

Be Sharp: The Simpsons & Music

Durrell Bowman, Ph.D. in Musicology (UCLA, 2003)

Book Proposal, Oxford University Press

The Book

1. Brief Description

This book interprets and contextualizes music from within the long-running, animated television comedy *The Simpsons* (1989-). The show includes a vastly wider range of music than any other TV show in history, but I have conceived of this book to encourage my readers to engage not only with music from within many of the show's more than 400 episodes, but also with other writings, TV shows, movies, and music. My approach is broadly comparative, contextual, and culturally theoretical, rather than narrowly technical and text-oriented. David Arnold argues that on *The Simpsons*, television itself is the "central defining element of culture,"¹ and Jonathan Gray similarly suggests: "For sheer density and frequency of jokes, nothing on *The Simpsons* receives as much parody and ridicule as the sitcom [situation comedy] and its surrounding apparatus."² If so, why would the show possibly need to have so much music?

In 2008, medical researchers at UCLA and the Weizmann Institute of Science published in *Science* an article identifying a "Simpsons' brain cell" or, more properly, the fact that an area of the hippocampus having to do with memory is strongly stimulated when research subjects watched and/or recalled specific clips of *The Simpsons*. UCLA neurosurgery researcher Itzhak Fried explains:

Given the vast range of experiences we are exposed to ... each brain cell probably responds to more than one clip, though the rules that select which ones it responds to are not understood. ... It is highly speculative to conclude that it is a "comedy cell," and even if it were it is just one cell in this study of many cells.³

¹ David L. G. Arnold, "'Use a Pen, Sideshow Bob': The Simpsons and the Threat of High Culture," in *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, John Alberti, editor (Detroit: Wayne State U. Press, 2004), 21.

² Jonathan Gray, *Watching with 'The Simpsons': Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 57.

³ Quoted in Roger Highfield, "'Comedy brain cell' that responds to humour found," *The Telegraph*, 5 Sept. 2008.

In this book, I focus specifically on music from among the “vast range of experiences” by which The Simpsons can be contextualized and through which the “Simpsons’ brain cell” makes at least some of its “selection rules.” My title, “Be Sharp,” refers partly to the 1993 episode “Homer’s Barbershop Quartet,” but it also suggests the show’s function in exercising musical/cultural capital (such as referential, intertextual “sharpness”) and satire (“sharp,” often subversive, humour) through parody-homage (Chapter 1), characterization (Chapter 2), defying expectations of cultural hierarchy and socioeconomic class (Chapter 3), and sexuality, religion, and otherness (Chapter 4).

2. Outline

Introduction: Listen to the Music...He’s Evil!

- Why This Book?
- Simpsons’ Music, Briefly
- Context and Paratext
- Theory, not Theory

Be Sharp: ‘The Simpsons’ & Music begins with an Introduction that establishes the book’s “reason for being” in bringing historical, genre, stylistic, reception, and ideological interpretations and contextualizations of specific music into dialogue with critical theory, cultural studies, media studies, and popular music studies. The show’s music is not highbrow, lowbrow, or middle-brow, but “no-brow,”⁴ and its creators, characters, and audience members often consume music as “cultural omnivores.”⁵ In addition, the show rarely implies that some music is “better” than other music, and, in fact, it often even erases the idea that music must be either “good” or “bad.” As initial examples of the show’s music, I briefly discuss a few songs and music-heavy episodes. In addition, I introduce the show’s wider context of other “adult cartoons” (especially of the 1960s and the 1990s/2000s), as well as the “paratext” of its origins, music-related spin-offs, and high availability. Other aspects of the Introduction appear in the “Brief Description,” “Outstanding Features,” and “Competition” sections of this proposal.

⁴ See Peter Swirski, *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2005).

⁵ See Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore,” *American Sociological Review*, 61.5 (Oct. 1996), 900-90. Peterson coined the term “cultural omnivore” in 1992.

Chapter 1: Do the Message—Music and Parody-Homage (49 pages, included with this proposal)

- “Homer’s Barbershop Quartet” – Barbershop Music, the Beatles, Other Music
- Intertextuality and Postmodernism
- Fox’s “Fool” and Navigating Music
- What Types of Music?
- Reviving Cartoon Music (and other music from 1959 to 1985)
- End-Title Variations
- Text-Only Music-Title Parodies
- Music (Sub-)Genre Literacy
- That’s My Name! (Well ... not really.): Celebrity Musician Self-Parodies
- Ringo, George, Paul, and John
- Which Musicians?
- Multi-Guest-Musician Episodes
- Other Guest Musicians
- Young Adults, Music & the Internet

Chapter 1 deals with ideas concerning intertextuality, postmodernism, and parody, including concepts related to Michel Foucault’s ideas about the “as and when” of temporal dispersions working within a complex field of discourse.⁶ Also relevant are Linda Hutcheon’s ideas about postmodernism’s “complicitous critique” and the ideological agency of postmodern parody.⁷ Jonathan Gray’s surprisingly music-free idea of *The Simpsons* being a TV version of a “court fool” also inspires aspects of this discussion,⁸ including my specific examples of the show’s complex musical-cultural navigation working precisely to chip away at authority while also risking an escape of the rebellion that the fool might otherwise contain.

Chapter 1 includes an overview of *The Simpsons*’ various relevant music genres and of the show’s numerous strategies for including music. Danny Elfman’s theme recalls his earlier “cartoon-inspired” music with the rock band Oingo Boingo. However, the show’s end-titles variations of that theme have made it possible for composer Alf Clausen, its writers, and certain guest musicians to use that almost too-familiar piece of music in new and creative ways that are completely consistent with their approaches to parodying other familiar music from earlier cartoons, movies, and TV shows. In addition, the show’s frequent use of text-only song-title parodies recalls Carl Stalling’s use

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1972, orig. 1969), 25-26, 28, 31.

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 13, 6, 89-113.

⁸ Jonathan Gray, *Watching with ‘The Simpsons’: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.

of song-title-related instrumental quotations in classic Hollywood cartoons, and the range of music thus suggested is remarkably similar to the show's variety of celebrity guest musicians and the assortment of music now available on the internet.

Chapter 2: Why Birds Suddenly Appear—Characterizations

- Logarithmic History
- How to Characterize
- Homer: "All Nite and E-ve-ry Day"
- Marge: "Like the Archies and the Banana Splits"
- Bart: "Bad to the Bone"
- Lisa: "When the Jazzman's Testifyin'"
- Maggie (baby) Simpson, plus the Extended Simpson Family
- Other Regular and Recurring Characters
- Inadvertent and Unlikely Characterizations

The most important concept in Chapter 2 concerns what I call "logarithmic history."

I mean by this The Simpsons' approach of freezing the "temporal dispersions" of its music references within mathematically-convoluted time periods in order to make more palatable the fact that the show's characters have been frozen in age for twenty years. Also important is the idea that a character can be associated with certain music inadvertently (such as when a song is heard only by the show's viewers) or with music that would otherwise (i.e., in the "real world") be quite unlikely to characterize such a person, such as Bart's knowledge of 1878 -1944 musical theatre songs and 1955-78 pop, soul, and country music songs. I demonstrate the effectiveness of addressing music-related issues in order to contribute to discussions of topics found in other books about The Simpsons and include an explanation of the five possible "qualities of use" in musically characterizing any specific character, from very brief utterances to elaborate production numbers.

Homer Simpson's music focuses on his happy-go-lucky, day-dreamer personality, such as when he sings a parody of Frank Sinatra's moody, 1965 hit ballad "It was a Very Good Year," but with modified lyrics about listening to Queen suggesting the mid- to late-1970s (and his frequent enthusiasm for other 1970s' rock, such as KISS) instead of a much earlier decade of the 20th century.

Marge's music typically inscribes her idealistic and somewhat naïve personality, such as in her multiple associations with the romantic, 1970 Carpenters' pop hit "(They Long to Be) Close to You" and her enthusiasm for such 1960s'-70s' pop crooners as Tom Jones and Bobby Sherman. Bart's music often helps to characterize the hell-raiser and/or pseudo-hipster sides of his personality, such as the parody of On the Town's frantic, World War II era, musical-theatre song "New York, New York" as "Springfield, Springfield" and his occasional interest in playing the guitar or drums. Lisa, a left-leaning budding intellectual, plays the saxophone and favours the dissemination of jazz and blues influences, such as in her spirited performance of Carole King's jazz-influenced 1974 pop song "Jazzman," accompanied by her African-American, sax-playing mentor, Bleeding Gums Murphy.

Chapter 3: Sax-a-mo-phone—Erasing Brows and Classes (32 pages, included with this proposal)

- The "Upper/Lower/Middle" Class
- Canon Fodder—Orchestral Music and Its Discontents
- "Unreasonable" Genre Juxtapositions and Chronologies
- The Vacuum(ing) of Opera
- Critical Theorists—A New Common Institution
- Discriminate Independently, Already!
- Sideshow Bob, Nancy Sinatra, and "Legitimate Thee-á-tur"
- "Making It Up as They Go Along:" Jazz
- Cartoons vs. Lampoons
- The Simpsons Movie
- Johann Sebastian and Alf

In Chapter 3, I suggest that music in *The Simpsons* often works to deflate the idea of "art music" functioning any more meaningfully in society than any other type of music. Inspired by ideas by Lawrence Levine and Raymond Williams, this chapter proposes that the show argues for—and provides—a non-hierarchical, rich, shared public culture and a new common institution. Elements of specific episodes and characters call into question the idea that particular socio-economic class divisions would—or should—unproblematically coalesce with particular categories of music. Discussions of an orchestral pops concert, a ballet held in a school gymnasium, and a parody of Mozart's life indicate the show's view that such things need to be satirized as merely eccentric,

occasional, and momentary aberrations from real life. Daniel Goldmark's work on aspects of cultural hierarchy in classic Hollywood cartoons of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s also provides useful inspiration.⁹

Chapter 3 includes discussions of how the show uses or parodies orchestral music from the “art music” and film music traditions, as well as opera, jazz, and the “fake musicals” that it sometimes derives from earlier plays or films. Supported by ideas from Lawrence Levine, Michel Foucault, and Linda Hutcheon, I also consider the possibilities of popularity not preventing cultural value and of the interpretive importance of historical discontinuities and intertexts. The show's recurring character Sideshow Bob exhibits one of its most prominent examples of the fakery of highbrow pretensions. I also discuss the show's predominant approach of “lamprooning,” including examples from 2007's *The Simpsons Movie*. I conclude by briefly considering the similarities between the pre-Romantic patronage system for “art music” and the late-capitalist system for TV music.

Chapter 4: Springy Edens—Sexuality, Religion, and Otherness

- Sex in Church?
- “Everybody Dance Now:” Camp and (Gay) Sexuality
- “We Used to Make Out to This Hymn:” Church Camp
- “Cuddly” Flanders' Music, plus Reverend Lovejoy
- Homer and Marge: “Natural Born Kissers”
- “Your Wife Don't Understand You:” Other Characters
- Springy Goodness and “Cosmosexuality”
- Music in and from “America Junior” and Elsewhere
- “O mein Papa:” Krusty the Clown and (Mostly Secular) Judaism
- “There are over 700 Million of Us:” Apu and Hinduism

In Chapter 4, I turn to musical aspects of cultural areas that *The Simpsons* treats—often stereotypically—as further aberrations from everyday life: sexuality, religion, and otherness. The show often intersects these areas, and I use the concept of music-related “camp” to explore how this is possible in relation to an episode concerning Homer's homophobia and another episode's rock-related, “church music” prank instigated by Bart. By comparison, Ned Flanders and (to a lesser

⁹ Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

extent) Reverend Lovejoy exemplify enthusiasm for such “traditional” church music as 19th-century evangelical hymns. A discussion of the role of music within Homer and Marge’s usual marital relationship is countered by the equally-significant participation of “campy” music within moments of temptation involving other characters. In addition, the concept of camp helps to explain the show’s elaborate brothel-supporting song (“We Put the Spring in Springfield”) and its recurring, pop-culture-obsessed, “cosmosexual” aliens (Kang and Kodos).

Chapter 4 also covers The Simpsons’ use of music in helping to represent places other than the United States, such as Canada (which Homer refers to as “America Junior”), Australia, England, Japan, China, Brazil, Africa, and the North American arctic. Musical representations of “otherness away from home,” such as 1981’s SCTV-spinoff song “Take Off (to the Great White North)” for Canada and 1944’s Carmen Miranda-inspired “Chiquita Banana Song” for Brazil, inscribe some of the show’s more potentially controversial uses of music in support of stereotypes. However, the show actually treats nearly all types of music (including American, British, and “art music”) in this same way. Similarly, the show’s treatment of “otherness at home” occasionally involves “secular humanist” musical representations of Judaism (usually involving Krusty the Clown, such as his performance for his estranged father of “O mein Papa”) or of Hinduism (usually involving convenience store clerk Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, such as a Hindustani wedding-band version of “Close to You”).

Coda: You Can’t Believe Everything You Hear!

In the Coda, I summarize and further contextualize not only my arguments about the central position of music within The Simpsons, but also the ways in which the show’s music exemplifies a number of concepts relevant to critical theory, cultural studies, musicology, and the history of ideas.

3. Outstanding Features

Be Sharp: 'The Simpsons' and Music engages with a number of issues that are usually encountered across potentially-arcane writings within the history of ideas or within widely-strung (and, often, ideologically-incompatible) accountings of the history of music. I thematically explore ideas such as intertextuality and parody, characterization, cultural hierarchy, and “otherness” by focusing on how an unusual—but highly accessible—cultural entity uses music from within nearly every available sub-genre to help elucidate such themes and how that music and those subject areas engage with ideas that are not usually explored in relation to music. Moreover, I do this without being inordinately technical regarding either critical theory or music theory.

Most critical, cultural, and media scholars avoid discussions of music, possibly because childhood piano lessons erroneously gave them the impression that “knowledge” of music must necessarily begin and end within a specialized “language” involving pitches, harmonies, and forms. In fact, an utterance (often a very brief gesture) of melodic contour, tone colour, texture, rhythm, lyrics, image, genre, and/or style often proves far more useful than any number of notes, chords, or structures in producing music-related meaning and knowledge. In this book, I offer my dialogic- and discourse-oriented discussions as yet another way to show that musicology should be about something other than reinforcing a few small things about so-called “art music.”

4. Competition

There are no existing books about music in *The Simpsons*, but *Be Sharp: 'The Simpsons' and Music* is meant to add to, engage with, and chronologically update Daniel Goldmark's work on Hollywood cartoon music of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s: *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). *The Simpsons'* approach to music derives largely from its writers' backgrounds in parody in the 1970s and '80s and the simultaneous

experiences of its composer, Alf Clausen (b. 1941), as the music director of TV variety shows (such as *The Donny & Marie Show*), as a Hollywood film score orchestrator, and as the composer for the sitcoms *Moonlighting* and *Alf*. This recalls Goldmark's discussion of Carl Stalling's (1891-1972) experience in accompanying silent films leading to his "postmodern" instrumental title-allusions to songs from various decades within each of his cartoon scores.¹⁰ It also recalls Scott Bradley's (1891-1977) interest in contemporary concert music (such as Copland, Britten, Prokofiev, and Schoenberg) leading to his "perfect job" as the composer of the experimentation-friendly, reaction-oriented, and virtually dialogue-free *Tom and Jerry* cartoons.¹¹ Nearly all of the writers of *The Simpsons* were born between 1950 and 1963, so they often make references to songs and other music from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, and Clausen is just enough older than them to be able to bring to the table a well-seasoned experience both of that music and of Stalling/Bradley-inspired instrumental scoring. The main difference from Warner Bros. and MGM in 1950 to *The Simpsons* in 1990, 2000, or 2010 is that Clausen, like his film composing colleagues, does not add most of his contributions until after an episode has otherwise been completed. The collaborative exceptions to this, however, stand out.

Since 2001, a number of academic books have been published about *The Simpsons*, but these have not included any substantive discussion of music. *'The Simpsons' and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001, edited by William Irwin, Mark T. Conrad, and Aeon J. Skoble) includes Deborah Knight's "Popular Parody: *The Simpsons* Meets the Crime Film" and Carl Matheson's "The Simpsons, Hyper-Irony, and the Meaning of Life," both of which usefully revolve around issues of some of the show's specific cultural forms. Mark I. Pinsky's *The Gospel According to "The Simpsons": The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) includes cursory discussion of some of the show's uses of religious music. *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University

¹⁰ See Goldmark, 21-23, 43.

¹¹ See Goldmark, 49, 57, 61-62, 67.

Press, 2004, edited by John Alberti) includes David L. G. Arnold's "Use a Pen, Sideshow Bob: The Simpsons and the Threat of High Culture," but some of his ideas (not really addressing music) contradict my own viewpoint on the show's use of music. Similarly, Jonathan Gray's *Watching with 'The Simpsons': Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006) engages with some of the same critical theories with which I engage, but he focuses on such topics as sitcoms, news media, and fan interviews. *The Cartoon Music Book* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2002, edited by Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor), includes Will Friedwald's brief introduction to the music of *The Simpsons*, as well as Goldmark's quite useful interview with *Simpsons'* composer Alf Clausen.

5. Apparatus

For contextual and comparative purposes, *Be Sharp* will include up to 36 still images, ten musical examples, ten text-based/multi-columns tables, and 180 footnotes. In the case of musical examples, a single line comprising several measures suffices in every instance. The only "charts" appear in the form of text-based tables (some of which include lyrics), and there are otherwise no graphs or diagrams. With the completion of Chapter 2 (45 pages), Chapter 4 (48 pages), and the Coda (twelve pages), plus a Preface (eight pages), a Bibliography (twenty pages), an Index (twenty pages), and likely additions and updates to the sections already completed, the manuscript's total length will be around 270 pages (or 81,000 words).

Market Considerations

Be Sharp: 'The Simpsons' and Music will appeal not only to Simpsons' scholars, but also to the show's culturally-attuned fans, and—predominantly—to other “cultural citizens” (including teachers) and scholars, such as those in cultural studies, media studies, American studies, popular music studies, and (I'd like to hope) musicology, ethnomusicology, film music studies, and music theory. These disciplines and sub-disciplines all have specific academic societies, with regular local, national, and/or international meetings, as well as journals, newsletters, and websites. Even just among music sub-disciplines, such societies include:

- the American Musicological Society (AMS)
- the Society for American Music (SAM)
- the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM)
- the Society for Music Theory (SMT)
- the College Music Society (CMS)
- the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM)
- the Film Music Society (FMS)
- the Canadian University Music Society (CUMS)
- the Royal Musical Association (RMA)

I am a member of AMS, SAM, IASPM, and CUMS and have presented conference papers and/or written reviews or articles for all four of them.

In order to reach fans of The Simpsons, books and articles related to the show can be listed and described (and sometimes excerpted) at “The Simpsons Archive:” <http://www.snpp.com>. Also, a number of universities and colleges have offered courses based around philosophical, sociological, and other issues in The Simpsons.¹² As for me, I hope to have the opportunity before too long of designing a university music history course based around my book.

¹² University courses based around The Simpsons include the University of California, Berkeley's “The Simpsons and Philosophy,” Tufts University's “The Simpsons and Society,” and the University of Fraser Valley's “The Simpsons as Sociology.” Siena Heights University has also offered “Animated Philosophy and Religion,” and San Jose State University has offered “The Simpsons as Social Science.”

Status of the Work

Be Sharp: 'The Simpsons' and Music is 50% complete. I first presented a relevant conference paper ("Logarithmic History and the Music of The Simpsons") for the 2006 annual meeting of the US chapter of IASPM, and I have been able to spend a lot of time researching and writing the book since July of 2008. I also just submitted a related new conference paper proposal ("Intertextual Music and Discursive Parody in The Simpsons") for June 2009's Echo Conference on Music and Humor, and by March 1st I will submit a related journal article as a proposal for the special, music-related issues of *Animation Journal* (October 2009) and/or *Interdisciplinary Humanities* (Fall 2009).

Sample Chapters (enclosed)

- Chapter 1: Do the Message—Music and Parody-Homage (34 pages)
- Chapter 3: Sax-a-mo-phone—Erasing Brows and Classes (28 pages)

Reviews

In my cover letter, I have included the names and contact information of three reviewers.

Author Background

Please see my Curriculum Vitae (enclosed) and my website: <http://durrellbowman.com>.