Chapter 7
“The Beat of your Heart”: Music in Young Adult Literature and Culture

Karen Coats

Teenagers use music, perhaps more than any other language or cognition-related activity, to regulate and alter their moods, establish and consolidate both core and tribal identities, celebrate the joys of embodiment, sublimate aggressive sexual or violent feelings, mourn relational losses, generate courage for new endeavours, affirm their values and beliefs, and worship their gods. They are voracious consumers of music; indeed, research shows that, in general, people are more likely to be avid music listeners between the ages of fourteen and twenty than they are at any other time in their lives, with consumption of music doubling between the tween and teen years.¹ In our lifetimes, we have seen a rapid evolution of personal music technology that has facilitated the private consumption of music. At home, clunky personal turntables turned bedrooms into places for teenage girls in particular to dance and dream,² while living-room HiFis with enormous speakers and complex toggle switches to engineer the sound allowed families to share their tastes with one another, willingly or not. On the road, car stereos not only picked up music radio, but could be upgraded with 8-track tape players, cassettes in the 1970s and 1980s, and now CD players, satellite radio, and MP3 devices. Outside the car, teens in the second half of the twentieth century used transistor radios and other portable music devices, and gathered around boomboxes on basketball courts, parking lots, and beaches, developing a public culture of music and dance that sometimes turned into a competitive substitute for gang violence as crews showed their superiority and turf ownership through break dancing rather than breaking heads. Today, it is rare indeed to see a teenager who isn’t occasionally, if not often, plugged into an iPod.

Considering the ubiquity of portable music in teenage culture, it is odd that authors of Young Adult literature often overlook the importance of music in their

writing, or even sometimes get it wrong in terms of technology or currency (in fact, this is one of the things that marks a book as consistent in its time period). Unless the book is specifically about a teenager’s relationship to music, many authors either omit any mention of it, or else they use it as a more or less atmospheric marker of setting, unimportant to character development. 1 For authors sensitive to the full materiality of the teenager’s world, however, music becomes an important code for social and individual identity formation, much like it functions in actual teenager culture. The sociological literature features rich and varied accounts of the role of music in youth culture, mostly focusing on the ways in which music functions to manage affect and enable self-fashioning at an individual level, and how it establishes and maintains group boundaries at the level of social identity; emerging research in cognitive neuroscience nuances our understanding of those processes by considering how the brain processes music and what implications that might have in our understanding of adolescent development. In what follows I will attempt to map some of the insights found through these studies onto the way music functions in contemporary adolescent literature, and how this coordinated approach can enrich our understandings of identity formation, which is arguably the key project of adolescence. My textual examples are by no means meant to be exhaustive, but rather point to some ways in which the uses of music in texts can be understood and interpreted.

Gender and ideology in music

In a 1992 article, Perry Nodelman notes a trend in Young Adult literature where male protagonists use music to foil an oppressive patriarchal order that insists on a form of masculinity that truncates the full expression of selfhood. Music in the novels he examines flourishes only in a feminine space, and the boys enter into that space as “an act of defiance against his father’s conventional male values,” discover their ability to express their “true” selves through music, and emerge as males more acceptable, according to Nodelman, to an ideology that values the softer side of masculinity: “A female music represents the essence of their presumably male selfhood.” 4 In other words, music in these novels, all written in the late 1970s to late 1980s, enables boys to negotiate their Oedipus complex with a decidedly second-wave feminist twist in the outcome.

Certainly, many contemporary novels fall into a similar pattern, but as teenagers fashion their identities in a post-Oedipal economy, gender becomes more of a fuzzy set, and the semiotics of music in teenager texts responds. Some expressions remain starkly traditional; for instance, in John Green and David Levithan’s Will Grayson, Will Grayson,2 the gay main character is obsessed with directing a campy high school musical extravaganza, musical theatre having become associated in the public imagination with gay men. But in other books, music is specifically cited that challenges tidy associations between character type and music genre. Moe, for instance, in Frank Portman’s King Dork,3 is a wannabe rock guitarist who dresses in his father’s old army coat and pretends to be edgy and unstable, and yet he describes his fondness for Bubblegum music, acknowledging that, although it was written for younger kids, it is “brilliant by accident” and “the best rock and roll music there ever was.”4 His love of this particular kind of music adds a layer to the central theme of the book, namely, Moe’s relationship to childhood itself. He positions himself as the anti-Holden Caulfield, rejecting Holden’s romanticized view that growing up means leaving something beautiful and worth cherishing behind, and yet his love of teenybopper music and his ironic nickname, Chi-Moe, short for child molester after a career survey indicated that he might make a good priest, belies the straightforwardness of his disdain for all things child. But it also positions him as someone who crosses gender lines in terms of musical taste. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, as well as Simon Frith, clearly position Bubblegum as the kind of music specifically embraced by teenyboppers, that is, prepubescent girls,5 and Moe’s embrace of it at first reactionary. He says, “maybe I got into it at first because it was so clearly the opposite of what everyone else liked,”6 but he goes on to claim his rediscovery of the genre as form of superiority in both taste and knowledge, a position that reinforces his defensive self-positioning as not like what he calls “the normal people,” people who fall into traditional gender and clique categories.

A more extensive and subtle example of gender blurring through musical taste appears in Steven Chbosky’s The Perks of Being a Wallflower.7 A playlist drawn from that novel positions Charlie, the protagonist, in an ambiguous gendered space in terms of his musical taste, as he listens to music that is traditionally coded masculine (Pink Floyd, Nirvana), and feminine (Simon and Garfunkel, Suzanne Vega), as well as music that blurs those categories (The Smiths, Genesis, Procol Harum, The Moody Blues). Much of the music Charlie listens to falls under the label of “emo,” a musical aesthetic that is illustrative of the blurring of gender boundaries in that it encourages both boys and girls to explore the range of emotions that have traditionally fallen into rigid gender binary associations. Emo as a label

3 Interestingly, tween survival literature (such as George’s My Side of the Mountain, Farmer’s A Girl Named Disaster, Hesse’s The Music of Dolphins, etc.) includes, as part of the protagonist's path to self-sufficiency, the need and ability to produce music of some sort.
5 Nodelman, “Males Performing in Female Space,” 224.
8 Portman, King Dork, 84.
10 Portman, King Dork, 84.
engenders strong responses among young people who either identify or actively dis-identify with the tag, but as a musical style, it emerged out of hardcore punk in the 1980s as a reaction to the violence inherent in the staccato rhythms, harsh dissonance, and intentionally shocking lyrics of that genre. Bands began to adopt a more distinctive melodic line and varied rhythms, and wrote lyrics that were deeply nostalgic and personal and elicited strong emotional responses, including cathartic tears, from their audiences. As Philip Tagg’s research shows, listeners tend to create verbal and visual images that are strongly tied to conservatively understood gendered representations while listening to music; hardcore punk’s commitment to fast, staccato rhythms, consistently loud volume, and rhythmic syncopations code it as male, while emo’s central characteristics of slower tempos, smooth legato rhythms, varying volumes, and descending melodic lines registers the music itself as feminine in most people’s estimations.12 Charlie’s introspective narration utilizes a traditionally feminine genre— the epistolary novel form— and yet it is his taste in music that truly ambiguous his gender presentation.

Janet K. Halfyard relates Tagg’s findings to the opening theme songs of the TV series Buffy the Vampire Slayer and its companion series Angel to demonstrate how the characters in those series play with gender boundaries, not to blur them, she concludes, but to display and then intentionally cross them in order to emphasize the moral, emotional, and material complexity of the world the two series create.13 Throughout the Buffy series, music plays an intentionally narrational role explored in detail by Amanda Howell.14 In her essay, Howell also considers the music in terms of the way it plays with traditional conventions of gender. Since the 1950s, rock music has established particular roles for males and females, roles that of course have shifted somewhat over time but still largely reinforce the image of the male rebel, restless for independence and sexual conquest, and his female object, a support who nevertheless holds him down with her demands for romantic love. According to Howell, Buffy complicates these images on multiple fronts, from its ironic play with 1950s and 1970s images of roll rebel bad boys in the characters of Angel and Spike, to its literalization of the musical metaphors of pain and death in the field of romance, to its expansion of ubiquitous rock romantic lyrics to include broader senses of loss than the break-up of a couple. At the center of these explorations is Buffy herself, whose coming-of-age narrative is intensified by her development into a mature warrior, and whose moments of transition and loss are almost always accompanied by haunting soundtracks with female vocalists that explore the line between the traditional pangs of romance and more profound expressions of subjective loss and destitution, scores that Howell sees as “more of an expansion of— rather than a departure from— the space conventionally delineated for female artists, listeners, and audiences by rock music and its commercial culture.”15 Howell concludes by agreeing with and expanding upon Halfyard’s reading of the series theme song, emphasizing how the power guitar, which has become a hallmark signifier of masculine heroism in the field of rock and beyond, is ironically associated with Buffy’s emergence and limitations as a female warrior who is also a commercial product.

In the recent Young Adult film Fish Tank, the music presents challenges to gender in a different way.16 Mia, the protagonist, retreats into the private sanctuary of an empty apartment to dance, dreaming about the possibility of dancing professionally. This might appear to be a traditionally feminine activity, but her music and dance style of choice is hip hop, a form whose lyrics are usually angry and often misogynistic, and she dances in a hoodie and baggy sweats. clothes designed to hide her body rather than put it on display. When she does manage to get an audition to dance professionally, it is clear to everyone except Mia, at first, that the kind of dancing she does is not the kind the promoters are after, and when she realizes that they want her to dance in a seductively feminine way, she runs out. Music is a complex signifier in this film; it augments Mia’s character development as an angry, defiant young woman, which in and of itself challenges the more traditional teenage tropes of the angry young man. However, her anger as represented by hip hop is clearly a survival mechanism; when she lets her guard down and attempts to adopt a more traditionally feminine, dependent role in response to her mother’s new boyfriend by choosing his favourite song (Bobby Womack’s cover of “California Dreamin”) to dance to, she ends up exploited and hurt. She and her mother finally bond while dancing to Nas’s “Life’s a Bitch,” a hip hop song that speaks to both of them of the gritty realities of their limited choices as poor, single women for whom anger is a hedge against despair.

The powerful associative qualities of gender in music consumption thus allow writers to use it as a signifier of character development in various ways to reinforce, challenge, or even blur gender norms and category distinctions.

13 Halfyard, Janet K. “Love, Death, Curses and Reverses (in F minor): Music, Gender, and Identity in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel.” Slayage: The Online Journal of Buffy Studies. http://slayageonline.com/PDF/halfyard.pdf. Retrieved 20 February 2011. It can also be argued, using Tagg’s findings, that the title music for Girlfight provides a more straightforward expression of Diana’s “feminine masculinity.” The staccato beat basically is the melodic line, coding the music as distinctly masculine, and yet its sound is that of a thin percussion instrument reminiscent of hand claps or a double-duty jump rope, a traditionally female pastime.
15 Howell, “If We Hear Any Inspirational Power Chords...”, 414.
Beyond gender: Music and identity

While gender stereotypes do not seem to have become less rigid in a post-Oedipal economy, the performance of gender among teenagers, as the above examples illustrate, is being called into question, and seems to allow for more transgression and finer gradations within other identity-marking discourses. Niche identities are more common and more pronounced, as young people struggle to assert themselves as individuals in a culture where the self has been characterized as both “empty” and “saturated.” What Cushman means by characterizing the self as empty is that we have abandoned the position that the self has some sort of pre-existent core of originality and authenticity that seeks expression; thus the project of 1960s teenagers to “find themselves” was always already doomed to fail because there never was a self to find, only one to fashion through the adoption of beliefs, values, material artifacts, and narratives made available through culture. This notion of an empty self was cynically perpetuated, according to Cushman, by both the advertising and the therapeutic industries of post-WWII America so that they could induce an identity crisis and offer ready-made, consumer-based solutions. Gergen then follows up by examining the effect of advertising and media image on young people; with so many voices coming at them from so many sources, teenagers are saturated with proliferating, competing messages on who to be and how to live, and no compelling narrative emerges to take precedence and sort out the relative importance of the conflicting voices. Teenagers have adapted by becoming experimental with their identities, trying on various roles and subject-positions. Young Adult literature of the twenty-first century reflects this new form of self-fashioning in various ways, but positioning music as the centre of the project of a character’s identity formation occurs less often in the literature than in real life. Indeed, Nicholas Cook goes so far as to say, “In today’s world, deciding what music to listen to is a significant part of deciding and announcing to people not just who you want to be ... but who you are. ‘Music’ is a very small word to encompass something that takes as many forms as there are cultural or sub-cultural identities.”

Studies of teenagers and their music abound, usually focusing on the subcultures that grow up around specific types of music, such as rap, hip-hop, rock, etc. Many studies focus on what Simon Frith termed “bedroom culture,” examining the use of music in private spaces, since, according to educational psychologist Reed Larson, adolescents are more likely to explore multiple possibilities for identity construction and negotiate stress and negative emotion while engaged in solitary media use. But Frith challenges the idea of music as expressive of some sort of core identity:

The question we should be asking is not what does popular music reveal about “the people” but how does it construct them ... popular music is popular not because it reflects something, or authentically articulates some sort of popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of what popularity is.

Frith goes on to argue that popular music serves three functions: 1) to create, in a very direct way, “a particular sort of self-definition” that establishes both identity and non-identity, 2) to provide language for feelings that might otherwise be unavailable to us, or else depressingly banal, and 3) to situate and organize our experiences of the past and the present. These functions of music all mediate the space between the public and the private, and hence prove crucial in the project of identity formation, because the most important outcome of identity experimentation is whether and by whom the identity is recognized and valued, and identities are always crafted in and through a process of social mirroring and feedback. These functions play out in interesting ways in literature that pays attention to the role of music in teenagers’ lives.

King Dork’s Moe demonstrates the way in which music can negotiate a public persona and enable connections between people, as well as with the past and future. As he struggles to craft a reasonable sense of who he is, he is hampered by the loss of his father, who died when he was young. He tries to connect with the memory of his dad by reading his books and listening to music his dad would have listened to as a teenager, and then he uses his knowledge of retro music to try to connect with his well-meaning stepfather, Little Big Tom. LBT, an aging hippie, clearly wants to have a meaningful relationship with Moe, and music helps them to share a language. Meanwhile, Moe and his best friend Sam have an ongoing shared fantasy of becoming a famous band. They treat their ambition with a large measure of irony, however, by continually changing the name of the band, the role of the players (although Moe is almost always on guitar), Sam’s contribution varies to include things like “bass and calisthenics,” or “bass and...

22 Frith, “Toward and Aesthetic of Popular Music,” 140
24 Portman, King Dork, 91.
interaction with the music itself. Further, she experiences herself as somehow separate from the hype that surrounds the kind of music she likes: As an indie music fan, she inhabits a niche identity that establishes her sense of style, her pastimes, even her ways of speaking as independent, that is, not mainstream; she and Victoria get it, and the rest of the world doesn’t. But when her life becomes fodder for paparazzi and internet lore, her style is blown out everywhere, and pop culture becomes a much too public mirror. The situation thus mounts a critique of the way a private life can become a commodity through song, while acknowledging that this process has become a necessary feature of individual access to the emotions made available through pop music in contemporary culture.

An unusual casting of identity construction through music is found in Antony John’s *Five Flavors of Dumb*. Main character Piper is intensely irritated with the way things are going at school and at home. A local high school rock band, Dumb, has won a competition, and their front man, whom Piper can’t stand, is acting like a conceited jerk. She challenges the band’s arrogance, reminding them that despite the win, they have no paying gigs coming up, and they take her up on their challenge by making her their manager for a month. Piper has no idea whether the band has any talent, because she herself is deaf, but she can tell by the way they interact that they are not working as a team onstage or off. This lack of synchronicity, which is available to Piper despite her inability to hear their music, threatens their future, but also acts as a metaphor for both Piper’s inner turmoil and her anger toward her parents, who have drained her college savings for a cochlear implant for her baby sister, which she takes as a rejection of her as a person on multiple fronts. Piper’s involvement in the band requires that she enlist the help of both a close friend and her brother to take care of the musical quality side of things, while she manages the personal relationships that are required to enable a group of teenagers to make music together. As she works with the band and overcomes multiple challenges to their success, including most of all their individual narcissisms, she develops a stronger sense of self that allows her to confront her parents regarding how she feels about her sister’s implant and replace the sense of herself as alone and undervalued.

In each of these texts, music has a clear role to play in creating and sustaining an identity that has value both to the individual and to the social groups that they care about. While Moe uses music affiliations to exalt his fragile sense of self and craft an oppositional identity to the cultural mainstream, Piper uses music as a bridge to create communities between herself and her family, as well as among the members of the band she’s trying to manage. Audrey’s sense of herself as a fan is challenged when she becomes part of the music she idolizes, but when she can cut through the clutter and sordidness of the music business, she can still find the exhilarating emotional release of losing herself in a good song.

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25 Portman, *King Dork*, 97
26 Portman, *King Dork*, 83.
27 Portman, *King Dork*, 84.
Music, emotion, and the adolescent brain

The emphasis on identity construction is perhaps enough of a reason to focus on the place of music in Young Adult literature, but recent research into cognitive neuroscience and the specific area of adolescent brain development renders the topic even more salient for scholars of youth literature. According to David Levitin, an intensified interest in music comes online for children around the age of ten or eleven, and continues through their teenage lives, so that, for most adults, the music that we hold in highest sentimental regard is the music of our adolescence. He cites cases of Alzheimer’s patients suffering from severe memory loss yet still able to recall the songs they knew when they were fourteen. Adolescence is a time of fundamental changes in brain structure: the prefrontal cortex, which is the known as the CEO of the brain, responsible for planning, assessing risk, impulse control, and reasoning, goes through a growth spurt just prior to puberty, followed by a period of pruning and organizing of the neural pathways, strengthening those pathways that are in use, and pruning away or dead-ending those pathways that are not reinforced through activity and experience. Meanwhile, imaging shows that the teenage brain is more dependent on the limbic system and the amygdala, the emotional centre of brain activity, for its responses to stimuli. Scientists speculate that, along with a surge in hormonal activity, this is why teenagers have a harder time regulating their emotional responses than most adults – an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex coupled with a perfectly responsive limbic system means that teenagers tend to lead with their emotions rather than their reasoning faculties.

In terms of responding to music, the limbic system is in charge of emotional responses, while the cerebellum, which is also undergoing a period of dynamic growth during adolescence, coordinates movement responses to music, such as foot tapping, dancing, or playing an instrument. So it would seem to follow that adolescents are more attuned to music than they are to argument when it comes to organizing their social lives, regulating their responses, and constructing their identities. In the process of neural maturation, connections between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala are strengthened, and the cerebellum, which coordinates thinking processes as well as motor processes, becomes more adept at doing its job. Music may intervene in these processes by helping to order the connections; that is, music has immediate emotional accessibility through systems that are already highly developed, but it is also an art form that is regulated through rhythm, structure, and anticipation. Therefore, it makes sense to think that young people may use music to forge and strengthen connections between the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. The result of those connections, for most people, is that emotional responses get tempered by what we have learned of consequences, as well as what we can imagine through reasoned creativity. But our adult reasoning skills are still informed by the emotional education we received throughout our adolescence, because our strongest memories always have an emotional component, and because the neural pruning we undergo is structured by experience, particularly repetitive experiences such as listening to the same songs or types of music.

I have argued elsewhere that what we have learned about the adolescent brain and its reliance on emotional response should make a difference in the way we approach and critique literature written for this age group. Literature that we might consider melodramatic and insubstantial is in fact developmentally appropriate and important if we consider a more robust theory of identity than we have traditionally espoused as education practitioners and/or literary theorists. In general, our approach to criticism of Young Adult literature has tended to focus on a cognitive/linguistic model, surfacing conflict and growth in terms of finding one’s voice and negotiating an ethical response to power and otherness, with our understanding of ethics leaning toward Kantian abstractions. But as psychoanalytic thinker Mark Bracher points out, this is an anemic approach to understanding the complexity of identity.

Bracher argues that our most persistent desire is for a coherent identity that has meaning in the world. He proposes a theory of identity that aligns with the Lacanian registers of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. In the register that imperfectly reflects the Lacanian conception of the Real, we experience our bodies at the level of emotion and feeling; the differentiation imposed by image and language is overwhelmed by oceanic feelings of relative connectedness, well-being, or dis-ease. This emotional register leads us to seek both the mirroring and the amplification of our emotions through others in order to validate and affirm those emotions. Songs that lead to social bonding, as well as religious songs that affirm the presence of the divine, especially when those songs are sung or experienced in the company of others, enable that sort of validation. The Imaginary register is the register of perception and images, particularly body image, where we seek to affirm our sense of self through our competencies at the level of the body. Whereas in literary criticism it is a commonplace to associate agency nearly exclusively with voice as linguistic competence, Bracher situates agency at the level of embodiment: we each have things that we do well, that make us feel good about ourselves, and hence when we feel uneasy or at odds in our emotional register, we can use our bodies to change our feelings, either by making ourselves look good, or by doing something, like jogging, woodwork, performing music, dancing, or knitting, that makes us feel more aligned with our ideal image of ourselves. Finally, there is the cognitive/linguistic component of

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our identity, where we attempt to situate our perceptions and emotions within specific signifiers that have value in the larger culture.

At any given moment, we experience challenges to one of the components of our identity, and we turn to the other components to compensate for perceived inadequacies. For instance, suppose, for purposes of an academic audience, we get an article rejected, or a bad teaching evaluation. This constitutes an assault on our linguistic/cognitive sense of self insofar as we desire to be perceived as intelligent scholars with publishable ideas, or dynamic teachers who desire appreciation from our students. We might respond by doing something nonscholarly that bolsters our perceptual/imagistic identity, or we might get drunk, which temporarily alters our emotional state. Eventually, though, since most of us are overly invested in our linguistic/cognitive identity component, we go back to our cognitive activities and work even harder to earn the signifiers that we have come to value.

Consider, however, that most teenagers, because of their brain structure, are more invested in the emotional and perceptual aspects of their identity. They, like adults, are actively seeking communal affirmation for their self-presentation, but they are more likely to seek that affirmation at the level of emotional mirroring, which is readily accessed through music. Benway’s Audrey, for instance, doesn’t just listen to music, she goes to concerts and positions herself near the speakers so that there is nothing but the sound of the music, the feel of the rhythm, and the press of bodies all around her. This practice effects a complex silencing technique that teens everywhere replicate by listening to their music loud, sometimes loud enough so that even the words cease to have their traditional semantic dimension, and become overwritten by their sound. Consider the following passage from Brenna Yovanoff’s The Replacements:

> It wasn’t like the other songs. There was no story, no conversation. This was just the feeling, without words or pictures, and it had nothing to do with Luther or his clean, singing guitar.

> It was the sound of being outside, of being alien. It was the pulse that ran under everything and never let you forget that you were strange, that the world hurt just to touch. Feelings too complicated to ever say in words, but they spilled out of the amplifiers, seeping into the air and filling up the room.

> Out in the crowd, everyone had stopped moving. They stood in the pit, staring up at me, and when I stopped playing, they started to clap.\(^{34}\)

Yovanoff captures the experience of emotional mirroring and amplification that happens in a musical transaction. Operating outside of representation through image or language, the music in this passage “spills” and “seeps” directly from the consciousness of the artist to the consciousness of his listeners, relaying rather than actually articulating an experience of loss that resonates thematically throughout the book.

In much fantasy literature, music acts as an irresistible emotional lure, beckoning humans to join a world where reason is abandoned and hedonistic pleasures triumph. Obviously, this usually results in capture or death for the human so seduced, exemplifying our cognitive bias. But in realistic fiction, music, even the kind that beckons a character beyond reason, can function in a healing context. Such is the case in Jennifer Donnelly’s Revolution.\(^{35}\) Oddly, the jacket text mentions nothing about the importance of music, which is central to the book. The first words of the book, “Those that can, do. Those that can’t, deecay,” immediately establish a musical hierarchy of insiders and outsiders. Within the first few sentences, phrases like beat-match, trip-hop, and Memphis mod, and name drops like John Lee Hooker and Beale Street similarly position readers and characters – you’re cool if you know what these things mean, and uncool if you don’t. Andi Alpers, the main character, clearly is an insider, particularly to the emotions of the blues. She is grieving the accidental death of her little brother, a death for which she feels wholly responsible. Meanwhile, she’s surrounded by a gaggle of superficial, rich poseurs who don’t know a thing about real sadness and who are in love with their own pretentiousness:

> “But, really, you can’t even approach Flock of Seagulls without getting caught up in the metafictive paradigm,” somebody says.

And, “Plastic Bertrand can, I think, best be understood as a postironic nihilist referentialist.”

And, “But, like, New Wave derived its meaning from its own meaningless. Dude, the tautology was so intended.”\(^{37}\)

The use of music to establish the boundaries of her social group foreshadows the central role it will play in establishing Andi’s character; the implicit sneer with which she reports their conversation emphasizes the distance she feels from those around her, even though they are all part of the same social and economic set: “No Billboard Hot 100 fare for us. We’re better than that,”\(^{38}\) she snarks, relegating pedestrian pop music to those who attend public school, not the elite of Brooklyn with their posh private school credentials. These snippets of reported speech and her commentary are immediately followed by someone complimenting her on her guitar playing; she, unlike her fellows, has real talent, but right now it’s in the service of her guilt, as she deliberately plays until her fingers rip and bleed.

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\(^{36}\) Donnelly, Revolution, 3.

\(^{37}\) Donnelly, Revolution, 5.

\(^{38}\) Donnelly, Revolution, 5.
While her headmistress chides her for using her music as an outlet for her pain, Andi focuses on the work she does with her guitar teacher, Nathan, a 75-year-old Holocaust survivor who does not try to talk her out of her grief. Instead, he supports her need to keep her wound open, offering her the authority of those whom she respects: “This word closure ... it is a stupid word, ja? Bach did not believe in closure. Handel did not. Beethoven did not. Only Americans believe in closure because Americans are like little children – easily swindled. Bach believed in making music, ja?”

However, Andi’s circumstances will not allow her to focus all of her attention on her grief and guilt as she wishes; she must complete a senior thesis or she won’t graduate. She has chosen a (fictional) eighteenth-century French composer named Amadé Malherbeau, who wrote mainly for the six-string guitar and, for the purposes of the story, was known for experimenting with minor keys, refusing traditional harmonies, and integrating the augmented fourth, also known as the Diabolus in Music, into his compositions. At first she refuses to write her thesis, but then her estranged, Nobel-prize-winning father gets involved, and she is forced to accompany him to Paris for winter break to work on her thesis while he works on a genetic mystery - the determination of whether a heart that has been recovered really belongs to the young Dauphin slowly tortured to death in the years following the French Revolution.

As the story progresses, so does the metaphor of the Diabolus in Music. The augmented fourth is a tritone - a musical interval that stretches across three tones - used to create an unresolved dissonance in the music. As Andi tells her father, it’s “kind of like asking a question that can’t be answered.” He doesn’t understand why that’s devilish, and he wouldn’t, because he is a scientist and a rationalist, and to his way of thinking, all questions eventually have an answer, even if that answer can’t be found with current technologies or ways of thinking. But Andi is attuned to her emotions, and she, like Nathan, knows that there are some questions that not only can’t be answered, but shouldn’t be, such as why little brothers can be swept up into someone else’s madness and killed as a result. Eventually, Andi meets a fellow musician in Paris on whom she develops a crush, and they connect through their music, playing their favourite songs for each other, sparking a small seed of hope in Andi’s bleak landscape. But it is not until she travels back in time (either a result of too many anti-depressants combined with wine and a blow to the head, or the introduction of magic realism into the text - either possibility is cleverly left open to interpretation) that she is finally able to work through the complex nexus of guilt and grief that has threatened to take her life. While in eighteenth-century Paris, she is indeed able to effect closure through finishing the work of Alexandrine, a girl who has been the Dauphin’s companion and is trying to keep his spirits up through the use of fireworks as he is being held and tortured in a tower. While there, she also discovers the true identity of Mahlerbeau and helps him through his composer’s block by exposing him to Radiohead and Led Zeppelin on her iPod.

Andi’s journey through grief to healing could not have been effected without her involvement in music on multiple levels. The “devil in music” is effective not simply on the metaphorical, semantic level, as an unanswered question, but as a material signifier – the sound of a tritone actually makes one feel off balance, as if one is, like Andi, in the midst of something unresolved. Like Charlie’s in Perks, and Audrey’s in Audrey, Wait, Andi’s music is real, and is a reflection of her emotional state, and readers who are familiar with the songs cited will have one more level of engagement with the characters as they participate in the silent reading of their stories. More importantly, however, they will know that these characters and authors actually understand the importance of music to the development of a meaningful sense of identity. Because music, says Andi, “It gets inside of you, ... and changes the beat of your heart.”

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40 Interestingly, the vampire Spike uses tritones when he sings in “Once More with Feeling,” the musical episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer in Season 6. His predicament, of being hopelessly love with Buffy, is echoed in his solo, which is sung in a minor key with lingering tritones; he is, literally, the devil in music.
41 Donnelly, Revolution, 84.