

“When Words are Not Enough: Aural Tropes and Compositional Techniques in Popular Music Dealing With Mental Health

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Genesis Examples:

“21st Century Schizoid Man” Section A Rhythmic Dissonance:

The image displays musical notation for the 'Section A Rhythmic Theme' of '21st Century Schizoid Man'. It features four staves: a vocal line, a drum line, and two guitar parts (RT and P/F). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 60 and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line consists of a sequence of notes: a quarter note, a dotted quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, a dotted quarter note, and a quarter note. The drum line shows a consistent pattern of eighth notes. The guitar parts (RT and P/F) feature complex rhythmic patterns with sixteenth notes, including triplets and sextuplets, and are marked with '2' and '4' respectively.

“God Only Knows” Lyric Sample:

*“If you should ever leave me
Though life would still go on, believe me
The world could show nothing to me
So what good would living do me
God only knows what I'd be without you”*

Music Box Motif Lyrical Samples:

“Mad Hatter” Pre-Chorus Sample:

*“Now I'm peeling the skin off my face
Cause I really hate being safe
The normals, they make me afraid
The crazies, they make me feel sane”*

Metrical/Rhythmic Dissonance Examples from “Constant Motion:”

Section A Metrical Progression: [$\frac{7}{8}$ - $\frac{3}{8}$ - $\frac{7}{8}$ - $\frac{5}{8}$] [$\frac{7}{8}$ - $\frac{3}{8}$ - $\frac{7}{8}$ - $\frac{5}{8}$ - $\frac{3}{8}$] [$\frac{7}{8}$ - $\frac{3}{8}$ - $\frac{7}{8}$ - $\frac{5}{8}$] [$\frac{7}{8}$ - $\frac{3}{8}$ - $\frac{7}{8}$ - $\frac{5}{8}$ - $\frac{5}{8}$]
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From the beginning of “Constant Motion,” there are metrical hints of the impending musical chaos. The underlined meters represent variations in a consistent pattern that serve the purpose of preventing the establishment of a completely stable riff.

Solo Section Rhythmic Theme $\text{♩} = 180$

Keyboard Solo Rhythm

2

RO

KR

5

RO

KR

8

RO

KR

♩ = 165

Rhythmic Theme

Solo Rhythm

RT

SR

RT

SR

The first eight bars represents the relatively calm portion of the keyboard solo. Though it certainly is frantic in terms of velocity, the metric delineations are clear. The second eight-bar section shown utilizes duple agogic and pitch-based accents playing against the large-form hypermeter in the background rhythmic theme. This is brief, but represents an irregularity in a work that largely focuses on frantic energy in the vocal line as opposed to the ensemble.

Ethereal/Nightmarish Soundscape Lyrical Samples:

“Hurt” Verse Sample:

“I hurt myself today

To see if I still feel

I focus on the pain

The only thing that’s real”

“Boot Camp” Verse Sample:

“I must obey the rules

I must be tame and cool

No staring at the clouds

I must stay on the ground”

Lyrical Candidness Samples (Trigger Warning:)

“Suicidal Thoughts” Verse Samples:

*“When I die, **** it I wanna go to hell
‘Cause I’m a piece of **** it ain’t hard to ****in’ tell”*

*“I swear to God I want to just slit my wrists and end this bull****
Throw the magnum to my head, threaten to pull ****
And squeeze until the bed’s completely red”*

An earlier example of a commercially-viable artist directly addressing the topic of suicidal ideations. Though these lyrics are mixed in with attempts at posturing (popular for Gangsta Rap in general) that somewhat betray the goal of expressionism, they do represent a level of candor that would not be replicated en masse until the 2010’s.

“I’m Sorry” Verse Samples:

*“Go ahead and call me a coward
And say that I’m not strong, because I’m not like you
Go ahead and call crazy
‘Cause I live in a maze, tell me how about you?” (Suicidal Narrator Viewpoint)*

*“Part of me feels bad for you
A part of me feels like you weak and I’m mad at you
And I don’t mean to be insensitive
But I don’t understand how we couldn’t prevent this ****” (Friend of Victim Viewpoint)*

This is the highest level of candidness displayed by a relevant artist I found thus far. The song itself is split into two sections: one representing the suicidal individual and one representing the grieving friend. Aside from directly discussing suicidal ideations, the inclusion of discussion and commentary on the common irrational thoughts and accusations from friends of the deceased represents territory rarely touched-upon in art discussing suicide.

Recommended Listening for Each Trope/Concept

Music Box

1. “Just a Thought” (2006)- Gnarls Barkley: 2:36- 3:42
2. “Lucid Dreams” (2018)- Juice WRLD: Entirety
3. “Leave Out All The Rest” (2007)- Linkin Park: Entirety
4. “XO TOUR Llif3” (2017)- Lil Uzi Vert: Entirety
5. “Am I A Psycho?” (2011)- Tech N9ne Feat. B.o.B and Hopsin

Rhythmic Manipulation

1. “Mordecai” (2003)- Between the Buried and Me: 0:00-0:50
2. “Voices” (1994)- Dream Theater
3. “Toxicity” (2001)- System of a Down
4. “AEnema” (1996)- Tool: 2:20-3:38
5. “The Downward Spiral” (1994)- Nine Inch Nails

Ethereal/ Nightmarish Soundscape

1. “Wounds” (2016)- Kid Cudi
2. “u” (2015)- Kendrick Lamar
3. “You Want it Darker” (2016)- Leonard Cohen
4. “Ain’t it Funny” (2016)- Danny Brown
5. “Son et Lumiere” (2003)- The Mars Volta

Lyrical Candidness

1. “What Do You Hear in These Sounds” (1997)- Dar Williams
2. “breathin” (2018)- Ariana Grande
3. “Super Rich Kids” (2012)- Frank Ocean ft. Earl Sweatshirt
4. “24/7” (2016)- Kehlani
5. “FEAR” (2017)- Kendrick Lamar