ISSN 2658-4824 (Print)
УДК 781.6
DOI: 10.33779/2658-4824.2020.3.028-045

KEVIN FENNELL

State University of New York
Stony Brook, United States of America
ORCID: 0000-0003-4980-5443
fennell.kevin@yahoo.com

КЕВИН ФЕННЕЛЛ

Государственный Университет
штата Нью-Йорк
Стоуни-Брук, Соединённые Штаты Америки
ORCID: 0000-0003-4980-5443
fennell.kevin@yahoo.com

Aesthetic Realism Explains Rock and Roll and Our Lives

This is an inquiry into what rock and roll as art can say to us about our very lives. It is based on the following principle of Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by American poet Eli Siegel: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” Six well-known rock and roll recordings are looked at for how they make a one of opposites — principally, inner feeling and outward expression, also wildness and precision, continuity and discontinuity, pleasure and pain; and how the seeing of these aesthetic opposites as one in the music of rock and roll can inform us about how we, as human beings, want to be in our everyday lives in order to be happy and truly expressed.

Keywords:

Rock and roll; Aesthetic Realism; Eli Siegel; opposites; Ellen Reiss; Jackie Wilson; The Beatles; Twenty One Pilots, The Marvelettes; The Script; Chuck Berry.

Эстетический реализм поясняет рок-музыку и наши жизни

Эта статья исследует то, что рок-музыка как искусство может нам сказать о само́й нашей жизни. Она основана на следующем принципе эстетического реализма — философии, которую основал американский поэт Эли Сигель: «Вся красота состоит в том, чтобы соединять воедино противоположности, и это соединение противоположностей воедино и есть то, к чему мы стремимся в нас самих». Шесть известных записей рок-музыки рассматриваются в контексте того, как они соединяют воедино, главным образом, внутреннее волнение и внешнюю экспрессию, дикость и точность, продолжительность и прерывание, удовольствие и боль. И как ви́дение этих эстетических противоположностей в рок-музыке может рассказать, какими мы, люди, хотим быть в повседневной жизни, чтобы быть счастливыми и искренне выражать свои чувства.

Ключевые слова:

рок-музыка, эстетический реализм, Эли Сигель, противоположности, Элен Рисс, Джеки Вилсон, «Битлз», «Твенти-уан пайлотс», «Марвелетс», «Скрипт», Чак Берри.

For citation/Для цитирования:

Fennell K. Aesthetic Realism Explains Rock and Roll and Our Lives // ICONI. 2020. No. 3, pp. 28–45. DOI: 10.33779/2658-4824.2020.3.028-045.

What is it about rock and roll? Why have millions of people been so taken by it — from the time it first emerged in the middle of the 20th century until now? I believe the reason we are so attracted to it, thrilled by it, is that good rock and roll has something we want and need for our very lives.

What I write here about the personal and cultural meaning of rock and roll arises from my study of Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the great American poet and educator Eli Siegel. At its core is this principle: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves."

Opposites we hear as prominent in rock and roll are inner feeling and outward expression, pleasure and pain, and, as the critic Carl Belz writes in *The Story of Rock*, "a wildness and excitement… [which] is always controlled."[1] The reason it thrills us is that, through its very sound, rock and roll tells us these opposites *can be one in ourselves*. I love this idea, see it as true, and in this writing I will show some of what I've seen, using particular rock and roll recordings as illustration.

In keeping with this, I'll first say some things about myself.

This Is What Happened to Me

At the age of 12, I fell head over heels in love with rock and roll when the Beatles first swept the world. Before then I had always liked music and singing and my care for rock and roll was growing, particularly through some of the records my older sister played — by artists like Dion and the Belmonts, the Cleftones, Neil Sedaka and others. But it was the Beatles who ravished me for real and gave me a feeling of honest, sustained pleasure I'd never experienced before. And I needed that. Already at that age, like young men today, I was getting lonelier, sadder and more confused. I felt pretty much unknown by the people in my family, and though I played with kids in the neighborhood and socialized at school, I felt more and more that my inner self was apart from other people, unknown and separate. It was painful.

Meanwhile, I didn't know what I was to learn years later. Aesthetic Realism explains that every person is in a deep debate at every moment of our lives between our hope to like, respect, and see meaning in the outside world (which is our deepest, most insistent desire) and the hope to have contempt for the world, to get "a false importance or glory through the lessening of things not oneself." While I very much wanted to care for other people and to be cared for by them, I also got a value from feeling I was made of finer stuff, and that other people were not good enough for me to be interested in or show myself to. So, although I felt bad about my inability to show my feelings and longed to break out of it, I also gloried in the sense of separation and "specialness" that I cultivated.

So, *what has all this to do with rock and roll?* Everything.

Rock and roll, like all art, stands for and embodies *respect* for the outside world. I loved it because, unknown to me then, it represented the solution to the mistake I was making in my life — and in particular this division I'd made between inward feeling and outward expression.

The Meaning of Rock and Roll Explained

As I studied Aesthetic Realism, I attended a class called the Opposites in Music, taught by Barbara Allen and Edward Green, at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City. In one of these bi-weekly classes, they read notes from an Aesthetic Realism lesson that Eli Siegel gave to a man who was a performer and composer of rock music. That lesson, which took place in December 1969, was a revelation to me! It was based on the principle I quoted earlier, "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves."

Mr. Siegel said to that musician, called Bob Walker*:

* The name of the man having the lesson was changed for this article.

The thing about rock and roll is that it puts two things together. So, Mr. Walker, have you found in rock and roll a sense of assertion and agony? That is, do you feel that somebody is asserting himself and at the same time there is something plaintive, a wail?
BOB WALKER. Yes.
ELI SIEGEL. All right. Now this has the answer to people's problems. On the one hand, they want to be very private and sad, and on the other, they want to have something like sunlight and public force. Rock and roll belongs to aesthetics — there are two opposites there — do you see them?
BOB WALKER. I think so, yes.
ELI SIEGEL. I would say that every person has to make a one of the most secret thing and the most public thing. And rock and roll among other things — it's not the only thing — rock and roll says that that can be done. The big principle is that if you listen to it there seems to be the utmost pain and the utmost assertion. …You have the most terrific woes… the words [are] mostly about, "How defiantly alone I am!" It's the tremendous assertion of loneliness.

Hearing this, I was thrilled. "This is it!" I thought, "This is why I love rock and roll!" And I believe this is the central reason why people in such great numbers around this globe have loved it, and do to this day. Don't we all want to make sense of our desires to "be very private and sad" and to have "something like sunlight and public force," to relate our secret, hidden selves to the wide outside? Since that time I have looked at many instances of rock and roll and asked: How are these opposites one, technically — not only in the words — but in the structure of the music itself? Here is some of what I have found.

1. Jackie Wilson's *Lonely Teardrops* — the Blare of Agony

Let's consider the classic rhythm and blues recording of 1958 produced by Berry Gordy and sung by the great Jackie Wilson, *Lonely Teardrops*. Here are the lyrics — they have, as Mr. Siegel said of rock and roll songs, "terrific woes."

Hey! Hey! Hey!
My heart is crying, crying
Lonely teardrops.
My pillow's never dry of
Lonely teardrops.
Come home! Come home!
Just say you will! Say you will!
Just give me another chance
for our romance.
Come on and tell me that one day
you'll return; 'cause,
Every day that you've been gone away,
You know my heart does nothing but
burn… crying…
Lonely teardrops…

The music begins very dramatically with a single drum beat. This lonely drum beat is on the upbeat, preceding the first full measure of the song, and is immediately joined by a whole flood of sound — the band and the big sound of female and male voices singing, "Shoo be do wop, bop, baaaa." On that last syllable, "baaaa," the voices all swoop downward in a kind of cry or groan; but it is done so neatly, with such style and in such a swinging rhythm that it also sounds very cheerful.

Jackie Wilson

Overlaying the backup singers, Jackie Wilson sings the word “Hey,” the first of three times. The way that first “hey” soars, wanders, retreats and swells is agonized and triumphant at once. In the lesson, Mr. Siegel asked Bob Walker about rock and roll, “Do you think it’s the blare of agony?”

As the backup singers repeat their lively opening phrase twice, Wilson sings “hey” another two times, and each one gets a more assertive punch. At the end of the third “hey,” all the voices and instruments stop. After a brief silence, we hear Wilson’s voice alone sing, “My heart is crying, crying…” Following this, the only thing that next breaks the silence is that single drum beat, just like the one that began the song. Again it is on the upbeat preceding a new measure, and again it is followed by a large rush of sound as all instruments and voices return, with Wilson singing “lonely teardrops” and the background singers, “Shoo-oo-be-do wop, bop, bop.”

[Listen to *Lonely Teardrops* in the following timeframe: 00:00–00:18 (that is, the first 18 seconds)]

Here is a YouTube address:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgyl_LBdcxo
(A complete discography of the songs I’m talking about will be at the end of this paper.)

I love that one drum beat in the midst of silence, which happens at several places in this song. I feel it stands for the lonely, solitary self that is also yearning to come forth. In the lesson, Mr. Siegel related rock and roll to what he called “the largest purpose of a person… to make a one of the utmost secrecy and the utmost relation or public meaning.” I feel that drum beat has tremendous heartbreak and tremendous pleasure at once. You can feel the pang going straight to the heart and at the same time the composing pleasure of that sure, reliable beat as it propels the song on into the next richly textured passage of sound. With all the loneliness and sorrow in the words, the music sounds nevertheless like a joyous celebration. Rock and roll, Mr. Siegel said, stands for “the desire of a person to unburden himself as if he were an earthquake.” I think this is what Timothy White was getting at when he wrote: “Rock and roll is the public expression of a personal truth, offered at no small risk.”[2]

In this and other parts of the song, there are strummed and plucked notes on muted guitar strings that stand out in time like individual teardrops. They sound painful and playful at once. Also those background voices, including the very high female voices singing in the middle of the song — and repeating at the end — the phrase, “Say you will!” are both excruciating and exhilarating.

In the bridge, which begins, “Just give me another chance,” the backup voices sing brightly harmonized chords on the syllable “ah,” and sound pleased, even reassuring. But simultaneously, as Wilson begs his lover to return and tells her that “every day [she’s] gone away” his heart “does nothing but burn,” his voice is a high-pitched wail, with many sour, straining blues notes impinging on each other. He’s crying, but what do we, the listeners, get? Happy exhilaration!

[Listen: *Lonely Teardrops*, 00:14–01:56]

I submit all this as evidence for the truth of what Eli Siegel said in the lesson from which I’m quoting: that the art of rock and roll solves a problem that every one of us has by being alive. He said to Bob Walker at one point:

> My essay “The Ordinary Doom”[3] says there’s a feeling had by everyone that the rest of the world doesn’t know him or her well enough. “The Ordinary Doom” is the feeling that we are more unknown than known. Do you think that you have that?
> **BOB WALKER.** Yes. I do.
> **ELI SIEGEL.** And do you think the purpose of rock and roll is to shatter it? The words

> are mostly about "how defiantly alone I am." It's the tremendous assertion of loneliness. And that is why it affects people more than other things, because there's something unabashed about it — also, in control. What I'm saying to Bob Walker is that rock and roll does show that the opposites are very much in motion, and that people are trying to be proud of their pain, not be skulking about it. And this is what I recommend — that he see himself and rock and roll as at one with all the art of the world.

I love this. Eli Siegel explained that rock and roll has had a message for people all this time: the strategic hiding from the outside world of what we truly feel, doesn't have to be. While I also hoped my hiddenness would be shattered, it never would have been except for the criticism I heard in Aesthetic Realism consultations, and then in classes taught by Chairman of Education Ellen Reiss. I was fortunate to hear questions that changed me very deeply, such as, "Do you think the outside world and other people are good enough for you to show what you feel?" I am grateful for the fact that I have been known truly — and continue to be — by Aesthetic Realism, including thoughts and feelings that I once felt would never meet the light of day — and for the feeling I have more and more that my inner life and the outside world are coherent.

Mr. Siegel said to Bob Walker at another point in the lesson:

> If you want to work with that aspect of music called rock and roll — it doesn't mean that you can't get to other aspects of music — there's Bach rock and roll, Mozart rock and roll, Victor Herbert rock and roll, but the big principle is that if you listen to it there seems to be the utmost pain and the utmost assertion.

That is such a true description of this song. The closing "Say you will!" section, with all of its agonized pleading, sounds like an ecstatic gospel meeting, complete with handclaps — double-clap on the second beat, single clap on the fourth. Listen to the remainder:

Little Richard

[Listen: *Lonely Teardrops*, 01:52 — End]

That togetherness of pain and assertion is also in the work of a close contemporary of Wilson: the immortal Little Richard. His passing earlier this year has me want to honor him in this writing.

I believe the reason Little Richard is so loved is that, as artist, he did what we are longing to do in our lives: have big, powerful, authentic *feeling* and show it in a way that is unfettered, unfiltered, uncompromised, and yet has accuracy and style. When we hear him almost turn himself inside-out on such classics as *Long Tall Sally, Lucille, or Good Golly Miss Molly* (just to name a glorious few), there is something so staggeringly entire, so ALL OUT in his singing, that it thrills us to our core. It sounds like pain, but it feels like joy! That, my friends, is rock and roll.

The Beatles

2. Assertion and Yielding, Independence and Need in the Beatles' *Help!*

I think a large reason the Beatles' great 1965 recording, *Help!* has remained one of their most popular songs is the surprising, bold, energetic way it deals with a question had by every person: "If I need something or someone and say so, am I strong or weak?" The song is very daring, with its raw, assertive outburst right at the outset — and what are they singing? "Help! I need somebody!" Right away, it goes against the feeling we can too often have, "I'm okay as I am. I know how to take care of myself."

In an essay titled "Care for Self," Eli Siegel wrote:

> The large matter is: What is the complete self? Is the self more complete as it needs, or more complete as it leaves out?[4]

This whole song — in its words, but also in its musical structure — is a saying that the self is more complete as it needs. For example, as we look at the opening eight bars, we see that they beautifully put together two opposites always present in need — assertion and yielding. As the Beatles sing "Help!" four times, each "Help!" is higher, more assertive, until the last is on an amazingly high C#: But with each new height the voices reach, the band simultaneously gets deeper, so there is yielding, too. We hear opposites together. As these eight bars go on, the music widens out, includes more and more.

John Lennon, who was the principal writer of this song, is musically crying out for help, and from the very beginning he *is* helped, strengthened by the other voices and instruments. From his first, blaring shout of the word "Help!" two other voices, those of Paul McCartney and George Harrison, *harmonize* with him. And guitar, bass, also drums — wonderfully played by Ringo Starr — are steadily pulsing that descending progression of chords, providing a solid ground for his plea.

[Listen: *Help!*, 00:00–00:11]
YouTube address:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Q_ZzBGPdqE

In his poem "Hymn to Jazz and the Like," Eli Siegel, addressing jazz itself, writes:

> The Beatles have used you somewhat to show that the whisper of one person can shout across land and water.[5]

That describes what happens in this song. And that "whisper of one person" that "can shout across land and water" is very much in keeping with the description of rock and roll in the lesson I have been quoting: "the tremendous assertion of loneliness."

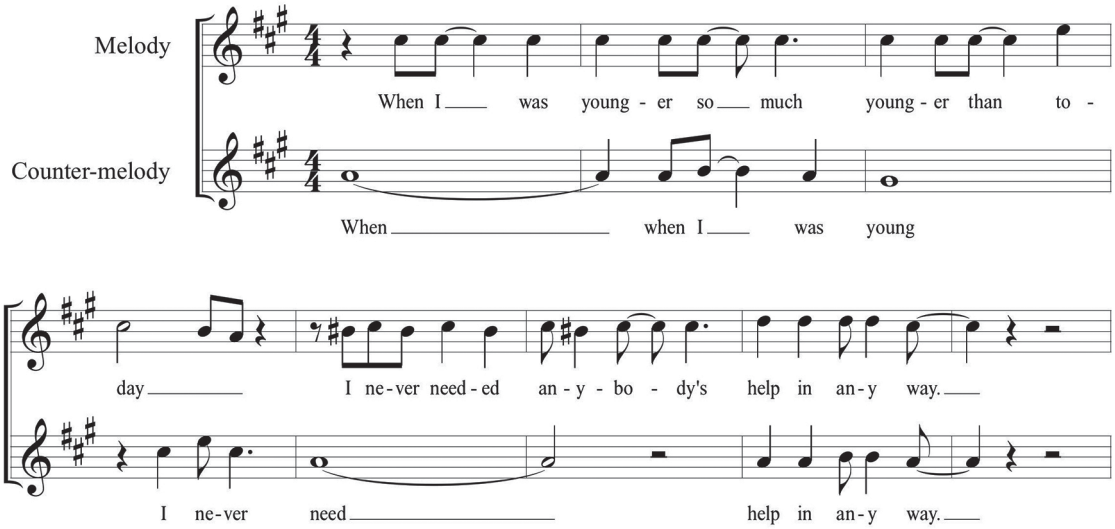
The verse is very energetic, with Ringo hitting the snare drum on every second and fourth beat, and the bright, ringing sound of a twelve-string acoustic guitar. Lennon sings a tight melody that *sticks almost unvaryingly to a single pitch* — conveying the feeling of a person stuck in painful isolation, and desperate to change it. He sings these words:

When I was younger, so much younger
than today
I never needed anybody's help in any way.
But now these days are gone and I'm not
so self-assured.
Now I find I've changed my mind
and opened up the doors.

As great a thing as any in the music of this song is what happens as Lennon's melody, which seems anxious and stuck, is juxtaposed with a simultaneous counter-melody come to by Paul McCartney, which has much more ease as it gracefully rises and falls. The words are basically the same, but fewer and more spread out, with some syllables occupying an entire measure (see Example 1):

When… When I was young…
I nev-e-er nee… ded help in any way.
Now… these days are gone…
And now I find… I've opened up the doors.

Example 1
Melody and Countermelody in ***Help!*** *by The Beatles*



As we hear these two melodies together, we're hearing something like restlessness and rest, agitation and satisfaction at once. It should also be mentioned that this is a great example of the wonderful relation of independence and need between Lennon and McCartney as songwriters — each bringing out something greater than what the other might have done alone. So, in their technique they actually solve the question of the song: their melodies *help* each other beautifully.

[Listen: *Help!* 00:09–00:30]

Like many people, I once felt that showing I was unsure of myself and needed help in any way was a humiliation. I wanted people, including women, to look up to me, be impressed by me, learn from me, while I kept my uncertainties hidden. Explained Mr. Siegel in "Care for Self," "When you want yourself to be separate, you have to try to convince yourself that your self is complete in some way."

Studying Aesthetic Realism, I came to see my notion of completeness was incomplete; in fact, very unmusical! Years ago, as my wife and I were expecting the birth of our daughter, I wanted to act more sure of myself than I was, have my feelings under control, and not need the assistance of other people. I was concerned about how stiff and irritated I was becoming, and in a class, when I asked Ellen Reiss why this was happening, she explained:

> There can be a feeling in a person that we are the most precious thing on earth, and any time we're with people, gold is being extracted from our purse.

And she continued:

> You are going to have the experience of holding this child the first day it is in the world. Do you want to say to the child on the day it is born, "Dear, I recommend that, whatever you meet, you keep yourself to yourself and don't let anyone really get inside of you. Your best friend is yourself." If you give this message to yourself, why shouldn't you give it to your child?"

Through this discussion, I saw the foolishness of what I had been doing, and I changed. I thank Ms. Reiss for her good will which continues to have such a good effect on my life.

Twenty One Pilots

All art shows, and Aesthetic Realism makes this clear, that we need what is outside ourselves, different from ourselves to really *be* ourselves. In *Help!* there's a wonderful culmination of need and triumph as the Beatles conclude, building to a powerful, yearning crescendo on that last "Help me-e-e" which melts into a sweet, harmonized ever-so-pleased "oooh," ending the whole song.

[Listen: *Help!* 01:51 — End]

3. *Stressed Out* by Twenty One Pilots — Boldness and Uncertainty Together

The hugely popular recording of 2015, *Stressed Out*, by the American rock duo Twenty One Pilots puts together, in a very likable way, opposites that mix people up terrifically: sureness and unsureness, or boldness and uncertainty. The song is basically one long complaint by a young man about how hard life is and how he longs for the "good old days" of his childhood. But it is done with humor, with rhythm and energy — in such a way that makes it likable.

Coupled with this is a deeper, more legitimate complaint that so many young people today have. That is, they are coming of age in a time of dismal economic prospects. Many in the U.S. are saddled with burdensome student loans, have a hard time finding good paying jobs, and even so, don't like the basis on which they are asked to work — to make profit for somebody else. They have a hard time feeling they can have a purpose in their lives they can honestly like. And as a result, they're "stressed out." This isn't said explicitly, but it's implied.

The song is an interesting mingling of hip-hop, electronic pop and reggae. Singer and songwriter Tyler Joseph starts out by complaining about how hard it is to write a song, then ends up complaining that now that he's older he's "insecure and cares what people think." Then we get to the refrain, "My name's Blurryface and I care what you think," indicating, I suppose, the pain of a person so concerned about what others think that he has no identity of his own — he has a "blurry" face. Then we hear the grand, sweeping, anthem-like chorus about longing for "the good old days when

our mama sang us to sleep/But now we're stressed out."

[Listen: *Stressed Out*, 00:00–1:13]
YouTube address:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gc4sY98Jn9I

As a fortunate man who is grateful to have learned from Aesthetic Realism about how harmful it has been to my life to use the comfort I got from my mother to see the world as harsh and unfriendly, I am certainly not recommending the sentiments expressed in this song. What I am saying is that these complaints are presented with a form that makes them pleasing and that, in fact, constitutes a criticism of those very sentiments.

In the Opposites in Music class, we recently studied music in relation to the landmark work by Eli Siegel, "The Aesthetic Method in Self Conflict," a chapter of his book, *Self and World*. In that work, Mr. Siegel shows greatly that the deepest conflicts affecting people every day are aesthetic matters, and that the resolution to those conflicts can be found in the technique of art. For example, he writes about a man he calls Harold Jamison:

> Look at Jamison. He is shy and he is arrogant; in fact, he is like most people. Sometimes, Jamison looks at himself and finds a person who is timid, wants to evade people, thinks people don't like him; is unassertive and inferior. At other times, Jamison is raring to go, feels like an excited regiment, like a dozen energetic lions up to something…
> The question Jamison and other people face is: Can, in one mind, feelings represented by superiority exist with feelings represented by inferiority? Can we be both humble and bold at 3:30 PM Tuesday? — Only art shows that the answer is Yes.[6]

As I said, I believe a large reason *Stressed Out* has been so extremely popular is that, in very likable ways, it puts together these opposites of boldness and humility. Also, opposites related to boldness and humility — definiteness and vagueness.

The song opens with very indefinite sliding sounds, produced probably by a synthesizer in sets of three: "buh-um, buh-um, buh-um." The bass notes hover and hum in a sort of ominous way, which, together with the sliding quality, gives a feeling of swampy indefiniteness. Then there are the spooky, Twilight Zone-ish, high-pitched, echo-y sounds that come floating in from time to time. You get a sense already of a person feeling aimless, unsure.

But the fact that these sliding sounds land so precisely on the first and third beats of a measure and then on the first beat of the following measure (and this pattern repeats) makes them also quite definite, bold, confident. The drums likewise anchor this introduction, accenting the second and fourth beats of each measure. Subtle intervening organ chords give the whole groove a reggae feel, which also lends a kind of jaunty confidence. The overall effect is one of ominous vagueness together with a feeling of sureness, direction, purpose.

[Listen: *Stressed Out*, 00:00–00:11]

Now the singer complains about how unsure he is of himself; about how he's "insecure and cares what people think," and here he's like Jamison who sometimes, Mr. Siegel writes, "is timid, wants to evade people, thinks people don't like him; is unassertive and inferior." But even here, amidst all this uncertainty and unsureness, the words are said with a very orderly rhythm. He is definite about what he's unsure about, and together with the drums, we feel a very reliable structure.

Then the refrain: "My name's Blurryface and I care what you think." The melody here — is it downcast or lightsome? The way it descends at the end can seem downcast, but there is also something lovely, buoyant, about it. Meanwhile, the music accompanying this refrain floats even more eerily than before,

seeming to represent a self that is drifting all over the place. Yet again, it is all contained securely within that very sure, bold beat.

[Listen: *Stressed Out*, 00:11–00:39]

I believe this song is trying to get at something much deeper than just pining away for one's childhood. In fact, Tyler Joseph said in an interview, about his point of view as a songwriter:

> I feel that humans are struggling all the time when it comes to purpose, trying to figure out what their purpose is… justifying your own existence. A lot of kids and people my age struggle with "What's the point?"

I hope Tyler Joseph and the whole generation of people he is representing in this song will soon learn of Aesthetic Realism and its explanation that the deepest purpose of everyone's life is to like the world. He could also learn that in the very structure of this recording, he and his musical partner Josh Dun are illustrating what liking the world means. The chorus that follows is at once soothing and sour, advancing and retreating, nebulous and exact — and as such stands for a world in which these opposites are one and that therefore can be liked.

Floating, spreading synthesizer notes accompany Joseph's voice as he grows grandly nostalgic on the words "Wish we could turn back time to the good old days/ When our mama sang…" Then the melody gets more tortuous and sour on the words, "us to sleep but now we're stressed out," ending on a really uncomfortable note. When these lines are repeated, drums, instruments and voices come in with more crashing force, once again bringing a definite anchor — and also impetus — to all this floating uncertainty and self-pity. The accompaniment gets bold, like (to use Eli Siegel's words), "a dozen energetic lions up to something." And then, with the repeat of the words "We're stressed out," things spread out once again.

[Listen: *Stressed Out*, 00:39–01:13]

In "The Aesthetic Method in Self-Conflict," Mr. Siegel writes:

> If a person is unable to do something, or if he doesn't know something, and he knows this neatly, definitely, he will not feel inferior in the morbid sense. He would feel at least he knew himself; and would be proud of that. In other words, in yielding to the facts about himself courageously, truly, there would be a self-approval.

Something approaching this happens in *Stressed Out*, because all this inferiority and self-doubt is being boldly, energetically expressed in this very rhythmic, organized structure. With all the complaining, there's something strangely celebratory about it. It is yet another illustration of Eli Siegel's words, "Rock and roll does show that the opposites are very much in motion, and that people are trying to be proud of their pain, not be skulking about it."

I'm grateful to have learned from Aesthetic Realism that the hope to have contempt for the world and people is what has given rise to both fake inferiority and fake superiority in me. As I have liked the world more — and instead of hoping to look down on people, as I have hoped to respect them more — sureness and unsureness have come to be in a more honest relation in me. This is a study I recommend to everyone.

In the second verse, the singer (well, you can't really call it singing — it's rap or hip-hop) goes on about a certain smell that reminds him of his childhood. Then he gets back to that conflict between childhood — a time, he says, when "nothing really mattered" — and the pressures of adult life, with the culminating line:

> *Out of student loans and treehouse homes we all would take the latter.*

The desperate whine in Joseph's voice also has energy, rhythm, and humor that make

it not just unsure but also bold, confident. Beneath this complaint, piano notes likewise sound both wandering and purposeful. Following the verse, the "Blurryface" refrain and the "stressed out" chorus both come around again in their turn.

[Listen: *Stressed Out*, 01:13–02:11]

The next section of the song takes on more urgency. With staccato synthesizer-notes accompanying the singer's rapid-fire syllables, he tells that he and his friends "used to play pretend" that they were flying in rocket ships. But, he tells:

> *We used to dream of outer space, now they're laughing at our face, saying, "Wake up, you need to make money!"*

And while that last line is sung and almost shouted by multiple voices with such ferocity, it also provides the release of humor — release from the frustration so many people feel now: "There must be a better, more likable means for me to conduct my life than what I've been presented with so far." The humor here is good.

In the very last section of the song, Tyler Joseph's voice is electronically altered to sound heavier, darker, more foreboding as it reiterates and hammers home some of the same complaints that came before. But with all the ferocity, the feeling of lightsome humor continues.

As I've been showing, I believe the success of this recording comes from the way it puts together seriousness and humor, vagueness and definition, boldness and uncertainty. And I believe that as such it can give people hope. As Eli Siegel wrote in the sentences I quoted earlier:

> Can we be both humble and bold at 3:30 PM Tuesday? — Only art shows that the answer is, Yes.

This recording, I believe, gives some of the evidence. Here's the remainder:

The Marvelettes

[Listen: *Stressed Out*, 02:11 — End]

4. Stop & Go, Pain & Pleasure in *Please Mr. Postman* by the Marvelettes

In his landmark essay of 1955 titled, "Is Beauty the Making One of Opposites?" Eli Siegel asks about Continuity and Discontinuity:

> Is there to be found in every work of art a certain progression, a certain indissoluble presence of relation, a design which makes for continuity? — and is there to be found, also, the discreteness, the individuality, the brokenness of things: the principle of discontinuity?[7]

The great 1961 recording by the Marvelettes, *Please Mr. Postman*, puts these opposites together in a wonderful way.

This song *starts* with an interruption — accenting "the brokenness of things." We hear a drumbeat followed by a group of female voices abruptly calling out "Wait!" But we soon find that we are moving along in a stream of rhythm, as lead singer Gladys Horton sings "Oh yes, wait a minute Mr. Postman! Wai-ai-ai-ait Mr. Post-ma-an!" while drums and handclaps mark the second

and fourth beats of each measure with two claps on the 2nd beat and one clap on the 4th. This style of handclapping, used again and again on rock and roll recordings, is a wonderful togetherness of brokenness and continuity. It breaks the time and keeps it moving; so the overall effect is that we're arrested and propelled forward at once.

[Listen: *Please Mr. Postman*, 00:00–00:08]
YouTube address:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSlzhYd0rYw

A section of call-and-response follows. And now, delightfully, the backup singers take the lead — with that whiny, complain-y, sour harmony. Their syllables are very rhythmic — most of them just a short eighth note in length — yet there is also a sense of spreading continuity, caused I think, both by the drone-y sound of their voices and also the fact that each voice sticks almost entirely to one pitch on each line:

Please Mr. Postman, look and see
Is there a letter in your bag for me?
'Cause it's been a mighty long time
Since I heard from this boyfriend of mine!

In contrast, the lead singer's responses are more elongated and travel more up and down the scale:

Whoa yeah-eah-eah eah-eah-eah!"
Please, plea-ease Mr, Po-oh oh-ostman!
Whoa-oa yeah-eah …etc…

Amidst all this stop and go, the message of these two parts — different as they are — is continuous: they complete each other; they speak in one plaintive voice to this postman. Underneath, the drum played by Marvin Gaye (yes, *that* Marvin Gaye — who later became a famous singer and composer on such classics as *I Heard It through the Grapevine* and *What's Going On?*) continues the pattern we heard in the handclaps earlier, and simultaneously maintains a steady double-time tapping-out of eighth notes on a closed hi-hat cymbal. Overall, there is definitely "a design which makes for continuity" yet within, there's brokenness, discreteness, individuality.

[Listen: *Please Mr. Postman*, 00:08–00:23]

This music, so delightful, has a big meaning for us. In life, we can go after a bad kind of continuity: just wanting to be outwardly agreeable with everyone, under all circumstances, no matter how unjust — and a bad kind of discontinuity: not wanting to fit in or get along with anyone, and associating our individuality with saying "No!" Music, when it's good, makes neither mistake.

Now, in the first two verses of the song, it's the backup singers who accent continuity, singing long, harmonized syllables, "Oooooh, wah-dooooo, wah-dooooo," across multiple measures while lead singer Horton makes sure discontinuity is honored, as she spells out in shorter syllables her complaint:

There must be some word today
From my boyfriend so far away!
Please Mr. Postman, look and see;
Is there a letter, a letter for me?

I've been standing here waiting
Mr. Postman
So-o-o patiently
For just a card or just a letter
Saying he's returning home to me.

During that second verse, the backup singers start breaking up their long syllables with shorter ones: "Oooooh, Wait! Wait! Wah-dooooo, Wait! Wait!" (and they get to even more variations later). And again, those voices! — so whiny and strange but somehow so lovely too — almost like some exotic wind instruments. In all this, and together with the band, the happy marriage of stoppage and flow goes on.

[Listen: *Please Mr. Postman*, 00:23–00:59]

What is it that we feel when the postman cometh, or when we go to our mailbox to see what might be there? Even our e-mail inbox? Are we looking for an exciting relation of continuity and discontinuity with people near and far? Are we hoping to like the world through that experience?

In the song, we can almost can see a girl running down the street calling after the postman as Gladys Horton sings: "You better wait a minute, wait a minute," while backup singers echo her with a rhythmic, "Wait! Wait a minute Mr. Postman!" The handclaps return, and the way brokenness and continuity, stop and go intermingle here — among voices, drums, piano and handclaps — is simply delightful. Then there are those pleasing moments of suspended interruption with, "Please check and see just one more time for me!" and of course, the famous line, "Deliver the letter; the sooner the better!" Horton's voice — plaintive, sometimes lyrical, sometimes husky, even raspy — conveys, with the help of the backup singers, that urgency. Meanwhile the song is never hurried. There is a steady, almost casual feel to the way the whole thing proceeds.

[Listen: *Please Mr. Postman*, 01:27 — End]

Eli Siegel described the essence of rock and roll when, in the lesson I quoted earlier, he called it "the blare of agony" while showing also that the upshot is *pleasure*. This song has that blare of agony, but don't we feel happy as we hear it? I'm grateful to be seeing more about why this matters through a discussion with me in an Aesthetic Realism class, where I asked about a tendency I sometimes had to feel hurt, and to focus excessively on that. Ellen Reiss surprised me when she asked whether I thought Mr. Siegel's explanation of rock and roll could in any way be used wrongly and inaccurately by me to feel that, yes, it's an expression of pain, but to *stop there* and not see the full picture. And she continued:

> Any time in art, if being hurt and pained are presented truly, there is pleasure. Is something in you less ready to get to that than the assertion of a certain hidden pain? …Whenever pain is presented with form it is no longer just pain. It is pain given so much form that there's joy. I think you could benefit from that more.

I *am* benefiting from it very much! I'm using it to criticize myself happily. Yes, like everyone, there are difficulties, obstacles that I meet, pain that I experience — but any time I try to sell myself the idea that that's the last word, it's a lie! I have such a rich and happy life because I learned from Aesthetic Realism the difference between contempt and respect — and I've seen that the world has a permanent, beautiful, lovable structure that one can always count on. That structure is the oneness of opposites. "Please Mr. Postman," in its presentation of continuity and discontinuity, separateness and togetherness, pain and joy as one — and in its transmitting such joy to us in the process — tells the real story.

5. Quietude and Explosion in *Breakeven* by the Script

In 2008, Irish rock band the Script released a song that has been loved internationally: *Breakeven*. It illustrates once again what has been true throughout the long tradition of rock music — what Eli Siegel described in the lesson I've been quoting from: the "tremendous assertion of loneliness." In it, a man tells that having broken up with a woman, he's in great pain while she seems to be doing fine — and that therefore, "When a heart breaks, it don't breakeven."

The beauty of this song is in the way it travels back and forth between quiet, inner soliloquy and passionate outburst. After a stirring introduction the band quiets down to just a couple of muted guitar notes, as the singer quietly tells:

The Script

I'm still alive but I'm barely breathin'.
Just prayin' to a God that I don't believe in.
'Cause I've got time while she got freedom,
'Cause when a heart breaks, no, it don't breakeven.

Her best days will be some of my worst.
She finally met a man who's gonna put her first.
While I'm wide awake she's no trouble sleepin'.
'Cause when a heart breaks, no, it don't breakeven... even. No...

In these verses, the melody resembles a person alone, not getting very far. It hovers around the third of the scale, rarely climbs beyond it, and consistently tumbles back down to the tonic. With the second verse, the drums rumble in (along with a second guitar) and we now almost feel the man's heart beating, which builds to a pounding as we transition into the chorus. Here the band swells even more, with the addition of keyboard and synthesizer.

[Listen: *Breakeven*, 00:00–01:06]
YouTube address:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzCLLHscMOw

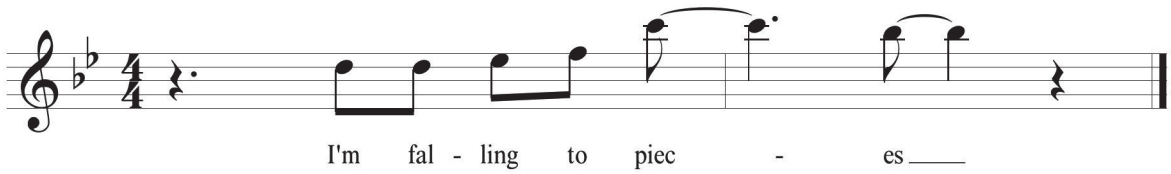
The melody leaps up and then falls, then struggles up and down some more, sounding like a person in pain, on the words:

What am I supposed to do when the best part of me was always you?
What am I supposed to say when I'm all choked up and you're ok?

Then the refrain "I'm falling to pieces" breaks through the boundary of the octave and climbs up to a high 9th (see *Example 2*), before settling back to the tonic. We feel a person reaching beyond himself, agonized, flailing. And don't we, at the same time, feel a person sailing forth, proudly showing himself? Isn't it both?

[Listen: *Breakeven*, 01:06–01:26]

Example 2
Refrain in Breakeven by The Script



In the next verse, we're back to the man's lonely soliloquy. It is quiet like the first two verses, but this time with the drums more energetic. The chorus that follows gathers more force than the one before, with more instrumentation and vocal accompaniment. The artful drama of soft and loud, waxing and waning emotion, continues.

The bridge starts relatively quietly, but leads to the singer's outburst to the woman:

Oh you got his heart and my heart but none of the pain
You took the suitcase, I took the blame
Now I'm trying to make sense of what little remains
'Cause you left me with no love, no love to my name…

Here, at the very moment the singer and band reach their loudest crescendo, they suddenly drop back again to that quiet, inner soliloquy of one man talking to himself, "I'm still alive but I'm barely breathin'." This last verse is followed by a passionate, concluding chorus, and another agonized (and soaring) refrain, "I'm falling to pieces."

[Listen: *Breakeven*, 01:26 — End]

Again I say the popularity of this song comes from the way it puts together these opposites of inner, secret feeling and outward blare. I believe Eli Siegel's explanation is true. I'll quote further from the lesson he gave:

I say the purpose of rock and roll is to make secrets a public delight. Rock and roll consists of opposites, and there is an assertion of agony. "If you don't care for me, O-O-O I still care for you O-O-O." There is a desire to take one's private life and to have a train caller give it.

6. Pleasure and Pain in Chuck Berry's *Johnny B. Goode*

It may have crossed your mind that not every rock and roll song is on a painful subject, and that is very true. What about a song that offhand is happy? Does the explanation I've been presenting in this writing still hold? I believe it does.

Take a song — a great song — from back near the dawn of rock and roll: Chuck Berry's eternal classic *Johnny B. Goode* of 1958. It's cheerful, it's speedy, it celebrates the success of Johnny B. Goode, who "could play a guitar just like a-ringin' a bell." So where's the pain? The pain is in the music, how it's structured.

Berry's powerhouse opening guitar solo is alive with energy and uplift. Bass and drum hit a sudden stop-time beat to mark the beginning of the third measure as Berry sails

Chuck Berry

right past it. Then, at the end of the fourth measure, the whole band kicks in, sounding like a railroad train coming down the track. And while many of the guitar notes are bright and strong (he hits the perfect fifth of the scale repeatedly), many of them also belong to the minor pentatonic scale, which overlays the chords with something tangled, sour, uncomfortable.

[Listen: *Johnny B. Goode*, 00:00–00:17]
YouTube address:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uf4rxCB4lys

While this is in the major key, it is shot through with blues notes. This is the hallmark of rock and roll: that togetherness of major and minor which — like its daddy, the blues — evokes pain and struggle underneath the joy, no matter what the words may be saying. This has, of course, been pointed out before in commentary about the blues and rock and roll. But the question is: *Why does it get us?* Is there something we are deeply hoping to learn from it? And can we?

Berry sings:

Deep down in Louisiana close
to New Orleans
Way back up in the woods among
the evergreens,

The chord that accompanies these first two lines is the tonic, B-flat major. As the verse continues, it goes through more shadings of dark and light, agitation and rest, with the use of flatted seventh chords (Eb7 and F7), while always returning back to that confident B-flat:

There stood an old cabin made
of earth and wood
Where lived a country boy named
Johnny B. Goode.
Who never ever learned to read or write
so well
But he could play a guitar just like
a-ringin' a bell.

Now we get to the chorus and the joy hits full throttle, as Berry sings:

Go! Go! Go Johnny, go! Go!
Go Johnny, go! Go!
Johnny B. Goode.

Every "Go!" is on the strong, heroic fifth of the scale and the last phrase "Johnny B. Goode" comes right on home to the tonic.

[Listen: *Johnny B. Goode*, 00:17–00:50]

Throughout the entire song, comfort and discomfort, pleasure and pain are one. The overall feel of the song is one of great triumph. But to triumph, you must have something to triumph over — something has to be struggled with. We feel that happening in the sound structure of this piece. And it means something for our lives: we want to feel as we meet obstacles and difficulties, that we can see them and the world itself in a way that makes for ease, pleasure, even joy.

Although the lyrics don't tell us, we can surmise that Johnny B. Goode himself had pain in his life, since we know that he lived in an old cabin made of earth and wood, and never learned to read or write. But the triumph of his life is that he has found something to authentically *love* — that guitar. And that is a clear parallel to the life of Berry himself, one of the great rock and roll artists of all time, although in fact he was well educated and never lived in a cabin. Still, he did struggle in his life with ugly difficulties, including racism, from his earliest days growing up in St. Louis, Missouri. He tells in his autobiography that his writing of this song arose from his visiting New Orleans for the first time and seeing the place where persons of his own race — likely his own ancestors — had been sold as slaves only a few generations before. But what did he do with the fury he felt at that injustice? Did he use it to feel disgusted or to lash out viciously? In the writing of this great song he did something

quite opposite: he aimed for beauty. And he accomplished it to a pretty large degree.

The masterful guitar solo that follows the second verse and continues through two complete revolutions of the chord progression has terrific ferocity, even anger. But it is not a hurtful ferocity or a petty anger — the ferocity and anger are the same as pure joy. I'll quote again these words of Eli Siegel:

> Rock and roll does show that the opposites are very much in motion, and that people are trying to be proud of their pain, not be skulking about it.

[Listen: *Johnny B. Goode*, 00:50 — End]

I'm quite sure that rock and roll in every instance whatsoever always aims at making a one of pain and pleasure, obstacle and release, inner feeling and outward expression. I've given some examples, and there are hundreds more. Any new rock and roll composition that comes out tomorrow will do the same, in its own fresh way. I'm grateful to know, because of what I've learned from Aesthetic Realism, that this has great importance for us. The fact that rock and roll has been loved for decades all over the world shows how much people everywhere want these opposites to be one in our lives. And the music itself, as Eli Siegel explained, shows "that that can be done."

NOTES

[1] Belz, Carl, *The Story of Rock*, Oxford University Press, 1972. 256 p.

[2] White, Timothy, *Rock Lives*, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1990, pp. xiii–xiv.

[3] "The Ordinary Doom" by Eli Siegel first appeared in the journal *Definition* (1961), and was reprinted in *A Book of Non-fiction*, ed. Rev. Joseph T. Browne. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1965.

[4] *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known*, Number 155, "Care for Self," March 17, 1976.

[5] Siegel, Eli, *Hail, American Development*, Definition Press, New York, 1968, p. 62.

[6] Siegel, Eli, *Self and World; An Explanation of Aesthetic Realism*, Definition Press, New York, 1981, pp. 95–97.

[7] The Fifteen Questions by Eli Siegel were first published by the Terrain Gallery in the announcement of its opening, February 26, 1955. Reprinted in the following periodicals: *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism*, December 1955; *Ante*, 1964; *Hibbert Journal* (London), 1964.

DISCOGRAPHY

1. Gordy, Berry and Roquel "Billy" Davis, Gwendolyn Gordy, ***Lonely Teardrops*** [recorded by Jackie Wilson, 1958]. On *Jackie Wilson — 20 Greatest Hits* [CD] Brunswick Records (2002)

2. Lennon and McCartney, ***Help!*** [recorded by the Beatles, 1965]. On *Help!* [CD] Capitol (2009)

3. Joseph, Tyler, ***Stressed Out*** [recorded by Twenty One Pilots, 2015]. On *Blurryface* [CD, digital download] Fueled by Ramen (2015)

4. Dobbins, Georgia and William Garrett, Freddie Gorman, Brian Holland, Robert Bateman, ***Please Mister Postman*** [recorded by The Marvelettes, 1961]. On *Motown Classics Gold* [CD] Motown (2005)

5. Frampton, O'Donoghue, Sheehan, Kipner, ***Breakeven*** [recorded by The Script, 2008]. On T*he Script* [CD] Sony (2009)

6. Berry, Chuck, ***Johnny B. Goode*** [recorded by Chuck Berry, 1958]. On *Chuck Berry (Chess Box)* [CD] Chess (1988)

About the author:

Kevin Fennell, Independent Scholar and Rock Musicologist;
B.A., State University of New York at Stony Brook
(11794, New York, USA),
ORCID: 0000-0003-4980-5443, fennell.kevin@yahoo.com

Об авторе:

Кевин Феннелл, независимый учёный, рок-музыковед, бакалавр,
Государственный Университет штата Нью-Йорк в Стоуни-Брук
(11794, Нью-Йорк, США),
ORCID: 0000-0003-4980-5443, fennell.kevin@yahoo.com