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"Staccato signals of constant information": telegraphic analogues in 1960s/1970s popular music

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Abstract

This essay discusses examples in 1960s-1970s popular music of Philip Tagg's "telegraphic anaphone" or Morse code museme—rapid, high-pitched, monotonal chatter used in news themes—in terms of media "noise". Following McLuhan's insight that a medium's message is not content but change of scale, pace or pattern, the museme is metonymic for the transformative effects of new technologies, a metacommunicative gesture that registers the impact of a medium as "noise", the shock of modernity. It also relates to stammering, heralding but also impeding communication, generated by anxiety/urgency. It plays a mediating role in musical structures, occurring in introductions or between sections, and relates to innovative sounds/scenes—Motown, Nashville, 1960s LA, UK glam, and German electronica, connotations changing according to historical and cultural locations. An analogical emulation of electronic sounds, the museme became redundant with the rise of electronic music, although the "stutter" continues into hip-hop via scratching and sampling.

KEYWORDS: Musematic analysis, telegraph, 1960s-1970s popular music, musicology, mediation

Introduction

"You Keep Me Hangin' On" – The Supremes (1966); "Communication Breakdown" – Roy Orbison (1966); "Western Union" – The Five Americans (1967); "Wichita

Lineman" – Glen Campbell (1968); "Melting Pot" – Blue Mink (1970); "Starman" – David Bowie (1972); "Radioactivity" – Kraftwerk (1975). What all these examples have in common, apart from being popular Western pop/rock songs/recordings released in the 1960s-1970s, is a musical device, or a "museme", referred to as "anaphonic telegraphy" (Tagg and Clarida 2003: 487). The museme is "a minimal unit of musical meaning" (Tagg 2003: 84), the basis of musematic analysis, or semiotic study of popular music. This is the method of this article, analysing the above examples chronologically to show the trajectory of this motif, which declined as telegraphy became obsolete, although the medium's redundancy was also linked to its noisiness.

"Staccato signals of constant information" is how Paul Simon (1986) characterised this museme or "composite anaphone": the rapid, irregular rhythms of "news music", widely used throughout the 1970s and 1980s, in TV productions like *Sportsnight* and news and current affairs themes (Tagg and Clarida 2003). "The rhythm of this type of anaphone resembles (…) the unpredictable patterns of dots and dashes heard while sending or receiving Morse code messages, a sound associated with immediacy and urgency since the early days of telegraphy" (Tagg 2013: 512). This museme incorporates "one-pitch patterns whose internal sound events are presented in alternately rapid (dashes, for example quavers) or very rapid succession (dots, for example semiquavers)" (Tagg and Clarida 2003: 487). Generally played on electric instruments, high notes on guitar or organ, the device has technological transmission connotations.

Harmonically, the museme functions as a monophonic, inverted pedal suspended over a chord progression: the pedal remains constant while harmonies (usually) shift underneath to create tension. In terms of song structure, the device tends to feature in song introductions, and between chorus and verse, thus highlighting its mediating function. It also occasionally features in choruses, in which case it performs more of a highlighting function. Thematically, it often links to lyrics about communication: "Communication Breakdown", "Western Union" (about receiving a telegram), and "Wichita Lineman" (about working on a telephone line). "Starman" is about alien communication via radio. The thematic link in "Melting Pot" is the underlying idea of global communication through a "peace anthem". "You Keep Me Hangin' On", the first occurrence of the museme, could link to telephone communication. One could also interpret it in broader terms: Motown's "Sound of Young America", achieved through the assembly line, acceleration, democratisation of the automobile and the transistor radio. By the mid-1970s, Morse code was becoming obsolete. "Radioactivity" by Kraftwerk is discussed as signalling the end of the "telegraphic anaphone"—literalising it (the track uses Morse code), ironising and superseding it (the electronic "beeps" of code had become effectively indistinguishable from new musical instruments like synthesisers). However, the distinctive "stuttering" of the museme did echo in punk and found new expression through sampling and scratching in hip hop. Part of my argument will be to suggest that along with the broader telegraphic media technology connotations, each example is also culturally and musically distinctive, responding to a unique milieu in space and time. Each of these songs will be discussed in its own section, both in terms of the museme as a medium, as noise, but also in terms of the specific culture, time and place of origin.

Having defined the telegraphic anaphone, Tagg and Clarida problematise it as:

> [S]o stylised by the seventies that even such explicitly telegrammatic cases as (…) Campbell's "Wichita Lineman" really present a different kind of musical sign (…) because the sounds of telegraphy had long since ceased to be part of people's sonic experience (…) the etymophony of news logo rhythms may be clear but its semiotic staying power (…) has yet to be explained (2003: 488).

If telegraphy was obsolete, why did its sound continue to resonate? Telegraphy had a distinctive sonic vocabulary, unlike most forms of communication, and not only transmitted and received messages but also signalled to non-telegraphers that messages were being communicated—it can be understood as metacommunicative "framing", or communication about communication (Bateson 1956). War films exemplify this use of Morse code—audiences would not understand the message, but would get the affect of urgency. Morse code also has a normative dimension: "The credibility value of Morse code is fetishised as signifying something so thorough, so unsullied by contradictory personal experience that it invites us to trust whatever tidings it brings" (Tagg and Clarida 2003: 490). According to Marshall McLuhan, "The telegraph brought the entire world of the living to the workman's breakfast table" (1969: 15). His claim does not have to be taken literally; rather it signals the ideological power of new media technologies.

Morse code, stammering and the shock of modernity

Morse code unites manual labour, mechanism and electronics. It requires human labour to enter the dots and dashes, but is mechanical in its translation of these into electric signals and electronic in its almost instantaneous transmission of these signals. It links both to human gesture and electronic mediation. Gesturally, it resembles stammering:

> a sound associated with stress, worry and urgency because even individuals who don't normally stutter are more likely to do so if under pressure to say something important instantaneously (…) short, quick notes clearly connect with fine-motoric rather than gross-motoric movement, with fingers tapping, or teeth chattering, rather than bodies bending, arms swirling or legs kicking (Tagg 2013: 513).

Thus, it connotes nervous energy and anxiety, possibly echoing McLuhan's insight that electronic media extend the nervous system (1964). Stammering is also metacommunicative as it anticipates but also impedes the delivery of a message, like Morse code. Arguably, the stammer became metonymic for youth culture's noisy inarticulacy, as in The Who's "My Generation" (1965) (1).

The affect of the telegraph is based around a paradox: it is the "sound of modernity"—Walter Benjamin's "shock" (1968); or Attali's noise as herald—"change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society" (Attali 1985: 14). But it is also obsolescent, highlighting the "noisiness" of the medium. The obsolescence of a medium makes its mechanism manifest; its noise becomes overbearing: "'If it works, it's obsolete'. When electric speed further takes over from mechanical movie sequences, then the lines of force in structures and in media become loud and clear" (McLuhan 1964: 12). This bears out Tagg and Clarida's argument that the

medium continues to "sound" even in (or because of) its obsolescence. Highlighting mediation, far from undermining authenticity, can reinforce it—just as tape hiss can signal authenticity in genres like lo-fi.

McLuhan defines mechanism as "a model of aggregation (…) that is achieved by fragmentation of any process and by putting the fragmented parts into a series" (McLuhan 1964: 11-12). Telegraphy exemplifies mechanism: it reduces language to a series of dots and dashes, delivered in linear sequence. Morse was the first use of binary code, anticipating computers. But McLuhan argues that in modernity, mechanism has sped up discrete fragments into a continuous flow, transforming experience. Either way, we no longer hear discrete fragments of content, but instead a background hum—the sound of the medium. The telegraphic anaphone proves McLuhan's tenet, "the medium is the message" (1964) to the degree that its affect is largely independent of its content. The museme is also medium-like in its mediating role in the musical text: occurring "in the middle", associated with the refrain, or at the beginning, in which case it can be thought of as interpolating or hailing the listener.

By representing the noise of communication, these texts highlight mediation. Although noise may be an obstacle to communication, it may also give rise to aesthetic pleasure. Arguably, these issues may manifest in a musical text as tension between musical and non-musical sounds, or between flow on the one hand, and noise on the other. The mechanical or fragment reading of communication noise balances its musical potential, for example, its interpretation as a rhythm, which is the difference between time as a sequence of discrete, equivalent units and "time as a generative force of invention and differentiation" (Crocker 2013: 8). Arguably, this latter awareness of the interpenetration of past and present is necessary to hear music.

"You Keep Me Hangin' On" (1966)

No. 234 in Rolling Stone's "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time" and the Supremes' eighth US number one in late 1966, "You Keep Me Hangin' On", a lyrically urgent addressing of a relationship on tenterhooks, is often heard as paradigmatic of the Motown Sound and ethos:

> [T]he (…) Supremes hits are the purest expression of the Motown sound (…) Diana Ross meshed seamlessly with the cyclical structure Holland-Dozier-Holland favored. Her singles resembled one long composition, each new release slightly modifying an element in the overall design, perhaps adding strings or punching the tempo up a notch. By "You Keep Me Hangin' On" (1966), the approach had become so polished that Diana Ross and the Supremes began to sound like an erotic gloss on the assembly-line existence Gordy had adopted in organizing Motown—and in this respect as well, the Supremes were the ultimate embodiment of the Motown ethos (McEwen and Miller 1978: 244).

The metaphor of mechanisation accelerated to a state of flow ("an erotic gloss") could be interpreted in terms of technological transformation through innovation and medium as "message" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967). "Pop music was being

revolutionized (…) by Motown, arriving from Detroit, a place without even a hint of cultural respectability. Produced by Berry Gordy, not only a young man but a black man" (Marsh 1985: 25). Gordy drew on Taylorist assembly-line techniques of the Detroit car factories where he had worked, to make Motown a "hit factory," improving efficiency and increasing productivity by breaking down work into manageable tasks and optimising workflows, including clear demarcations between songwriters, musicians, artists and audiences. Staff songwriters Holland-Dozier-Holland "completed two or three songs a day (…) working at them bit by bit. 'We would have parts of songs, like hooks or maybe parts of a verse, so that by the end of the day we would have something accomplished'" (George 1985: 117, quote from Lamont Dozier). David Morse added that "H-D-H ruthlessly cannibalize old songs for spare parts; verbal phrases, thematic ideas, musical figures, accompaniments, even saxophone solos are shuffled together and reworked from disc to disc; every song is a collage" (quoted in George 1985: 118). Mechanisation was key—recordings, words, licks, musicians and artists were treated as parts recombined until the optimum combination was found. Every track went through a quality control process that included multiple iterations ("Hangin'" took eight sessions to complete) to produce a continuous stream of hits, "the sound of Young America" (Rolling Stone n.d).

The automobile was ideologically allied with democratisation: "the car created highways and resorts that were not only very much alike in all parts of the land, but equally available to all", reflected in the outpouring of rock and roll songs about cars (McLuhan 1964: 221). Most critically, it affected the power and mobility of youth, whom Motown addressed through the new technology of transistorised car radios, optimising their sounds for this new medium:

> In quality control's offices Motown chief engineer Mike McClain built a minuscule, tinny-sounding radio designed to approximate the sound of a car radio. The high-end bias of Motown recordings can be partially traced to the company's reliance on this piece of equipment (George 1985: 114).

Motown recordings used heavy limiting and compression to equalise and maximise volume and equalisation that accentuated the highest and lowest frequencies to overcome the background noise of car engines; Gordy also had disk-cutting equipment installed at the studio so recordings could be assessed on-site in the right format (George 1985).

Motown fused Taylorist efficiency, capitalist entrepreneurship and Black creativity through collaboration (Smith 2001). "Hangin'" exemplifies the process, its distinctive Morse code-style guitar introduction connoting urgency, excitement, but also smooth-running machinery—like a new car (Figure 1).

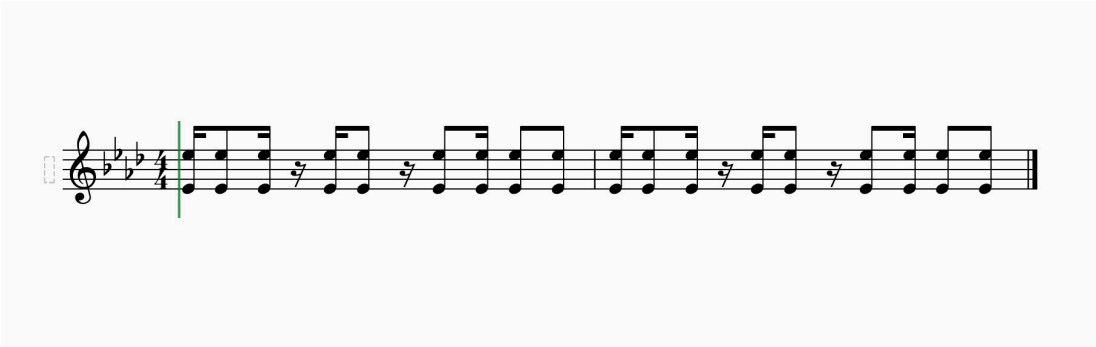

FIGURE 1. "You Keep Me Hangin' On"

Lamont Dozier dreamed up the guitar intro; top studio musician, guitarist Robert White played it; and Diana Ross, who became Motown's biggest star, sang the song. Both the galvanising guitar part and Ross's vocal shared a distinctive top-end sparkle that made Motown records stand out, while the propulsive bottom-end was supplied by bassist James Jamerson and drummer Benny Benjamin, the Funk Brothers. The assembly-line process could open Motown to accusations of Adorno-esque "standardisation", however:

> Through the mid-sixties, H-D-H's compositions and arrangements grew more ambitious (…) songs full of dramatic pauses, swelling instrumental passages, and unexpected rhythmic changes, H-D-H's "classical period". Brian Holland had been listening to a great deal of classical music, and studied the dynamics of tension and release so important to the form (George 1985: 118-9).

"Hangin'" was also musically unorthodox and innovative, with jarring harmonic shifts (from the G# major key of the intro/chorus to the tonally ambiguous verse, in B or E major, via an unexpected chromatic pivot of A major). Alongside "classical" complexity, the track also reflected rock influence, in the prominent electric guitar, a new sound for Motown. Its syncopated, percussive sound was reminiscent of Black rhythmic innovators like Bo Diddley and James Brown, and anticipated later soul/funk like "Shaft" (1971), when the guitar sound, albeit in a lower, more guttural register, and put through a wah-wah pedal, became allied to Blaxploitation narratives of urban crime. White's part, which repeats with each chorus, is an octave figure in D#, panning from left to right, underpinned with organ chords (G# D#m F# E) that increasingly clash with the riff, conveying anxiety, restlessness and alienation. Ross's spoken asides ("And there ain't nothing I can do about it!") echoed the deterministic urgency of the stuttering motif, which in turn could be heard as challenging the "Western hostility to repetition" that made traditional musicology resistant to Black music (Danielsen 2006: 154-9).

"Communication Breakdown" (1966)

This Roy Orbison single was released in November 1966 ("Hangin'" was released in October) so it seems that the telegraphic leitmotif arose here independently of Motown. It can be heard as updating the Nashville Sound of Nashville RCA Studio

B, associated with producers like Chet Atkins, and Orbison's early hits. Here, he pursues a more contemporary folk-rock direction. Unlike the Supremes song, Orbison's was not a US hit, although it was popular in Australia and New Zealand.

Despite its relative commercial failure, "Communication Breakdown" can be heard, like the Supremes track, as at once innovative, and a sophisticated commentary on technology, alienation and communication failure. The song was about how Orbison's marriage to Claudette Frady had "gone wrong", but her death in a motorbike accident earlier that year imparted an even grimmer atmosphere (Amburn 1990: 154). Orbison's songs "possess a psychological complexity that is commonly believed not to have existed in pop music until Dylan and The Beatles" (Marsh 1999: 47). Often entertaining extravagant fantasies that can suggest "psychic disturbance" (highlighted by David Lynch's use of "In Dreams" in *Blue Velvet* [1986]), Orbison's complex, dramatic songs defied songwriting convention—some, like "In Dreams", were virtually "through-composed", that is, continuously evolving, featuring little or no repetition (Lehman 2003). "Communication Breakdown" is formally complex: after a brief introduction featuring the museme, there are two verses with refrains (the verses also contain metric irregularities that support Orbison's idiosyncratic vocal phrasing); then bridge A/refrain, bridge B/refrain, refrain repeated over different chords (anticipating the coda), bridge C/refrain, coda/refrain. The point of continuity throughout is the refrain, "communication breakdown", always accompanied by the characteristic monophonic "telegraph" meme, played on an electric 12-string (Figure 2).

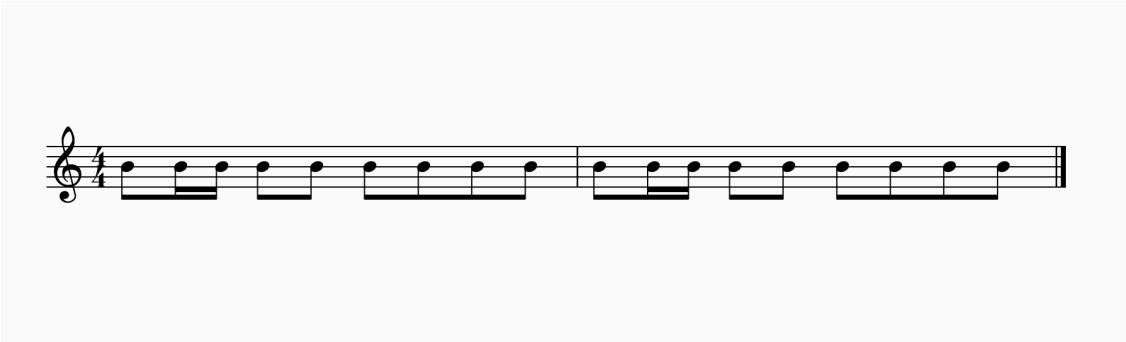

FIGURE 2. "Communication Breakdown"

Rhythmically, Orbison was influenced by the Mexican music he heard in his Texas childhood, and syncopated bolero, rumba, and flamenco rhythms are common in his work—the telegraphic motif uses an abbreviated rumba rhythm, demonstrating how the motif, as with Motown, was infused with a specific flavour, exotic and nostalgic on the one hand, but also suggesting, in this case, prickles of paranoia (Amburn 1990) (2). The electric 12-string suggests folk-rock "jangle", like the Byrds, and the recording mostly lacks the orchestration of his earlier work. Lehman (2003) compares it to Simon and Garfunkel's lyrical expressions of loneliness and alienation like "The Sound of Silence" (1965). The melancholy is reinforced by the introduction of a sustained low note, possibly strings, underneath the refrain, starting at 1'57", playing a tonic E against the sustained B in the pedal, an empty fifth sustained over the coda's double plagal cadence (A E B), producing a striking, solemn, dirge-like effect. The telegraphic motif here supports the idea of the

imminent delivery of a message of doom, albeit leavened with rhythmic life and harmonic complexity.

"Western Union" (1967)

The Five Americans were a Texan garage band who appeared on Lenny Kaye's 1972 *Nuggets* compilation (although not this song, their only hit, reaching number 5 in the US in early 1967). The garage rock of *Nuggets* combined second-hand R&B influences (via British Invasion groups like the Rolling Stones) with early psychedelia, to produce a sound which led to "punk rock", a narrative coined by early 1970s writers at *Creem* to reclaim authentic rock and roll from the hippie counterculture. Compositionally, "Western Union" was a letter song, a well-established genre in pop music, with a couple of technological twists—the group's signature sound was a Vox Continental organ, which helps supply the characteristic pedal, along with electric guitar and an insistent "tuh tutuh tutuh" vocal refrain. "Mike Rabon, our lead guitar player, was just fooling around with his guitar when he came up with a unique sound," member Norman Mezell said. "It sort of reminded us of a telegraph key. That's when we decided to write 'Western Union'" (Pore-Lee-Dunn Productions n.d.). Once again, the telegraphic motif is associated with innovation, if not gimmickry. The song title refers to the US telecommunications company—the follow-up single was entitled "Zip Code".

A notable feature of the track is its monotonality—the majority of the song uses just two chords—D major and Dsus4. This makes it extremely drone-y, especially when combined with the pedal, which emphasises A, a fifth relation, like the preceding examples (Figure 3). The drone in turn suggests psychedelia, which often manifested as fascination with sustained tones, extracting maximum interest out of minimal stimuli. The psychedelic drone had a double valence—primitivist, archaic and exotic—"the drone as synecdoche for archaic folksiness and peasant simplicity which harmonic practices among the aristocracy and merchant classes had supposedly superseded" (Tagg 2001: 84). The drone can also be technological, producing the "unified awareness" that McLuhan saw as arising from electronic media (1964: 249). At the same time, it can represent grinding urban monotony just as much as hallucinogenic bliss, because the other aspect of Nuggets was its influence on punk (Bannister 2006). A proto-punk track like "I Wanna Be Your Dog" by The Stooges (1969) featured producer John Cale's piano stabbing a single note throughout, echoing his Velvet Underground work and the influence of New York minimalist composers like La Monte Young.

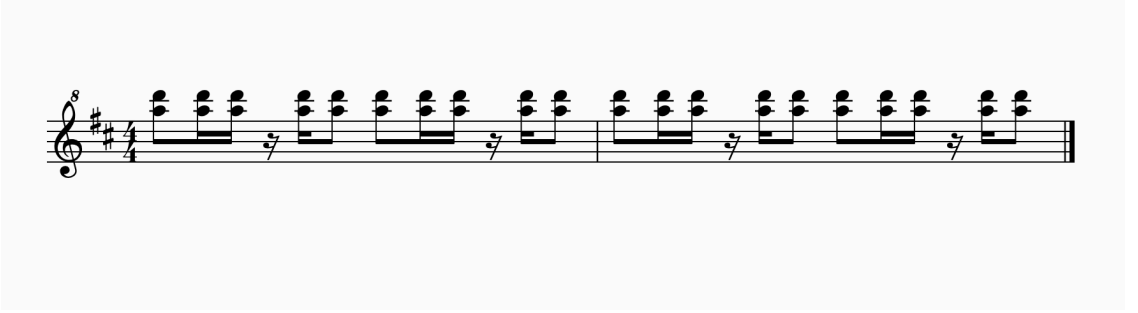

FIGURE 3. "Western Union"

Unlike psychedelia, the Velvet Underground used extreme volume to achieve "ego death", imagined in much less benign terms than the counterculture, achieved not through psychedelics but through speed and heroin. So, in addition to its telegraphic connotations, the museme here connects to avant-garde minimalism, repetition, and their connections to altered states, whether heaven-sent or hell-bent.

The "stammering" effect typical of the telegraphic motif is literalised in "Western Union" as the pedal is echoed in the vocals, which repeat the morse motif at the end of the chorus and in a call/response with the lead vocal in the verse. The lyric is a "dear John" tale of rejection, so it is possible to read the stammer as produced by anger, grief or frustration (although the singer also announces he has found a new love later in the song).

A final twist to the monotonal nature of "Western Union" is its possible relation to the flatness of the US Midwest (also a theme in "Communication Breakdown" and "Wichita Lineman"). Tagg notes how it is "no surprise to find plains and other large, empty, motionless spaces manifested in terms of static harmony (…) and how it can in euroclassical contexts also be understood in terms of a drone" (Tagg 2001: 83-4). The image of telephone poles stretching into the distance is paradigmatic in this regard, producing a mythical America of endless possibility (a later example being Tom Petty's "American Girl" (1977), which mythopoetically combines psychedelic jangle with punk drone).

"Wichita Lineman" (1968)

The song, a no. 3 US hit, was commissioned by Glen Campbell as a follow-up to "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" (also set in the US Midwest and written by Jimmy Webb). Campbell had started in LA as a session guitarist, one of the Wrecking Crew, so again part of a distinctive "sound"—1960s West Coast pop—that was rapidly becoming dominant in commercial music (3). Campbell could also sing and was becoming a star in the country/adult contemporary pop market. Now he was looking for another hit, and Webb recalls that Campbell kept phoning him while he was writing the song, to check its progress: in this sense, the "lineman was still on the line".

Webb, who had grown up in the Midwest, recalled seeing linemen working: "An image occurred to [Webb] of a long, flat Kansas country road, with telegraph poles careering away from him in the distance, shimmering in the summer sun. No contrast, just horizon (…) a long line of telegraph poles disappearing into the distance and a lonely figure suspended against the endless sky (…) A featureless world, like being on Mars" (Jones 2019: 92, 97). It added up to a portrait of a lonely man—the first "existential country song" (Jones 2019).

Once again, the example strains at the limits of genre, fusing country, baroque pop and easy-listening. Harmonically, the song is complex, starting in F major but changing key mid-verse to D major (approximately at the word "overload"). It has been suggested that the F major section deals with the lineman's immediate situation, while the latter section, which includes the refrain, alludes to his unrequited romantic feelings, "and I need you more than want you / And I want you for all time" (Rooksby 2001). The telegraphic motif (Figure 4) seems to reinforce the latter, as it comes in at the end of the refrain and (as in many of the succeeding

examples), mediates between the refrain and the next verse. Rooksby suggests that this section, repeated in the coda, features a "Bb-C change, harmonically either IV-V in F major or bVI-bVII in D major, never resolving — as we leave the lineman suspended between two lives, just as he is suspended between the earth and sky" (2001: 54).

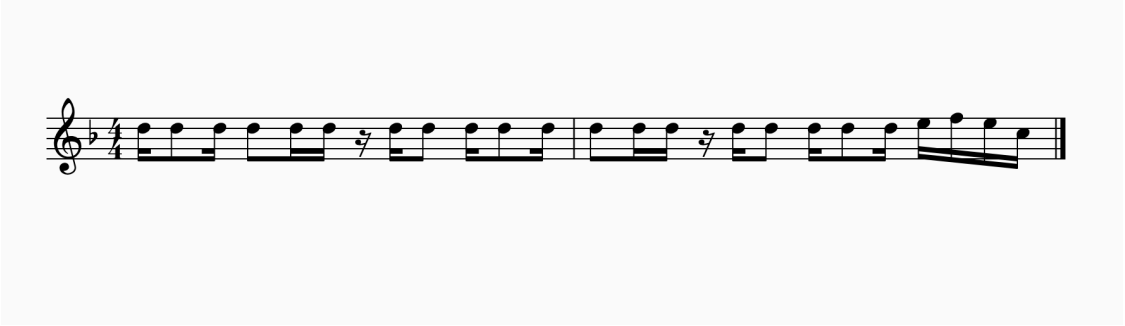

FIGURE 4. "Wichita Lineman"

Thus, the whole "telegraphic" section has an unearthly quality, emphasised with high strings (arranged by Al De Lory). The Morse code part was added with Webb's "Gulbransen electronic organ (…) Its unique 'bubbling' sound echoed what he imagined to be the noise the signals made as they passed though the (…) wires" (Jones 2019: 109).

> Glen said, "Here at the end I want it sound like (…) 'Telstar'" (…) I just held these two notes down, and the organ takes these two notes, either a fourth or a fifth, and it cycles them up and down the keyboard (…) a very shivery, icy, almost like outer space kind of sound. It sounded very technological (…) Glen went crazy and said, "We have to get that, we gotta put that on the fade" (…) I played open fourths and fifths up and down the keyboard with only two fingers (…) a fascinating tintinnabulation a little like the Northern lights" (Webb, quoted in Jones 2019: 110).

Once again, technological novelty is at the forefront of the Morse sound. Interestingly, both Campbell and Webb heard it as "eerie" and "alien", connotations developed later in texts like "Starman", where the message emanates from a "beeping satellite" (Tagg and Clarida 2003: 490). But the motif also suggests Midwest spaces and skies—along with the tinkling sounds of messages on the wire, all emphasising the narrator's isolation. So, the meaning of the motif changes—still about the sound of communication, but overlaid with rural isolation and existential emptiness.

"Melting Pot" (1970)

The late 1960s and early 1970s pop charts featured several "global anthems"—influenced by hippie utopianism, allied to McLuhan's interconnected "global village". Beginning with the Beatles' 1967 broadcast of "All You Need Is Love" on *Our World* (the first live, multinational, multi-satellite television production), a

range of paeans to universal "brotherhood" appeared: the Fifth Dimension's "Age of Aquarius" and Sly and the Family Stone's "Everyday People" (both 1969); quasi-religious appeals like "Oh Happy Day" by the Edwin Hawkins Singers (1969), "My Sweet Lord" (George Harrison 1970), "Joy To The World" (Three Dog Night) and "Imagine" (John Lennon)—both 1971. Advertisers also latched on to the trend: Coca-Cola's "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing" (1971) became a hit for the UK's New Seekers. The term "melting pot" acquired its meaning of ethnic assimilation and elimination of cultural difference via Israel Zingwill's eponymous 1908 play, which locates the US as the melting pot of a new global society.

"Melting Pot" was written by Roger Cook and Peter Greenaway (who also wrote "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing"). Once again, there was a "sound" in the background, as the multi-racial group Blue Mink was largely made up of UK session musicians, such as Herbie Flowers (bass) and Madeline Bell (vocals) who performed on many hits of the period, often written by Cook/Greenaway. It became the group's debut single and the first 1970s number one in the UK. Although not a US hit (ironically), it fitted the global unity/peace anthem genre, with its ethnically diverse cast, rousing chorus, and lyrics about "a get-along scene (…) a beautiful dream", although some of its language, while intended as a send-up of racial stereotypes, would later be condemned (RadioToday 2019).

As a "singalong", the track is harmonically straightforward, based around a repeated I IV V (F Bb C) chord sequence common in 1960s pop, which Tagg (2001: 442) terms the "La Bamba loop", after Richie Valens' 1958 hit. The morse code motif, an octave figure in unison on piano and electric guitar, repeats an F over a descending chord sequence (F Eb Db C) at the end of the chorus, forming a bridging section between chorus and verse—giving the impression that the chorus is being relayed around the world by electronic media, a connotation reinforced by the underlying harmony's temporary departure from diatonicism (Figure 5). Media's connecting quality is symbolised in the bridging sound of the motif: structurally it performs a similar mediating role in "Wichita Lineman" and David Bowie's "Starman" (4).

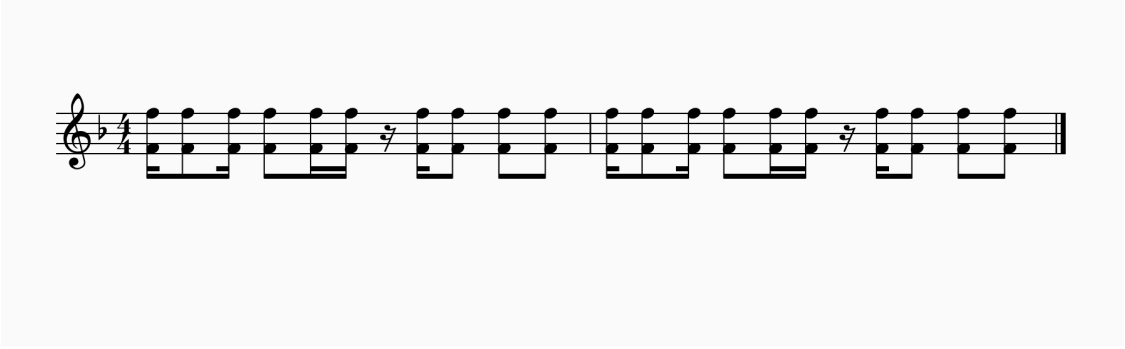

FIGURE 5. "Melting Pot"

"Starman" (1972)

Connected to 1960s McLuhanite "globalism", US technological utopianism promised to expand human presence into space. Narratives of alien contact had underlined the power of electronic media—Orson Welles' 1938 broadcast *The War*

of the Worlds demonstrated how easily radio audiences, already edgy with the sound of Morse code, could be misled. But influential texts like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) suggested alternatives to Cold War paranoia. David Bowie had already imagined himself as an astronaut in 1969's "Space Oddity" (used by the BBC in coverage of the Apollo 11 moon landing in July that year). He continued to address galactic themes in "Life on Mars" (1971) and "Oh You Pretty Things" (1971), adopting the persona of Messianic spaceman Ziggy Stardust on the eponymous 1972 album, for which "Starman" was the first single. Aptly, "Starman" deals with an alien who becomes a pop star, through the radio: "He was into Marshall McLuhan—he just thought the medium was the message, there's nothing deeper, that's it" (Battista 2022). Like Andy Warhol, Bowie thought that media impact was everything; content was overrated. These ideas also related to glam rock, the genre with which Bowie was now associating—its emphasis on glitter and fun could be read as the visual equivalent of telegraphic chatter.

A media magpie, Bowie plundered culture, constructing stardom through polysemic style and calculated outrage, creating a patchwork of allusions for fans to pick over. The introduction of "Starman", similar to "Space Oddity" (loosely strummed major 7ths on a 12-string acoustic), positions it as a sequel in the space race story. The narrator is listening to his radio when it fades and "Came back like a slow voice on a wave of pha-a-ase / That weren't no DJ, that was hazy cosmic jive"; signal noise blurring into the message. The music then pauses for the entry of the Morse motif, A notes, on a phased electric guitar, over descending chords A and G, very similar to "Melting Pot" (the difference being that the order is reversed so that the telegraphic motif precedes the chorus) (Figure 6). As in "Melting Pot", the sound implies broadcast, a hero's fanfare: "There's a starman waiting in the sky," also suggesting the sound of a "beeping satellite", an idea Bowie could have got from Pink Floyd's "Astronomy Domine" (1967). The chorus, like "Melting Pot", is a "singalong", using a common progression of diatonic chords in F major (F Dm Am C or I vi iii V), while the verse is centred around Gm, which, if regarded as ii of F major, introduces a feeling of expectation borne out by the chorus.

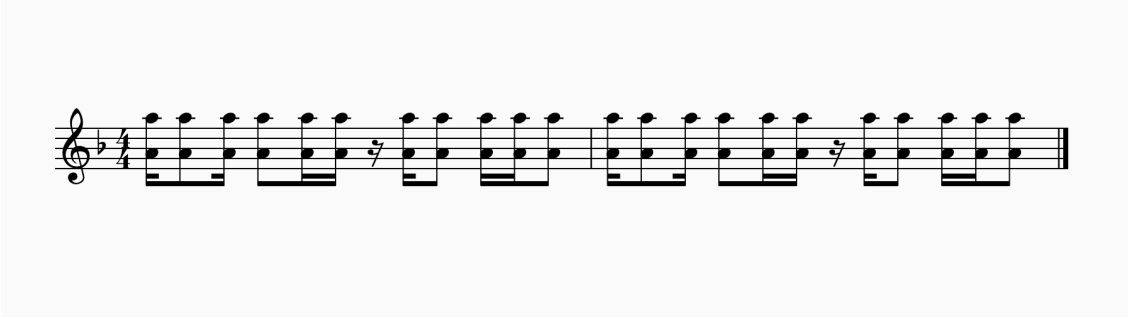

FIGURE 6. "Starman"

Bowie sings an octave jump on the chorus hook, a gesture of elevation; Campbell uses a similar vocal jump on the refrain, "still on the line". In Bowie's case it also alludes to Judy Garland's "Over the Rainbow", from another text about being saved by fantastic beings (*The Wizard of Oz*). Garland was also a camp icon, thereby tying Ziggy's alien-ness to his sexual identity, opening up a space of queer-ness:

"He'd like to come and meet us, but he thinks he'll blow our minds". But for all that, the chorus ends with an invocation to "boogie" familiar to most rock fans, pastiching glam rock compatriot Marc Bolan.

"Radioactivity" (1975)

If "Starman"associated telegraphy with the related (and more relevant) medium of radio, the title track of Kraftwerk's 1975 album, their first fully electronic effort, extends this association, revealing while also questioning its power. The telegraphic museme comes full circle—whereas in earlier examples, the museme was created analogically, by musical instruments, here the electronic sounds of the museme are of the same order as the sounds used by the group. Secondly, the track uses actual Morse code (to spell out the song title). Accordingly, it is not possible to notate what is essentially more like a "found" sound.

With Kraftwerk, the medium becomes the message literally, as the band see themselves as working primarily with radio waves, developing the "radio" connotation that began with Bowie. However, Kraftwerk are less interested in listening to and more interested in being a radio station: "We saw ourselves, Kraftwerk, in the Kling Klang studio, to be a kind of radio station of our own" (Ralf Hütter, quoted in Schütte 2020: 41-42).

Whereas in the earlier examples, the Morse code museme is like a news flash from another time or place, highlighting mediation, here it appears as apparently a normal part of the electronic world (although this world is strange). Electronic sound was, for Kraftwerk, part of everyday life, just as it was a normal part of their music. Like Andy Warhol, they wanted to transform the mundane experience of modernity into art, neither new nor old, but current (Pattie 2010).

There are a number of differences between Kraftwerk's "Radioactivity" (1975) and the earlier examples, marking the end of the "telegraphic anaphone". This track uses Morse Code in a more literal fashion than the earlier examples, which were analogically emulating Morse, making it primarily signify as music, whereas here the sound is more like "found sound". At the same time that the use is more literal, it is also more ironic—for example, the track segues from the album's opening track, "Geiger Counter", in which the electronic "beeps" measure radiation, implying that the code, the radio signal, is potentially lethal. This reading also links to the cover art, which shows a radio set manufactured during the Nazi era, suggesting the sinister power of radio as a propaganda tool (the sets only received shortwave so they could not pick up foreign broadcasts). The overall sense is that the telegraphic anaphone has been superseded.

Conclusion

This essay has applied Tagg and Clarida's discussion of the "telegraphic anaphone" museme to the use of this museme in 1960s-1970s popular music in the US, UK and Germany. It argues that it is used primarily to represent the "sound of the medium", the "noise" associated with media transmission, and the "shock" associated with new media, emphasising the impact of the medium, rather than its

content. From earliest instances (Motown, Roy Orbison), it was also associated with specific regional sounds (Detroit, Nashville) while also expanding to suggest the US Midwest, and becoming associated with punk minimalism and psychedelia through its "drone qualities". In its final phase, the sound migrates to the UK and Europe, tending to highlight the "radio" connotations of the "pop anthem", invoking McLuhan's global village, or Bowie's glam singalongs.

New music technologies rendered the telegraphic anaphone obsolete. However, the minimalistic aspects of the museme—its tendency to repeat a single tone, and its meta-communicative aspects (its stutter) were aspects taken up in punk. The Clash used a single-note staccato guitar on "Tommy Gun" (1978) (with the obvious imitative connotation) and actual Morse code at the end of "London Calling" (1979). Given the demagogic aspects of the group, the invocation of motifs of "urgency" seemed apt, although also anachronistic—"London Calling" referred back to the BBC's WW2 call sign, suggesting nostalgia for militarism. However, the mutual endorsement of the group and Grandmaster Flash (Afrika Bambaataa) facilitated cross-cultural communication and hip-hop collaboration with other new music (Toltz 2010). Thus, Kraftwerk influenced early hip-hop, and the new technologies of turntabling, sampling, and scratching re-introduced the "stutter" by literally cutting up and repeating content. Now the stutter could involve the entire track, which could be paused, repeated, scratched—a much more radical intervention, although arguably one that continued a key theme of youth culture as "noise", a disruption of "flow", a metacommunicative gesture that emphasised breaks in transmission and made them part of a new, albeit fractured whole. If Morse code had represented digital code as a mechanism, the speeding up of that process via computers made the mechanism into a new medium, much as the telegraphic museme had represented the acceleration of mechanical sequence into electric flow.

Endnotes

(1) Perhaps the first artist to highlight vocal and electronic stuttering was The Who. Notoriously on "My Generation" (1965), vocal stuttering highlighted subcultural "noise" (Hebdige 1979), and inarticulacy, as in debut single, "I Can't Explain" (1965). The stuttering was amplified via Townshend's manipulation of his guitar pickup switch to produce Morse code-like signals amid the aural chaos of feedback and distortion of "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere" (1965).

(2) The hammer-like bolero rhythm of "Running Scared" (1961) had overtones of the firing squad, as Orbison contemplated romantic doom.

(3) Sagittarius's "Get the Message" (1968) was another track recorded by Los Angeles' session musicians, possibly including Glen Campbell (Sagittarius was well-known musician/producer Gary Usher). The track featured the characteristic Morse effect on the chorus.

(4) It was also a big hit in New Zealand, reaching no. 2 in 1970 and no. 1 in a remake by When The Cat's Away in 1988.

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