Introduction
LISTENING FOR GENRES

What could make you care if a bass drum goes *THOOM* instead of just *thump*? What’s the difference whether a concerto ends loudly or quietly? What does it matter if a piece is called “Nocturne,” “Notturno,” or “Nocturnal Sounds?” The musical genres discussed in this book gave sense to such minor distinctions. Little instances of this-versus-that proliferated across American popular music of the 1970s, shaping classic soul albums, million-selling disco songs, and odd pop records. In Western art music, too, subtle differences had outsized effects, which we can grasp in short birthday pieces and expansive genres like the concerto. Popular or unpopular, these genres relied on small details to connect people, works, practices, institutions, resources, and ideas. Those connections were often fragmentary, unstable, and contingent; but they held, if only for a moment, and gave these genres ways to face the world. The chapters that follow ask how these sorts of connections happened and what they tell us. This means accounting for a lot of music, some of which you may know about and some you may not have heard of. It means trying to rehear the American 1970s through the workings of its musical genres. And it means wondering what musical genres are, and what they do.

Genres are good at making you care. They make things matter. They create new kinds of differences, new roles for difference. Musical genres can do all this in a variety of ways. This book listens hard to a half-dozen genres and asks how: how have they changed musical experience, and what have they added to the fabric of the world? It works comparatively, across these and other genres, to show what 70s music can teach us about the relations among people, genres, and works. It moves between popular and classical genres, bigger and smaller genres, and recognized and unrecognized genres in order to
demonstrate how musical genres of the 70s differ from one another—and what they share. The book springs from a conviction that the cultural productions of the American 1970s present an extraordinary richness deriving from how they played with genres and from the details their genres make a place for. The American 70s created pressures and possibilities its musical genres reflected. Seventies soul gave people new ways to imagine social space and to engage with issues of the day. Disco changed how people made songs. Nocturnes of the 1970s gave new-music listeners reasons to think about moods and the senses. Concertos of the 70s leveraged the convention of soloist-vs.-orchestra to encourage people to listen harder. And so on. Listeners may have glimpsed this richness at the time, but genre theory, then and since, has not. We haven’t tried to say what this richness does, aesthetically and culturally.

This is partly because we haven’t listened to what American musics of the 70s tell us: that musical genres are complex, messy, and dynamic. Individually and collectively they add up to heterogeneous constellations of phenomena. Genres are collections of works; sets of practices; comings together of people; repositories of ideas, images, and conventions; ways of interacting with spaces, technologies, and institutions; and much else. Putting this another way, musical genres illuminate not just works, but people, technologies, spaces, and everything else that makes up a cultural landscape; they can serve as a bridge between individual aesthetic objects and larger social structures. But they need to be experienced in all their multiplicity.

Experiencing the genres this book considers will mean emphasizing five characteristics of musical genres in general—five basic aspects that define musical genres and shape our encounters with them:

1. **Genres are part of the material world.** A genre fundamentally depends on *what is actually available to be experienced* in the works, events and practices that connect with it. Genres can’t be experienced apart from their material existence: immaterial notions like “genre rules,” irony, and minor-mode harmony need material features (like recording studios, hairstyles, and synthesizer sounds) to hang on to. In musical genres especially this encourages attention to the materiality of sound, the materiality of body/brain processes, and the materiality of spatial relations.

2. **Genres can’t be experienced outside of time.** Genres are ineradicably temporal. It’s not just that genres like Philadelphia soul have historical origins and unfold in historical time, and not just that their sonic effects are necessarily time-based: they structure time in many ways, from their slower rhythms of emergence, growth, and decline, through
the temporalities of composition, rehearsal, production, performance, and ordinary getting around, to the multitemporality of musical works (form, phrase, meter, and so on), and the micro-rhythms of aesthetic experience.  

3. **Genres are irreducibly multidimensional.** Genres interact with works, practices, institutions, spaces, economics, technologies, conventions, forms, images, and ideas; they impinge upon emotions, social relations, modes of comportment, a range of stakeholders, and events of many sorts.  

4. **Each genre is a metagene.** Every genre establishes specific roles for other genres, for all its dimensions, for the works that engage with it, and for the concept of genre itself. Each genre proposes a system of genres and ways of inhabiting this system.  

5. **Genres are subject to contingency.** A genre happens but might not have happened; it creates effects that might or might not be apprehended by a given person in a particular time and place; and it contends and aligns with other forces in ungovernable ways.  

All five of these characteristics favor multiplicity over generalizations, and immanent features over abstractions. As such they cut against long-standing assumptions about genres: that genres mostly classify works, that they can be fully explained through historical accounts, that they’re best understood as social practices, that they enforce rules and contracts, and that they can be mapped in two-dimensional space. More importantly these basic characteristics remind us that genres are entangled with forms of life that go beyond the making and experiencing of art.

So why begin a book about musical genres of the 1970s with questions about the small and unimportant? (A great deal of this music has had broad aesthetic and social impact; a good bit partakes of the monumental.) There are three main reasons. First, the musical genres of the 70s flooded American cultural space with trivial details and fine distinctions. It’s worth making room for all this stuff alongside what would seem to really matter: the things people care about aren’t always what’s important. Second, details make it harder for us to abstract, generalize and simplify—which is legitimately helpful when we’re dealing with practices and repertoires that have been understood in reductive ways. And third: we will see that minor details helped animate 1970s culture, and that works of the 70s often advertise themselves as bearers of minute particulars. We’ll find that when these genres grew large, when they explored big issues, when they pushed music out into other realms of the social, they did so in and through little details.
Take Parliament’s “The Freeze (Sizzaleenmean).” This nine-minute album cut, the first song on side two of the million-selling LP Glorystallastoopid or Pin the Tale on the Funky, nurses a small distinction while calling attention to its very obsession with minutiae. It’s 1979, near the height of disco’s popularity, but “The Freeze” delivers a funk groove that would seem more at home much earlier in the decade. “CAN we get you hot?,” the female backing vocalists sing crisply in unison, starting on the downbeat. They wait about four beats, with the bass-line-driven groove underneath and bandleader George Clinton’s spoken voice interjecting “Got me hot,” before they continue: “Can we MAKE your temperatures rise?” The backing singers repeat this alternation for most of the song in continual call-and-response with Clinton. [track 0.1] So if you were inclined to hear the first question as merely rhetorical—the presentation of a dance-music cliché with a little sexual suggestiveness rolled in—do you want to rethink your response when you hear the second question’s more “precise” language? Is the joke that you’re now encouraged to take the question seriously where before you just heard it as an exhortation? Or that the precision fails to clarify the nature and source of the heat? What’s the difference?

About three minutes in, this double back-and-forth becomes truly funny. As the female singers keep switching between their two questions, Clinton uses his role in the call-and-response to draw attention to an even finer distinction:

**Clinton:** OK girls: “*can we get you hot, may we make your*”
**Backing Singers:** Can we get you hot?
**C:** Say “may you” [sic] next time around
**BS:** May we make your temperatures rise?
**C:** Just the girls: “*can we get you hot, may we make your.*” Here we go, girls
**BS:** Can we get you hot?
**C:** Talk to me: “*may we*”
**BS:** May we make your temperatures rise?
**C:** One more time: “*may we make your temperatures rise*”
**BS:** Can we get you hot?
**C:** “*May we*”
bs: May we make your temperatures rise?
c: Talk to me, talk to me, y'all

The song has shifted. First it emphasized an inexplicable oscillation between a polysemic colloquial expression and a restatement in more neutrally descriptive terms. Now it’s enforcing a strangely decorous insistence on proper language use—but only half the time, and as the product of a gendered and class-influenced give and take. The funky groove could be heard as the bedrock for these exchanges, or as the record’s raison d’être. What kind of song is this? What has it invested in and what is it trading on?

“The Freeze (Sizzaleenmean)” is a late-seventies funk record. But it sticks closely to James Brown’s groove-oriented output of 1965 through 1974—so much so that it can be heard as an homage. “The Freeze” shows many key aspects of Brown’s funk style. It’s a long, bass-line driven song featuring call-and-response; a lot of the material undergoes frequent repetition. The rhythm guitarist, bassist, and drummer perform a groove that places weight on the downbeats and injects syncopation everywhere else. They do so with a funky feel that may reflect the contributions of Brown alumni like Bootsy Collins and his brother Catfish. “The Freeze” takes the form of Brown’s extended funk songs. It has a four-measure introduction that comes back twice; about 80 percent of its length is devoted to the basic two-measure groove; and it has a contrastive bridge. The sound of the recording is rather dry and thin by comparison with contemporary radio and dancefloor fare; the drums, especially, seem more like early-seventies funk than late-seventies disco. Maceo Parker, Brown’s best-known saxophonist, weaves ad-libs around the vocal call-and-response. Even the song’s title gestures toward Brown. This sort of definite-article-plus-noun title conventionally names a dance type; Brown employed this convention often, while Parliament (and related groups like Funkadelic, Bootsy’s Rubber Band et al.) did so nowhere else. The puzzling parenthetical too recalls a titling gambit Brown used increasingly across the 70s. And the interchange between Clinton and the “girls” reflects both the quirky and the objectionable in the gender and class politics of Brown’s on- and offstage dealings with his employees.

If funk were nothing more than groovemaking in the James Brown manner we could stop here. But that was never true—certainly not of Brown’s varied output, which included many funky pop originals and funked-up pop covers along with funk-inflected soul ballads, bluesy instrumentals,
R&B songs, and Tin Pan Alley chestnuts. Within songs, too, funk usually projected a mix of genres. And seventies funk made use of genres and genre conventions in highly characteristic ways: genres present not only typical features (which we call conventions), but typical ways of handling these features (which we can call metaconventions). In “The Freeze” it’s the playful work of homage, plus the song’s persistent humor, that signals the presence of this “meta” dimension. Along with the funny “Can we . . . May we” exchange, the song’s recurring contrastive bridge helps make this dimension audible. The bridge presents changes of meter, texture, and melodic/harmonic style, leading us down a darker path featuring Parker’s edgily chromatic avant-jazz improvisation; its basic riff could work in a hard-rock context, an affinity that connects obliquely with the rock-oriented lead guitar running (quietly) through the verses. This bridge thereby fulfills a genre convention, but with a mix of elements you wouldn’t hear on Brown’s records. The relevant metaconvention, which operates even across Brown’s oeuvre, is this: funk songs draw on the genre’s established practices in a manner that makes an issue of how, and that seeks to expand these practices. So even though the call-and-response and this exaggeratedly contrastive bridge broaden the song’s range of effects—in quite different directions—these features keep the song close to the center of the funk tradition.

It’s characteristic of 70s funk that a fine distinction like “Can we . . . May we” animates a song by both pushing out and focusing in. This exchange pushes out by giving us reason to wonder just how strange funk’s conventional call-and-response schemes can become: What can these exchanges talk about? How far can they stray from simply giving affirmation, making exclamations, encouraging dance moves, providing punctuation, or introducing musical ideas? What can a lead singer ask for? How odd can his language, affect, and persona get? What sorts of roles can he and the female backing singers adopt? The “Can we . . . May we” exchange also focuses in. It animates “The Freeze” by deepening the song’s investment in its groove-driven funkiness, as if its homing in on something vanishingly small reflects a giving up of what matters, of the world, or even of sense, in the face of the groove: it’s the song telling us that all we should care about is a beat pattern, a bass line, a bunch of other instrumentalists entraining to a groove, and a handful of vocalists getting us to feel that groove.

This fine distinction also reflects investment in funk as a genre. Heard as a deep dive into funk’s conventions and how they operate, the “Can we . . . May we” distinction tells us that the musicians grasped and cared about the
genre’s commitments. And at a level that exceeds the musicians’ control and intentions, this minor detail reveals the genre’s major tensions: structured song vs. infinitely extendable groove, danceability vs. other functions, focus vs. stylistic heterogeneity, precision vs. casualness, seriousness vs. humor, a record’s fixity vs. the unpredictability of live improvisation, singularity vs. convention, individuality vs. collectivity, immediacy vs. historicity, having something to say vs. wanting to lose oneself in a groove.

These tensions can remind us that many factors impinge on a record like “The Freeze”—institutionally and culturally as well as musically. Making a groove, conceiving a song, producing a record, and marketing an LP are different processes with different histories, temporalities, and stakeholders; all of these processes leave an impress on the finished product. Direct and indirect record-industry pressure is a big part of what impinges. The record industry was experiencing a boom in the second half of the 1970s, much of it driven by Black music, especially disco. Black artists had reason to eye the sales of their LPs, seven-inch singles, and increasingly twelve-inch singles in the pop, soul, and dance-music markets. Widely publicized chart data, accurate or not, made stakeholders more aware of how Black music was performing commercially. Major and independent record labels alike benefited from pumping out product; mining genres like funk and disco sometimes made better sense than putting massive promotion behind a few superstars. P-Funk’s success created pressures of its own. Along with the group’s status as a premiere touring outfit, Parliament and Funkadelic had had eight gold records between them since 1975; Funkadelic had a number-one soul hit and a quick-selling LP on the charts at the time *Gloryhallastoopid* was released. As Amy Nathan Wright has detailed, there was a brand to manage, with a distinct sound and iconography—a mythology, even—along with a Motown-like expanding roster of headliners, mostly drawn from the ranks of P-Funk sidemen and backing singers. So some of what impinged on a song like “The Freeze” was specific to the P-Funk model, which relied on big scores to finance and justify the spinoffs, which worked in turn to keep musicians happy enough to create the big scores and do the tours.

What impinges musically and culturally has a lot to do with P-Funk’s production process. In the late 70s this meant many people working quickly, one after another adding elements over basic tracks, in a structure George Clinton called “assembly line.” Each person had something distinctive to provide, from the guitarist who first put chord-progressions on a four-track tape to visual artists like Pedro Bell and Overton Hall who worked on the
Surprising ideas and investments emerged from this process. Songs became permeable to the genres these musicians knew—jazz, rock, pop, classical, disco, soul, gospel, as well as funk—to the histories of these genres, and to the specifics of the group’s own history, which had been marked by explicit engagement with genre-boundary policing (as in a song like Funkadelic’s 1978 “Who Says a Funk Band Can’t Play Rock”). Clinton and other lyricists could quickly grab hold of phrases from TV ads, old songs, the Bible and spirituals, sportscasting, the dictionary, and DJ patter; they could draw material from chemistry, pop psychology, politics, Clinton’s stuffed animals, and much else. What songs were “about” was partly determined by how these sources interacted.

When we say that music, culture, and institutions impinge on a record like “The Freeze” we’re acknowledging the uncertainties that attend record production when many actors play a role and things come together quickly. The efficiency and openness that allows people to speedily produce commercially successful records means there’s a degree of uncontrol—things happen to a record as it’s being made. It’s not as if a single artist, producer, label boss, corporation, sales chart, production practice, or musical genre can dictate how a song turns out. Each of this record’s actors creates forces that contend and align with other forces in unexpected ways. The distorted guitar doesn’t seem fully at home with the basic groove, for example, but it paves the way for the rock-oriented riff that powers the song’s bridge. And when people work fast, as P-Funk and most other soul, funk, and disco musicians did, they don’t normally ask “why?” once a record clicks. Nor do audiences need them to.

A basic point here is that the genre both creates pressure and provides ways to relieve that pressure. Funk’s past haunts “The Freeze”: James Brown, the “Godfather,” looms over this record’s sounds and practices. But, as the “Can we . . . May we” exchange shows, Brown’s foundational strategies (like improvised call-and-response) suggest ways to get past him. Funk’s present too pushes in on this song. The late-70s disco market held powerful attractions. Funk groups like Earth, Wind and Fire, Kool & the Gang, and many others tapped into that market by producing long, danceable songs featuring catchy melodies over driving bass lines locked in with heavy drum sounds. P-Funk did this too with late-70s mega-hits like “Flash Light,” “One Nation Under a Groove,” and “(Not Just) Knee Deep.” The sound, forms, and lyrics of funk had changed by 1979, partly because dance music had become more reliably lucrative. But funk also provided scripts for resisting disco’s pressure: songs like “The Freeze” leveraged funk’s investments in rock and jazz in a
manner that nudged them away from the dance floor. It’s not hard to find danceable disco songs with meter changes, dissonant saxophone playing, or distorted guitar, but “The Freeze” puts all these elements into the framework of a “listener’s song” rather than a dance song—which opens up space for the funny “Can we . . . May we” exchange. More broadly, funk’s groove-oriented approach provides a mechanism for things to pop into musicians’ heads, and solid grooves make it easy to add new elements; but these elements can create tensions that need dealing with, and funk’s practices show how to deal.

So, we could say, funk creates space for details like “Can we . . . May we.” This little detail becomes possible thanks to funk’s convention of call-and-response over a groove, its improvisatory practices, and its “freewheeling, uninhibited, trying to get you, entertaining kind of attitude.” The genre’s persistent jokiness, and the depth of its engagement with its past, allow this detail to count as a detail—as something that can just out and gain attention as part of a whole. And the fact that the “Can we . . . May we” exchange appears on a million-selling LP both amplifies it and justifies its presence. We can say further that this detail helps animate the song. Whether a particular listener notices it or not, whether it’s meant to work as one of the song’s hooks, whether its humor is its raison d’être or something mostly for the musicians themselves, this fine distinction is a locus of effort and energy. It gives the song liveliness, vividness, and interest: the P-Funk people care about this detail, and they show us how to care.

We can also say that this detail teaches us about funk as a genre, in three main ways. First, it reminds us that the scope of what we can attend to in a funk song is deep and broad—deep in the sense that we can listen into foundational practices like groove-making and call-and-response and extract something new from them, and broad in that this scope encompasses elements like humor, gendered labor, and engagement with funk’s past. Second, the “Can we . . . May we” distinction makes exaggeratedly clear that funk records are products of negotiation. Again, this distinction introduces tensions that enter a field of forces already riven by other tensions. Putting it another way, the this-versus-thatness of “Can we . . . May we” triggers a process that unfolds in relation to many other musical and social processes that together produce the song. This funny negotiation helps the song achieve and justify its nine-minute length, and it projects the song into realms of sociality in which the difference between “can” and “may” might matter.

And third, this detail teaches us that funk embraces contingency. We can’t predict how this fine distinction will influence any particular experience of
the song. We can’t determine what its point is, or if it has a point (or, indeed, whether the point is its pointlessness). Even if George Clinton had explained, in 1979, exactly what this distinction was about, we couldn’t have predicted how that would have shaped the song’s reception. What we do have is a genre-specific sense that groovemaking is a fundament, the funk group’s energy and “attitude” too are fundaments, and almost anything else can bubble up to the surface. The unknowns surrounding the aims and effects of this minor distinction—why it bubbled up and whether listeners will care about it—are a sign of how funk works. A funk song asks its listeners to abide with not knowing what will emerge from its musical textures, whether it’ll be danceable, how silly or serious it’ll become. Funk builds in this acceptance of contingency. Artists rely on it for space to move, and as something to react against; this reliance is what we would expect from musicians like P-Funk, who literally tell us “Think!” at one moment and “Ain’t nothin’ but a party” at the next.

One song’s assertion of a fine distinction has told us about a particular genre, reminding us we can learn about genres through individual songs and their details. If close reading is a tool in this investigation, it’s a kind of close reading that registers but doesn’t seek to overcome slippages of meaning or indeterminacies of function. It doesn’t assume that everyone, or no one, grasped a meaning at the time, but asks instead what difference it would have made to grasp it or not. It’s a mode of reading that can accept refusals of meaningfulness, or the possibility of pointlessness—that can acknowledge the things we’ll never explain (or don’t need to). It seeks to preserve an initial sense of “what the fuck is that about?” even while pushing for an answer. And this is a mode of close reading that doesn’t wait around for masterpieces or archetypal examples. As such its readings happen in full awareness of the many other songs and little details that too could be read closely. Parliament’s “The Freeze (Sizzaleenmean)” needs to be heard as one of several thousand late-70s funk songs; we gain insights from one song only if we know how it relates to many others. For that reason this book’s archive includes thousands of pop songs, soul songs, and disco songs, fourteen hundred concertos, and hundreds of nocturnes. Listening to the works that participate in a genre can be a good way to study
that genre. Patterns emerge. We’ll often find that what’s most interesting about a particular case is what it shares with other examples of its genre, and not what makes it singular.

In context of all the songs it’s entangled with, a record like “The Freeze” can also teach us something about 1970s genres more broadly. Some of what “The Freeze” does, many other funk songs do; and many genres of the 70s do the kinds of things that funk does. While these traits are not exclusive to musical genres of the 1970s, they are key to the behavior of genres and works in the 70s. “The Freeze” demonstrates some basic things about how musical works of the 70s interact with genres. These traits group into three categories: (1) the ways that multiple genres impinge on 1970s musical works; (2) the ways these works embrace genres and genre conventions; and (3) the fact that works interact with genres in a self-reflexive manner.

1. “The Freeze” shows how genres like funk, jazz, rock, and disco become part of a song’s substance. They course through the song and invigorate specific elements. These genres are thus experienced contingently in ebbs and flows. (The rock guitar appears only in the verses, and it’s quiet enough that you can miss it; the bridge’s riff might or might not be heard as rock-oriented.) So the question isn’t “is this a funk song or a rock song?” or even “is this a funk song and a rock song?” but “how did this song connect with the sounds, practices, and institutions of funk and rock (and other genres)?” “The Freeze” is typical in that it’s impinged on by a handful of genres that operate sometimes in concert and sometimes in conflict. It’s also typical in how it brings out the tensions that define its home genre—tensions that help open it up to other genres.

2. It shows too how 70s songs engage with genres and genre conventions. Like many musical works of the 1970s, “The Freeze” uses genre conventions as material—sometimes sheepishly, reluctantly, lazily, or condescendingly, but without trying to bully us into looking past this use toward something ostensibly deeper. Similarly this song generates complexity and interest by turning a conventional scheme like call-and-response into a trope; humor is part of how this happens. In short, “The Freeze” is a song that doesn’t attempt to avoid conventions or to transcend genre; instead, it retains an experimental, skeptical attitude toward the genres it connects with, while also preserving the value of ease, repetition, shorthand, playfulness, casualness, not-caring, overconfidence, and trust in listeners. Studying music of the 1970s shows that 70s musicians didn’t like to be excluded from particular genres, they didn’t like to be limited to a single genre, and they didn’t always
want their works to be judged principally as members of a genre; this especially affected artists of color, as shown in Maureen Mahon’s book on Black women in rock.\textsuperscript{24} Seventies musicians often took issue with particular genre conventions and practices, and they sometimes set themselves up in opposition to specific aspects of a genre’s history. But they didn’t usually evidence a desire to operate in a space “between genres” or beyond the field of genres;\textsuperscript{25} and if they did, their works, their audiences, and the networks of people, objects, and institutions that sustained them quickly pulled the genres back in. (Even a mega-artist couldn’t fully determine whether a drummer would produce a dancefloor-worthy beat, nor whether a piece of electronic gear would signal disco three months hence, nor whether a record label would market a song as pop. No one could fully control the cultural associations of a saxophone or a particular chord progression.) Like most 70s musical works, “The Freeze” uses genres to connect with audiences, institutions, and other songs. By drawing on genres, a work submits to the economic and aesthetic judgments of those genres’ markets—perhaps unhappily, but without conveying the sense that it’s inappropriate to have to. This included the Western art music genres discussed in this book. These connections with the commercial sphere are part of a genre’s sociability as well as the principal means by which its objects circulate.

3. “The Freeze” demonstrates a broad 70s trend toward self-reflexiveness in a work’s interactions with genres. Self-reflexiveness here is the capacity to perform analytical work on a genre’s conventions and practices by means of those conventions and practices.\textsuperscript{26} Self-reflexiveness is basic to funk, as Tony Bolden has argued, and this is precisely what “The Freeze” accomplishes with its canny use of call-and-response over a groove.\textsuperscript{27} Many works this book discusses are like “The Freeze” in that they might be called self-theorizing objects. Self-theorizing musical works have mechanisms for telling us what they’re doing and how; they have stories about the genres they interact with; and they provide generalizable insights into the process of making cultural objects.\textsuperscript{28} Taken together, the works that participate in a genre constitute a self-theorizing archive, which means that there are patterns to the self-reflexiveness demonstrated by these works. As Samuel Floyd suggests, “genres Signify on other genres,”\textsuperscript{29} and in any given genre, this reflexive gaze will focus on specific practices and conventions and leave others uninterrogated. These patterns add up to a conception of how genres work, what’s important to them, and what they’re good for. It’s partly for this reason that an individual genre can help us theorize the field of genres.