurring theme in his writing), refers to an ostensibly real (but actually fictional) Chinese encyclopedia, the "Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge," that categorises animals as follows: "a) belonging to the Emperor; b) embalmed; c) tame; d) sucking pigs; e) sirens; f) fabulous; g) stray dogs; h) included in the present classification; i) frenzied; j) innumerable; k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush; l) *et cetera*; m) having just broken the water pitcher; n) that from a long way off look like flies."[103] For Foucault, the notion of such an absurd classificatory system provokes uneasy laughter. As he explains,

> Perhaps because there arose in its wake the suspicion that there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous*, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; I mean the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*...in such a state, things are 'laid', 'placed', 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all.[104]

Borges' encyclopedia removes the "table" on which the items can be gathered together, in a physical sense as well as the *tabula* "that enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes, to group them according to names that

[101] Foucault, *The Order of Things.*
[102] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, March 1967, https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/.
[103] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," quoted in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xv.
[104] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xvii-xviii.

designate their similarities and their differences."[105] Foucault locates this type of confusion in heterotopias, which "are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that...because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things...to 'hold together.'"[106]

While not to the absurd extent of Borges' encyclopedia, the diverse types of factors at play in genre similarly present a profound heterogeneity with regard to generic classification. As Fabbri illustrates, genre is constructed of various kinds of features, ranging from musical to behavioural to sartorial, but often one of these domains will hold the most significance for any particular genre, producing a "hyper-rule" of greater definitional import than others. Commencing with these primary rules for a musical taxonomy might result in a Borgesian list, such as: that played exclusively on synthesizers; intended for teenage dancing; in the form of 12-bar blues; played by and for individuals with modified clothing and hairstyles; highly personal; of Afro-Cuban origin; played by queer musicians; etc. These varied axes of definition do not necessarily demarcate wholly distinct categories or help to place an item of music in one genre rather than another if multiple features are present. Foucault continues with the consideration of animals in this regard, questioning what distinguishes a cat and dog in Borges' encyclopedia "even if both are tame or embalmed, even if both are frenzied, even if both have just broken the water pitcher;"[107] musical categorisation can similarly be complicated by traits shared between genres. Of course in practice additional generic and musical features would be called upon to clarify generic allegiances, and with an understanding that genre categories are fundamentally porous and overlapping rather than discrete. Nevertheless, the confusion of classificatory process

[105] Ibid., xvii.
[106] Ibid., xviii.
[107] Ibid., xix.

that arises from juxtaposing the primary vectors of definition for various genres points towards the type of challenges arising in parsing cases of generic mixture.

Drawing together a vast and heterogeneous array of elements is characteristic of heterotopic artworks. Kelvin T. Knight finds parallels between Foucault's explication of heterotopia and his contemporary writing on Flaubert, which addresses his novel *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. In this novel, Flaubert conjures a heterotopic "parade of historical, religious and mythical figures and creatures, borrowed from numerous different texts and traditions."[108] This incongruous compilation, Knight suggests, functions like the magic carpet—a device at the centre of Foucault's discussion of the heterotopia in a lecture shortly following his published text on the subject—"transporting Flaubert's protagonist and readers through a gallery of disparate scenes,"[109] while representing the world, as Foucault notes the design of carpets historically did. In Flaubert's book, rather than a condensation of the world into one carpet, it is an impossible collection of ideas borne out of the library, drawn from a wide array of texts.[110] Foucault proposes that such intertextuality, inaugurated by Flaubert, is the basis for a tradition of literature that followed, including that by Borges. The adoption of the concept of heterotopia in literary studies continues this theme. In studying recent Latin American literature, Adam Morris proposes that the "narrative recycling" featured in these works results in a type of heterotopia that "inaugurat[es] a new form—one that favors subsuming the novel into the novel-system of a *textual network*, a system of literary works whose narrative strategy depends in part on the distributed network."[111] In a slightly different vein, Leena Kore Schröder considers the poetry of John Betjeman through the lens of heterotopia, finding that in his writing, "juxtapositions of

[108] Kelvin T. Knight, "Placeless Places: Resolving the Paradox of Foucault's Heterotopia," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 1 (2016): 149.
[109] Ibid., 150.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Adam Morris, "This Product Made from Postconsumer Content: Narrative Recycling and New Novelistic Economies," *Criticism* 57, no. 1 (2015): 12-13.

discursive practices do not draw him into the solitary irrational unconscious, but rather reveal to him the interrelatedness of wholly socialised experience that is the dialogical life of language."[112]

I propose understanding the collection of features in Nyro's music, drawn from a range of distinct genres, as a type of aural/discursive heterotopia. In presenting aspects of soul, Broadway, girl group, singer-songwriter, blues, and as critics have it, folk, rock, classical, and more, Nyro's music overwhelms familiar frameworks for comprehension that are built of individual (or at most, overlaps of two) generic schemas. In her music, these various influences coexist like those "fragments of a large number of possible orders [that] glitter separately."[113] They resist assembly into a coherent discursive whole since, as I have outlined above, the genres Nyro invokes have contrasting and even contradictory norms in domains such as authenticity, audience, and division of labour. This operates at the level of individual works as well as at the level of Nyro's oeuvre, where with an album like *GTAM* Nyro's role shifts from author of personal songs to performer of popular numbers penned by others, with a prominent role played by backing vocalists. These differing and even incompatible features do not find a ready terrain in any one genre but instead forge a heterotopic space, which Foucault proposes is "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."[114]

Much of this incompatibility, or impossibility, lies in the discursive realm, that which shapes reception and comprehension of what is heard. In this regard, I wish to highlight the domains of audience and meaningfulness. As Hesmondhalgh observes in relation to rap music, "others can borrow from and adopt the form, but nearly always with reference to the homological

[112] Leena Kore Schröder, "Heterotopian Constructions of Englishness in the Work of John Betjeman," *Critical Survey* 10, no. 2 (1998): 25.
[113] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xvii.
[114] Foucault, "Of Other Spaces."

relationship between music and social group that is central to its meaning."[115] Thus even when it is not enacted, the notion of a particular articulation of music and demographic manifests as a core aspect of its meaning. Nyro of course had her own, real audience, aligning more with some genre's norms than others (notably an older base than that of girl groups, though her audience may have listened to girl group music in their younger years). But this cohesive reality does not nullify the conflicting associations carried by the genres at play. For an individual listener to understand and locate her music—for instance, with the aim of marketing it or seeking musical community—the task is complicated by the genre cues that point to distinct, even mutually exclusive audiences.

Similarly, the frivolity and entertainment associated with girl group and Broadway goes against the serious contemplation associated with the nascent singer-songwriter genre; in reception norms, frivolity and contemplation do not share conceptual space. In terms of meaning and listening practices, then, the different understandings and approaches invited are not only distinct but run counter to one another. Again, in practice, listeners may find profound meaningfulness in Nyro's Broadway and girl-group inspired sounds, or may lightly enjoy the radio hits she penned without attending to their more esoteric lyrics, but the co-presence of these generic cues sends conflicting signals as to which listening practices are to be engaged and which are to be set aside, or whether an attempt may be made to hold them in an uneasy tension. While critics often praised her music, and perhaps for themselves resolved or disregarded these issues, it remained a slippery object that they struggled to locate and communicate about generically because it invoked contradictory notions of audience and meaning, as well as other aspects of genre such as mode of production. In this sense, Nyro's music may be real but it cannot be fully seen through the lens of a single genre.

[115] Hesmondhalgh, "Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above," 34.

With this in mind, I wish to consider Pete Johnson's comment in his review of *Eli* that Nyro "seems to be mocking the cliches which creep into pop songs [as such] phrases inserted into unfamiliar contexts show that she has been listening ironically to other music."[116] In this opinion Johnson seems alone among critics, and I certainly do not hear any sense of mocking or irony in Nyro's approach. But his recourse to this explanation is nonetheless of interest. If a range of musical references are gathered together in an ironic assemblage, they are made coherent and associated through this shared lens of irony. Returning to Foucault's explanation of the disruption of heterotopias, irony may stand in for Johnson as a "table" upon which to comprehend the various items gathered there, to replace the expected generic table removed by the incommensurability of the heterotopia's contents. Johnson's tenuous invocation of irony-as-table reflects the challenge posed to reception by music such as Nyro's. While different in approach, it is addressing the same issue flagged by Robb Baker when he stated that "it's as if she is performing in a musical vacuum: there are absolutely no points of reference possible."[117] Through Foucault's formulation, Baker's struggle to approach Nyro's music through generic frameworks useful to critics might be understood to originate from a profusion, rather than vacuum, of points of reference that do not otherwise hang together, failing to provide the conceptual table; the absence of the table may present itself like a vacuum despite the many pieces of familiar objects present.

Indeed, as Baker's struggle suggests, heterotopias disrupt familiar orders and ways of knowing, "breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things."[118] While it may be tempting to latch on to Foucault's descriptor "wild," which along with his comments on the crumbling of syntax

[116] Johnson, "Laura Nyro Makes a Change," D40.
[117] Baker, "With Robb Baker: Hail, Laura Nyro!"
[118] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xv.

suggests something entirely free of set frameworks and vital in its detachment, this would be to deny the connections retained by all components of the heterotopia to existing structures. Heterotopias are still intimately connected with the world around them, and this principle is well illustrated in the domain of genre. The notion of listening to or creating music entirely in the absence of genres is impossible (even as genre categories themselves will never be fixed or firmly delineated), and a heterotopic music is only rendered so because of the strength of genre categories it engages with. The challenge of describing an album of music with disparate generic affiliations is echoed and extended in efforts to locate an artist's oeuvre, as I will consider in posthumous accounts of Nyro's work, which address issues of legacy and canonicity more than identifying a potential audience for a given album.

Canonicity and reception

Nyro's death in 1997 sparked many retrospective assessments of her career, and there have since emerged numerous profiles of her on online music resources and encyclopedias, as well as in tribute albums, and these texts offer a window into how her oeuvre as a whole was interpreted generically. Such writings convey how Nyro's music was perceived in light of her various sounds over the course of her career, and shed light on issues of canonicity. These writings seem to tend in one of two directions: one being a continuation of earlier discourse of generic multiplicity, and the other being a subsumption of her music under the banner of "singer-songwriter," albeit often with caveats.

The first of these approaches is illustrated by articles found in the *New York Times*. In an obituary article, Stephen Holden describes her as a "singer and songwriter whose impassioned, iconoclastic music exploded pop song conventions" and "a pioneer in the confessional, free-form

school of songwriting that grew out of 1960's folk music" with "a kaleidoscopic musical sensibility that fused elements of folk, soul, gospel and Broadway tradition into intensely introspective songs that transcended easy stylistic categorization."[119] In a similar vein, later that year Deborah Sontag wrote, "With a three-octave range of emotions and a confessional style, Nyro turned her insides out in music that defied easy categorization because it was so many things at once: bubbly and soul-searching; commercial and experimental; jazzy and bluesy, with a touch of soul and doo-wop."[120] Sontag opts for largely different generic points of reference than Holden chose, aside from soul. The room for divergence in the contents of their lists reflects the range of genres drawn upon substantively by Nyro such that different listeners may focus on largely different sounds. In opting for a list-based approach, though, both critics foreground Nyro's generic plurality as the defining quality of her music.

Assessments of Nyro as falling under the umbrella of singer-songwriter are found in writings such as a version of the Associated Press's obituary as run in the *Chicago Tribune* which begins by describing Nyro as "a singer-songwriter who influenced a generation of female artists."[121] This article leans into these descriptors, stating further that "along with Joni Mitchell, [Nyro] was one of the leading female exponents of the [singer-songwriter] genre" in its early years. (Other versions of this article run in the *Globe & Mail* and the *Detroit Free Press* similarly employ the term singer-songwriter but do not narrow the focus to female artists at the outset.) In a number of articles meant to summarise her career, this term is used as a label for her but is nuanced with descriptors of other genres. *Rolling Stone*'s obituary began, "Singer/songwriter Laura Nyro, whose original, pioneering fusion of soul, gospel, jazz, R&B and pop created a catalog of million-selling hits for artists ranging from Three Dog Night to Barbra Streisand."

[119] Stephen Holden, "Laura Nyro, Intense Balladeer Of 60's and 70's, Dies at 49," *New York Times*, April 10, 1997, D29.
[120] Deborah Sontag, "An Enigma Wrapped in Songs," *New York Times*, October 26, 1997, AR35.
[121] Associated Press, "Influential Songwriter Laura Nyro, 49," *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1997, 11.

Billboard proceeds along the same path, describing her as "the beloved New York singer/songwriter [known for] deeply soulful performances and unique blend of pop music influences."[122] The entry for Nyro in *Encyclopedia Britannica* outlines her as an "American singer-songwriter who during the 1960s and '70s welded urban folk blues to the gospel resonance of the girl group sound."[123] Similarly, the biography of Nyro on AllMusic seeks to encapsulate her thus: "An influential New York City-based singer/songwriter with a powerful, soulful voice who bridged the gaps between folk, pop, and soul."[124] AllMusic also includes generic classification with links to content for the terms listed, and in this section of the profile Nyro is billed as "pop/rock" genre with styles of "singer/songwriter," "soft rock," and "AM pop." Like the previously discussed articles, these texts make the breadth of Nyro's generic affiliations clear. However, by being subsumed under "singer-songwriter" they are framed more as stylistic influences within one primary genre rather than a de-centred web of genres.

These articles, as obituaries or encyclopedia entries, face the task of distilling what kind of music Nyro made and additionally of tracing her impact. For this second task, genre groupings often serve as guideposts; it is possible to say that an artist had an impact on, say, funk or disco. In instances where a genre-based field of impact is apparent, there is nothing amiss with such an approach. These types of statements also provide information about canonicity, as artists are painted as important figures in the development of a genre. For Nyro, though, it is not a straightforward decision to locate her influence in the path of one genre, but it is also not self-evident how to communicate this entirely without generic guideposts short of listing every artist who has listened to her.

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[122] Jim Bessman, "Acclaimed Singer/Songwriter Laura Nyro, 49, Dies," *Billboard*, April 19, 1997, 12.
[123] Lucy M. O'Brien, "Laura Nyro," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (April 4, 2019) https://www.britannica.com/biography/Laura-Nyro.
[124] Mark Deming, "Laura Nyro," *AllMusic*, https://www.allmusic.com/artist/laura-nyro-mn0000137474/biography.

In many of these articles concerning Nyro, "singer-songwriter" is called upon to perform this function, and Nyro is woven into the genre's emergence in the late 1960s. Stephen Holden's piece, despite not using the term "singer-songwriter," nonetheless refers to that generic landscape in his nod to Nyro's role in the "confessional, free-form school of songwriting" that he connects also to Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. The somewhat more nebulous borders of the genre provide less friction for Nyro's inclusion, but its norms still render her on its periphery. Critics do not identify her sound as surfacing in later artists of the genre. Her approach to song form is occasionally linked to that of Rickie Lee Jones, herself a misfit in the genre. Nyro's personal, emotionally expressive writing is more in line with the genre's field of impact, although, as discussed above, the obscurity of her lyrics make this, too, a less than straightforward line of influence.

Holden also credits her with helping to usher in "blue-eyed soul," but this is not in line with the chronology of the phenomenon, which emerged in 1965-1966, prior to Nyro's debut. It would seem that Holden is attempting to convey the import of Nyro's music by implicating her in the creation of genres and traditions. This strategy follows established ways of granting and communicating value in popular music, defining a field of impact and indicating canonicity within the given genre. However (whether through fault of memory or otherwise) it is not an accurate representation of Nyro's involvement in blue-eyed soul, though a stronger case is to be made for her role in the growth of personally expressive songwriting.

Another thread that emerges in multiple articles is Nyro's impact on women in popular music. This concept conjures a legible, if more nebulous, sphere of influence such as that assembled periodically in best-of lists in music publications where gender stands in as an axis of coherence among otherwise disparate artists. At times this field is further narrowed along generic

lines (at least nominally), such as "women in rock" or "women in blues," but is otherwise extended broadly across popular music. Nyro undoubtedly had a significant impact upon subsequent female musicians, and the tribute album *Time and Love* released the year of her death features an all-female lineup, bolstering this angle for reception of the time. However, where critics have chosen to highlight this domain of Nyro's reach, they also ignore the influence she had on other artists, with notable omissions including Todd Rundgren and Elton John.

That the sphere of "women in popular music" becomes something of a default is demonstrated in comments where this delineation is not made explicit. For instance, Holden does not remark upon gender, but in his list of artists inspired by Nyro he includes only women, citing "Rickie Lee Jones, Kate Bush, Wendy Waldman, Jane Siberry, Teena Marie, Suzanne Vega, Toni Childs, Tori Amos and Paula Cole," and Patricia Romanowski writing for *Rolling Stone* similarly suggests that "artists including Rickie Lee Jones, Alanis Morissette and Tori Amos bear the mark of her influence."[125] Steve Morse, whose article for the *Boston Globe* led off by describing Nyro as a "cosmically inclined feminist" and placed her alongside Carole King and Joni Mitchell as among "the first singers to write in an authentic women's voice," elected to use only a quotation from Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls regarding Nyro's legacy, and traced her impact to Rickie Lee Jones and Suzanne Vega.[126]

While some of the artists listed have cited Nyro as an influence (such as Rickie Lee Jones, appearing in most of the lists in question), others such as Tori Amos have not. This does not negate the effects they may have felt from Nyro's path-breaking career—for instance, Thomas D. Mottola, then-president of Sony Music, suggests that Nyro "laid the groundwork for an entire generation of female singer/songwriters"[127]—but it does not identify direct chains of

[125] Patricia Romanowski, "Tribute: Laura Nyro 1947-1997," *Rolling Stone*, May 29, 1997, 17.
[126] Steve Morse, "Laura Nyro, 1947-97 Cancer claims unsung writer of some of era's greatest hits," *Boston Globe*, April 10, 1997, E, 1:4.
[127] Quoted in Bessman, "Acclaimed Singer/Songwriter Laura Nyro, 49, Dies," 12.

influence, and instead groups together women in popular music quite generally. That many critics turned to a "women in popular music" narrative, explicitly or not, to trace Nyro's legacy reflects how that category appears to be natural and self-evident, and highlights the challenge of defining the terrain within which she had impact. To some degree, the move to a "women in rock" domain of legacy again appears motivated by the lack of generic cohesion in which to locate Nyro's impact. Significantly, though, locating her impact in this domain also pulls the focus away from her aesthetic contributions and obscures the nature and scope of her impact.

The challenges of outlining Nyro's legacy, a task typically entwined with genre, affects the place accorded to Nyro in broader discussions of popular music. I will employ the Grove Music Online and *Encyclopedia Britannica* articles concerning particular genres as a representation of canonicity here, while acknowledging that canons are continuously debated and other sources may propose different histories and central figures. While the critics above largely agree on the prominence of soul in Nyro's music, quite consistently listing it in the genres that form her sound, Nyro is not mentioned in the articles on soul in either reference work. This observation is not to argue that she should be included, but to highlight the challenges in locating music between genres in broader histories and narratives about popular music. In terms of soul, Nyro was not a soul artist as such, nor are those who claim her influence. While it thus does not necessarily make sense to add her name to such an article, it also raises the question of how a significant artist so engaged in a genre while not defined by or with it is to be related to its history. Similarly, Nyro is not included in articles on gospel, folk-rock, blues, or blue-eyed soul (although in his Grove Music article on exoticism, Ralph Locke names her under this umbrella, and not in relation to Orientalism).

Nyro is listed under singer-songwriter in both sources, though in John Potter's Grove Music article on this subject the approach to the term is quite loose, leaving her role unclear. Both functional and generic definitions appear to be employed in the article without clear distinction in their use. Nyro is included under the subcategory of R&B singer-songwriters, in the company of artists such as Chuck Berry, who while being singer-songwriters in the functional sense are not so in the generic sense, and Nyro's connections to the generic sense of the term are not identified and may be assumed not to exist, given the framing. The article on singer-songwriters in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, penned by critic Stephen Holden, defines singer-songwriters as "professional troubadours performing autobiographical songs who ascended in the early 1970s." Holden lists Nyro among this wave alongside others including Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Randy Newman, Neil Young, and James Taylor. Here, she is described as "vastly influential but only marginally successful, [having] invented an intensely passionate and private, keyboard-based style that borrowed from gospel, folk, jazz, and Broadway."[128] This placement in the genre-based article allows Nyro space in its history, though it is clear that her generic plurality still pulls her away from the genre's norms.

Returning briefly to the topic of women in music, a survey of sources listing top selections in this vein find Nyro on the outskirts of the canon. Where she appears, it is often in low positions on the list. For instance, NPR's 2017 list of "The 150 Greatest Albums Made By Women" includes *NYT* at #82, while Nyro sits at #52 in VH1's list of "100 Greatest Women of Rock & Roll" from 1999. She is only mentioned in passing in Sheila Whiteley's *Women and Popular Music*, and is absent from *Rolling Stone*'s 2012 "Women Who Rock: The 50 Greatest Albums of All Time," Meredith Ochs' 2018 book *Rock-and-Roll Women: The 50 Fiercest*

[128] Stephen Holden, "Singer-Songwriters," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/singer-songwriter.

Female Rockers, Wikipedia's "Women in rock" article, and from the list of "Best Female Musicians of All Time" on the crowd-sourced voting platform ranker.com. (She is also left off ranker.com's list of "Greatest Lesbian Singers," and as the list includes other artists attracted to multiple genders, it does not seem that Nyro's fluid sexuality is the cause for this exclusion.) This overview (albeit brief) suggests that defining her field as women in music has not been a solution to identifying her influence or domain for canonicity.

While there are the occasional lists not bound by genre in *Rolling Stone* and similar publications such as the hundred greatest musicians of the century, which leave room open for artists whose place is otherwise hard to locate, histories and narratives of popular music are typically broken down into histories of genres, plus some moments of crossover. This principle of sorting allows for the histories of different genres to exist simultaneously and in dialogue with one another, and undoubtedly offers much to the history of popular music in identifying varied traditions for consideration in their own depth and relationships. In theorising the heterotopia, Foucault insists that in order to organise knowledge, there must be a first principle of difference, such that one thing may go in one category and another will be separated from it in a different category; Borges's encyclopedia egregiously violates this principle. While there may be many objections to Foucault's stance on this approach to knowledge, understanding the friction of a first principle of difference against the heterotopia is illuminating to the question of canonicity. When artists like Nyro arise, this first principle of sorting finds her excluded from the categories that form popular music history despite her many connections to them. She is allowed as something of a misfit in the category of singer-songwriter, a label which renders the exuberant horn arrangements and bombastic celebrations of her sexuality on *Eli*—the album that first saw her brought into that neophyte generic discourse—rather unexpected and confounding, if not

entirely inappropriate, for a listener expecting from music of the genre a gentle acoustic guitar, quiet singing, and subtle poetry. For music like Nyro's, following the principle of sorting based on a primary generic affiliation renders it out of place and potentially deficient when it is better understood as heterotopic.

While these discursive channels do not readily accommodate Nyro, in addition to the range of those who cite her as an influence, the covers of Nyro's songs recorded during her career and that have emerged in tribute albums since show that she most certainly has an active place in popular music history in the view of many artists, and in relation to a wide range of genres. Artists who have interpreted her songs hail from jazz, pop, rock, big band, folk, and more. As is evident, though, hybridity can result in an artist being left adrift in broader narratives of popular music which often rely on genre-based canons, and when included, being cast as a strange or marginal instance of the category. Seeking a conceptual space for Nyro in pop music history calls for greater attention to cross-pollination—not simply crossover—as a conceptual terrain unto itself. Although attending to crossover highlights music that bridges genres, as a conceptual byproduct of genre-defined thinking, it reinforces the generic centres and their boundaries. As Brackett observes, crossover music demonstrates the mutability and porousness of genre boundaries while simultaneously reinforcing them, as music can only be a crossover when there are distinct enough areas to be crossed between.[129] Additionally, the market goals of crossover music have often been those of bridging margin and centre, such as country artists crossing over into the mainstream, reinforcing a centre/periphery model. Attending instead to a heterotopic musical space, which like crossover is still intimately connected to those orders outside of it, can offer a conceptual model beyond these binaries.

[129] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 26.

The overload of genre cues in Nyro's music prompts a reevaluation of what is taking place in her music—of what meanings are brought into circulation with each component present, and what meanings are accorded to the whole—and brings up questions of whom such music circulates among, how it is produced, and where its impacts lie. In bringing together aspects of genres that collide in meaning, Nyro's music provokes questions about norms and interpretation, like what it means to have music that is bold and brassy and intimate, entertaining and poetic. This type of confrontation, Robert Topinka suggests, "offers the possibility of irritating dominant forms of order," even as "any new knowledge formations will emerge with the imprints of both hegemonic and heterotopic space."[130] As such, this reevaluation does not displace the role of genre or the presence of norms, but exposes their porousness. Where crossover may begin this process, a heterotopic musical space further erodes the certainty of generic boundaries.

This provocation can extend beyond Nyro's music. In identifying the heterotopia's relation to the rest of the world, Foucault supposes that it may act as an illusory space that in turn reveals the other "real" spaces as yet more illusory.[131] While Foucault does not expand upon this notion and leaves his own understanding somewhat illusory, it suggests a mode of critique that allows what is often assumed as self-evident structures of knowledge to be reassessed. In relation to genre, this can be understood to highlight the illusory nature of generic codes and norms. Far from stable, associations such as that between genre and audience are revealed to be plural and not inevitable. This understanding is in line with the notion of articulation which maintains that the linkages that exist between communities and musics are not totalising or fixed, which is crucial for understanding how music and audiences are linked and how music functions in the social sphere.

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[130] Robert J. Topinka, "Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces," *Foucault Studies* 9 (2010): 60.
[131] Foucault, "Of Other Spaces."

Music like Nyro's that opens up a heterotopic space offers this kind of critical perspective from within music rather than from theory, inviting listeners to reassess the firmness of the "rules" associated with the genres in question. Nyro's music may act as a space for reevaluation of the assumptions carried in generic frameworks as we are presented with poetic lyrics set to bombastic, entertaining music, with teenage love lyrics paired with compositional gymnastics, with multiple models of authenticity, with multiple time periods, racial codings, age groups, and geographic locations. As I will discuss more in the following chapter, Nyro's lyrics do not always offer clear paths of entry into the meanings her music may carry. But like her impressionistic lyrics that offer rich surfaces without a clear denotation, inviting listeners to find their own sense in the words (or simply enjoy the sensuousness they evoke), her mix of genres withholds a clear angle of approach but offers instead many points of entry and pathways to explore. Listeners may need to do more of their own navigating within Nyro's music, but can be rewarded with not only a rich musical experience but also a novel outlook towards a range of genres from this heterotopic vantage point.

Chapter 4: Queer Aesthetics

On top of the remarkable genre hybridity Nyro demonstrates in her music, she departs from the norms of these genres not only by intermixing them but also in her compositional and performance sensibilities, moving seemingly at a whim through metres and tempos and combining elements without necessarily heeding the norms of where and how they function. The varied elements Nyro draws together within individual songs offer a rich aural experience, filling the sound-world with heightened emotion, excitement, and passion. Her lyrics, which tend towards the impressionistic and at times obtuse, offer little on their surface as a guide to where the song may (or may not) be going. These marked qualities contribute the sense that her music is not straight(forward), and invite inquiry as to their potential meanings and motivations. I propose that in light of Nyro's sexual orientation, these features be considered as expressive of a queer aesthetic. In this chapter I will consider three facets of Nyro's music within a queer aesthetic framework: lyrics, racial cross-identification, and form.

The study of queer aesthetics builds upon foundations laid by feminist criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, which posed a challenge to the dominant, implicitly androcentric models of criticism. Literary scholars including Hélène Cixous, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Elaine Showalter notably argued that literature written by women had a distinct, female quality. Cixous theorised "*écriture féminine*,"[1] while Spacks conceived of the difference in women's writing as having a "special point of view, delicately divergent thought it sometimes may be."[2] Such linking of identity to artistic output is central to theories of queer aesthetics. While these scholars were met with harsh criticism, particularly charges of essentialism and the impossibility of defining feminine style, their theories offered concepts that, with revisions as well as dialogue with other

[1] Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa."
[2] Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Avon Books, 1976), 3.

theoretical traditions, have been used to develop further insight into the relationship between gender/sexual identity and creative work. Music scholarship took up this line of inquiry particularly in the early 1990s, with multiple landmark texts considering music and gender, as well as music and queerness, published at this time. Contributions from scholars including Susan McClary, Marcia Citron, Philip Brett, and Suzanne Cusick are foundational to this area of study.[3]

Showalter highlights the dominant strains of feminist literary criticism in the early 1980s as focusing on feminine difference in four sites: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural.[4] Queer aesthetic studies have largely focused on the cultural and linguistic (extrapolating the latter to include musical syntax). However, queer criticism in many cases takes a different attitude than that suggested by early feminist literary critics. Cixous posits *écriture féminine* as an aspiration rather than reality, and Showalter argues that women's writing "is still haunted by the ghosts of repressed language, and until we have exorcised those ghosts, it ought not to be in language that we base our theory of difference."[5] These very ghosts are frequently the subject of inquiry for queer aesthetics. As Fuller and Whitesell write, "in many instances, the shaping influence of sexuality on musical creation is evident only in closet formations. This may be given concrete form in the thematization of solitude, stopped mouths, closed rooms, or ominous secrets."[6] The language of subterfuge is especially queer; the social circumstances that have largely characterised queer experience have necessitated flying under the radar and developing means of expression that go undetected by heterosexual, often homophobic

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[3] Notable texts include McClary, *Feminine Endings*; Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Philip Brett, "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, 2nd Edition*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006; first published in 1994): 9-26; Suzanne Cusick, "On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, 2nd Edition*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006; first published in 1994): 67-83.
[4] Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," 186.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Fuller and Whitesell, "Introduction: Secret Passages," 15.

audiences. The desire to communicate with fellow queers while going undetected has generated countless creative strategies and signifiers, which are dependent on context (sometimes hyper-local) and often fleeting. However, common patterns and themes arise in these expressive strategies, which queer theorists have identified and explored.

In music, themes of ambiguity, ambivalence, passing, silence, and Orientalism have been established as queer expressive strategies employed by queer (here used as an umbrella term) composers and songwriters. From Tchaikovsky to Britten to the Pet Shop Boys, similarities of expressive strategy can be found with enough consistency to identify queer signification. The temporal range of these examples also demonstrates that Stonewall marks a period of transition rather than a full culture shift, as the same types of expression carry over past 1969 (as did widespread homophobia) even if they are modified and deployed in drastically different artistic contexts. I will consider some of these themes below in relation to Nyro, whose music, rather than featuring clear-cut referential queer content, operates through aesthetic strategies that can be understood as queer.

The time spanned by Nyro's career, the late 1960s to the mid-1990s, saw substantial changes in the representation and acceptance of queer people in North America. Nyro's first two albums appeared prior to the 1969 Stonewall riots, with the third likely also completed before then (it was released only three months later). By the mid-1980s, when Nyro was releasing her later albums, lesbian feminism had become a significant presence even if still outside of the mainstream, with "women's music" and industry enterprises including the lesbian-identified label Olivia Records developing in association. Her music can be considered in relation to this changing context, as particularly the rise of the women's music movement and feminist struggle undoubtedly influenced her. Notwithstanding these significant shifts, there was no full

transformation of culture, and despite the position of Stonewall as a watershed moment, homophobia and repression remained very much present throughout her career. As such, defense strategies and models of identification forged prior to Stonewall persist, even as newer structures emerge. Thus, while it could be argued that Nyro operated historically in a "post-liberation" context, overall, it was still a context of repression of homosexuality. As such, Nyro faced risks personally and to her career were she to be branded a "lesbian" artist, a label which would deny the range of her sexuality and pigeon-hole her into one category, a process she resisted in many domains of her life and work. As Nyro stated, "I don't fall into categories and people constantly want to put me in categories, but I refuse."[7]

In Nyro's music, queer feminist themes became more explicit in her later songwriting, but lesbianism is not directly disclosed. Her lyrics reflect both a persistence of themes and the influence of changing culture over the course of the three decades of her career. Considering her lyrics, as well as her cross-racial musical investments and her idiosyncratic song form, I argue that queer strategies and orientations are reflected in these marked qualities of her songwriting.

Lyrics

Nyro's lyrics include instances of queer themes, some more overtly queer and others comparatively hidden. But beyond thematic content, while relatively clear narratives or love songs can be found amongst her songs, her lyrics are often cryptic and obfuscating, particularly in her early albums. Such qualities, beyond impeding straightforward interpretation, may be understood as an expressive strategy and aesthetic stance. She remarked to this end in a 1969 interview, "I think abstractly. That's the best way, anyway. People have to work for the meaning

[7] Nyro, quoted in Albertson, "Laura Nyro: From the Heart."

themselves."[8] I suggest that Nyro's lyrics exhibit queer sensibilities in strategies of obfuscation as well as thematic content, shifting towards more directly expressed sentiments over the course of her career, though aspects of both tendencies can be found throughout. After surveying more overt queer themes in her music, I will draw on insights from Fred Maus and Nicholas de Villiers to illuminate the queer potential of obtuse lyrics.

While there are few direct indications of queerness in Nyro's lyrics, those she did include are significant. Her song "Emmie" (*Eli*) is often regarded as the first lesbian pop song for its tender, passionate lyrics directed towards a woman. Nyro rhapsodizes the song's "Emily" as someone who "ornament[s] the earth for me," a "weaver's lover" who is "born for the loom's desire" (the loom also evoking the image of a piano), and suggests passion and desire in lines like "who stole mama's heart and cuddled in her garden, darling Emmie," and the refrain repeated at the end, "she got the way to move me, Emmie." Even so, Nyro's framing of the song later in her life somewhat muddies the waters as to the meaning of the lyrics. Nyro kept "Emmie" in her repertoire, still performing it when she was in a relationship with her partner Maria Desiderio. By this later moment, she suggested the song was broadly about love for women, downplaying the erotic, but also reflecting a lesbian-feminist outlook. While Nyro was guarded about her personal life, and this widening of the song's implied scope may have deflected potential speculation, she was also immersed in feminist thinking, and, alongside accepting the term "woman-identified" for herself, her revisions reflect a general love and centring of women that was also characteristic of lesbian thought at that time. And notably, in performance on *LATBL* (recorded in 1988 and released the following year), Nyro includes a coda

[8] Clein, "Laura Nyro: Rock Madonna from the Bronx," 23.

that begins, "Mother (my friend)/Daughter (my friend)/Sister (my friend)/Lover..." Kort remarks that this "was as close to coming out as Nyro would ever do onstage."[9]

On her later *MS*, there are more readily perceptible queer love themes and links to lesbian culture. By the time of this album's release in 1984, lesbian feminism was an established, if sidelined, presence in popular culture and within music communities. Olivia Records, the lesbian collective-driven label for women's music, had formed just over a decade prior, and the women's music movement was in full swing. Nyro herself had attended and would later perform at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival,[10] a large, long-running festival created and attended by women, many of whom are lesbian, that, as Kath Browne describes, "strives to provide an alternative way of living and interacting that is rooted in respect for each other and the celebration of womyn and femininities in all their forms,"[11] though it has often been criticised for its trans-exclusionary definition of "womyn." Nyro's writing moved towards the direct political content that this movement championed, leading *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden to remark that this album might be better suited to a label like Olivia Records were Nyro not an established pop artist.[12] Nyro also championed women's visual art, undertaking an extensive search to find suitable work for inclusion with the album.[13]

While seemingly in dialogue with the women's music movement, Nyro did not effect a wholesale shift to this sphere of activity; nonetheless, her writing on *MS* expresses concerns related to feminist struggle alongside more open discussion of queer sexuality. Nyro's lyrics on this album are especially notable for their openness concerning the gender of the lover she addresses. Her songs on this album refer to a "lover," often addressing them in the second

[9] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 60.
[10] Ibid., 230.
[11] Kath Browne, "Lesbian Separatist Feminism at Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," *Feminism & Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2010): 249.
[12] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 206.
[13] Ibid., 204.

person, obviating the need to choose a gendered pronoun. For instance, in "Roadnotes," she sings, "I want everything/that you can bring/to set the night in motion/Lover that's right," and in "Late for Love" she affirms, "Love is really you/Many kinds of love/is very real-/ly it is you/it's not a hollywood movie/Love is where you are." This technique is most prevalent in her later work, especially *MS* and *AITD*, but instances appear throughout her oeuvre.

Although avoiding gender attribution in romantic address is a common strategy of closeted queer expression, Nyro combines this approach with more direct indications of bisexuality, rather than solely an evasion of divulging same-sex desire. Certainly, the strategy of avoided pronouns can work to avoid revelations of a lesbian relationship, but in Nyro's case it also honours her attraction to multiple genders. On *MS*, in "Melody in the Sky," Nyro makes perhaps her most direct reference to bisexuality, with the line "I'm not waiting for Miss or Mr. Right." This song also includes other feminist and queer attitudes towards relationships, such as leading an independent life, the absence of patriarchal structures of ownership, and the choice to engage sexually only as desired, for instance in the lines "Lover/I'm your friend/and tonite your melody/and you own yourself/I belong to me." These themes are echoed throughout the album. One song not on *MS*, indeed not released on an album and only much later issued as a bonus demo track on a CD release of *Smile*, "Coffee Morning," is also noteworthy in this regard. In this song, I suggest that Nyro queers lesbian identification as she refers to herself as a "lavender woman" within a song celebrating love with a male partner (however, it is also possible that Nyro was not drawing on the association of "lavender" with lesbianism, and instead described herself via colour as she was known to do for harmonic and timbral qualities).

Nyro's interest in goddess spirituality and affinity for the natural world, as well as frustration with the established, patriarchal system, are also on display in the lyrics of *MS*. Such

sentiments are strongly associated with lesbian culture of the time; interest in goddess spirituality and wicca is reflected, for instance, in the lesbian feminist periodical *WomanSpirit*, published quarterly throughout the decade before *MS*, and collective separatist back-to-the-land projects (known as the lesbian land movement) gained a foothold, with some continuing to the present day.[14] On *MS*, Nyro's "Sophia" concerns itself with the goddesses Sophia and Hecate, with appeals to both for illumination, while "Trees of the Ages" finds spirituality and wisdom in the natural world. Linking spiritual concerns with queer and feminist reconsiderations of love and relationships, Nyro states of "Late for Love," the lyrics of which are concerned with questions of what constitutes love, "That song carries my spirituality—not a religion that's handed down to you—but a personal meaning."[15] Critiques and questions of the established order, including ideas about love and relationships, permeate the album. Nyro's dissatisfaction with the patriarchal status quo is most evident in "The Right to Vote," where, faced with the option to vote for different flavours of the same system—"should I vote for 'A' or 'B'?/'A' talks a lot/but not to me/'B' wants war/kill or flunk"—she instead opts to "Forget the vote/I'll just go out and get drunk," opining, "I think my place/is in a ship from space/to carry me/the hell out of here."

Another later song, "Louise's Church" (*WTD&LTL*), offers an ode to queer and lesbian women artists. Nyro highlights Sappho, Billie Holiday, Frida Kahlo, and Louise Nevelson, celebrating their work. While she does not directly name their queerness, the artists she refers to were notable queer figures, and Sappho alone is a powerful signifier. In drawing together these names—a sort of Sapphic artistic ancestry—Nyro brings herself into the fold, too, going to "Louise's church/[that] she built in the city," and asking, "Goddess of life & music/Shine on me awhile," weaving herself into this tradition and lineage.

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[14] Sine Anahita, "Nestled into Niches: Prefigurative Communities on Lesbian Land," *Journal of Homosexuality* 56, no. 6 (2009): 724.
[15] "Notes from an Interview on 'Envisioning a Feminist World'," 35.

Nyro also introduces queer potential in certain cover versions of heterosexual pop songs, a capacity that arises in covers of songs written by artists of a different gender, as Erik Steinskog observes.[16] "Desiree" (*GTAM*) is an example of this phenomenon, as the term or name "Desiree" is overwhelmingly associated with the feminine, and would likely be perceived as an ode to a woman. Nyro's cover of the Moments' "Sexy Mama," while not explicitly presenting a female lover, does leave the gender ambiguous through use of the second person, and Nyro's revisions of the lyrics suggest reciprocity and equality in place of the imposition and braggadocio of the original. She also revised "He Was Too Good to Me" to a gender-neutral, direct address, as "You Were Too Good to Me" (*AITD*), in line with her other writing of the time.

Aside from "Emmie," none of Nyro's early songs contain overt queer content. But particularly in these albums her lyrics are abstract and opaque, and in conjunction with music may be considered a form of queer expression. Alongside some more direct writing of experiences like love and heartbreak, she evokes sensory experiences that do not assemble into a realistic environment but instead abstractly suggest feelings and impressions, and makes reference to powerful forces and characters sprung from a combination of religion and her imagination. For example, in "December's Boudoir" (*Eli*), she writes, "December will bear our affair/running on streets of delight and decemberry ice" and tells of "love-colored soul kissing spice." While these lyrics paint evocative pictures, in many cases they cannot be directly, literally understood. Many such instances can be found on *Eli*, *NYT*, and *CATBOS* and to a lesser degree on her later albums which feature somewhat more literal writing.

The opacity of her lyrics, particularly in the context of an emerging discourse of confessional writing associated with the singer-songwriter, merits further theorisation. Nicholas

[16] Erik Steinskog, "Queering Cohen: Cover Versions as Subversions of Identity," in *Play It Again: Cover Songs in Popular Music*, ed. George Plasketes (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 139-52.

de Villiers considers the role of confession and autobiographical truth-telling in relation to homophobia and the closet, building upon de Man's deconstruction of confessional discourse alongside Foucault's similar theories of the obligation to admit and conceal sexuality.[17] Opacity, he proposes, is a queer strategy to counter these conflicting mandates, and he considers its deployment by queer figures in cultural forms and genres associated with truth-telling. He notes the particular issues arising in biography and interviews, genres in which, traditionally, "homosexuality is treated as an object of knowledge, something spoken about, rather than as a positionality from which it is possible to know and to speak."[18] The texts and speech acts he studies are, he proposes, "efforts to shake the dominant hermeneutic of the closet."[19] Although Nyro's output differs from that studied by de Villiers, particularly in consistently conveying a sense of meaningfulness rather than emptiness through her emotive delivery (even in potentially "empty"-sounding cliché phrases), her obfuscating lyrics direct attention to their surface, bringing them into dialogue with the material de Villiers addresses. Nyro's refusal of the confessional disclosure of sexual orientation also aligns with the figures de Villiers considers, as she was resistant to labelling herself in that way (and resisted being categorised more generally).

Nyro's song "The Confession" (*Eli*) illustrates a subversion of the norms of confession, a quality that has additional meaning within the confessionalism of the emerging singer-songwriter genre. While she exuberantly expresses sexual pleasure (e.g. the enthusiastic, full-voice delivery of the coda, "love my love-thing/love is surely gospel"), the lyrics are also in many ways oblique. For instance, the song opens, "Super summer sugar coppin/in the morning/do your shoppin baby," which evokes indulgence and the pursuit of pleasure, with words that suggest abundance but seem loosely gathered in a free play of phonemes, with direct

[17] Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 5.
[18] Ibid., 11.
[19] Ibid., 1.

meaning remaining elusive. Also of interest is the song's paradoxical confession of virginity following experiences with many lovers: "Oh, I hate my winsome lover/Tell him I've had others at my breast/But tell him he has held my heart/And only now am I a virgin/I confess." This "confession," promised in the song's title, runs counter to the expectation that sexual experience, rather than virginity, would be the subject of confession. Further, Nyro recasts the notion of virginity itself through her own framing through the notion of love regardless of prior sexual experience. Such opacity in the face of the norms of confession, de Villiers suggests, can be understood as queer even if the subject matter cannot be parsed. Instead of understanding opaque statements as performing a camouflaging of meaning, and in this way operating within the closet, de Villiers suggests that they can be regarded as a strategy that challenges the discourse of closet and confession, resisting both the concealing and revealing that these discourses demand. As he approaches queer appropriations of confessional, or diary-type, works with an attention to surfaces rather than probing for hidden meanings, I consider the evocative surfaces of Nyro's lyrics as a rich source of content regardless of the specific meanings they may have held for her.

In Nyro's case, even if she in some places encoded personal meanings in her lyrics, this does not mandate a quest to understand them by probing for hidden truths. Attending to the surface, however, can highlight the sensibility created by the overall aesthetic strategies that Nyro employs throughout her lyrics, regardless of any specific encoded meaning. As de Villiers posits, one cannot identify with a figure whose texts are opaque; one identifies with their expressive strategies. Nyro's significance to a devoted young audience may indeed be due in part to the identification made possible by opacity, since as a strategy it extends beyond her particular experience, and can have meaning to many who, owing to their queerness or other reasons, feel unable to directly communicate their emotions and experiences.

Significantly, Nyro's opaque lyrics are delivered in a highly expressive musical setting. This type of conjunction has been considered by Fred Maus, who in writing about the Pet Shop Boys suggests that the pairing of glamorous music with evasive lyrics constitutes a queer aesthetic configuration, as it arises from a strategy of closeted expression that can conceal meanings while being emotive and suggestive. Importantly, Maus maintains that the ambivalence in question is "neither reducible to gay coding nor fully separable from it."[20] For gay audiences and those attuned to such meanings, familiar with the evasion of language of the closet, Maus suggests, indirectness itself can become the subject.[21] This quality alongside opulent sound "can itself be heard as a gay-coded configuration, whatever the specific content of the lyrics."[22] Maus also addresses similar themes with regard to REM's Michael Stipe. As de Villiers suggests that listeners identify with strategies of obscured expression rather than the real person behind them or an intended meaning in the text, Maus observes the interpretations fans make of Stipe's lyrics, which differ from each other and presumably from Stipe's personal sense of their meaning, but this does not preclude feeling a sense of connection.[23]

Nyro produces this type of juxtaposition especially on her early albums, with evocative but abstruse lyrics delivered in an intense, highly emotive, timbrally lush musical setting. While these lyrics are of a different sort than those of the Pet Shop Boys, in which Maus identifies ambivalence rather than abstruse impressionism, in their musical presentation they produce a similar configuration, both evoking and withholding meaning. Throughout her oeuvre, Nyro's performances imbue her lyrics with a profound sense of meaningfulness through her impassioned playing and vocal delivery, which traverses the dynamic range from whispered to full belt voice, through tempo fluctuations, rubato, and unexpected forms. The arrangements particularly for *Eli*

[20] Maus, "Glamour and Evasion," 386.
[21] Ibid., 383-385.
[22] Ibid., 385.
[23] Maus, "Intimacy and Distance," 197.

and *NYT*, which Nyro oversaw, add to both the lavishness and sparseness that heighten the effects of her songs. The production of *NYT* by Nyro and Roy Halee adds to the lushness of the sound with heavy use of reverb on Nyro's voice. Thus, while we may not know the radically personal meaning Nyro had in mind when she sings of "love-coloured soul kissing spice," "blown fleets of sweet eyed dreams," or "mainstream marzipan sweet/baking out in December heat,"[24] we can hear that these lyrics are richly meaningful through their musical presentation and sensory evocation, and perhaps identify with its vigorous opacity.

Racial cross-identification and Orientalism

Throughout Nyro's oeuvre, there is a strong influence of Black popular musics, especially soul and girl groups. Certainly, white artists affiliating themselves with Black musics is a common phenomenon in popular music. Eric Lott has clearly presented the central role of minstrelsy in American culture as a way for white performers to play into both interest and repulsion or fear toward Black people, and the roots he traces continue in many ways to underlie expressive culture.[25] Nyro's peer Joni Mitchell famously took on an alter ego of a Black man, even to the extent of donning blackface. Nyro herself remarked in 1969, "I've always identified with black people. I was not consciously aware of it though. Every day I wake up, I fight. I'm committed to what I believe in. I identified with the black people's struggle because I didn't find a struggle in white people. It's a really beautiful thing. But it was painful to me in my childhood."[26] She maintained this sense of identification, remarking later in her career, "As a woman, as an artist and in my sensuality I always knew the beauty of darkness, shadow and color. In this sense, I've

[24] Lyrics from "December's Boudoir" (*Eli*) and "Sweet Lovin' Baby" (*NYT*).
[25] Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[26] Clein, "Laura Nyro: Rock Madonna from the Bronx," 23.

thought of myself as a dark woman although my skin is white."[27] Nyro's sense of inner Blackness was also reinforced by Patti LaBelle, with whom Nyro collaborated and who became a close friend, as LaBelle commented, "As I used to tell Laura all the time, she is a black woman in a white girl's body."[28] However, the privilege accorded to whiteness means that this identification and affiliation can be freely chosen without the oppression that comes with being read as Black, as well as the option to step back at any time. Nyro's later comment quoted above continues, "I've been brought up in a racist, divisive world that teaches so little enlightenment or warmth toward people of diversity—a world that can't handle diversity—a patriarchy that avoids empathy at all costs and sets up every woman with the potential for racism."[29] While she demonstrates awareness of and concern towards racial dynamics, she also somewhat obscures the power imbalances by speaking in vague terms and especially in not naming whiteness where she instead says "every woman" has the potential for racism.

But within this more widespread sense of affiliation or identification, particular queer resonances are possible, and I wish to probe this aspect further here. Dusty Springfield, another queer, white musician active at the time, offers a point of comparison to Nyro. In her discussion of Springfield, Patricia Juliana Smith highlights the sense of connection that a white queer woman may feel in identifying with Black women and their music.[30] In addition to Nyro's mention of her sensuality in the remarks quoted above, there is the question of the impetus for her affiliation with Blackness more generally. In her study of Dusty Springfield, Annie Randall also approaches this issue, as "attraction to 'the music itself' does not explain Dusty's determination to break through the heavily policed gender borders that prevented white female

[27] "Notes from an Interview on 'Envisioning a Feminist World'," 34.
[28] Patti LaBelle, quoted in Mark Anthony Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life: A Rhythm and Blues Nation* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 79.
[29] "Notes from an Interview on 'Envisioning a Feminist World'," 35.
[30] Smith, "'You Don't Have to Say You Love Me'," 108.

pop singers from jumping racialized musical boundaries."[31] Randall relays a statement made by Springfield that resonates with that of Nyro: "I have a real bond with the music of coloured artists in the States. I feel more at ease with them than I do with many white people. We talk the same language....I wish I'd been born coloured. When it comes to singing and feeling, I just want to be one of them and not me."[32] Randall posits that Springfield's Irish identity in an English context may have played a role in this feeling of connection. Additionally, her queerness may be a factor here in contributing to a sense of not belonging in the social group she was raised in, leading her to seek identification elsewhere with others who shared a marginalised position within the wider society. A sense of outsider allegiance with Black women is a dimension also identified by Smith in her consideration of Dusty Springfield's stylistic choices, and she suggests this played an important role for Springfield. This is a potential factor for Nyro, as her comments regarding the childhood pain that led her to identify with Black struggle suggest, standing as an outsider for her queerness—in identity and general sensibilities— as well as in being Jewish in a Christian-dominated society.

Smith additionally suggests that Springfield turned towards the comparative freedom to express sexual themes that, Smith argues, was present in Black music at the time. While this latter motivation may be shared amongst white subjects regardless of sexual orientation, "the black woman and her music," Smith proposes, "symbolized a displaced sexual freedom and power to middle-class white audiences—and thereby provided a means of subversively articulating unspeakable sexuality for a queer girl."[33] Nyro's choices of material to cover on *GTAM*, as Mark Anthony Neal notes, also foreground songs originally recorded by Martha and the Vandellas (rather than The Supremes, for example), a band associated with a "grittier" and

[31] Randall, *Dusty!*, 22.
[32] Ibid., 24.
[33] Smith, "'You Don't Have to Say You Love Me'," 108.

"more defiant" image that Neal suggests may reflect a desire on Nyro's part "to more directly connect to the vitality of that sound and that model of black femininity."[34] Randall notes that Springfield was also particularly drawn to Martha and the Vandellas, with whom she got to perform, and took inspiration from Black women musicians who projected a sense of autonomy and control over their music and sexual lives.[35]

The sexual expression accorded to Black music within the white imaginary is an important factor here. Regardless of the stated object of desire in song lyrics, the perceived permission to express oneself sexually in Black music, Smith posits, allowed Springfield to find a sexually expressive voice even while closeted, permitting some form of expression even though the orientation in the lyrics appeared heterosexual. For Nyro, who was also attracted to men, heterosexual lyrics of Motown songs did represent aspects of her sexual desire. But her engagement with this repertoire, understood alongside her own songs, suggests an inclination towards passionate expression in general, constituting a fluid eroticism. Nyro's ecstatic renditions of Motown songs as well as her own writing that draws on these styles reveal an affinity for the sexual expression she and many others found in Black popular music of the time. Her cover of Smokey Robinson's "You've Really Got a Hold on Me" (*GTAM*) illustrates her heightening of the song's sexual charge, as she literally holds onto the title phrase of the song for extra time, and adds an amped-up coda that maintains its energy even as its volume is decreased to near-whispers. This intensification is characteristic of her covers of other Motown songs. Overall, her cover performances greatly exceed the dynamic range of the originals, increasing the intensity and sexual charge of these songs. We can posit the appeal of sexual expression more generally for a queer subject who is impeded from complete, direct articulation of her desires.

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[34] Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life*, 85.
[35] Randall, *Dusty!*, 23, 25.

The heightened sexuality and expression imputed to Black women and music forms a backdrop to the emotion Nyro could channel through soul music, and the role of these concepts must be considered as a potential factor in Nyro's generic choices.

In addition to this foundational affiliation with Black popular music, Nyro's music exhibits an investment in Orientalist themes in relation to China and Japan. While only a handful of Nyro's songs directly engage in Orientalism, they are quite marked in this regard, and prompt me to question what about this discourse appealed to Nyro and what expression it facilitated. Her methods of engaging in Orientalism varied, ranging from Chinoiserie to the participation of Japanese musicians, but a sensual quality can be found in most cases. I will consider what queer meanings may be generated through Orientalism and what affinities may subtend this investment.

The "sexual promise" of the East that Edward Said identifies as a construct of Orientalism has been adopted by many queer figures as a channel of camouflaged expression. Philip Brett addresses the use of Orientalism, and in particular the inspiration of gamelan music, identifying it as a common thread amongst many gay male composers in the twentieth century, revealing modes of queer expression and identification fraught with issues of domination and appropriation. Brett observes the othering of both queer and Oriental subjects in heterosexist Western culture, suggesting this shared outsider status may be an impetus for the use of the Orient as a cipher for queer desire.[36] Although Brett indicates the potential for a different type of Orientalism in the work of white queer composers than that of heterosexual authors, he addresses the profound issues of power that remain and prohibit an unproblematic usage. As Brett explains,

[36] Brett, "Queer Musical Orientalism"

> even the sincerest and most accurate imitation of a cultural form or practice is appropriation when the composer is located on the power side of the postcolonial divide, and any *other* kind of representation than the specific is likely to belong to the species of generalized Western projections that do incredible damage by collapsing cultural distinctions, by encouraging stereotyping, and by actively promoting misunderstanding and worse.[37]

Similarly, Jeffrey Geiger contemplates the complexity of this issue in assessing Charles Warren Stoddard's fiction, and asks "to what extent Stoddard's work might have enabled patterns of identification and recognition to emerge from a subaltern, queer readership, even while (or perhaps because) it endorsed the stereotypes of imperial hierarchy...and was framed by dominant modes of 'us' envisioning 'them.'"[38] As Kadji Amin remarks, drawing on Sharon Holland, "a theory of the vicissitudes of racialized desire within racist social orders must enlist 'the erotic as a possible harbinger of *the established order*.'"[39]

The aspect of privilege required for the pursuit of Orientalism that allows queers to identify with an Oriental "Other" is stressed by Sam Baltimore, who writes that "the availability of that subject position—choosing to identify with the Other—rests on creators' ability to pass as Not Other....That means inhabiting, at least in part, the normative Eurocentric identity at the heart of Orientalism's patriarchal view of the exotic."[40] This observation is important in the study of queer expression as all too often a white perspective is assumed as universal, overlooking the experiences of queers of colour. With Nyro as my subject, I will be focusing on a white perspective, but wish to make this choice explicit as reflective of this particular context.

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[37] Ibid.
[38] Jeffrey Geiger, "Subaltern Looks and the Imperial Gaze: Charles Warren Stoddard's *South Sea Idyls*," in *Indiscretions: At the Intersection of Queer and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Murat Aydemir (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 38-39.
[39] Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 79.
[40] Sam Baltimore, "Ashman's *Aladdin* Archive: Queer Orientalism in the Disney Renaissance," in *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen: Critical Approaches from 'Snow White' to 'Frozen,'* ed. George Rodosthenous (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), 209.

Acknowledging the inescapable problematics and harms of any form of Orientalism including that by queer authors, I seek here to understand further the implications of its uses in a queer context and what work it does in constructing queer subjectivity. A number of studies of queer Orientalism postulate answers—necessarily contextual and contingent—to these questions. In Brett's consideration of gay Orientalism, he posits whether for composers such as John Cage and Lou Harrison it may constitute a reverse discourse or mode of critique.[41] Robin Hackett, in her study of the related domain of "Sapphic primitivism," argues that for authors Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, and Sylvia Townsend Warner instances of primitivism reflect "efforts to represent and simultaneously not represent lesbianism," displacing sexuality onto colonial scenes and people even while being critical of such a practice.[42] As Hackett notes, this displacement was found also in sexological writings of the late nineteenth century, laying a foundation for these writers' usage. This tradition of usage allows lesbianism to be carried as a "third meaning" in Barthes' sense, "a meaning that rides 'on the back' of articulated language but evades description by critics' metalanguage."[43] Sam Baltimore's observation that the "relocation of the homoexotic east into the homoexotic uptown has a long history in the musical"[44] points to the continued adoption of this strategy.

To contextualise Nyro's Orientalism, I will briefly outline the nature of mid-century American Orientalism as well as lesbian Orientalism in particular. In contrast to the Orient addressed by Edward Said, encompassing the area referred to by the West as the Middle East, American Orientalism particularly of mid-century is focused on China and Japan owing to the United States' dealings with both countries. While the particularities differ from that theorised by Said, as Karen Leong notes, "as viewed through the lens of gendered and heteronormative

[41] Brett, "Queer Musical Orientalism"
[42] Hackett, "Sapphic Primitivism in Modern Fiction," 38.
[43] Ibid., 39.
[44] Baltimore, "Ashman's *Aladdin* Archive," 213.

relations of power, European *and* American orientalism justified power inequities resulting from colonization, territorialization, and imperialist destiny," and both traditions exoticise and feminise Asian nations and cultures.[45] By mid-century, as Christina Klein observes, Orientalist tropes were entrenched in Hollywood plots while the United States engaged in the Korean War, enacting imperialism abroad and reflecting its supporting cast of stereotypes at home. In music, the popularity of exoticism in hi-fi and lounge music also reflected these trends. John Corbett approaches a different but related concern in contemplating how American experimental composers drew upon East Asian musics, and some such as Hassell imagined a plane of equal exchange that masks the persistent power imbalance between West and East.[46] Christina Klein stresses that middlebrow intellectuals of the time, while professing a distaste for imperialism, nonetheless justified American expansion in other guises.[47] Thus, while these mid-century developments reflect greater interest in exchange and collaboration, they remain in a broader socio-political context wherein the Western author is centred and in a position of power.

Even as this discourse reflects and perpetuates a patriarchal outlook, women's participation has been significant in both European and American Orientalism, both in material culture and in performance and authorship. Significantly, as Mari Yoshihara observes, interest in Oriental culture and masquerade was linked with the idea of the "new woman" in America, and facilitated access to different modes of gender and sexuality.[48] Emily Apter, too, calls attention to the sexual license accorded to women via Orientalist figures, observing the appeal to white,

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[45] Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2-3.
[46] John Corbett, "Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others," in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, 163-186 *(*Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)
[47] Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)
[48] Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.

European women, especially those who were queer, of performing Orientalised femininity on and off stage.[49]

Yet little has been written about queer women artists and authors who have engaged in an Orientalism concerning East Asia. Women's travel writing about the Middle East in earlier periods has been discussed in this regard, but the particular dynamics of the harem and veiling, which are largely the focus of those writings, limit the amount of comparison there can be between this branch of Orientalism and that focused on East Asia. Indeed, the ledger of such artists is small. American lesbian poet Amy Lowell, with her profound interest in Japanese poetry, stands as the clearest example, but I have yet to discover peers that may have followed suit. Perhaps Nyro and Lowell alone, though it seems likely that there are others. There may be dots that require connecting, hidden references to queerness that await interpretation, and continuing unwillingness to engage in such discussions; Yoshihara's substantial discussion of Lowell's Orientalism, for example, does not even mention her lesbianism. But a more widespread use of primitivism by white lesbian authors offers significant resonances and suggests similar intentions and modes of erotic, desirous expression along parallel structures of imperial power, and I draw also on this area of scholarship to inform my discussion.

The songs of Nyro's that most clearly exhibit Orientalism are "Children of the Junks," "Japanese Restaurant Song," "Upstairs by a Chinese Lamp," "Map to the Treasure," and "Smile (with Mars at the end)." Orientalism in these songs manifests as chinoiserie, travelogue, and unequal collaboration in an attempt at prefiguration—imagining a better world—and many of them link the Orient to themes of sexuality and femininity. It is worth acknowledging here the feminisation of the Orient in the Western view; thus, it may represent a site of investment in the

[49] Emily Apter, "Acting Out Orientalism: Sapphic Theatricality in Turn-of-the-Century Paris," *L'Esprit Créateur* 34, no. 2 (1994): 109.

feminine for lesbian authors that in appearing to follow normative cultural tropes is rendered culturally acceptable.

"Children of the Junks" (*Smile*), written while Nyro was in Hong Kong, exhibits the most overt Orientalism in lyrics owing mostly to a racist characterisation of the appearance of Chinese children. Additionally, the song's locale, Kowloon, is used as a lyric but in being given a line to itself (and in the hand-written lyrics, its letters spread diagonally downward) is presented more as a vocable than a term with meaning. Certainly, Nyro's attitude appears to be one of fondness, but this does not mitigate the damage as it perpetuates a stereotype. The objects of the East are foregrounded and poeticised in the lyrics. There are many references to the junks, as well as "dragon rings/tax free things" and communist propaganda. As a product of Nyro's time in Kowloon, it participates in the tradition of first-hand accounts of the Orient by Westerners that contribute to the imagined East. In this song, though, the junks not only dot the harbour but become personified, and are used to express romantic reverie in the lines "night comes/sleep for me/aint nothin' just a moonstruck junk/on the sea." Overall, this song is less engaged in themes of romance and sensuality than the others I address here. While it poeticises daily life in Kowloon, it does not demonstrate the intimate sensory focus towards objects of the Orient that the other songs evince. Nyro's later "Japanese Restaurant Song" (recorded on 1989's *LATBL*) also indulges in description of Oriental decor and clothes as well as Nyro briefly imagining herself as a geisha. While not employing musical signifiers of the Orient, this song illustrates her continued investment in and imaginative identification with the East throughout her career.

"Upstairs by a Chinese Lamp" and "Map to the Treasure," which form a pair on *CATBOS*, employ chinoiserie, representing the Orient through musical cliches and lyric, drawing these tropes together with sexually charged lyrics. In terms of musical Orientalism, "Upstairs by

a Chinese Lamp" opens with a motive in the piano featuring an augmented second, followed by parallel fourths, with a shimmer of chimes behind it, evoking the Oriental exotic and chinoiserie in particular. This figure is delivered in a free yet tentative manner, played three times and followed by a ponderous, stepwise descent, lending an exploratory sense to this introduction. A softly played gong is heard near the end of this introduction, adding another musical signifier of the Orient. In its hesitancy as well as its soft, almost hushed tone, the introduction generates a sense of intimacy. This atmosphere is continued in the instrumental hook that follows, which is characterised by the minor pentatonic and parallel root position triads (featuring parallel fifths), continuing to evoke the Orient through tropes of chinoiserie. Pentatonicism is also suggested through use of an ascending minor third-major second figure to begin the vocal line.

In the song's lyrics, the Orient is referenced in the titular lamp and "China tea," affirming the musical signifiers and helping to establish a context wherein the lyrics more broadly can be understood in an Orientalist vein. The attention paid to "ladies'" domestic labour (sweeping the floor, doing dishes, shopping) marks the song-world as discursively feminine in a traditional heterosexual context. The song also tells of a woman who daydreams of "the man who takes her sweetness" by the Chinese lamp, combining traditionally female domestic labour with romance in a patriarchal context. This active, seemingly aggressive male figure alongside the passive role of the woman falls along familiar Orientalist narrative lines regarding gender dynamics.

Curiously, an Orientalist heterosexual theme with marked "feminine" and "masculine" roles, in a patriarchal vein, is reminiscent of Amy Lowell's work. Such dynamics, Yoshihara notes, were heightened by Lowell in her adaptations of Japanese poems and poetic styles, and are familiar to the American Orientalist tradition. As Cecilia Rosenow highlights, Lowell's poetry in

the first half of her collection *Two Speak Together* is inspired by the Japanese forms of haiku and particularly waka, which typically includes romantic emotions. A significant trope in waka poetry is a woman longing for her male lover to return.[50] Similar to Nyro's writing, Lowell's work features sensual descriptions of women, for instance in the poem that opens this collection, adapted from a late-eighteenth-century Japanese poet, which describes the beautiful women, in this case courtesans, of Tokyo and the movement their garments as they walk.[51] Both of these features offer parallels to "Upstairs by a Chinese Lamp."

Through the musical context and Nyro's vocal delivery, this lyric content is also suffused with a sensual and implicitly sexual affect, with a sense of femininity heightened by Nyro's vocal range, as she uses her upper register throughout, in a breathier tone than she employs elsewhere. The role of "spring," which "whispered in her ear" and is associated with flame, song, and winds that "caress, undress, invite," is supported by the entrance of a flute, and through this setting provides a feminine-coded sensual presence acting on the woman. This encoding also echoes the association of Oriental femininity with nature; Rosenow indicates the pervasiveness of this connection in the American imaginary regarding Japan, and observes Lowell's deployment of such tropes, particularly in conjunction with a woman's longing for her absent male lover.[52]

More broadly, the presence of the Orient invokes the discursively feminine, and much of the song maintains a sensual tension through use of Nyro's upper vocal register and the unresolved harmonies of the verse which find release only upon return to the hook. I suggest that in addition to the role of spring this creates a feminised, sexually charged space wherein Nyro, from a woman's perspective, attends sensitively and sensually to the women she imagines in the

[50] Rosenow, "Pictures of the Floating World," 59.
[51] Ibid., 61.
[52] Ibid., 70-71.

market and bedroom of the song-world. Seen in this light, the Oriental theme provides an established, safe venue to indulge in a sensual depiction of the feminine. The chinoiserie calls upon a tired stereotype, but it is one that allows Nyro's indulgence in attention to the feminine to be camouflaged by the gendered nature of the discourse.

"Map to the Treasure," which flows uninterrupted from the end of "Upstairs by a Chinese Lamp," continues the use of chinoiserie, but is more explicit in its description of pleasure taken in and through the exotic. It recalls aspects of the previous song's pentatonicism in an inverted deployment of the opening melody, heard here as a descending major second-minor third, as well as through parallel fourths and fifths in the upper voices of the piano in the extended interlude build-up. These sonic commonalities link the two songs while signalling the imagined Orient. The opening of the song is set not so far afield geographically, but still signals a domestic exotic with the lyrics "Where is your woman?/Gone to Spanish Harlem." Nyro's lyrics also tend more towards the exotic here, invoking the visual and olfactory pleasures of the East: "jade and coral, perfume from Siam." This recalls the trope of countries of the Orient being described as more vivid in all sensory regards by Western observers.

Significantly, these sensory delights are to be found in the "treasure of love," as Nyro draws a direct link between Eastern products and sexual themes. The sexuality depicted in this song is in relation to "my pretty medicine man," using the first-person possessive rather than the previous song's third-person narrative. This represents one aspect of my inquiry as to how a queer subject may express an otherwise heterosexual love. Here, the feminised Orient provides one such mode of expression. We may hear through the combination of the aesthetic indulgence in the feminised Orient and love for her "medicine man" a fluid, queer sexuality.

The use of a racial Other to draw out a queer subject's sexuality—in relation to both male and female love interests—is also seen in the related discourse of primitivism in literature by numerous early-mid 20th century lesbian authors. Hackett's discussion of Townsend Warner, Woolf, and Cather's use of racial Others to spark sexuality in their white, queer female protagonists offers examples of how features of these Others serve as tropes of access to sexuality and erotic energy.[53] In "Map to the Treasure," rather than features of an othered person, it is the othered objects of the Orient that signal the sexual spark. While there are distinctions between Orientalism and primitivism, the common use of a racial Other to invoke and inspire sexuality in a white subject reveals parallel strategies held between these texts.

The projection of sexual energy onto racialised Others is a more general feature of imperial and colonial discourse, and alone does not signal a queer meaning. But, I suggest that through this common queer usage, deployments like Nyro's and those of the earlier lesbian authors can function as double-voiced utterances, legible and primed for circulation within the hegemonic heterosexual Orientalist discourse as well in queer discourse(s), carrying the "third meaning" of queer sexuality; rather than a garbled surface of a cipher, by drawing on tropes of a familiar discourse, this dominant meaning remains available while allowing—and perhaps concealing the existence of—a sapphic sense. This has implications for how these statements contribute to the discourses of Orientalism; in borrowing familiar tropes, it offers them back for re-inscription of the same dynamics while also giving voice to queer subjectivity.

Of these songs, "Smile (with Mars at the end)" is the most overtly sexual, but does not draw upon lyrical tropes of chinoiserie, and its incorporation of Japanese music is predominantly restricted to the beginning, briefly, as two kotos are used in the introduction, and the extended instrumental coda in which the kotos return. However, the odd strum of the koto is inserted into

[53] Hackett, "Sapphic Primitivism in Modern Fiction," 39, 89.

the body of the song, weaving an Oriental thread throughout. In terms of queer subject matter, the directly sexual reference to cis-female sexuality with "+ the fire + the kiss of the cunt-tree night/Your tender strong freaky love" strongly suggests a queer female sense of attraction. The final line of sung lyric "All I want to do is..." is followed by a saxophone solo and the extended bass/flute/koto coda, a section which we may assume is "Mars." While the use of music to substitute for voicing a taboo sexual desire may be cliché, given the context this device also carries a potentially queer sensibility that flows through the Japanese koto as well as the Western smooth jazz. Contemplating this instance of Orientalism alongside those discussed above, Lowell's poetry once again offers an apt point of reference. Lowell's *Pictures of the Floating World*, Simone Knewitz observes, is divided into two parts, one which presents more direct Orientalism alongside heterosexual themes and the other that includes less direct Orientalism alongside lesbianism. Knewitz comments that the "poems in both parts...are sexually charged, though presenting qualitatively different sexualities. The racially other, potentially threatening sexuality of the secluded world of Japan in the first section is contrasted with intimate eroticism and worship of the beloved in the domestic garden in [the latter part]."[54] While Nyro of course does not fall entirely along the same lines, between the songs discussed above and "Smile," she traces similar outlines in how she approaches the pairing of Orientalism and sexuality. Resonances with the first part of Lowell's collection may be heard in a song like "Upstairs by a Chinese Lamp," while the intimacy and self-assured expressions of erotic desire found in "Smile," in a musical setting distant from but still tied the Orientalism of the other songs, holds more in common with the latter part.

[54] Knewitz, "Poetics of an Enclosed Garden," 185.

In "Smile," the participation of two koto players, Reiko Kamota and Nisako Yoshida, recalls the type of blending discussed by John Corbett[55] as he surveyed "progressive" approaches to Orientalism, as well as the ideas of exchange Christina Klein considers. These musicians did not become regular collaborators of Nyro's, and their contributions are curated within her vision for the song, dynamics which reflect the power imbalance at the heart of these issues. But what is generated and gained through this musical pairing is also worth investigating. The coda abandons forms and gestures familiar to Western listeners, has an improvisatory feel, and peters out rather than presenting a clear conclusion. While it is abundantly clear that Nyro did not require non-Western influence to innovate in song form, this provides a different type of departure. The suggestion that this section is "Mars" could be taken as linking the koto music to that which is alien, and further exoticising it. But references to Mars abound throughout the song (the recurring "mars in the stars, mars is arisin") within a Western idiom, suggesting that the intent may not be that of an alien, distant exotic. The concluding printed lyrics leading into Mars are "the world's insane/the paper's gone mad/but our love is a peace vibe/yes," evoking the shelter of a relationship, enacting peace in the face of a world in turmoil. Mars is then perhaps a different, liberatory quality of love, one that may be traditionally othered and suppressed but here imagined as possible to create, prefiguring a better, freer world. As Thomas Waugh notes, "Alongside the erotic fantasies of the exotic homosocial Other, queer collective histories have always invested ideologically in imagined homelands situated elsewhere in time and space."[56] Here, musical Orientalism is the venue for such prefiguration.

Following this line of interpretation, we can understand Nyro as envisioning a type of love that provides a shelter removed from the troubles of the dominant, normative world, and the

[55] Corbett, "Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others," 163-186.
[56] Thomas Waugh, "Cultivated Colonies: Notes on Queer Nationhood and the Erotic Image," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 2, no. 2/3 (1993): 145-178.

Mars coda as departing to such an alternative realm. With this sense, the influence of Japanese music in this song is used to present a utopic escape. This can be understood as queer in a broad sense as an abandonment of the life and world given on the straight line. Akin to Britten's linkage of queerness and the concept of peace through Orientalism that Brett illuminates, it can be heard here to represent another world thought possible outside of the turmoil and strife of Western society, even while it participates in a discourse that upholds a pillar of this very society.

Philip Holden and Richard J. Ruppel suggest that "much of the literature of colonialism...attempts to provide a series of gendered technologies of the self,"[57] and this notion, I suggest, easily extends to the domain of sexual orientation. For Nyro, we can understand her investment in Orientalism as a tool of expressing her gendered, sexual subjectivity. A queer use of Orientalism does not counter its power or redirect its flow in its dominant discourse, and I am wary of pink-washing this usage. But I suggest that these sapphic uses reveal another subject position from which Orientalism is constituted, harnessing its gendered aspects and forming a different, intertwined discourse of Orientalism bound up with queer subjectivity.

The ease with which the dominant discourse of Orientalism has been constituted as and borrowed for queer expression is testament to its power and fundamental place in the construction of the Occident. Rather than a challenge to imperialism, queer deployments of its vocabularies may in fact reveal Orientalism's strength in being flexible to accommodate multiple discourses and subjectivities within it, as queer erotics, to return to Sharon Holland's articulation, act as a "harbinger of the established order." In the broader area of queer aesthetics, it is also important to not let our justified distaste or opposition hold us back from identifying structures such as Orientalism as tools of queer expression, expecting and acknowledging the missteps or

[57] Philip Holden and Richard J. Ruppel, "Introduction," in *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature*, ed. Philip Holden and Richard J. Ruppel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xiii.

flaws of earlier queer artists, but also being mindful of our role as audiences for the instances of their art that present these structures for enjoyment. Through considering Nyro's music I hope to spur further consideration of the mutual constitution of queerness, Orientalism, and imperialism.

Form

Nyro's songs, particularly those on *Eli* and *NYT*, feature atypical formal structures that may enthrall or baffle listeners depending on their aesthetic sensibilities. Many of her songs include abrupt and repeated shifts of meter, sections that go on "too long," and eruptions and disappearances of orchestrated backing unreliably motivated by location in the form. Recollections from Clive Davis, then president of Columbia Records, reveal Nyro to have been fully opposed to modifying her songs to conform to standard models for a successful single, suggesting that she highly valued their full forms.[58] What is striking to me, and what I believe generates both surprise and engagement with her music, is the strong connection to traditional and contemporary pop song forms and genres that her music maintains even as it departs from them. Nyro's familiarity with standard forms, such as the 32-bar form characteristic of Tin Pan Alley and the lyric structure of twelve bar blues, is clear in her writing. Broadway music, which itself frequently employs the Tin Pan Alley structure, is an audible influence. Nyro's music also exhibits a profound connection to Motown, particularly early '60s girl groups, and her cover recordings of this material are testament to her affinity. But as clear as these affinities are, it is equally clear that her music is *not that*; her compositional uses of these styles amalgamate them with other influences and with her unique approach to form, and her covers depart from the original recordings with heightened performance (e.g. increased dynamic contrast, sustained notes on key words, and formal extensions, interruptions, and additions).

[58] Davis, *Clive: Inside the Record Business*, 99.

Certainly, complex and/or "excessive" form has varied manifestations with differing aesthetic sensibilities. While I am not asserting that Nyro is alone in her approach, I do wish to distinguish it from what appear to be more common strategies of formal experimentation. Albin Zak's overview of epic forms of the 1970s focuses largely on songs in which formal sections are informed by lyric content,[59] which is distinct from Nyro's approach. Walter Everett discusses complex rock song forms, highlighting examples by bands including the Who, the Beatles, the Doors, the Moody Blues, and the Mothers of Invention. These instances include songs that are like mini-operas, where each section comes to a sense of closure, while others resemble suites or medleys. Many have a sense of build-up or momentum, such as the Beatles' "Happiness is a Warm Gun" which opens rather unassumingly and increases tempo over the course of its subsections, moving also to greater harmonic stability and a sense of arrival in the final section; a similar arc can be heard in their "You Never Give Me Your Money." Examples from the Mothers of Invention are more abrupt in their transformations and less teleological, though they display an ironic distance, resulting in a sense of pastiche. By contrast, Nyro's songs employ interrupted, non- or differently teleological forms, but with an aesthetic immediacy and expressiveness quite distinct from the Mothers of Invention. Everett does include one of Nyro's songs, "Stoned Soul Picnic," in his discussion (though he attributes it to the Fifth Dimension who recorded a cover). He describes it as possessing "an unusually mercurial structure, fluid but not goal-directed,"[60] despite reading it as being in verse-chorus form, linking this fluid structure to the subject matter of the lyrics, commenting that "the form flows as freely as do the libations."[61] Jason Summach also addresses "Stoned Soul Picnic," and like Everett, connects its form to the lyrics. Yet counter

[59] Albin Zak, "Rock and Roll Rhapsody: Pop Epics of the 1970s," in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: Critical and Analytical Essays*, 2nd edition, ed. Walter Everett (New York: Routledge, 2008): 345-360.
[60] Walter Everett, *The Foundations of Rock: From "Blue Suede Shoes" to "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 149.
[61] Ibid., 150.

to Everett (in a difference of opinion enabled by the tension between AABA and verse-chorus form in Nyro's writing), he views it as a compound AABA form containing what he labels as two distinct bridges. The second of these bridges is the section that concludes the song, and Summach connects this atypical formal decision to the lyrics' invitation to partake in libations, suggesting it represents taking "metaphoric or pharmaceutical trains that will transport the participant to new psychological places" in how it "transcend[s] formal dictates."[62] But the song is far from alone in Nyro's oeuvre in terms of unusual structure, and its compatriots do not offer to discharge the strangeness of their form through links to lyric content.

I wish to interpret such formal characteristics in Nyro's music within a queer aesthetic framework. Feminist musicology, as mentioned above, opened the door to consideration of how gender and sexuality may be encoded in musical structures. In addition to strategies of expression—those practices that encode queer feeling—I wish to contemplate what a queer orientation to musical expression may be, that is, how it may be informed by queerness regardless of whether or not queer feeling is being secreted into the work through the aforementioned strategies. This is perhaps tending more towards the asymptotic line of *écriture féminine* that Cixous envisioned, although in my formulation it necessarily remains rooted in a social context in which queer is fundamentally at an angle to the dominant, heterosexual culture, rather than such a position being a limitation to expressive potential. In contrast to Cixous's utopic notion of unhindered womanhood and feminine expression possible without patriarchy, I focus on queer in the sense of being/doing against the grain of the heterosexual, and rather than aspiring to a stable minoritarian gay or lesbian identity. Susan McClary notably illuminated the gendering of commonplace aspects of Western music including sonata form and cadences, advising that such features are "habits of cultural thought," taken for granted, yet "perhaps the

[62] Jason Summach, "Form in Top-20 Rock Music, 1955-89" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2012), 83.

most powerful aspects of musical discourses, for they operate below the level of deliberate signification and are thus usually reproduced and transmitted without conscious intervention."[63] In framing her inquiry, McClary posed the question, "What are the assumptions that fuel these mechanisms so often called by the neutral name of 'tension and release'...? Whose models of subjectivity are they, given that they are not universal? To what ends are they employed in compositions? What is it, in other words, that the listener is being invited to desire and why?"[64]

Following studies that consider how gender and musical form may be linked, Jennifer Rycenga introduced a queer window onto the form of popular music, advancing the concept of complex forms as queer in their excess and exuberance. Rycenga's readings take as their subject music by heterosexually-identified rock artists Yes and PJ Harvey, and as such her analysis offered a queered reading rather than arguing for exuberant form as a queer expressive strategy (though she did not foreclose such a possibility). In approaching forms she considers unusual and unique, Rycenga writes, "Once reproduction and predictability are no longer considered normative or requisite, a more sensuous and exuberant approach to form can materialize."[65]

Drawing on theories of "excess and exuberance" in the natural world advanced by Bruce Bagemihl, Rycenga considers how a queer organicism could be perceived in musical form, asking whether pleasure can be understood as a component of organic form, and wondering "what if the organic was seen as extravagant, luxuriant, inelegant, even clitoral?"[66] Rycenga distinguishes this proposed formal pleasure from that of traditional formal listening, wherein "the (alleged) pleasure in formal listening arises from measuring the music against an abstract and absent model," a process that has "a kind of compulsory reproductive mandate" and "an

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[63] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 16.
[64] Ibid., 13.
[65] Rycenga, "Endless Caresses," 236.
[66] Ibid., 245.

imperative for abstraction."[67] By contrast, Rycenga proposes that a queer, somatic pleasure can be drawn from music such as that of Yes and PJ Harvey, wherein "excess queers the form, merging the boundaries between content and form, making of form a somatic, temporal experience."[68]

While I draw inspiration from Rycenga's theorisation of queer formal excess, I also wish to question assumptions and implications of her approach. First is the sense of what queer is and does, as the term's definition is as fluid as some of its meanings hold it to be. Rycenga does not offer her working definition of the term, which thus requires reconstruction from her usage. In pursuing Bagemihl's biological theory, which presents same-sex relations as a fundamental part of the natural world, Rycenga appears to equate queerness with same-sex relations, and in presenting queerness as part of the fabric of life denies the sense of otherness and/or opposition that it often carries. While a positive reclamation of an identity is certainly a valid endeavour, as is charting an aesthetic based on such a reclamation, important facets of queer identity and aesthetics are left out in this approach. Abandoned is queerness as deviation, as challenge, as antithesis to the dominant, heterosexual society, and the aesthetic strategies accompanying these structures of feeling. Certainly, Rycenga is not responsible for theorising all possibilities of queer form, but failing to acknowledge these alternatives in the use of the term queer and rooting her aesthetic model in a biological theory suggests a universality that simply does not obtain.

Second, I wish to question Rycenga's hasty dismissal of traditional formal listening. This is not to invalidate Rycenga's concerns; indeed, questioning and finding alternatives to normalised structures and turning from the abstract to the somatic are significant components of feminist and queer thought. In this regard, her model is a valuable intervention. However, the

[67] Ibid., 236.
[68] Ibid., 245.

relationship to norms that she dismisses is precisely a potential site of deviation; the "excesses" in the material she discusses are necessarily perceived as such in relation to normative pop songs, whether this point of reference is explicitly acknowledged or not. I instead suggest that it is possible to balance Rycenga's concerns with my contention that deviations or alternatives (both implicitly understood in relation to a norm) can be sites of queer meaning and indeed pleasure. One consideration to this end is that in many cases formal differences register upon the listener without the need to count measures or consult a score, even if their particularity may not be described prior to such analytical listening. Perhaps more importantly, composers and songwriters engage with norms of the musical traditions they partake of, and overlooking that interaction would leave out a significant facet of musical expression. Brett offers a useful example in his focus on the experiential act of performing a duet from a gay subject position while attending to particular harmonic or formal moments.[69] This enacts a balance between the freer listening practices Rycenga advocates for and the insight that can be gained from formal listening. It is misguided to disregard entirely the tool of formalised listening to identify the relationship—however close or distant—that exists between a given work and the normalised structures it interacts with; to theorise queer aesthetics, attention to the dance with norms performed by queer artists may be more illuminating.

Despite these contentions, Rycenga's work offers an intriguing provocation to queerly read form in popular music. Finding Nyro's formal deviations distinct from the types of complexity and excess of rock forms discussed by other authors, I will build on Rycenga's prompt to consider Nyro's approach to song form as a queer aesthetic feature. I will address two primary issues regarding form in Nyro's music: her atypical uses of standard formal elements

[69] Brett, ""Piano Four-Hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire"; Susan McClary also addresses harmonic and organisational differences in Schubert's music in conjunction with gender and sexuality, in "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, 2nd Edition*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006), 205-233.

and design and the differently or non-teleological quality of much of her writing. The songs "Mercy on Broadway," "Timer," "Captain Saint lucifer," "Sweet lovin baby," "Map to the Treasure," "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?", and "The man who sends me home" will serve as exemplars.

"Mercy on Broadway" (*NYT*)

Time	Formal section	Lyrics
0:00	Verse	Madison smiled...
0:24	Chorus?/Prechorus	July mercy on broadway...
0:37	Chorus	shine/everybody...
0:47	Collapse	On Broadway jive and pray...
1:06	Verse (altered)	People and the landlords shine...
1:33	Chorus?/Prechorus	July mercy on broadway...
1:46	Chorus	shine/everybody...
1:57	Coda	Mercy on broadway...

"Mercy on Broadway" was included in *PopMatters*' write-up about the CD reissues of Nyro's early Columbia albums, where it was described by the magazine as one of "probably the most accessible tracks on *NYT* [alongside "Save the Country"]" as it "revert[s] to more familiar structures," in contrast to the preceding cuts which elicit descriptors including "frenzy," "sluggish," "screech[ing]," "avant garde," and "artistic chaos."[70] This statement is surprising, and somewhat perplexing, as while "Mercy on Broadway" certainly engages with familiar formal sections, it is arguably more notable for how it departs from and interrupts these structures. But its ability to evoke a sense of familiarity despite its departures is exemplary of the queer cut along the bias that I propose hearing in Nyro's music. In "Mercy on Broadway," Nyro engages with the song functions of verse, prechorus, chorus, and coda, but approaches these sections

[70] Ronnie D. Lankford, Jr., "Laura Nyro: Eli and the Thirteenth Confession/Gonna Take a Miracle/New York Tendaberry," *PopMatters*, July 25, 2002, https://www.popmatters.com/nyrolaura-reissues-2496008987.html

slantwise, engaging some prototypical features while eschewing others.[71] An additional section defies categorisation under familiar pop song terms.

Broadly, the song is constructed in two very similar halves, interrupted with different material that, as noted above, does not suggest any formal function, and capped by a coda. Each half is composed of three distinct sections, which occur in the same order in the first and second parts. I will address these sections in some detail as to how they reflect and depart from the formal functions they suggest, while subsequent analyses will be briefer.

The song begins with a section that functions as a verse. Here, this section is eleven and a half measures, ending with the lyric "in my sweet July." Similar material recurs later in the song (1:06) with largely different lyrics, though it concludes with the same line (preserved in lyric and music). The combination of new lyric and repeated music is one of the prototypical features of a verse, and we can comfortably understand these two sections as such, though not without complication. In pop songs, the music of a verse would typically be repeated fairly faithfully, with some modifications to the vocal melody to accommodate the new lyric. However, Nyro in some ways disrupts this expectation of recurrence. The second verse substitutes different chords in its opening, opting to turn quickly to the tonic of F major rather than the vi (the relative minor) of the opening verse, and the melody is altered accordingly, though it still follows a similar contour. Notably, its metric regularity of 4/4 time is interrupted, and it is extended to twelve and a half measures from the initial eleven and a half. The metric disruption occurs with the line "in the doom swept the band away," which I propose hearing in 6/8. While this line

[71] For my approach to formal sections, I draw on theorist Trevor de Clerq's use of prototype theory in this domain, as articulated in Trevor de Clerq, "Sections and Successions in Successful Songs: A Prototype Approach to Form in Rock Music" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2012). In his approach, rather than employing definitions that outline parameters for song components, each section (such as verse, bridge) is viewed as a collection of features that are indicative of its function in the song. The more features that are prototypical, the more prototypical a section is as a whole, but any one feature's absence does not preclude identification under a particular label as long as others suffice to orient us to the section's function. Beyond identifying the normative, this approach facilitates discussion of atypical instances, as well as hybrid sections.

could also be argued to be the "extra" bar in this verse, I believe the following measure ("Baby on broadway"), despite returning to 4/4, is a better candidate, as the harmonic functions of the first verse would be replicated without this measure's addition. Furthermore, this vocal is presented as if it is a backing vocal, doubled by Nyro, sung closer to the microphone, and recorded with more reverb, setting it sonically apart from the rest of the verse. In being given a full measure and the front of the mix, though, it steps into the foreground and occupies metric space that it "shouldn't" have. That these divergences occur in the first half of the verse make their effect that much stronger, as it is somewhat disorienting for the listener, with confirmation of repetition only arriving securely towards the end. Thus, while this second verse can be securely recognised as such, it also challenges this status by interfering with identification at the outset and avoiding duplication of section length and musical material.

The second section, commencing at the lyrics "July mercy on broadway" (0:44), presents greater challenges to identifying within standard pop forms. It gives many signals that it is acting as a chorus. To this end, it features thicker texture, reaches a peak of melodic pitch, and introduces a doubled vocal for the first time within the song (and, making it all the more noticeable, the first time in the album). The title of the track is delivered in this first line of lyric, and this is a common feature of choruses. The recurrence of this section in similar fashion following the second verse further supports its role as chorus. This second iteration includes a change of lyric and melodic contour for one line, however, which is atypical for a chorus. Additionally, where a chorus typically affirms the tonic (and often confirms it cadentially), such harmonic content is eschewed here, opting for stronger emphasis on the relative minor. Greater doubt is cast upon its status as chorus in its last line ("she'll make you pay...") and in light of the following section which commences with "shine/everybody" (0:37). In this last line, the

harmony moves through VI major to a hybrid chord that, with a return to F natural, instead of sounding as tonic, effects a pull towards C major. This generates a sense of harmonic departure and motion, rather than closure, and creates a sense of arrival upon the start of the new section.

This subsequent section—"shine/everybody"—offers itself as a stronger candidate for the role of chorus. Vocal harmonies are added and the texture becomes thicker yet, it features a simple repeating lyric with repeated musical material, and it repeats in full later in the song (1:46). It is still not a prototypical chorus, however; it does not clearly present the tonic, it is only four measures long, and does not feature the song's title, so while it can be considered a chorus, it passes through only some of the prototypical parameters for this status. Nonetheless, it prompts a reconsideration of the section prior, which may be retrospectively understood as a prechorus. Rather than classify that section strictly as a prechorus, though, I wish to respect the ambivalence generated by its initial invocations of chorus function.

To interpret the path Nyro takes through these elements of song form, and the deviations therein, I draw on Sara Ahmed's theory of queer as an orientation. Informed by phenomenology, Ahmed contemplates how "orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others...shap[ing] not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance."[72] In emphasising "orientation," Ahmed invokes spatial metaphors for the life paths of queerness and heterosexuality. In this sense, through cultural repetition of heterosexual life paths as normative, the perspective of heterosexuality follows a straight line, with attendant features (such as heterosexual romantic partnerships, marriage, children) falling "naturally" along this line. As Ahmed explains, a "queer orientation might not simply be directed toward the 'same sex,' but would be seen as not following the straight line."[73] A queer

[72] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.
[73] Ibid., 70.

perspective—returning to the word's roots to indicate that which is twisted—falls slant-wise, viewing the world at an angle, rendering its features askew.

Nyro's skewed approach to formal elements, I propose, can be viewed through this lens of queer orientation that approaches existing components from a novel, slant-wise angle. Ahmed also stresses that "queer lives do not simply transcend the lines they do not follow, as such lines are also the accumulation of points of attachment."[74] This notion of queer orientation as a course athwart of the "straight" line that nonetheless maintains points of attachment to it informs my approach to Nyro's music. As I noted earlier, Nyro's music maintains deeply felt attachment to aspects of popular song, yet transforms them through treatment and context. When Nyro invokes a pop genre, she is not creating emotional or post-modern aesthetic distance from that point of attachment, but it is equally clear that her approach is not "in line" with the invoked song form or the genre and tradition it represents.

In addition to these sections that clearly invoke formal prototypes, if passing through them on a slant, Nyro includes material that departs from familiar pop form. Beyond coming slant-wise to objects on the straight line, Ahmed elaborates that "the discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go 'off line' to reach such objects."[75] I suggest that the moments where Nyro more completely abandons formal prototypes may be understood as this type of "off-line" material.

In "Mercy on Broadway," this type of departure follows the first chorus, after which there is a sense of collapse. Rather than the chorus concluding, it is elided through a repetition of the lyric "shine/everybody" which, rather than delivered in layers of harmony, is reduced to a solo vocal, winding its way down melodically and leading into the subsequent lyrics ("on

[74] Ibid., 75.
[75] Ibid., 71.

Broadway jive and pray"). In continuing out of the chorus, these lyrics do not invite a mimetic collapse in the music, which is independently motivated towards this structural collapse. The previously steady pulse of the bass line (heard in the piano and/or electric bass throughout the song) slows dramatically and ceases articulating rhythms that provide clear meter or division of measures, causing listeners to lose entrainment to the beat. A low C is insistently struck three times, and the timing varies more over a detour through the pitches A, E, G, and C again. While this section's location in the formal succession of the song is a common place for a bridge, it does not internally signal another formal function, and its overall effect is one of being unmoored rather than oriented to a new section.

While the second verse gets the song "back on track," following the second iteration of the chorus, a coda occurs which takes another unexpected turn, suddenly slowing dramatically and turning to the flat side following suggestions of D major. The tonic of the song's verses (F) is abandoned. This sonically rich gesture, with overdubbed harmonies, does not end the song, however; instead, this is done by a cheeky, defiant "ha!" over the pitch C. Given this resting point, bare as it is harmonically, we can understand the preceding chords as an Aeolian cadence towards C (Ab – Bb – C as bVI – bVII – I). This C in the bass recalls the C that dubiously tolled in the "collapse" section, which in addition to the harmonic content leaves one questioning the certainty of closure.

On top of the formal irregularities of this song, Nyro's performance decisions particularly with regard to tempo bear noting. Tempo fluctuation is characteristic of Nyro's style particularly on *NYT*, exceeding the norms of popular music wherein changes are fewer and/or more slight. "Mercy on Broadway" picks up roughly ten beats per minute over its first line, reverts to the original tempo and again gains ten beats per minute in the second line, gaining

another eight in the second section before dropping fourteen for the chorus, and dropping at least fifteen below the original tempo for the start of the second verse. The rapid fluctuation between these tempi contributes to an idiosyncratic style (and one that caused frustration for session musicians). While not a component of form as such, tempo regulation exerts a normative function in popular music, and Nyro's style disregards the norm of a fairly steady tempo in favour of frequent fluctuations in service of musical expression.

"Timer" (*Eli*)

Time	**Formal section**	**Lyrics**
0:00	Introductory verse	Uptown/goin down...
0:42	Verse A	Oh I belong to Timer...
1:19 **or** 1:20	Proto-chorus/Transition	pleasure ground... **or** it was sweet and funny...
1:37	Verse B	Holdin/to my cradle...
2:00	Chorus (+ interpolation)	So let the wind blow Timer...
2:37	Coda	God is a jigsaw...

"Timer" demonstrates other deployments of an askew take on form. It does not offer repeated sections as "Mercy on Broadway" does, but in other ways adheres to prototypical section roles. A chart of its overall form might appear fairly normal, but its constituent parts belie such simplicity.

In isolation, the opening of the song might seem to defy prototypes, as it moves through different tonal areas, metric feels, and general character. However, given Nyro's demonstrated familiarity with and fondness for Tin Pan Alley form, this introduction can be considered a Tin Pan Alley-style introductory verse; even if stranger than traditional examples, it is in essence in line with this formal type. While it can be understood within this formal role, its unpredictability and varied characters may inhibit identification on first hearing and instead disorient the listener.

The following section, commencing at "Oh I belong to Timer" (the preceding line, "My darling friends," may be considered introductory to this section) is recognisable as a verse. However, its lack of recurrence later in the song is a turn away from prototypical function in relation to the song as a whole. There are different ways the subdivision and ending of this section can be understood. In one hearing, following the expectations set out by the first measures, it can be taken as a 16-measure verse, following the fairly common SRDC grouping of phrases[76] with relatively prototypical characteristics, aside from the uneven distribution of measures in the final two phrases (5+3 rather than 4+4). But the final phrase does not convincingly project closure, inviting an alternate interpretation. Alternatively, the verse can be heard as beginning along the lines of this structure, with a four-measure phrase and its restatement, followed by a five-measure phrase that departs from the previous phrase, but then rather than concluding, goes to a two-measure transition that is elided into the following section. As these hearings result in different lengths for the section, they also impact how the beginning of the next section is heard, as well as its resulting length. The elisions of these sections, compounded by irregular phrase lengths, allow for ambiguity as to their beginnings and ends.

The following section—understood either as the eight measures from "onto a pleasure ground" or the seven measures from "it was sweet and funny," and ending before "Holdin/to my cradle"—is somewhat more ambiguous; the melodic contour is similar to that of the first phrases of the verse, but compressed in time and more repetitive, and delivered with doubled vocals. In these ways, it signals functions akin to those of a chorus. However, it remains away from the C tonic, and ends with a move towards IV (the chord that concludes the phrase splits the difference between V/IV and IV/IV, giving the root of V/IV in the bass while suggesting the IV/IV above

[76] Walter Everett labels this common sentence-type phrase structure in pop music as SRDC, for "Statement – Restatement – Departure – Conclusion," in Everett, *The Foundations of Rock*, 140.

it). These latter qualities set suggests a transitional role. We may call it a proto-chorus/transition, but as this label makes clear, it lies between section roles and complicates the process of identification.

The next section, starting "Holdin/to my cradle," signals verse function, but is not a repetition of the earlier verse. However, it moves through similar harmonic territory as the previous verse, following its tonicisation of IV with immediate clarification that this chord is still functioning as IV in the home key, and returning to the familiar cycle of diatonic minor keys. It counters this harmonic similarity with metric contrast, though, turning to straight rather than shuffle feel, and adds backing vocals which are not found in the first verse. Because it is musically distinct from the preceding verse, it defies expectations of the role of the verse within the context of the song.

This section leads into material that strongly suggests chorus function: the section beginning "Let the wind blow Timer" invokes many features of a chorus, including tonic confirmation, many iterations of the title, faster harmonic motion, shorter phrase lengths, and full texture. One phrase stands out within this otherwise prototypical chorus, however; for two measures, it switches to straight rhythm from the shuffle of the rest of the section, and the melody reaches higher in register. This phrase ("and if you love me true, I'll spend my life with you") is best considered an interpolation. Its distinctness from the surrounding material and sense of departure alludes to qualities of a bridge. Another connection bears noting, though; the melodic contour, textural support, and pacing recall the opening of "Luckie," the first track of the album, lending it as a result a sense of introductory quality. Despite these pronounced features, the concise nature of this phrase and its prompt return to material consistent with the chorus to that point make it clear that it is not a separate section, but a noteworthy interruption. This chorus

section does not recur, but its location within the song to this point is fairly typical. It offers enough prototypical features to be identified as a chorus locally and globally, though the lack of repetition later in the song and the brief interpolation mark its departures from the norm.

Finally, a section that acts as a coda closes out the song, fading out rather than reaching conclusion. It has distinct sections within it, alternating rapidly between material and straight/shuffle rhythm, generating a sense of instability and uncertainty rather than closure. This instability is heightened by use of bVI in alternation with the tonic and iii, and persistent use of the flat third in the tonic as well as iv7 and v7. The last phrases, including that which fades out in repetition, linger on a minor-inflected chord that despite the C pedal does not lend a sense of resolution.

Overall, a description of the form appears fairly regular—introductory verse, modern verse, transition/proto-chorus, verse, chorus, coda—but the lack of repetition of any section, plus the abnormalities discussed above, transform it substantially from what those labels suggest though not beyond recognition. The song is essentially through-composed, but Nyro cleaves to familiar song components nonetheless.

“Captain Saint lucifer” (*NYT*)

Time	Formal section	Lyrics
0:00	Verse	Mama mama/you’re a whiz and a scholar...
0:37	Prechorus	Now I’ll live and die...
0:45	Chorus	Meet me captain Saint lucifer...
1:05	Bridge A	Meet me captain Saint lucifer...
1:20	Verse	Mama mama/you’re a whiz and a scholar...
1:52	Prechorus	Now I’ll live and die...
2:01	Chorus	Meet me captain Saint lucifer...
2:16	Bridge B	Gutters in stacks/is where I come from...
2:41	Coda	[instrumental]

With respect to "Captain Saint lucifer," I will briefly highlight a marked departure from formal norms at the level of its large-scale succession pattern. While most of the song proceeds in a relatively prototypical manner, with a two-part verse, prechorus, chorus, bridge, and another iteration of verse, prechorus, and chorus, it is the following section that is of interest here. After the second chorus, a new section begins (at "Gutters in stacks/is where I come from") that departs from the material previously heard, strongly suggesting bridge function in both its internal features and its place in the succession of the song. But rather than return to a verse, as is typical of a bridge, it dissipates into a brief coda in the piano; it seems we had walked onto a bridge still under construction and continued off the unfinished end, landing with a vague recollection of a verse we recently heard. Everett notes that some songs do conclude with a bridge, so this disposition of sections is not unheard of, however, the examples he provides fade out in the bridge material. In "Captain Saint lucifer," it is as much the location of the bridge as its collapse that is notable. Similar to the collapse of the chorus of "Mercy on Broadway," the bridge appears to have discharged all its energy without having reached a stable section to follow. The expectations of a bridge to lead to a new verse heighten this sense compared to "Mercy on Broadway," and the concluding "you're my baby"—a mollifying type of lyric—cannot fully contain the intensity that preceded, as it arrives and concludes rather suddenly. The somewhat delicate yet rushed concluding gesture in the piano adds to this sense, and also invites comparison to the unconvincing cadence Brett discusses as a moment of "passing" via a "cover-up gesture" in Schubert.[77]

[77] Brett, "Piano Four-Hands," 160-161.

“Sweet lovin baby” (*NYT*)

Time	Formal section	Lyrics
0:00	Verse A	I belong/to the man...
1:25	Chorus	Sweet lovin baby...
2:27	Verse B	natural windmill...
3:21	Chorus (truncated)	That’s lovin baby...
3:29	Bridge	where is the night luster?...

“Sweet lovin baby” reflects both Nyro’s engagement with popular song style as well as her divergences from it, vacillating between familiar form and artistic departure. Its opening section is sparse and ponderous, and does not clearly mark itself off from the preceding track “The man who sends me home,” contributing to uncertainty towards both the end of that song and the beginning of this one. It explores harmonic territory on both sharp and flat sides of its home key of C, and is left hanging on an A major chord. Also, Nyro plays with the time, avoiding a strong sense of meter and extending phrases to accommodate her vocals. Rather than giving grounding in a steady pulse, this generates a sense of instability and uncertainty. While we can call this section a verse for its general function in the song, it does not follow prototypes internally (expected phrase structure) or on a larger scale in that this music does not recur later in the song. Indeed, it could alternately be regarded as an introduction, though it would be disproportionately long to fit our expectations of an intro. With this ambiguity, it does not evoke a familiar pop genre or form, and instead suggests a unique, personal artistic approach.

Following this meandering verse is a section that offers the familiar style of a soul ballad chorus, offering a familiar style and formal clarity. Distinct from the harmonic wandering of the previous section, this chorus is grounded in F major, though it arrives there abruptly without a clear cadence after the A major that caps the previous section. This A major could be read as an alternative tonic standing in for the C, leading cadentially into F, but the leap from A

down to C in the vocal line and Nyro's phrasing of this moment suggest more of a break between the sections. While Nyro sings the song's title (a feature characteristic of a chorus), the lyric fits squarely on the beat, as befits a chorus, but only for the first few words. It quickly adds rhythmic complexity to the vocal line, fitting many words in a short span of time, resulting in declamation more typical of a verse. Quickly following this pull away from chorus function, the first musical phrase of this chorus section is heard again with different lyrics, suggesting that we are still indeed in the chorus, though one that is not as straightforward as initially suggested. Thus, while this section overall offers a move to the warm, familiar sounds of a chorus in a soul ballad, it also pulls away from the prototype.

The sense of chorus function grinds to a halt over a sudden harmonic shift from the chorus's local tonic of F to D major. This figure, over the word "loneliness," repeats in melody and harmony the "loneliness" of the opening section, and suggests a departure from the chorus. This phrase has a sense of a breakdown; the contentment of the chorus cannot be sustained amidst the encroaching solitude. The steady pulse which lent a relaxed feel to the chorus is disturbed with insistent descending chords pounded out to stress each word in the voice ("comes down like loneliness"). A return to C and softer vocal delivery after this, at the lyrics "Natural windmill," suggest a new section that also functions as a verse. It is distinct harmonically and melodically from the opening section, though both, like in "Timer," may be considered verses even though they defy the expectation of musical repetition.

Once again, a turn from sharp to flat ushers in the chorus material. As is prototypical of a chorus, it begins repeating the material of its previous iteration. Here it is curtailed much sooner though; instead of the ten measures previously allotted to this material, only two measures appear here. We are left without a full manifestation of a chorus, as this proves to be

but a short allusion. What follows is characterised by a marked increase in tempo, rapid harmonic rhythm, and a shift to straight rhythm in contrast to the relaxed shuffle of the chorus. This brief section concludes the song. Like "Captain Saint lucifer," this material evokes bridge function despite its location at the end of the song, but here stands in greater contrast to what preceded it. In "Sweet lovin baby," Nyro evokes soul ballad style while pulling away from those norms within the chorus, the verse material, and the concluding bridge-like section.

The remaining examples illustrate how Nyro's use of form interacts with teleological norms. These songs reflect playful engagement with and turning away from the goal-directedness typical of pop song forms. While I will present certain examples of Nyro's songwriting as cases of non-teleological form, I do not intend to suggest that there is no sense of direction or climax in her music. Indeed, it is often quite the opposite; as journalist Randy Shields puts it, "If you think that the young Laura Nyro can't or won't get any higher, louder, bolder, bangier or more thunderous, you're happily wrong—she always goes there."[78] These peaks of intensity are characteristic of her performing style and songwriting, often approached by extended build-ups. But they are frequently turned away from, collapsing, fading away, returning to the relative calm that preceded them, or indefinitely forestalled with nowhere to come to fruition, instead discharging the build-up of energy. These forms do not adhere to the senses of expectation and arrival that have been mapped onto pop song form, but neither do they fully abandon such notions. Rather, they play with teleology, conjuring the energy and expectation of such forms but deploying it in a way that subverts its norms.

[78] Randy Shields, "The Laura Nyro Incarnations," *Counterpunch*, September 28, 2012, http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/09/28/the-laura-nyro-incarnations/.

Returning briefly to "Mercy on Broadway," the ambiguity of the chorus/prechorus section and the collapse of the chorus can be considered in relation to goal-directedness. Jay Summach argues that a prechorus "transforms the verse-chorus song from a two-section form into a three-section form that is more strongly teleological."[79] Yet here, as what initially suggests chorus function is only retrospectively understood as a prechorus, the teleological implications of both the prechorus and chorus are subverted (as an initial sense of arrival in a chorus is belied when a stronger candidate for this role follows). The chorus proper, which should stand as the goal in a teleological model, is itself undermined by dissonant harmonies and more strongly by its dissolution into material that loses the pulse of the song as well as clear sense of function or direction. In "Mercy on Broadway," then, we can hear Nyro playing with the teleological roles of the prechorus and chorus in pop form.

"Map to the Treasure" (*CATBOS*)

"Map to the Treasure" offers a different manner of engaging with teleology. Recalling Ahmed's characterisation of the queer turn away from the goals of the "straight" line, I propose hearing such a turn away in the formal design of this song. Over the course of a minute and a half (from 2:00 – 3:30), Nyro repeats the same two-measure phrase in the piano, and gradually accelerates the tempo, until at 3:30 she doubles the speed of the left-hand pulse over the same phrase in the right hand, continuing for another twenty seconds in this manner. This whole section is nearly two minutes of rhythmic build-up. The following section largely maintains the increased energy brought by the build-up (though not without interruption), but less than two minutes in (at 5:43) the figure of the build-up is reintroduced in the piano, and only twenty seconds later it comes to

[79] Jay Summach, "The Structure, Function, and Genesis of the Prechorus," *MTO* 17, no. 3 (October 2011) http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.11.17.3/mto.11.17.3.summach.html

rest. The sparse short section following suggests that the song may be concluding, but reveals itself to be a brief period of respite from the frenzy of the preceding material, and we are brought back to the song's subdued, ponderous opening material, coming to an end without cadence or fanfare just after the eight minute mark.

The long build-up also merits further scrutiny. While it undoubtedly increases intensity rather dramatically through its increase in tempo, it does not offer any harmonic cues of directionality, departure, or a point of arrival to come. The song opens with an alternation between G minor and A minor, the G eventually circled with a move to an F bass, and hints at but just as soon moves away from a dominant chord in G, pulling the F# leading tone down a half-step into a Bb major chord followed by a C chord, suggesting a move to F that does not materialise. Harmonic direction, it is clear, does not drive this song. The build-up occurs over the skeleton of an A minor chord, established as a local tonic, with nods in the melody towards pitches of the G and F chords of the opening, but relentlessly maintaining an A bass. These two repeating measures do not offer a sense of harmonic direction, but through persistence create a new tonic for the following section. We thus arrive in the same tonal place in which we began the journey. In the section following the build-up, beginning at "take my hand now," the local tonic of A is nigh confirmed with a dominant, but rather than cadence, it falls down step-wise through chords on the fourth, third, and second scale degrees, and on another occurrence turns to a G bass, which evokes the alternation of the opening section as well as suggesting locally a bVII chord functioning as a dominant. While this section is more harmonically active, it still does not pursue familiar paths of directionality, opting instead for moments of intriguing contrast while largely resting on the local tonic of A and its iv chord as well as a move to C alternated with its IV, before a figure reminiscent of the build-up enters as the energy peters out, and the opening

material centred on G returns. By this treatment of harmony alongside that of tempo, in "Map to the Treasure" Nyro creates a sense of movement within stasis and a circularity to the overall journey.

"Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" (*AITD*)

Nyro's cover of the King/Goffin "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?", recorded towards the end of her life, presents another approach to eschewing teleological form. Nyro's rendition quite faithfully incorporates the melody of the original, but her harmonic setting is notably restricted. She arpeggiates the tonic chord throughout most of the verse, breaking into new chords solely for the refrain and bridge, which become bright, prominent features in the rather muted landscape. But most notable is the coda that Nyro adds to the song. Maintaining a tonic pedal, Nyro adds a coda that extends over three minutes—becoming half of the track's length—built out of two vocal lines from the song. This prolonged stretch of tonic harmony allows the intensity of the bridge to dissipate and contributes to the recording having an overall sense of stasis. Through these decisions, Nyro cultivates stasis even in preexisting material that originally had a teleological harmonic structure.

Rejections of normative temporality, such as Nyro demonstrates here, have been discussed in aesthetic and life-course contexts as reflecting a queer stance. Rycenga suggests that the rejection of goal-oriented form in favour of stasis can be understood as a gay/lesbian outlook in parallel with the theories of biological exuberance she invokes. In a similar vein, though focusing on the progression of life rather than of songs, Jack Halberstam suggests in his discussion of queer temporality that "For people who either stay outside of reproductive logics or refuse the futuristic logics of investment, insurance, and retirement...other temporal schemes

exist."[80] In songs like "Map to the Treasure" and "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?", Nyro demonstrates that she is not bound by the exigencies of directionality. In other instances, Nyro makes a wholesale departure from teleology. While this is less common in her early work, I will highlight "The Man Who Sends Me Home." Though I will not address "Stoned Soul Picnic" here, I recall Everett's assessment of its form as being an "unusually mercurial structure, fluid but not goal-directed"[81] as another example of Nyro's non-teleological writing.

"The man who sends me home" (*NYT*)

"The man who sends me home" is unique in Nyro's oeuvre, as it is through-composed and without any clear reference to formal sections of popular music. Its opening suggests that repetition could be in store; the first measure is essentially repeated in the third measure, suggesting regular two-measure phrases, but the departure in the fourth measure from what preceded makes clear that this will not take place. The fifth measure ("when my hair is down") marks a more profound departure in harmony, melody, timbre, and volume, with a sudden intensity that is just as quickly pulled away from. The rest of the song is similarly unpredictable, with each phrase offering no strong sense of what will follow; for instance, the intensification at "and don't you know now or never" does not build to the peak of the earlier moment, and instead subsides soon after. The ending, even, is only surely confirmed when the next song has begun, as it comes to a pause without a cadential gesture or phrase-structural conclusion, hovering in a

[80] Jack Halberstam, "Keeping Time with Lesbians on Ecstasy," in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 335. Halberstam expands upon this discussion in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), while Elizabeth Freeman addresses "chronobiopolitics" and the ways in which queer subjects have been regarded as bearers of temporal disruption, as "denizens of time out of joint," in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 19.
[81] Everett, *The Foundations of Rock*, 149.

hushed final sung word, “home,” that does not offer any indication that home is where we might be.

Rather than set expectations that are confirmed (or forestalled or denied), as goal-directed music does, “The Man Who Sends Me Home” creates focus on the present. Each moment of the song can be enjoyed for itself, and listening pleasure is to be taken in the sonorities and timbres as they arise. While particular chords can certainly be heard as surprising or unexpected, this is not due to defiance of any expectations set within the song via harmonic phrase structure, but only to the broad expectations of tonality. The attention this song calls to immediate aural sensations rather than to processes of anticipation and arrival recalls the alternative temporalities discussed by Halberstam.

In both the nature of formal sections and in their overall organisation, these songs exhibit an approach to form that engages familiar principles while diverging from their standard deployment. While Nyro’s unique style received criticism and did not make for significant chart success for her own recordings, it drew loyal fans and inspired many fellow songwriters. The admixture of popular and highly personal styles brings points of attachment—while approached at a slant—and “off-line” points together in a queer orientation to form. Returning to McClary’s question of whose models of subjectivity and desire are employed in musical form, I suggest that the approaches to form in Nyro’s music reflect a queer model of subjectivity and desire. Nyro’s detours from prototypical forms can be understood in relation to a queer path through and around the “straight” line and a capricious relationship to teleology familiar to queer subjects.

Decades before Ahmed wrote of a queer slant, E.M. Forster described the queer poet C. P. Cavafy as “standing...at a slight angle to the universe,” employing this characterisation twice

more in the short essay. Forster's use of "slight" is important; the poet and his speech are at an angle such that they are not in line with the universe, but not so far off that they are alien, incomprehensible. Forster's descriptions bear quoting at length:

> Such a writer can never be popular. He flies both too slowly and too high. Whether subjective or objective, he is equally remote from the bustle of the moment, he will never compose either a Royalist or a Venizelist Hymn. He has the strength (and of course the limitations) of the recluse, who, though not afraid of the world, always stands at a slight angle to it....He may be prevailed upon to begin a sentence—an immense complicated yet shapely sentence, full of parentheses that never get mixed and of reservations that really do reserve; a sentence that moves with logic to its foreseen end, yet to an end that is always more vivid and thrilling than one foresaw.... And despite its intellectual richness and human outlook, despite the matured charity of its judgements, one feels that it too stands at a slight angle to the universe: it is the sentence of a poet.[82]

Building on this line of thought extending from Forster to Ahmed, I posit that a slant-wise approach as found in Nyro's handling of song form can be understood as a queer aesthetic orientation, expressing different relations to time and different modes of attachment to shared cultural forms.

[82] E.M. Forster, "The Poetry of C.P. Cavafy," in *Pharos and Pharillon* (Hogarth Press, 1923), 91-97, https://archive.org/stream/pharosandpharill030745mbp/pharosandpharill030745mbp_djvu.txt

Conclusion

Nyro's song "Luckie," the first track on *Eli*, boldly announces her presence as an artist, as she introduces herself by bombastically declaring, "Yes I'm ready, so come on Luckie," with full-voiced singing backed by a horn and string arrangement. Key elements of Nyro's aesthetic and approach to her art are on display in this song, which showcases the results of her creative control, her genre hybridity, and her queer aesthetic sensibility.

While the album, Kort suggests,[1] charts a coming of age, "Luckie," despite being the first track, by no means suggests an immature artist. The confidence and conviction Nyro conveys in this entrance comes across in her vocal performance, as well as her approach to making the album according to her artistic vision. While *Eli* was her second album, it was the first under her creative control, and "Luckie" marks the start of her self-directed career in this sense. Having taken legal action to break from her contracts with Artie Mogull and Verve/Folkways, Nyro had free rein at Columbia, even if this took frequent assertion to maintain. With David Geffen, newly acting as her manager, she held her own publishing rights via the publishing company the two set up, Tuna Fish Music, the subsequent sale of which to Columbia gave Nyro financial security. The album rings out with arrangements by Charlie Calello—who Nyro had wanted to work with on her previous album—who designed parts to fit Nyro's writing rather than curtailing her songs to fit a more standard mold, despite the budget overruns that resulted. On "Luckie," Calello complements Nyro's Broadway big-band sensibility with a brassy, punchy arrangement.

For listeners taking in the album, listening to "Luckie" is preceded by the first impression given by the album jacket design, which features Nyro's downcast glance against a

[1] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 59.

dark background, and the perfume of the lyric sheet. Neither of these aspects give any suggestion of Broadway and the exuberance of Nyro's writing and Calello's arrangements found inside. Instead, these elements—created under Nyro's guidance—suggest a seriousness and sense of artistry more associated with the nascent singer-songwriter genre. "Luckie," bursting through the door as it does aurally, immediately flies in the face of those expectations. Nyro's lyrics suggest commonplace, even stock sentiments in declaring "Luckie's taking over and his clover shows," and repeating "I'm gonna go get Luckie." But the lyrics also pull towards seriousness and poetry, with evocative, cryptic descriptions and a cast of characters including the Devil and the Captain. After the first line declaring "Yes I'm ready, so come on Luckie," Nyro continues, "Well, there's an avenue of Devil who believe in stone/You can meet the Captain at the dead-end zone." This obtuse yet significance-laden writing pervades *Eli*, and introduces symbolic figures—the Captain, God, and the Devil—that recur especially throughout *Eli* and *NYT*. These poetic lyrics sit alongside the almost cliché references to luck and coarser images like "dig them potatoes if you've never dug your girl before." In these brief moments of the opening of *Eli*, Nyro is evoking genres of singer-songwriter, Broadway, and soul, and cues in all of these directions cycle without coming to rest in any one as a predominant point of reference. As the song and album progresses, this list only expands.

But perhaps the most striking aspect of "Luckie" is Nyro's play with its meter and form. Alternating between straight and shuffle feel, it exemplifies Nyro's tendency to shift feel and time at will, often many times in one song. While the insistent feel of the opening line in straight rhythm, markedly different from the more relaxed shuffle feel of what follows, could be excused as a distinct intro, its recurrence—abruptly, mid-song—insists on its connection to the rest of the song. This recurrence is an unexpected turn of events, as Nyro inserts this introductory material

immediately after the end of the song's chorus, where a verse or bridge would normally be expected. She does follow it with a bridge, but the disruption of this phrase's straight feel is carried over, and an additional three-measure phrase in shuffle feel is inserted to transition back from the main straight bridge to the shuffle verse. The outro reverts to straight feel and recalls the introduction material to close. While "Luckie" is not the most formally aberrant of Nyro's songs, it showcases her play with formal design and time that I have argued reflects a queer aesthetic sensibility. The artistic control, genre hybridity, and queer aesthetic sensibility already evident in "Luckie" persisted throughout Nyro's career in different forms.

The journey of the song's development, leading to the version that ended up on *Eli*, equally reflects Nyro's artistic principles. When Nyro auditioned for Artie Mogull in 1966, two years prior to the release of *Eli*, she performed a still inchoate version of the song that became "Luckie," under the title "Luckie's Takin' Over."[2] Many of the key lyrical elements are present, but the song is a far cry from what she eventually released. It is unremarkable in both form and meter. This is not to say that Nyro was not already innovating; indeed, her dance with conventions can be seen clearly elsewhere in her songwriting of the time. Reflecting on the themes of the pop music of her youth, Nyro was clear that, as she commented in a 1968 interview, "I always knew that 'Moon/June' was not what love was about."[3] In another song played for Mogull during the audition, "Moon Song," she does indeed rhyme those two words, but it is already evident that her lyrics are inclined towards the abstract, gathering cliché phrases in a way that sheds sense while infusing sensuous impressions, saying to her lover that she will "pocket a star fresh from June." "Luckie's Takin' Over," however, leans more heavily on the stock imagery and common forms of popular song. But its transformation into "Luckie," as heard

[2] These recordings were recently (September 2021) released as *Go Find the Moon: The Audition Tape*, where this song has been again titled "Luckie," although it had previously been in unofficial circulation as "Luckie's Takin' Over." Nyro's intended title for this earlier version is not clear, and I am maintaining the alternative title for clarity.
[3] Kloman, "Laura Nyro: She's the Hippest—and Maybe the Hottest?," D32.

on *Eli*, displays Nyro's intentional development of her aesthetic. Nyro's cultivation of her aesthetic, even prior to her move to Columbia, is evident in this song's trajectory as she held back "Luckie's Takin' Over" from release until it she had developed it into something truly her own.

Since Nyro's death, her music has been championed by other artists, bringing it to new audiences via cover versions as was the case during her lifetime. Notable tributes are *Time and Love: The Music of Laura Nyro*, a collection of covers by women musicians released shortly after Nyro's death, the 2014 Billy Childs-led *Map to the Treasure: Reimagining Laura Nyro*, containing collaborations between Childs and an array of performers, and Judy Kuhn's 2007 *Serious Playground: The Songs of Laura Nyro*. Additionally, a compilation of covers entitled *Sassafras & Moonshine: The Songs of Laura Nyro*, released in the UK in 2012, gathers together covers by various artists recorded from 1967 to 2007. Artists on this collection come predominantly from pop and R&B, including The Staple Singers, Mama Cass, The Supremes, and Peggy Lipton (of Mod Squad fame); the vast majority are female. This album of existing covers draws almost exclusively on songs from Nyro's first three albums, with one from her fourth, *CATBOS*; the albums mentioned above similarly skew to the early part of her career, including more from *CATBOS*, but only one later song, "To a Child" (*MS*), which appears on both the Childs and Kuhn albums. These tribute efforts include musicians hailing from a variety of genres, but skew somewhat towards jazz as well as R&B. This is also the case for an album of covers released during Nyro's lifetime, *The Music of Laura Nyro* by Ron Frangipane and His Orchestra (1971), which presents sweet big band-style arrangements of songs from *MTAND* and *Eli* (and the liner notes draw attention to the better-known covers of Nyro's songs already circulating at the time,

effectively expressing that she was not as well known as a performer). While jazz was far from the most prominent genre in Nyro's hybrid mix, it has proved to be an inviting avenue of approach to her music. Even so, as a conceptual category and musical tradition, it does not provide a helpful frame to introduce new listeners to her music nor does it offer a path to canonicity; nor does any one of the other genres represented.

As Nyro commented to *Down Beat*, "If anybody could be miscast, it's me—that's been my problem, because, if you put my music in the wrong place, it becomes a freak. I don't fall into categories and people constantly want to put me in categories, but I refuse."[4] Suggesting that Nyro's music and legacy is better understood and appreciated in light of genre hybridity and a queer aesthetic sensibility, as I propose, does not help to transform her into a pop icon nor add her to canons that she has been left out of. But to shoehorn her into a category that she exceeds, as is evident by the list of caveats following claims to her status as a singer-songwriter, for example, makes her a "freak," and invites limits that she refused. Her slippage from "my music" to "I" in the above quotation is also instructive, as this rejection of categories extended to her sexual orientation. Approaching her life and music with attention to the various threads she wove together, as her refusal of categories suggests, offers a richer understanding of the hybridity and fluidity found there, and does not pursue a belated stardom that she avoided in her lifetime.

Nyro's career, as it was, from Carnegie Hall to weekend dates at small clubs—rather than the other way around—would often be taken as a sign of failure. Certainly, this is how Geffen regards her career after his involvement in it ended. But Nyro did not share this opinion, finding her own successes according to a different metric. In her approach to her life, and in the sentiments expressed in her lyrics increasingly over the course of her career, it is evident that Nyro conceived of value in her pursuit of music on her own terms, in her home life, sexual

[4] Albertson, "Laura Nyro: From the Heart"

pleasure, and more broadly, in aspiring to a more just world. She indulged in travel, sharing the experience with friends, but kept a spartan home. A visitor to her Danbury house, producer Joe Wissert, remarked, "There was *nothing* there. Talk about sparse! There was a small gas range. There was a piano, a bench, and a little cot bed. It blew me away."[5] While she could have afforded more lavish surroundings, this was not her idea of the home or life she desired, and she focused instead on other priorities and pleasures. Her celebrations were also uniquely her own, and did not resemble the typical spoils of a financial success. Kort reports an outing to mark one of Nyro's early achievements, as recalled by Nyro's friend Lee Housekeeper:

> "She said she'd promised herself that when she had a hit record she was going to take a limousine to this particular White Castle and get some sliders," says Housekeeper. "She was telling me how her classmates had made fun of her. I said, 'Don't you want to get out of the car and thumb your nose at someone?' She said no. It was just a private little experience she wanted to have."[6]

While Nyro deviated from the norms of stardom and success, she prioritised her music-making and took her career seriously, pursuing a life and aesthetic of her own design. An avid list-maker, many of Nyro's preoccupations and desires are recorded in notebooks she kept (as well as on other materials at hand, including scraps of paper and coffee filters). I will highlight three excerpts from notebooks written later in her life that express aspects of her priorities and passions.

1. Performance preparation

A set list for a practice performance lines most of the left side of the page. Below and on the right, inserting new chunks of words on angles wherever they might fit, consuming the page, Nyro includes notes about how she intends to perform particular aspects, and reminders of chord

[5] Kort, *Soul Picnic*, 154.
[6] Ibid., 105.

progressions. At the top of the page, she includes prepared stage patter. It consists of fairly basic comments, but she has nonetheless written them out and layered them with revisions. She begins, "Thank you-- I've been a songwriter ~~for the~~ all winter + I~~'m~~ just started out going out singing again + I'd like to sing you some new songs," and adds "studying the art of musical architecture again" which it appears she intended to insert after "been a songwriter." In another prepared comment, presumably intended to be delivered after "Woman of the World," she writes,

> That's a new song that I'm finishing writing still as I'm traveling (touring) and
> next is learned
> ~~learned~~ at this ~~was~~ a song I (first) sang many years ago when I had all the answers
> about 15 (when I knew everything).[7]

Nyro's precision regarding how she wanted to phrase what many would consider to be passing remarks is striking. While she retreated from the limelight, she maintained her own high standards for her work as a performing musician. This precisely-crafted stage patter suggests a strong sense of professionalism as well as careful curating of all aspects of her art and image as a performer.

2. Mothership (crone-house?)

Contemplating what would have become her middle years had she not passed away, Nyro (likely in the mid to late 1980s) wrote out a list of "What I want in my 40's + will have." While she did not end up moving from her home in Danbury, included in this list is "a wonderful home (crone-house?)."[8] She assessed potential locations with concerns such as whether it lent itself to cycling or that it "Mite Be too WHITE."[9] She later elaborated upon her ideas for relocating, articulating

[7] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 1, folder 5, personal notebook, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.
[8] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 1, folder 9, personal notebook, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.
[9] Ibid.

the features that she sought in a new home, in this latter instance dubbed a "Mothership." This list begins with the priorities "1) Art 2) Progressive feminist resources in community – for women [everyone] and children 3) Home environment – feel like mothership A) nature with water – that magic B) And Privacy."[10] Nyro's concerns over a potential home city being "too WHITE" suggests such concerns informed her view of the world she wished to live in, and likely also directly for the environment she wished for her son, of South Asian background on his father's side, to grow up in. Reflecting Nyro's aspirations as well as her concerns about the world, this list of priorities suggests a kind of utopian outlook.

Nyro also elaborated her vision for her home life in these same notes. This list begins with "Me + Art" (and it appears that she had initially written "work" in place of "Art," but scratched it out). After this, she includes "Me + Gil" (her son), "Me + Dogs," "Me + Maria" (her partner), "Me + friends + family," "Me + Nature," "Me + Nanny + other child." As her notes make clear, being a mother and a partner were important roles to Nyro, but at the same time, these were not her purpose or sole priority. She placed importance on her music as well as her family, and as other commentary attests, to feminism as being part of the vision for the present as well as the future she envisioned.

3. Turn-ons

Elsewhere, Nyro made a list of a number of her turn-ons and turn-offs. The former includes "Reading poetry – feminist visionary writing, spiritual personal affirmations," "Sensual sexual

[10] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 2, folder 1, personal notebook, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

fantasies," "Noguchi lamps," and "Hot pink, pale pink, Black, Red clothes," while the latter includes "Dealing with Ed Morgan"[11] and "Any bureaucratic paperwork."[12]

Notably, also included in her list of turn-ons is "Fitting the world to me, since I don't quite fit in the world." Nyro did this in many ways throughout her life. She shaped her circumstances to suit her, and forged a career that lasted until her death in an industry that typically demands sales and star power to do such a thing. Taking in popular music of disparate genres, rather than choosing to work in one, she drew them together into a sound that maintained meaningful connections to its sources of inspiration but forged a space beyond them. She took well-worn pop song forms and tropes and transformed them into her own distinctive, idiosyncratic style.

Nyro did not chase after stardom, but sought to make her own art and life according to her own rubric of success and to reach people with her music. Approaching her legacy, I aim not to move her belatedly towards the channels of fame that she avoided and that do not hold a ready place for an oeuvre or career such as hers. Rather, I offer tools to approach her music that may make us more sensitive to its value and richness. I have touched on a handful of facets that I understand to be significant to Nyro's aesthetic and to the career she crafted. Nonetheless, there are many more aspects I did not engage with, including the religious imagery and gospel influence in her music, as well as others that I only briefly addressed, such as how Nyro's later music fits with (and does not fit with) women's music. I also suggest that a utopian vein runs through Nyro's music and view of life, and this domain warrants further consideration. Nyro's oeuvre offers many further sites of inquiry to be pursued, and, I hope, provokes us to enrich our appreciation and

[11] I did not encounter other mentions of Ed Morgan in Nyro's notes, nor does his name appear in histories of the industry; I would venture that he was a functionary at Columbia, though cannot say for certain.
[12] Patty DiLauria Collection on Laura Nyro, box 1, folder 6, personal notebook, Library and Archives, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

understanding not only of her music but of the musics she draws upon and other hybrid, queer artists who like Nyro become "freaks" against a backdrop of categories they do not fit.

Reviewing *Eli*, in an otherwise generally favourable critique, Jon Landau wrote, "The cumulative impact of Laura's excesses make[s] this a difficult album to listen to all the way through."[13] The "excesses" of Nyro's music—of intensity, formal detours, and of genre categories—are undoubtedly part of what keeps it at the sidelines. Yet they are also are the features that enrich the world Nyro creates and offers to those who wish to listen. Indeed, many listeners have opted to follow Nyro's detours, "strollin' at ease in the great green harmonies" and "walk[ing] the path of heart and soul."[14] Nyro's paths are not entirely remote, and indeed cross with well-worn tracks, including those we would wish to avoid, like Orientalism. But other intersections present fresh vantage points on the familiar, both within pop music and in the experiences of the world she conveys. In these renewed outlooks and detours, Nyro's music —"sound architecture and rose and blues"[15]—offers novel structures through which to perceive its points of contact and expresses a sensorially-enriched experience, inviting listeners who are drawn to, rather than confounded by, its queer "excesses" and hybridity.

[13] Landau, review of *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, 29.
[14] "Serious Playground" (*AITD*); "Trees of the Ages" (*MS*).
[15] "Serious Playground" (*AITD*).

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