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Writing Jimi: rock guitar pedagogy as postmodern folkloric practice¹

JEFF SCHWARTZ

Introduction

Most instruction in electric guitar, bass guitar, drums and electronic keyboards is conducted on a one-to-one basis by uncertified, independent teachers. The lessons are face-to-face, and based on the student's imitation of the teacher's example. Popular music education is a 'little tradition' (in comparison to school music departments) and largely an oral one, thus meeting the usual criteria of folk cultures.

However, popular music, especially rock, which is the focus of this article, is part of mechanically reproduced, late capitalist, commodity culture. While the skills of popular musicianship are taught in a manner resembling the folk process, the texts of popular music are available to all in their authoritative form: records, tapes, CDs, 8-tracks, etc. The folk process of local oral transmission works differently here; performance technique, the physical motion of playing an instrument, is passed from person to person, mutating in this handing-down as it does in folk culture, but the text, the music itself, does not change. It is fixed, canonical. The popular music recording serves as an even stricter model than the classical music score.

Consider also the situation of the self-taught musician. Many popular musicians, such as myself, learned from books and by imitation of records. I have played guitar since the sixth grade (1979) and my early experience is probably typical. I learned basic chord forms and the names of the notes on the guitar neck from the legendary Mel Bay *Modern Guitar Method* (Bay 1972), which featured such inspiring modern songs as 'Down in the Valley' and 'John Henry'. I remember the hippest song in the book was 'Love Me Tender'.

Once armed with this basic knowledge, I began trying to figure out songs by listening to records. More importantly, I entered a community of guitar players at my Junior High. Some of these musicians took lessons and some knew more skilled players who informally shared their knowledge. We showed off the songs we could play, worked together to figure others out, and created a competitive environment, making each one of us work harder at home with his record collection to learn something no one else had. Communities like this one exist everywhere there is rock music, and are the reason why almost every adolescent boy knows how to play the beginning of Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' (a situation brilliantly satirised in the movie *Wayne's World*). The story of how I

learned to play 'Stairway . . .' is an excellent example of this modified folk process.

My friend Steve Vaughn knew 'Stairway . . .' and he wouldn't show it to me. He had learned it orally; someone who had had it shown to him showed it to Steve. Steve was not willing to surrender the status that his knowledge gave him. Amongst our group, Zeppelin was the band of choice, and 'Stairway . . .' was considered their masterpiece. Anyway, my thirst for knowledge was not to be denied. I went to the Musicland store at the local mall and stole the sheet music for 'Stairway . ..'. It was written for piano, but I was able to adapt it to guitar fairly easily. Most popular sheet music available has been intended for pianists and adaptations of guitar-based songs are often horrible, for example, the versions of the Rolling Stones' 'Satisfaction' and James Brown's 'Say it Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)' in *The New York Times' Great Songs of the Sixties* (Okun 1970). However, the 'Stairway . . .' chart was fairly accurate; I only had to transpose the piano part up an octave and devise a fingering that was comfortable for my small hands.

At school the next day I unveiled my new showpiece. Steve was unimpressed. Although our renditions sounded virtually identical, our techniques were quite different and we have not, to this day, decided which one of us was 'true', 'right' or 'correct'.

Situations like this one probably no longer take place. During the 1980s, the level of theoretical knowledge and technical ability expected from rock guitarists increased tremendously.² Players such as Randy Rhoads, Steve Vai, Joe Satriani, Yngwie Malmsteen, and Eddie Van Halen produced music which was too challenging for most adolescent boys to learn by ear, and which could not be adapted for piano score. Accurate books of rock guitar music began to be published. Today, it is possible, from several sources, to get a precisely notated version of almost any popular guitar-based song, with authoritative fingerings. There are many video and audio tape lessons available which teach songs, some even featuring the original performers. There are also quite a few magazines: *Guitar Player*, *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*, *Guitar School*, *Guitar Extra*, and *Guitar World*, which publish transcriptions in each issue.

The central question which this article sets out to answer is: how has this explosion of written material affected the oral discourse of popular instrumental learning?

Fieldwork

I first felt that the best way to answer this question was to survey private popular music teachers about their use of these new materials in their work. I made a list of questions and distributed it at stores selling records and musical instruments in Bowling Green, a small town in Ohio. Disappointingly, only one of these forms was returned to me. The response was from an employee of Jim's Guitar who works in sales and gives lessons. Jim's Guitar is the main rock instrument store in Bowling Green and a centre for the musician community, dealing extensively in used equipment, featuring a bulletin board for players seeking to form groups, and providing rehearsal space for several local acts. The survey form, with his answers, follows.

Q: Do you read music?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you teach your students to read music?

A: Yes.

- Q: When you teach a song to one of your students, to what degree do you use demonstration, tabulature, traditional notation, the original recording of the song, or other media?
 A: Demonstration, to a large degree.
- Q: How do magazines such as *Guitar School*, *Modern Drummer*, *Bass Player*, and *Guitar for the Practicing Musician* affect your students and your teaching? Do you use them in lessons?
 A: Never.
- Q: How have instructional videos and tapes affected your students and your teaching?
 A: Great device to show technique.
- Q: Can rock music be written down?
 A: Yes, but it has to be felt.
- Q: Is it more important to teach technique or famous players' licks?
 A: Both. (but he underlined the word 'technique' in my question, emphasising it over the other term).
- Q: What function does learning by ear have in your teaching?
 A: Allows student to begin visualising music.

Despite its brevity, this response illustrates several significant points. It implies a concept of authenticity, the same one which repressed the market for accurate rock guitar music during the 1960s and 1970s. Rock can be written down, 'but it has to be felt'. There are still musicians today who avoid learning to read music because they feel it will stunt their creativity. Although written music is used by this teacher, he still relies upon demonstration as his main instructional mode. Part of this comes from a romanticised primitivism; it is more 'real' to learn from a live demonstration than from a printed text, but part of it also comes, I think, from the teacher's desire for self-preservation. If his students become too proficient at reading written scores, they will no longer rely on him for information.

To adapt to the new abundance of written material, this teacher stresses technique. He provides his students with the physical skills they need to interpret the charts they will encounter. This is precisely the situation in European classical music: all pieces are learned from written music; the teacher's function is to enforce the physical disciplines necessary for proper execution. The guitar music of the 1980s and 1990s requires complex and efficient technique, but too much of an emphasis on physical precision conflicts with the ideology of rock primitivism previously described. Consider the 1970s 'Progressive rock' of bands such as Yes, Genesis, and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer and the Punk reaction against it, epitomised by the Ramones, Happy Flowers and the Germs, as the extreme terms of this conflict.

It is clearly in the interest of manufacturers of instructional video and audio tapes to define lessons as song-teaching. This is what they can do better than a live instructor, because the stereo or VCR is infinitely patient and repeatable. Most technical instruction consists of the teacher observing and correcting the student's errors. Learning songs is much more a process of copying a demonstration. A recent advertisement for the 'Learn to Burn' series of audio and video tapes blatantly exhibits this definition of lessons as song-learning.

TAKE THIS TEST!

1. How many songs on this page can you play?
2. Now, how many can you play all the way through? That's what I thought. Most guitarists know 30-40 songs (that is the 1st few chords & a lick or two from the solo). **WHY?** Because learning a song from a \$25.00 an hour teacher is beyond most guitarist's [sic] budget. Tab books don't work because they're hard . . . (Mitchell 1992)

This ad goes on to criticise written rock music in all its forms, not as inauthentic, but as too difficult for the common player. 'Tab' refers to tabulature, a method

of notation using six horizontal lines, representing the guitar strings, with numbers written on them showing the positions of the various notes. It is often used as a substitute for the conventional musical staff, and also as a supplement, providing fingerings for difficult passages.

One must surely wonder how many tapes 'Learn to Burn' has sold by insulting its customers' intelligence. Tablature is only very slightly more abstract than the film of players' hands used in the video lessons and much easier than the verbal directions used on instructional audio tapes, for example: 'fifth position, fourth string, seventh fret, "A"'. ('Metal, Rock, and Blues' 1992, p. 160). Here, it takes seven words to describe one note. The same could have been represented by one number in tab, or one conventional note.

Theory

The 'Learn to Burn' advertisement, as well as my Junior High story, assumes that beginning musicians want to be able to precisely imitate their idols. **'What You Hear On The Album Is Exactly What You'll Learn!'** (Mitchell 1992). What is involved in this imitation?

A rock record is a simulated performance, one which never really happened. It is made up of bits of performances, edited together to appear as a seamless whole. For example, the band Def Leppard, in the May 1992 issue of *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*, describe recording the chordal guitar parts on their albums one note at a time. Instead of one musician strumming six notes, the one musician plays the song six times, playing a different note of each chord each time. To accurately perform this live would require six guitarists, an absurd situation. Instead, the one guitarist plays the six note chord, a less-than-perfect replica of his electronically enhanced self.

Electronic recording falsifies time and space. What appears to be a three minute performance by five musicians often is actually made up of hundreds of shorter performances by a variety of musicians, which probably did not take place in the order in which they appear. What appears to be an individual's performance is frequently not, especially for drummers. It is common practice to record each part of a drum set (snare, hi-hat, bass drum, the many toms and cymbals, etc.) on a separate track and to replace the parts that are not satisfactory. Often, a finished song's 'drummer' is a cyborg, a composite of hands and feet from various humans and machines.

Space is also forged in the recording process. Echo and reverberation, which signify acoustic space, are created by electronic devices, and the arrangement of instruments within the recording is devised through their relative volume and stereo location, controlled by the engineer and producer. Often, electric instruments are plugged directly into the recording apparatus; their signal never passes through the air making what we hear as sound.

The recording is a simulation, a copy for which there is no original, which denies the possibility of an original (Baudrillard 1983, p. 11). It is the perfect fake, one which erases the desire for an original and the potential for such a desire to exist (Eco 1986, p. 19).

What the musician who copies a record does is to make the simulation real, to construct a physical, real-time performance where none previously existed.

Whatever manipulations the studio text was put through, the copy musician finds a way to perform them.

Of course, all the musician is doing is imitating an imitation, but this meta-simulation takes place in what is called 'real time'. It starts at the beginning of the song and proceeds to the end as a linear, continuous whole. The performance time falsified in recording is made real. The copy musician's sound, even if it is affected by electronic space-altering devices such as reverb, echo, chorus, and delay, must also pass through a real space to be heard by an audience.

Even the musician who made the recording, when playing live, is in this position of 'realising' the simulation, as in the case of the guitarist from Def Leppard described above. Jacques Attali thoroughly describes this situation in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*: 'today the performance is only successful as a simulacrum of the recording' (1985, p. 85).³

Writing Jimi

What then, is the status of written rock music? Unsatisfied by my survey, I decided to look at the various available notated versions of a specific song and what relationship they imply between the guitarist, the recording, and the score. I chose 'Purple Haze' by Jimi Hendrix, because it was, like 'Stairway to Heaven', one which I struggled to learn, and because it has appeared in many written forms.

The earliest published music for 'Purple Haze' appears in a book entitled *Jimi Hendrix Anthology* (1975, p. 143).⁴ This is a collection of music for all officially issued Jimi Hendrix compositions. The amount of performance information provided is minimal; most songs only include the vocal melody and a simplified chord progression.

In order to copyright a piece of music in the USA, it must be written down (Bennett 1983, p. 218). Record companies, who are accustomed to musicians like Jimi Hendrix who do not read or write music, have staff members who prepare 'lead sheets' (scores consisting of the vocal melody and chord progression) so that the music can be documented to establish legal ownership. This ultimately leads one to ask, what is the essence of a song? Is it, in fact, the vocal melody and chord progression, or does it include improvisations and specific instrumental sounds? This issue is presently being decided in various sampling-related law suits and is far beyond the scope of this article.⁵ My question is, what use is this chart to a guitarist attempting to learn the song?

My answer? It's not very much use at all. None of the distinctive guitar figures played by Hendrix are included in this arrangement, and it is written in the key of F, while every recorded version by Jimi Hendrix is in E. The chord progression is correct, but over-simplified. A crucial part of the sound of 'Purple Haze' is that the first chord is a dominant seventh with a sharp ninth on top. Without this distinctive voicing, the harmonic movement is basically indistinguishable from that of the Monkees' '(I'm Not Your) Stepping Stone', the ending of Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Freebird', J. J. Cale and Eric Clapton's 'After Midnight', or dozens of other songs.

It is not inconceivable that an aspiring musician could get this book and, through extensive listening to the record, figure out the correct key and chord voicings, but this would not be substantially different from learning the song completely by ear. The only relevant piece of information given the guitarist by the

version of 'Purple Haze' in *Jimi Hendrix Anthology* is that the chord progression is I–III–IV, which is not a very difficult thing for even a beginner to discover. This book does almost nothing to affect the guitarist's learning process; it is still necessary, patiently by ear, to come up with an approximation of what Hendrix actually played. The recording stands as the absolute authority.

Richard Daniels' *Jimi Hendrix Note for Note* (1980) appears to be the required supplement to the *Jimi Hendrix Anthology*. It presents the signature guitar parts and solos to Hendrix's best-known songs. However, these parts are written only in tabulature. The finger positions are shown, as well as specialised guitar techniques such as sliding, bending and vibrato. What Daniels' notation does not include is any kind of rhythmic information. He shows which notes to play, but not how long to play each one. The student is expected to learn this part by ear.

This book is an example of folk-style teaching. What Daniels provides is not different from the information exchanged by my junior high friends and I: 'Here's where you put your fingers – listen to the record a few times and you'll hear how it goes'. This also supports the idea that rock 'must be felt', in the words of my informant. In *Jimi Hendrix Note for Note*, the notes can be written and taught, just like any other kind of music, but the rhythm, the *groove*, is unrepresentable and must be learned by imitation. Face to face transmission is still the ideal here, and it alters the process very little that we are dealing with Jimi's electronic simulacrum.

Sheila Whiteley's transcriptions are from a perspective completely opposite to that of Daniels. Traditional notation is used exclusively, without any understanding of the mechanics of the guitar. For example, in the first bar of her example 4, the last two and one half beats are actually one sustained note, bent up and down in pitch three times, not seven separate notes (1990, p. 42). However, her purpose is not to educate guitarists, but to show how drug references in Hendrix's lyrics are supported by musical content.

Even with this consideration, Whiteley's score can serve as an example of the potential inadequacy of conventional notation for guitar-based music. Not only does she ignore bending technique, but her rhythms are 'square', oversimplified. They seem to prove Daniels' and my informant's opinion that rock cannot be fully documented in writing. She also does not include any fingerings. This is important because most notes on the guitar can be played in more than one position; the sets of notes available on each string overlap. There is a difference in timbre between the strings: the thicker strings produce a fuller sound, and this is particularly evident in distorted, high volume electric guitar playing such as that of Jimi Hendrix.

Whiteley's notated version of 'Purple Haze' presents the score not as an aid to performance, but as an aid to analysis, in contrast to Daniels and the *Jimi Hendrix Anthology*. These two concepts of the use of the score are joined in the works of Steve Tarshis (1982) and Andy Aledort (1985, 1989, 1990),⁶ which are products of the 1980s boom in guitar music.

These versions of 'Purple Haze' include both tabulature and standard notation. They feature varying degrees of rhythmic accuracy and technical detail, though all are thorough enough that a musician could perform a recognisable rendition using only the score, without studying the recording. As advertised on the cover of one edition, these transcriptions are 'complete' and 'authoritative' (Aledort 1989). However, in their completeness, these works come into conflict with the nature of the recording as simulation.

Many transcriptions of rock guitar performances include music which is accurate, but unplayable. This 'impossible music', as Bennett calls it (1983, p. 231), takes three forms: 'mistakes', overdubs, and extreme technique. I put 'mistakes' in quotation marks because it refers to notes that were probably unintentionally played by Hendrix, but have become, by their presence on recordings and in these books, part of the canonical versions of these works. There are numerous cases when Hendrix strikes an open string while changing position. Should the student attempt to duplicate what were most likely accidents? Aledort, in his 1985 transcription labels one such instance (bar 10, second beat) with an asterisk and 'Unintentional note', but he drops this annotation from his later versions and even includes another note, probably of similar provenance (bar 10, beat 3).

It was common for Jimi Hendrix, in the studio, to layer many guitar parts on a song. In quite a few songs, such as 'Crosstown Traffic' and 'Castles Made of Sand', the signature musical figure arises from a composite of up to four independent guitars. Like the previously mentioned guitar player from Def Leppard, Hendrix in concert could only impersonate his electronically enhanced studio cyborg self. The guitarist who would copy Hendrix's studio recordings is in the same position, forced to decide which elements of the many available are essential. For example, Aledort includes in his transcriptions glissandi overdubbed by Hendrix.⁷ It is impossible to play these slides and sustain the notes of the main guitar melody, unless one performs the slides with one's picking hand (a variation of the technique associated with Stanley Jordan and Eddie Van Halen). However this technique is almost totally anachronistic. Hendrix himself simply omitted the slides in live performance (Whitehill 1991, p. 121). The guitarist playing 'Purple Haze' with the added slides is hyperreal, a more accurate representation of Jimi than Jimi himself.

The third type of 'impossible music' presented in Hendrix transcriptions is extreme technique: playing that either cannot be produced in real time or that could not be duplicated even if notated. An example of the former is double-speed guitar, performed with the tape recorder running half as fast as for the other parts of the song, and then played back at standard speed. The sound produced by this technique cannot be duplicated in 'real time', since, obviously, it requires the performance to be on tape. The latter type of playing takes place as accompaniment to the guitar solo in 'Purple Haze'. Aledort writes: 'Behind the solo there is a guitar ad libbing mood-altering tremolo bar antics, such as striking the D, G, and B strings simultaneously and depressing and releasing the bar randomly' (1985, p. 14). His decision to not transcribe this part and his description of it as 'mood-altering' (i.e. of interest only to users of psychedelic drugs) and 'random' are attempts to edit it from the song. In fact, Aledort's 1989/1990 transcriptions not only omit this part, but also do not mention his decision to do so. No matter how precisely he represented it, Aledort tacitly argues, no player could duplicate this section of Hendrix's performance.

Tarshis and Aledort's presentation of the score as a text useful without the recording and their and Whiteley's use of notation as an aid to analysis, rather than as a guide to performance, show what I feel is a significant movement in rock pedagogy, from an oral, folk-like model to a written one, which resembles that of European classical music.

Much more work remains to be done on this subject. Not only should someone interview music teachers at length, but there are quite a few artists whose

music, like Hendrix's, has been published in a variety of strange, compromise formats: The Beatles, Steely Dan, Paul Simon, Led Zeppelin, and the Rolling Stones all come to mind, and there are many more. The emergence of the various guitar magazines and of schools offering degrees in popular music performance are also relevant,⁸ and someone, but not I, will need to ask what effect all this has had, and will have, on the oppositional potential of rock.

Endnotes

- 1 This title was inspired by my friend Jeannie Ludlow's dissertation: 'Writing Monahsetah: Native American Poets (and) Writing the Body' (Bowling Green State University, 1992).
- 2 See Walser (1992) for a detailed treatment of the increasing knowledge of music theory among heavy metal guitarists.
- 3 More extensive discussion of postmodernism and recording technology can be found in Goodwin (1990) and Mowitt (1987).
- 4 This version is also included in *Jimi Hendrix: The Forty Greatest*. A slightly more elaborate chart, basically this lead sheet expanded to a piano score, is in *Jimi Hendrix: The Musician's Collection*. This expanded chart has all the faults of the lead sheet and more; the piano arrangement is of the quality one expects to hear from the 'hard rock' programme on a cheap electronic keyboard. The marketing of this shoddy text (to *musicians*, no less) is the latest example of the incredible disrespect and exploitation of Hendrix's legacy. See Shapiro and Glebbeek 1990, pp. 481–98 for more on this.
- 5 I recommend Costello and Wallace (1990, pp. 91–4) on these issues.
- 6 Aledort's transcription of 'Purple Haze' has been published three times. The 1989 and 1990 versions are completely identical, while the 1985 score is slightly less detailed (see bars 7, 9 and 10).
- 7 These slides are on the fourth beat of bars 4, 6, and 8 in Aledort 1985 but only in bars 4 and 8 in his later versions.
- 8 Walser (1992) touches on both of these phenomena but they are not central to his work.

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Endnotes

² **Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Virtuosity**

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⁸ **Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Virtuosity**

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Sheila Whiteley

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