

## The Harmonic-Bass Divorce in Rock

### Introduction

Although pitch organization in rock music can often be explained using traditional interpretations, some situations call for new perspectives. [NEXT] One well-known scenario is the “melodic-harmonic divorce,” in which the melody and the harmony appear to operate independently of one another. [NEXT] A good example of “melodic-harmonic” divorce can be found in the song “Rock’n Me” by the Steve Miller Band. [NEXT] In the third bar, note how the harmony played by the electric guitar and bass changes to a power chord on A, yet the vocal melody seems to freely traverse a B major pentatonic scale—as if the melody is “stuck” in the original tonic key of B major without much apparent regard to the A5 chord underneath. [NEXT]

In my paper today, I show that a related type of independence can be found in rock music between the harmonic layer and the BASS—[NEXT] what I call the “harmonic-bass divorce.” Like Allan Moore, I thus see rock texture as having three functional pitch layers: a melodic layer, a harmonic layer, and a bass layer. I classify cases of harmonic-bass divorce according to the three categories of melodic-harmonic divorce introduced by Drew Nobile in his 2015 *Spectrum* article: [NEXT] “hierarchy” divorce, where one musical layer embellishes while another does not; [NEXT] “loop” divorce, where one layer repeats a pattern while another layer moves against that pattern; [NEXT] and “syntax” divorce, where two layers exhibit different types of motion to a structural goal. To be clear, by “divorce” I mean a surface-level independence or stratification that still involves some element of coordination on a more background level. I could say more about these terms, but given my limited time, I think it will be more productive to consider some examples.

## Hierarchy Divorce

[NEXT] Returning to the Steve Miller Band example, Nobile classifies the melodic-harmonic divorce as a “hierarchy divorce,” as his Schenkerian analysis shown here illustrates. Specifically, Nobile views the melody alone as conveying a prolonged tonic chord, while the A5 chord is a passing sonority.

[NEXT] Hierarchy divorce between the harmonic layer and the bass is not uncommon in classical music. The most familiar case is the pedal point, such as shown in this Bach example. Even though theorists think of the bass as implying a single tonal function, here tonic, above this pedal we hear a syntactically valid chord progression, complete with local predominant, dominant, and tonic functions. This clash of tonal functions on the musical surface within the same key is a hallmark of harmonic-bass divorce. [NEXT]

[NEXT] It’s not difficult to find bass pedal points in rock music, too, of course, such as this Rolling Stones example. Interestingly, David Temperley cites this song as an example of melodic-harmonic divorce, as shown in the red bracket. Yet as Temperley himself points out, the power chords in the guitar occur over a B-flat pedal in the bass. The middle harmonic layer is thus divorced from both the melody and bass. So even in the simple case of a traditional bass pedal, it’s useful to think of rock texture as have three distinct pitch layers. [NEXT]

[NEXT] A less conventional harmonic-bass hierarchy divorce occurs in rock when the harmonic layer sustains a background tonal function while the bass embellishes with implied foreground chords, what we might call an inverted pedal. [NEXT] The U2 song

“With or Without You” is a good example of this. The bass line here strongly conveys the chord progression of 1-5-6m-4, despite the persistent tonic arpeggio by the electric guitar loop. As you listen, consider two possible hearings, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: Do you hear the tonic arpeggio as [NEXT] 1) creating upper extensions to the the chord functions implied by the bass—in other words, creating sevenths and ninths above the root—or [NEXT] 2) Do you hear a prolonged D triad, with a bass line that diverges from this sustained chord—in other words, a harmonic-bass divorce? [NEXT] Note that, unlike Roman numerals, the “slash” or “hybrid” notation shown in Hearing 2 does not require the bass note after the slash to be a member of the chord in front of the slash. We might infer, therefore, that slash notation encourages popular musicians to think about triads and bass notes as separate entities; or conversely, it reflects a mode of thinking that is already established among popular musicians.

[NEXT] Along these lines, consider the song chart shown here, which is notated in Nashville numbers. I don’t have time to fully explain Nashville numbers; suffice it to say that it is a common system used by professional musicians that substitutes scale degrees for the letters in pop chord symbols, with each number equal to a measure unless otherwise indicated. The first measure in the red box is thus a root-position tonic chord, while the second measure is a tonic chord with scale-degree 6 in the bass. (Ignore the angle bracket on top of the 1 over 6 chord; it’s a rhythmic notation). One might wonder: Why did the author of this song and this chart—Chas Williams, who is a Berklee-trained professional session musician—notate the chord in the second measure as a tonic triad with scale-degree 6 in the bass rather than simply calling it a 6 minor 7 chord? When I e-mailed Chas this question, he said, <quote> I want the guitar players to think more in terms of hanging on the 1 chord while the bass does the movement <end quote>. His use of the word “think” is telling, as it reveals a conceptual

distinction between the harmonic layer and the bass that does not see the two as necessarily dependent. In addition, this example reveals that even though we as listeners may not hear harmonic-bass divorce in a passage—you might, for example, just hear a 6 minor 7 chord in the second bar—the idea that bass lines and a harmonic layer above can act independently may have been an important conceptual factor in the writing or performance of a song. I'll play this example now; be aware the meter here is 2/4, so the measures go by quickly. [NEXT]

### **Syntax Divorce**

[NEXT] Let's turn now to the second category of harmonic-bass divorce: syntax divorce, which I define as when the bass and upper voices move towards or arrive at a shared structural point, like a cadence, in a seemingly independent manner. [NEXT] The opening to "Jump" by Van Halen is a good example of this. The opening phrase begins with a traditional pedal point—in other words, a hierarchy divorce between the harmonic layer and the bass. [NEXT] The syntax divorce occurs at the predominant chord, boxed here in red. This sonority has what appears to be a tonic chord in the upper voices over scale-degree 4 in the bass. I see this conflict as arising from surface-level contrary motion towards the final dominant chord. [NEXT].

One reason "Jump" is such a good example is that the instrumental parts are so exposed, so it is fairly easy to hear each individual note. More typically, it is often difficult to pick out the precise pitch content of the harmonic layer of a rock song, and so we naturally rely on familiar patterns in lieu of a score, perhaps misinterpreting cases of harmonic-bass divorce simply as instances of chord extensions. Authorized scores sometimes exist, though, and they can help reveal the compositional organization. [NEXT] Bruce Hornsby, for example, released transcriptions of his songs that he edited

himself, writing that the transcriptions should be <quote> almost totally correct and complete <end quote>. [NEXT] The melody and chord changes for the verse to “Every Little Kiss” are shown here, which reproduces the authorized score. Like “Jump,” we find another syntax divorce before the half cadence. [NEXT] Notice that the second line begins with the bass and melody moving in parallel thirds, which could have continued at the end of the second bar had the bass moved to a B-flat under the word “Day.” Instead, the bass moves to scale-degree 4 to create a syntax divorce leading to the F chord. Again, had I not been presented with this transcription, I may have heard the pre-dominant chord simply as some sort of 4 major 9 chord. [NEXT]

Syntax divorces don’t always have to occur at strong cadences. [NEXT] Consider, for instance, the verse of “You Are the Sunshine of My Life” by Stevie Wonder. The keyboard and vocal melody are shown here, although I have removed the rhythmic aspect of the keyboard part to more clearly show the voice leading. [NEXT] The sonority of interest here is the F over G#, which seems to function somehow as an applied dominant to the following C# minor 7 chord. [NEXT] But while the bass in bars 3 through 5 implies a 2-5-1 progression in the key of C#, [NEXT] the upper voices simply slip down by half step. The F chord is very similar to the upper voices in a tritone sub, although not quite. Overall, the harmonic and bass layers both participate in structural motion to C#, but they do so via different pathways. [NEXT].

## **Loop Divorce**

[NEXT] Now for the third and final category, loop divorce. Nobile defines a chord loop as two to four chords that repeat for a significant portion of a song. Because chord loops end where they begin, Nobile argues that they lack a strong sense of any tonal goal; the melody thus bears the burden of defining phrase and formal structure in a melodic-

harmonic loop divorce. A similar effect can be found in cases of harmonic-bass divorce. As in melodic-harmonic loop divorce, harmonic-bass loop divorce involves a succession of two to four chords in the harmonic layer that repeat. But instead of the melody bearing the burden of delineating phrase and formal structure, the bass now shoulders that weight.

[NEXT] A good illustration of this can be found in the Dolly Parton song, “I Really Got the Feeling.” [NEXT] The keyboard intro, shown here, begins with a typical hierarchy divorce, with the right hand alternating C and G triads over a C pedal in the bass. [NEXT] This triadic ostinato pattern in the right hand continues in the third measure even though the bass moves to F, which is not consonant with either of the two looped triads. To my ears, the perception that the bass and upper voices act independently is particularly strong in a loop divorce. The looping chords, perhaps because they are repeated, become marked for consciousness, such that I hear the triads in the upper voices more strongly as individual triads per se rather than as extensions or chord members above a bass root note. [NEXT] This example ends with a syntax divorce between the harmonic layer and the bass, as the upper voices cadence on an F triad while the bass cadences on a G. Some of you may know this F over G sonority as a “gospel” or “soul” dominant, since it’s fairly common in R&B music. I see this as yet another byproduct of the more general principle of harmonic-bass divorce. [NEXT]

The overall strategy we see here—a hierarchy divorce, followed by a loop divorce, ending with a syntax divorce—seems to be a common blueprint in popular music. [NEXT] As another example, consider the intro to “I Can’t Fight This Feeling” by REO Speedwagon. The loop in the harmonic layer involves four chords: A, E, F-sharp minor 7, and then E again. [NEXT] After establishing this chord loop in the first two measures over a pedal on A, the bass moves to F-sharp for two measures. [NEXT] Without

question, the F-sharp in the bass makes bars 3 and 4 sound overall like a cohesive span of submediant harmony. Yet there is still a palpable feeling of harmonic motion within this submediant space. Unlike the previous example, where the loop divorce only involved one change of bass, [NEXT] the bass here pushes forward in bar 5 to the D, creating an overall feeling of subdominant harmony in which the chord loop in the harmonic layer can be reinterpreted yet again. [NEXT] As in other instances of loop divorce, the loop is broken by a syntax divorce—here again, a gospel dominant of D over E, which slips into a regular E major chord to end the phrase. [NEXT].

You may have noticed that these last two examples of loop divorce both occurred during keyboard introductions. The prolonged period of harmonic-bass independence needed for loop divorce may not leave much room for an additional pitch layer. There may be a limit on how much layer independence the average listener's ears or brain can handle without becoming overwhelmed. Divorce between any two layers thus appears to often be momentary or trade off between layers. [NEXT] In the New Edition song "Maryann" for example, note how the background vocals move out of the way as the right-hand part of the keyboard dances between apparent D and G triads to create a loop divorce with the bass. Overall, the harmonic language here is fairly sophisticated, but the organization of the harmonic layers into triads arguably helps our ears and brains make sense of it all.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I will admit that existing concepts—such as pedal points, hybrid chords, and chord extensions—can all be used to understand the examples I have shown. I do hope, though, to have affected a new way of thinking about all of these concepts. Specifically, independence between musical layers in rock can occur not only between

the melody and accompanimental parts, but also between the bass and these other two layers. I also do not deny that cases of harmonic-bass divorce may be found in common-practice music. A deceptive cadence, for example, might arguably be seen as a simple instance of syntax divorce between bass and upper voices. But harmonic-bass divorce, like melodic-harmonic divorce, seems to be more endemic to rock music.

[NEXT] As an outro, I would like to play the song “Blue” by Joni Mitchell. I chose this example for a few reasons. First, the bass layer is not truly monophonic. Every low bass note here has an upper fifth, either played simultaneously or through arpeggiation. We might thus call the overall sonorities we find here polychords, but I see this upper fifth in the bass simply as a thickening agent, kind of like musical corn starch. Second, this excerpt exemplifies the conceptual separation between harmonic and bass layers. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that every single sonority in the right hand is a triad and that these triads are almost all built on different roots than the low bass note beneath them. Finally, I chose this example because it shows instances of harmonic-bass divorce that don’t fit neatly into any of the three categories I discussed. To be sure, there are instances of hierarchy and syntax divorce here, but Joni Mitchell’s compositional style in this song seems to use layer independence as a generative principle to support the lyrics. Like the narrator, for example, the right hand often seems at “sea” with regard to the left hand. And while the repeated E bass notes in the second system “anchor” the undulating D and E triads above, the harmonic layer eventually cuts loose from the bass to “sail away.” [NEXT]

[NEXT] Thank you.