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Rock 'n' Roll Sound Tracks and the Production of Nostalgia

by David R. Shumway

Music plays a central role in the production of nostalgia in the nostalgia film genre. An analysis of some of these films—especially The Graduate, Easy Rider, American Graffiti, and The Big Chill—and their respective music tracks demonstrates that the genre should not be associated with a particular politics.

It is risky business, as Barbara Klinger has warned us, to identify a genre with a politics. Klinger is concerned with a mode of analysis, common to film studies of the 1970s and 1980s, in which genres that deviated formally from Hollywood norms were automatically held to be progressive. She argues that this “critical position seems especially difficult to maintain, logically, in the face of . . . ‘pluralizing’ forces . . . that impinge upon the internal contours and reception/consumption of the genre film.”¹ This warning should be extended to the treatment of innovative genres that are held to be regressive, a salient example of which is the “nostalgia film” as Fredric Jameson has described it.²

This article focuses on a distinctive component of several nostalgia films of the 1970s and 1980s—the rock 'n' roll sound track—in an effort to analyze their ideology. The use of such sound tracks must be understood in the context of the films *The Graduate* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969). These films not only mark the emergence of the rock sound track as a formal feature but also initiate the linking of such music with nostalgia and the generational solidarity that in later films are taken for granted. I will focus on music and the production of nostalgia in three films—*American Graffiti* (1973), *The Big Chill* (1983), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987)—and will briefly discuss *Baby, It's You* (1983) as a film that deals with similar situations unnostalgically. Each of these films uses music and nostalgia to different political ends, but, taken together, they call into question the assigning of any particular politics to the nostalgia film or to nostalgia itself.

To understand the importance of music in the films discussed here, one must begin with Claudia Gorbman's observation that the use of popular music in films has changed the relationship between music and image. This change becomes clear if one simply considers the irony of the title of her book on studio-era film scores, *Unheard Melodies*: unlike the classically inflected scores of yore, rock sound tracks are meant to be heard.³ Whereas the goal of the traditional film score was to cue an emotional response in the viewer without calling attention to itself, recent

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sound tracks, consisting mainly of previously recorded material, are put together on the assumption that the audience will recognize the artist, the song, or, at a minimum, a familiar style. Tie-ins between films and sound track recordings have become so important that producers now routinely hire musical consultants to assemble a collection of songs that not only will make the movie more appealing but will also lead to sales in music stores.

The films to which this trend may be traced, *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider*, both spawned highly successful sound track albums. But these films and the others I will be discussing differ from the run-of-the-mill movie with a popular music sound track. The music in these films is meant to be not merely recognized but often to take the foreground and displace the image as the principal locus of attention. Moreover, the music in these films secures a bond between consumer and product while also arousing a feeling of generational belonging in the audience.

The Graduate. *The Graduate* has been credited with being the first film to use previously recorded popular music in place of an orchestral film score. As is well known, director Mike Nichols asked Paul Simon to write some original songs for the film but in the end decided to use several already recorded songs by Simon and Garfunkel instead. Nichols's use of music is striking in part because of its relative scarcity. Indeed, in the case of "Mrs. Robinson," a song specifically written for the movie that later became a hit, only the chorus and instrumental bridge are heard. Although Dave Grusin is credited with writing the score, *The Graduate* usually has no scoring except when Simon and Garfunkel's songs are heard. This makes their songs all the more significant to the viewer because they constitute almost all of the movie's extradiegetic music.

The Graduate opens to Simon and Garfunkel's earlier hit, "Sounds of Silence," while we watch Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) arrive at the Los Angeles airport. The visuals, although filmically inventive, are intentionally "boring": we see Benjamin on a moving sidewalk as the camera tracks alongside him so that we see only the blank wall moving behind him. In this minimalist visual context, the song claims a greater share of the viewer's attention, and its complex lyrics, while not likely to be comprehended completely, establish the theme of alienation that the narrative will explore. In this instance, the song comments on the narrative. Such commentary is one of the major ways popular songs have been used ever since.

The Graduate also uses popular music in the service of nostalgia. "April Come She Will" and "Scarborough Fair/Canticle" accompany montage sequences, one depicting the relationship between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft), and the other, Benjamin's pursuit of Elaine Robinson (Katherine Ross). Both these songs also comment on the narrative action, but in addition, they serve to create an elegiac mood, a sense of retrospection lacking in the diegesis itself. *The Graduate* is not presented with a voice-over telling us that we will get a glimpse of that narrator's past, but its bildungsroman-like plot strongly implies it. The montage sequences telescope the diegetic time just as our memories select certain experiences for detailed preservation and consign others to be

classified as examples of our larger experience. Although all of *The Graduate* may be understood as Benjamin's recollection, the two sequences focused on here convey the strongest sense of being already complete as we witness them. "April Come She Will" and "Scarborough Fair/Canticle" share the common theme of lost love, a frequent object of nostalgia in Western culture. They are also presented as *folk songs*, distinguished by their simple melodies and sparse accompaniment from "Sounds of Silence" and "Mrs. Robinson," which have rock arrangements. In short, the lyrics and the music of "April Come She Will" and "Scarborough Fair/Canticle" recall past times. In 1967, rock 'n' roll was young enough that it could not readily produce nostalgia.

Easy Rider. By contrast, *Easy Rider*, another important work in the genealogy of the nostalgia film, does not use music to create nostalgia; however, it shares with *The Graduate* not only its use of popular recorded music but its strong sense of generational identity. *The Graduate* carries the theme of generational strife from Benjamin's refusal to play the clown for his parents' guests at the opening party to his cross-swinging rescue of Elaine from the marriage her parents arranged. Simon and Garfunkel's songs encourage the identification of Benjamin with a disaffected generation and discourage our seeing him for the isolated, idiosyncratic individual he might otherwise seem. *Easy Rider* also depicts generational antagonism, but it trades much more strongly than *The Graduate* on pop music as the emblem of youth culture.

The use of recorded music in *Easy Rider* was also seen as a major innovation in popular film, even though Kenneth Anger had used the same approach in his avant-garde classic *Scorpio Rising* (1963).⁴ The music in *Easy Rider* often becomes the focus of attention. For long stretches of the ride east from California to violent death someplace between New Orleans and Florida, *Easy Rider* presents the two motorcyclists riding against the background of a changing landscape and songs that comment on their adventure. The sound-track album was the first multi-artist record of its kind to become a significant sales success. As in *The Graduate*, none of the music here is literally diegetic, but all of it is meant to be heard. Some of the songs, such as "Born to Be Wild," seem almost redundant because their subject matter so closely parallels the narrative and characters. Others, like "The Pusher," ironically undercut the information we get from the images.

The most important effect of the music is not to provide commentary, however, but to foster generational solidarity. The music doesn't distance us from the action but encourages us to identify with the film's protagonists and with "our" generation, whom they are supposed to represent. It is the music we hear on the sound track—more than dress, drugs, or wanderlust—that leads us to identify with Billy (Dennis Hopper) and Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and to define ourselves against various others represented in the film: straights, rednecks, cops, and so forth. As Simon Frith argues, "Rock . . . is about difference and what distinguishes us from people with other tastes. It rests on an ideology of the *peer group* as both the ideal and reality of rock communion."⁵ Music in *Easy Rider* is the central way such communion is represented since the film's plot and images are strongly individual-

ist. Music may be especially well suited to conveying a sense of collectivity. Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler argue that

Music in the cinema is one aspect—in an extreme version—of the general function of music under conditions of industrially controlled cultural consumption. . . . Ordinary listening, as compared to seeing, is “archaic”; it has not kept pace with technological progress. . . . For this reason, acoustical perception preserves comparatively more traits of long bygone, pre-individualistic collectivities than optical perception.⁶

Easy Rider and, indeed, rock in general may trade on this characteristic of music to build a sense of a specific, generational collectivity.

It is important to emphasize that *Easy Rider* is not a simple celebration of the ideal rock communion but a lament for its unreality. That unreality is registered in two events at the end of the film. The first is Wyatt’s assertion that they “blew it,” a reference to the failure of their trip to locate either a spiritual or a material Promised Land. The second is, of course, their murder. The first of these events suggests that the communion is itself illusory: Billy and Wyatt are outlaw individualists whose actions reveal that they are incapable of genuine communal behavior. But even if we give them credit for learning this, their murder implies that such communion is impossible. *Easy Rider* creates a powerful sense of generational solidarity only to undermine and finally destroy whatever utopian possibilities such solidarity might offer. The film leaves us united in our anger and our difference from “them,” but without any hope that our difference can make a difference. Thus, we might see *Easy Rider* as a film about why nostalgia films became necessary. If the rock ‘n’ roll communion could no longer plausibly be located in the present or future, it could be placed in a fictional past.

American Graffiti. It has been asserted that *American Graffiti* (1973) “almost single-handedly invented fifties rock & roll nostalgia.”⁷ Jameson has called it “the inaugural film of [a] new aesthetic discourse,” the “nostalgia film,” or what French critics have called *le mode rétro*, which Jameson has taken to be a prime example of the postmodern effacement of history.⁸ Although I will show that *American Graffiti* does efface history as Jameson claims, my larger argument calls into question the idea of the “nostalgia film” as Jameson defines it.

To understand nostalgia in film, we need to start with the larger meaning of *nostalgia* in the current cultural context. The term is, of course, far too polysemic for its range of meanings to be adequately represented here, but there are two that I want to isolate. The first meaning, which is assumed in many other meanings as the root or authentic sense of the term, is the subjective experience of an emotional state or consciousness of longing for one’s own past. Such personal nostalgia is a very common experience, and it permits the second kind, which I will call commodified nostalgia, to function.

Commodified nostalgia involves the revival by the culture industry of certain fashions and styles of a particular past era. Such revivals have precursors in architectural and other cultural revivals of the nineteenth century and in the various manifestations of antimodernism in early-twentieth-century America.⁹

Commodities were produced and sold during this era to people who wanted to revive long-dead historical epochs such as the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Notice, however, that in this instance nostalgia is used by analogy with the personal experience, since no one living could actually have such experiences.

The twentieth century marks a new stage in the commodification of nostalgia because the eras to be revived had already been defined by representation in the mass media. The existence of widely read newspapers with similar contents, followed by magazines, newsreels, radio, and finally TV, meant that popular fashions and events were much more widely shared experiences. Previously, bits of the recent past lacked sufficient popular identity to receive such treatment. Moreover, the growth of mass media also made commodified nostalgia increasingly available as the century progressed. From Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday* (1931) to the emergence of pop music "standards" in the swing era and the nostalgia films of that period to television of the 1950s with its continuous "revivals" of old movies, an ever-more-recent past came to be packaged nostalgically. The revival of such recent history made it possible that actual nostalgia for personal experience of that time might be called up. Such commodified nostalgia evokes the affect of nostalgia even among those who do not have actual memory of the period being revived.¹⁰

Jameson argues that "nostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation." Jameson's emphasis is on the way such films render the "'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and 1930s-ness or 1950s-ness by the attributes of fashion."¹¹ Although the music in *American Graffiti* certainly fits this description, its role there is not exhausted by it. It is my contention that music is the most important ingredient in the production of the affect of nostalgia or the recollection of such affective experience in the viewer. What leads me to this claim is that "golden oldies" have long been offered to radio listeners precisely as an aid to personal nostalgia. The convention that popular songs call up for us memories of earlier periods in our lives is so powerful that we might be inclined to call oldies the tea-soaked madeleine of the masses. But if hearing an old song on the radio invites us to remember our own past, movies use the same technique to evoke the fiction of a common past. Popular music works because it was and is widely shared, but not necessarily because the audience literally remembers the songs.

In this last case, popular music functions like classical film scores in that what is significant is the style of the music, although the style has a very specific temporal association usually absent from classical film music. *American Graffiti* appealed to an audience that included many too young to have grown up with the music in the film. Thus, the songs need not literally bring the past to life for the viewer but give the impression of such an experience, creating a fictional set of memories that, especially when taken together with other such representations, may actually come to replace the audience's "original" sense of the past. Of course, those who lack any other representation of the period will be all the more likely to assume that the representation in the film is "true."¹²



Figure 1. The high school dance in *American Graffiti* (George Lukas, 1973). Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This process of fictionalizing the past is all the more effective in that what is brought to mind is not unfamiliar, even though the audience never actually lived through it. Some of the songs—for example, “Johnny B. Goode,” “Surfin’ Surferi”—are likely to be recognizable precisely as oldies. Others are used for their association with previous representations of “the fifties.” The group performing at the high school dance opens with “At the Hop,” a song that would be familiar to much of the film’s audience as a result of the popularity of the rendition by the fifties revival band Sha Na Na. The music reminds us repeatedly that we are in the fifties. Costumes, slang, and, perhaps most important, the automobiles also have this effect, but none of these elements evokes a sense of temporal specificity as much as the music. And yet it is only a sense, since the songs on the sound track are not the ones a typical radio station would have played in 1962–63, when *American Graffiti* is set. Instead, we hear a sampling of hits from the years before the Beatles, records that made it on to the *Billboard* Hot 100 between 1955 and 1962. In short, the music we hear is idealized “fifties music,” rather than the music of a particular historical moment.

Nevertheless, the radio serves as the presumed source for most of the music in the film. Even before the first shot of the film is seen, Wolfman Jack announces a song. Thus, it is as if the entire movie takes place with one radio station playing in the background, although we may occasionally move out of range of it or, in the case of the hop, to a place where similar music is playing from a different source. Given the ubiquity of the music and the fact that its volume changes without clear narrative explanation (e.g., the music is always loud when we get an establishing shot of Mel’s Burger World, but the volume then decreases to allow conversation to be foregrounded), we cannot classify the music in *American Graffiti* as straightforwardly diegetic even though the movie wants the viewer to assume its quasi-diegetic origin. Rather, the line between diegetic and nondiegetic is impossible to establish. Music doesn’t come from particular places in the film’s space; it pervades that space.

Its function is not mainly to convey this or that mood or emotion but to constantly keep the viewer located somewhere else, in a time and a place that is gone, lost, but not related historically to the present. Music is the primary means by which an alternative world, "the fifties," is produced for the viewer.

The first song we hear is, appropriately, Bill Haley and the Comets' "Rock around the Clock." This is appropriate not only because it is widely regarded as the first rock 'n' roll song but also because it opens and closes *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), one of the 1950s juvenile delinquency films that constitutes much of the "past" to which *American Graffiti* refers. Virtually all the characters in the film are familiar from movies or television: the j.d. gang, the pharaohs, the hot rodders, the nerd, the head cheerleader, and the class president. Only Richard Dreyfuss's Kurt seems not to have come from some other representation of the era. Thus, not only the music but the entire film is a representation of well-known representations of youth in the 1950s. It is the seamlessness of this system that has allowed *American Graffiti* to be used as a prime example of the postmodern image-society, in which images are supposed to replace any more substantial understanding of past or present. Although this may seem to be an extreme overstatement when applied to an entire period of history, it is an accurate enough account of the way nostalgia works in this particular film. Nostalgia by definition involves the idealization of a lost time or place, but what is lost need not be entirely fictional. In *American Graffiti*, however, an entire "era" has no existence outside the entertainment industry. Thus, *American Graffiti* is fundamentally a conservative film that offered its post-Vietnam, post-1960s audience a glimpse of the America it would rather see, one that has no apparent connection to the war and protests that dominated the news media.¹³

But what of the sense of collectivity that film music has been said to bring to the viewer's perception? *American Graffiti* would seem to bear out Eisler and Adorno's warning that this evocation of the collective is highly prone to ideological misuse.¹⁴ We are invited by the music to imagine a past that is precisely shared, yet such a felt attachment is entirely at odds with the individualism of the narrative. We are presented with what is purportedly a group of teenagers, yet their connection to each other is tenuous and almost random. Moreover, the film's ending, in which we are given brief bios of the main characters, clearly valorizes the career of Kurt, the one who manages to escape. There is no community in *American Graffiti*, but the music makes us forget this.

The success of *American Graffiti* led to several conservative trends in Hollywood filmmaking. But, *pace* Jameson, the use of period setting per se was not one of them. As Mike Davis has demonstrated, *Chinatown* (1974) is a genuinely historical film, however slick its appearance.¹⁵ Rather, *American Graffiti* spawned a series of movies focusing on adolescents, a trend still in evidence today. Moreover, the profits from the film enabled George Lucas to make the *Star Wars* trilogy, three movies about longer ago and farther away, and to redeem war and revivify notions of the "evil empire" in the process. *American Graffiti* also established a new model wherein popular recorded music was used without a clear distinction between diegetic and extradiegetic origin.

The next two films I will discuss follow this model, although neither of them is as insistent on preserving the semblance of diegetic location. Both films also produce nostalgia, but in neither case is it for a completely fictional time and place.

The Big Chill. *The Big Chill* is actually less a nostalgia film than a film about nostalgia.¹⁶ When Chloe (Meg Tilly), the late Alex's youngish girlfriend, observes, "I don't like talking about the past as much as you guys do," she calls our attention to the nostalgia in which the others are constantly engaged. Unlike *American Graffiti*, which seeks to present the fifties as a seamless whole, *The Big Chill* constantly frames and reframes the sixties. The characters offer a variety of metonyms for the period: hope, commitment, political activism, drugs, love, and friendship. Such explicit discussion of the period makes it clear that it is a conflicted representation and thus does not offer us a total immersion into lost time. Yet like *American Graffiti*, *The Big Chill* relies on the music to represent the sixties directly to the audience. Also, as in *American Graffiti*, a selection of hit records is used, spanning a period of roughly six or seven years. Since most of the music in *The Big Chill* makes its way into the diegesis as records Harold (Kevin Kline) chooses to play, it is not explicitly offered as a sample of music of the period. Rather, it is offered as the music the group listened to when they were student radicals. What is strange about this is that the music includes nothing overtly political, not even Bob Dylan, and psychedelic music is excluded entirely. The sound track includes only one British song and features several songs likely to be held in contempt by the anti-Establishment students this group is supposed to represent: Three Dog Night's "Joy to the World" and the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice?" The dominant musical genre might be characterized as mainstream soul, including five records by Motown artists and two by the blue-eyed soul group the Rascals. Thus the music seems not to characterize the protagonists but to evoke the sixties for the film audience in a noncontroversial way.

This use of sixties popular music parallels the general ideological work of *The Big Chill*: the salvaging of the sixties from its radical politics. Exactly what kind of politics the group practiced is never clear, and the only specific incidents mentioned are a few large national demonstrations. Each member of the group is portrayed as some kind of failed reformer (public defender, ghetto teacher, social worker, etc.), but most of them have ended up as materially successful professionals, each trying to "get what he wants," as one character puts it. They should be satisfied with their lives, but Alex's death reminds them that something is missing.

It's worthwhile here to explore in some detail an example of the interrelation of music and image that articulates this theme. At the conclusion of Alex's funeral, it is announced that one of Alex's favorite songs will be played. Karen (Jo Beth Williams) takes a seat at the organ and begins to "play" the opening strains of the Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want." The rendition is unusual in that it opens with a church organ prelude. As a result, in the beginning of the sequence, the music is absolutely diegetic and perfectly appropriate as a funeral *postlude*. Even viewers familiar with the song are not likely to recognize it right away. Thus, they experience the dual pleasure of recognition and of being cleverly misled. The opening shots of this sequence show members of the group having

the same experience of recognition as they sit in the church, almost as if to clue the spectator about how to respond. The song's chorus is also ironically appropriate for the funeral of a suicide victim, since Alex clearly did not get what he wanted, but didn't manage to get what he needed either.

As the music shifts to the R & B-styled song itself, the music becomes nondiegetic (a trope that this film will use many other times), and the images are of the various members of the group leaving the funeral. The song's volume is lowered to allow for dialogue in various automobiles but raised to the foreground during shots that present the movement of the funeral procession as a whole. The song thus serves sonically to bind the members of the group together, to encourage *our* identification with them through the repetition of a record with which we (the baby-boomer audience for which this film was made) are likely to have already identified, and to locate both these connections in the era in which the Stones' song was released. The latter is reinforced by the dialogue and the action, for example, smoking dope. Moreover, the group members' interactions let us know that not only Alex couldn't get what he wanted.

"You Can't Always Get What You Want" underlines the point that *The Big Chill's* characters feel that they have settled for less than they wanted and that something is missing. What is evoked for them by their reunion is not only this emptiness (the big chill?) but the comparative fullness of their former existence together. I take this to be an instance of genuine nostalgia (i.e., a homesickness for something that within the diegesis of the film was real). Much of this nostalgia is nonetheless trivial: the football games, for example, both watched and played. But in this nostalgia there is also a shared utopian moment, the recollection of the group's communal being and identity. This is evoked by a reference to a plan to buy land together and the repeated assertion of the group members' love for each other. More important, the communal vision is reinforced by the events in the film. Given the social fragmentation of our world, even the gathering of so many of this group for a college friend's funeral could be considered utopian. Their staying together for the weekend and their obvious genuine friendship for one another is thus all the more idyllic, especially when we learn that the group has a history of romantic involvements that rival those of the couples in a John Updike novel.

Like *Couples*, *The Big Chill* gives us a picture of an alternative form of community defined in part by its incestuousness and its violation of the rules of monogamy. Ultimately, the film is unwilling to endorse the vision it evokes; Jeff Goldblum's ironic joke that ends the film—"We've taken a vote; we've decided we are never going to leave"—is meant to suggest the impossibility of communal life being sustained for more than a few days, even as it also expresses the desire for such a life. That it would be impossible given who these people have become is, of course, accurate enough, but the film seems to question their individualism in spite of itself. If the music in some way embodies the group's community, it also functions to deny the contradictions that exist between such utopian desires and the reality of alienated life under capitalism. In other words, the music gives us the illusion of a community that the film's narrative, like contemporary social life, cannot sustain.

Dirty Dancing. *Dirty Dancing* was the most recently produced of the nostalgia films, but in its setting and themes it seems to fit between *American Graffiti* and *The Big Chill*. Actually, *Dirty Dancing* is set in 1963, nearly the same year as *American Graffiti*, although you would never know it from the film's visual or aural cues. Where the latter film used mainly hit records from the fifties, *Dirty Dancing* includes more obscure songs that are more genuinely contemporary with the summer in which it was set.¹⁷ *Dirty Dancing* also begins with the radio (in this case, the DJ is Cousin Brucie), and the first several songs we hear are likely to be quite familiar: the Ronettes' "Be My Baby" and the Four Seasons' "Big Girls Don't Cry." In addition to their commentary on the film's story, the education of Frances "Baby" Houseman (Jennifer Grey), the songs' familiarity serves to evoke nostalgia for a specific historical moment. It is the period before the Beatles and the Kennedy assassination, a period of national innocence that parallels Baby's own, when she thought she "would never find a guy as great as [her] dad." The other songs of the same historical moment in which the film is set produce nostalgia, much as those in *American Graffiti* and *The Big Chill* do. However, *Dirty Dancing* also contains songs that were newly composed for the film and that are distinctly anachronistic in style and/or production. These do not produce nostalgia in the same way and in fact might be read as disrupting the nostalgia effect.

Many of the records used in *Dirty Dancing* seem to be in the service of another agenda besides the production of nostalgia. If *American Graffiti* is essentially, if covertly, conservative and *The Big Chill* overtly, if somewhat ambiguously, postradical, *Dirty Dancing* is plainly and simply liberal. It is nostalgic, in fact, for liberalism. Baby is one of *The Big Chill*'s reformers before she went to college. She repeatedly asserts that her father taught her to want to change the world, and the film refers to the incipient war in Vietnam and the fight for civil rights in the South as causes for which Baby shows concern. Such references are often politically meaningless, as they are in *Forrest Gump* (1994), but in *Dirty Dancing* they serve the film's overtly liberal agenda.

Surprisingly, given the Hollywood of the 1980s, *Dirty Dancing*'s central conflict centers on social class. Music is used to help define the working-class world and distinguish it from Baby's middle-class one, and that music is not just rock 'n' roll but rhythm and blues. Johnny (Patrick Swayze) and his friends dance to records by black performers that are unlikely to have been readily familiar to the 1987 audience. For example, the Contours' "Do You Love Me?" and Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs' "Stay" are likely to be remembered if at all from recordings by the Dave Clark Five and the Four Seasons, respectively. Although Otis Redding became a major star by the end of the 1960s, his songs used in the film, "These Arms of Mine" (Redding's first single) and "Love Man," were not big hits. This mild defamiliarization makes the music seem fresh and thus conveys its transgressive character. It is the dancing Baby witnesses that both shocks and attracts her during her first visit to the staff quarters, but the music is the aural equivalent of the dirty dancing she sees. "Do You Love Me?" and "Love Man" are both produced with the raw edge that came to define the sound of Stax/Volt recordings of the early and mid-1960s. These songs recall the rhythm and blues recordings of the early 1950s



Figure 2. Baby (Jennifer Grey) and Johnny (Patrick Swayze) rehearse their mambo steps in *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987). Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York.

that white rock 'n' rollers often covered. The raucous guitars and saxophones, forward-mixed percussion, and shouted or otherwise distorted vocals distinguish these recordings not only from the music adults were listening to but from the songs that dominated the pop charts in the early 1960s. Both the dancing and the music are thus beyond the pale of middle-class propriety.

It is curious that, of the three films under discussion here, *Dirty Dancing* is the only one that in any way evokes the subversive or transgressive experience with which rock 'n' roll was associated. The music in *American Graffiti* is treated as completely naturalized and tame. There is no indication that anyone could find such music shocking or objectionable. Thus, the film's opening homage to *Blackboard Jungle* seems unintentionally ironic; whereas "Rock around the Clock" had been accused of inciting riots among some audiences of that 1955 film, here it serves merely to remind us that we are in that quaint and innocent time called the fifties. I have already noted the absence of protest music and psychedelic experimentation in *The Big Chill*. *Dirty Dancing* portrays the R & B records played by its working-class characters as sexually liberating and as transgressive of the aesthetic and moral norms of the middle-class adult culture of the Catskills resort. Whether or not we want to accept that such music was subversive in any serious way, it is important to recognize that it was felt to be so. To fail to recognize this is once again to deny the reality of cultural conflict. *Dirty Dancing* does more than recognize the cultural conflict over rock 'n' roll, however: it reinterprets it. Although other nostalgia films deal with the ideology of the same generation, rock 'n' roll in *Dirty Dancing* is mainly a marker of socioeconomic class. The film does not deny generational solidarity so much as it gives it a new, class-associated meaning.

The plot of *Dirty Dancing* is in several respects typical of older Hollywood cross-class romances, with one significant difference: *Dirty Dancing* is told from the woman's point of view. If we accept Susan Douglas's argument—that early 1960s girl-group music helped teenaged girls of that period value and accept their

own sexuality—we can understand such songs as early instances of enunciation from such a point of view.¹⁸ In the Shirelles' song "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" for example, the singer wants to know whether her boyfriend will still love her after she has sex with him. The film presents a negative example of this sort of adolescent conflict in Robbie (Max Cantor), a Harvard-educated Lothario who impregnates and abandons a woman. The girl-group music in *Dirty Dancing* reinforces the identification of the spectator with Baby, and it contributes to our sense that the story is one *she* is telling. Although *Dirty Dancing* was directed by a man, Emile Ardolino, one suspects that authorship of the film belongs with writer and coproducer Eleanor Bergstein and producer Linda Gottlieb. These women may be responsible for the film's progressive stance on a number of issues.

Baby is portrayed not only as attracted to a working-class man but willing to risk her reputation to help him. Early in the film, Baby overhears the owner of the resort lecturing his staff about their relations with the guests. The waiters, who have been recruited from Ivy League colleges, are encouraged to "romance" the girls. The working-class entertainers, however, are instructed to stay away from the girls, and they are clearly treated as undesirables. Cross-class romance is thus specifically prohibited. Baby's motives for violating this rule are at first curiosity and later romantic interest in Johnny, but as a result she learns a political lesson about the injustice of class divisions. The film makes the ideological conflict crystal clear when Robbie tells Baby that some people count and others do not and hands her an Ayn Rand novel. That position clearly loses out, when even Baby's father admits that he misjudged Johnny. However, the resolution of the characters' diegetic conflicts may also leave the viewer with the illusion that such conflicts can be easily resolved off screen as well.

Dirty Dancing literally avoids Hollywood's usual happy-ever-after ending by framing Baby and Johnny's romance as a summer fling, but this also contributes to the film's nostalgia. Since the story is explicitly told as a recollection, we are encouraged to feel the loss not only of innocence but of a particular time and place. The resolution conveys the same message as in *The Big Chill*: values such as social justice are an illusion of innocent youth. This nostalgia effect exists in contradiction to the message of the narrative itself, that individual commitment can make a difference. Although the latter message is less radical than the communal vision of *The Big Chill*, *Dirty Dancing* conveys a sense of political possibility at this level that the other film works to deny.

To the extent that nostalgia is a product of historical re-creation, that produced by *Dirty Dancing* is limited compared with that produced by *American Graffiti*. *Dirty Dancing* is much less concerned with displaying the appropriate styles, so that it lacks the high-gloss surface Jameson criticized. The use of music is more in keeping with its role in classical Hollywood cinema. There is no diegetic excuse for many of the songs that are used. The film has traditional scoring that accompanies many scenes without recorded music. More important, *Dirty Dancing* almost certainly needs to be understood as a variation on an old Hollywood genre, the backstage musical. Although narrative realism is never violated by unmotivated singing, the film incorporates several production numbers that at the

very least reach the limit of such realism. That these performances are accompanied by newly composed songs may be seen to heighten their unreality. In this move, *Dirty Dancing* seems to break its own carefully constructed frame, to move from the “reality” of another time to become an explicit movie fantasy.

The film’s concluding production number embodies these contradictions of style and meaning. The scene opens with Johnny returning to the resort after having been thrown out. He announces that, as originally planned, he will conclude the talent show already in progress, and he invites Baby to perform the dance they did earlier at another hotel. Baby and Johnny dance to “The Time of My Life,” a new song but one sung by former Righteous Brother Bill Medley. The song’s production is recognizably 1980s, but the track as a whole is reminiscent of 1960s hits Phil Spector produced for the Righteous Brothers, such as “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling” or “River Deep, Mountain High.” Both the dancing and the song are triumphant and seem designed to make us forget the very temporality that the film earlier insisted upon, giving viewers in effect the classic Hollywood ending—including the final embrace. This exultant fantasy gives the film a powerful note of hope that its historical framing should have prohibited. In other words, the Hollywood ending here could be read not as an ideological diversion but as progressive in that it leaves viewers with a feeling of political possibility.

Baby, It’s You. Whether *Dirty Dancing*’s excursions beyond realism further derealize the film’s ideology or position the audience to question the nostalgic framing of such politics remains an open question. However, it is worth considering another film about 1960s youth culture that strives for a different kind of realism than any of the films discussed so far. Although set in 1967, *Baby, It’s You* (1983) is not a nostalgia film in Jameson’s sense.¹⁹ The period that writer/director John Sayles depicts is one for which we are encouraged to feel only the most ambivalent longing. Rather than depicting “the time of one’s life,” *Baby, It’s You* tells the story of a difficult—and ultimately impossible—cross-class romance, portrayed as exciting and dangerous but predominantly unhappy. Whereas the other films are more or less relentlessly pretty to look at (*The Big Chill* even makes dressing a corpse look pretty), the urban New Jersey landscapes and interiors in *Baby, It’s You*, as well as its very cinematography, are gritty. Yet in spite of its depiction of mundane social space and its frank acknowledgment of class oppression, the film offers little hope regarding its working-class hero’s future. *Baby, It’s You* seems not only less hopeful but also less critical and less political than *Dirty Dancing* because it fails to treat class conflict in any terms except as a barrier to romance.

The music in *Baby, It’s You* is less significant than it is in the other three films, but at first it seems to be used to reach similar ends. Like *Dirty Dancing*, *Baby, It’s You* uses a good bit of girl-group music and perhaps for the same reason: it is also mainly the story of a young woman, Jill (Rosanna Arquette). But in *Baby, It’s You* popular records often function more like classic film scores, serving to augment the emotional character of the scenes. This may explain why the film can get away with using anachronistic Bruce Springsteen recordings from the 1970s. Moreover, the other films portray a unified musical field, whereas Sayles uses music to reveal

two cultural conflicts. One becomes apparent in the hero's obsession with Frank Sinatra, which renders impossible the sense of generational solidarity cultivated in the other films. Having a rock band play "Strangers in the Night" in the film's concluding scene drives this point home.

The second conflict is expressed by the changes in the music as the decade matures and the heroine moves from her New Jersey high school to Sarah Lawrence College. Although the earlier music would fit perfectly into the other three films, the later music includes songs such as Al Kooper's "(First I Heard Her Say) Wake Me Shake Me" and the Velvet Underground's "Venus in Furs." These musical ruptures interfere with any nostalgia effect that *Baby, It's You* might produce. Yet even though the film's look and its sound prohibit nostalgia, it fails to convey any sense of political possibility. It ultimately seems to be another bildungsroman, like *American Graffiti*—the story of one who escapes, a portrait of an artist as a young girl.

Conclusion. What should be clear, from the discussion of these several uses of nostalgia, is that the "nostalgia film" as Fredric Jameson describes it exists only as one variant of the commodification of nostalgia. If Jameson got *American Graffiti* right, he grossly overestimated it as the embodiment of a trend in filmmaking and, more important, of a new consciousness. As my allusions to modernist texts may have suggested, neither nostalgia nor the other formal characteristics of these films are distinctly postmodern. In spite of their differences, however, the films have several characteristics in common. Each film represents youth by means of the recorded music used on its sound track, and in these films (and in our culture generally), youth is the privileged site of nostalgia. Three of the four films choose the same moment of youth—the end of high school/beginning of college—as their focal point. Although this moment has all kinds of hoary cultural resonances, the key one for these films is as a last moment of freedom from the responsibilities of adulthood. The protagonists "grow up" in one way or another. In this light, we might read *The Big Chill* as a film about people who didn't grow up until much later, their college years thus representing the same kind of innocence that high school represents in the other movies. Each of these films also depicts youth as a period of sexual initiation and experimentation. Doubtless much of the appeal of nostalgia for one's youth is rooted in the memory of adolescent sexuality. Nostalgia is important here because such memories are often of terribly painful and threatening experiences.

Proust said that when he actually lived his life it was troubled by feelings of fatigue, sadness, and anxiety, feelings that are absent from his artistic re-creation of his life.²⁰ The combination of music and narrative in *American Graffiti*, *The Big Chill*, and *Dirty Dancing* may allow such pleasurable rewriting to occur in the minds of spectators. The conflicts presented both musically and narratively in *Baby, It's You*, by contrast, may prohibit such nostalgic rewriting.

These considerations lead one to question the possibility of assigning anything more than highly local or narrowly temporal validity to the association of particular generic or formal features with specific political agendas. All politics must move among different temporal settings—past, present, and future—and must present

not only a creditable sense of reality but a hopeful vision of the future. It is as untenable to claim that nostalgia is always conservative or reactionary as it is to assert that a more distanced or critical representation of history is always progressive.

Notes

I want to thank Frances Bartkowski for conversations about *Dirty Dancing* and Paul Gripp, Valerie Krips, and *CJ*'s two anonymous readers for their helpful comments and suggestions. The usual disclaimers apply.

1. Barbara Klinger, "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited: The Progressive Genre," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (1984): 89.
2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), xvii, 18–19.
3. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 162.
4. R. Serge Denisoff and William D. Romanowski, *Risky Business: Rock in Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Press, 1991), 168–69, call *Scorpio Rising* "the first dramatic film to incorporate rock music." They cite *Scorpio Rising* and *The Graduate* as precursors of *Easy Rider*'s "use of rock music as an artistic statement complementing plot and visual images."
5. Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 213.
6. Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (London: Athlone, 1994 [1947]), 20–21.
7. David Erhinstein and Bill Reed, quoted in Frith, *Music for Pleasure*, 207.
8. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xvii, 18–19.
9. David Lowenthal, "Nostalgia Tells It Like It Wasn't," in Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw, eds., *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 20–21; Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).
10. There is another sense of *nostalgia*: its use as a pejorative judgment on any recollection of the past. By calling references to the past nostalgic, the motives for such references are impugned, usually in favor of (an often unstated) assumption of historical progress. This point is significant because I want to insist that nostalgia is a particular attitude toward or construction of the past, and not all representation of the past or its artifacts is nostalgic.
11. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.
12. Lynn Spigel, "From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women's Memories and Television Reruns," *Screen* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 23–30, notes that television reruns came to represent the past for many of her students.
13. Thus, I am in agreement with Colin McCabe's assertion in "Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure," *Screen* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1976): 21, that *American Graffiti* avoids "a specific set of contradictions—those raised by the impact of the Vietnam War on American society," but I disagree with McCabe's larger analysis that such avoidance of contradiction is the result of the realism it shares with most other Hollywood films. What distinguishes *American Graffiti* is the particular means by which it renders the past as an experience of nostalgia.
14. Adorno and Eisler, *Composing for the Films*, 21.

15. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990), esp. 21, 44, and chap. 1, "Sunshine or Noir."
16. Interestingly, director and cowriter Lawrence Kasdan's first feature, *Body Heat* (1981), is cited by Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 20, as an instance of reverse nostalgia, the "colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode," because the film depends on our awareness of its film precursors, such as *Double Indemnity*. See also Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 112.
17. This principle of selection was not used rigorously, however. Otis Redding's "Love Man," for example, is from the late 1960s. But because these anachronistic songs are unfamiliar, they seem less designed to contribute to the representation of a fictional time than to represent a distinct style defined against the popular music on the radio.
18. Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 83–98.
19. It is worth noting, however, that John Sayles's first film, *The Return of the Secaucus 7* (1980), is often cited as the most significant precursor of *The Big Chill*. Although *The Return of the Secaucus 7* is almost a home movie and anything but slick or glossy, it does establish Sayles's general interest in nostalgia.
20. Milton D. Miller, *Nostalgia: A Psychoanalytic Study of Marcel Proust* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 106.