

Beck's *Song Reader*: An Unbound Music Book

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BECK'S *SONG READER*. An Unbound Music Book

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ABSTRACT

The pop/alternative musician Beck created a stir in the music world when he released his 2012 “album” *Song Reader* as a book compilation of individual pieces of sheet music. This included a guide to reading music notation, together with an introduction describing the work’s intentions and inviting readers to perform their own versions of the songs. Two years later, a recording of the songs interpreted by various well-known artists was issued. The video to one of these, Jack White’s interpretation of “I’m Down,” focuses entirely on the presentation of the track in the book-album *Song Reader*: the musical notation, lyrics, and artwork. Using multimodal discourse analysis together with Derrida’s notion of grammatology, this article will analyse both the book-album and the “I’m Down” video. If the Derridean violence of writing brings speech under its over-arching wings, then notation can be seen as dominating musical discourse: the habit of not notating popular music is in fact a (usually subconscious) semiotic decision to differentiate from the (classical/art) music tradition. *Song Reader*’s release as a book, only to be later reappropriated as a “normal” album, means that it can be understood as an example of “unbound” popular music reincorporated into the mainstream—yet the “I’m Down” video can be read (literally) as a rebellion against this. Or can it? Without their “alternative mainstream” status, neither Beck nor White would have been able to exploit the popular music business in this way. To what extent can the institutional discourse of popular music be infiltrated from the inside? What is the status of “unbound” music-as-literature?

RÉSUMÉ

Beck, musicien pop/alternatif, a créé un certain remous dans le monde musical en 2012 en faisant paraître son « album » *Song Reader* sous la forme d’un livre, soit une compilation de partitions individuelles. On y trouvait des instructions pour la lecture de la notation musicale, ainsi qu’une « Introduction » décrivant l’œuvre et ses intentions, et invitant le lecteur à réaliser ses propres versions des chansons. Deux ans plus tard, un enregistrement des chansons par divers musiciens connus a

paru. La vidéo de l'une de ces chansons, « I'm Down », interprétée par Jack White, porte sur la présentation de cette pièce dans le livre-album *Song Reader* : la notation musicale, les paroles, les illustrations. S'appuyant sur les principes de l'analyse multimodale du discours et sur la grammatologie de Derrida, le présent article propose une étude du livre-album, ainsi que de la vidéo « I'm Down ». Si la violence de la lettre derridienne fait de la parole une partie intégrante de l'archi-écriture, la notation musicale peut être considérée comme un discours musical dominant : l'habitude de ne pas écrire la musique populaire constitue en fait une décision sémiotique, généralement subconsciente, de se distancier de la tradition musicale (classique). L'œuvre *Song Reader*, parue d'abord en tant que livre, mais envisagée ultérieurement comme un album « ordinaire », offre un exemple de production musicale sauvage récupérée par le courant musical dominant, récupération contre laquelle la vidéo de « I'm Down » semble littéralement se rebeller. Mais est-ce vraiment le cas? Sans leur double statut d'artistes alternatifs et populaires, ni Beck ni White n'auraient pu tirer parti du marché de cette façon. Dans quelle mesure est-il possible d'infiltrer de l'intérieur le discours institutionnel associé à la musique populaire? Quel est le statut de la musique en tant que littérature « sauvage »?

You've taken the notes from your head and played them
out loud on a public annou[n]cement instead
'Cause all your thoughts get distorted
The feedback goes on and you've ruined the song
While ev'ryone just plays along
It's only the notes that you've played that drowned out
the thoughts from a song that was lost
And the song you sang it didn't have a name
There was nothing but the song we were singing.¹

In 2012, the alternative pop musician Beck released his album *Song Reader* not as a recording, but as sheet music, “an album that could only be heard by playing the songs.”² The project was on the one hand a work to recreate the popular musical culture of a past era (the early twentieth-century United States) for contemporary audiences, an era before the advent of commercial recording, where “[h]ome-played music had been so widespread that nearly half the country had bought the sheet music for a single song, and presumably gone through the trouble of learning to play it.”³ On the other hand, the project's genesis in the early twenty-first century sprang, at least in part, from a reaction to the use of technology in pop music:

There was an unspoken division between the music you
heard on the radio and the music you were able to play

with your own hands. By then, recorded music was no longer just the document of a performance—it was a composite of style, hooks, and production techniques, an extension of a popular personality’s image within a current sound.⁴

The book-album, then, is an unbound music book: by releasing it only as sheet music, the individual tracks were opened to a level of interpretation, participation, and expression that goes beyond the karaoke machine and the cover version:⁵

Don’t feel beholden to what’s notated. Use any instrument you want to. Change the chords; rephrase the melodies. Keep only the lyrics, if desired. Play it fast or slow, swung or straight. Take a song and make it an instrumental or an a cappella. Play it for friends or only for yourself. These arrangements are starting-off points; they don’t originate from any definitive recording or performance.⁶

This story of *Song Reader*, which I have briefly retold here with heavy reliance on Beck’s own words, is not the full story. In this article I will focus on two further aspects of the book-album. First, the poetics of the presentation of the tracks in *Song Reader* is a major feature that cannot easily be captured in any sounding performance. Indeed, *Song Reader* is remarkable for its contribution to the discourse of musical notation in popular music, and an understanding of this notion through the use of multimodal critical discourse analysis will form the backbone of my study. My second principal line of enquiry focuses on the release in 2014 of a recording of *Song Reader* by various artists, including and co-produced by Beck. This went directly against the claims at the time of the book-album’s release in 2012 that it would only be released as sheet music.⁷ The professionally made video to Jack White’s version of “I’m Down” features not the musicians but the music notation, and it is on the video to this that the final part of my study will focus.

Music Notation in Popular Music Discourses

The relationship between music notation and popular music is not simple. Some popular music traditions (e.g. big band jazz) make extensive use of

music notation; others (e.g. blues) use it less. In many cases, it boils down to the personal choice or the circumstances of the musicians involved: for instance, if a musician has never learnt music notation, they will not use it. While pop songs from the era nostalgically referenced in *Song Reader* were commonly distributed (and presumably played) through their sheet music, it is now a commonly held, if rarely stated, belief that musical literacy—the ability to read musical notation—is a skill that is considered to belong to classical music. Within current discourses of popular music, notation is noticeable by its absence.

Yet, as Beck says in his Preface, prior to the wide use of sound-recording technology, music notation was the only way that music of any genre could be transmitted remotely. Music notation is itself a performance.⁸ The tradition on which *Song Reader* draws, of popular songs transmitted as sheet music, did not die with the advent of radio, video, or even digital media: record labels and publishers still work together to produce sheet music versions (usually piano reduction, lyrics, and chords) of popular albums after their release. Indeed, Beck's inspiration for *Song Reader* was that seeing his “original recording [of a '90s album] . . . distilled down to notation made it obvious that most of the songs weren't intended to work that way.”⁹

Due to its absence from the discourses of popular music, music notation—or even its lack—in popular music is very rarely analysed. While analysts such as David Machin and Theo Van Leeuwen may make extensive use of the tools of critical discourse analysis and multimodality to discuss aspects of popular music including artwork, videos, melody, harmony, and more, the general absence of musical notation from their discussion is striking.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the tradition of delimitating popular music from “the score” is itself a reaction to music notation: the very absence of music notation from popular music testifies to its presence elsewhere. This can be understood in Derridean terms as popular music's reaction to the “violence” of notation (as arche-writing) on sounding music. In this article, therefore, I will use the method of multimodal critical discourse analysis for popular music established by Machin, but also apply this to the book-album, since in *Song Reader* the notation is inseparable from the sounding product(s). For this reason, I treat the written presentation of the music in *Song Reader* not only as an essential part of any sounding performance, but as a performance in and of itself, one which can be compared to other performances, sounding

(Jack White's interpretation of "I'm Down") or silent (the presentation of the same track within the book-album).

In *De la grammatologie*, Derrida argued that the invention of writing was not only a violence done to speech (and memory),¹¹ but that speech is in fact a subordinate part of "arche-writing."¹² This notion can be applied to music notation. The desire to harness living sound in writing, to displace its other and its double and work to reduce its difference, is behind all recording technologies of sound, including music notation. Derrida considers sound to be part of the written *trace*; indeed *already a trace* which has always been present, always indescribable.¹³ He questions whether there is any sense in establishing a "natural" hierarchy between the acoustic and graphic images, for "the acoustic image is not seen; the graphic image is not heard."¹⁴ There is no way to capture every musical effect in notation. Likewise, sounding music on its own cannot portray, for example, a typeface.¹⁵

If music notation is part of the arche-writing, then it is by definition present in all music, even that which has never been notated. What *Song Reader* achieves can therefore be understood as a metaphysics of presence: it brings to the fore in popular music the ever-present trace that is notation. It is this that makes the 2012 edition of *Song Reader* a subversive, unbound, pop album, a book-album that can be understood as a counter-discourse, a reaction to the dominant discourse, which not only shapes the songs it contains but also brings to the fore the role of the listener (interpreter, reader) in musical discourse as a whole.

Beck, *Song Reader* (2012)

Song Reader, in its 2012 format, is a *mise en abyme*. Even before removing it from its clear plastic wrapper, the reader can see that it is a book based on music notation due to its high visual salience: the front and back covers prominently feature notation, with the words "Song Reader Beck" as the largest elements, displayed in an elaborate calligraphic typeface in which the lines of the musical staves merge into the words. The use of stylised handwriting denotes subtlety and intimacy—this gives the book-album a personal feel, and adds to the idea that the reader can be involved in its realisation. These words take up space both horizontally and vertically—space which can be understood as room for contemplation and creativity.

The words in typed small-caps, “twenty / new songs / by Beck,” thus provide a contrast, yet even these are linked to music notation as they are enclosed within the kind of bracket that unites staves on piano sheet music. The colour palette is limited to white lines of staves and words with gold notes and decoration on an unmodulated dark-blue background. This reversal of the usual dark-on-white can be linked with *Song Reader*’s reversal of the norms of notation in the popular music industry. There is nothing on the front cover which does not relate to music notation, yet the way in which it is manipulated and used indicates the freedom of interpretation which is key to *Song Reader*.

The background to the back cover continues the theme from the front; indeed, the staves of music extend across the spine and become the staves that turn into the calligraphic writing on the front. These staves display a (near) quotation from the opening lines of the track “Just Noise,”¹⁶ although, as the wrapper is not yet off, chances are the reader does not yet know this. What is immediately obvious though, at least on my edition and presumably on many others, is that the back cover is mostly obscured by an advertisement for *Song Reader* itself.¹⁷ When the book-album is finally opened and the first sheet-music track removed the multisensual *mise en abyme* becomes clear: every track has individual artwork on its front cover, and an advertisement on its back cover. Within these is the musical notation: appealing to the eye, the ear, and the touch.

Once open, the layout of the inside of the book-album resembles that of a gatefold LP. On the left (“side one” for cultures who read from left to right) are tracks 1–10 within a gatefold that extends halfway up the tracks behind; on the right are 11–20. These latter, however, are behind the Preface whose front cover closely resembles the album’s but with a red background, and the separate “Introduction” by Jody Rosen. On the left, the artwork of the first track “Don’t Act Like Your Heart Isn’t Hard,” with its artwork of greenish hues and city skyline, contrasts both the blue of the book-album as a whole and the red of the Preface. Indeed, while each of the sheet music tracks has its own artwork, the colours red and blue dominate (with variations in hue), together with black, white, and some pale green. Therefore the choice of green in the artwork to the first track is likely with this contrasting effect in mind. (Quite a different, and less dramatic, effect would have been achieved if the track “Just Noise,” which follows the blue-

white-gold colour scheme of the cover, were presented as the first track.) The gatefolds are a continuation of the blue and white from the cover; on one of these a stylised male figure is playing an upright piano, on the other a similar yet differently clothed and coiffed figure is playing a guitar, eyes closed. Neither are using notation. The track listings on the gatefolds are written in a typeface resembling careless handwriting in capital letters.¹⁸ All of this contributes to the invitatory, unintimidating, friendly feel of the book-album which states that notation is a thing of beauty, and not to be afraid of.

Taken as a whole, the format of the book-album is an invitation to readers to (re)create the music themselves through the notation: the intertwining of words and staves, the proliferation of musical symbols, and the absence of any identifiable artist image. Beck erases the performance of his self in order to allow readers to perform their own selves.¹⁹ In 2012, when on-screen consummation of both words and music (including notated music) was continually increasing, the physical presentation of *Song Reader*, with its highly saturated, unmodulated blue and gold (traditionally luxurious colours, and those of the French royal *fleur-de-llys*, indicating a calm, classy restraint) and its invitation to reader involvement that is entirely bodily (open the book, sing the works to life), sat in stark contrast to the dominant, passive, mediated means of receiving popular music.

In such a musical landscape, the use of notation in *Song Reader* plays on discourses of hypermediacy and immediacy (“the double logic of remediation”).²⁰ On the one hand, the book-album is intrinsically hypermedial: it re-fashions older media (the song sheet, the gatefold LP) into something new; its various media play dual roles (the notation is part of the artwork, which is an intrinsic part of the tracks and the book-album, which is a *mise en abyme* of itself). On the other hand, the very invitation to reader participation brings a form of immediacy to popular music that had been lost with the advent of recording technologies and the music industry: individual, authentic interpretations of pop songs.²¹ The freedom of *Song Reader* is that there are no wrong answers; the lines between composition, improvisation, and interpretation are blurred. It is not even necessary to be able to read music notation: not only is there a how-to guide provided (including an explanation of chord tablature), Beck’s Preface granting full freedom of interpretation means that as long as the titles are retained—not

even the two stalwarts of the pop song, the lyrics and chords, need to be respected—*Song Reader*'s tracks can be performed.

Although Beck's musical style is usually considered to be alternative, it is hard to imagine that a less acclaimed alternative artist could have released *Song Reader*. Beck is, after all, a mainstream-sanctioned alternative artist—he has twice won the Grammy award for “best alternative album.”²² Were a small-time, independent, or indeed non-white/male/gender-normative/able-bodied musician to undertake such a project it would not have attracted the same type of media attention, audience participation, or sales, as it did at the hands of Beck. Thus the unbound book-album which had the power to upset dominant pop music discourses could only do so because that very power had been granted by those same discourses.

This reliance on the mainstream is evidenced by The Beatles intertext which I will shortly discuss in “I'm Down.” In addition, this relationship of the alternative to the mainstream is not unlike the relationship between notation and popular music: “in separating itself from the mainstream, the alternative not only acknowledges that the mainstream is there, but in a way makes it indispensable.”²³ Reader performances of the tracks from *Song Reader*, both live and recorded (and uploaded to sites such as YouTube, SoundCloud, or SongReader.net), are most often made by unsigned, amateur, or autodidact musicians, who, of course, make up the vast majority of musicians worldwide. In addition, by uploading a recording to a website where it can be heard for free, these musicians are effectively giving away their music—here, their own interpretations of Beck's music—to the wider world. This is in contrast to the book-album, which is not available digitally, and is not free.²⁴ In this way, then, reader interpretations of the tracks are distributed (more) independently of the music and publishing industries (albeit with their sanction), whereas the book-album itself is not.

Given this background, it is not surprising that *Song Reader* was embraced by the recording industry, and in 2014 it was released as a regular, recorded album by various artists. The artwork of the sound-album is a direct echo of that of the book-album, although of course the size is different due to the formats. Beck's introduction is reproduced in an adapted form, with the invitation now set, somewhat awkwardly, in the past tense: “We told the performers not to be beholden to what's notated.”²⁵ Another important

change is that the tracks are listed on the back cover—and their order is altered. While there is no prominent advertisement on the back cover, instead there is a note, colour-co-ordinated so as to blend in with the artwork, that states that all proceeds will be donated to a children’s writing organisation. If music notation is a relatively lenient gatekeeper in *Song Reader* the book-album, it is nevertheless only open to those who are able to read English. The choice of beneficiary for the sound-album is therefore born of the same spirit of participation as the book-album.²⁶

“I’m Down” in *Song Reader* (2012)

In the 2012 book-album, “I’m Down” is the second track. When the reader first opens the book, and removes the first track from the gatefold, “I’m Down” appears behind. The cover artwork has an immediately striking western-movie theme: the prominent symbol of the gun firing the banner which reads “I’m down & this town is a nuisance”; the cowboys; the typeface of the main title. The cover art is an exercise in word painting, combining “down” with the surreal (yet depressive) world we will encounter in the lyrics. The title “I’m Down” takes up the majority of the front cover, and although the letters are all expanded capitals, they get progressively smaller as they drift off the bottom in a cloud of smoke (from a gun?). They are theatrically curved, with one word (“I’m”) enclosed in a banner. In addition, the cover vectors point clearly downward: the words of the title run down off the page towards the bottom; one of the cowboys is scuba diving downwards; the other is looking down at his feet on the stilts he is using to walk, themselves providing downward lines. The only vector which is not a clear down is that from the gun firing the first line; the words here read downwards over three lines, but the banner itself rises again at the end. The colour palette is limited, using only pale yellow, red, and brown on an off-white background; the effect is of a faded poster for an old-time western movie. The colour fill-ins are shaded using horizontal lines reminiscent of engravings: this hybrid use of colour adds to the nostalgic olde-worlde feel. The cover artwork therefore creates a visual rhyme with the track’s overall format. Perhaps most striking of all, the modality (verisimilitude) of the image is low. Not only are we in the realm of stylised, hand-drawn images, how many cowboys, even in the wildest of westerns, scuba dive or walk on stilts in full cowboy gear? This is a world where anything can happen, a theme which will resound in the lyrics.

Opening the page to reveal the notation, it is immediately obvious that the western theme is carried over into the title, where the words “I’m Down” are written in heavy, bold capitals in a typeface which would clearly denote saloon bars and cowboys even without the artwork on the reverse. The words “written by Beck Hansen” are here presented not only to denote him as composer, but also as if he is an actor in the movie: “*written by*” is in italics; underneath, one word per line, is “Beck Hansen” in bold. Yet the music notation itself is conventional, clear and easy to read: on pages 3 and 4, where the title is not visible, only the lyrics hark back to the unreal world so clearly presented on the cover.

It is on the back cover of the track that the intertext to The Beatles’s song of the same name is most evident.²⁷ While Beck’s “I’m Down” does not have any obvious parallel to that of The Beatles bar the shared title and the keyboard solo, the back cover to the sheet music—which is, in keeping with the rest of the *Song Reader* book-album, an advert for another song—departs from the western-poster theme. Here, “Song Hits For the Home” advertise a song “sung with great success by Devlin Hogue” entitled “You Don’t Have to Change Your Shoes (to Walk All Over Me).” Like most of the adverts in *Song Reader*, this snippet plays on our semiotic expectations and contains more than a hint of the absurd. Nevertheless, the lyrics (such as they are) are in a similar vein to The Beatles’s “I’m Down,” not Beck’s.²⁸ Whereas McCartney’s lyrics are sung by him from a clearly male perspective (“Man buys ring / Woman throws it away”), the masculine-sounding fictitious “Devlin” and the decidedly male boots which form part of the song’s decoration also invite us to read the fragmentary “You Don’t Have to Change Your Shoes” as a male lament in the same tradition.

Returning to “I’m Down” in *Song Reader*, it is important to note that the format of the pages takes precedence over the pianist’s convenience, for the page turn falls during the instrumental. The dropping out of the vocal staves for the instrumental and coda makes reading the chords (placed over the vocal line elsewhere in the track) easier for a keyboard player; a visual incentive to improvisation. A more convenient page turn, however, would not be in keeping with the loose-leaf format of *Song Reader*. Indeed, if the solo is not to be completely improvised (and/or played without using the notation), it is not too hard to picture a singer turning the page on an out-

of-tune home upright: this adds to the nostalgic sentiments overtly played out in the book-album.

Any nostalgic spirit is, however, complicated by the lyrics. The “prayer in a personal ad” may belong to a more recent era, but the “skyscraper city” and “debutante in a tank-top” arguably bridge past and present. Also, the dark humour of the lyrics is far more in keeping with Beck’s style than that of early twentieth-century pop. Nevertheless, the semiotics of the notation invite both improvisation and faithful interpretation: the simple harmonic structure (I-IV-V with vi characterising the bridge), together with notated bass progressions and chromaticism in the piano part and carefully notated syncopation in the vocals. The key of E major, particularly inviting for guitarists, once again contributes to the play-it-yourself atmosphere.

The layout of the music spreads over four sides, two on the reverse sides of the front and back covers, and two as a single loose sheet. This lack of binding adds to the feeling of freedom, and also the precariousness of the nostalgic format (how many old sheet music songs are unplayable due to lost loose leaves?). In approaching the musical notation itself, it is in fact two words which first command this reader’s attention: “piano” written in small letters next to the bracket coupling the staves, and the indication, in a larger font and in italics, “shuffle.” The first of these is significant because, despite being clearly a song with lyrics, the opening bars have no vocal staff, only piano staves, with the vocal staff not joining the layout until the second system. This denotes the form of the track, with a clear instrumental introduction, as well as indicating that the distinguishing sound feature at this point, the figure, will be the piano.²⁹ The guitar tablature, here a single E chord, provides both the visual and sounding field: unlike the lyrics the tab is present throughout the track, but unlike the piano part it is unchanging, without further indications, and thus easy to ignore. When the vocal line enters, with its lyrics that command attention by bringing in text and taking up horizontal space that forces the piano notation to be more spaced out, in the semiotic structure it becomes the visual figure. When it drops out again—in the instrumental and coda—the piano staves once again take over the figure. Thus the very presence of notation on the page suggests, even to the untrained reader, that the track follows the traditional dominance of the vocals in pop—or, rather, it offers nothing to suggest that this is not the case when the vocal line is present. What is entirely absent

from the notation in “I’m Down” (and in all the tracks in *Song Reader*) is bass and percussion. This is, of course, due to the nostalgia of the format, which once again speaks of a home setting in an age without amps or microphones.

The indication “shuffle” is a significant choice of word. On a purely music level, it signifies that the beat should be divided into three even though it is written as divided into two; in other words it indicates a swing or 12/8 feel. So why is the track notated in 4/4 not 12/8? Why “shuffle” rather than “swing”? Notated jazz music is traditionally swung; so traditionally, in fact, that it is not usually indicated in the notation; the performers swing the rhythm as a matter of course. (Indeed, in jazz the opposite indication “straight 8ths” is used in cases where quavers should not be swung.) Since *Song Reader* is not intended for professionals, and since not every track is necessarily swung, the choice of 4/4 is in keeping with the rest of the book-album but needs some clarification. The indication “shuffle” provides this, but by the end of the track the reader understands that it is also a play on words. The Vaudeville “soft-shoe shuffle” (immortalised by Laurel and Hardy in the 1937 film *Way Out West*) was tap without the shoes: an accessible, relaxed, and often humorous dance style.³⁰ (In addition, the change—or not—of shoes in the advert on the back of “I’m Down” in *Song Reader* highlights this reference.) The narrator, the lyric “I,” is shuffling along, nonchalant and deadpan, going nowhere in a hurry. This is also borne out by other features of the track that are found in the notation.

The pitch of the notated music sits well in the staves, with the exception of several bass notes which require leger lines below the left-hand piano staff. This statement seems banal at first, but in the context of the track it is significant. *Song Reader*’s tracks can be played in any key, so the choice to notate in E major, apart from being convenient for guitarists, may seem meaningless. It is not. The melody of the “I’m Down” vocal line in E major sits low in the voice, whether male or female. It does not require straining to reach the track’s highest notes; in fact, it requires some sinking for a tenor or soprano, as can be seen when the notated vocal line drops—rather than leaps—below the staff to a B. At no point does the vocal line go above its staff, or even venture into its top two lines. Additionally, the melody has a narrow pitch range: the verses are almost entirely made up of four notes (E-F#-G#-A), only moving up to B and C# in the more plaintive bridge. This

makes the occasional sinking to the B below the staff, together with the corresponding return of the melody into the staff, all the more obvious to the eye. The notation of the vocal line is therefore comfortable, shuffling along, with the occasional sinking that is more dejectedly downbeat than emotional. The overall progression of the melody line is descending: any rise (as in the opening three quavers, to the words “I’m Down”) is followed by a much slower descent. This is true for all the verses. The bridge has a slower, chromatic rise which builds the tension, only for it to be released in the vocal line which descends to the tonic E using the same notes and rhythm as the vocal line at the end of the verse. The very last note of the vocals is the 2nd of the scale (and thus in the dominant chord), an F#, which gives the line an unfinished feel: this melody cannot even find its way to an end point. The notation contains no melismas (all syllables are allotted one note each, apart from the first “down” of each verse which gets two), no outpourings of emotion. Removing the idiosyncratic imagery of the lyrics, a basic discourse schema would be: “I” isn’t happy → but has to live with it or else . . . The unfinished . . . here is signified both in the lyrics by the departure from the rhyme scheme in the last bridge, and by the vocals finishing on an F#. In keeping with this emotional stasis, the notated vocal line is entirely deadpan; even a minor key would display too much emotion. In sum, the notated melody goes nowhere and doesn’t care: its limited range implies a lack of energy as well as a sense of resignation. It merely shuffles self-depreciatingly along, hands in its metaphorical pockets, “a back road over a roadblock.”³¹

The rhythm adds to the dead-pan, shuffling nature of the track. The 12/8 here is lazy (too lazy to even be written as such). This is not free jazz (or Beethoven’s *Eroica*) contesting the dominance of the beat; here, despite the use of syncopation, almost every beat is clear. The exception to this is the very first beat of the track, which is a rest: a shrug too lazy to sound. This rest is a feature of the notation only: in a sounding performance, any opening rest is not heard, and the effect is in fact a motion towards the second bar, equivalent to a pick-up.³² The syncopations in the vocal line provide instability; the piano provides the beat. In the verses the syncopations delay resolutions to the tonic, giving the effect of dithering. In the bridges the syncopations coincide with repeated pitches, thus adding to the lazy stasis even when the melody is slowly rising. The final note of each bridge—and thus of the track—is also syncopated. Even without playing (or

being able to play) the notation, in the visual context there is a clear downward motion (continued in the piano part) that implies that this syncopation is not the kind that provides energy and bounce, but rather that it contributes to the shuffling, deadpan descent of the narrator. The word “down” occurs twice at the opening of each of the three verses, and each time it is on the beat: the first accented word of the track, repeated for good measure. The piano beat becomes freer in the instrumental sections, with the notated line adding triplets, chromaticisms, and a much broader range which continues into the accompaniment to the third verse. Even the deadpan melody line eventually responds to this, though this is not due to the activity of the narrator: it is the “debutante in a tank-top who’s telling me how to be free” who gets the only vocal decoration. This takes the form of a passing chromatic G natural—the minor third in E major—which corresponds to the only change of agency in the lyrics: the narrator’s melody slides over its tones as someone else offers a way out of the gloom.

Jack White, “I’m Down” (2014)

When *Song Reader* was released as a recording by various artists in 2014, Jack White’s “I’m Down” was the second track on side 2 of the LP.³³ It was also released as a video track on White’s Vevo channel, and it is on this that my analysis will focus.³⁴

The most striking feature of the video is its use of the format of “I’m Down” in *Song Reader* the book-album. There is no portrayal whatsoever of White, or Beck, or any character; there is no story, no drama, no subtext.³⁵ Rather, after a brief opening shot which is simply a white screen, the video shows the upper part of the cover to the track’s sheet music, panning downwards. There is only one significant adjustment: the addition of a pale blue to the colour scheme. It is used in the decorative title words (including the banner behind “I’m,” and for the outline of the cloud which contains the title). For the first 11 seconds of the video the pale blue signifies cool calm, yet provides some energy through contrast to the other colours—it thus sets the scene for White’s interpretation. Of course, during these opening seconds the introduction is also playing, and we can hear the instrumentation. An acoustic guitar plays a downward 3-2-1 progression to the tonic which is played in the left speaker (or earphone) only, before a distorted bass guitar comes in with the 3-note upward progression to the

tonic as written in the sheet music. At the first beat of the next bar the drums and keyboard enter, with electric guitar taking over the figure. Thus the introduction starts gently, sneaking in from the side, but is quickly submerged into the field by the distorted bass and electric guitar.

“In pop, video is normally a support to the music,” writes Machin.³⁶ Here, however, the video is a support to the notation, which, in the context of *Song Reader* the book-album, is, of course, the music. Machin gives three ways of understanding music videos’ relation to their music: elaboration, extension, and enhancement.³⁷ The video to “I’m Down” falls into the first of these categories, in which “we see the same thing slightly differently, hearing no more about it.”³⁸ An elaboration video, therefore, is merely the elaboration of the sound—except, of course, in the context of *Song Reader*, the images of the video are the elaboration of the musical notation. After the introduction, once the vocal line enters, the video to “I’m Down” is simply the music notation, moving at the same rate as the sound, with the words of the lyrics jumping into shot as they are sung.

There are some important differences between the notation in the video and on the sheet music. The most obvious change in semiotic devices is in the colours. The video keeps the traditional black-on-white of the sheet music for the vocal line only, and replaces the black of the piano part for two of the colours from its presentation of the front cover: red for the right hand staff, bracket, and text directions such as “verse”, and the added pale blue for the left hand staff, guitar tab, and animated lyrics (though when the vocals drop out for the instrumental, the piano right hand staff, at that point the figure, is black, returning to red when vocal line returns). Thus the meanings of the colours are imposed onto the music notation in the video: the serious black for the figure, the calm but contrasting blue for the piano left hand. Behind this runs imagery from the cover: occasionally the cowboy on stilts sails up, his scuba diving colleague swims down, and the cloud comes and goes in both directions.

The differences are not limited to the use of colour, however. Another striking point of diversion is the placement of the lyrics. On the video, the lyrics are written in block capitals, which take up more space than the normal type used in the sheet music. The extra space is required because the placement of the words in the video is not dependent on where they fall

with regards to the melody, but on how they sit on the screen: they are arranged such that each lyric line builds up word-by-word to centre shot, regardless of what the notation is doing in the background. Therefore, whereas the notation plods along with the sounding music, the lyrics are independent. In the sheet music the narrator's words align with their melody, in the video they are free to do their own thing. This has obvious connotations both for the deadpan message of the track and for the freedom of *Song Reader*. Since the notation to the introduction is not shown in the video, gone is the indication "shuffle." White's interpretation is energetic, adds a female backing singer, uses rubato, adds interjections, and at times changes the lyrics, rhythm, and melody.³⁹ He plays out his frustration in the bridge, where his voice quality moves from melodic in the verses to a more nasal sound, coupled with distorted guitar playing on the beat. The chromatic passing notes notated in the piano bass are seen but not heard, leaving the tension increase to the vocalist, who decreases it again in the last line of the bridge when he returns to the gentler, less nasal style.

All the while, the notation continues. It continues even in the instrumental, where the pianist departs from it entirely.⁴⁰ This highlights the improvisation, which in turn connotes artistry, spontaneity, individuality, immediacy, and freedom. The notation only disappears in the coda, where the front-cover artwork reappears, once again panning downwards. The final instrumental departs from the notation considerably, including allowing the track to finish indisputably on the tonic, at which point it is the image that fades to white and the video ends.⁴¹

In White's recording, the sounds of the instruments and voices are relatively pure. They are clearly recorded in a studio, but they are not obviously modulated: these are real instruments playing, real people singing. This means that the sound has a high modality, signifying authenticity. With the exception of the nasality of the bridge, White's voice displays no raspiness, vibrato, or reverberation; his suppressed emotions only find release through the distorted guitar in the ground. White's interpretation of the lyrics changes the agency of the narrator: the imperatives in the first bridge ("Feed a warrant to a billy goat / check the spelling on a suicide note") are altered through his added interjection which is a direct appeal to the listener, and his change to the first person ("Listen! I fed a warrant . . .").⁴² This therefore means his interpretation carries more frustrated, personalised energy than

that implied by the notation. White also brings a particularly masculine feel to the track that is in keeping with The Beatles intertext: man doesn't have woman(?) → man has to live with this. This discourse schema is re-enforced by the female backing vocals harmonising with White at a higher pitch but lower volume: the female is in the background, behind the track's sentiments which are now told entirely from the male point of view. (If the track were performed by a female lead vocalist the effect would be quite different.) The drum part provides the main 12/8 drive in the swung quavers on the high hat, with the snare drum syncopating the third beat a quaver early. This, together with a tempo which is roughly two heartbeats per bar, gives a relaxed, though not lazy feel (imagine the difference were the drum part played with wire brushes rather than sticks). In the bridges, however, the drums move to straight crotchets in unison with the guitars, before dropping out entirely with the tension release in the final line: again, the frustration builds, only to be dissipated through depression (first bridge), disappointment (second bridge), and resignation (final lines). The words are the most animated part of the video, because of their movement and because they do not sit in their notated place. This animation re-enforces the prominence of the vocal part, but it also reflects fans' fascination with lyrics and the sing-along spirit of *Song Reader*.

Conclusion

Song Reader emerged out of an iconographic, image-based music market that was (is arguably still) coming to terms with music distribution in the digital age. The discourse of music as “free” does not fit well with capitalist market-driven economies, as the lawsuits against the likes of Napster show. This had repercussive effects on the file streaming formats and technologies which have become somewhat officialised (e.g. through artists' YouTube channels, Spotify) and funded by advertising. This in turn has affected music presentation and representation to a great extent, particularly in popular music which occupies the largest market share.⁴³ It is from this that the book-album *Song Reader* emerged as a performance of the notation of popular music. The performance draws on a nostalgia for a past time, where popular music was circulated widely without imposed sound. This nostalgia assumes a greater degree of musical literacy in fans of popular music than today: it appears that Beck himself grew up and began to compose and perform whilst unable to read music.⁴⁴

The multimodal critical discourse analysis of the book-album presented here shows that it forms a deliberate counter-discourse to that of the role of notation in popular music. Rather than being the preserve of the chosen (classical) few, the notation of *Song Reader* presents itself as open to all. Indeed, it incorporates music notation at every level, from the cover and the artwork of the individual tracks to the comic advertisements on the back. Through the (apparent) obliteration of the compositorial self, the music assumes the stance of being written not for Beck's glory but for reader recreation and re-creation. *Song Reader* the book-album brings to the fore what the majority of artists, critics, fans, and scholars try to negate: the notation of popular music. It is a performance of grammatology that makes explicit the ways in which popular music falls under the over-arching wings of music notation.

Yet the very act of producing *Song Reader* was only possible due to Beck's status as an alternative artist sanctioned by the mainstream. This then made the venture irresistible to re-appropriation. Nevertheless, the release of the recording in 2014 continued the subversion: music notation is incorporated into the album cover and the three official videos, the proceeds are donated to a children's writing charity, and there are hundreds of thousands of performances available for free online. My multimodal discourse analysis of one of these, Jack White's "I'm Down," shows that despite its incorporation into the mainstream, it sticks to the notational ideals of *Song Reader*. Although White, as performer, naturally imposes his own interpretation onto the track, turning its deadpan shuffle into a comparative powerhouse of frustrated masculine energy, the overt presence of the music notation in the video displays the extent of his creative licence as a performer. In the video to "I'm Down" the reader is still very much present, and an active part of the music.

Through a Derridean understanding of music notation as arche-writing, it can be seen that even pop music cannot escape notation. *Song Reader* is therefore an example of unbound literature, a book-album that dared to break the norms of pop music—norms which are often far stricter than those of classical music due to sheer numbers and market value. Thus *Song Reader* sits deliberately on the margins: of Beck's music, of mainstream music discourse, and between pop and (pop's vision of) classical music. Its status relies on the mainstream, endorsed by it but not fully incorporated

within it, just like the person we like to think of as its creative mastermind. *Song Reader* is a statement of freedom—but how free is it? To answer that question we need to listen to the debutante in the tank-top from “I’m Down”—except that she is voiceless, unless you let her speak in your performance of the song.

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Notes

¹ Beck, “Title of This Song,” *Song Reader: Twenty New Songs by Beck* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s Books, 2012). My first-edition copy of the book-album has a missing “n” in “announcement”; I have added it here within square brackets, albeit with an awareness that such feedback might distort thoughts and ruin the song.

My thanks are due to Lisa Colton, Martin Siefkes, Jan Krasni, and the two anonymous reviewers who read the article pre-publication, and to students at the University of Tromsø’s Musikkonservatoriet, particularly popular music students, for answering my endless questions regarding their use of notation.

² Beck Hansen, “A Preface to a Song Reader,” *Song Reader* (n.p.). The text to the Preface (without the artwork, formatting, and layout) was also published online by *The New Yorker* on November 12, 2012, with the altered title “A Preface to Song Reader”: <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/a-preface-to-song-reader>.

³ Beck Hansen, “A Preface to a Song Reader,” *Song Reader* (n.p.).

⁴ Beck Hansen, “A Preface to a Song Reader,” *Song Reader* (n.p.).

⁵ In this article I use the term “track” to denote the individual tracks of *Song Reader* the book-album, and the more general term “song” to indicate a broader cultural context.

⁶ Beck Hansen, “A Preface.” A study of fans’ interpretations of tracks from *Song Reader* is beyond the purview of this study, but would be a welcome extension to the work, particularly with reference to methodologies from both fan studies and the digital humanities. For a suggested departure point, see Adrienne Evans and Mafalda Stasi,

“Desperately Seeking Methodology: New Directions in Fan Studies Research,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 11:2, 4–23, [http://www.participations.org/Volume 11/Issue 2/2.pdf](http://www.participations.org/Volume%2011/Issue%202/2.pdf). Thanks are due to Kirsty Sedgman for the reference.

⁷ Jordan Bass and McSweeney’s Books, “A Q&A with Beck Hansen, Author of *Song Reader*,” *McSweeney’s*, (undated, but the text claims “late in 2012”), <http://www.mcsweeney.net/articles/a-qa-with-beck-hansen-author-of-song-reader/>.

⁸ Kate Maxwell and James Simpson, “Page, Performance, and Play in Medieval Transmission and Reinterpretation: Presence and Absence in the Oxford *Roland* and Guillaume de Machaut’s *Voir dit*,” in *Proceedings of the 16th Nordic Musicological Congress, Stockholm, 2012*, ed. Jacob Dekert and Peder Kaj Pedersen (Stockholm: Institutionen för musik- och teatervetenskap, Stockholms Universitet, 2014), 144–153, http://www.mups.su.se/polopoly_fs/1.212426.1417515207!/menu/standard/file/NMC_2012_Proceedings_nov14_2.pdf; see also Kate Maxwell, “Performing Notation, Notation Performing,” in *Notations 21*, ed. Teresa Sauer (New York: Mark Batty, 2009), 147.

⁹ Beck Hansen, “A Preface.”

¹⁰ Theo Van Leeuwen, *Speech, Music, Sound* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 195: “I would like my text to be read the way jazz musicians improvise on a tune, rather than the way classical musicians interpret a score. The latter must recreate authoritatively imposed meaning, and do so according to the intentions of an author. The former take ideas from everywhere, and then do something new with it.” In *Analysing Popular Music: Image, Sound and Text* (London: Sage, 2010), David Machin goes to considerable lengths to avoid notation, instead using graphs and arrows to designate pitch movement. It should be noted, however, that analyses of classical music tend to treat the score as a means to an end, with the semiotic aspects of notation usually deserving only the briefest of mentions unless the score is deliberately provocative (e.g. in graphic compositions).

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de minuit, 1967), 55.

¹² Derrida, 82–83: “Nous voudrions plutôt suggérer que la prétendue dérivation de l’écriture, si réelle et si massive qu’elle soit, n’a été possible qu’à une condition: que le langage ‘originel’, ‘naturel’, etc., n’ait jamais existé, qu’il n’ait jamais été intact, intouché par l’écriture, qu’il ait toujours été lui-même une écriture. Archi-écriture dont nous voulons ici indiquer la nécessité et dessiner le nouveau concept; et que nous ne continuons à appeler écriture que parce qu’elle communique essentiellement avec le concept vulgaire de l’écriture. Celui-ci n’a pu historiquement s’imposer que par la dissimulation de l’archi-écriture, par le désir d’une parole chassant son autre et son double et travaillant à réduire sa différence.” For a translation see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 56.

¹³ “La trace est en effet l’origine absolue du sens en général. Ce qui revient à dire, encore une fois, qu’il n’y a pas d’origine absolue du sens en général. La trace est la différance qui ouvre l’apparaître et la signification. Articulant le vivant sur le non-vivant en général, origine de toute répétition, origine de l’idéalité, elle n’est pas plus idéale que réelle, pas plus intelligible que sensible, pas plus une signification transparente qu’une énergie opaque et aucun concept de la métaphysique ne peut la décrire. Et comme elle est a fortiori antérieure à la distinction entre les

régions de la sensibilité, au son autant qu'à la lumière, y a-t-il un sens à établir une hiérarchie 'naturelle' entre l'empreinte acoustique, par exemple, et l'empreinte visuelle (graphique)? L'image graphique n'est pas vue; et l'image acoustique n'est pas entendue. La différence entre les unités pleines de la voix reste inouïe. Invisible aussi la différence dans le corps de l'inscription." Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 95 (italics rendered as in source).

¹⁴ Trans. Spivak, 65.

¹⁵ Some (but not all) jazz publications indicate informality with chords printed over lyrics in typefaces that resemble handwriting.

¹⁶ This is in fact unreadable on my copy, but judging from the 2014 album cover, the quotation is not quite exact, for there are two additional quavers at the end of the first staff. In the 2012 book-album: these are on the spine, together with two further additional quavers at the end of the second staff. These latter two, however, do not feature on the 2014 album.

¹⁷ Small italicised writing in the bottom right corner of the advert helpfully points out that "*This sticker is removable.*" It certainly is not on my copy, at least not without causing damage.

¹⁸ Readers are advised to perform an image search on the internet using the terms "Beck Song Reader"; images of the book-album come up within the first couple of lines, although at the time of writing none of these are licenced for re-use. There are also several images available in the following article by Laura Barton, "Beck on his Song Reader: 'It Was a Struggle for Me,'" *The Guardian*, November 26, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/nov/26/beck-song-reader-it-was-a-struggle-for-me>.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the performativity of the self, body, and gender, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 171–180. I intend to explore the role of gender in *Song Reader* in a further study.

²⁰ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 2–15.

²¹ For a full discussion of the discourse of authenticity in popular music, see Machin, 14–18.

²² Jenny Eliscu, "Yes, Beck is Back (But Which Beck?)," *Billboard* 126:6, February 22, 2014, 22–27.

²³ Linus Johansson, "Taking it as a Man? Music, Youth, and Gender, Outside and Within Mainstream Media Cultures" (PhD diss., University of Uppsala, 2015), 25.

²⁴ The price tag of the book-album was roughly equivalent to that of a special-edition LP; that is, more expensive than downloading music or buying a CD, but considerably less expensive than book collections of original art.

²⁵ Liner notes to *Song Reader*, Warby Parker, 2014.

²⁶ The beneficiary is 826 National, a non-profit organization whose website mission statement pledges to help young people “explore their creativity and improve their writing skills” (826national.org).

²⁷ “I’m Down” is the title of the B-side to The Beatles’s 1965 single “Help.” I use “intertext” and related terms here with the understanding that “the theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and so, that it does not function as a closed system,” María Jesús Martínez Alfaro, “Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept,” *Atlantis* 18:1–2 (1996): 268–285 (268). Alfaro is of course referring to “intertextualité” as established by Julia Kristeva in *Recherches pour une sémanalyse: Essais* (Paris: Seuil, 1969). Here the term is important in that the freedom of *Song Reader* is such that readers are free to bring their own interpretations and understandings to the text, much more so in the book-album than through the 2014 recording, in which the meanings are mediated by interpreters (in the case of White’s “I’m Down,” a man performing himself).

²⁸ “You don’t have to say you’re sorry when you’re glad to see / me suffering while you’re out and being fancy free” is in the same sentiment, not to mention rhyme scheme, as The Beatles’s “You tell lies thinking I can’t see / You can’t cry ’cos you’re laughing at me / . . . / How can you laugh / When you know I’m down?” It is also interesting to note that the advert informs us that the song is available from “Battlin’ Hansen Songs and dances”; in the context of the wordplay already evident in “Devlin Hogue”—an anagram of “lived enough,” shades of the same black humour as the lyrics to Beck’s “I’m Down”—the echoes between “Battlin’” and “Beat’in’” are hard to ignore. In addition, The Beatles’s live performances of “I’m Down” that are available on YouTube display considerable liberties taken by John Lennon during the keyboard solo (e.g. that from the Shea Stadium in 1965 shows him playing with his elbows, to the clear amusement of George Harrison). Given the liberties encouraged by *Song Reader*, and the fame of The Beatles, it is surprising that I have yet to find a recording of Beck’s “I’m Down” that imitates John Lennon’s keyboard antics. Perhaps I should record one of my own.

²⁹ My use of the terms “figure,” “ground,” and “field” is based on their use in Van Leeuwen, *Speech, Music, Sound*. Here, however, I apply them not only to sounding music, but to musical notation which, in *Song Reader*, comes before any sound is played.

³⁰ My thanks to Lisa Colton for this observation.

³¹ A Schenkerian analysis of the vocal line (arguably the musical equivalent of a discourse schema) reveals a 3-2 progression. The 1 is heard in the piano, on the second quaver of the final bar, after a quaver rest on the downbeat. As if this displacement weren’t enough, the line then rises immediately to 2-3, with 5 over the top. The final note in the bass is over an octave below the staff: the lowest note in the track. The notation thus literally ends on a low note, under a metaphorical shrug. In White’s interpretation, however, he alters the ending such that the progression in both the vocals and accompaniment is the usual 3-2-1, which is in keeping with his more energetic realisation of the track.

³² However, perhaps the opening shot of the video to Jack White’s performance of the track, a pure white screen, can be considered a nod to this.

³³ It is also track seven on the CD, though this is numerologically much less satisfying given that the supertonic, the 2nd, is an important feature of the vocal line. (“I’m Down” is track two in the book-album, as already observed, and is followed immediately by another obvious Beatles intertext, “Saint Dude.”)

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Do6vcnTXbY>. It is one of only three tracks from *Song Reader* to have an official music video; the others are “Don’t Act Like Your Heart Isn’t Hard” (Juanes) and “Heaven’s Ladder” (Beck). All three videos are produced by Anthem Films, and all three share the same basic format of featuring the track artwork from book-album *Song Reader* and the musical notation with animated lyrics. This is a far cry from the usual aesthetics of music videos produced by Anthem Films, as can be seen from their website (<http://anthemfilms.com/work/music-videos/>).

³⁵ It could be argued that the background white relates to Jack White, but given that it is also the background of the sheet music’s artwork, and that the other two videos also stick to the colour schemes of their sheet music, I think this is just coincidence.

³⁶ *Analysing Popular Music*, 193.

³⁷ *Analysing Popular Music*, 192. Machin uses Halliday’s extensions of linguistic clauses as the theoretical background.

³⁸ *Analysing Popular Music*, 192.

³⁹ White’s narrator does not sing the chromatic G natural in the final verse; however, he is still affected by the debutante in the tank-top, for he slows the rhythm to triplets. (There are other, minor, differences too, but there seems little point in enumerating them all here.)

⁴⁰ I should note that the notation is not an exact copy of that in *Song Reader*, but the differences are minor (perhaps errors). In addition, the “page turn” in the video happens a bar too early, which is interesting given my earlier comments—in fact made as a keyboard player—regarding the difficulty of getting this turn in correctly when performing from the notation.

⁴¹ Perhaps the video designers anticipated enough adverts from Vevo to feel no need to reproduce “You Don’t Have to Change Your Shoes,” or it was simply too much of a departure from “I’m Down” in its new context.

⁴² The interjected “Listen” (and White’s other interjections, which fall at the opening to the bridge each time) are not given in the words in the video, but they do present the line as “I fed” rather than “Feed.”

⁴³ For a discussion of the influence of file sharing, lawsuits, and technologies on popular music presentation and representation, see Johansson, 10–13.

⁴⁴ As he states in the interview with Laura Barton for *The Guardian*, cited above. There is no particular reason to assume he is not telling the truth.

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