

# The Semiosis of Soul: Michael Jackson's Use of Popular Music Conventions

by

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## Abstract

Michael Jackson, possibly more than any other pop artist of the 20th Century, managed to bridge the gap in musical tastes between African American audiences and European American audiences. During his time at Motown, he internalized the goal, taught to all Motown artists by Berry Gordy, of crossing over and appealing to European American audiences. Motown artists helped popularize R&B music among white listeners. However, none achieved the same level of crossover success as Jackson. This paper looks at the popular music conventions that Jackson drew from to appeal to diverse groups expressing a variety of musical tastes. In so doing, he was able to communicate something essential and authentic that resonated among the many different people who came to appreciate and love his music.

**Key words:** conventions, social values, community, crossover, power.

The focus of my research for this paper is the conventions Michael Jackson engaged with to create his music. Specifically, this paper will be looking at the conventions at work in “Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough” and “Beat It.” I’m curious how these songs are similar and different, why Jackson chose the conventions he engages with for these two songs, and what social values the songs express. I want to show how Jackson’s choices and the way he engaged with the conventions expressed his social values and the social values that were growing in prominence in American society at the beginning of his post-Motown solo career in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I will look at his use of these conventions and how they express his ideal society, encompassing the plurality of American society, creating, in effect, a new community amongst his fans. Jackson, by drawing from myriad sources to create his original music, placed himself squarely within Postmodernism.

## Postmodernism in Popular Music

Fredric Jameson (1991) claims it is the spatialization created by MTV (p. 300). I don't know if that's correct. I believe there has always been spatialization in music; for example, in concerts, in opera, in musical theatre, in religious music, in musical performance in general, and even when we perform music casually among friends around a camp-fire or in karaoke. In African American music spatialization is the community that is created in a performance, especially in less formal performance scenarios. Think of a jazz club or blues club where the audience interacts with the performers. In such cases, both performer and audience are participants in the performance, and, therefore, participants in the production of meaning. Susan McClary (2000), describing a performance by gospel group, The Swan Silvertones, asserts:

For the duration of the performance, we inhabit a world in which everyone participates, in which tradition balances with individual invention, in which self conjoins harmoniously with community, in which body, mind, and spirit collaborate, in which the possibility of a sustained present replaces tonality's tendency to strain for and against closure. (p. 28)

I believe this quality is expressed in popular music as well; specifically, it can be seen in Michael Jackson's music. He brings together disparate parts to create something fresh. By doing so, he brings together people of disparate backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

Michael Jackson certainly had a great influence on MTV videos. Before *Thriller*, videos were for promotion of an album or single, or were video tapings of live performances; *Thriller* turned videos into an entertainment medium like movies with the soundtrack provided by the song. However, the music became an accompaniment to the images, not unlike in opera and film. MTV provides a postmodern function in the way it reinforces or imposes narrative on the music. Although, the lyrics may suggest a narrative structure, the images in the video provide concrete images thereby interpreting the lyrics for the viewer; for example, the video for "Beat It" reinforces images of conflict and resolution even though the lyrics are about defeat and courage. In this case the images impose an interpretation on the song.

I think a useful description of Postmodernism in music is McClary's (2000) description of how 18<sup>th</sup>-Century composers composed their music: the "process of grabbing established conventions and arranging them according to the needs of the moment" (p. 61). Although she wasn't referring to Postmodernism or popular music, this description is at the heart of Postmodernism. Certainly, "grabbing established conventions" has existed for many hundreds of years; however, in our time, music is defined by its "stylistic pluralism" (p. 32). Therefore, artists are now engaging increasingly with conventions from a variety of genres to express social values in a fresh way rather than only using the conventions that have become hackneyed from overuse in a single genre.

Using conventions from a variety of sources allows the artist access to signifiers they wouldn't otherwise have had. It also allows a commentary about the social values expressed by the conventions. If Postmodernism is considered a rejection of Modernism, then it can also be considered a return to pre-Modernist concepts of art creation, when total originality wasn't as important as how artists engaged with the conventions at their disposal. In the case of Michael Jackson's songs, "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" and "Beat It", the Postmodern aspect is how Michael Jackson engages with the conventions of the various popular music genres he draws upon.

## **Musical Conventions**

According to McClary (2000) conventions "are intensely ideological formations: . . . they are the assumptions that allow cultural activities to 'make sense'" (p. 5). She clarifies what conventions are by using a number of synonyms from other areas of study: they are "structures of feeling," "political unconscious," "mythologies," "paradigms," "dominant fictions," and "social contracts" (p. 5). She suggests that conventions are necessary for the communication of meaning in music: "conventions always operate as part of the signifying apparatus, even when they occupy the ground over which explicit references and encodings occur . . ." (p. 6). However, as with all human created products, "none of them counts as anything more than artificial constructs human beings have invented and agreed to maintain—in particular contexts, for particular reasons, to satisfy particular needs and desires" (p. 6). In other words, conventions in music are stylistic choices. Chord relationships, timbre, and performance choices—such as growling, vibrato, among others—are conventions that express the social values of the performer(s) and the audience, thereby creating or re-creating community, albeit transitory and temporary.

Conventions can also express mutually exclusive meaning depending on the audience or individual who is listening: some music might reinforce the dominant social narrative to some groups while expressing resistance to others. When conventions are used outside their native milieu, it seems to me they can come to mean different things depending on the participants in the musical performance. McClary (2000) discusses how British youth borrowed the conventions of the blues from African Americans, altered it to suit their culture, and used it to express social values that were important to them. They appropriated the music "to meet their own needs" (p. 55). Jackson does this too, especially with songs on *Thriller*, and specifically on "Beat It," where he is engaging with conventions from rock, hard rock, heavy metal, and electropop. Artists also use conventions ironically, drawing attention to that which the convention usually signifies. Conventions can be at odds with explicit references, thereby creating a dissonance in the communication of meaning, allowing for multiple interpretations.

## **The Significance of Conventions**

McClary (2000) suggests, “The power of music—both for dominant cultures and for those who would promote alternatives—resides in its ability to shape the ways we experience our bodies, emotions, subjectivities, desires, and social relations” (p. 6-7). Understanding conventions helps us to understand culture and how both the dominant narrative and alternative narratives are communicated. They communicate how we express ourselves through our bodies, our body image, and our philosophy of body and mind.<sup>2</sup> Conventions reinforce our concepts of community and reflect the social structures of our societies. In essence, conventions are the modes by which meaning is communicated through music. Conventions are meaningful tropes in music, which convey social values through abstract sound rather than language.

## **Expressing Social Values**

McClary (2000) talks about how the Classic blues singers of the 1920s sang openly about female sexuality (p. 44-45). This is an example of music overtly offering an alternative to the dominant narrative. The kind of close harmony employed by gospel groups expresses a social value of a certain kind of close-knit community structure or community feeling that is at odds with the modern fragmentation of society into autonomous nuclear families. Music can express resistance to modern power structures in this way. Modern power structures individualize us while simultaneously totalizing our social existence (Foucault, 1983, p. 213). Music that brings people together and minimizes the self in favor community is expressing resistance towards the dominant narrative.<sup>3</sup> Yet Heavy Metal, which expresses power in various ways, communicates both the dominant narrative’s power structures along with a resistance to those same power structures. Robert Walser (1993) discusses how heavy metal “deals with experiences of powerlessness that may be to some extent, overcome” (p. 110). Therefore, for the powerless, metal expresses a desire for power or an acceptance of existing power relationships. While for those with a modicum of power in their lives—such as over their own children or spouse or subordinates at work—metal reinforces the existing power structures (Walser, 1993, p. 110).

Meaning in music (as in any art) is negotiated between performer and audience, and between the various members of the audience themselves. This relationship is manifest regardless of the performance media: live or recorded. Alan Lomax (1968, 1999) discovered that “song style symbolizes and reinforces certain important aspects of social structure in all cultures” (p. vii). In hierarchical societies, such as in many European societies, folk songs are often sung by solo vocalists; sometimes accompanying themselves on an instrument, sometimes a cappella. In less hierarchical societies, like certain African societies, there is an antiphonal structure with the leader singing a line followed by choral repetition or commentary, reinforcing the importance of community consent for the leadership.

This song structure is commonly referred to as call-and-response. In the least hierarchical societies, such as the Aka, Efe and the Mbuti societies in Africa, there is either no sole leader in music or there are shared leadership responsibilities. Thus, much of their music is purely choral (Lomax, 1999, p. 42). In cases where leadership is adopted, it rotates through the group. Lomax (1968, 1999) also showed how interval choice reflects social structures. In more repressive societies, the harmonic and melodic movement tends to be in smaller intervals. Thus in Japanese folk music, the smallest intervals are microtonal—often manifested as ornate appoggiatura—reflecting the traditional rigidity of the society.<sup>4</sup>

Although Lomax was primarily interested in folk song, I think his discoveries about song style and social structure have resonance throughout popular music as well. Walser (1993) shows in his study of heavy metal how certain modes prominent in various types of metal express certain social values; for example, in Thrash metal the use of the Phrygian mode is common. The suggestion is that the half-step movement at the beginning of the mode expresses a constriction experienced within society.<sup>5</sup> I would venture that the dissonance created by the Phrygian mode and the use of distortion express an alienation from the over-culture. The use of distortion on guitars can be traced back to the tendency in African music to “dirty” the sound by attaching things such as beads and other sound making devices to the bodies of acoustic instruments.

## **Method**

The primary analytic methods applied were textual, historical, and sociological. The ideas have been developed from a combination of printed and recorded primary and secondary sources.

## **Analysis of Conventions in “Don’t Stop” and “Beat It”**

Michael Jackson engaged in the conventions of music popular in his era; for example, he drew heavily on African American musical conventions in *Off The Wall*. Rickey Vincent (1996) states, “Michael Jackson brought all the hip elements of black music together” on this album. Jackson especially engaged with the conventions of disco and funk, for “Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough” in order to express various levels of freedom: sexual, gender, social, and ethnic. According to Smokey Robinson (1989), “Black music in America has always reached out to everyone” (p. 215). “Don’t Stop” stays true to this ideal: it pulls us in, encouraging us to dance together. In other words, it fosters the creation of new communities. Thus Jackson was able to co-opt these conventions in order to express the social value of creating community among disparate groups.

When disco was under attack in the late 1970s, Jackson reinvented himself by drawing on conventions from European American rock music. In *Thriller* he drew more from what are traditionally considered “White” genres of popular music, such as, rock, heavy metal and hard rock, along with electropop:

Throughout the 1980s, the influence of heavy metal on other kinds of popular music was pervasive and substantial. On what became the best-selling record of all time, Michael Jackson (or his producer Quincy Jones) brought in guitarist Eddie Van Halen for a cameo heavy metal solo on the song “Beat It” (1982). Just as Jackson and Jones used Vincent Price’s voice on “Thriller,” on the same album, to invoke the scary thrills of horror films, Van Halen’s noisy, virtuosic solo fit well in a song about danger and transgression. (Walser, 1993, p. 15)

From Walser’s discussion we can see that Jackson was engaging in conventions customarily used in heavy metal: horror, danger, and transgression. An argument can be made that all of these styles—rock, heavy metal, hard rock, and electropop—owe a great deal to African American music. As McClary (2000) asserts, “the innovations of African Americans have become the dominant force in music around the globe” (p. xi). And as Walser (1993) states, “[a] heavy metal genealogy ought to trace the music back to African-American blues . . .” (p. 8). Therefore, if heavy metal owes a debt to African American music, surely every style of popular music style owes something to African American music. McClary (2000), paraphrasing Leonard B. Meyer, allows “that our time is characterized most by its stylistic pluralism” (p. 32). Jackson embodied this in the way he engaged with the conventions at his disposal regardless whence they came.

## **Funk**

Funk, developed out of ‘60s soul music, is an African American style that retains many aspects of African music. Most apparent is that rhythm is paramount; melody and harmony are secondary. It is rhythm, primarily, in African American music that creates community; for example, in her discussion of blues, McClary (2000) suggests “the groove that sustains the blues serves as a conduit linking the body, words, musicians, listeners, and a realm often experienced as sacred” (p. 36). In gospel music there is “no transcendence without the body, no individual redemption without the community” (p. 36). The same can be said, perhaps even more so, in fact, for funk. The lack of harmonic movement means that rhythm is the convention that catches our attention, which pulls us in. In *Musicophilia*, neurologist Oliver Sacks (2008) discusses how music can have a powerful effect on the brain.<sup>6</sup> As is seen in African ritual dance, rhythm can put people into trances. In the Black church as well, the rhythm of the music has the power to alter a person’s behavior. It is the rhythm that mesmerizes us.

Funk rhythm is based around “the one,” the downbeat. The one brings everyone together, linking us together in a rhythmic community. The focus on “the one” expresses the interconnectedness of all people. It also expresses a belief in a holistic world-view with a creator deity holding everything together. Funk rhythms are layered and pieced together like the rhythms in African drum music. Each individual part might be relatively simple, but played together they form cross-rhythms and poly-rhythms to create a complex rhythmic mosaic. Funk also allows for virtuosity expressed within the community, an African retention in African American society. In her discussion of rap, McClary (2000) puts it best when she states that the music engages with “a whole network of African American practices: namely the emphasis on powerful physical rhythms, on call/response, on individual virtuosity enfolded in community” (p. 160). This is an apt description of funk as well.

Funk is a very diverse genre: James Brown kept relatively strict control over many aspects of his songs, piecing the parts together with the cooperation of his music directors and the musicians. George Clinton, on the other hand, left a lot up to the individual musicians. Parliament/Funkadelic songs are looser jams with the social value of a kind of collective freedom expressed in songs like “Free your mind and your ass will follow.”<sup>7</sup> Sly & the Family Stone, an integrated band, were performing heavy funk jams from the late ‘60s onwards. They helped bring the music to the attention of European American society with their performance at Woodstock. There are as many expressions of funk as there are funk artists. Hip hop artists, too, have been engaging with the conventions of funk for the past 30 years.

## **Disco**

Disco evolved from funk. It is perhaps the more palatable funk to a certain audience that finds it difficult to relate to the heavy rhythm of funk. Vincent (1996) makes a distinction between disco and what he calls dance-funk to distance funk from the producer driven, corporate music that latched onto the popularity of disco (pp. 216-230). Disco is easier to dance to, relying less on syncopated rhythms than the heavily accented four beats per measure. It has a lighter timbre with more reliance on melody and harmony than funk. Disco songs often have complex production, including strings, horns, and backing vocals. The wall-of-sound approach wasn’t uncommon in disco productions. Disco was developed and popularized in African American dance clubs in New York City where it soon became popular in the homosexual community as well. It is an inclusive musical style where communities often maligned by the over-culture are dominant, such as female performers, harkening back to the Classic blues era; openly gay performers, as in The Village People; and African Americans, in bands like Chic and The Trammps. By the late ‘70s, disco had crossed over to become the pop music of its time. It was an integrated music: bands like KC & the Sunshine Band were made up of black and white performers. This reflects something that had started in the late ‘50s with soul music. Much of the deep soul from Memphis, put out on Stax/Volt records had both white and black performers. Motown, also, was integrated.

The “disco sucks” movement was anti-black, anti-gay, and anti-feminine. And I would venture to say that it was antagonistic towards the kind of integrated, multi-ethnic, pluralistic, multicultural society represented and extolled by soul music in the ‘60s and ‘70s. “Disco sucks” was concurrent with the rise of conservative social in the U.S. By 1981, Republicans were in control of the White House again. The groups that suffered most from the anti-disco propaganda were African American bands, like Chic, which were associated with disco in the public mind-set, but were not the pre-programmed, corporate, producer-centered music that many people thought of as representative of disco.<sup>8</sup>

## **Electropop**

From 1978 to 1983 Electropop had its first wave of popularity (“Electropop”). Like disco, it was also a genre of dance music. Although disco introduced the drum machine into mainstream popular music, electropop took drum machines and synthesizers much further. A representative song is Kraftwerk’s “Trans-Europe Express.”<sup>9</sup> The sounds produced aren’t mimicking acoustic instruments; it is the synthesized sounds themselves that are important here. Synthesized sounds are an expression of the human constructed world. They express the industrialized world; automation and computers as opposed to the organic world. It is a world of machines where everything fits together like gears. Lives are regulated, nothing is left to chance, and there is no opportunity for improvisation.

Electropop owes many of its qualities to disco: tempi, drum machines, and its spatialization in dance clubs. However, it wasn’t affected by the “disco sucks” sentiments of the time. Therefore, pop artists such as Madonna and Michael Jackson were able to draw from electropop to create their new style of dance music. The popularity of electropop coincided with the rise of MTV (Szatmary, 1991, pp. 252-258). Jackson was comfortable with the new video medium, altering it to suit his needs.

## **Rock, Hard Rock, Heavy Metal**

Hard rock and heavy metal express many of the same things: power, desire, and traditional gender relationships. The social values of rock, hard rock, and heavy metal tend to be more conservative than funk and disco. They reinforce, in many cases, the dominant narrative. By the late 1970s and early 1980s the rebelliousness of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s and 1960s was co-opted by the mainstream establishment through the control of music by just a few corporations.<sup>10</sup> Hard rock is often blues-based. The sounds aren’t as distorted as in heavy metal. The beat is heavy with accents on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> beats. The drums often play a standard backbeat, which is heard throughout rock ‘n’ roll, rock and R&B.



At the same time that electropop was flourishing, the early 1980s saw a resurgence in the popularity of hard rock (“Electropop”). A new form of heavy metal called thrash metal, combining elements of traditional metal and hardcore punk, reached the apex of its popularity by the mid-1980s. As they did with disco in the 1970s, artists drew from the conventions of the popular music of their time to express themselves. Michael Jackson was no different. The expanded use of the electric guitar in the song “Beat It” reflects this. Like in thrash, the bass doubles the guitar line throughout. Unlike the bass line in “Don’t Stop,” which lays down a funk rhythm with little or no harmonic movement, the bass line in “Beat It” is dynamic covering the range of a minor 10<sup>th</sup> (E two octaves below middle C to G one octave below middle C). It outlines the harmony while doubling the main refrain theme played by the guitar.

## **Discussion**

### **“Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough”**

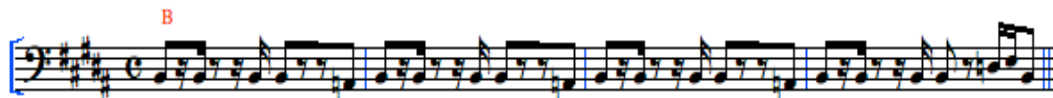
Like funk rhythms, disco rhythms links bodies together creating communities. In “Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough” the funk and disco conventions are apparent: the emphasis on “the one” or downbeat, the focus on a single chord rather than chord changes, rhythm is predominant, the goal is to get us to move. The lyrics have a double entendre, a convention of African American music. In the first verse Jackson sings about the heat and the power and the lovely feeling. The lyrics are vague enough to allow multiple interpretations; however, sex is implied. The refrain is simply the repeated lines, “Keep on with the force don't stop/Don't stop 'til you get enough” (Jackson, 1979). This could be referring to dancing or sex or just the desire for love. The refrain are also relatively vague. We just know that Jackson wants the object of his song to “Just love me ‘til you don't know how (ooh)” (Jackson, 1979). The second verse is more explicit: “Touch me and I feel on fire/Ain't nothin' like a love desire (ooh)” (Jackson, 1979). The “oohs” make us think of sexual climax. They are one of Jackson’s signature conventions, which he used throughout his musical career. In this verse Jackson is expressing a desire to be touched, and how being touched turns him on. Unlike later Jackson singles, he doesn’t use the words “girl,” “she,” or “her,” leaving the object of his desire ambiguous. This allows for anybody to project him or herself into the singer’s perspective. The singer is the spokesperson for the community, much like the preacher in the Black church or the blues singer in the local club. Jackson is expressing the desires of the community he is helping to create in this song. It is neither heterosexual nor homosexual. “Don’t Stop” allows us to express our sexuality in whatever way we want. True to the ambiguity Jackson expressed throughout his adulthood, he denied that the song was sexual in nature.<sup>11</sup> The freedom implied is an uninhibited expression of our bodies, our sexuality, in essence, ourselves.

The repetitive vamp on B provides a circularity, which reinforces the lyric, “Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough.” The music won’t stop until we get enough. The bass plays a funk line reminiscent of a James Brown or George Clinton song (Ex. 1). The first half of each bar is busier than the later half. Funk rhythm focuses on “the one,” the downbeat of each measure. The one is more than just the heaviest beat in funk, it’s also representative of an African holistic belief system. Vincent (1996) explains “the one” as follows:

In the African musical experience, everyone is included, for everyone’s individual rhythms are essential to the total vibe. Thus, all participate as part of a greater whole. A locked, happening rhythm brings everybody together grooving *as one*. Ultimately, to be “on the one,” the musical performance is not only emphasizing an ancient rhythmic pattern, it is emphasizing the essential openness toward all participants to the groove. Locked, yet fluid, when everything is “on the one,” a harmony among all people is achieved. (p. 37)

Thus the first half of the measure is locked into this rhythmic togetherness. The second half, on the other hand, is increasingly free. The player is able in the third and fourth beats to express his or her individuality by playing a “lick” or by leaving it empty. The bass player on the recording plays an improvised passage in the second half of every fourth measure, approximately. On the upbeat of the fourth beat of most measures the bass player plays an A natural, the flattened seventh of the B chord, as a pickup to the next downbeat. However, anything is possible in the second half of a measure. As Bootsly Collins says, “you can change that” (Bootsly, 2007).

Example 1: “Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough” bass line.7



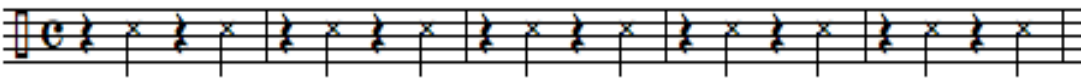
The primary purpose of the song is to get us to dance. With the bass providing a solid rhythmic foundation holding everything together, the rhythm tracks are layered like drums in African music. The bass drum doubles the bass line (Ex. 2), the snare hits every second and fourth beat (Ex. 3), and the hi-hat keep a steady quarter-note rhythm (Ex. 4), a cabasa plays an eighth-note rhythm (Ex. 5), a clave hits off-beats on the upbeats of two and four (Ex. 6). There are also other percussion instruments (bells, woodblocks, etc.) doing various other rhythms. There is a certain amount of freedom in the percussion. The musicians are able to improvise slightly different rhythms or variations on the rhythm they started with. The snare plays a typical backbeat. The hi-hat does what the bass drum does in a more standard disco song, while the cabasa functions as the hi-hat does in more standard disco. This only scratches the surface of what’s going on rhythmically in “Don’t Stop.” The layers of rhythm fit together like puzzle pieces to create an impelling dance groove.

The tempo of the song (120 bpm) fits right within what is common for disco: it wasn't too fast or too slow, just right for dancing. The timbre is light, uplifting. The strings underpin the harmony, providing a foundation on which the rhythm floats. The total effect is a wall of sound that envelopes us, carrying us forward, and connecting us to others through the rhythm.

Example 2: "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" bass drum



Example 3: "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" snare drum



Example 4: "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" hi-hat



Example 5: "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" cabasa



Example 6: "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough" clave



The lyrics also suggest continuing the rhythm until you can't take it anymore, until "you get enough." The circularity expresses a non-teleological world-view; whereas Western tonal music strives for closure, African music strives for continuity. The rhythm in "Don't Stop" is related to the funk rhythm demonstrated by Bootsy in his video; however, it's a little tighter, more rigid (Bootsy, 2007). This suggests a slightly more repressed social value. Where funk expresses an idealized freedom, "Don't Stop" expresses freedom with conditions.

The structure of "Don't Stop" follows a formula that is common to many R&B songs: about two-thirds of the way through the song there is an instrumental section. In this case it's a guitar solo. "Beat It" follows this same formula; however, in "Beat It," the guitar solo engages with the conventions of heavy metal, pushing the envelope of the controlled solos of pop music.

Although *Off The Wall* is a great album and very successful, when the “disco sucks” movement started, Michael Jackson had to find a new direction. From this point he begins to engage with the conventions of electropop, rock, and hard rock.

## “Beat It”

“Beat It” opens with imposing, ominous synthesizer tones. The menacing tones create an atmosphere of foreboding or danger. Following this, a drum pattern clearly influenced by electropop begins. The programmed drums place us squarely in the technological world inhabited by Kraftwerk and other electropop groups. The setting of the video confirms that we are in the non-organic world: a late 20<sup>th</sup>-Century city. The tempo is considerably faster than “Don’t Stop,” giving the song a rock feel. After this intro, the distorted electric guitar and the bass begin. They outline the two principle chords of the refrain, Em and D. In the verse sections, a C chord is added.

The bass line for “Beat It” was the first bass line I ever learned, which says something about Michael Jackson’s crossover success (Ex. 7). I come from an area of Canada where heavy rock has traditionally been quite popular. When heavy metal hit its apex in popularity in the 1980s, Eddie Van Halen, who played the guitar solo in “Beat It,” was one of the most well-known and popular hard rock musicians of the time.

Example 7: Bass line from “Beat It.”



The bass line is unusual for pop music in that it doubles the guitar part rather than just chugging along playing the roots and fifths of the chords like in many generic rock or pop songs. However, this is consistent with much heavy metal from the '80s (e.g. in much thrash the bass doubles the guitar an octave lower; in many ways this is reminiscent of classical music.)<sup>12</sup> Unlike the bass line in “Don’t Stop,” this bass line is totally diatonic. There are no “blue notes” like the flattened 7<sup>th</sup> at the end of each measure of “Don’t Stop.” The verse sections are slightly more funky, harkening back to the style of “Don’t Stop.” The bass and guitar play shots on the roots of the ‘i’, ‘VII’, and ‘VI’ chords (Ex. 8).

Example 8: Verse bass line

The image shows a musical score for a bass line in E major, 4/4 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins at measure 1, the second at measure 4, and the third at measure 8. Above the notes, chord symbols are provided: Em, D, Em, D on the first staff; D, C, D, Em, D on the second staff; and D, Em, D, Em, D on the third staff. The bass line is characterized by a steady eighth-note pattern, often with a sixteenth-note triplet or run in the middle of each measure.

By engaging in the conventions associated with hard rock, Michael Jackson must have internalized some of the social values expressed by that music. Or the social values represented by this music somehow resonated with him. David P. Szatmary (1991) suggests that:

Michael Jackson, the most important rock star of the early 1980s, epitomized the growing conservatism in America. He did not smoke, drink or take drugs. He even refused to utter the word *funky*, preferring *jelly* instead. A devout adherent to the Jehovah's Witnesses, the singer attended meetings at a Kingdom Hall four times a week and regularly fasted on weekends. (p. 261)

One of the social values communicated by some hard rock and heavy metal is misogyny, or male power over females. This social value is manifested in some of Jackson's videos: "few heavy metal videos have ever approached the degree of narcissistic misogyny routinely displayed by pop star Michael Jackson" (Walser, 1993, p. 117). However, some heavy metal and hard rock videos are notorious for their objectification of women; for example, Van Halen's video for "Hot For Teacher" and Helix's videos, both "clean" and uncensored. By adopting some of the conventions of hard rock and heavy metal, we must assume that they convey social values important to Jackson.

One of the most obvious social values expressed by heavy metal is power. Having been created by working class whites in Britain and America, it expresses a need for power in one's society. Working class whites and working class blacks have more in common with each other than with those of the middle class or the upper classes. Heavy metal expresses desire: the desire for power, the desire for control of one's life, the desire for control over the means of production. It is both resistant to the dominant social narrative and reinforces it at the same time.

It's not that heavy metal artists necessarily want to invert the power structures of society; they just want a share of it, perhaps. I think "Beat It" expresses this both overtly and covertly. In the video, Michael Jackson is trying to bring people together. He has done the same with his choices of conventions. "Beat It" is a combination of both African American and European American musical conventions. They are seamlessly fused expressing Michael Jackson's desire for a pluralistic society where everyone can contribute something positive.

The lyrics are about a kid caught up in a culture of violence. The video makes explicit that it is gang violence that is the problem. Jackson portrays himself as a peacemaker, using the power of music and dance to bring people of different communities and ethnicities together. Like in "Don't Stop," there are very few words in the song. After the opening statement of two verses followed by the refrain and another two verses, the remainder of the song repeats the refrain. The lyrics speak to the youthful male desire for power, for strength, and to be held in regard by one's peers for physical prowess. Although the lyrics don't specifically solve the dilemma of the young man who doesn't want to be a boy, but a man, who doesn't want to see blood, but wants to be a macho man, the video resolves the conflict with dance (Jackson, 1982).

Rhythmically, a major difference between "Beat It" and "Don't Stop" is the amount of syncopation. Unlike "Don't Stop," the rhythmic structure of "Beat It" is very much "on the beat." The Stax songwriters discovered early on that one reason for the success of Motown singles was the way "every syllable is on a beat" (Dowd qtd. in Bowman, 1997, p. 94n6). I would extend this to include the rhythmic feel of the bass and drums as well. In "Beat It," like in many Motown hits, when compared to "Don't Stop," everything is on a beat. Even in the verses the rhythm is primarily on the beat.

Musically, the alternation between E minor and D in the harmony expresses what the lyrics leave up to our imagination. Alternating a minor 'i' chord with a major chord built on the seventh degree of the scale is an inherently unstable progression. It feels that Jackson is trying repeatedly to resolve the minor 'i' to the major 'VII'. The 'VII' chord here is the fifth of the relative major (G major), so the harmonic movement does compel the music toward closure; however, a strong cadence is evaded by the constant return to the E minor chord. Jackson is working through the emotions traditionally associated with the minor tonality—sadness, pathos, negativity—and trying to turn them into positive emotions normally associated with the root or "the one." He is pulling two seemingly oppositional elements together, changing both of them in the process. Like in the video, Jackson is pulling the disparate social values of opposing groups together, resolving them, and encouraging the polarized groups to work together to create a new community. In the verses he even touches on a C chord, the most stable tone in the gamut. That C chord is held out as a kind of object to aspire to. Let's move from this negative E minor situation toward a C major situation. He's expressing the idea of creating a new society that includes everyone.

Jackson is doing what popular music does, even in this age of mass mediation and the corporatization and commoditization of culture: “Popular music, even in the era of Sony-CBS, MTV-Europe, and Michael Jackson as global Pepsi salesman, is still a progressive, empowering, democratic force” (Frith qtd. in Keil & Feld, 1994, p. 263).

## Conclusion

Although Jackson expresses conservative social values on the one hand, with his music he is attempting to resolve the polarities found in American society. With music, he introduces traditionally antagonistic groups together, uniting them in a new community through the rhythm of the music and dance. At the beginning of *This Is It*, dancers from around the world make statements about what Jackson’s music and dancing mean to them. They talk about how it changed their lives for the better (Ortega, 2009). Jackson brought these people together through his art.

Jackson, in short, “Don’t Stop” and “Beat It” work in much the same way. Although he is engaging with different conventions with the two songs, and the social values expressed by the two songs are seemingly mutually exclusive, Jackson is manipulating the conventions to express social values important to him, which he believes are important for society at large. And judging from his phenomenal success internationally, his music expresses something important to societies outside of America as well. There is no reason why concepts of freedom are at odds with a desire for power in one’s life. After all, freedom is the power of self-actualization, which Jackson epitomized.

Jackson’s strength as an artist was his ability to remake himself, to change his music, and to reflect the change in popular taste. He transcended the hatred represented by the “disco sucks” movement by engaging with different conventions to create his art. The nature of his music is that of African American music in general: “to include, not to exclude” (Robinson, 1989). If, as Baraka suggested, that African American music is the history of Africans in America, then Jackson’s music tells the story of African Americans in the early 1980s (p. viii).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> One of the findings in the research I conducted for my MA thesis was that African American music expresses resistance towards the over-culture. By doing so it enables the creation or re-creation of community, albeit transitory and temporary.

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the European philosophy of mind/body dichotomy in contrast to the African holistic philosophy, see Susan McClary, *Conventional wisdom: The content of musical form* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000, pp. 32-62).

<sup>3</sup> Foucault suggests that a way to study power relations is from the perspective of resistance towards power (p. 211). I happened upon this concept by happy accident while writing my MA thesis. I looked at resistance and rebellion in African American music from slave songs through the blues (Bayer, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> These ideas and accompanying data can be found in Alan Lomax, "Song structure and social structure," (1962) in *Write me a few of your lines: A blues reader*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 32-56 and Alan Lomax, *Folk song style and culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> See Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Oliver Sacks (2007), writing about one of his patients who suffers from a kind of epilepsy brought on by music, quotes her as saying "a well-punctuated rhythm was for her the most dangerous feature in music" (p. 24).

<sup>7</sup> Parliament, "Free your mind and your ass will follow," *Free your mind and your ass will follow* (Westbound Records, 1970).

<sup>8</sup> In *Everybody dance: Chic and the politics of disco*, Daryl Easlea (2004) states "Disco sucks was largely a chance for racist as well as homophobic expression" (pp. 152-153). He quotes a number of African American artists who were negatively affected by the movement. Susan McClary (2000) also discusses the "Disco sucks" movement as a reaction against "the music of black and gay dance clubs" (p. 152).

<sup>9</sup> Kraftwerk, "Trans-Europe Express," *Trans-Europe Express* (Kling Klang, 1977).

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<sup>10</sup> See Rob Bowman, *Soulsville, U.S.A.: The story of Stax Records* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997) for a detailed discussion of the demise of Stax/Volt, an independent label started in the 1950s, caused in part by larger corporations in 1970s. A larger corporation purchased Motown in the 1970s. Chess ceased to exist in 1975.

<sup>11</sup> When his mother expressed concern over the possible sexual meaning of the lyrics, Jackson told “her that the song was not a reference to sex, but could mean whatever people wanted it to” (*Don’t Stop ‘til You Get Enough*, n.d.).

<sup>12</sup> See Walser’s (1993) discussion of the influence of classical music on heavy metal (pp. 57-107).