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
three.oldstyle.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, economies, technologies, conventions, forms, images, and ideas; they impinge upon emotions, social relations, modes of comportment, a range of stakeholders, and events of many sorts. 

3. **Each genre is a metagenre.** 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 *Gloryhallastoopid* 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-inflected give and take. The funky groove could be heard as the bedding 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
album covers. 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.”21 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 liveness, 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

Genres (and Genre Theories) in the 1970s

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. 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; 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. 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. 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. 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,” 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.

12 • INTRODUCTION
These are simple points. It’s not hard to imagine how a work could interact with several genres in dynamic, time-bound ways. It’s not hard to understand why musicians would engage in a give-and-take with a genre’s conventions and practices, or embrace one strand of a genre’s history while keeping another at arm’s length—or how a work could participate in a genre even if its makers don’t want it to. Nor is it difficult to grasp how works that participate in a genre could employ mechanisms for reflecting on that genre. These characteristics add up to a kind of complexity that works derive from their interactions with genres, a complexity that shapes thousands of popular songs and classical pieces of the 1970s. But this complexity was underplayed in genre theory at the time, and hasn’t been given its due.

This is partly because genre theory, then and now, has had trouble simultaneously grasping complexity and multiplicity. Grasping them separately hasn’t been seen as a problem. Genre theory can acknowledge complexity in the form of rare “masterworks that . . . far surpass the conventions of their genre,” as Hans Robert Jauss did in his groundbreaking 1972 essay “Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature”—even as his point was that these “unexpected” masterworks constitute a rupture in the genre’s history. There’s no theoretical difficulty when a particular genre like the novel is said to be complex, as opposed to the “little behavioral genres” of ordinary speech. Indeed, Fredric Jameson claims that the very maturity of the nineteenth-century novel and its successor, “the unclassifiable ‘Livre’ or ‘text,’” signals “the end of genre.” For Jameson genres survive only in the “half-life of the subliterary genres of mass culture.” Because these “subliterary genres” do not bear discussing, this approach yields a genre theory without genres: for the few works that matter, genres exist only as “raw material.” The novel’s complexity and its proliferation thus operate on entirely distinct registers. Nor do theoretical difficulties arise if a popular genre “evolves” to the point of producing complex “self-reflexive or formally self-conscious” works; this evolution was fundamental to Thomas Schatz’s Hollywood Genres (1981), where it provides a reason to not look at genres in their less “evolved” states.

Similarly, genre theory can handle masses of texts—but only on the assumption that no individual text needs unpacking. “Distant reading” suffices. This hands-off approach became the basic tack when genre theorists were confronted by the multiplicity of 1970s popular music. Talking in 1979 about “contemporary pop music of whatever type,” Jameson actually denied that there was “anything to be gained by reconstituting a ‘corpus’ of texts after the fashion of, say, the medievalists who work with pre-capitalist
generic and repetitive structures;” it’s as if the capitalist framework, and perhaps the multiplicity itself, makes works and genres less amenable to (and worthy of) analysis. But why? Even if we concede that a multiplicity of songs means many non-masterworks to potentially contend with, even if these songs circulate in the commercial sphere and “we live a [sic] constant exposure to them,” why does this entail “a structural absence . . . of . . . ‘primary texts’” to study? Jameson is saying, in effect, that (1) the greater the number of popular songs we’ve heard, the less we can learn from any new song, and (2) the greater the number of texts interacting with a genre, the less interesting each interaction.

If we follow the logic of all these approaches we reach a troubling conclusion: the artistically significant works can’t teach us about genre precisely because they’re artistically significant, and the artistically insignificant works can’t teach us about genre because they’re insignificant. The significant works are by definition exceptional: they constitute a too-small minority of texts, and they derive their significance from the “modernist revolutions” that “successfully repudiated the older” genres, as Jameson put it. Artistically insignificant works (whether they’re pop songs or members of “subliterary” genres) are too numerous, and they’re churned out in ways that limit their individuality; furthermore, our “constant exposure” to their multiplicity means we can’t find anything new in them. So, it follows, the significant works are too few to generalize from, and the masses of insignificant works zombify the genres they participate in. This taste- rather than fact-driven logic governed the approach to contemporary fiction and music in the genre theories of the 70s, and it straitened the study of genres in film.

The problem stems from a widely shared sense that the universe of texts consists of good exceptions fighting it out with bad everything else. This is the idea that there’s not just a sharp border between literature and the “subliterary,” but also a great preponderance of the subliterary, which makes it hard for the literary to emerge. The same situation is understood to hold in film, with rare examples of high-quality cinema (whether auteurist, independent, or otherwise “art”) barely surviving in the face of run-of-the-mill commercial movies. Similarly, everyone has heard the genre-dismissing line about there being only “two kinds of music, good and bad,” whether it’s attributed to Handel, Rossini, Bizet, Ellington, Basie, Ray Charles, or Jimi Hendrix. But when asserted in the 1960s and after this line tends to convey a sense that the good is rare: if a musical work seems at home in a genre, which most works do, it’s probably less than good.
We find this “good exceptions” approach in Jameson and Schatz, and in the late-60s/early-70s genre theorizing of Carl Dahlhaus.\(^{41}\) Jameson pictures twentieth-century cultural space as an overdetermined commercial sphere (consisting of “genre films,” “subliterary” or “formula” print genres, and popular music) that transforms the “older generic specifications … into a brand-name system against which any authentic artistic expression must necessarily struggle.”\(^{42}\) Jameson’s unabashedly modernist language—“authentic artistic expression” battling the “subliterary” in a proxy war against capitalism—connects with Dahlhaus’s approach to genres in Western art music.\(^{43}\) Just as Jameson explicitly equates “contemporary ‘high culture’” with modernism and draws a line below, Dahlhaus isolates a particular strain of contemporary late modernism, treats it as fully representative of postwar Western art music, and places it above “trivial music.”\(^{44}\) For Dahlhaus too, genres no longer have any just claim on aesthetic activity. “Since the late eighteenth century all genres have rapidly lost substance,” and individual works “submit only under duress to being allocated to any genre;” this historical development comes from “a tendency to favor the exceptional”—a consequence of the composer “having to maintain [a] position in the market place without the backing of a patron.”\(^{45}\)

This explanatory scheme rendered most contemporary cultural production inaudible. While Jameson refused to recognize the masses of “‘primary texts’” around him, Dahlhaus failed to acknowledge that hundreds of symphonies, concertos, string quartets, and sonatas had been written since World War II (many by modernist composers), and that these genres weren’t slowing down; nor did he allow space for the emergence of new genres.\(^{46}\) Dahlhaus’s and Jameson’s approaches demonstrate how scholars theorized contemporary musical genres in the 1970s—partly because their efforts add up to just a handful of sporadic attempts. Indeed, genre theory of the 70s mostly left music untouched.\(^{47}\) Jameson wrote about music only in passing, and never devoted a whole article to questions of genre. Dahlhaus, too, published but a few pieces on genre, and did not specialize in the music of his day.\(^{48}\) In film studies, where questions of genre had gained more attention in the 60s and 70s, the idea of the “good exception” proved very resilient. When Schatz placed “genre films” against what he called the “non-genre film,” for example, he too was isolating a small number of works and saying they deserved greater scrutiny.\(^{49}\) Even Leo Braudy’s serious attempt to defend the study of “genre films” was compromised by a frame that places these films, which embrace “conventionality,” against the rare “film ‘classic,’” which doesn’t.\(^{50}\)
So genre theory of the 60s and 70s inherited and perpetuated a rare-exceptions-plus-the-rest ontology. This ontology ended up devaluing “the rest,” the practice of aesthetic evaluation, and even the exceptions themselves. Scholars who succumbed to this picture of cultural space reacted in a variety of ways, none of which involved engaging with a multiplicity of contemporary works. The approach represented by Jameson, Dahlhaus, and Jacques Derrida was genre theory trying to put itself out of business; for Dahlhaus, “the history of genre disintegrates when the mediocre degenerates to the level of aesthetic vacuity,” and if you “speak only of important, exceptional works,” you find that “the history of exceptions is no longer the history of a genre.” This approach says that genre theory no longer has genres to study or works it can tell us anything about.

The other major theoretical strains, too, showed no urgency about works of the here and now. Film theorists like Schatz and Braudy started with existing canons (“Classic film,” the old Hollywood studio system) and received ideas about each genre’s origins and themes. They sought to move genre theory toward industry studies, reception theory, or visual iconography. But having delimited their modest-sized canons, they didn’t fully investigate them; there was no careful working through of institutions, audiences, or visual devices, nor any attempt to engage with “all films [in a genre], regardless of perceived quality.” And when literary theory of the 70s actually embraced genres, it did so in a self-deprecating way, apologizing to the left for its reinvestment in supposedly stodgy matters of norms, classificatory schemes, and literary systematics, and to the right for its willingness to consort with vernacular cultures. All these approaches gave scholars reasons to not investigate.

What did they miss? Above all, these scholars failed to grasp the nature and extent of what was happening artistically in the 1960s and 1970s. In music especially this meant the work that was being produced and disseminated; the practices that enabled this proliferation; the networks that connected these works, institutions, and stakeholders; and, simply, the intensity of the effort and care that went into this aesthetic activity. One can understand why a 70s medievalist might not have seen how lucky it was for genre theory that there had been over one thousand genre-mixing funk songs by the time Parliament released “The Freeze,” or that new pieces for soloist and ensemble were appearing on average about once per week, or that there were zero disco songs before 1972 and thousands upon thousands by the beginning of 1979. But particular kinds of works and sets of practices
were so prominent in the 60s and 70s that anyone thinking about questions of genre might have been stirred by them.

Even a scholar of literature, film, or Classic-Romantic music could have noticed how the LP was reconfiguring the ways genres operated, for example. Genres like rock, soul, opera, and electronic music changed once they embraced the long-playing album’s concretion of sounds, images, and text, its capacity to embody a genre’s variety and internal tensions, and its possibilities for bridging genres. Albums changed the ways a genre faced the world, became legible, and revealed the identities and concerns of its stakeholders. So too might a key group of musical practices have roused theorists of genre to ask what was happening. New sounds were everywhere in the 60s and 70s. Musical practices that broadened the possibilities of instrumental and vocal sound were swirling through genres: think Jimi Hendrix’s use of feedback, chamber music’s incorporation of percussion, synthesizers in jazz. One could easily hear extended techniques, expanded ranges, new instruments and kinds of voices, and increasing numbers of non-Western, folk, electronic, electroacoustic, and formerly underutilized instruments. These sounds and practices created new possibilities for concertos, string quartets, and symphonies, funk, pop, rock, salsa, and jazz songs. They opened these genres up to other music, and raised questions about the relations of genres to idioms, techniques, and technologies. These musical practices reanimated older genres—thus helping them stay alive—and enabled the proliferation of new genres. But none of this activity spurred anyone doing genre theory at the time.

Neither did genre theorists acknowledge the highly visible changes in musical networks of the 1960s and 70s. The growth of music journalism might have encouraged scholars to move past entrenched distinctions between “high,” “low,” and “middlebrow” musical genres. Images of the recording studio, and stories about the hundreds of hours musicians were spending there, could have made scholars ask what all that time, effort, and technology was doing for musical genres. The boom in attempts to “record communal musical events,” which Braudy notes was cinema’s “major musical trend of the late 1960s,” gave genres an audiovisual intensity that might have compelled a rethinking of the visual dimension of musical genres, and of the multisensory economies of musical experience. And a broader sense of what people could musically care about—hairstyles, drum sounds, advanced degrees, the thickness of vinyl LPs—might have inspired a correspondingly broader sense of how many dimensions musical genres possessed.
In short the people who were (not really) writing about musical genres in the 1970s missed everything that might have slowed down their investigations: everything that gave the lie to the “decline of genres” thesis, everything that showed commonalities between “high” and “low” genres, everything contesting the idea that genres straiten aesthetic activity, everything that complicated typical accounts of genres’ emergence, growth, and decay. Starting with a group of popular-music articles by Franco Fabbri, and Stephen Neale’s 1980 booklet on genre in film, things changed a bit. Not only were there more historically- and institutionally-focused studies of popular genres; there were rigorous, multidisciplinary returns to key questions. Fabbri focused on norms, for example, and Neale asked how ideology was articulated through cinematic resources like narrative. But the idea of looking closely at a multiplicity of texts (or events) across multiple genres didn’t emerge in this wave of 80s and 90s genre theory.

The turn toward norms, ideology, institutions, and practices couldn’t save genre theory from its blind spots. Even now one struggles to find scholars acknowledging what music of the 1970s makes clear: that genres are riven by internal tensions; that there’s a dynamic play of genres in any individual work; and (partly because of these tensions and this play) that musical works present broken surfaces and embody multiple systems of value. And it remains too easy to find people talking about works as being “in” genres, making two-dimensional maps of the field of genre, uncritically accepting artists’ dismissals and disavowals of the genres they engage with, and spending time asking whether a practice, or group of texts, is or isn’t a genre. We need to let more people, more kinds of objects, and especially more works influence what we say about musical genres. Because genre theory has not listened closely and comparatively to big corpora, it has been able to survive on generalizations. We’ve missed not just works, but the details of those works: we’ve been unable to grasp the ways that individual genres create details and seek to make them count for something. Because there has been too little attention to the play of genres in individual works, we haven’t learned to listen for how genres function and affect us moment by moment. And because we haven’t looked hard enough at the dynamic ways that works embody and project genre identities alongside other forms of identity—identities that derive from time, place, nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and ability—we’ve missed something important about how identities function and interact.

So not hearing the 1970s prevents us from understanding how musical genres work—how they connect with songs and with one another, how they
operate across a range of practices, institutions, and networks, and how they make a place for particulars. Not understanding how musical genres work means we’re missing something: we’re missing something ethically about the ways we care and the ways we relate to each other, and we’re missing something ontologically about what there is to care about and orient ourselves around. This music still needs what Foucault called “curiosity,” which “evokes ‘care.’”62 It needs us to move slowly through many examples, and a multitude of details, across many dimensions of genre. This book thus adopts a deliberate pace that fits the dense thicket of 1970s cultural production. In doing so it finds material to study in little details, fine distinctions, emergent conventions, odd interfacings with musical technologies, gradual shifts in sonic characteristics, and subtle ways of playing with genres; this is where the action is. The chapters that follow put a multiplicity of recordings and scores under the magnifying glass in order to find a new way back to questions of identity and sociality.

WHAT GENRES ARE, HOW THEY WORK, WHAT THEY DO

If genres are more than collections of texts and conventions, more than social formations and sets of practices, more than institutions and modes of discourse, what are they exactly? If Alastair Fowler is right, and the idea that genres classify objects is a “venerable error,” what do genres actually do?63 How do genres operate, and how do they work upon us? For purposes of this book the answers lie in the five basic features mentioned up front: that genres possess

1. many dimensions;
2. a materiality that defines their nature and extent and shapes their immaterial aspects;
3. an ineradicable temporality that functions at many scales;
4. a reflexivity and relationality that make them work as “metagenres”; and
5. a high degree of contingency in their origins, makeup, and effects.

It’s worth saying a bit more about a few of these features, but not before providing some account of how genres hit us as genres.

This account can center on the notion of genericity. Genericity names the property of bearing the stamp of a genre. It’s about experiencing something
in light of a genre. (That something can be the width of a tie, a series of repeated notes, or waiting on line to get into a club.) More strongly, it’s part of “learning to love new particulars”: as Max Cavitch says, “Through a textual object’s genericity, we learn to recognize and value its difference from what we have been taught to desire.” These questions of recognition and valuation have ethical as well as aesthetic implications; this helps determine the stakes of genericity, especially when we consider devaluation, and failures of recognition. When we think about genericity we’re asking which aspects of an analytical object come forward thanks to the effects of a particular genre. Or, more broadly, we’re asking:

which aspects, features, moments, objects, utterances, activities, or physical characteristics of, in, or associated with this text, event, setting, or practice are readable, become visible, “fit,” give pleasure, provoke thinking, or spur talking as an effect of, or in light of this genre’s presence, meanings, functions, or institutions?

Genres, these questions tell us, can shift perceptions of many sorts of entity, sometimes profoundly. Indeed, genres can actually create aspects, moments, features, objects, and roles, like a record’s capacity for “easy mixing” in a DJ set, the “break” in dance music and its visible trace in a record’s grooves, the “twelve-inch version” of a danceable song, and the “disco consultant.”

Genericity is a key concept for this book even though the word seldom appears in the core chapters. This is because, by focusing attention on how a genre can “light up” specific aspects, features and moments, the notion of genericity provides reasons and ways to attend to the dynamic play of genres in particular works. That is, any work will be impinged on—partly illuminated—by several genres, and it’s worth investigating the details of how, when, and for whom. Genericity can inform studies of large corpora as well: attending to what a genre lights up across many works that share a time, place, or medium can reveal patterns. By showing these regularities (like the wide use of disco’s “four-on-the-floor” bass-drum patterns, discussed in chapter 3) we can connect works that are “in” a genre with those that merely borrow from it. Genericity reminds us too that many of a work’s attributes need to be experienced and recognized as such, which means they may be subjective or appraisive (like
the nighttime impressions conveyed by the postwar nocturnes considered in chapter 4); this is but one way that genericity underscores contingency.

Thinking about genericity, asking how many sort of things can bear the stamp of a genre, brings us back to the multidimensionality of genres. Taken together, the genericity of a reverb patch, a typeface, and the physical distance between instrumentalists on stage can suggest that genres don’t so much classify works as constellate features. The heterogeneity of these features is itself crucial to how genres operate and how they’re received. In methodological terms, the multidimensionality of genres favors an emphasis on genericity’s moment-by-moment are-you-getting-this-or-not over atemporal notions like “genre rules” and the “generic contract.” The concept of genericity makes it worthwhile to spell out what there is to be gotten—to actually list the dimensions of genre. What follows is a brief spelling-out.

Given this book’s emphases it makes sense to view the dimensions of genre from the perspective of texts—principally records, performances, and (in Western art music) scores, bearing in mind paratexts like titles, liner notes, and onstage monologues, and the larger “epitextual” field (the discourses of press releases, reviews, interviews, DJ and show-host patter, etc.). This perspective reflects the book’s aims but remains wide enough to suggest what a practice-, institutions-, or audience-based investigation of a genre might look like. My list of the dimensions of genre has been preceded by Jennifer Lena’s ambitious attempt to delineate the shared attributes of sixty-four mostly American musical genres. Boiling these sixty-four down to four ideal types of genre (”avant-garde,” “scene-based,” “industry-based,” and “traditionalist”), Lena creates a template of attributes across twelve dimensions. Here I list a larger group—nineteen dimensions, most of which are themselves multidimensional—in order to show the range of what we can listen and look for when we investigate what musical genres do. The language I use has been shaped by questions that have arisen in the course of studying postwar musical genres, but it’s designed to be applicable to other musics and to genres in other media.

The concept of a genre includes:

- **Practices, activities, behaviors**: What are people doing—or what do they think they’re doing—when they participate in this genre? How does the genre show on their bodies and faces? What are the meanings of these activities and behaviors, and how are they talked about? How is information about this genre taught and learned? How does this genre define, regard, and reward (material and immaterial) labor?
• **Functions and effects:** What are these texts for? What do they do? What roles do they play? What effects (real and putative) do they have on the body/brain? What sorts of affects and emotions are they associated with, and how are these affects/emotions created, depicted, registered, and channeled?

• **Audiences, people, participants, stakeholders:** Who are this genre’s people? How do these texts (and their paratexts) picture them? How does this genre figure the relations among (its) people, including author-to-author, author-to-audience, friendship, etc.? Who produces and otherwise facilitates these texts? Who is being addressed by them (and how do they represent the people they don’t address)? Who has a stake in this genre?

• **Contexts:** Where do these texts circulate, where do these activities happen—in which places, institutions, and discursive networks? What are the real and virtual spaces in which they’re experienced, and how does this affect the works’ size, forms, and functions?

• **Modes of dissemination and consumption:** How do these texts circulate? How are they exchanged? How available are they (where, to whom)? What are the trade routes? Does the genre have a name? Does it function as a pigeon-hole? Does it have a market presence? How does money enter the picture?

• **Origins:** What stories are told about where this genre comes from? Are these stories accurate? Does this genre emerge from a particular time and place, or group of people? How do its origins reflect and influence its relation to other genres?

• **History and tradition:** Across what time spans and in what socially sanctioned ways are these texts produced, disseminated, consumed, and known? How does this genre change over time?

• **Temporalities:** In what ways does this genre structure, picture, and embody the flow and experience of time (at longer, medium, and shorter time-scales)?

• **Size:** How big or small are these texts?

• **Form:** How are these texts organized? Sections? Beginnings, middles, ends? What’s the role of form in this genre and how is it talked about?

• **Medium:** Are these texts all in the same medium? If so, how does the medium shape them? If not, what’s the nature of the intermediality?

• **Objects, resources, technologies:** What sorts of equipment, technologies, and other stuff play a role in the creation and dissemination of works in this genre? Who has access and who doesn’t?

• **Materials, features, conventions:** What are these texts made of? What do they tend to include or exclude? Which features help identify a text as being in this genre? Which analytical parameters does this genre encourage us to trace? What are this genre’s “metaconventions?”
Principles: What seem to be the regulative principles, norms, or “rules” governing how people make, interpret, use, or respond to these texts? Which notions of correct/incorrect and good/bad do you find in this genre? How are these principles and notions made known? Are they explicit or not? How stable are they? Who gets to judge? What are the legal and extra-legal modes of governance in this genre?

Values: What do these texts picture as important (or unimportant), beautiful (ugly, sublime), etcetera? What are the value-words used around this genre? What do they seem to want you to care about? Are there notable incommensurabilities or tensions between any of this genre’s values?

Themes, subject matter, ideas: What are the basic ideas this genre seems to embody? What do these texts tend to talk about? Does the genre seem to possess, endorse, underwrite, or imply a particular world-view? How does it treat what lies outside its materials, principles, values, and ideas? What is this genre’s ontology, or sense of what there is? What “particular kind of world” does this genre “project?”

Names, titles, paratexts: How are texts named in this genre? What does it mean to call something a member of this genre? In what ways are its paratexts important and not?

Stylistic features: Does this genre-name also signal a style? Are this genre’s stylistic fingerprints visible in images, clothes and hairstyles, typography? Does this genre present stylistically distinctive modes of comportment or kinds of language-use?

Metageneneric relations: How does this genre relate to other genres? How does it picture the role and the field of genre? What supergenres does it belong to? How does it generate and shape understandings of its subgenres and any countergenres?

Calling these sets of attributes “dimensions” may obscure how much they’re entangled. Language-use in a genre will affect its work-titles and other verbal paratexts, for example; resource-intensive genres limit the number and kinds of people who produce it, as Audre Lorde noted in 1980; a genre’s conventions will be influenced by how its texts circulate; the spaces in which a genre is experienced may affect its sense of form. These dimensions depend on one another for definition and weighting; a genre that recognizes a “godfather” like James Brown or a point of origin like New Orleans will narrate its history accordingly; a genre whose norms are verbalized explicitly may be more likely to establish agonistic metageneneric relations, as in first-generation British punk; the twentieth-century nocturne, which maintained strong intermedial relations with the visual arts, never developed a robust visual dimension of its own. So investigating one dimension requires consideration of
the others. Studying the dimensions of a genre also requires attention to how these dimensions manifest in a temporal flow—to how we apprehend them as they assert themselves in particular texts, events, or practices.

Every genre possesses all these dimensions. But they’re entangled differently in each genre, hierarchized differently, and disposed differently in both temporal and spatial terms. Think about a dimension like form. The postwar concerto has simple formal principles that govern its overall mode of proceeding (like solo-orchestra-solo-orchestra-etc., which entangles form with a textural scheme and a basic concept), while disco’s principle of the “break” governs a specific thing that happens somewhere in the middles of songs (thus entangling form with dancefloor function and bodily comportment). Postwar nocturnes and 70s funk songs don’t exhibit formal principles one can delineate so clearly—but they all do have forms. In the short pop records chapter discusses, the sense of form reflects the fact that songs may be heard in passing, or only in part, by listeners whose engagement may be shallow, fleeting, or narrow-focused (connecting form with the absence of a clear function or mode of dissemination). Or take meanings: a genre’s cultural meanings can lie in the textures of works that participate in it, in the discourse around it, in its makers’ heads, in the spaces between works and listeners, in the social institutions that support it, in the listener’s gut. A given genre will be regarded in ways that reflect where this dimension is located.

This book treats multidimensionality itself as a basic fact about what genres are and how they work. Multidimensionality provides a frame for understanding concepts like intermediality, formal variety, social function, cultural memory, relevance, and diachronic change from the perspectives of individual genres. Thinking multidimensionally can reveal how genres differ from one another, in four main ways. First, thorough examination of a genre’s dimensions, and how they’re entangled, hierarchized, and disposed, can serve to provide a map of that genre’s insides, alternative to the two-dimensional mappings of multiple genres one often sees in studies of genre: in place of schemes that render genres commensurable by flattening them out, multidimensional pictures heighten a genre’s distinctiveness. Second, comparing several genres multidimensionally shows that each genre can provoke its own modes of analysis and, more broadly, its own ways of being apprehended. Third, a multidimensional framework can help us understand how genres manage to stay alive even when they’re remediated, or just alluded to, or when they operate without being invoked by name (as the postwar concerto often does). And fourth, a multidimensional account
of a genre gives the clearest image of how it establishes relations with other
genres: the ways a genre constellates, concretizes, and temporalizes its fea-
tures and aspects is what makes genres into metagenres.

Among the dimensions listed above, the idea of “metageneric relations”
stands most in need of further explanation. Calling genres “metagenres”
means partly that a genre’s identity is relational: as chapter 1 shows, for
example, late-60s pop was defined against rock, soul, classical music, and
other genres. But the notion of a metagenre also signals that there’s no
genre-neutral field on which these relations can unfold. That is, each genre
proposes its own dynamic system of genres. It places itself within this sys-
tem, not necessarily at the center, and seeks to determine the inhabitants.
(Just as a genre requires observance and non-observance of conventions, so
too does it need to establish an inside and an outside, and a sense of borders
and margins.) Further, calling genres “metagenres” acknowledges that each
genre affects the discourse around it: each genre gives substance and shading
to the aesthetic concepts we use, like expression, personality, catchiness,
memorability, complexity, and experimentation, and it creates a role for the
concept of genre itself. Each genre influences the nature and function of
these concepts—and hierarchizes them—in accordance with both the needs
of its stakeholders and the tendencies of its materials. A genre also shapes the
role and limits of an individual work, person, event, institution, or practice
in redrawing this map as it goes along. And while a genre pictures cultural
space according to its own needs, it must do so in contestation with forces
from within and without. In sum, genres constellate heterogeneous features;
they “concretize and vitalize” concepts, and by doing so they instantiate a
set of relations among genres and in the wider world.

This book’s title is meant to raise questions about what musical genres
are in the late-modern American moment its chapters focus on. What is a
“living genre,” and what’s it opposed to? This is not just, or mostly, a mat-
ter of live performance; it does not require anything like Philip Auslander’s
“liveness,” nor does it need to be “absorbed into the fabric of everyday life,”
as it does in Kay Kaufman Shelemay’s important concept of a “lived musical
genre.” But in the moment it’s experienced, it “symbolizes vitality, a sense
of aliveness,” as Mellonee V. Burnim says of performance in Black culture.
And taken as an unstable constellation, a living genre is “superresponsive
to its environment,” as Wai-chee Dimock says of the epic (citing Aristotle’s
Poetics). Its “vitalization of ideals” happens through its details, telling us that
genres can encourage a “focus on what is small and alive, rather than grand

LISTENING FOR GENRES • 25
Indeed, a living genre’s conventions and practices are what
Wittgenstein called “forms of life” (which Angus Fletcher helpfully
glosses as “includ[ing] the sense of staying alive and of being lively”). Genres can
also give us reasons to take seriously Walter Benjamin’s dictum that “the idea
of life and afterlife in artworks should be regarded with an entirely unmeta-
phorical objectivity.” This dictum should be heard in light of Audre Lorde’s
reminder, in a 1977 essay on poetry for a magazine of women’s culture, that
“our feelings were not meant to survive.” Put bluntly, a genre can live though
its people do not, and (as Max Cavitch says, following Henry Louis Gates)
studying genres can begin the process of “recuperating . . . lost human con-
stituencies.” In musical terms the idea of “living genres” can become a way to
register the vitality of the music and material culture the seventies were awash
in. This means hearing life in the LPs, the branding, the old and new gear,
the commissions, the grants, and the course syllabuses, even the mechanisms
of classification. Listing out these modes of liveliness begins to suggest that
the idea of “living genres” opposes itself not to putatively dead genres, nor to
Jameson’s “half-life” of “subliterary” genres, but to the very idea that genres
are lifeless containers, deadening reductions of complex social practices, or
post-mortem accountings of spontaneous creative activity.

Late-modern artistic genres must often live dangerously, however. Wil-
liam Connolly characterizes late modernity—which includes the 70s and
can be said to extend into our present moment—as a set of interlocking
pressures on the subject:

There is, first, an intensification of the experience of owing one’s life and
destiny to world-historical, national, and local-bureaucratic forces. There is,
second, a decline in the confidence many constituencies have in the probable
future to which they find themselves contributing in daily life. There is, third,
an even more ominous set of future possibilities that weigh upon life in the
present. Each of these developments is distinct enough, in its newness, its
intensification, or the extent to which it is inscribed in lived experience, to be
treated as a defining dimension of contemporary life.

Postwar artistic genres reflect these pressures. The people, works, and in-
stitutions that connect with these genres are subject to contingencies that
affect not only their participation in these genres, but their very existence;
it follows that a genre’s being “living,” “alive,” or “lively” depends on factors
well beyond its stakeholders’ control. In the 1970s especially genres bear a
double burden. Number one, genres in general could be seen as old-hat or
merely quaint; the discourse around them made it easy to think that they weren’t what was interesting or important about the works, people, and practices that interacted with them. And number two, the specific genres that circulated in the 70s could be seen as inadequate to their historical moment, whether they were traditional genres like the nocturne and the concerto, trendy genres like disco and Philadelphia soul, or underacknowledged genres like pop and occasional pieces. What these diverse groups of works and practices share is that they arrive just after what we call “the sixties” and are haunted by a sense of belatedness or loss, even when they embrace narratives of progress and abundance. A late-modern genre’s life can be precarious, whether or not it’s in decline.

**FOLLOWING THE PLAY OF GENRES . . .**

These conditions enjoin us to listen hard to—and for—late-modern musical genres. This can require a kind of slowed-down critical focus: how do genres make themselves available, and light up specific elements, in the moment-to-moment unfolding of a musical work? I suggested above that the “genericity” idea calls on us to attend to the play of genres in particular works. By registering what there is to be heard, trying to actually hear it, and asking what it means if a listener grasps a particular element or doesn’t, we’re acknowledging that this play of genres will exceed what contemporary listeners verbalized; our accounts will bear an uncertain relation to what these audiences heard. This obliges us to tread carefully. We listeners have a hand in producing the play of genres as we experience a work, but we do so in relation to what that work gives us; the activity should feel like following rather than leading.

Listening for liveliness and following the play of genres returns us to music’s multitemporality. The real-time experience of music is multitemporal. We attend variously to different sorts of rhythms at different times, spurred not only by the materiality of the musical sounds we hear but by other sounds, by memories and other thoughts, and by the multisensory effects of other stimuli. The material sound-stream itself presents multiple temporal strata: beyond the multitemporalities of form, musical syntax, and micro-rhythmic effects, we can hear juttings-out of slower temporalities, from the rhythms of studio time, rehearsal, and composition, to longue-durée transformations of conventions, musical technologies, production practices, aesthetic categories,
the histories of instrument-playing bodies, and much else. Of course the stubborn materiality of sound also imposes its own temporalities on the experience of a work (through a crash cymbal’s slow decay, the use of reverb, the force behind the first attack of a brass fanfare, the ways an analog synthesizer slowly drifts out of tune, and so on).

If we’re tracking the play of genres in a musical work, then, we’re paying attention on multiple temporal levels, to many different kinds of flow. In one sense we’re treating genre as a trackable parameter, like harmony, capable of smaller- and larger-scale effects, functioning in relation to other parameters, and subject to differences in how people grasp and interpret it. But we’re also thinking about genre as one of the many cultural forces that can impinge on a musical work—in this regard like history, political economy, technology, community, ethnicity, gender, or the disciplined body. Indeed, tracking the play of genres can suggest a way to temporalize these other forces by asking whether, when, and how they come forward in the experience of a particular work. Putting this another way: a genre identity, like all identities, is experienced in ebbs and flows, and in relation to other sorts of identity.

The rest of this introduction will sketch the play of genres in a very short funk song, and in a postwar lyric poem by Elizabeth Bishop and its musical setting by Elliott Carter. Bishop’s “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” will provide an opportunity to see how the play of genres can work in relation to an anxious movement among the senses, language-games, and poetic figures; Carter’s Bicentennial remediation of this poem, too, puts its flow of genres into a swirl of other contending forces. But first we will turn back to late-70s funk. Together these examples will give a sense of what it means to cultivate an ear for musical genres of the 1970s.

Parliament’s “The Freeze (Sizzaleenmean)” showed how a particular detail could provide clues to funk’s modus operandi. But it also demonstrated how multiple genres can flow through a 70s funk song and light up specific elements. These genres—and the elements themselves—are experienced contingently, depending on who’s listening when, where, and how. Taking the whole of another late-70s funk song will give a clearer sense of how the play of genres can work in a multitemporal flow. “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude)” appears in two entirely different incarnations on Earth, Wind and Fire’s triple-platinum LP All ’N All (1977). The first and longer of the two times out at about a minute and twenty seconds, closing side one.

The first “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude)” rewards attention to the moment-to-moment play of genres. An interlude, like a prelude, conventionally does
only one thing or presents a single idea; if its function is simply to establish a soundworld, set a mood, or maintain continuity, it can do so with a minimum of material. But “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I]” goes out of its way to present a mix of genres. Vocal and instrumental parts enter one at a time, encouraging you to focus on individual elements. The song fades in on a Fender Rhodes electric piano and finger snaps. [Track 0.2] Falsetto voices enter, in unison, with a “Brazilian” melody (sung in vocables), soon supported by trumpets and trombones. The horns swell, engulfing the Rhodes, and we hear a new percussion part played (perhaps with a castañet technique) on what sounds like stones. The drum set enters, then electric bass. New, highly contrapuntal vocal material appears. We hear the start of an electric guitar solo as the song fades out. The staggered entrances work to showcase the skills of the musicians. Some of the parts foreground the performer: Philip Bailey’s falsetto, Verdine White’s muscular electric bass, the funky drummer (Fred White or Maurice White). Others parts might get you to pay attention to the engineer (George Massenburg), like the finger snaps and the “stones,” while the horns encourage you to notice arranger Tom Washington—the voicings and the mixture of muted trumpets plus open trombones signal jazz but also possess individuality.

Washington’s horn arrangement shows how the song works as a whole. “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I]” is set up so that particular instrumental and vocal parts connote specific genres. This approach raises the question of whether and how this song hangs together, given its multiple sources and range of addressees. You have the Brazilian vocal material and the funky bass and drums. The horns suggest jazz, the guitar solo signals fusion, the Rhodes and handsomely-produced finger snaps are typical for mid- to late-seventies soul, and the part played on “stones” may sound vaguely Latin American. The contrapuntal vocal material has a more complex genealogy. It goes back to jazz vocal groups like Lambert, Hendricks and Ross (at least), and may even recall classical/jazz pastiches by artists like the Swingle Singers, but the precise and varied articulation, and the nature of the melodic material itself, gives it a high-sixties character; it connects with late-sixties bossa-nova-influenced pop-soul and pop, particularly given the group’s extensive collaboration with arranger Charles Stepney, who had helped define late-60s pop-soul vocal arranging through his work with the Dells and Rotary Connection.93

The clarity and specificity of these genre references differ, as does the likelihood of their being understood. Many listeners would have heard the Rhodes
part as soulful and the horns as jazz-like without specific songs or artists having been referenced; and soul gains additional weight as the 1970s-Black-music genre that mostly strongly shaped reception and marketing, including the considerable promotional efforts of Columbia Records. By contrast, the initial vocal material not only “sounds Brazilian” but alludes to Milton Nascimento: Nascimento received writing credit, and the melody in falsetto recalls his approach. (The second “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude),” on side two, reproduces instrumentally the opening of a Nascimento composition and performance that begins Wayne Shorter’s 1975 LP Native Dancer, also on Columbia Records.)

These generic allusions to música popular brasileira (MPB) are clear and specific but not as accessible to EWF’s non-Brazilian listeners. Some elements can attract attention for failing to disclose their identity: the stones function partly as something that makes you say “what was that,” thereby contrasting with elements that are more easily identifiable. It’s also typical that each genre allusion emerges through a different mix of parameters: jazz through harmony and texture, funk through rhythm and timbre, fusion through timbre and melody, música popular brasileira through melody, rhythm, and harmony. Thinking along slightly different lines, the interlude’s Brazilian quality derives mostly from the song-as-written, its funkiness comes principally out of the song-as-performed, and its character as late-70s soul reflects the song as arranged, produced, and marketed.

The effects of genres are ineradicably temporal, but they aren’t limited to this sort of variable real-time flow. Following the play of genres means listening for other modes of temporality. For one thing this song squeezes half a dozen genres into a mere eighty seconds. There’s a kind of virtuosity in this display, but also a sense of temporal compression. This song stands out for presenting what seems like too much material for its length and ostensible purpose (especially once we acknowledge that this rich LP hardly needs fully wrought interludes between songs); the song’s individual elements seem to rush toward its boundaries. Even within the song’s conceit of wheeling things in and out, the contrapuntal vocal material is more generous than it has to be. The slight excessiveness of Verdine White’s ad-libbing on the bass line helps make things funky. George Massenburg’s work provides further examples. As engineer, Massenburg shapes the sounds of instruments and voices individually through deft mic’ing and equalization so that every element is differentiated. In a song like “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I],” the differentiation helps you hear the variety of elements the song contains, and complicates the meaning of individual elements—the finger snaps work partly as vehicles for
reverb, for example, so they can’t be heard simply as natural or spontaneous. But Massenburg exceeds this function to create a sound recognizable as his alone; as a departure from an engineer’s usual roles, this personal stamp is yet another force resisting the song’s temporal compression.

This sense of compression—and the effort and energy it derives from—pushes the song’s play of genres out into the whole LP. That is, this compression engages another set of time-strands: recollection and anticipation, grasping the LP as a whole, hearing how “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I]” differs from other songs on (and beyond) the LP. In particular the compression shows funk’s tendency to include more than a song can safely contain. All the genres this song includes could have been explored more fully, and each of them does in fact receive fuller treatment at some other point on *All ’N All*. This interlude’s play of genres thereby reminds us that funk exceeds the bounds of any individual song. There are many funk songs with a broad generic mix, but none that exhibits the breadth a typical funk album incorporates. Indeed, while all of EWF’s albums present a range of styles, this range includes songs that don’t themselves exemplify the funk song: taken individually they can be heard as soul, top-
f_0, and so on, but as part of an album they reveal funk’s attempt to include *everything*. The interludes on *All ’N All* play a role in this breadth. They help make the album’s mixture of songs more heterogeneous—more varied in function, length, form, genre, and in what they ask of listeners. Because of its stated function and the compressed way it’s put together, “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I]” can be heard both as presenting too much material too quickly and as smooth background music. These hearings depend on the listener’s perspective, the setting, and the mode of diffusion (headphones, a bass-heavy sound-system, an average stereo, a portable cassette-player, etc.). At the same time, these interludes function as links: they help create a larger-scale form and argue for the album as a unit.

These interludes also teach us about how funk comports itself. The kinds of effort and energy “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I]” embodies can demonstrate how this genre faces the world. Playing funk isn’t meant to sound easy. If funk is a test for musicians, it always says “show your work.” The effort and energy partly serve an aesthetic of rawness: talking about *All ’N All* in the liner notes for a 1999 remastering, Maurice White said “I wanted it to sound raw, at least the way we define it [laughs].” Rawness makes the energy and effort audible. This song’s rawness derives not only from the aggressive bass and drums but equally from how the song’s unison-voices-plus-finger-snaps
scheme creates the image of a street-corner setting (a setting that works as a trope in both Brazilian and North American music). But throughout *All 'N All* the “raw” sound requires the group’s frank use of sophisticated production techniques; this is part of why White laughs. Rawness and sophistication complicate one another: the sophisticated production values mean that the “raw” or “street-corner” quality can’t be taken too literally, while the assertion of rawness means these sophisticated techniques aren’t adequate on their own. This tension can itself become a source of energy.

Funk’s mode of comportment shapes its play of genres. Seventies funk musicians were always multiply competent: many had backgrounds in jazz, classical, gospel or the blues, and all of them could perform soul. But funk seemed to make them want to go beyond what they know. Groups like Earth, Wind and Fire performed songs in other genres like insiders, with no trace of an accent, but they often took an additional step. They worked to make themselves competent in other genres’ material to the point where they could not only play it straight but play it funky. Because they did things the hard way, 70s funk artists truly learned the languages of the genres they borrowed from. Funk’s incorporation of other genres normally goes along the grain of stylistic or formal similarities. For example, música popular brasileira shares with funk, soul, jazz, disco, and gospel (Maurice White’s first musical language) an Afrocentric way of placing chromatic harmony under diatonic or pentatonic melodies; “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I]” manifests this connection. We can hear this openness to other genres as both a reaching out and a letting in. The flipside of this openness is also important: it means there’s often no clear way to separate out funk’s stakeholders—or its institutions (like record labels) and musical materials—from those of a neighboring genre like soul.

The manner in which “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I]” plays with genres may come the closest of any of its features to defining 70s funk. As noted in connection with Parliament’s “The Freeze,” this is a *meta*conventional feature: we’re thinking not only about what sorts of music the song incorporates but *how* it incorporates them. Most 70s genres underwrite generic mixtures; the essential point, though, is that each genre differentiates itself at this meta-level. We can begin to discern these differences by simple structural analysis of individual songs like this one. How many genres does this song’s mixture incorporate? How much of the song is given over to genres other than funk? Do the borrowed genres occupy certain sections or strata of the song and not others? How do these genres relate to funk and to each other?
So the play of genres here tells us about the song, and about the *All ’N All* LP. It also tells us about funk as a genre, about the other genres this song connects with, about the relations among these genres, and about their similarities and differences. As such, it teaches us about the broader field of long-1970s popular music. Again, the play of genres involves multiple time-strands. MPB governs the song’s concept, which has a different temporality than the way soul shapes the overall production practices, which is different from how the funky elements jut out from time to time, and from the surprise-effect of the late-appearing jazz-fusion guitar solo; all this is different again from the unevenly felt and mostly held-off pressure from disco’s emphasis on danceability, bigger drum sounds, and denser cymbal patterns. Different too is pop’s temporal logic of the hook that can stick in your memory and blot out other parts of a song; so is the temporality of pop-soul’s uneasy balance between that temporal logic and the force of soulful singing. We can even hear the effects of slower music-historical flows: the increasingly unsustainable conflict between big-drum-sound exploration and rhythm-section arranging; more investment and changing aesthetics in Brazilian record production, mastering, pressing, and diffusion; and the fifteen-year embrace between Black music and pop in Los Angeles recording studios.

This interlude’s play of genres, which is grounded in the specific poetics of funk’s genre mixing, leads us to a central point. A song can have multiple centers or foundations. Consider “Brazilian Rhyme (Interlude) [I]” from the perspective of funk’s values: the weight of the bass and drums—the way they can suffice to carry the song—make funk the song’s foundation. If MPB is your standpoint, however, you might place the voices at the center, you’ll grasp the song’s status as a Nascimento pastiche, and you might be nudged by Earth, Wind and Fire’s impossibly refined sonics. The prevailing values of late-seventies soul—smooth but soulful voices, a tight rhythm section (softened with horns, keyboard pads or strings), good rhythm arrangements, sophisticated production values, a balanced mixture of elements—will be heard as central from that genre’s perspective. This multiplicity of centers is one of funk’s essential characteristics, as I’ve suggested; but it informs us about all these genres.

A second basic point is that this listening exercise reveals things we can’t learn without following the play of genres. We sense above all the push-and-pull of funk’s multiple time-senses, which are shaped by compression and expansiveness, spontaneous juttings out and long-practiced discipline. But this mode of listening can sharpen our ears for the multitemporal flows of
every genre this song connects with—including those it doesn’t participate in, like disco, whose market presence and production aesthetics haunt late-70s music. What remains to be said is something equally basic: a song’s play of genres happens within a larger field of forces. Songs interact with genres at the same time as they engage with other cultural forces, other sets of practices, and other modes of identity. Turning away from popular music to vocal chamber music and musically-informed lyric poetry, we can follow the play of genres

... INTO A WORLD OF GENRES AND OTHER FORCES

One can see why Elizabeth Bishop’s 1951 “View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress” drew Elliott Carter’s attention. Not only does the poem foreground a developed instance of diegetic music; the scene of audition takes place in a public, notably “American” setting that connects with the Bicentennial occasion of the commission Carter had received. “View of the Capitol” makes an issue of its female subject’s status as the poem’s voice (in a way that resonates with Carter’s interest in questions of voice, vocality, and the singing subject). And it presents a dynamic play of genres and rhetorical modes that Carter—a famously sensitive reader of poems—would have been fully capable of grasping. This play begins with the poem’s title, which signals the genre of the topographical poem. The topographical poem describes a place, natural or manmade, either from a fixed point or in the process of moving around or through it. Poems in this genre run from intimacy to grandeur, from meditation to propaganda, partly depending on the nature of the place described. This poem’s first stanza acknowledges a kind of responsibility to the topographical poem, but immediately swerves:

Moving from left to left, the light
is heavy on the Dome, and coarse.
One small lunette turns it aside
and blankly stares off to the side
like a big white old wall-eyed horse.

Describing the light rather than the Capitol itself, this first stanza directs its gaze out of the picture. It verges into a cascade of whiteness-words—“white” and “wall-eyed,” but also “lunette” and “blankly”—only to arrive at an impasse: where does the poem go after producing a horse? This stanza makes a problem of the topographical poem in two quite different ways. First, its
exaggeratedly precise descriptive impulse squelches the speaker’s response to the view, which is normally a key element of topographical poems.\textsuperscript{107} It’s as if in late modernity the materiality of the light becomes a necessary element in the work of description: the topographical poem’s principal job becomes impossible, and this endless task leaves no room for the poet’s reflection on the scene. Second, the magic-trick horse, which fulfills the stanza’s rhyme-scheme but deflates its tone, shifts “View of the Capitol” away from the topographical poem and toward the register of experimental modernist lyric (playing in more elemental ways with language and form, perception and description).\textsuperscript{108}

The beginning of the second stanza reflects the opening generic frame: the unidentified speaker’s gaze takes in another aspect of the view. But it gives the rest of the poem over to a mostly aural phenomenon, going from seeing to hearing, and from stasis to movement:

On the east steps the Air Force Band
in uniforms of Air Force blue
is playing hard and loud, but—queer —
The music doesn’t quite come through.

It comes in snatches, dim then keen,
then mute, and yet there is no breeze.
The giant trees stand in between.
I think the trees must intervene,
catching the music in their leaves
like gold-dust, till each big leaf sags.
Unceasingly the little flags
feed their limp stripes into the air,
and the band’s efforts vanish there.

Great shades, edge over,
give the music room.
The gathered brasses want to go
boom—boom.

In genre terms, “View of the Capitol” proceeds from the topographical poem to a more modernist quasi- or mock-Stevensian meditation on whiteness. (Wallace Stevens’s “The Auroras of Autumn,” which describes a beach with a deserted white cabin and a man who “turns blankly on the sand,” had recently appeared in print.)\textsuperscript{109} The second stanza shifts the generic register again, now toward something like a Romantic lyric of “visionary hearing.”\textsuperscript{110}
Bishop’s imaginative reconstruction of this sonic phenomenon moves the poem into overt trope (lines 13-15), which gives “View of the Capitol” a hint of allegory, a hint that’s finally taken up, in mock-Homeric apostrophe, with the pun on “Great shades” (meaning “shade trees” but suggesting spirits of the dead), and in the personification of the band in the onomatopoeia of the final line. The genre of political satire acquires a special importance here through its refusal to appear—it hovers above the surface of the poem without touching down until the final two lines. And because “View of the Capitol” was written during Bishop’s yearlong tenure as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress, and the poem first appeared in a July 4th issue of the New Yorker, it becomes readable as an occasional poem; this brings certain elements to the fore.

The poem’s movement among genres is complicated and enhanced by an equally rapid movement among the senses of sight, hearing, and touch, and among language-games. The movement among the senses is suggested first in the description of light as “heavy” and “coarse,” and shows clearly in a phrase like “dim then keen, / then mute”: sight then touch, then hearing.

As noted with respect to the first stanza, the movement among language-games and poetic figures sometimes stabilizes but often subverts the genres the poem engages with. In the second stanza, for example, the unstable generic situation becomes an issue through the poet’s wry use of what could be called the language-game of poetic repetition: “the Air Force Band / in uniforms of Air Force blue.” These two lines read first like a trope on what Wittgenstein calls “the language-game of giving information,” a language-game that plays a role in the topographical poem: these lines pile up more and more detail, even as it’s unclear how or whether this detail is supposed to function as information. But the excessiveness of the repetition also sounds literary. The language-game of poetic repetition might be defined as the superfluous repetition of a phrase—redundant at one level—that nevertheless adds something by way of emphasis, musicality, or a sense of difference. Here, however, the repetition, with its strangely hollow ring, creates a deadening effect. It makes the poem feel stuck, impeding the turn toward sound.

Other words and phrases too freeze or redirect the poem: “intervene” (whose contemporary geopolitical meaning dissonates against the imaginative generosity that marks the rest of the sentence it appears in, perhaps hinting at satire); the notion that “each big leaf sags” under the weight of the sonic “gold-dust” (which has been read as reflecting a lesbian subject-position); “gathered brasses” (which suggests the military’s top brass); “boom—boom,”
the truncated final line; and especially the set-off “queer,” which performs and literally means a turn aside. These words and phrases become part of and obstacles to the multitemporal flow of genres—in a poem that plays on tensions between movement and stasis.

This poem, then, uses “genre as a field of potential identities.” The poet performs the genres she approaches, one after another, changing them to suit her purposes of the moment; at the same time, these genres perform their work upon her, encouraging certain modes of talking and thinking, and discouraging others. But the key thing is how other modes of identity interact with the poem’s play of genres. Beginning with the poem’s title, genre identities help structure the ebbs and flows of many sorts of identity. That is, genre identities shape the presentation of features that mark this poem as “Cold War,” “modernist,” “traditional,” and “American,” and that position its speaker as a woman, an outsider, queer or lesbian, cooped up, anxious, a (“public”) poet, and as recording an unfolding experience. And it works the other way too: these identities reflect the poem’s handling of the genres it draws on. The poem entangles all these identities with time and the work of the senses.

Carter’s setting picks up on a lot of this. Its most notable aspect, unsurprisingly, may be how Carter handles the half-heard band music. The penultimate song in _A Mirror on Which to Dwell_, a six-song cycle on Bishop’s poetry for soprano and nine instrumentalists, Carter’s “View of the Capitol” is _A Mirror_’s most insistently “public” song, and the only one that signals the cycle’s Bicentennial occasion. Returning to the poem’s second stanza will help us grasp how Carter’s setting uses a play of genres to connect with that occasion, with the poem’s speaker, emotional tenor, and physical context, and with a musical experience that both poet and composer find (in Carter’s words) “absurd and monstrous.” In doing so we can begin to think about genres as forces that impinge on a musical work in concert and contestation with other forces.

Bishop’s registering of this sonic phenomenon—which she rehearsed in a diary entry—would have struck Carter as similar to the descriptions and depictions of band music in flux one finds in composers like Mahler and especially Ives. And indeed Carter’s rendering of the band music makes at least one interviewer hear the song “almost as a tribute to Ives.” Hearing Ives becomes an alternative to hearing genres. In Carter’s musical context, the explicit musical representation of band music would need some kind of aesthetic justification. It would be much easier to imagine a staged meeting with a singular figure like Ives (whom Carter knew and had ambivalent
aesthetic reactions to) than to picture an “abstract” late-modern composer engaging with genres; as we have noted, following Eric Drott’s critique of Dahlhaus, hearing genres in late-modern Western art music goes against the critical grain. But genres certainly mattered for Carter, and as Anne Shreffler’s studies of his sketches reveals, Carter sought to create a play of genres in “View of the Capitol.”

The “Air Force band” enters the musical texture of Carter’s setting just before the soprano begins to present the second stanza. [Track 0.3 [0:54–1:33], web ex. 1] Shreffler notes that Carter considered bringing in hints of the band music right at the song’s opening but decided against it, so the coincidence between the band music and the specific lines of poetry that provoke it helps us hear this generic allusion more clearly. Hearing this allusion is an issue because there are real questions of definition: what represents the band? Does anything depict the obstruction? What conveys the speaker’s response? Instruments associated with band music enter the song’s texture for the first time here: piccolo, E♭ clarinet, snare drum, and bass drum, along with the contrabass playing pizzicato. But the most assertively marchlike rhythm is played by the viola, which is “metrically uncoordinated” with the rest of the instruments but pretty well synced up to the vocal part (with respect to tempo and pitch). The pitches of the viola and the voice are severely restricted. Carter’s setting of this stanza has them focus on a diatonic collection of just four pitches (in ascending order D♭, E♭, B♭, C), eventually swapping the B♭ for a new highpoint of D♭ (m. 29, on the word “queer”). This makes the collection chromatic but preserves the scheme of major seconds at top and bottom, a large interval in between, and a strongly projected major seventh.

Carter’s orchestrational gambit for this stanza creates two main effects. First, it makes the band music inseparable from the idea that it’s being heard medially and intermittently; Carter ensures that you can hear band music at this moment, but he does so in a way that raises questions of what exactly you’re hearing as band music, and whether you’re hearing band music or a hearing of band music (and perhaps whether you’re hearing Bishop’s band music, or Carter’s, or even Ives’s). Second, by using the pitch-limited, march-rhythm-pastiching viola as a mediator between voice and “band,” Carter’s setting maps the speaker’s restriction of movement onto what she’s hearing in the band music; this makes the scene’s “absurd and monstrous” affect more available to listeners.

As you hear the mediated band music you’re also hearing Carter’s interaction with the genre of vocal chamber music. This is the cycle’s home
genre—it’s how the piece is cataloged, programmed, marketed, and framed by its paratexts. *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* follows a rich vein that begins with Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*: song cycles for solo voice and mixed, ad-hoc chamber ensembles that vary the instrumentation from song to song. But Carter exercised himself about writing for voice. When he accepted the commission for *A Mirror* he hadn’t composed any vocal music for nearly thirty years. In the early ’70s he was saying that “vocal music in general has to be rethought completely and . . . I don’t have the time or the patience to do that singlehandedly.” Carter’s approach to setting texts and writing for voice and instruments suggests nothing like a complete rethinking, however, as he readily acknowledged. *A Mirror* continually reaffirms the priority of the voice, not by restricting the activity of the instruments, but (in the manner of Bach’s cantatas) by making the voice prove itself through intense contrapuntal engagement. And Carter adheres to many aspects of earlier vocal music: conventional functions of melisma and registral high-points; traditional modes of vocal sound-production; a close relation of phrase-length to comfortable breathing; and, above all, respect for a poem’s versification. Still, the cycle reflects a self-conscious attempt to negotiate with a genre that foregrounded specific practical and aesthetic problems. For Carter, these problems included hearing the words of a sung poem, finding singers who could handle the challenges of intonation and rhythm that instrumentalists are accustomed to (and institutions that support those singers), dealing with the slower speed of presentation that sung words demand, projecting meanings the poem leaves unsaid, and conveying a reading that stems from the composer’s “taking great care” with the poem.

Shreffler’s study of the sketches brings out two additional genres that might otherwise remain inaudible. Carter’s notes refer to an “under-current of funeral-march;” this funeral-march idea appears throughout the song as a slow pulse that governs a multilayered rhythmic structure. Carter also tagged some band-music sketches with the label “banda,” alluding to the “coarse” onstage band in Verdi’s operas. As Shreffler points out, the “banda” suggests musicians who stand at a physical remove from the orchestra and possess a “lower level of playing technique.” We could add that the “banda” normally represents a generic intrusion into the staged multimedia vocal genre of opera, which makes it quite different from military-band music and vocal chamber music. The funeral march gives Carter’s setting a more complex sense of occasion, partly because like the band music it can only be heard mediately, intermittently, and contingently. The song thereby establishes a
relation between the poem’s lyric moment, the July 4th (or Bicentennial) celebration, and some occasion for mourning, but it doesn’t define that relation. The banda can be heard to intensify this complex sense of occasion by signaling the fact and occasion of performance itself: banda musicians are costumed, made up, and put onstage to perform as a performing band—in a darkly comic way, this is playing as play-acting. The funeral march’s function as a rhythmic stratum also highlights a basic feature of Carter’s polyrhythmic textures: they can accommodate multiple genres simultaneously.129

Listening for genres can make us more receptive to the forces that co-create a song like Carter’s “View of the Capitol.” In keeping with the themes of Bishop’s poem, these forces include the energies and experiences of poet, composer, performers, and everyone else who helps bring (a hearing of) this song into being; musical, literary, social, and political histories; time, wind, and weather; the calendar, money, and labor; gender and other cultural identities; and body/brain capacities, including those of the human voice. In other words: genres reflect the idioms of vocal and instrumental writing, the uses of conventions and other musical materials, the nature and role of aesthetic categories like tradition, influence and originality, and other forms of long-duration temporality. But they do more than this. Genres are forces that make these interiorities and exteriorities part of the experience of a work.

Carter’s setting of the second stanza can demonstrate these effects. Think how the song’s genres can create different imaginings of its multisensory surround, for example. The military band is buffeted by the weather, and by a sense that they’re intermittently heard—and that no one’s really paying attention. The members of the “banda” have to play characters under the hot stage-lights, moving around with their instruments. Participants in a funeral march proceed slowly, with the earth underfoot, some carrying a coffin. And performers of vocal chamber music are reading score, counting, trying to make eye contact with one another, seeking balance, adjusting to the poem’s sonic and semantic nuances as the singer responds to them. These are all different modes of comportment, reflecting different sorts of physical and cultural impingements. They’re all contingent and time-dependent, but they remind us that genres can offer pictures of the world that are multidimensional, sticky, and vivid.

So when we hear a moment like “but—queer—,” with the bass-drum hit dying away, the snare drum sneaking in, the viola doubling the soprano’s notes while continuing to push onward with its steady rhythm, and the “band” instruments percolating, we’re hearing the song’s genres contending
and aligning with other forces to momentarily concretize a relation between a work and the world around it. This field of forces connects the music’s broken surface with the speaker’s fraught, underdefined, and provisional subject position. The fiction of a speaker thinking in real time, briefly halting the work of description, can thus become a way to animate the song’s key relations: between poet and speaker; speaker and singing subject; poet and composer; poet and recollected event; poet, setting, and audience; and composer, performers, and listeners.

It matters greatly that our sense of these relations can be affected by enigmatic sketches a scholar uncovers after the fact. It matters that the field of forces animating these relations can include elements Carter was thinking about but didn’t intend to put into the work, elements he wanted to make audible but couldn’t, and elements he wouldn’t have been able to control even if he had wanted to. We benefit from imagining hearings in which the funeral march and the banda drop out, hearings in which Ives takes over, hearings in which the violist channels march music for strings and projects a different chamber-music genre into the song’s texture. Living Genres in Late Modernity focuses on what is actually available to be experienced at the moment when a work first reaches a public. But it tries to do justice to this broader sense of what can go into a work and what can be gotten from it. A genre adds to the works it connects with. And unlike the discourses of history, technique, originality, and influence—which are invoked far more often in connection with late-modern works—the discourse of genre builds in the question of how a work is experienced. Genres give us more to experience, and they give us ways to value that “more.”

Chapter 1 makes a theme of the pop song’s “more,” focusing on strategies of relentless accumulation and display in an intensified sort of pop from 1968 and 1969. This chapter begins a sequence of three chronologically-arranged chapters that ask how Black popular-music genres connected with the rest of American popular music, and with the wider world, in the long 1970s. Chapters 2 and 3 listen for these connections in soul and disco, respectively. This book’s final two chapters return to the uncertain terrain of late-modern Western art music. Chapter 4 focuses on the still-living nocturne as a fragile and fallible “minor” genre. In chapter 5 an essential point is that—despite those uncertainties—nothing can stop the (even older) concerto. Chapters 4 and 5 shift not only to Western art music, but to genres with centuries-long time spans. This means asking what made the long 1970s a unique moment
for these genres. These chapters don’t move away from popular music entirely, however: by paying attention to musical conventions, moods, surface effects, money, trends, fashions, and fads, to LPs as objects of material culture, and to journalism, advertising, and record sales, they treat these “classical” genres as popular music. Taken together, then, this book’s chapters show both contrasts between art and popular genres, big and small genres, older and newer genres, lucrative and less-commercial genres, recognized and unacknowledged genres, and socially “thick” and socially “thin” genres.

But the book ends darkly. As the Afterword suggests, looking back on the book’s core chapters, art’s best promise may be the possibility of endless doubt. Genres are necessary to aesthetic activity but insufficient, and they’re always in competition with other forces; we may have to accept the idea that genres are exactly the sum of their details and occasions. What genres are good at, finally, is asking us whom we recognize as human others, and how we should respond; asking us what we need to know, or need to have experienced, in order to acknowledge each other. They help us grasp the nature of the collective in collective aesthetic experience. Genres interpose themselves as pure institution, pure structure. Lacking the warmth of communities, the dignity of rituals, the thickness of social formations, the imposing presence of authorship, they just allow themselves to serve as the third term mediating a work and a listener, or two works, or a group of listeners, enjoining us to hold onto the experience of those relations. First, though, genres ask us to listen for them.