

# Led Zeppelin's 'Dazed and Confused': From lament to psychedelic tour de force

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## Introduction

Recorded during September and October 1968, and released on the band's self-titled debut album in January 1969, Led Zeppelin's 'Dazed and Confused' is the most significant example of the group's approach to the translation of studio recordings into vehicles for improvisation and experimentation in a live performance context.<sup>1</sup> One of the songs that guitarist Jimmy Page introduced to the other members of the band at their first meeting in London in 1968, 'Dazed and Confused' was to remain an integral part of Led Zeppelin's concert set lists until 1975, being performed at almost all of their concerts during this period. In her book *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the power of rock music*, Susan Fast describes 'Dazed and Confused' as 'arguably the most important locus for musical experimentation' throughout the majority of Led Zeppelin's career.<sup>2</sup>

Building on Fast's assertion regarding 'Dazed and Confused'—that the original recorded version constituted a 'blues lament', which in performance developed into an extended exploration of psychedelic<sup>3</sup> and avant-garde experimentation<sup>4</sup>—this paper will explore the interconnected relationship between those characteristics that make the work a lament and their contribution to the work's capacity to sustain lengthy periods of improvisation. It will be argued that the ability of the song to support the extended guitar experimentation that became a feature of its concert performance stemmed from the dramatic potential of the original studio version—a drama that derived in many ways from its original conception as a lament. The aspects of the original studio recording that make

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1 Led Zeppelin 1969, *Led Zeppelin*, [LP], Atlantic.

2 Fast, Susan 2001, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the power of rock music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 18.

3 Psychedelic connotes here an expansion of consciousness (*ibid.*, p. 18; *Oxford English Dictionary* 2011, [Online edition], Oxford University Press, Oxford). Although often linked to hallucinogenic drugs, the term, for the purposes of this paper, refers to the ability of music to represent, or even induce, a similar expansion of consciousness.

4 Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy*, pp. 18, 24, 29.

it a lament, with a particular focus on the use of the guitar, will be examined with regard to their significance as crucial elements of the extended guitar improvisation that characterised subsequent live performances.

## **‘Dazed and Confused’ as a Blues Lament**

Led Zeppelin’s ‘Dazed and Confused’ was not an original work of the new band in 1968. A version of the song ‘I’m Confused’ had been performed by Page with his previous band, The Yardbirds, during 1967 and 1968. Both this and Led Zeppelin’s later version drew heavily on a song, also entitled ‘Dazed and Confused’, by Jake Holmes, released in June 1967 on the album *The Above Ground Sound of Jake Holmes*.<sup>5</sup> Holmes’s original provided a significant model for Page, who made use of the vocal melody, aspects of the structure and, most significantly, the chromatically descending bass riff, identified by Fast as a reference to the descending lamento bass patterns of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing heavily on Jake Holmes’s version, Led Zeppelin’s recording of ‘Dazed and Confused’ magnified the elements of the work that link it to the tradition of the lament. Holmes’s descending chromatic bass line, which in his version is heard below repeated tonic chords on the guitar, is given total prominence at the opening of Led Zeppelin’s version, the line being repeated twice as a bass solo, accompanied only by atmospheric harmonics on the guitar. This bass line continues as the sole accompaniment to the opening verse, after which it is repeated twice more, where it is doubled on guitars an octave and two octaves higher. The line again serves as the sole accompaniment for the second and third verses. The incessant use of the riff is interrupted only by the insertion of a short instrumental break between verses two and three, consisting of repeated dominant chords and a rising semiquaver pattern that contrasts with the descent of the bass. In this way, what for Holmes was a bass line working in conjunction with the guitar part, for Led Zeppelin became elevated to the status of a riff, which, typically of their approach to composition, was doubled on bass and guitar parts. Unlike Holmes’s original, there are no other guitar parts that contrast with the riff, which permeates the whole of the musical texture.

Another example of the intensification of the lament-like characteristics of Led Zeppelin’s version in comparison with Holmes’s original concerns the lyrics, which in Holmes’s version retain a certain ambiguity of reference. In contrast, Led Zeppelin’s lyrics are more transparent, following what Fast describes as ‘a well-developed lyrical trope of the blues: the outpourings of a man under

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5 Holmes, Jake 1967, *The Above Ground Sound of Jake Holmes*, [LP], Tower.

6 Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy*, p. 22.

the spell of a woman who toys with his passion but whom he can't leave'.<sup>7</sup> These lyrics reflect the pain of the protagonist, effectively creating a lament of unrequited love. This is clearly reflected in the first three verses, those which precede the guitar solo. The final verse, whilst repeating the opening lines of the first and thus cementing the character of the whole, also suggests a progression on behalf of the protagonist from the totally impotent state of the opening verses to a more defiant position suggesting action: the sending of the bill, we may presume for pain caused. Not only does this brief statement suggest a level of defiance, it suggests that the protagonist has managed to break the spell of the woman in question sufficiently to leave her.<sup>8</sup> This slight, but significant, shift in attitude between the initial three verses and the final verse is suggestive of the significance of the intervening guitar solo (to be discussed below) in countering the impotence of the opening verses:

Been dazed and confused for so long it's not true  
Wanted a woman, never bargained for you  
Lots of people talkin', few of them know  
Soul of a woman was created below  
You hurt and abused, tellin' all of your lies  
Run 'round sweet baby, Lord, how they hypnotize  
Sweet little baby, I don't know where you been  
Gonna love you baby, here I come again  
Ev'ry day I work so hard bringin' home my hard-earned pay  
Try to love you baby, but you push me away  
Don't know where you're goin', I don't<sup>9</sup> know just where you've been  
Sweet little baby, I want you again  
Been dazed and confused for so long, it's not true  
Wanted a woman, never bargained for you  
Take it easy baby, let them say what they will  
[Will your] tongue wag so much when I send you the bill?<sup>10</sup>

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7 Ibid., p. 24.

8 This idea is alluded to in various concert performances where Robert Plant, improvising lyrics, makes reference to 'I Can't Quit You Baby', another song from their debut album (ibid., p. 25). The suggestion that the protagonist has left the woman also parallels traditional uses of the lament in situations of parting or departure, such as those of the Greek tradition discussed in Alexiou, Margaret 2002, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Second edn, Revised by Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos, Rowman & Littlefield, Oxford, pp. 118–22.

9 There are conflicting transcriptions of this line. Both Fast and the International Music Publications score included in *Early Days* (Led Zeppelin 2000, *Early Days: The best of Led Zeppelin. Volume One*, [Music score], International Music Publications/Warner Chappell Music, London) transcribe this line as 'I don't know just where you've been', whereas an earlier score, also published by International Music Publications (Led Zeppelin 1990, *Led Zeppelin: Off the record—Led Zeppelin I*, [Music score], Warner Chappell Music/Rittor and International Music Publications, London), transcribes it as 'only know just where you've been'. To the current author, the latter is correct.

10 Led Zeppelin, *Early Days*, pp. 39–55.

Such an invocation of a blues trope, combined with the descending chromatic bass, creates an intersection between the disparate, yet related, traditions of the lament and the blues. Paul Oliver states that from the beginnings of African-American slavery in the early seventeenth century ‘to “looke blue” had been current for well over half a century as a phrase to describe low spirits, and by the end of the eighteenth century “the blue devils” was a familiar condition of mind’.<sup>11</sup> This conception of the blues as a state of melancholy correlates closely with the emotional world of the lament. It is the combination of these elements that led Fast to describe Led Zeppelin’s ‘Dazed and Confused’ as ‘an agonizing blues lament’.<sup>12</sup>

## Intensification of the Lament: The guitar solo

There are several other aspects of Led Zeppelin’s version of ‘Dazed and Confused’ that may contribute to an interpretation of the work as a lament. These aspects relate to the intense and dramatic nature of the expression—something that Ellen Rosand has identified as characteristic of the lament from its origins in Greek drama: ‘At least since the drama of Greek antiquity, the lament had enjoyed a special status; an emotional climax followed by a resolution of the action, it was a soliloquy, a moment of particularly intense expression within the movement of a narrative structure.’ Citing examples from Ovid and Ariosto, Rosand argues that the lament ‘provided the occasion for special formal development, the display of particularly expressive rhetoric and affective imagery’.<sup>13</sup> These characteristics are apparent in both Led Zeppelin’s recording and their performance of ‘Dazed and Confused’.

The dramatic intensity of Led Zeppelin’s ‘Dazed and Confused’ as it appears on their first album is most clearly highlighted in Page’s two-part guitar solo. In the first, slower section of the solo, Page makes use of a violin bow to produce a range of unusual sounds from the electric guitar. This is then contrasted with a faster, more conventional and technically virtuosic guitar solo in the second section. Both segments of the solo make reference to the lament-like character of the work, and in doing so contribute to an intensification of the emotional expression of the opening verses.

Page’s use of the violin bow plays directly into the interpretation of the work as a lament. Page uses the bow to repeatedly create sustained, legato glissandi

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11 Oliver, Paul 1990, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the blues*, Second edn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 284.

12 Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy*, p. 24.

13 Rosand, Ellen 1979, ‘The descending tetrachord: an emblem of lament’, *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 3, pp. 346–59, at pp. 346–7.

descents of a minor third, initially from the third scale degree to the tonic (G to E), thus replicating the interval outlined by the chromatic descent of the first part of the main riff. This approach makes use of an unusual guitar technique to create an instrumental suggestion of a sigh—a traditional association of the lamento bass. This effect is further heightened by Robert Plant's vocal echoing of Page's instrumental motive, effectively creating a vocal affectation of a sigh. This section of the solo may thus be interpreted as an instrumental invocation of the emotional pain of the protagonist.

This descending minor third motive is developed until the violin-bow portion of the solo is concluded through an extended chromatic glissando descent through an octave. This descent again parallels the chromatic shape of the main riff, and serves to again heighten the emotional intensity of the 'sighing' motive of earlier in the solo. The chromatic descent continues in quavers through a major seventh, at which point the Phrygian flattened second scale degree is emphasised, being held for four bars, until finally resolving onto the lower tonic to conclude the bowed section of the solo.

The second section of the guitar solo, contrasting the first in terms of meter, tempo, timbre and technique, also makes reference to both the main descending riff and a musical suggestion of sighing or crying. Whilst the second part of the solo in the main presents rapid guitar passagework against a repeated rising bass riff, the opening of this section also contains a descending figure that may be interpreted as paralleling the earlier invocation of sighing during the bow solo. Once again doubled by Plant's vocal, the guitar presents a gradual descending semibreve pattern, beginning on the seventh scale degree, and descending initially to the subdominant (D, C-sharp, B, A)—a melodic shape that is again suggestive of the opening riff. The final three notes of the descent to the tonic (G, F-sharp, E) proceed as two minims and a semibreve, providing an arresting diminution of the rhythm, which is then repeated, the second time concluding on the seventh rather than the tonic.

This passage may be interpreted as an intensification of the 'sighing' motive of the bowed section of the solo into a more emotionally extroverted wailing or crying, which interestingly creates a musical image that parallels the original Latin *lamentum*, meaning weeping or wailing.<sup>14</sup> The coupling of the guitar part with a high vocal register and the vocalisation 'Ah' on each pitch are suggestive of wailing, whilst the minim/semibreve pattern of the second half of the descent may be suggestive of the shorter breaths characteristic of sobbing or crying. Interpreted this way, the affectation of sighing in the first part of the solo has

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14 *Oxford English Dictionary*.

been transformed into a more intense and extroverted expression. Both sections correlate with Rosand's explanation of the lament as displaying 'expressive rhetoric and affective imagery'.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the faster section of the guitar solo also explores a second, contrary relationship to the descending chromatic riff of the opening verses. The bass riff over which the guitar solo unfolds after doubling the riff twice presents a repeated rising quaver pattern (A, B, D, E, G, A, G), which highlights the significant pitches of the original descending riff: the third scale degree, the tonic, the seventh scale degree and the dominant.<sup>16</sup> This reinterpretation of the significant pitches of the main riff creates both a sense of musical unity and a suggestion of contrasting emotional content. Prior to the second half of the guitar solo, the predominating feature of the thematic material is melodic descent, whether in the main riff or in the descending intervals of the bow solo. The contrasting shape of the bass riff that is repeated throughout the second half of the guitar solo, whilst related to the main riff, suggests a slightly more defiant attitude on behalf of the protagonist, who is now unwilling to surrender himself entirely to the pain of the earlier sections of the work. Whilst not managing to purge entirely this anguish, which inevitably returns with the return to the main riff for the final verse, following the guitar solo there is a sense that the pain and sorrow of the opening verses have now been tempered, given a harder edge, through a mood of defiance, suggested by the final line of the final verse: '[Will your] tongue wag so much when I send you the bill?' The guitar solo therefore serves both significant narrative and dramatic purposes in the work.

## 'Dazed and Confused' as a Vehicle for Improvised Experimentation

Led Zeppelin's version of 'Dazed and Confused' may be seen as closely paralleling many aspects of the lament, not only through the chromatic descending bass, but also through various musical invocations of sighing and crying that intensify the emotional expression, and which are given further dramatic power through the contrasting approaches of the guitar solo. These aspects of the song lend 'Dazed and Confused' significant dramatic potential in performance—something that was fully exploited by the band between 1968 and 1975, but which was to transform the work from the 'blues lament' of *Led Zeppelin* into a vehicle for extensive musical experimentation.

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<sup>15</sup> Rosand, 'The descending tetrachord', p. 347.

<sup>16</sup> This riff is also related to the instrumental break used following verses two and three, which outlines a similar rising pattern making use of major seconds (E, F-sharp, A, B, E, F-sharp).

Significant not simply for the regularity of its performance during the first seven years of the group's performing career,<sup>17</sup> 'Dazed and Confused' represented many important aspects of Led Zeppelin's approach to the live concert. Not content to merely replicate their studio recordings in concert, Led Zeppelin incorporated large sections of improvisation within certain songs, vastly altering the nature of these works in comparison with their respective studio versions, which Page described as 'really just frameworks for our stage performances, when we really stretch out'.<sup>18</sup> The combination of a simple, evocative descending chromatic riff with the striking contrasts, in both sound and technique, of the bipartite guitar solo lent 'Dazed and Confused' a dramatic intensity and expressive immediacy that made the song a particularly appropriate vehicle for improvised experimentation in performance. Those characteristics that enable the original studio recording to be characterised as a lament were the very characteristics that provided the work the capacity for extended abstract improvisation into unfamiliar sonic territory.

The focus of this improvisation in performances of 'Dazed and Confused' was the two-part guitar solo, both sections of which became greatly extended, highlighting the inherent dynamism of the original.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, Fast describes 'Dazed and Confused' as 'the most malleable and extended piece in the band's repertory, sometimes running to half an hour or more in performance; within this expanse of time, the musicians were free to roam wherever their imaginations took them'.<sup>20</sup> Fast's characterisation of live performances of 'Dazed and Confused', whilst acknowledging the extensive expansion through improvisation relative to the studio recording, does not, however, adequately acknowledge the carefully structured approach that the band applied to this process. Unlike the improvisational approaches of their early contemporary Cream, who would create extended solos over a continuously repeated bass line,<sup>21</sup> Led Zeppelin's approach to the expansion of 'Dazed and Confused' was to expand various individual sections, incorporating periods where the harmonic and rhythmic structures of the original recording were entirely absent. Crucial to the effectiveness of this approach, in which the audience was presented with large periods of unfamiliar material, were the connections that were retained with the original studio recording. These brief, but significant, references to

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17 See the concert set lists provided in Lewis, Dave with Pallett, Simon 2005, *Led Zeppelin: The concert file*, Omnibus, London.

18 Godwin, Robert 2003, *Led Zeppelin: The press reports*, Collectors Guide Publishing, Burlington, Ontario, p. 72.

19 In performance, the introduction and coda were also regularly extended as a means of balancing the extended guitar solo.

20 Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy*, p. 18.

21 See the live version of 'Spoonful' released on *Wheels of Fire* (Cream 1968, 'Spoonful', *Wheels of Fire*, [LP], Polydor). Allan F. Moore: 'On almost all the solos on Cream's *Wheels of Fire*, both bass and rhythm guitar maintain the song's harmonic patterns, restricting the pitches available to the lead guitar at all times' (Moore, Allan F. 2001, *Rock: The primary text*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK, p. 84).

the version of the work most familiar to their audience provided aural markers of how the improvised performances related to the original, in effect guiding the audience through the unfamiliar improvisation. Thus, the extended performances of 'Dazed and Confused' were able to challenge audiences with unfamiliar material whilst simultaneously retaining an element of coherence with the original. That Led Zeppelin recognised this process as an important factor in enabling their audiences to engage with the improvised sections is reflected in the fact that, rather than taking an entirely free approach, extended performances of the work within each tour, and even between different tours, reflected a remarkably similar structure, the references to the studio being employed in a consistent fashion in each performance.

## The Guitar Solo in Performance, Part I

Accompanied by drums, bass and voice in the studio recording, the violin-bow solo in performance regularly incorporated a lengthy unaccompanied segment, in which Page explored the sonic possibilities of the bowed electric guitar, creating an abstract, avant-garde soundscape that was largely removed from the musical parameters of the work. Through this improvised experimentation, Page transformed the bowed guitar solo from an evocation of sorrow and sighing into a psychedelic exploration in sound. Of this section, Fast observes: 'The experimentation with sound, especially Page's trademark use of the violin bow to play his electric guitar, radically expanded the sonic palette, serving as a metaphor for the expansion of consciousness into uncharted territory, and on this count the piece is a classic example of psychedelia.'<sup>22</sup>

Despite this, Page's bow solo within performances of 'Dazed and Confused' consistently retained connections with the studio original through differing uses of the minor third G–E. This interval formed the basis of the bowed glissando descent of the studio cut, creating an instrumental invocation of a sigh, and it is with this interval—frequently elaborated upon or filled in to create a stepwise descent—that Page often opened the bowed portion of the solo in performance.<sup>23</sup> Further to this, the other motive that Page used even more regularly during the bow solo (A, G, D, E) may also be seen simply as an

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22 Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy*, p. 18.

23 Ibid., p. 37. Of the officially released live performances of 'Dazed and Confused', this may be heard in the version from *The Soundtrack from the Film the Song Remains the Same*, recorded in 1973 (Led Zeppelin 1976, *The Soundtrack from the Film the Song Remains the Same*, [LP], Swan Song). Bootleg recordings of other performances also demonstrate this, including those from Sydney, 27 February 1972 (Led Zeppelin [n.d.], *The Rover's Return*, [Unofficial DVD], Genuine Masters); New Orleans, 14 May 1973 (Led Zeppelin 2006, *Bourbon Street Renegades*, [Unofficial CD], Empress Valley Supreme Disc); New York, 12 February 1975 (Led Zeppelin 2002, *Led Zeppelin's Flying Circus*, [Unofficial CD], Empress Valley Supreme Disc); and Seattle, 17 March 1975 (Led Zeppelin 2011, *Haven't We Met Somewhere Before?*, [Unofficial CD], Empress Valley Supreme Disc).

expansion of this descending minor third.<sup>24</sup> In the same way that the solo itself is expanded, the melodic material that forms the basis of the improvisation is expanded through the addition of upper and lower neighbour notes to expand the frame of the original minor third. These connections, which, as Fast states, became somewhat 'set in performance',<sup>25</sup> provide melodic coherence between the abstract improvisations of performance and the more familiar recording of Led Zeppelin's first album.

## The Guitar Solo in Performance, Part II

The second, more conventional period of the guitar solo was similarly extended, making use of contrasting sections of fast passagework and periods of relative pause. On occasion, riffs from other songs would be inserted, providing an extra section.<sup>26</sup> Whilst again much of this portion of the solo was improvised and therefore largely unfamiliar to the audience, short passages of the original studio version were always retained, providing the audience with brief markers by which they could relate the performance to the studio recording.

The most significant example of this technique is the consistent use in performance of the opening of the second portion of the solo as recorded on the studio version. The distinctive descending semibreve/minim guitar and vocal passage—suggestive of wailing or crying—was consistently used in performance at, or close to, the beginning of the second part of the solo. This passage thus served to provide a brief but distinct connection with the studio recording following the extended violin-bow improvisation, and prior to a further period of extended improvisation.<sup>27</sup>

The consequence of this approach to improvisatory expansion meant that the dramatic contrasts of the bipartite guitar solo were both expanded and intensified. In addition, whilst short passages of the original were retained as markers, the material was for the most part unfamiliar to the audience, who, through the improvisatory process, were challenged to take a journey into the unfamiliar.

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24 Fast discusses this motive in some detail, but does not note a link between this and the original descending minor third motive of the studio recording. Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy*, pp. 37–8.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

26 The performance of 'Dazed and Confused' from a 1972 concert in Los Angeles, released on *How the West Was Won* (Led Zeppelin 2003, *How the West Was Won*, [CD], Atlantic), incorporates the riff from 'Walter's Walk', a song that had been recorded earlier in 1972 but which would not be released until 1982, on the band's final album, *Coda* (Led Zeppelin 1982, *Coda*, [LP], Swan Song).

27 This may be observed in various officially released live recordings of 'Dazed and Confused', including those from *DVD*, which included three versions, two recorded in 1969 and one in 1970 (Led Zeppelin 2003, *DVD*, [DVD], Atlantic and Warner Vision); *BBC Sessions*, recorded in 1971 (Led Zeppelin 1997, *BBC Sessions*, [CD], Atlantic); *How the West Was Won*, recorded in 1972; and *The Soundtrack from the Film the Song Remains the Same*, recorded in 1973.

This process inherently changed the nature of the work in live performance. Rather than simply providing instrumental affectations of sighing or crying, the two sections of the solo served as vehicles of psychedelic exploration; however, those elements of the studio recording characteristic of the intensified affective expression of a lament, the bowed descending minor third suggestive of sighing and the descending semibreve/minim motive of the second half of the solo invoking crying or wailing were what were specifically retained as aural signifiers of the studio original within extended live performances. Their expressive immediacy, coupled with melodic simplicity, made them the ideal figures with which to frame the larger-scale abstract improvisation. Similarly, the simplicity of the descending chromatic riff used as the accompaniment to all four verses in performance provided a familiar and easily accessible, yet also expressive, frame for the expansion of the dramatic two-part guitar solo. The return of the riff for the final verse at once signals the end of the instrumental improvisation and the return to the emotional world of the protagonist. This culmination parallels the subtly altered nature of the final verse of the studio recording, but, given the extensive improvisations undertaken in performance, the final verse now suggests resolution. Whilst balancing the opening verses, in performance, rather than being simply a reiteration of the anguish and sorrow of the 'blues lament', the final verse functions as a return to the familiar after a diversion through the unfamiliar. In this way, it assumes a sense of achievement and culmination, resolving the tension and suspense created by the extended period of unfamiliar improvisation.

## Conclusion

In concert, then, 'Dazed and Confused' became far more than simply a 'blues lament'. With the foregrounding of the descending chromatic bass, intensified dramatic expression and affective invocations of sighing and crying, Led Zeppelin sharpened the focus on the lament-like characteristics of Holmes's original, thus not only providing a framework for, but also expressly enabling, the transformation of the work into a vehicle for extended psychedelic sonic improvisation. The significance of the lament origins of 'Dazed and Confused' to the potency of expanded improvised live performances serves as a case study in the use of familiar musical tropes as a foundation for experimental musical innovation, and an example of a nexus between aspects of divergent traditions and innovation in popular music.