

## **“Is She Weird”:**

### **Subverting Cultural and (Hyper)Metric Norms in the Music of the Pixies**

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#### **Introduction**

Hello, today I'll be talking about the music of the Pixies—in particular, about the role of rhythm and meter in the Pixies' idiosyncratic musical style. First, some historical backdrop.

[NEXT] The Pixies are an American alternative rock band formed in Boston in early 1986. The group's original lineup consisted of—as shown here from left to right: Joey Santiago, lead guitar; Charles Thompson (also known as Frank Black and Black Francis), lead singer and rhythm guitar; Kim Deal, bass and vocals; and David Lovering, drums. [NEXT] From 1986 to 1993, the Pixies released five albums. In the US, the Pixies had two Gold albums but no Platinum certifications. In other words, the Pixies achieved only moderate commercial success during these years. For example, no single by the Pixies ever charted on the *Billboard* Hot 100. The Pixies are still active today, touring and recording, although without Kim Deal. But I am going to focus exclusively on these early years, because the Pixies are perhaps best known for influencing and presaging the explosion of grunge and alternative rock on mainstream culture that occurred in the early 1990s.

#### **A Comparison to Nirvana**

Note that the Pixies last album, *Trompe le Monde*, was released in September of 1991, the same month that Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was released and brought grunge and alternative rock to the masses. The relationship between Nirvana and the Pixies goes deeper still. [NEXT] For instance, Nirvana's lead singer, Kurt Cobain, stated in a 1994 *Rolling Stone* magazine interview that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was modeled on a Pixies song. To quote Cobain, "I was basically trying to rip off the Pixies. I have to admit it.... We used their sense of dynamics, being soft and quiet and then loud and hard." Perhaps largely because of this quote, the Pixies are often cited as the originators of the extreme dynamic changes between soft verses and screaming choruses that became so widespread—and arguably clichéd—in the music of alternative rock.

I'd be surprised if anyone here has never heard "Smells Like Teen Spirit," but I'll play a short excerpt nonetheless. As you listen, the contrast between the quiet verse and loud chorus should be obvious. [NEXT] But I also want you to pay attention to how "square" the song is in terms of its phrase organization: the song cycles a 2-bar chord progression, the lyrics create a 4-bar phrase, the verse and prechorus are both 8-bars long, which combine into a 16-bar passage that precedes the chorus. The hypermeter—and when I say hypermeter I mean the organization of measures into larger groups—is built entirely on powers of 2: 2, 4, 8, 16. Let's listen. [NEXT]

[NEXT] Now consider a song from the Pixies' first album called "I've Been Tired." Like "Teen Spirit," "I've Been Tired" has a soft verse followed by a loud chorus, but the rhythmic and metric organization is much less square. It's difficult to know how to best represent the phrase structure of this song. Like "Teen Spirit," "I've Been Tired" loops a single chord progression over and over. But instead of four chords, each of which lasts two beats, it's three chords, each of which lasts two beats. We might say the song is in a 3/2 meter, as I've notated the verse here, with each chord

lasting a half note. But you'll probably find it difficult to keep track of hypermeter in the verse, since the vocal phrasing is so loose and free. Once the chorus kicks in, things become more interesting. The title phrase "I've Been Tired" is sung every four beats and thus encourages us to hear the chorus in 4/4, as I've notated it here, but that meter rubs against the underlying chord progression, which repeats every six beats, and thus a hypermetric hemiola or cross-rhythm is created. Let's listen. [NEXT].

So while the "soft-loud" formula—as copied by Nirvana and innumerable bands that followed—may be an important part of the Pixies' legacy, perhaps a more significant and unique part of the Pixies' sound—something that seems to have not been widely adopted by later alternative bands—involves the avoidance of metric norms, especially those that disturb standard hypermetric schemes. I don't mean to discount the many other elements that go into the Pixies' style—such as Frank Black's *Sprechstimme* vocal delivery or the incomparable singing style of Kim Deal.

But after reading hundreds of pages of interviews with the band, their close associates, and commentary by scholars, I have found essentially no mention of rhythm and meter. Yet this is a central facet of the Pixies' musical idiolect. As I'll show today, Pixies songs often avoid the hegemonic 4-bar phrase structure that typifies rock music. This is accomplished in various ways, but perhaps the most common strategy is the use of groupings in units of three at various levels of the metric hierarchy. The Pixies' avoidance of traditional metric frameworks, I would thus argue, serves as an auditory cue to help convey the unconventional aspects of alternative culture.

### Some Data from Corpus Studies

My argument relies in part on the ability to say that common aspects of metric organization in the Pixies's music are not common in other rock music. So I'll make an attempt at that. [NEXT] Based on data from three existing corpora of popular music, for example, 4/4 is by far the most common time signature, [NEXT] whereas groupings of three at the beat level—such as 3/4 and 9/8—are very rare. Certainly, a 3/2 time signature is exceptional. What's more interesting about the Pixies's music is not at the time signature level, though, but rather at higher levels in the metric hierarchy.

Unfortunately, not all of these corpora have hypermetric information encoded. [NEXT] But the 2011 corpus by Burgoyne does. This corpus of 546 songs is particularly appropriate, because it encodes *Billboard* hits from 1958-1991, which is the era up to and including the Pixies. [NEXT] As this table shows, if we ignore trivial one-bar phrases, the corpus has 14,349 phrases total. [NEXT] Of these, more than 11,000 are four-bar phrases, and phrases that are powers of 2—that is, 2-bar, 4-bar, 8-bar, or 16-bar phrases—account for roughly 93% of the phrases overall. [NEXT] Admittedly, we do find 401 three-bar phrases, but they account for less than 3% of the total. Moreover, most of these 3-bar phrases are isolated events, happening only once or twice in a song—such as a phrase extension or elision—and never with any regularity. In fact, there is only one case in this entire corpus that has more than 3 instances of a 3-bar phrase in a row: this is the outro to David Bowie's "Golden Years," which is so improvisatory that I would not really consider it to establish a strong sense of hypermeter.<sup>1</sup> So I would state fairly confidently that zero songs in this 546-song corpus show evidence of true 3-bar hypermeter.

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<sup>1</sup> Song #100 ("Maggie May" by Rod Stewart) has some 3-bar hypermeter, but it involves odd time signatures.

Now while this *Billboard* corpus informs us about phrase organization for top-40 hits, I must admit it says little about alternative rock. Unfortunately, no corpus of alternative rock currently exists. [NEXT] But as a small way to investigate this, I analyzed the form and phrase structure of all twelve songs on Nirvana's *Nevermind* album. As you can see, almost every section is built on 2-, 4-, 8-, or 16-bar phrase lengths. [NEXT] The only exception is "Drain You," which adds a bar at the end of the chorus. Otherwise, all the songs on this album—an album that undoubtedly became a model for thousands of aspiring alternative rock bands—displays very regular phrase organization.

Now let's take a look at the Pixies. [NEXT] This table is one attempt to categorize and quantify the types of metric and hypermetric irregularity found in the 63 original songs that the Pixies recorded during this era. These statistics should be taken with a grain of salt, since the categorization scheme can often be unclear, as we'll see. Also, be aware that some songs appear in multiple categories, so the percentages add up to more than 100%. [NEXT] That said, I find that only about 14 of the 63 songs are metrically regular. In other words, more than 77% of Pixies songs contain metric or hypermetric irregularity, and most of these use groupings of three in some way or another.

For the remainder of the talk, I will illustrate some of these categories via musical examples. [NEXT] Let's begin with "Crackity Jones," a song that shows consistent 3-bar hypermeter. Note that in the verse, the last phrase is four bars long, but I hear that more as an extension to the prevailing 3-bar hypermeter than a return to the standard 4-bar paradigm. Also note that in addition to the 3-chord loop creating 3-bar hypermeasures, both the verse and chorus are comprised of three phrases total. So we're seeing 3 at multiple levels of the metric hierarchy. [NEXT].

[NEXT] A very similar hypermetric organization can be found in the song "Is She Weird." Here again, both the verse and chorus are built around the same repeating chord progression, which demarcates 3-bar hypermeasures. At the end of the verse, we find another 4-bar phrase, but again I see it as arising from an extension to the prevailing 3-bar scheme, not a return to the 4-bar standard. [NEXT].

Note that the 3-bar hypermeter in this song is created by looping six chords, whereas previous songs used loops made of three chords. The Pixies thus use multiple ways to avoid quadruple groupings. [NEXT] The song "Rock Music" shows another common strategy, one we saw before in "I've Been Tired." Each chord in this 3-chord loop lasts two beats rather than a full bar. It's unclear how to best notate situations like this, which is why providing statistics on the types of metric irregularity in the Pixies' music is somewhat difficult. Should we notate the song in 2/4, where each chord lasts a bar and thus creates irregular hypermeter. Or should we notate the song in 3/2, where we create a more normal hypermeter but have an abnormal meter. Another option would be to notate the song in 4/4, having the 3-chord loop go in and out of phase with the bar lines. [NEXT] But I can't hear it that way for this song. Let's listen [NEXT].

As a compositional strategy, groupings of three seem especially endemic to chorus sections. [NEXT] In "Wave of Mutilation," for example, the verse conveys a standard 4-bar hypermeter, albeit with only three repetitions of these 4-bar phrases. In the chorus, a more radical change occurs. As in other examples, I can't say whether it is best to think of the chorus as switching to

2/4, as I've shown here, with 3-bar hypermeter, or simply switching to 3/2. But a metric shift definitely occurs, with the harmonic rhythm speeding up and the chords looping in groups of three. [NEXT]

Using groups of three in a chorus—in particular, saving the irregular metric element for the high point of the song—is an interesting songwriting technique. Typically, we think of a chorus as the catchiest part, the part that's easiest to sing along with. Are Pixies choruses thus harder to sing along with than your average rock chorus? Perhaps, and that may be one reason why their music never had the commercial success of bands like Nirvana. But it might also help explain why the Pixies engender such adoration by fans and critics, because their chorus sections are like a puzzle that you have to aurally untangle. [NEXT] Consider, for example, the song "River Euphrates." The verse is 6-bars long, with a bar of 2/4 at the end of the first 4-bar phrase. On paper, the chorus almost seems simpler, in that all it does is loop a 3-bar chord progression. But despite the half-bar and phrase elision in the verse, the chorus sounds more weird and compelling, and I think a lot of that is wound up in my attempt to resolve where the beginning of each phrase occurs in the chorus due to the irregularity of the 3-bar hypermeter. Note that the link here has a rather odd metric organization based on multiple levels of three as well. [NEXT].

We could be here awhile with me playing interesting examples, but due to time constraints, I'll play just one more, "Gigantic," which is one of the Pixies most well-known songs. [NEXT] I'm ending with this song because I think if we had to guess as to what song or songs might have been the template for "Smells Like Teen Spirit," this would be a good contender. "Gigantic" has a similar structure to "Teen Spirit," in that there is a two-bar chord loop that repeats four times in the verse and keeps repeating throughout the prechorus and chorus. The lyrics of the prechorus, "Hey Paul, hey Paul, hey Paul, let's have a ball" are very reminiscent of the prechorus in "Teen Spirit": "Hello, hello, hello, how low." But unlike "Teen Spirit," the 2-bar chord progression in the prechorus of "Gigantic" repeats only three times, thus creating a 6-bar section. If we take the hypermeasure here to be the 2-bar chord loop, then this prechorus would have three 2-bar hypermeasures, in other words irregularity at the hyper-hypermeasure. Of course, as we go higher and higher in the metric hierarchy, irregularity becomes a more subtle effect. But it's palpable nonetheless, and I believe it helps the prechorus from becoming too stale given all the repetition of the chord loop in the song. [NEXT]

In conclusion, I hope I have given a sense for some of the idiomatic metric and hypermetric irregularities in the Pixies' music. Of course, there are many musical and lyrical elements that go into the Pixies's unique sound, so rhythm and meter is undoubtedly just one aspect. Much work still remains to do, not only in better cataloging and categorizing rhythm and meter in the Pixies' music, but also in exploring to what extent these techniques can be found in the music of other bands, whether that be other projects by the band members themselves, such as the Breeders or Frank Black's solo work, contemporary alternative artists, such as PJ Harvey or the Throwing Muses, or bands that influenced the Pixies, such as the Talking Heads or Iggy Pop. But that's another paper! [NEXT]