

Cut Every Corner: Intertextuality and Parody in the Music of *The Simpsons*

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Abstract: This article reworks ideas about parody, postmodernism, and television from such critical and cultural theorists as Linda Hutcheon, Jason Mittell, and Jonathan Gray to contextualize the wide variety of parody and intertextuality in the music of the animated TV show The Simpsons. It explores several categories of the show's music, such as: variations of cartoon themes, songs, instrumental underscoring, and guest musicians. This article particularly uses specific episodes of The Simpsons to highlight parodies of the show's own theme, movie music, themes from other TV shows, and so on. The show's music thus functions as a kind of court jester or king's fool.

Résumé : Cet article revient sur les idées des théoriciens critiques de la culture tels que Linda Hutcheon, Jason Mittell et Jonathan Gray au sujet de la parodie, du postmodernisme et de la télévision, pour mettre en contexte le large éventail de parodies et d'intertextualité que l'on trouve dans la musique de la série animée télévisée, Les Simpsons. Il examine plusieurs catégories musicales de cette série, telles que les variations sur le thème de la musique du dessin animé lui-même, les chansons, la musique de fond instrumentale et les musiciens invités. Cet article recourt à certains épisodes de Les Simpsons en particulier pour souligner les parodies du thème musical du dessin animé lui-même, de musiques de films, de musiques d'autres séries ou émissions de télévision, etc. On y découvre que la musique de cette série détient en quelque sorte la fonction de bouffon ou de fou du roi.

The King's Fool: Postmodern Parody, Television, Music, and *The Simpsons*

Linda Hutcheon suggests that a new form of parody — citing something only to make fun of it — can be accomplished through such postmodern means as “ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality” (1989: 93). She

doubts that this can happen in television, though, saying: “Most television, in its *unproblematized* reliance on realist narrative and transparent representational conventions, is pure commodified complicity...” (10; emphasis in original). Television, however, changed a great deal in the 1990s and 2000s. Jason Mittell discusses the idea that American TV from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s “will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the medium can do” (2006: 30). The animated television comedy *The Simpsons* (1989-) provides an example of such challenges, as it combines serial, sitcom (situational-comedy) elements with episodic, culturally critical highlights that frequently make use of references from elsewhere. The show’s creators positioned it as semi-postmodern and loosely realist, and most of its references cite things in order to make fun of them. *The Simpsons* includes intertextuality and parody — often walking a fine line between the two — and the show’s writers, composers, and guest voices have explored these things extensively in its music.

Jonathan Gray usefully compares *The Simpsons* to the context and function of the king’s fool in medieval courts — a merry rogue or safety valve who chips away at authority while also risking the rebellion that the king intends for the fool to contain (2006: 11). Gray also suggests: “For sheer density and frequency of jokes, nothing on *The Simpsons* receives as much parody and ridicule as the sitcom and its surrounding apparatus” (57). What he doesn’t address, though — in focusing only on speech — is that a king’s fool (a.k.a., court jester) often provided this mechanism through songs and music. Others have also ignored music’s role. David Arnold argues that on *The Simpsons*, television itself is the “central defining element of culture” (2004: 21). Similarly, Mittell (2001) discusses some of the accomplishments of *The Simpsons*, but without using any examples from the show’s use of music. Many non-music scholars find music to be a too highly specialized area to explore and assume it requires esoteric knowledge of structure, forms, music theory, and so on. However, musicology can participate in cultural explorations without being overly technical, and it can be accessible to other types of scholars. The present article acknowledges and contextualizes the importance of music by exploring intertextuality and parody through music as a central defining element of culture as expressed in the court jester role of *The Simpsons*. I offer this approach as an encouragement both to non-music cultural scholars and to academics interested in other types of music, who should be able to find transferable value in how and why these particular uses of music produce meaning.

To demonstrate the centrality of music in *The Simpsons*’ parodies, I discuss the show’s wide variety of musical genres and styles, its existing cartoon-referencing theme song and genre-parody variations of it, and “original” songs

that make fun of existing ones by rewriting their words and/or reworking their musical gestures within new contexts. Musical parody in *The Simpsons* is also enacted by guest musicians voicing often derisively animated versions of themselves and by the show's instrumental underscoring teasingly referencing the music of classic films. Like a king's fool, music in *The Simpsons* constantly chips away at authority and risks crossing the threshold of rebellion. It does so regardless of the type of music being referenced or parodied.

Music in *The Simpsons* acknowledges the historical and stylistic importance of various songs, instrumental works, and genres, while also often making fun of them. The show typically uses culturally familiar music references, such as well-known television and movie themes (frequently including its own theme), former Top 40 hits, famous classical works, and popular works of musical theatre. In the most straightforward instances, the show quotes an existing recording — sometimes simply mentioning the title — of a piece of music. In somewhat more complex cases, it adapts a piece of music by involving one or more of the show's regular characters, by featuring the contributions of a guest musician (for example, a pop star or rock band), or by incorporating it into the show's instrumental underscore. In its most elaborate examples, the show develops sustained pastiches, such as in its originally composed parodies that allude to specific works of musical theatre. Many other TV shows, movies, and cultural forms have done similar things with music, but *The Simpsons* provides a case study of an elaborately spun, though also reasonably coherent, web of how these elements can function within a single entity.

Drawing on the music of 31 seasons and 684 episodes, I have identified that the show's creative team uses music in five primary ways: (1) original songs (some of which appear in several ways throughout an episode, including selected end-titles), (2) main theme end-title variations (and occasional opening-title variations), (3) background instrumental music cues, (4) quotations of and allusions to existing music (including text references), and (5) guest voices of established musicians. "Who Shot Mr. Burns? Part II" (S07E01),¹ which originally aired in 1995, provides a good example of an episode making use of all five types of music.² The opening titles include an abbreviated version of the show's main theme, incorporating an allusion to the theme of TV's *Dragnet* (1951-59), which was itself a quotation from Miklós Rózsa's film score for *The Killers* (1946). The episode includes various instances of dramatic and/or suspenseful dream sequence, remorse, and action sequence background music. Several short, instrumental cues comprise dramatic, minor-key variations of the main tune of the show's theme, and harp glissandos are elsewhere used to indicate going in and out of flashbacks. The episode also includes a parody of 1960s action-oriented spy music (similar to that of TV's *The Mod Squad*,

1968-73), a brief quotation of church organ music, and an allusion to Angelo Badalamenti's psychedelic, saxophone-oriented, jazz-like music from the "red room" sequences of TV's *Twin Peaks* (1990-91). In addition, it includes the Emmy-nominated original song "Señor Burns," with music composed by Alf Clausen and lyrics written by episode writers Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein, performed by Tito Puente and His Latin Jazz Ensemble. Puente also appears as an animated guest-voice version of himself in a spoken sequence (as he did in Part I), and his group provides the episode's "Afro-Cuban" end-title variation of the show's main theme.

The Simpsons' music ranges extremely widely stylistically, from Renaissance and Classical era music to late-20th century minimalism and from various types of pop-rock music to jazz, urban, country, religious, and world music. The show's original songs, main theme variations, and background cues frequently allude to existing songs, styles, and genres in order to acknowledge their cultural importance while also making fun of them. However, its music-related quotations and guest voices even more obviously signal ironic recontextualizations for purposes of parody. It is significant that *The Simpsons* makes frequent references to external songs and that nearly a third of its many hundreds of guest voices comprise musicians. Much of that intertextual referencing and celebrity networking has to do with the show's writers, not its composers. However, the show also includes many "original" songs, usually with lyrics by an episode's writer(s) or a guest songwriter and with music by Alf Clausen. Such songs frequently parody existing styles, genres, and — in some cases — specific, existing songs.

The Simpsons' Main Theme

The Simpsons' main theme (first heard in its complete form in January of 1990) was written by former rock musician and emerging film composer Danny Elfman. The show's first 13 episodes (1989-90) were scored by Richard Gibbs, and a handful of episodes in the fall of 1990 were scored by either Arthur B. Rubinstein, Patrick Williams, or Ray Colcord. The show's most significant composer, though, is Alf Clausen, whose first contribution was for 1990's "Treehouse of Horror" Halloween special (S02E03). He then composed the music for about 600 episodes of the show.³ In addition to other *Simpsons*-related music items, the soundtrack recording for *The Simpsons Movie* (2007) was also released, with the film having been scored by German-born composer Hans Zimmer. Zimmer had worked with *Simpsons* co-developer James L. Brooks on several projects, and Clausen's stoic response to not having been hired for the movie was: "Sometimes you're the

windshield; sometimes you're the bug" (Harris 2007). In 2017, after 27 seasons with *The Simpsons*, the Emmy-winning Alf Clausen was replaced as the TV show's composer by a partnership involving, not surprisingly, Hans Zimmer.⁴

The Simpsons' approach to music derives largely from its writers' backgrounds in parody-related comedy in the 1970s and '80s. However, Alf Clausen also had comparable music-related experience as the music director of the TV variety show *Donny & Marie* (1976-79), as a Hollywood film score orchestrator, and as the composer for the sitcoms *Moonlighting* (1985-89) and *ALF* (1986-90). Nearly all the prominent, early writers of *The Simpsons* — including creator Matt Groening — were born between 1950 and 1963, so they often make references to songs and other music from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. However, Clausen is just older enough to have been able to bring to the table a well-seasoned experience not just with the music of those decades, but also with earlier, song-inspired, instrumental cartoon scoring.

Music in *The Simpsons* includes composer Danny Elfman's quirky, largely orchestral theme, which intentionally evokes earlier television cartoon music. The theme for *The Simpsons* first appeared as a preliminary, less-orchestrated version in the first of the show's full-length episodes to be broadcast: December 1989's Christmas-themed "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire" (S01E01). Elfman then completed his full version of the theme, and some often creatively self-reflexive variations of it appeared in every subsequent episode of the show for more than 30 years. In his theme, Elfman specifically channels the style of Hoyt Curtin's fun, quick themes for classic 1960s primetime animated television shows, such as 1962-63's *The Jetsons*. Curtin's TV theme songs from the 1960s are classic, authoritative examples of cartoon music, and Elfman's approach to emulating that style provides a kind of cheeky, me-too, semi-deflating aesthetic. However, the show also takes the idea much further, as other composers and musicians have re-worked and arguably deflated Elfman's theme in various new contexts throughout numerous episodes of *The Simpsons*. The idea of a newly composed TV theme emulating an earlier theme and then itself being reworked and reused by others (i.e., for humorous purposes) exemplifies Linda Hutcheon's idea of postmodern parody exploring the idea of a "self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (1989: 1). Compare Figure 1 and Example 1 with Figure 2 and Example 2.⁵

The Simpsons' theme is entirely instrumental after its three-chord vocal opening, whereas *The Jetsons'* theme largely includes vocals after its instrumental opening. However, the two themes similarly build their initial vocal gestures, rising through a perfect fifth via a tritone (a raised fourth in F major or C major: B-natural or F-sharp), with the tritone resolving upwards by a semitone on the sung surname.

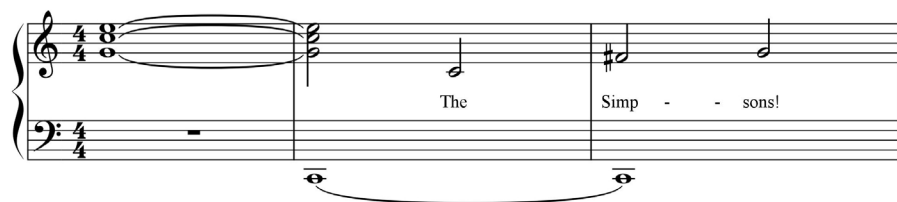


Fig. 1: The Opening of *The Simpsons'* Theme. (Danny Elfman, Fox Film Music Corp., 1990)



Fig. 2: *The Jetsons'* Theme. (W. Hanna, J. Barbera & H. Curtin, Barbera-Hanna Music, 1962)



Fig. 3: The Main Tune of *The Simpsons'* Theme (D. Elfman, Fox Film Music Corp., 1990)

The main tune of *The Simpsons'* theme expands on the work's opening vocal gesture, but is now made rhythmically quite active (see Fig. 3).

The predominance of F-sharps in *The Simpsons'* theme also preserves the function of the continuing B-naturals in *The Jetsons'* theme, and they frequently clash with more diatonic notes, often with the participation of jarring, brass-instrument chords. The third measures of both themes (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) also similarly provide further contrast with parallel, offbeat-emphasizing rhythmic bursts. In addition, the first measure of *The Simpsons'* theme rises, which is balanced by its second measure falling (Fig. 3). *The Jetsons'* theme (which ends on E-flat or flat-7 of F major) does the opposite, with a falling instrumental gesture that leads into a rising vocal gesture (which is itself anticipated by the rising bass line in the opening measure). Notably, in 2015's "My Fare

Lady” (S26E14), a second introduction to the episode features Alf Clausen’s combination of Hoyt Curtin’s theme for *The Jetsons* with Danny Elfman’s theme for *The Simpsons*. Similarly, Clausen’s recurring vocal/chamber/percussion theme for *The Itchy & Scratchy Show* (1990–, the extremely violent cartoon that appears numerous times within *The Simpsons*) helps to parody such classic cat and mouse cartoons as *Tom and Jerry* (1940–58).

Elfman and Clausen do not mean simply to parody (i.e., “make fun of”) earlier cartoon themes, but they certainly do reference them intertextually and update them stylistically in order to deflate them somewhat. Indeed, Elfman had already excelled at creating music similarly influenced by — and moving beyond — cartoon and comic-oriented contexts. By the time he created his theme for *The Simpsons* in 1989, he had already worked as a composer for adventure-comedy, adult-fantasy filmmaker Tim Burton on three films: *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure* (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1988), and *Batman* (1989). Elfman’s style and aesthetic context make sense for *The Simpsons*, as the show was conceived as a cartoon that *can* be funny for children but is mainly intended for adults.

Elfman had even earlier explored “adult cartoon” themes as the lead singer, rhythm guitarist, and main songwriter of the Los Angeles-based group Oingo Boingo. The group’s new wave rock era of the 1980s frequently included edgy, alternative, adult-themed songs, but with a quirky, humorous, cartoon-like tone that partly eased that edginess. The Oingo Boingo song arguably closest in style to Elfman’s eventual *Simpsons* theme is “Nasty Habits” (1981), a song that lyrically addresses the possibility of otherwise strait-laced citizens privately exploring such things as sadomasochism and pornography. See Figure 4 and Example 3.

The band plays the song’s instrumental introduction between several sung sections and at the very end of the song. The use of closely related single-measure gestures, a pervasive bass tritone (in this case, G to C-sharp), clashing intervals, dissonant brass chords, and a quick tempo (168–171 beats per minute) connect Elfman’s *Simpsons* theme to at least some of his earlier, cartoon-like rock band work with Oingo Boingo. However, Danny Elfman’s



Fig. 4: Oingo Boingo’s “Nasty Habits” (D. Elfman, 1981)

main title theme, for which he received an Emmy award nomination, is — and only in its original form — his one and only contribution to *The Simpsons*. It was left to Alf Clausen and others to self-consciously deflate the “regal” authority of Elman’s theme.

Intertextuality vs. Parody in End-Title Variations of *The Simpsons’* Theme

Although Alf Clausen did not write the main theme of *The Simpsons*, his various end-title (and other) variations of it help dozens of episodes parody the stylistic worlds of television shows and other contexts already referenced in them. These variations do so while also providing self-contradictory, self-undermining versions of the show’s main theme. They exist in a grey area that teasingly acknowledges other music — referencing it, but only slightly making fun of it. Indeed, such contexts allowed Clausen to treat the show’s main theme as though it were also an existing piece of music from somewhere outside of the show. For example, Clausen’s *Addams Family* variation (from 1993’s “Treehouse of Horror IV” – S05E05) fuses that 1964 television theme’s (Example 4) characteristic partial rising scale (through a perfect fourth) and finger-snaps with *The Simpsons’* theme, including Halloween-suitable, theremin-like electronic sounds (Example 5). The latter part of Season 6 includes many examples of such “mash-ups.” A pseudo-Australian version of the theme (from 1995’s “Bart vs. Australia” – S06E16 – Example 6) includes didgeridoo, stick-like percussion, and folk-like strings and acoustic guitar. Clausen’s mock-Renaissance variation (from 1995’s “Lisa’s Wedding” – S06E19 – Example 7) includes recorder-like flutes, celeste-like keyboards, harp, and percussion. His *Hill Street Blues* variation (from 1995’s “The Springfield Connection” – S06E23) incorporates that 1981 TV theme’s (Example 8) common-tone chord gesture, jazz-influenced electric guitar and saxophone lines, high strings, and an upwards key change (Example 9).

Guest star end-titles have produced similar theme variations, such as Tito Puente’s Afro-Cuban world pop band music (1995’s “Who Shot Mr. Burns? Part II” – S07E01 – Example 10), Sonic Youth’s experimental grunge rock (1996’s “Homerpalooza” – S07E24 – Example 11), and Los Lobos’s vaguely jazz-rock version (2005’s “Thank God It’s Doomsday” – S16E19 – Example 12). Thus, the show’s end-titles music ranges considerably in genre and style, including distinctive TV themes, several types of world music (in varying degrees of authenticity), instances of non-pop-rock band music, examples of art music, and some fairly eccentric rock groups. These

end-title variations have thus allowed Alf Clausen and others to use and partially deflate the almost too-familiar theme in new and creative ways. They produce “light parody” by merging the show’s theme with earlier styles and songs from elsewhere. The show thus makes fun of itself, while also teasingly acknowledging things from elsewhere. Such moments provide examples of how the show’s music enacts Jonathan Gray’s “merry rogue” court jester to produce “safety valves” (2006: 11) that somewhat reduce the value pressure of various types of music — and even of *The Simpsons’* own theme — but arguably without quite risking the possibility of puncturing them out of existence.

Parodies of Cartoon, TV, and Movie Music

The Simpsons provides numerous references to the history of cartoon and other TV music, including parody-homages of the themes for *The Flintstones* (1961) and *All in the Family* (1971). *The Flintstones’* opening theme gives a sense of Fred’s life, including his job at the Bedrock Quarry, his commute home, and a trip to a drive-in movie (Example 13). Similarly, the parody in 1993’s “Marge vs. the Monorail” (S04E12) evokes Homer Simpson’s working-class job at the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant and the joyous end of a workday. In this case, though, the song ends with the character crashing his car into a chestnut tree (Example 14). The *All in the Family* theme, “Those Were the Days,” was written by Lee Adams and Charles Strouse (Example 15). “Lisa’s Sax” (S09E03), which first aired in 1997, includes a sequence that transfers Archie and Edith Bunker’s 1970s nostalgia for the 1930s-40s (such as Glenn Miller, Herbert Hoover, and classic cars) to Homer and Marge Simpson’s 1990s nostalgia for the 1970s (such as the Bee Gees, overweight Elvis, and eight-track tapes) (Example 16).⁶ In these cases, replicating the same melody with new, sardonic words produces parody, not merely an allusion to an existing work.

The Simpsons’ intertextual pastiches of scenes from movies also produce critical commentary and parody. For example, in 1997’s “Simpsoncalifragilisticexpiala(Annoyed Grunt)cious” (S08E13) the Simpsons hire a British nanny — Shary Bobbins — who parallels Julie Andrews’s character in Disney’s 1964 film *Mary Poppins*. The episode title evokes “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,” with “Simpson” replacing “Super” and “Annoyed Grunt” voiced as Homer’s favourite expression: “D’oh!” “Cut Every Corner” parodies R. M. and R. B. Sherman’s song “A Spoonful of Sugar.” Similar to the transformations of the themes from *The Flintstones*

and *All in the Family*, “Cut Every Corner” sardonically re-works the enthusiasm of “A Spoonful of Sugar” for a magic-enhanced, room-cleaning game into a smarmy attitude about doing a half-assed job. Ironically, even though *The Simpsons* made fun of Disney almost as often as it made fun of Fox (the show’s broadcast network), Disney acquired Fox in 2019. The deflationary value of such jokes and parodies thus increased considerably, especially given that many fans of *The Simpsons* will now watch the show on the streaming service Disney+.

Co-composed by Alf Clausen, with lyrics by episode writers Al Jean and Mike Reiss, the gestures, orchestration, general style, and selected lyrics of “Cut Every Corner” closely match those of “A Spoonful of Sugar.” However, unlike the borrowed melodies from TV themes, in this case the very melody itself has been parodied by creating contours similar — but not identical — to the original. The approach thus closely evokes the original song, but without using its exact melody and lyrics. It thus makes fun of the fact that only those limited elements can precipitate cases of copyright infringement. Compare Figure 5 and Example 17 with Figure 6 and Example 18.

Both songs are in F major and use the same rhythms and melodic notes that fall within the same range (middle C to B-flat — or a perfect fourth on either side of F), but the actual notes are not arranged in the same way. For example, the original falls a major sixth (from A to C) on “medicine go,” whereas the parody rises through the same interval (C to A) on “really not.”⁷ The “new” song undermines the authority of Disney’s original by creating a parallel universe version that obscures its kinder, gentler aesthetic in favour of something mean and sharp.



Fig. 5: “A Spoonful of Sugar” (R. M. and R. B. Sherman, 1964)



Fig. 6: “Cut Every Corner” (Al Jean, Mike Reiss, and Alf Clausen, 1997)

Musicians as Guest Stars for Purposes of (Self-)Parody

Jonathan Gray argues that *The Simpsons*' "revolving door of guest stars contributes to the deification of celebrities in society" (2006: 84). However, very few of its guest stars — including the 30 percent of them who are musicians — are left entirely unscathed when they appear as animated versions of themselves on the show. Such guests must know perfectly well that the show will skewer them, but they don't mind subjecting themselves to some "safety valve" deflating. They turn themselves into temporary jesters for the court of *The Simpsons* and risk being devalued. For example, in 1993's "Radio Bart" (S03E13), singer-songwriter-bassist Sting (formerly of British rock band The Police) is made accountable for the charity-rock songs of the 1980s. Sting had sung on the first of these songs: British super-group Band Aid's 1984 song "Do They Know It's Christmas?" After Bart cons Springfield into believing he is stuck in a well, Sting collaborates with Krusty the Clown (who had ostensibly once fired him as an opening act) and other members of the entertainment community to record the hapless attempted charity song: "We're Sending Our Love Down the Well." Similarly, in *The Simpsons Movie* (2007), alternative rock band Green Day performs on a barge. As the barge begins to dissolve and sink from the amount of pollution in Lake Springfield, the group transitions to orchestral string instruments and plays the hymn "Nearer my God to Thee" — thus referencing a famous, music-related moment in James Cameron's 1997 film *Titanic*. The band's well-known song, "American Idiot," is then parodied in a church organ "Funeral Version" during a remembrance service for the "deceased" band members. According to the king's fool of *The Simpsons*, even charity rock and church music require some deflating.

The Simpsons has found some very creative ways around the twin difficulties of representation and licensing. "Dancin' Homer" (S02E05), which aired in 1990, contains the show's first musical guest: "American Songbook" pop singer Tony Bennett. He sings Jeff Martin's newly composed song "Capital City," which recognizably parodies the gestures and urban-enthusiasm lyrics of the title song from Martin Scorsese's 1977 film musical *New York, New York* (composed by John Kander and Fred Ebb). Although the film's title track was originally performed by Liza Minnelli, the style and instrumentation of Frank Sinatra's 1979 cover version, which is the version parodied on *The Simpsons*, are better known (Example 19). The song initially accompanies the Simpson family driving through Capital City (Springfield's nearest large city), but then Bennett himself appears in mid-song, which plays with our expectations concerning background music versus source — or realistic "diegetic" — music (Example 20). After Bennett's appearance, other major music stars began to appear on

the show quite regularly. In some cases, entire episodes were based around such guests.

Contemporary pop star Michael Jackson appeared anonymously in 1991's "Stark Raving Dad" (S03E01). He provided spoken dialogue (credited as "John Jay Smith"), under the guise of a delusional — not to mention large and white! — mental patient who merely *believes* he is Jackson. He was not contracted to sing in the episode, however, so Kipp Lennon impersonated the star's famous, high singing voice on "Ben," "Billie Jean," and "Happy Birthday, Lisa." Jackson was impressed by the impersonation and apparently wanted to play a joke on his family and make them think he sang in the episode (Brooks 2003). "Happy Birthday, Lisa" was written by Jackson for the episode, and *The Simpsons Songbook* (2002) humorously credits it to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, but the BMI publishing citation tellingly credits "MIJAC MUSIC." After the controversial documentary *Leaving Neverland* (2019) renewed exploration of the late singer's alleged sexual exploitation of young boys, *The Simpsons* creators removed the episode from the show's media content for possibly having been used by Jackson during his alleged activities (Al Jean qtd. in Stern 2019). In any case, stars of the magnitude of Sting, Green Day, Tony Bennett, Michael Jackson, and even The Beatles' Ringo Starr, George Harrison, and Paul McCartney have been willing to be temporary court jesters on *The Simpsons*. By participating in the show, such wealthy and arguably out-of-touch celebrities can demonstrate a more self-effacing, relatable, and "deflated" sense of themselves. In addition, after Jackson's confusing, anonymous appearance in the fall of 1991 (and Dustin Hoffman's similar one earlier that year), all guest stars on the show had to agree to be credited as themselves (Gates 1994: 40).

Expanding upon Jonathan Gray's conception of *The Simpsons* as a king's fool, even the leading song parodist of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, "Weird Al" Yankovic, appears on the show several times as a court jester. In 2003's "Three Gays of the Condo"⁸ (S14E17), Yankovic parodies John Cougar Mellencamp's young-love, Middle America, folk-rock song "Jack and Diane" (Example 21). Yankovic's parody, "Homer and Marge," references grilled-cheese sandwiches, Marge's big heart, Homer's large stomach, and the fact that their "love goes on" (Example 22). The scene, however, also parodies the parodist, with Homer making fun of Yankovic as being pretty much the same as 1960s song-prankster (and pre-Yankovic/pre-*Simpsons* court jester) Allan Sherman. Yankovic similarly appears in 2008's "That '90s Show" (S19E11), spoofing TV's *That '70s Show* (1998-2006), and Sherman's music also appears in parodic contexts in multiple episodes of *The Simpsons*. The show thus acknowledges Sherman and Yankovic as pranksters worthy of emulation and further humour.

Chipping Away at Authority and (at) a Rich Shared Public Culture

Lawrence Levine suggests that our cultural distinctions are too “rigidly hierarchical ... [thereby] limiting the dimensions of our understanding of culture,” that we need “a more open and fluid set of divisions more conducive to facilitating the truly complex comparisons we presently lack,” and that cultural hierarchy has caused the loss of a “rich shared public culture” (1988: 7, 9). *The Simpsons* is just such a non-hierarchical, open, and fluid place for complex cultural comparisons and a rich shared public culture. The vast majority of the references to existing pieces of music in *The Simpsons* appear in the middle of various episodes in order to help define the personalities, politics, and/or aesthetics of a wide variety of the show’s individual characters. The quality of use varies considerably, though, including: a character singing or speaking part of a song, a dropped-in recording, a textual-visual reference, or an elaborate re-performance. Homer and Marge are frozen in their late thirties, but their music spans numerous decades, as though they were teenagers anywhere from the late 1960s through the late 1990s. The effect provides what might be called a “logarithmic” sense of time, as the show stretches the couple’s high-school years across teen-aged music references from a period of about 30 years. Each of the four years of high school is worth about seven or eight years in the historical universe of *The Simpsons*. The characters’ ages are frozen, but their music comes from a wide variety of eras, as though that music all somehow came from the same period.

Homer’s preferred music is most commonly hard rock and helps to define the happy-go-lucky and day-dreamer aspects of his personality. Marge’s music is most often pop-rock and typically helps to inscribe her idealistic and somewhat naive personality. Bart keeps turning ten years old, and his music often helps to characterize the hell-raiser and/or pseudo-hipster sides of his personality. Lisa, who keeps turning eight, plays the saxophone and especially loves aspects of jazz and the blues. Other music *links* Marge and Homer by way of pop, rock, soul, and dance-oriented songs. For example, the romantic pop song “(They Long to be) Close to You” arguably functions as Marge and Homer’s song. It was written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David in 1963 but the best known version was recorded by the Carpenters in 1970. Its opening line asks the question: “Why do birds suddenly appear every time you are near?” and *The Simpsons* initially used the song in flashbacks related to the spring of Marge and Homer’s senior year of high school (1974), especially in 1991’s “The Way We Was” (S02E12). In 1999’s “Maximum Homerdrive” (S10E17), Marge selects the song’s tune for her new doorbell, but it malfunctions and keeps repeating, like an ear worm. “Close to You”

then re-appears in 2007's *The Simpsons Movie*, after Marge has temporarily left Homer in order to do the right thing (i.e., save Springfield), and he finds himself longing for her.

In addition to its fluidity of references to character-enhancing popular music, *The Simpsons* resists the idea of a traditional, high, dominative culture and frequently satirizes the artificiality of such social constructions. Indeed, the show makes fun of an even wider variety of popular forms, sometimes by mashing them together with supposedly "higher" music. In 1995's "The Springfield Connection" (S06E23), Homer and Marge attend a Hollywood Bowl type of outdoor orchestral pops concert. The use of such a venue may have been inspired by various 1938-1950 cartoons set in that venue (see Goldmark 2005: 118). The concert includes John Williams' theme from 1977's *Star Wars*. Homer, who hardly comes across as a connoisseur of European art music, complains about a bassoonist's late entry and, especially, about laser effects and mirrored balls "butchering the classics" and cheapening the memory of John Williams (b. 1932 and still alive), who must be "rolling around in his grave." The performance of the *Star Wars* theme ends with the mid-18th-century folk tune most commonly associated with the nursery rhyme, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." The Simpsons' own Dr. Hibbert appreciates that both tunes allude to stars, describing it as a "deviliciously satirical" joke, but Homer does not appreciate it. Cultural hierarchy has already been compromised in the performance *itself*, by adding a kind of classical music to a classic science-fiction film theme — and *that* is what Homer rejects.

In 1995's "Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum-Doodily" (S07E03), Homer conflates classical music and jazz by singing the opening motif of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 into Lisa's saxophone, to the words: "Sax-a-mo-phone ... Sax-a-mo-phone." The same work re-appears in 2005's "The Seven-Beer Snitch" (S16E14). Marge convinces Springfield to build a \$30 million, cutting-edge concert hall, designed by Frank Gehry and parodying his 2003 Los Angeles Walt Disney Concert Hall. At the venue's premiere everyone prepares to leave after Beethoven's first eight notes and even the orchestra leaves when they remember that the next piece is an "atonal medley" by Philip Glass. The fact that *everyone* leaves considerably amplifies the implications of a handful of music critics leaving Carnegie Hall when exposed to modern jazz in the 1955 cartoon *Pizzicato Pussycat*. The subsequent degeneration of the Springfield hall is accompanied by Alf Clausen's plaintive variation of Beethoven's originally assertive motif. Beethoven's 5th is also referenced elsewhere in *The Simpsons*. So, in a number of episodes, even one of history's most famous European art music composers and his best-known musical gesture are deflated by Fox's fool.

Instrumental Music Intertextuality

The Simpsons includes a few, recurring character or “idea” instrumental themes (leitmotifs) provided by composer Alf Clausen. However, most of the show’s background music appears as one-offs — used only once, in a very specific circumstance, such as in 1994’s “Bart of Darkness” (S06E01). In that episode, Clausen provides a modified version of Maurice Jarre’s uplifting, instrumental, barn-building music from the 1985 thriller *Witness*. The Simpsons construct a backyard pool, but their first attempt results in a barn, accompanied by a variation of Jarre’s noble, Aaron Copland-esque, folk- (or common man) inspired, pan-diatonic, ascending-gesture-favouring music. A bearded (but, appropriately, moustache-less), suspenders- and hat-wearing Amish man appears and says: “’Tis a fine barn, but sure ’tis no pool, English!” Homer replies with an Amish-ized, “olde tyme” version of his ubiquitous catchphrase: “D’oh-eth!” In this segment derived from *Witness*, *The Simpsons* restricts its parody and use of irony to one music reference, one scene, one character, and a brief pair of verbal utterances. However, as Linda Hutcheon points out, that film already echoes and rewrites, parodically and ironically, aspects of the 1952 western film *High Noon* (1989: 103). Alf Clausen points out that his music in such cases is “paying homage to these things ... we honor that music ... it’s a tribute to it rather than trying to totally poke fun at it” (Goldmark 2002: 246). So, Clausen acknowledges that his work often straddles a fine line between intertextual referencing (i.e., for acknowledging the importance of things) and producing flat-out parodies of them.

Conclusion: Genre Reworkings, Narrative Complexity, Intertextuality, and Parody

The Simpsons provides what Noël Carroll refers to as a “two tiered structure of communication,” allowing straightforward and esoteric meanings to emerge simultaneously (Carroll 1982: 61). The show constantly pairs its nature as a humorous cartoon with allusions to other television shows, movies, musicals, literature, visual art, and various types of music. *The Simpsons’* stories, characters, dialogue, and cartoon-like jokes can be enjoyed by almost anyone (often including children), but culturally attuned adults can find much deeper levels of additional meaning in them. Carroll refers to young people enjoying the “rousing adventure sagas” of the *Star Wars*, *Superman*, and *Indiana Jones* franchises, but older people also viewing them as “remembrances of things past” (62).

The Simpsons can be understood as a kind of “genre reworking” (Carroll 1982: 61), meaning that the show constantly visits and re-contextualizes a wide variety of existing cultural forms. While creative boundaries may be pushed with genre reworking, it does not always work, which provides a rich field for parody. For example, only a small audience appreciated the esoteric meaning of Stanley Kubrick’s controversial 1980 film adaptation of Stephen King’s novel *The Shining*. Other viewers found Kubrick’s expectation-thwarting reworkings confusing. *The Shining* has been parodied on *The Simpsons* several times, but especially memorably as “The Shinning” in 1995’s “Treehouse of Horror V” (S06E06). That segment includes Alf Clausen’s variation of Wendy Carlos and Rachel Elkind’s opening titles music for *The Shining*, which begins with an instrumental, brass-section reference to the well-known Gregorian chant, “Dies irae” (“The Day of Wrath”) (Example 23). “The Shinning” also includes electronic cluster chords similar to other parts of Carlos and Elkind’s work, and later parts of Clausen’s adaptation also approximate the modern European works used by Stanley Kubrick throughout his film, such as excerpts from Bartók’s *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, six pieces by Penderecki, and Ligeti’s *Lontano*. After 15 years, even the score from a relatively complex film adaptation can be sufficiently recognizable to a general audience to be further adapted and parodied itself.

Jason Mittell suggests that narratively realistic humour and action in such narratively complex shows as *The Simpsons* are amplified by “violating storytelling conventions in a spectacular fashion” (2006: 36) In particular, “formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action typical of most viewers” (36). In other words, the suspension of disbelief is neither required nor desired. On *The Simpsons*, music also participates within a complex, transcendent level of awareness largely involving intertextuality (referencing things from outside) and parody (making fun of such things). In the court of *The Simpsons*, music has enabled various types of jests and jesters. 🍄

Notes

1. S07E01 refers to Season 7, Episode 1 of *The Simpsons*. This numbering convention is used throughout the article. The reference section at the end of the article contains a list of episodes cited in chronological order, including episode titles, primary writers, directors, and original broadcast dates.

2. The episode title references the advertising catchphrase “Who Shot J. R.?” from 1980’s similar season-cliffhanger context on the TV show *Dallas*.

3. Three albums of music from the show were released: *Songs in the Key of Springfield* (1997), *Go Simpsonic with the Simpsons* (1999), and *The Simpsons: Testify* (2007). The title of the first of these parodies Stevie Wonder's 1976 album-title: *Songs in the Key of Life*. The three albums contain some of the media examples in the playlist for this article. They also include audio versions of the examples provided as video clips, as well as additional pieces of music mentioned herein.

4. Alf Clausen won his first Primetime Emmy Award for the Jazz Era parody song "We Put the Spring in Springfield" from 1996's "Bart after Dark" (S08E04), with lyrics by guest songwriter Ken Keeler. He won his second such Emmy for the celebrity- and socially-conscious-musical skewering "You're Checking In" from "Kickin' It: A Musical Journey through the Betty Ford Center," in 1997's "The City of New York vs. Homer Simpson" (S09E01). Ken Keeler again wrote the lyrics for that song, but he also co-wrote its music. Clausen was similarly nominated for seven additional song Emmys from 1994 to 2005 and received two nominations for Outstanding Music Direction in 1997-98 and twelve nominations for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Music Composition for a Series (Dramatic Underscore) from 1992 to 2011. Clausen is the most often nominated musician in the history of the Emmy Awards.

5. See playlist at: <https://bit.ly/MUSICultures-47-Bowman>. All examples referred to in this article are included in the playlist.

6. Also, Carroll O'Connor's voice for Archie Bunker influenced Dan Castellaneta's voice for Homer Simpson, which also sounds something like Jackie Gleason's voice for Ralph Kramden (in the 1955-56 sitcom *The Honeymooners*) and Alan Reed's voice for Fred Flintstone — was which itself modelled after Gleason and Kramden. Jean Stapleton's voice for Edith Bunker (especially when singing the show's opening theme song) also influenced Julie Kavner's gruff voice for Marge Simpson. Moreover, the idea of a show's characters performing its opening titles later appeared with Lisa Simpson's exuberant saxophone solos during nearly all of *The Simpsons*' opening titles and in the theme songs of *Family Guy* and *American Dad!*

7. The episode also includes several related parodies: "Minimum Wage Nanny" (a take-off on "The Perfect Nanny"), "A Boozehound Named Barney" (from "Feed the Birds"), and Groundskeeper Willie's variation of Bert's (Dick Van Dyke's) one-man-band: performing Michael Sembello's 1983 *Flashdance* hit "Maniac," instead of the original film's "Jolly Holiday."

8. The episode title is a pun on the title of the 1975 film *Three Days of the Condor*.

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