

# Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship

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music as intertwined with his life and against the larger backdrop of American music of the 1970s and 1980s, we contemplate some of the diverse ways that the politics of race, gender, and sexuality have informed new music composition, stepping into the zone of difference that Eastman experienced, embraced, and forced his listeners to confront.

## 10 | Synthesizing difference: the queer circuits of early synthpop

JUDITH A. PERAINO

What is the sexuality of synthesizers? What is the gender? With these questions I am suggesting, of course, that there is an association of gender, sexuality, and synthesizers. Part of my agenda here is to examine how such an association came about in popular music, particularly in a style called "synthpop." Elsewhere I have explored the ways in which music functions within Michel Foucault's notion of "technologies" – systems of practices or disciplinary techniques on the levels of the social and the individual, which "human beings use to understand themselves."<sup>1</sup> Such musical technologies often call into question norms of gender and sexuality. This essay investigates how the more common understanding of technology as the science of machines became a Foucauldian "technology" – a means of thinking about the self, subjectivity, identity, and ontology. The circuits that I trace here provide a musical backstory to "the posthuman turn" in contemporary critical theory – a turn initiated in 1985 (the late end of synthpop's "golden age") by Donna Haraway's essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," reinvigorated by N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999),<sup>2</sup> and continued by scholars such as Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013). These writers, among many others, propose a radical dismantling of the conceptual boundaries that separate nature, culture, and technology. As Braidotti summarizes: "[t]he relational capacity of the posthuman subject is not confined within our species, but it includes all non-anthropomorphic elements."<sup>3</sup> If David Cecchetto is

<sup>1</sup> See Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Heavwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1–9; Foucault citation on 4.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Sociologist Review* 52 (1985): 65–107; Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 60.

### Short-circuiting identity

The desire to be a machine is distinctly the desire *not* to be human – to have no desire, no sexuality, no gender. Under such circumstances, gender and sexuality can also be imagined as superficial, without functionality – or better, perhaps, as default interfaces, like the keyboard controller of a synthesizer. Clearly nodding toward this idea, the cover for The Human League's 1979 album *Reproduction* directly attacks sexuality and its presumed functionality (see Figure 10.4).

Crying naked babies appear encased in a dance floor that cracks beneath the feet of nightclubbing men and women. Upon closer inspection, the position of the dancers calls into question their sexuality, despite their stereotypically gendered legs: the two women are clearly dancing together, while the man is turned away from them. Dancing, the album art seems to



Figure 10.4 The Human League, *Reproduction* (1979).

suggest, is not part of a heterosexual seduction that will become “productive”; it is something our bodies do that has no bearing on reproduction. Indeed, dancing may even be a willful stomp on reproductive sexuality. The music of *Reproduction* is austere and somber – hardly danceable, in fact – and lacks any of the “pop” sensibility of The Human League’s later song “Don’t You Want Me.” Indeed, many of the songs on the album could be considered an outright attack on pop, such as their cover of the Righteous Brothers’ 1964 hit “You’ve Lost that Loving Feeling.” By playing up the disjunction between the cold, inhuman synthesizers and the romantic emotionalism of the original, The Human League’s version of this song encapsulates the early robot aesthetics of synthpop. Here, sentimentality is used to *demolish* sentimentality, to expose the mechanical reproduction of sentimentality in pop, and, more importantly, to call attention to its breakdown. The one dance hit on the album, “Empire State Human,” expresses pure narcissism – a fantasy of willing the body to grow taller in order to be distant from other people. To dance to this song is to reproduce the sexual politics of the album cover.

This cold-hearted humanity of The Human League contrasts with another iconic image in early synthpop: the warm-hearted android of Gary Numan. Inspired by the novels of Philip K. Dick and William S. Burroughs, Numan unabashedly combined the theatrical acumen and indeterminate sexuality of David Bowie with the fascistic robot-identity of Kraftwerk to create compelling musical explorations of a bleak future of human emotions and (dis)connection, sometimes imagined as furtive or ambivalent homosexual encounters.<sup>54</sup> Numan’s first British hit song “Are Friends’ Electric?” from his sci-fi concept album *Replicas* (1979) perhaps best reflects “the boundary disputes between human and android” that link early synthpop to later posthuman theories.<sup>55</sup> The song has few typical markers of (human) pop music: it is well over five minutes long and lacks both a chorus (or even much of a melody) and a danceable, syncopated groove. Instead, the listener is hooked by an eerie, mechanical musical world, one marked by a mid-tempo ticking beat, a simple bass line, and a starkly angular synthesized riff

<sup>54</sup> Numan’s songs with homosexual references are scattered throughout his albums, including his pre-synthpop days. They include “Friends” and “Joe the Waiter” (from *Tubeway Army*, 1978); “Are Friends’ Electric?” and “It Must Have Been Years” (from *Replicas*, 1979); and “She’s Got Claws” (from *Dance*, 1981).

<sup>55</sup> Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 162. Hayles is referring to the science fiction of Philip K. Dick, and especially *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, which was a clear model for Numan’s *Replicas*.

Example 10.2 Main riff from "Are Friends Electric?" (1979) by Gary Numan. Beggars Banquet Records Ltd.

comprised of open fifths and octaves with a final "wrong note" that creates a melodic tritone. This tritone hints at the fallibility of "the system," both musical and mechanical (see example 10.2).<sup>56</sup>

More curious still, for a hit song, is the alternation between sung and spoken lyrics. The sung verses, pitched above the riff but narrow in range, dispassionately tell of an encounter with a mechanical male "rent-a-friend," who can also serve as a sexual companion. The double-tracking of Numan's reedy voice creates an unreal, vocoder-like quality to the singing, with moments of noticeable delay that split his voice in two. The singing voice is thus barely readable as human.

[Sung over main riff]  
 You know I hate to ask  
 But are "friends" electric?  
 Only mine's broke down  
 And now I've no one to love

The spoken verses, by contrast, sound entirely human. Against a new hollow pattern of electronic pitches (arpeggiated seventh chords with missing thirds), Numan recites sentimental words full of abject memories and feelings of longing, betrayal, and loneliness. Music, here, seems to fall at affective expression. Humanness resides in simple speech.

[Spoken]  
 So I find out your reason  
 For the phone calls and smiles

<sup>56</sup> Numan himself referred to the riff as having a "wrong note." See Numan with Malins, *Praying to the Aliens*, 63. See also Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave?*, 171–72.

And it hurts  
 And I'm lonely  
 And I should never have tried  
 And I missed you tonight  
 It must be time to leave  
 You see it meant everything to me

It is unclear who or what is the lost object of desire – the broken electrical "friend" or a deeper loss of human contact. Or perhaps such emotions and desires – that can be turned on and off – are part of the electronic future. Indeed, the first spoken verse ends with the line "I don't think it meant anything to you," while the second ends with the line "You see it meant everything to me." This is a zero-sum emotional universe that betrays the thin line between mechanized humans and sentient robots.

Within the musical context of early synthpop artists like The Human League and Gary Numan, it is small wonder that *Melody Maker* called Wendy Carlos a "human synthesizer." Carlos had indeed seemingly achieved the critical objective of synthpop: to become a machine, to synthesize an "unnatural" human, albeit one that finally conformed to gender. In 1979, normative gender and heterosexuality seemed almost remnants of the past – a retrosexuality to wax nostalgic about, resynthesize, or stomp out altogether. And yet, at the height of synthpop in the early 1980s, female vocalists emerged with warm and soulful singing against the icy, bubbling electronic beats. In "Don't Go" (1982) by the British group Yazoo (known as Yaz in the US because of a name conflict with a record label), the R&B vocal style of singer Alison Moyet fits squarely within a pop sensibility, while also clearly relating to the sound of 1970s disco divas. Moreover, the sentiment seems authentic: words of sexual obsession and addiction match the urgency and passion of the delivery. Was synthpop becoming human and embodied? Not according to the album cover, which showed that synthpop was still the music of nonhumans – or, rather, posthumans (see Figure 10.5).

Though the songs do not contain overtly homoerotic lyrics, the cover art for Yazoo's *Upstairs at Eric's* depicts a homosocial world of mannequins dressed in the gay-macho, or "gay clone" fashion of the day: muscle t-shirts, jeans, and boots.<sup>57</sup> Their bodies are severed at the waist, groins

<sup>57</sup> For more on gay clones culture and music, see Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens*, 176–84.



Figure 10.5 Yazoo (also Yaz), *Upstairs at Eric's* (1982).

and legs pushed some distance back from their torsos. Gender and sexuality – here specifically masculine and gay – are a locus of disruption, and, quite literally, dislocation. While the voice pulls us toward the human, the album cover jerks us in the opposite direction, confronting us with the disjunct body, broken down, as it were, into components. Are we to hear the impassioned vocals of “Don’t Go” as merely another module, patched into the synthesized whole? It is hard not to, especially in light of the fact that keyboardist Vince Clarke replaced vocalist Alison Moyet in 1985 with another soulful singer, Andy Bell, to form the synthpop duo aptly called Erasure.

The rise of synthpop and its emblems of alienation and difference reflect a cultural moment particular to the dawning of the 1980s, when a sense of encroaching technology provoked both fascination and horror. New

personal computers, video games, answering machines, and cheap, user-friendly synthesizers allowed widespread access and implementation of technology while revealing at the same time new forms of human obsolescence.<sup>58</sup> Yet it would seem that the synthesizer’s affiliation with such identity crises began at least a decade earlier, when Carlos and Elkind threatened classical music with their Bach *contra naturam* and their technological Beethoven qua fascistic governmental control. In the midst of escalating Cold War tensions and dehumanizing government policies that paid less attention to quality of life than to missile defense systems, the synthesizer brought a suspicion of the perversely mechanical to an activity thought to be entirely the province of the human – making music. In the science fiction of synthpop, humanity is reduced to a list of basic components: bodies, gender, sexuality, desire. But the play of gender and sexuality in synthpop was ultimately not about creating a gay-identified music. On the contrary, synthpop provided a sustained meditation on sexuality detached from identity, desire dislocated from gender. Tropes or innuendos of same-sex desire served to throw desire itself into relief, to defamiliarize it. This alien desire, in turn, was a direct attack on corporate pop music by way of an attack on pop’s own particular fascism – hetero-normative love.

The association of same-sex desire or gay identity with dehumanized androids and mannequins could be considered a menacing development, especially in the years just before the AIDS epidemic, were it not for the fact that the mid-1980s saw a second generation of synthpop artists – Bronski Beat, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Pet Shop Boys, and Andy Bell of Erasure – who really were gay and, more importantly, increasingly marketed themselves as such, without the mediation of robotic androgyny.<sup>59</sup> The shift from alien to overt desire was due in part to early synthpop’s ideal of the human synthesizer, which exposed

<sup>58</sup> On the effect of affordable synthesizers and other music technology, see Caterforis, *Are We Not New Wave?*, 152. Theberge, following the Marxist theories of British Cultural Studies, argues that technology functions as a commodity that engenders behaviors and approaches in musicians; thus the consumption of technology drives creation, rather than creation driving the production of technology. See Theberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine*, esp. 1–13, 51–71.

<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of some of these bands, see Aaron Lecklider, “Between Decadence and Denial: Two Studies in Gay Male Politics and 1980s Pop Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 16:2 (2004): 111–41; and Fred Maus, “Glamour and Evasion: The Fabulous Ambivalence of the Pet Shop Boys,” *Popular Music* 20:3 (2001): 379–93.

the tension between complex human emotions and the mechanical social interface – the “controllers” – that are gender and sexuality. Synthpop artists pulled out and confused all the patch chords of identity; it was left to the synthesizer to bring these disconnected circuits back together again.

CHARLES HIROSHI GARRETT

In March 1983, the Beastie Boys recorded “Cookie Puss,” their first hip-hop track of a musical career that began in 1979 and spanned more than thirty years. There was little indication upon the release of the subsequent *Cookie Puss* EP that the Beasties would later be recognized as significant musical artists who gained induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2012. On the contrary, coming from a group that until that time had been affiliated more closely with New York’s punk scene, the song literally delivered a practical joke. “Cookie Puss” revolves around excerpts from prank phone calls made by the Beasties to a branch store of Carvel, the retail ice-cream chain. The title refers to a character featured on an ice-cream cake sold by Carvel, and the song captures the Beasties calling unsuspecting and confused employees, demanding to speak to “Cookie Puss.” Although the track does not feature the distinctive rapping for which the Beasties would become known, it is built on a hip-hop beat and overlaid with snippets from their taped phone calls, as well as brief samples from the comedian Steve Martin’s album *A Wild and Crazy Guy* (1978). Presenting their childish humor accompanied by the voice of a popular stand-up comedian, the Beasties’ exclamations become increasingly insistent, obnoxious, violent, and sexist as they reach the climax of the single. Built on male adolescent humor that proved very appealing to some listeners and just as offensive to others, the track became their most successful release to that point in their career, and it received enough airplay on college radio stations to convince them to explore further directions as rap artists.

Members of the group later described “Cookie Puss” as a childish experiment and a dumb joke, but that did not prevent them from re-releasing it with other early recordings as part of the compilation *Some Old Bullshit* (1994). In addition to having accrued commercial appeal for a fanbase that had grown exponentially, these tracks offered a glimpse of their musical development and acknowledged how important a prankster attitude had been and remained to their appeal. After the success of “Cookie Puss,” the Beasties sought to meet more conventional expectations for rap artists by hiring a DJ, Rick Rubin, to enhance their live shows.