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Progressive Listening, or Listening as Improvisation: The Case of The Shaggs

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Regress Forward

The Shaggs, perhaps in spite of themselves, are the least likely to inherit the fruits of any attempt at the mapping of aesthetic reception.

The Shaggs existed before punk-inflected irony made DIY incompetence cute and fashionable. This wasn't an attempt at free jazz or expanding the boundaries of the avant-garde. As a major influence, the Shaggs cited cuddly 1960s Brit-rockers Herman's Hermits.[\[1\]](#)

They performed almost exclusively at the Fremont town hall and at a local nursing home, beginning in 1968 and ending in 1973. Many people in Fremont thought the band stank.[\[2\]](#)

Much has been said and written about The Shaggs, the short-lived musical trio of three young sisters (Betty Wiggin: rhythm guitar, vocals; Helen Wiggin: drums; and Dorothy (aka Dot) Wiggin: lead guitar, vocals, arrangements), in the late 1960s/early 1970s. They seem to be especially prevalent among blog and other internet sites, which are, contrary to what might be assumed, not without examples of critical engagement. They have also made their way into a book.[\[3\]](#) After the shock of hearing The Shaggs for the first time, a fair share of critics have come to be preoccupied with solving the very puzzle of how, in fact, this music ever came to be in the first place. This obviously ushers in questions of context, history, intentions, motivations, etc.—questions that, where relevant to my present purposes, I hope not to underestimate. But even more motivating for me is the strong probability that this recording—of three teenage sisters playing original music, all of which is marked by obviously amateurish musical playing ability—presents a difficult, but perhaps irresistible, challenge for aestheticians and music listeners alike. True, there is something marvelously off-centered about this music. But could that be all? After all, there are countless examples of music that most people might consider off-centered. Or could

it all come down to merely my own esoteric taste in music? I do not think so. There is something else happening with The Shaggs. It is something borne of the confrontation between the familiar and the strange and a subtle tension between the 'gestural' and the 'intentional'. Here, despite what may be commonly perceived as their close similarity, I take these two terms as differing in at least one crucial sense, even if it is only a matter of degree. That is, one can be quite deliberate in an action without necessarily having, or even conceiving of, an object, a finality, a resting place for that action. The latter is what I would consider the view from classical phenomenology, where "intentionality" really means: "transcendental subject meets intentional object." With an ounce of caution in trying to give a visual analogue to a musical subject, one might nevertheless think of a Jackson Pollock painting. True, one might cite Pollock's aggressive and active drip method as being quite deliberate and intentional, but the works themselves, the affect of these paintings, are arguably more gestural than intentional, more suggestive of something than settling on something. Of course, I also believe that we should be mindful of relegating Pollock's work to that vague critical void that is sometimes given the name of "abstraction." Pollock's art is certainly not "representational" in any traditional sense, but there is something quite emphatically concrete about it, something that hits you, something awash in gesture and dripping in affect. And so it is with The Shaggs. Although there is a seemingly unabashed, even joyful, gesture to what they do (rickety collisions of cooings, pluckings, and thumpings), there is nevertheless a profound lack of intentionality, or, if one wishes, a lack of directed intentionality.

When listening to The Shaggs, it has occurred to me that most, if not all, of the common conventions for listening, most of my receptive "equipment" for musical digestion is necessarily thrown out the window. All bets are off. In other words, The Shaggs force me, the listener, to reorient and adapt—that is, to improvise my experience, to scramble for meaning. Now, one might ask, is this not the case, to some degree, with any music (art, or even "experience," taken in its broadest imaginable application)? According to Adorno, no—this is precisely the critical and sobering point he makes in terms of popular music and its connection to "regressive listening":

The very existence of the subject who could verify such [musical] taste has become as questionable as has, at the opposite pole, the right to freedom of choice, which empirically, in any case, no one any longer exercises. If one seeks to find out who 'likes' a commercial piece, one cannot avoid the suspicion that liking and disliking are inappropriate to the situation, even if the person questioned clothes his reaction in those words. The familiarity of the piece is a surrogate for the quality ascribed

to it. To like it is almost the same thing as to recognize it.

Music as entertainment...seems to complement the reduction of people to silence, the dying out of speech as expression, the inability to communicate at all. It inhabits the pockets of silence that develop between people moulded by anxiety, work, and undemanding docility.^[4]

But even if we say, yes, we do, in fact, always seek some meaning, it is, nevertheless, safe to say that this does not always happen with respect to The Shaggs. Their fondness of Herman's Hermits notwithstanding, The Shaggs often sound like a musical shipwreck. At least in the sense where I might look to their intention, or to any reliable patterns in the music, or to any marked style, etc., "The Shaggs," as musical "authors," are difficult to situate. In the words of Barthes, "in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath..."^[5] Can I then "disentangle" The Shaggs? Perhaps. As a rather stark, radical anecdote to Adorno's regressive listening, The Shaggs force a productivity, what I would call a progressive listening.^[6] In part out of deference to what was politically at stake for Adorno, I am mindful of the political investment the term "progressive" might suggest. Nevertheless, I will emphasize an aesthetic line here and let the reader draw (or not draw) her own sense of its political import.

In particular, then, in listening to The Shaggs I become the musical "reader" par excellence. Barthes again: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."^[7] With very few musical quotations and inscriptions to go by, I am truly, in Barthesian terms, forced to write (as a listener) this most complicated of musical "Texts."^[8] The "readerly" becomes the "writerly," Barthes would say.^[9] Thus, in this essay I seek to explore and draw to the surface those qualities of The Shaggs's music (in some instances, it may even be more apt, if kitschy, to say The Shaggs "phenomenon") that engender this progressive listening. I will argue that The Shaggs actually force us to take a rather different approach to aesthetic inquiry, uprooting our conventional ways of reception and modes of criticism in the process; this compels us to engage in a kind of improvisatory aesthetics. Through their nearly ungraspable blend of innocent music-making with its unabashed lack of technique and musical cohesion we are led to be more creative and multi-layered in our exploration and criticism—to some extent, in our very sense of aesthetic value. It is, paradoxically, and perhaps somewhat perversely, our near total disbelief, and (cringing) befuddlement over such music that provides a kind of aesthetic value or pleasure. In one sense, we want to listen to The Shaggs because they

are so “bad”; but this, in turn, is precisely what might make their music so “good.”

Thus, implicit in this project is a form of negative criticism, in which it will become evident that most of the traditional theoretical modes and signposts of aesthetic analysis might, in fact, be insufficient for our encounter with *The Shaggs*. However, as a result of this predicament, a positive, vital criticism can be glimpsed as well, whereby our palette for aesthetic appreciation and response to music (whether *The Shaggs* or various other musics) is, for better or ill, challenged and expanded.

Popular Is As Popular Does

Again, in investigating *The Shaggs* I wish to tread lightly, and be mindful of overpsychologizing, of overemphasizing certain more speculative aspects tied to their background, upbringing, etc.^[10] Rather, I would begin by stepping back. Consider this as a type of phenomenological “bracketing.” It is my wager that, upon initially hearing *The Shaggs*, most listeners would apprehend their music with some ounce of disbelief. Here we have three teenaged sisters, all dressed in what appear to be school uniforms, very similar to Brownie outfits,^[11] flailing away at their instruments. I say “flailing away” not so much to be derogatory, but because this description would at least seem to match what both non-musician and musician listeners, from whatever proclivity or background in music, would perceive as the “amateurishness” of the ensemble. If nothing else, it is clear that *The Shaggs* lack cohesion. *The Shaggs* can be a rather difficult listen, even for those schooled in more open and unpredictable musical examples from edgier genres (e.g., from the classical avant-garde of a John Cage through to the free improvisation of a Cecil Taylor.) In many cases, their music is possibly even capable of challenging one’s palette for what qualifies as digestible music. “So what?” rebuts the die-hard *Shaggs* fan. Well, this may ultimately be a fair response. But let us be patient. After all, there is another side of the spectrum where reviewer Susan Orlean describes *The Shaggs* as “winsome but raggedly discordant pop.”^[12] But is this a bit of a stretch? Maybe not. Granted, upon a first listen, *The Shaggs* would impress most as “raggedly discordant.” Moreover, “winsome” seems ultimately apt, even though such an assessment would seem to require the shedding of any latent snobbery and the admission of a playful sense of humor. But “pop”? Is this pushing our appreciation of *The Shaggs* a bit too far? For one might argue that pop music—especially of the heavily commercial variety (e.g., Britney Spears)—is quite intentional, preconceived, structured, and predictable, and most listeners familiar with a range of pop music can hear and (if applicable) see this as well. Such is not the case with *The Shaggs*.

That being said, what might then be called for—and what the example of *The Shaggs* may

inspire—is a refashioning of “the popular,” a great deal of which has been done in the area of popular music studies. In a previous essay,^[13] I sought to make a contribution to that very project, using Chris Cutler’s taxonomy of the popular as a launching-off point.^[14] Cutler traces what he would consider failed options for assessing the breadth and depth of the popular. First, in the ‘Popular’ by Numbers model the guiding criteria for judging the popular amounts to statistical analysis. Second, in the ‘Popular’ as ‘Folk’ model, folk is defined as music “of the people” (i.e., “popular”). Third, in the ‘Popular’ as Genus model, Cutler sees a more fruitful direction, implying more a kind of sensibility—indeed, a “popular aesthetic”—rather than a genre or market commodity. Moreover, it would seem that, for Cutler, as for other popular music theorists like Theodore Gracyk and Simon Frith, such a take on the popular might begin to cut through what have traditionally been certain sharply drawn distinctions in popular music criticism. On the one hand, there is the view that the “choices” given to us by commercialized media actually represent abundant freedom in cultural expression (i.e., the idea that the popular music industry simply “gives the people what they want”). On the other hand, following Adorno and Horkheimer, the primacy of a “culture industry” looms over a stark dichotomy between “mass culture” and alienated subjectivity. For his part, it is here that Frith makes the challenging assertion that, if cultural modes—e.g., popular music—are to be transformative, as opposed to escapist (or engendering what he calls “culture-as-transformation” rather than “culture-as-reconciliation”), they “must challenge experience; they must be unpopular.”^[15]

Of course, informing Frith’s prescription here is the descriptive claim that popular music does, in fact, operate this way for many consumers, and for a much more varied spectrum of consumers than the Adornian “huddled masses” viewpoint might allow. For instance, in his discussion of hip-hop and dance music, Russell A. Potter writes that “among the fans of many current pop music genres, the awareness that their music constitutes noise to others has become a definitional aesthetic and driving force.”^[16] Hence the distinction between what I have previously called the “unpopular popular” (kindred to Frith’s culture-as-transformation) and the “mainstream popular” (kindred to Frith’s culture-as-reconciliation). Examples of the latter are more immediately identifiable. If nothing else, we might start with “Top 40” (also a genre unto itself, we should recall) and go from there. Examples of the former are a bit more challenging—but I suppose that is the point. For my part, I offer Bjork, for whose music and its reception the conventional mass/individual, popular/avant-garde, mainstream/marginalized binarisms no longer seem to hold. As I have previously written, the fruits of Bjork’s musical experimentalism are now nearly ubiquitous in the annals of popular music culture, but the music is nevertheless still experimental.

But where do The Shaggs fit in this taxonomy? Here, Theodore Gracyk’s discussion (and

subsequent refashioning) of the aesthetic notion of “disinterest,” especially as it pertains to popular music, seems useful; in one sense, the idea that “we respond to the intentionality of the act before we respond to the intentions we glean from it” corresponds with what Gracyk calls “the ‘spoonful-of-sugar-helps-the-medicine-go-down’ defense of disinterest.” The wager here is that “independent musical rewards can motivate a disinterested listener to invest enough interpretive energy to enter imaginatively into the world it represents.”^[17] Regardless of what we “know” (or think we know) about The Shaggs, the sheer awkwardness and juxtaposition of musical elements in what they do marks a gesture and an affect that draw us more immediately into a process rather than into a product. Here Gracyk is right to mention Barthes’ notion of “signifiante” where we respond, in other words, to its sense of freedom and possibility more than to any ‘message’.^[18] Of course, that being said, Gracyk is also concerned about the other extreme, where “to refuse to listen to music because of its origins—whether ‘I don’t listen to faggots like the Indigo Girls’ or ‘I don’t listen to Green Day and Everclear now that they’ve sold out to corporate rock’—is to refuse community.”^[19] Now, in a general sense, we could take Gracyk’s use of the term “community” as implying the notion of aesthetic “interest,” which is to say, the proper contrast to the more common notion of “disinterest” we have been discussing. However, we should follow Gracyk in apprehending “community” more literally, thus foregrounding its more profound and expansive meaning. “Community” suggests communality, and speaks to the ways in which we encounter, use, explore, and discuss music. Music does not exist in a bubble. We may not always wish it to be the case. We may often want to be able to listen to just the music—but there never is just the music. Or, differently put, music is always already more than we might imagine. Music is a fundamentally heterogeneous phenomenon. Hence Gracyk’s other concern that, “if disinterested attention can lead to unexpected pleasures and thus unexpected alliances, its dangers should not be ignored. One price to pay is that each listener will, at times, take pleasure in material that imparts a noxious message. Instrumental autonomism thus explains the predicament of feminists who are troubled by the fact that they love misogynist rock music. They love the music as music despite some of the ideas it so powerfully expresses.”^[20]

For his part, Gracyk recalls being “swept up in the undeniable power” of Guns N’ Roses only to be “disgusted to have ever liked them,”^[21] given that the blatant bigotry and homophobia of some of their lyrics soon became apparent. I am reminded of a somewhat light-spirited—and yet edgy—exchange, I once had with my sister, having to do with Frank Sinatra. In response to my fondness for Sinatra (I may have also just put on a Sinatra recording, which may have precipitated the exchange), she vehemently replied something to the effect of: “He was a mobster and a womanizer!” (In other words, how could I possibly like a guy like Sinatra?! And moreover, who cares if he is a great musician?!) I then quickly retorted (albeit with a slight

chuckle): "Why can't you separate the man from the music?!" Crude as it may seem, we might ask here: who is right? Better still, what is right here? How do we find our way in such cases? Where is the line between aesthetic "appreciation" and aesthetic "judgment"? Gracyk entertains one possibility: "One could maintain a high degree of disinterested attention, listening selectively, or one might look for unintended ideas in the content, reading against the grain. Or, more challenging still, one could reflect on the possibility of entering into community with someone [e.g., the fan of Guns N' Roses, and, implicitly, Guns N' Roses themselves, but also, arguably, likewise with Sinatra] whose sense of self is built on hatred."[\[22\]](#) Regardless, Gracyk, thankfully, seems less interested in dictating an answer for us here. Rather, the hope of his pragmatism would seem to function as an aesthetic "teachable moment," providing some tools of negotiation whereby our aesthetic sense and critical capacity is expanded:

When unfamiliar music provides jouissance, it promises further rewards that derive from a fuller, more complex understanding of its perspective on the world. Listeners who pursue this promise often confront and (perhaps) refashion their existing interests. Committed feminists will have to confront the misogyny of the Rolling Stones. But in confronting it, they will also grapple with the different messages in different songs, and might then puzzle even more about Aerosmith's stance toward sex and gender. Bringing very different interests to the same music, other members of the popular audience will confront identities that, from the perspective of their current interests, involve varying degrees of subversion. Disinterest thus positions one to reflect on self-identity and so, potentially, to alter one's performance of identity.[\[23\]](#)

Thus, we might say that, generally speaking, the very line between disinterest and interest is blurred.

Now, it is perhaps true that *The Shaggs* do not ignite the kind of controversy over which Gracyk struggled with *Guns N' Roses*, or over which my sister and I struggled with *Sinatra*. Nor are *The Shaggs* (as I have already suggested) ripe for the same kinds of issues *vis à vis* aesthetic discernment as are *Guns N' Roses* and *Sinatra* (though these are two rather disparate examples themselves!). But Gracyk's discussion of disinterest/interest is, nevertheless, relevant to *The Shaggs*. In one sense, some, at their own peril, might view *The Shaggs* as naïve young innocents from backwoods New Hampshire. Perhaps, as a result, they would thus "forgive" *The Shaggs* for what they deem to be nearly incomprehensible music. In another sense, however, such "forgiveness" is a kind of aesthetic bad faith, which betrays a tacit dismissal of any aesthetic

fruits (and yes, even jouissance) that The Shaggs might bear.

Ultimately, then, The Shaggs's entry point into the discourse of "the popular" is along the lines of what, following Frith and Potter, we might call an unpopular popularity. It might very well entail the image of innocent darlings of unintentional musical chaos under the auspices of happy-go-lucky songs about parents, radios, stuffed animals, and Halloween. Perhaps this is a matter of kitsch, or cult status, like the failed successes (or successful failures?) of "American Idol," which often features unwittingly awful, out-of-tune, out-of-style amateur entertainers who don't make the cut. But then that's just it, isn't it? What The Shaggs seem to lack is precisely the kind of phenomenological intentionality most listeners, might attribute (however much) to even the most experimental pop music—an intentionality, to be more specific, that seizes its object.

Is It Live, or Is It Music?

The Wiggin sisters of the late 60s seem unable to arrive at (or align) certain rhythmic, harmonic and melodic elements with any group cohesion whatsoever. In fact, each individual instrumentalist displays a marked lack of technical ability in general. At the very least, these items might seem requisite for identification with some musical genre. Or are they requisite? After all, The Shaggs have earned their place as forerunners of what has been called "outsider music." Now, to clarify, in Irwin Chusid's estimation, musical iconoclasts such as the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson (though a "like-nobody musical genius," still widely "embraced by the public"), Frank Zappa, Sun Ra, Marilyn Manson, and the Butthole Surfers ("outré icons who have achieved wide public exposure"), to name but a few examples, are not outsiders, although "many (if not most) major figures in the arts began their rise to stardom as nominal outsiders." Rather, outsiders are "those who lurk in the shadows...those who exist not simply away from the mainstream, but disconnected from it."[\[24\]](#) In other words, I believe that this would entail, for most of us, suspending our usual working sense of music that is even just a bit out there, or challenging to our taste. Neither the range from Bartok to Beethoven nor Lester Bowie to Chris Botti would suffice here. The Shaggs, in this estimation, are then really out there!

True, outsiders, Chusid continues, are nevertheless often "very likeable, if not commercially viable," and, "like folks artists in other media, typically lack formal training"[\[25\]](#) Of course, that being said, The Shaggs can execute some chords and get through musical structures, however loosely defined. Yet, beyond this, everything rhythmically remains quite consistently and completely off, and the voices, melodies, and harmonies are essentially out of tune with the instruments, not to mention with each other.[\[26\]](#) Again, one is tempted to ask

how this music ever got recorded and marketed in the first place.

*The liner notes from the original release of *Philosophy of the World* somehow still leave us with a strange feeling of bewilderment:*

The Shaggs are real, pure, unaffected by outside influences. Their music is different, it is theirs alone. They believe in it, live it. It is a part of them and they are a part of it. Of all contemporary acts in the world today, perhaps only the Shaggs do what others would like to do, and that is perform only what they believe in, what they feel, not what others think the Shaggs should feel.

The Shaggs love you, and love to perform for you. You may love their music or you may not, but whatever you feel, at last you know you can listen to artists who are real. They will not change their music or style to meet the whims of a frustrated world. You should appreciate this because you know they are pure what more can you ask?

Betty, Helen and Dorothy Wiggin are the Shaggs. They are sisters and members of a large family where mutual respect and love for each other is at an unbelievable high. They study and practice together, encouraged and helped by those around them. Betty, Helen and Dorothy live in a small town in New Hampshire, in an atmosphere which has encouraged them to develop their music unaffected by outside influences. They are happy people and love what they are doing. They do it because they love it.[\[27\]](#)

These notes are simple, almost naïve sounding, and yet demonstrate a kind of critical edge in spite of themselves. The notes are direct, but seem to be suggesting that there is more here than meets the eye, or ear. One wonders whether The Shaggs actually realized how perfectly odd the music sounded. Perhaps the joke is on us. Although Mike Walsh is playful in his dissection of the above liner notes, his commentary articulates well our curious entanglement with The Shaggs:

“Their music is different, it is theirs alone,” the note proclaimed. This fact I readily conceded. The Shaggs “do it because they love it. . . They believe in it, live it. It is part of them and they are part of it.” Obviously someone forgot to let them in on the joke. The message also noted, “you

know they are pure what more could you ask?" Well, I wondered, what more could I ask? First of all, I wasn't convinced they were "pure." Perhaps the drummer was actually a frustrated studio musician who thought it was funny to play off beat. I wanted to know who was behind this mysterious project. But the back cover note carefully avoided facts.

It did not seem possible that anyone who had listened to the radio in the past twenty-five years could have made this record. The note explained that The Shaggs "live in a small town in New Hampshire, in an atmosphere that has encouraged them to develop their music unaffected by outside influences." What the hell do they do in small New Hampshire towns, I wondered, scramble radio signals? These girls and their music simply did not seem plausible.[\[28\]](#)

Or perhaps there is no joke at all? Are we just being insensitive spectacle seekers?

In any event, my interest here is less with pigeonholing The Shaggs's artistic pretensions, much less with saddling them with some sort of identifiable genre. Rather, I am interested in the ways in which the very phenomenon of The Shaggs irritates our aesthetic antennae through their seemingly unnameable, inarticulatable affect, their ability to confound our aesthetic judgment and reception. Are The Shaggs sublime?

What The Shaggs themselves could not have possibly realized was how someone, such as myself, or Mike Walsh, or even Frank Zappa could so delight in this music.[\[29\]](#) Why? Precisely, because it seems to miss the mark, pure and simple, but with such a provocative result; it appears to be, at once, deliberate and carefree. Lyrically, too, The Shaggs elicit this delightful incredulity. Perhaps the three young sisters might have, quite innocently, deemed it a success if the moral lesson of "Who Are Parents?" were to bring other parents and children together in happiness and joy when they mused, "Some kids do as they please/They don't know what life really means/They don't listen to what the ones who really care have to say/They just go and do things their own way/Who are parents?/Parents are the ones who really care/Who are parents?/Parents are the ones who are always there."[\[30\]](#) Here, a brief historical anecdote would seem apt.

Apparently, their parents—especially their father—did care. Somehow, these three

young girls (the oldest of whom was 22 at the time), and the music they created, were, as the story goes, prized enough by their father, Austin Wiggin, Jr., that he believed them to possess an amazing talent that needed to be expressed, presented, and recorded. However, as we learn from the liner notes for the release *The Shaggs*,

when Austin Wiggin, Jr. and his teenage daughters Dorothy, Betty, and Helen drove from their home in Fremont, New Hampshire to a recording studio in Revere, Mass. one day in the late 1960s, none of the participants could have guessed at the events that were to transpire as a result of the music recorded that day. The girls hadn't been playing very long and were uncertain of their abilities. Upon hearing the three sisters play, the recording engineer suggested to Austin that perhaps the girls weren't quite ready to record. But Austin Wiggin, Jr., a true visionary, was intent on capturing the moment. "I want to get them while they're hot," he reportedly said.[\[31\]](#)

*Perplexity, once more. Of course, only now in hindsight, through the benefit of time and the immortality of the recording, can some of us come to the strange and somewhat perverse conclusion that Austin Wiggin, Jr. was right. He was a kind of "visionary" for bringing *The Shaggs* to us. *The Shaggs's* music was "hot." However, without the intent of robbing *The Shaggs* and their father of a certain innocence, I nevertheless pursue this "hotness" to perhaps slightly different ends here. Critical hedonist that I am, I become preoccupied with the ramifications of this music in terms of how it seems to disorient our musical listening experience. Paradoxically, part of this disorientation is, in fact, due to our sense of *The Shaggs's* innocence. But is there more to this music? I am somehow compelled to track *The Shaggs's* "noise." For it is, in some sense, noise. But is it merely the noise that naysayers and drop-jawed disbelievers say it is? No, I would argue.*

Quite a Reception

*The noise of *The Shaggs* approaches something similar to what Jacques Attali meant by "noise" in his seminal book by the same name.*[\[32\]](#) *The Shaggs seem well-suited to Attali's noise, because, succinctly put, they are not making "music" within the confines of a prevailing dominant network. There, Britney Spears, perhaps the extreme example (or is she now the norm?), would make the cut. However, practitioners of "noise performance," whose aim is to respond to the virtual silencing of society (bred by consumerism and the information age—what Attali calls repetition) precisely by reasserting and reconfiguring the noises of industry—from*

hammering, cutting, and burning, to reconfiguring the developments of “new technology”—would not make the cut.[\[33\]](#)

Now, it might be argued that there are, in fact, certain recognizable musical conventions in *The Shaggs*’s failed attempts, possibly resulting from the Herman’s Hermits’ influence. But I would argue that this is why we are able to assess how unconventional they actually are. More specifically, it is that curious juxtaposition—faint chicken scratchings of recognizable music-making combined with utter dislocatedness—which makes *The Shaggs* so “noisy” in the Attalian sense. As is so often the case with respect to everyday discourse around music, we might be tempted to legitimate and/or provide some reference for *The Shaggs* by describing their music in relation to a combination of other musical groups. I am sure the reader can relate to this—and my friends and I do it all the time. So, here is one try: “*The Shaggs* are ...kind of like a cross between Herman’s Hermits and a more genteel *Sex Pistols*.” But does such an analysis make *The Shaggs* any less noisy? Yes, we can grant that there are faintly recognizable songs, which somehow manage to have a beginning and an ending. Yes, we do, in fact, hear instruments that we recognize: guitars that seem to be plunking away at some semblance of what we might call chords, drums that seem to be playing some semblance of what we might call rhythm (even a kind of rock backbeat at times), and voices that we recognize as singing melodies and harmonies (though usually sounding like a slightly awkward attempt at unison), however peculiarly intoned and rhythmically askew. But *The Shaggs* are made even noisier by the fact that, even when they seem to be playing some semblance of traditional rockabilly-type music and song, the end result is consistently something quite different (to put it mildly). Again, it is a matter of almost surreal juxtaposition, the confrontation between chaos and form, between the unknown and the familiar. Lester Bangs put it a bit more emphatically: “You should hear the drum riff after the first verse and chorus of the title cut—sounding like a peg-leg stumbling through a field of bald Uniroyals...They just whang and blang away while singing in harmonies reminiscent of three Singing Nuns who’ve been sniffing lighter fluid and their voices are just so copasetic together (being sisters, after all) you’d almost think they were Siamese triplets. Guitar style: sorta like 14 pocket combs being run through a moose’s dorsal, but very gently.”[\[34\]](#)

Its colorful flare notwithstanding, Bangs’ description of *The Shaggs* points to a curious snag as far as aesthetic reception is concerned. Even though the setting and design for their raucous and reckless music is utterly innocent and simple, its impact is profound. That is, it is one thing to call something “noise” that is purposely rather free and open, and does not seem to give any concern to “listenability”—a kind of musical narcissism.[\[35\]](#) However, it is quite another thing for these three girls to be playing what they are playing (not to be confused here

with composing) so deliberately, with such intent, and yet with such unintentional results.

As we have seen with Barthes, chalking up The Shaggs phenomenon to a problem of phenomenologico-aesthetic intentionality would prove insufficient. Again, with just a little effort in musical comprehension, I believe most people can hear in The Shaggs at least an attempt to work through all of the chords and patterns, all of the rhythms and drum fills, all of the melodies and harmonies, and at least some fairly traditional sounding songs. However, all of this occurs in the midst of a music that sounds so painstakingly off the mark to our ears. For instance, in all fairness, it would be somewhat inaccurate to say that the drummer, Helen Wiggin, does not follow a beat that anyone can hear. Most listeners, I believe, do, in fact, hear her beat, loud and clear. The only issue is that it never seems to be aligning itself to anything else happening in the music.

*Here, I might offer, with some caution, another sympathetic example that comes to mind. In 1966, the saxophonist Ornette Coleman recorded the album *Empty Foxhole*[\[36\]](#) with his longtime collaborator Charlie Haden on bass and then 10-year-old son, Denardo. Although the musical context is, in many ways, vastly different (The Shaggs rockabilly, happy-go-lucky short songs versus the Coleman trio's essentially "free," collective improvisation, if laden with Coleman's typical influx of blues and melodicism during this period), one can hear *an* innocent intentionality that, to varying degrees, misses the mark musically. Or does it? As a drummer who often works in improvisation himself, I have always thought that, although no one musician's style is ever so readily imitable, part of what is so amazing about the young boy's playing here is that one would really have virtually no foothold from which to even begin to study, digest, and imitate it, unless one could actually become a 10-year-old boy or girl, fresh from receiving his or her first set of drums. But this is, of course, impossible. What, then, can one take from this music, from the "impossible" drumming of this youngster? And from which angle: the performer's or the listener's? For the young boy's drumming is affective, beyond the simple novelty of being the drumming of a young boy! Deleuze and Guattari articulate the notion of becoming—in this instance, a kind of "becoming-child"—which is no longer "self," and not quite yet "Other" (also impossible, in the strictest, most distinct sense), but in between, liminal, experimental, signaling a new horizon.*

*There is an area *ab* that belongs to both *a* and *b*, where *a* and *b* "become" indiscernible.[\[37\]](#)*

For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not "really" become an animal any more than the animal "really" becomes something else.

Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes.[\[38\]](#)

Meanwhile, more “mature” approaches to a freer style of drumming (in improvisational or “free” jazz, and other improvised musics, for example) also resist strict meter and pulse, but there is still, Barthes might say, a distinct sense of pulsion, drive, force, however multi-rhythmic and ametered it may be. If Helen Wiggin’s drumming can be said to have pulsion, it would nevertheless seem to lack an articulated musicality. But again, my point is not to make this the brunt of an evaluative claim here. On the contrary, I wish to suggest that these examples disrupt our usual modes of evaluation. How, in the case of Helen in particular, does this playing challenge our usual apprehension of musical elements such as beat, rhythm, timing, but also “musical time” in general?

In another sense, in listening to The Shaggs one might have the impression that they were recorded with some sort of performative loop in mind, in which the engineer told each of them to start playing the song at slightly different times. In the context of a compositional minimalism, Steve Reich composed a looping or “phasing” in his various phase pieces quite deliberately.[\[39\]](#) Terry Riley composed a form of disjunctive overlapping of repeated elements.[\[40\]](#) Not so with The Shaggs.

Now, much of the positive criticism concerning The Shaggs delights (quite understandably) in their unbridled energy, vitality and playful chaos. For some, this by itself—regardless of any further exploration of what is actually happening musically—is worth the price of admission. For others, there is a reveling in what is said to be an uncanny cohesion with The Shaggs. I would submit that The Shaggs seem particularly and paradoxically well suited to accommodating both chaos and coherence. And yet they also problematize these qualities. For once again, the Wiggin sisters do, in fact, have some facility on their instruments. And this, in the midst of its slightly-off-kilter-at-all-times quality, gives the music a kind of...charm? We listen along. We follow their movements. We are fairly certain we can hear what they are trying to accomplish, where they want to go musically. We will The Shaggs as we listen along. “You can do it,” we say to ourselves—“You can sync up the drum and guitar rhythms...keep trying...” This is similar to the way in which we will the ball we attempt to throw into the basket with a little “Body English.” However, it is where the example of The Shaggs parts company with the example of throwing the ball that we apprehend their marvellously confounding particularity. With throwing the ball, our utilitarian goal and outcome are clear

and concrete. Making the basket gives us a sense of joy in success. Missing the basket gives us a sense of sadness in failure. But with The Shaggs, our ongoing reception of their music seems always multiple, even conflicted, forcing us either to consider different interpretations or momentarily dispense with all interpretations! One online reviewer of Philosophy of the World suggests this idea when, in a brief piece on what is curiously described as “one of the better ‘incorrect’ albums,” he or she writes: “At first you think ‘this is just bad,’ but then you find yourself singing the melodies and lyrics all day long, so something must have worked.”^[41] I am certainly interested in what this “something” might be. But this merely scratches the surface of my own enquiry.

As we listen to The Shaggs work through different musical ideas or passages we cringe a bit at what we fear will be endlessly failed attempts, as suggested by the constant and utter dislocatedness of the music. And yet this utter dislocatedness is precisely what makes The Shaggs amazing, and yes, awe-inspiring. “Some listeners may feel uneasy and squirm in their seats when they find themselves entertained by the Shaggs,” writes Chusid.^[42] In other words, regardless of a more formal, recognizable sense of aesthetic success or failure, The Shaggs do succeed aesthetically. We are, even if we might not fully understand why, somehow pleased by what is happening. In a curious reversal of sorts, our reception of The Shaggs mirrors the process of R.G. Collingwood’s “art proper.” While still focusing on a somewhat liminal state, the primacy that Collingwood gave to the psychology of the artistic process is now given a Barthesian turn, toward us, the listeners of The Shaggs. We feel...we don’t know what we feel.^[43] With The Shaggs, perhaps the expression “It hurts so good” is more to the point here. There is some pleasure, however perverse or unsettled, at play even in the person who, listening to The Shaggs, cringing, exclaims in befuddlement, “How can they be that bad?!” As Chusid writes, “Duke Ellington once said, ‘If it sounds good, it is good.’ Well, sometimes if it sounds bad, it’s even better.”^[44] Point taken—but in the context of aesthetic inquiry, Chusid’s tongue-in-cheek comment perhaps unwittingly implies an edgier, more serious notion, an almost Nietzschean point that cuts through the heart of more traditional ideas about aesthetic value.

Petite immanence

At this point, however, I should distinguish what I am exploring here from criticism that praises The Shaggs’s ultimate cohesive transcendence. True, I have already suggested, in fact, that there is “more” to The Shaggs than pure chaos (whatever that is), and that we might do well to explore “beyond” their unabashed innocence. However, I would offer that what is distinct about The Shaggs is something more immanent in nature—which is to say, concerned in large part with The Shaggs’s affect, with how they challenge our own reception, with how we are

thrown into a kind of existential-aesthetic crisis upon hearing them and with how it is that we grapple with this predicament. Now, one might interject that, as with most kinds of music, repeated listening of The Shaggs would result in increased familiarity, even predictability. And this may be so. Still, I would then be interested in how one might actually reach a state of familiarity with The Shaggs. How are our usual ways of listening to, and familiarizing ourselves with, music challenged and altered over the course of our repeated listening to The Shaggs? What kind of musical listener have we become? There is little reference here to “good” or “bad” (Nietzsche)—this pairing, in a sense, being aesthetics’ version of the grander philosophical doublet of truth and falsity. There is rather what might only be a form of musical autopoiesis.^[45] This runs somewhat counter to the idea that, depending on one’s perspective, there is an underlying or overarching meaning, or source behind the phenomenon at hand. Such a view might claim that the argument about immanence fails to truly engage with The Shaggs. Is there some self-absorption here, whereby, a la Barthes, the reader or listener’s reception is overemphasized? Should we not rather pursue the “essence” of The Shaggs, to put it generally? Here, a kind of essentialism would make our engagement clear, and our appreciation of The Shaggs theoretically legitimate. But if that be the case, where then might this essence reside? In composition? In improvisation? Neither seem apt in and of themselves. In intention? In spontaneity? Neither of these seem sufficient to cover The Shaggs either. The Shaggs force a kind of immanent critique for the sheer lack of transcendent logic with which to analyze them. In other words, with The Shaggs, the appeal to transcendence doesn’t seem adequate or appropriate. Clearly, we ought not to take ourselves too seriously but rather acknowledge that a discussion of The Shaggs and such weighty philosophical concepts as immanence and transcendence might seem out of proportion. Hence “petite immanence.” In seeing The Shaggs as occupying their own little slice of immanence, I would locate these proliferating points of combustion and connection on the surface of the music, which, here especially, is seemingly all we have to work with. The surface of The Shaggs is a surface of differences, not cohesion, even if there is a sense in which we want the music to cohere. What we are “given” is simply what we are given—neither a clearly unified musical concept nor a deliberate sense of clever juxtaposition, but pure difference, if we might speak this way—innocent, unbridled, and unreflective.

Another way to frame the objection to the “immanence” argument would be to criticize it for being too tethered to a literal interpretation of immanence as residing “within,” which might, in the casual sense of the term, indeed imply the kind of self-absorption of which we just spoke. But our nod toward reception over intention relies, in fact, upon an immediate confrontation with externality, as embodied in The Shaggs. Here, our “within” simultaneously implies a “without.” Contrary, then, to the charge of self-absorption, what is suggested here (and what is more accurately the impetus behind Barthes’ textual erotics) is rather a blurring of the lines

between the following relationships: subject/object, intention/reception, passive/active, readerly/writerly. This may be an old story by now, but one to which The Shaggs might give a fresh look.

What The Shaggs provoke is an aesthetic reception based on displacement, opening, expanding, connecting. Thus, The Shaggs are an apt musical analogue to the “immanent ethics” of Deleuze and Guattari, which, as Daniel W. Smith argues, entails the power of something to deploy its capacities and increase its power of acting “to the point where it can be said to go to the limit of what it ‘can do’” (i.e. immanence) rather than streamlining, closing, judging—in terms of the “proximity to or distance from an external principle” (i.e. transcendence).[\[46\]](#)

Of course, this claim could only really apply to our reception of The Shaggs, what The Shaggs embody—or at least could embody—for the listener. These three young girls had no formal aesthetic or ethic themselves. On most accounts, they did not set out to create a bizarrely profound music of unspeakable tonal, rhythmic, and textural juxtaposition. But so much the better for The Shaggs’s little immanence, which is so deliciously confounding for performers and listeners, aestheticians and non-aestheticians. Our philosophical reception is awoken, challenged, and expanded in such a distinct way precisely because of the innocence, the lack of intentionality, the lack of an aesthetic—in a sense, the lack of a philosophy, strictly speaking! Instead, we have The Shaggs’s affect. For Deleuze, such a confrontation between the philosophical and the “nonphilosophical” is not only quite natural, but quite necessary.

I realized how much philosophy needs not only a philosophical understanding, through concepts, but a nonphilosophical understanding, rooted in percepts and affects. You need both. Philosophy has an essential and positive relation to nonphilosophy: it speaks directly to nonphilosophers ... Nonphilosophical understanding isn’t inadequate or provisional, it’s one of philosophy’s two sides, one of its two wings.[\[47\]](#)

And elsewhere, Deleuze and Guattari write:

It is not just a question of saying that art must form those of us who are not artists, that it must awaken us and teach us to feel, and that philosophy must teach us to conceive, or that science must teach us to know. Such pedagogies are only possible if each of the disciplines is, on its own behalf, in an essential relationship with the No that concerns it. The plane of philosophy is prephilosophical insofar as we consider it in

itself independently of the concepts that come to occupy it, but nonphilosophy is found where the plane confronts chaos. Philosophy needs a nonphilosophy that comprehends it; it needs a nonphilosophical comprehension just as art needs nonart and science needs nonscience.[\[48\]](#)

Deleuze and Guattari's reflections on the relation between philosophy and non-philosophy open the way for an immanent experimentalism that helps define an appropriately supple approach to The Shaggs. Such an approach would refrain from categorical reasoning, as might be the case in a transcendental hermeneutic, narrowly aimed at finding The Shaggs's "true" meaning. Here, in addition to praising The Shaggs as "a touchstone of unpretentiousness,"[\[49\]](#) as "earnest, authentic, and refreshingly guileless"[\[50\]](#) (an assessment with which I concur), one reviewer, however, seeks out an "internal logic that transcends the conventional relationship between ability, technique, and originality."[\[51\]](#) Another reviewer rightly discusses how The Shaggs are usually received along extremes, whereby "their complete lack of traditional musical sense is either uproarious or somehow transcendent in its crudeness."[\[52\]](#) But in the same breath, a claim is made about "the Wiggins' dexterity as pop musicians,"[\[53\]](#) a designation that, as I suggested at the outset, might miss the mark. Following Chusid, we may actually, perhaps unwittingly, be undermining The Shaggs by placing them into a somewhat neater category—in this case, "pop" (though we might legitimately continue to mull over the "outsider" designation). "[T]he fortitude of [The Shaggs's] nascent musicianship" is also touted, as well as "how tenuous and complicated their compositions really are."[\[54\]](#) Here, "nascent," if implying young, or just coming into existence, seems apt. On the other hand, there is equally a sense in which "nascent" implies "developing," which, in turn, might make its way to giving The Shaggs some kind of teleological stamp of approval. "Ah, this music does have a purpose after all."

In his discussion of music as text and/or performance, Simon Frith opposes theories of "context" to theories of "text," and, in turn, "performance as experience (or set of experiences) of sociability" to "performance as a means by which a text is represented."[\[55\]](#) On Frith's account, what this thus mandates is that "before trying to make sense of performance as a way of working with a text, we should first be sure we understand how performance is different, how it is 'non-textual.' What makes something a 'performance' in the first place? What are its conditions of existence?"[\[56\]](#) For our present purposes, the relevance of this discussion would, at the very least, seem to hinge on the fact that, even with respect to such a thoughtful treatment of text and performance as is given here by Frith, The Shaggs might make the answers to such questions rather elusive. But perhaps this is precisely Frith's point. We turn again to Deleuze: The Shaggs are rhizomatic, extending outward, here, then there, following along, even building

upon, certain ideas until they trip or stumble and suddenly change course. Just when we think they are mapping out a kind of territory, allowing our aesthetic sensibility to settle on some shred of recognizability, or even familiarity, our cushion is pulled out from under us; we are destabilized, deterritorialized.

Improvising with The Shaggs

Now, let me be clear. In addition to celebrating *The Shaggs* within a critical milieu, I, as much as anyone, welcome a more expansive and complicated notion of “the popular,” beyond our more cookie-cutter, commercial examples.^[57] So, I do, in fact, think that we can go with this “Shaggs as pop” line of thinking, at some level, as we explore the music more broadly. However, I am wary of attributing some latent redemption to *The Shaggs*. *The Shaggs* do, indeed, “pack a subversive punch” and this would be subtly reinforced if we were to consider them as outsider pop music gurus. But again, I fear that we impart something to their music that may not be there when we, for instance, compare *The Shaggs*’s later material, which “falls back on amateurish bubblegum country,” to “the singularity and starkness of their debut.”^[58] First and foremost, what music of *The Shaggs* is not “singular and stark” (undoubtedly an apt description)? Moreover, although “amateurish bubblegum country” is both a fun and potentially useful descriptor, it seems little more than a reviewer’s ruse in this context. Part of what is so “singular” about *The Shaggs*—whether perceived casually or critically—is their unwitting defiance of categorization.

Generally speaking, in addition to whatever kitsch value they have been given, the noise of *The Shaggs* forces us to apprehend music, and the contexts of music, in a much different way than we are accustomed, which, at times, might just very well lead us to speechlessness before its mystery, and at other times to the heightened chatter of disbelief. Again, it might be said that we are compelled to engage with *The Shaggs* more improvisationally, not, however, to assert *The Shaggs*’s music as “improvisation” per se (at least as that term might suggest a specific or general genre of music, like “free jazz,” or “free improvisation,” etc.), nor to offer *The Shaggs* as an “improvisational” group. True, a certain improvisational significance would seem relevant since (following Attali) their music exists largely and unabashedly outside of the dominant frameworks for listening to, and creating music—if we can generally characterize the current paradigm of musical experience as passive. But perhaps a better—if, in some ways, more speculative—term here would be improvisationality. If we were to put it more crudely we might say that, whereas improvisation is what the performers do (in addition to constituting a genre unto itself), improvisationality is something in which performers and listeners take part. Similar to Frith’s “performance,” improvisationality is a sensibility. Following Richard Bauman’s idea

of an “emergent structure,” Frith describes it as something that “comes into being only as it is being performed.”^[59] Here it is the doing-thinking of music, which implies, as Jeremy Gilbert states, that “all musics possess an improvisational dimension, which is to say a rhizomatic moment at which connections are made between musics, subjects, and non-musical machines and at which a certain opening onto a ‘cosmic’ space of infinite possibility occurs: a moment of the musician-composer’s becoming-music.”^[60] Thus, if we cannot say that The Shaggs are improvisation, what they nevertheless do seem to accomplish, like improvisation, is precisely this kind of blurring of elements for our aesthetic apprehension. And such apprehension might very well be even more heightened, if only, in a kind of peculiar way, given the very peculiarity of their music!

Of course, to Gilbert’s “musician-composer” we should also add the listener’s becoming-music. As Frith states: “‘listening’ itself is a performance: to understand how musical pleasure, meaning, and evaluation work, we have to understand how, as listeners, we perform the music for ourselves.”^[61] Here again, The Shaggs seem to embody a peculiar space. For theorists and practitioners of improvisation engage in the extremely valuable debate concerning the very relationship between improvisation and composition, but most of this debate seems to revolve around the examples of intentionally improvisational musics and performers/composers—e.g., Anthony Braxton is both an accomplished practitioner of “creative improvisation” and a composer of the highest order who has developed a vast, intricate compositional “logic” with hundreds of pieces to his name. The example of Braxton would seem to suggest that the question of improvisation versus composition is, from the start, unfair. But The Shaggs would seem to complicate things even further. For them, music is not, at least in any intentional way, improvisation. And because of this, we, as listeners, are given even less of a foothold on music that often seems utterly incomprehensible, (perhaps even more incomprehensible than the most freely improvised music imaginable) because what we hear is a curious juxtaposition of faintly recognizable structures with faintly recognizable musical execution. My suggestion is that we, the listeners of The Shaggs, must improvise a response; we must become listeners-as-improvisers.

Of course, if, in an attempt to locate The Shaggs in some sort of popular milieu, we actually discover ways in which, inversely, even the most commercially-laden networks of musical reception have value beyond passivity—where expressions of popular culture come to demonstrate more complexity (subversion?) than had been previously assumed—then so much the better. Many theorists of popular culture will seize, and have seized, that moment.^[62] Meanwhile, it is true that we might (however directly or tangentially) be able to legitimately place The Shaggs on an albeit rather peculiar genealogical tree, one which includes “outsider

music," "free jazz," and "new music." It is also true that The Shaggs might legitimately lay claim to being an item of kitsch. What could be more exemplary in this respect than teenagers in tacky uniforms singing about Halloween while playing music that unintentionally sounds like it is from outer space (well, perhaps Mars in the rockabilly 50s)? Still, The Shaggs are, in many ways, about as un-pop as one can get. For instance, they would certainly seem an unlikely candidate for Theodore Gracyk's assertion of popular music as "mass art," where "the audience provides the requisite self-reflexive turn by becoming explicitly aware of signifying practices employed in the construction of the text," or even where "recognition of the intertextuality of mass art challenges the belief that it invites merely passive consumption."^[63] Even if this discussion demonstrates some possible link between The Shaggs and popular music, it would nevertheless appear that such "requisite self-reflexivity" (if it is at all present in our apprehension of The Shaggs) is bound to be stymied. But then, this is not necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, similar to Gracyk's previous discussion of disinterest versus interest, I believe that further problematization of the liminal musical space I wish to claim for The Shaggs, coupled with Gracyk's own claims about the reception of popular music, serves precisely to strengthen the impact of both of our claims. In a general sense, I have attempted to offer The Shaggs as possibly leading the way to a phenomenology of aesthetic reception that relies upon an improvisationality in the listener, which, however broadly and vaguely construed, would at the very least begin by uprooting some of our traditional aesthetic and metaphysical assumptions and the conventional wisdom of much aesthetic criticism concerning how we listen to and experience music.

[1] See Irwin Chusid, *Songs in the Key of Z: The Curious Universe of Outsider Music*. Chicago: A Cappella, 2000, 2.

[2] See Susan Orlean, "Meet the Shaggs." http://www.shaggs.com/meet_the_shaggs.html. (This story is also copyright 1999 by the *New Yorker* magazine. It appeared in the September 27, 1999 issue.)

[3] The Shaggs occupy the first chapter of Chusid's book: "The Shaggs: Groove is in the Heart," Chusid, op. cit., 1-12.

[4] See Theodore Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *Culture Industry*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001, 29-30.

[5] See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 147.

[6] I say “stark, radical anecdote” because there are other examples that might come to mind, which many of us might think to be on the fringes of pop or rock or jazz—respectively, Bjork, Radiohead, or Ornette Coleman, for example. But somehow, whether or not I might agree or disagree, I hear Adorno in the back of my head, chafing persuasively about how the many outlandish images and characters in Bjork’s music and overall persona, not to mention her deep interest in modern technology, only capitulate to the cultural industry, how Radiohead’s supposed political, anti-government stance becomes, despite its hordes of young followers, a commercial fetish in its own right, and how Ornette Coleman, if not playing a popular music in any direct sense, still relies upon the repetition and riffs heard throughout jazz, about which Adorno’s scathing critique is well-known. However, The Shaggs, I offer, would seem a particularly formidable item against Adorno’s seemingly impenetrable theory.

[7] Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” op. cit., 148.

[8] Of course, here I mean to use the term “Text” in the way that Barthes himself—and numerous poststructuralists writing in the wake of Barthes—use it. That is, in this discourse, “Text” is often used instead of “text” to distinguish the former term as taken up by theory rather than the more conventional, everyday latter term (e.g. text = book, essay, article, something one can hold in one’s hands and read). As one example, I have in mind Barthes’ essay “From Work to Text” (in *Image, Music Text*. Op. cit., 155-164), in which he deliberately used “Text” (note cap) in contrast to “work” (note lower case).

[9] See, especially, Barthes’ *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

[10] Chusid puts it well: “Psychoanalysis doesn’t concern me. I have, for the most part, avoided digging into family dysfunctions that may have given rise to this music. I’m not a psychologist, and it would be presumptuous to delve into the aftereffects of childhood trauma or parental abuse suffered by any particular artist.” Chusid, op. cit., xix.

[11] “The gawky LP cover photo,” writes Irwin Chusid, “depicts guitarists Dot and Betty in paisley tunics over pleated, tablecloth-plaid, knee-length skirts...The trio poses unpretentiously before a dusty green curtain on what could be an American Legion stage.” Chusid, op. cit., 6.

[12] Orlean, “Meet the Shaggs.” Op. cit.

[13] See Michael Szekely, “Pushing the Popular, or Toward a Compositional Popular Aesthetics.” *Popular Music and Society* 29 (1), 2006, 91-108.

[14] See Chris Cutler, *File Under Popular: Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music*.

Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1993.

[15] See Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, 20.

[16] See Russell A. Potter, "Not the Same: Race, Repetition, and Difference in Hip-Hop and Dance Music," in *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Theory*. Eds. Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, Andrew Herman. Malden: Blackwell, 1998, 38.

[17] See Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001, 230.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 232.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 234.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Chusid, op. cit., xvi.

[25] Ibid, xv-xvi.

[26] More to the point might be Mike McGonigal's description of "off-kilter singing conducted in unison that sounds like the hit parade broadcast from Jupiter" on Amazon.com, http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00000IOQQ/qid=1118769993/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_2_1/103-4982220-7447009

[27] See The Shaggs, *Philosophy of World*, RCA Victor 09026 63371-2, 1999 (1969).

[28] See Mike Walsh, "The Shaggs and How They Changed My Life," <http://www.shaggs.com/mwalsh.html>.

[29] Zappa famously, if somewhat satirically, praised the distinctiveness of this music by saying, "The Shaggs. Better than the Beatles...even today." See The Shaggs, *The Shaggs*, Rounder Records 11547, 1990 (1982).

[30] The Shaggs, *Philosophy of the World*.

[31] See John DeAngelis, liner notes, The Shaggs, *Philosophy of the World*. RCA, February 1999.

[32] See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

[33] For a more in-depth look at noise performance, see Csaba Toth's "The Work of Noise and Pedagogy," in *Poetics/Politics*. Ed. Amitava Kumar. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, 201-18.

[34] See Lester Bangs, "Better Than the Beatles (and DNA, Too)," *The Village Voice*, Jan. 28-Feb. 3, 1981.

[35] Of course, that kind of agenda—i.e., noise for the sake of noise—is just as often not necessarily the case. Moreover, we project what we imagine to be the motivation behind such kinds of musical expression at our peril.

[36] See Ornette Coleman, *The Empty Foxhole*. Blue Note CDP-84224, 1994 (1966).

[37] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Tomlinson and Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 20.

[38] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 238.

[39] For instance, "It's Gonna Rain" (1965), "Come Out" (1966), "Piano Phase" (1967), and "Violin Phase" (1967).

[40] An obvious example here would be "In C" (1964).

[41] [Rusty Likes Music](http://www.rustyspell.com/music/shaggs.html), "The Shaggs," online music review, August 2004-Nov 2004 by <http://www.rustyspell.com/music/shaggs.html>

[42] Chusid, op. cit., 11.

[43] Referring here, of course, to a general idea found in Collingwood's *Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958). My specific resource in this case is an excerpted version of *Principles* entitled "Art and Craft," which appears in *Aesthetics*. Eds. Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 215-220. In discussing the emotion of the artist, Collingwood writes: "All he is conscious of is a perturbation or excitement, which he feels going on within him, but of whose nature he is ignorant. While in this state, all he

can say about his emotion is: ‘I feel...I don’t know what I feel’” (217).

[44] Chusid, op. cit., ix.

[45] My usage of the term “autopoiesis” is actually inspired here by a section of Paul Patton’s book on *Deleuze and the Political*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Noting Deleuze’s quite emphatic link to Nietzsche, Patton discusses how Deleuze and Guattari described philosophical concepts as “non-referential,” and thus “not subject to the norm of truth and falsity.” Concepts are, rather, “autopoietic, self-positing entities,” which, interestingly enough entails that they are “fictions” (25-26).

[46] See Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics,” *Parrhesia* 2 (2007): 66-67.

[47] See Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, 139-140.

[48] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Op. cit., 218.

[49] Borrowed or stolen from Chusid, op. cit., 1.

[50] Counterpoint Music Review, <http://www.counterpoint-music.com/specialties/shaggs.html>

[51] Ibid.

[52] Pitchfork Music Review, <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/record-reviews/s/shaggs/shaggs.shtml>

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Frith, *Performing Rites*, op. cit., 204.

[56] Ibid.

[57] This was my preoccupation, for instance, in “Pushing the Popular, or Toward a Compositional Popular Aesthetics.” *Popular Music and Society* 29 (1), 2006, 91-108.

[58] Pitchfork Music Review. <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/record-reviews/s/shaggs/shaggs.shtml>

[59] Frith, *Performing Rites*, op. cit., 208.

[60] See Jeremy Gilbert, “Becoming-Music: The Rhizomatic Moment of Improvisation,” in *Deleuze and Music*. Eds. Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 135.

[61] Frith, *Performing Rites*, op. cit. 203-204.

[62] Again, an example that comes to mind is Simon Frith’s excellent *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), as well as the wonderful collection of essays in *Mapping the Beat: Popular Music and Contemporary Life* (Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), edited by Thomas Swiss, John Sloop, and Andrew Herman. Theodore Gracyk’s *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), although more focused in some ways, addresses relevant issues pertaining to appropriation, politics, and gender. Here, Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) is a key work. Meanwhile, writers like John Mowitt and Andrew Goodwin have focused on the link between popular music and technology.

[63] Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me*. Op. cit., 63.



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