"Analysing the Performance Gestures of Queen."

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To begin, here are several statements about British rock band Queen:

- "The magic of Queen was Freddie Mercury, Brian May, Roger Taylor, and John Deacon […] it was the combination that turned Queen into a legendary phenomenon" (Purvis 2011, p. 11);
- "Queen managed to take four very individual identities and merge them into a single unstoppable force" (Doherty 2011, p. 28);
- "Each [band member] was an essential ingredient…the band could function only as a result of their joint contributions" (Sky 1994, p. 26).

This paper forms part of a large-scale analysis of Queen's musical idiolect,[1] from the studio albums *Queen* (1973) to *The Game* (1980). One of the key research questions is, how can the analyst engage these statements? Or, is it possible to explain the Queen combination without resorting to hyperbole or cliché? Ultimately, one can only speculate as to *why* Queen worked as a group; nonetheless, in this paper, I will present a method that leads to some suggestions of *how* the Queen combination worked from a musical perspective; these findings, I believe, cut to the heart of Queen's idiolect.

The title of this paper refers to the "performance gestures" of Queen; evidently, the two terms have varied connotations and meanings. "Gesture" has been defined broadly as a small musical segment. This definition follows Hatten (2004), and can be regarded similarly to Tagg's "Item of Musical Code" (Tagg 1982). With regards to "performance," recent work in the area of performance analysis has focused on how, in classical music contexts, different performers interpret the scores that they are playing (see Cook *et al.* 2012). In other words, the writers are concerned with subtle variations against a constant (i.e. notated) framework. The same aim is implicit here. With respect to individual band members, the focus is on how each player articulates his 'notes on the page'; with respect to the group, the focus is on how the raw materials of the song (the chords, the melodies, the structure) are arranged. Combining the two strands, this analysis is concerned with the

[1] "Idiolect," like in linguistic terms, refers to those musical details that distinguish one artist from another, usually within a common style (see Moore and Ibrahim 2005).

finer, perhaps more nuanced, details of songs that operate at individual and idiolect levels, to extend Middleton's distinction (Middleton 1990).

It is necessary to mention briefly several other studies that have influenced the current work. In the field of electroacoustic music, Denis Smalley's theory of spectromorphology accounts for changes of sonic shapes within a composition; the means of change include alterations to the attack, decay, continuation of notes, or to the spectral density (Smalley 1997). In a popular music context, Andrew Legg (2010) identifies 13 basic techniques that are frequently employed by gospel singers, including blues inflections, elongated consonants and grunts. Similarly, Moore (2012, p. 102-3) argues that analysis of a singer's timbre can begin from four factors: the register of the note, the position of the sound in the vocal cavity, and the singer's attitudes to rhythm and pitch. Finally, Spicer's analysis of the Police demonstrated that the band's idiolect was the result of idiosyncratic stylistic fusion (Spicer 2010).

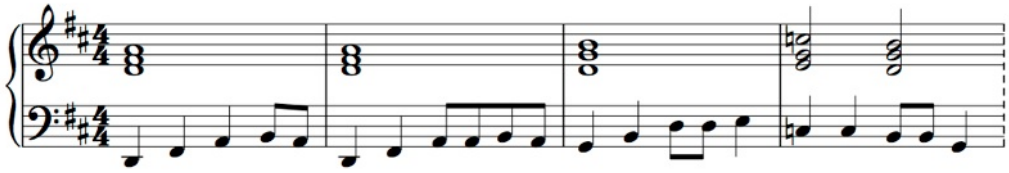
Underpinning these studies is emergence theory, a concept otherwise known as "greater than the sum of its parts." What the studies show is that the whole — whether a timbre, a performance, or a song — is comprised of multiple, micro parts or gestures. Thus, understanding the parts in detail leads to an understanding of the whole. The question then becomes, how does one capture these musical gestures in as much detail as possible? One option is language, as advocated by Robert Walser (2003, pp. 34-5). His description of Kenny G's saxophone playing is typifies this approach: "He plays ornaments on his ornaments, with nuances on his nuances…he swells and fades and throbs with no trace of force, no pushiness" (Walser 2003, pp. 34-35). Thus, one could talk of Mercury's juxtaposition of "delicate" and "forceful" singing tones, or Brian May's "melodic" guitar solos.

Insightful and accurate as these adjectives may be, they are not useful for, either for a large-scale study or for relating the band members' parts. Put another way, if Mercury sings "delicately" in the verse of "Bohemian Rhapsody," can one apply the adjective to his vocal of "Killer Queen"? And how does one compare "delicate" with "melodic" with any other descriptions that may arise? Given the context of this research (a doctoral dissertation), it was necessary to construct a more rigorous method that would uncover performance traits

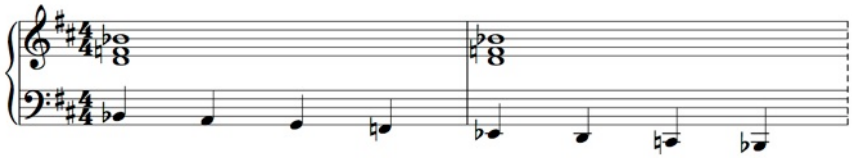
and musical interrelationships, and that could be applied in the same way to each song of the corpus.

The method is rather simple: for each band member/instrumental part of Queen's songs, I have developed a set of questions that investigate the role played by the musician in the song, and the playing style of the musician. The questions are laid out in Appendix A.

Before outlining some results from this method, there are several points to address. First, despite their appearance, the questions are not designed to produce quantitative or concrete answers. The question on the bass guitar's counter-melodic properties is a good example. There is no point at which the bass moves from a harmonic-rhythmic to a melodic role. However, by being aware of the potential for this role change, the analyst can make sense of the bridge in 'Crazy Little Thing Called Love,' as shown in **Examples 1 and 2**.



Example 1. 'Crazy Little Thing Called Love,' Verse, Harmonic Reduction and Bass Line



Example 2. 'Crazy Little Thing Called Love,' Bridge, bars 5-6, Harmonic Reduction and Bass Line

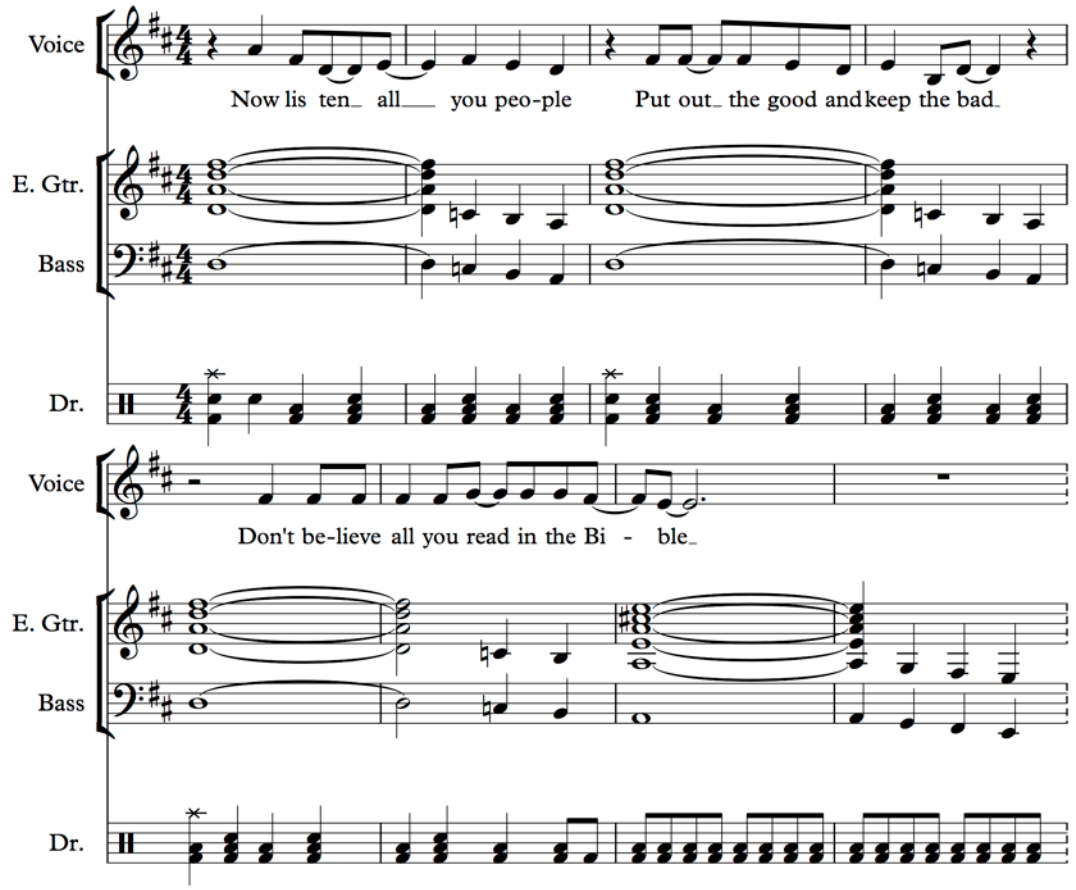
Second, the analysis has been undertaken with reference to self-produced transcriptions and sheet music, and with the great assistance of *Sonic Visualiser*. This programme provides detailed spectrograms, from which one can see, quite easily, subtle approaches to pitch and articulation, especially in the vocal parts. Third, the questions have been specifically designed with Queen's songs in mind; but with some tinkering, there is no reason the general approach could not work for other artists as well.

In applying these questions to the Queen corpus and the individual band members, one uncovers a great number of gestures, many of which reveal something about the band's approach to stylistic fusion. For the remainder of this paper, however, I will focus on the notion of gestural unity, that is, the gestures which connect two or more of the band

members. There are three main ways in which gestural unity is evident — motivic, rhythmic, and articulatory. While some of the analytical findings below betray particular stylistic influences, others point towards musical details that may be more distinct to Queen.

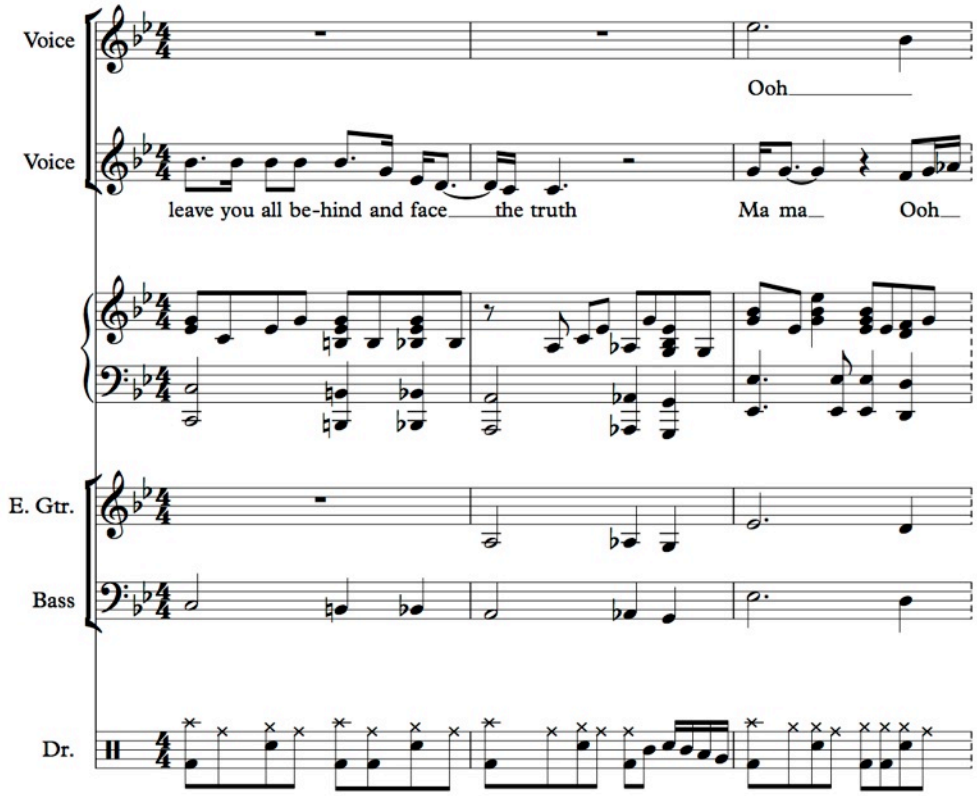
Motivic Unity

The first category is motivic unity, which refers to similar pitch relationships. The final example of this paper will look at more subtle motivic relationships, but I will begin with the simplest type: motivic unity from instrumental doubling. This is most evident in the case of Brian May, on guitar, doubling John Deacon's bass lines. This trait appears first on the debut album, *Queen*, in the March section of 'Great King Rat,' which can be seen in **Example 3**. Similar cases can be found in the instrumental of 'Jesus' and the introduction of 'Ogre Battle' from *Queen II*. These examples are rather typical of the hard rock style, in which songs reside; comparable examples can be found in Led Zeppelin's 'Black Dog,' 'Misty Mountain Hop' or Deep Purple's 'Space Truckin.'

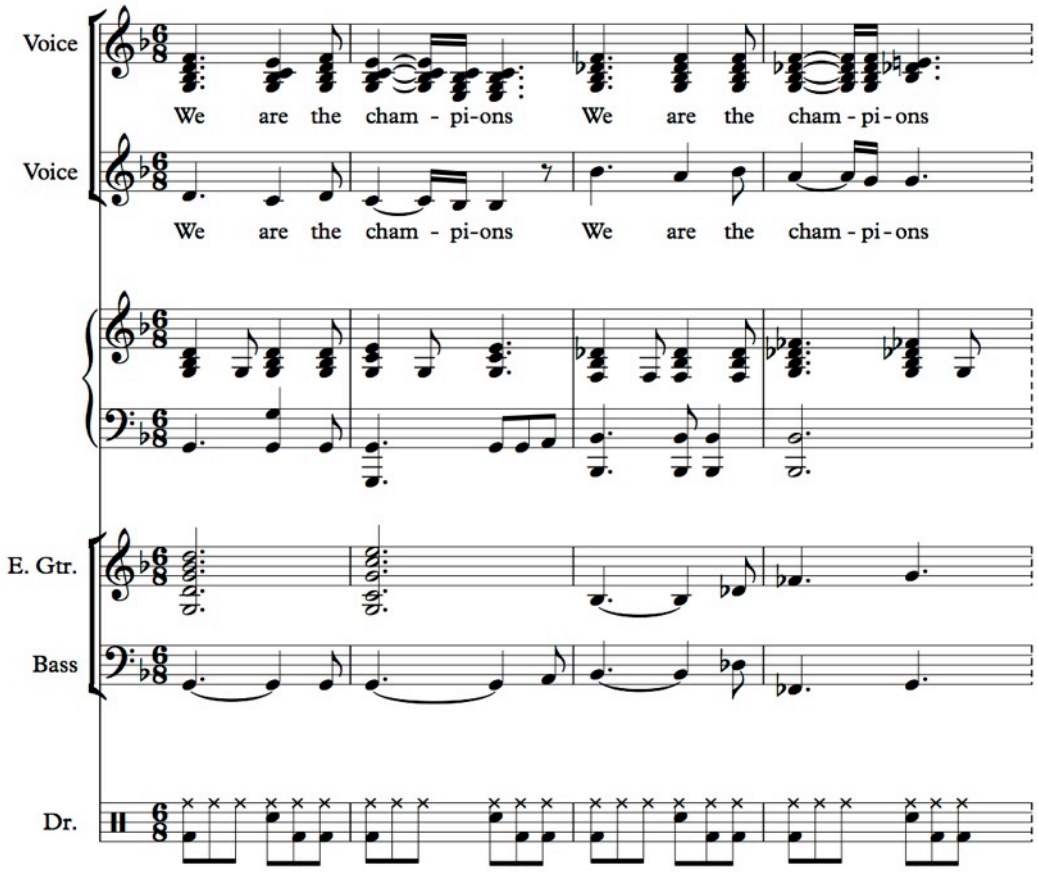


Example 3. 'Great King Rat' (1973), March, 2'42'-2'55"

This feature went on to become, however, a key component of Queen's rock ballad style. Although the band's harmonic language was conservative, they embellished progressions with step-wise chromaticism. This frequently occurred in the bass lines, as typified by the second verse of 'Bohemian Rhapsody' **(Example 4)**, 'We Are The Champions' **(Example 5)**, 'In The Lap of the Gods...Revisited,' 'Spread Your Wings,' 'Sail Away Sweet Sister,' 'Play the Game' and 'Save Me.' Brian May's guitar would, therefore, be useful to bulk up the bass lines, transforming their role from harmonic support to a powerful counter-melodic voice.



Example 4. 'Bohemian Rhapsody' (1975), Verse II, 2'16"-2'25"

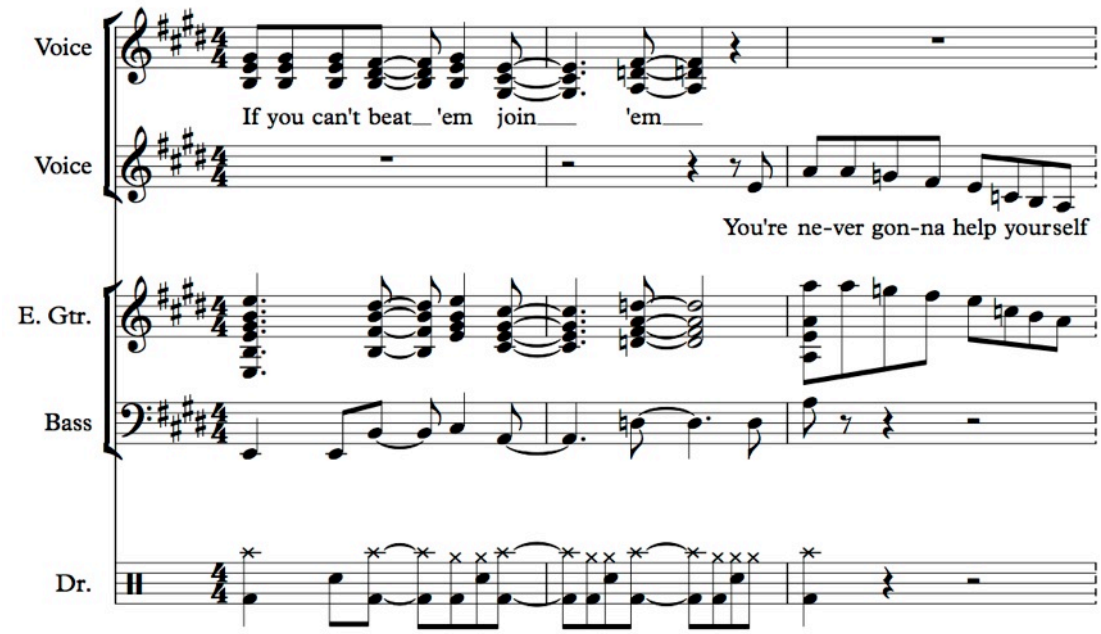


Example 5. 'We Are The Champions' (1977), Chorus, bars 5-8

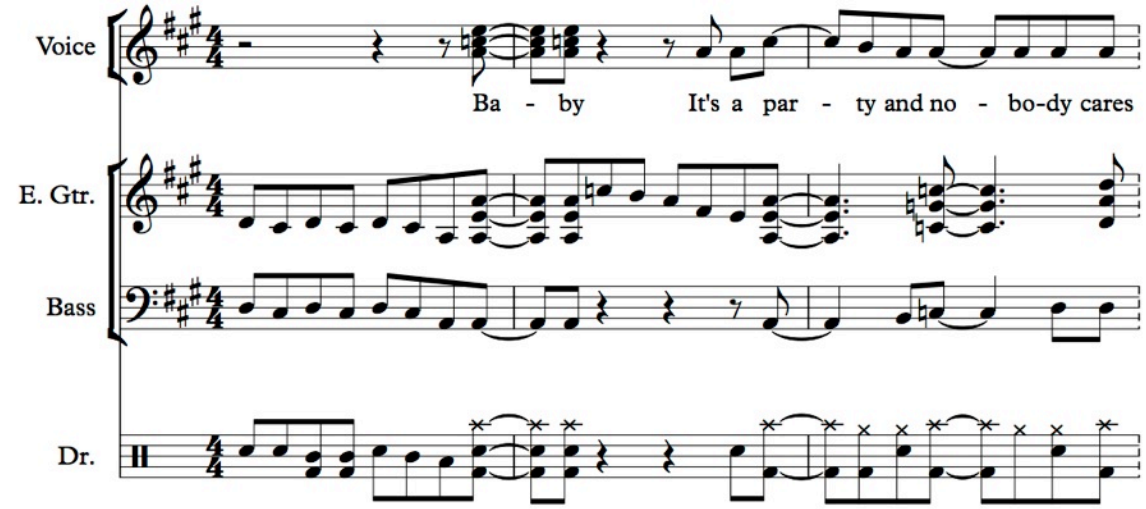
Rhythmic Unity

A second form of gestural unity relates to rhythm. Clearly, unified rhythmic gestures occur with great regularity in all popular music; here, I am referring to the instances when the full band accentuates a syncopated riff or rhythm.

A common gesture is for the syncopated vocal line to be emphasized by the rhythm guitar, bass, and drums. The title line from 'If You Can't Beat Them,' shown in **Example 6**, is a typical example. It is easy to find stylistic precedents for this trait, again from hard rockers Deep Purple. In both 'Highway Star' and 'Lay Down, Stay Down,' Ian Paice's kick drum locks into the syncopated vocal delivery and harmonic rhythm, as articulated by the guitar, bass and Hammond organ. Such rhythmic patterns and relationships can be found also in Bad Company's 'Good Lovin' Gone Bad,' and Boston's 'Rock and Roll Band' and 'Party,' the latter of which is shown in **Example 7.** This second group of examples confirms Queen's close proximity to the mainstream of 1970s rock.

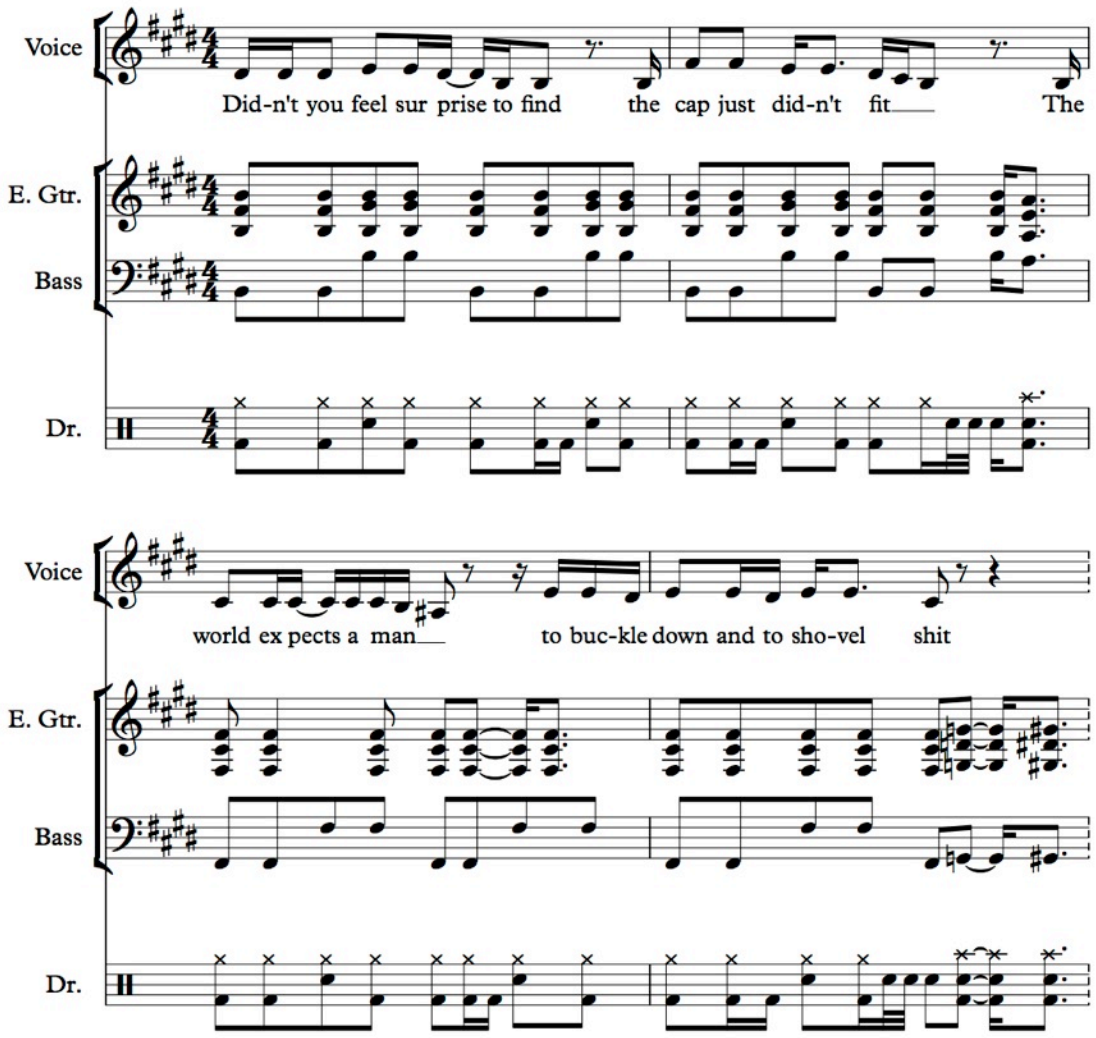


Example 6. 'If You Can't Beat Them' (1978), Chorus, 1'44"-1'48"

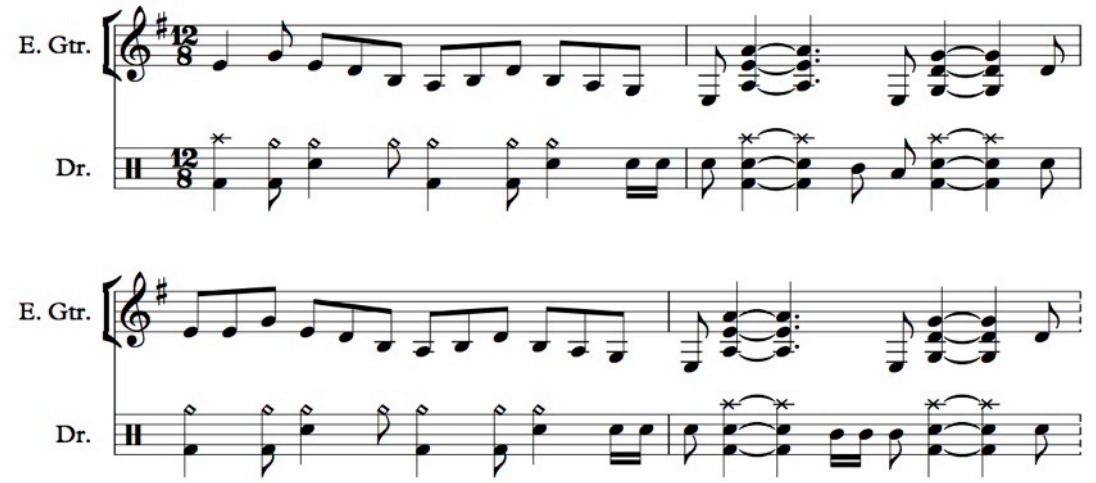


Example 7. Boston, 'Party' (1978), Chorus, 1'00"-1'05"

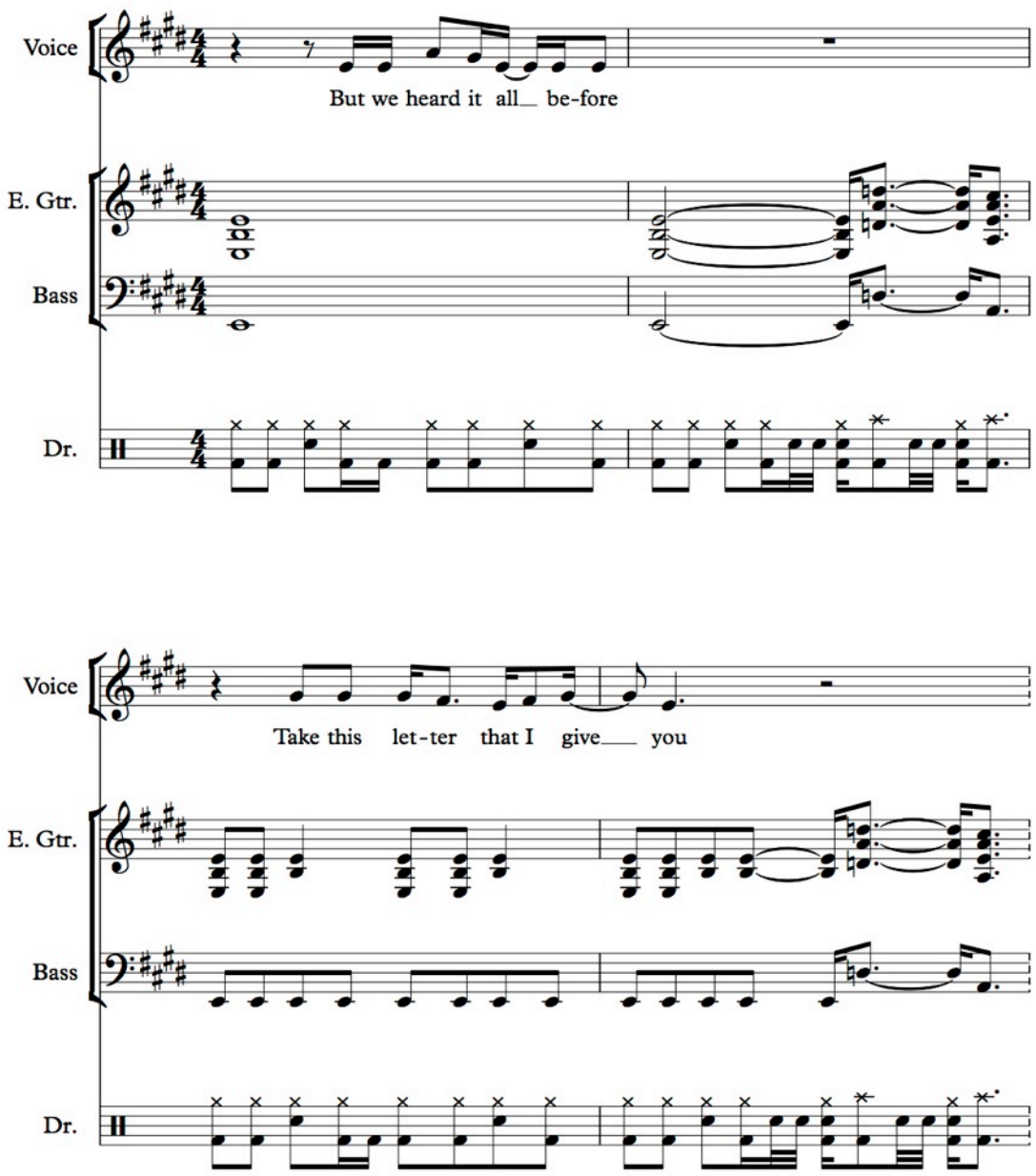
In their earlier albums, there is another rhythmic gesture which takes us down more interesting stylistic paths. **Examples 8-11** demonstrate a form of rhythmic punctuation, as appearing in ‘Son and Daughter,’ ‘Brighton Rock,’ ‘Father to Son,’ and ‘Bohemian Rhapsody.’ The same type of rhythmic gesture appears elsewhere in ‘Stone Cold Crazy,’ ‘The Prophet’s Song’ and ‘White Man.’ In this gesture, the syncopation is preceded by a snare or tom roll, and is marked by a held guitar chord, usually in the second half of bar. The guitars, bass and drums are, therefore, punctuating the riff or phrase.



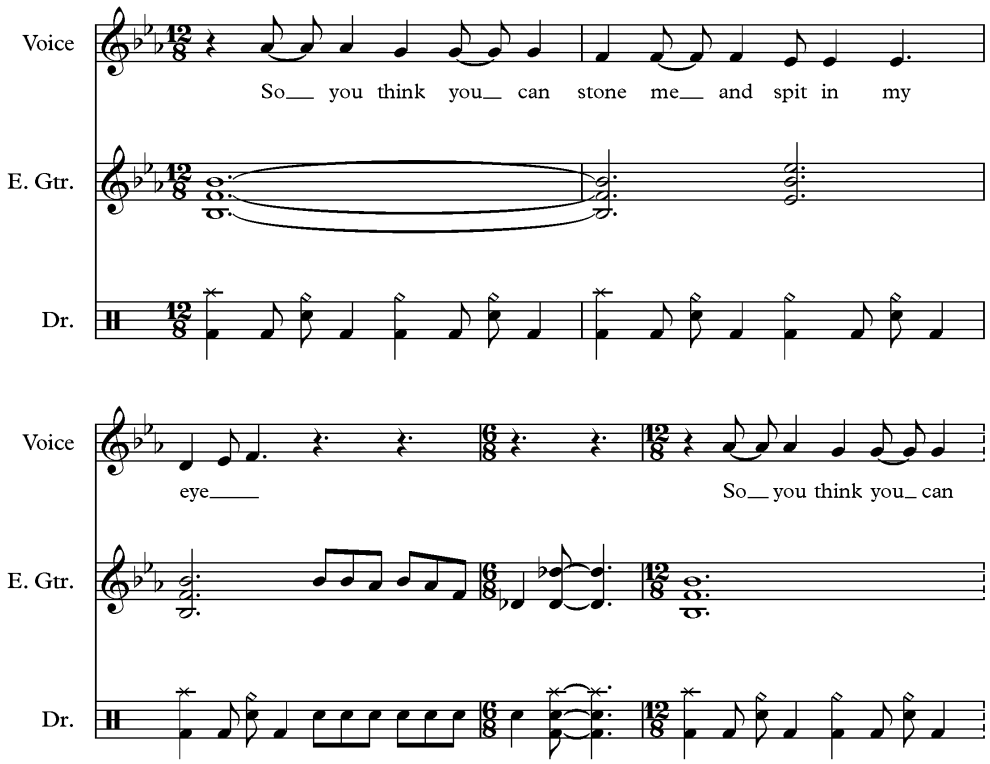
Example 8. 'Son and Daughter' (1973), Verse, 0'46"-0'58"



Example 9. 'Brighton Rock' (1974), Coda, 4'57-5'02"



Example 10. 'Father To Son' (1974), Bridge, 2'08"-2'20"

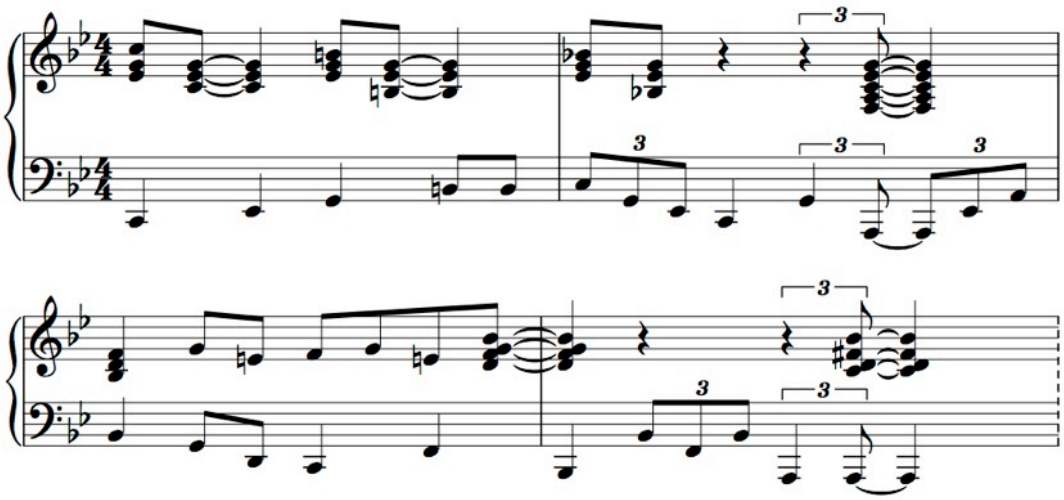


Example 11. 'Bohemian Rhapsody' (1975), Rock Section, 4'16"-4'23"

As per the previous examples, the actual syncopated rhythm is close to those found in 1970s hard rock. Without making too sweeping a point, what is different between Queen and the artists is the manner of articulation. Where other hard rock songs – such as Deep Purple's 'Might Just Take Your Life,' 'Highway Star,' or Black Sabbath's 'Sabbath Bloody Sabbath' — present the syncopated riffs against a continuing groove, either on the backbeat or hi-hat, this rhythmic gesture from Queen tends to momentarily suspend the groove.

This raises the question as to other stylistic influences or predecessors. Closely related gestures can be heard in Slade songs, such as 'Take Me Bak 'Ome' or 'The Whole World's Goin' Crazee'; in other ways, Queen's rhythmic gesture is akin to stop-time, in which case, there would be no shortage of potential influences. From interviews with Brian May (Circus 1976) and Roger Taylor (Sugar 1993), Hendrix' 'Purple Haze' may be relevant. That said, this rhythmic gesture, to me, is much closer to the swing and big band style. A couple of post-Queen swing pastiches (Cherry Poppin' Daddies' 'Zoot Suit Riot'; Brian Setzer Orchestra's 'Hey Louis Prima' and David Lee Roth's 'Just A Gigolo') are testament to this observation; in terms of pre-Queen source material, the instrumental section from Sinatra's recording of 'For Once In My Life' is notable, as suggested in **Example 12**. Brian

May stated in a 1993 interview that the band's influences varied from classic rock and roll through to classical music, skiffle, vaudeville and traditional jazz. Although specific examples for the latter styles are not given, it would seem likely that the band were familiar, at least, with some swing and big band music, and thus, it is possible that subtle stylistic traits may have filtered into their hard rock sound.



Example 12. Frank Sinatra, 'For Once In My Life' (1969), Instrumental, 1'56"-2'08", Brass Reduction and Double Bass

Articulation Unity

This final category, looking at articulation gestures, is, perhaps, the most interesting. Two of Freddie Mercury's vocal trademarks were to scoop and slide up to higher notes, and to delay the onset of vibrato until after the note's attack. Frequently, the two techniques are combined, as can be seen in **Figure 1**, a spectrogram from the first verse of 'Love of My Life.'

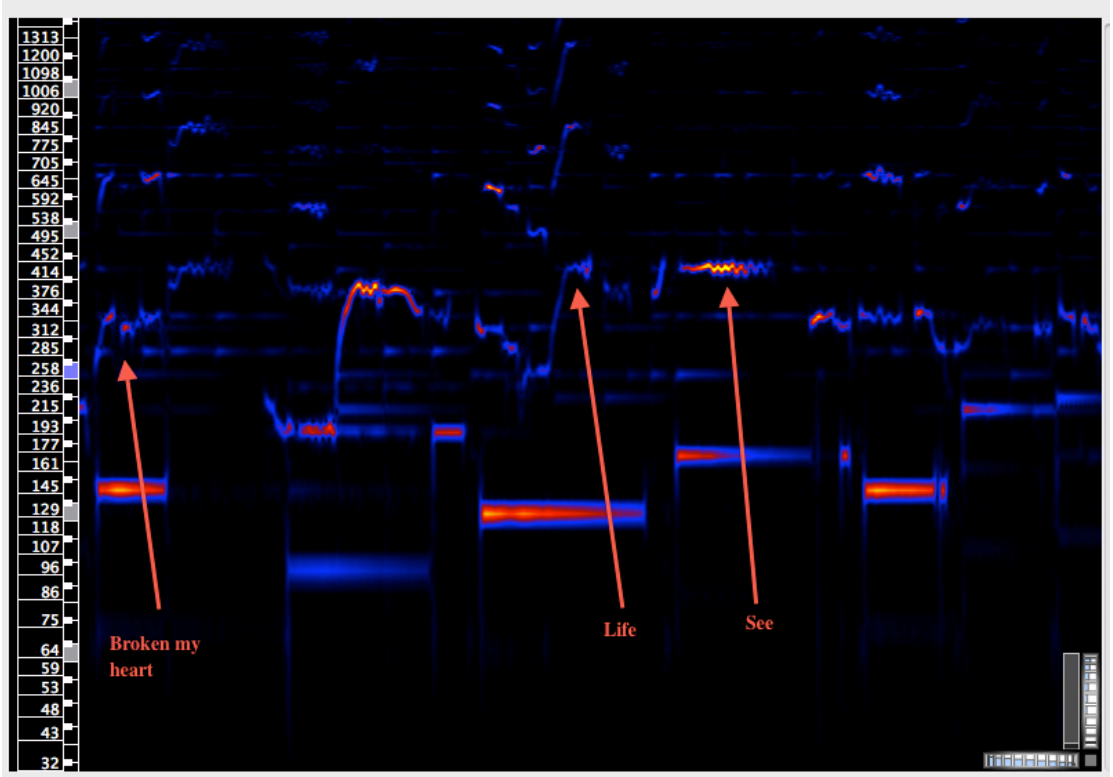


Figure 1. 'Love of My Life' (19875), Spectrogram, Verse I, 0'29"-0'47"

When these two traits are combined, it gives the strong impression of Mercury constantly singing behind the beat — the exact pitch arrives late, and the emphasis, from the vibrato, is also withheld. This articulation gesture appears frequently in the backing vocal parts as well. **Figure 2** shows the backing vocals in the second verse of 'Love of My Life'. It is easy to hear the delayed stress in the vocals, but one can also see this articulation. The louder sounds on the spectrogram are designated by the yellow, and then red lines. Thus, one can see the relative volume increasing through the words, "back" and "know." Similar relationships between lead and backing vocalists are evident on 'You Take My Breath Away' and 'Killer Queen.'

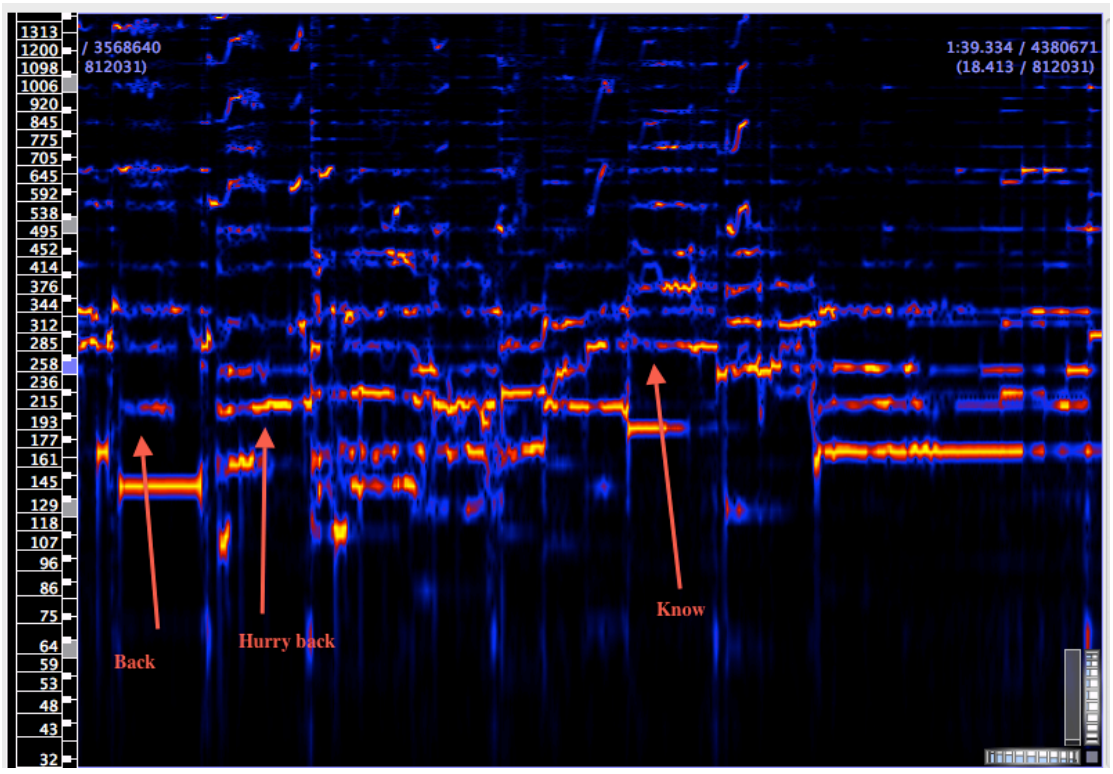


Figure 2. Queen, 'Love of My Life' (1975), Spectrogram, Verse II, 1'24"-1'42"

To further develop the picture, one can consider Brian May's guitar articulation. In **Figure 3**, the spectrogram of 'Love of My Life' shows a very subtle use of vibrato after the immediate attack of the note. In 'Somebody to Love,' the relationship is more obvious. **Figure 4** shows a spectrogram of Mercury's vocal from the first verse. One can hear and see exaggerated slides between notes as well as heavy vibrato on the longer notes. **Figure 5** shows the beginning of the guitar solo. One can observe not only similar melodic shapes, but also near identical articulation gestures. The initial phrase is marked by May's string bending; similarly, the held notes are marked by wide vibrato. It, thus, appears that a key part of Brian May's guitar style was to imitate the gestures from Freddie Mercury's vocal.

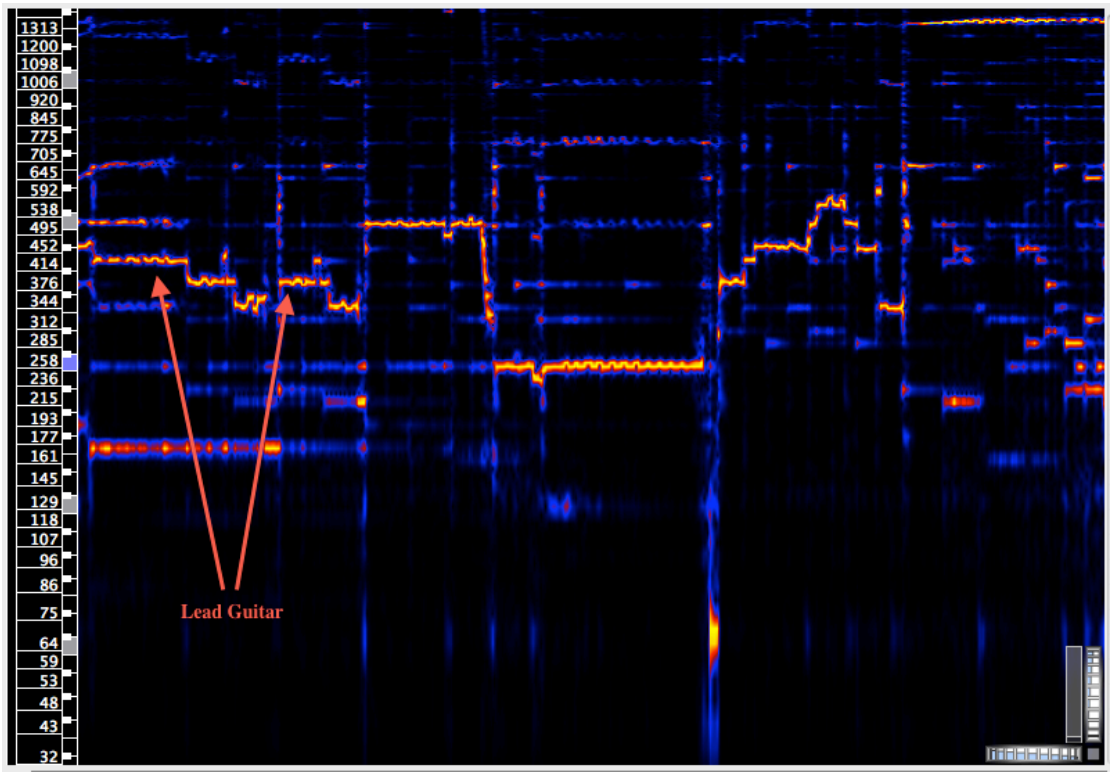


Figure 3. 'Love of My Life' (1975), Spectrogram, Instrumental, 2'20"-2'37

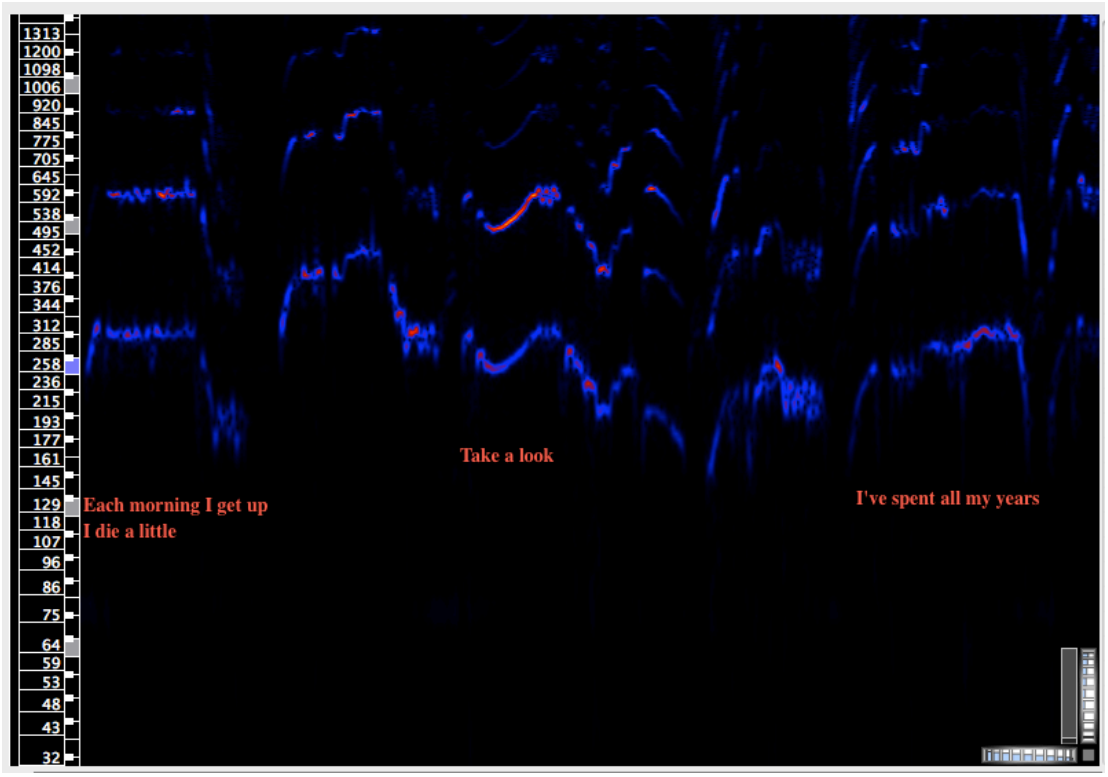


Figure 4. 'Somebody to Love' (1976), Voice Spectrogram, Verse, 0’28”-0’45”

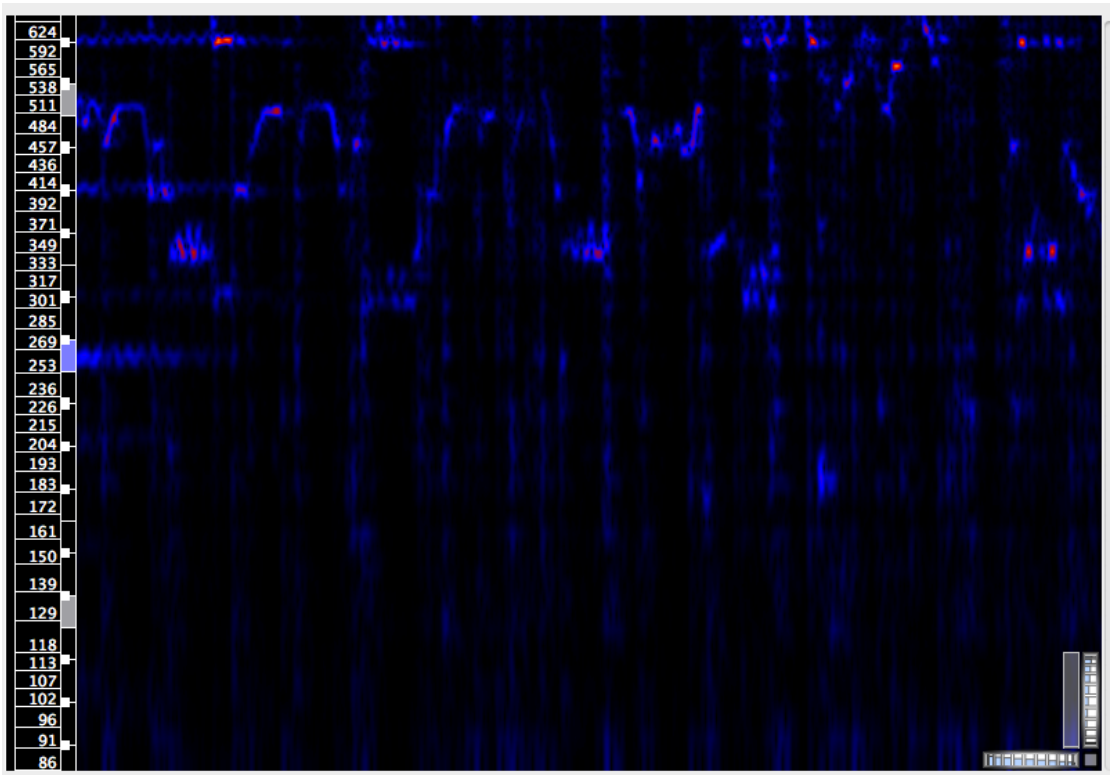
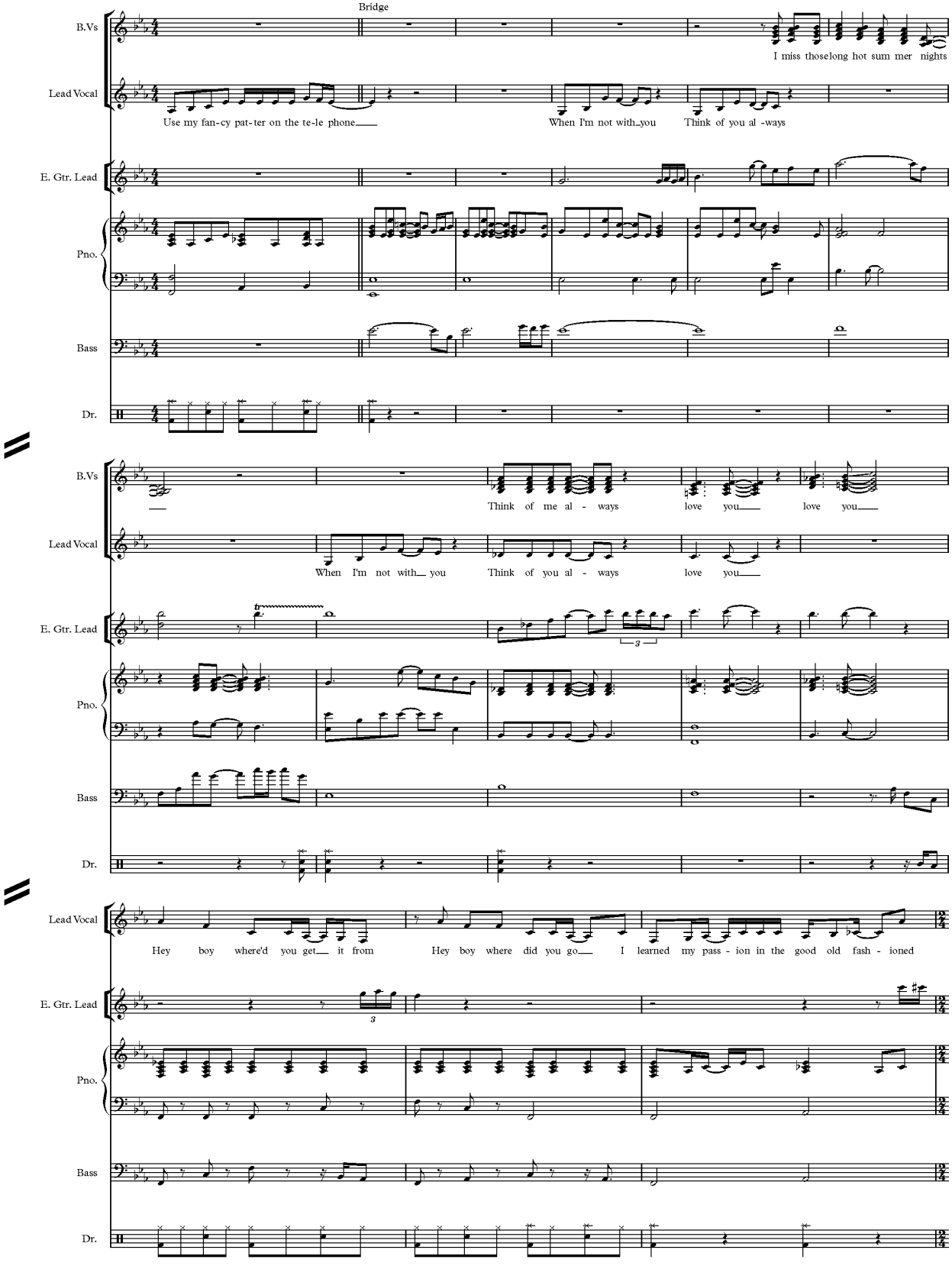


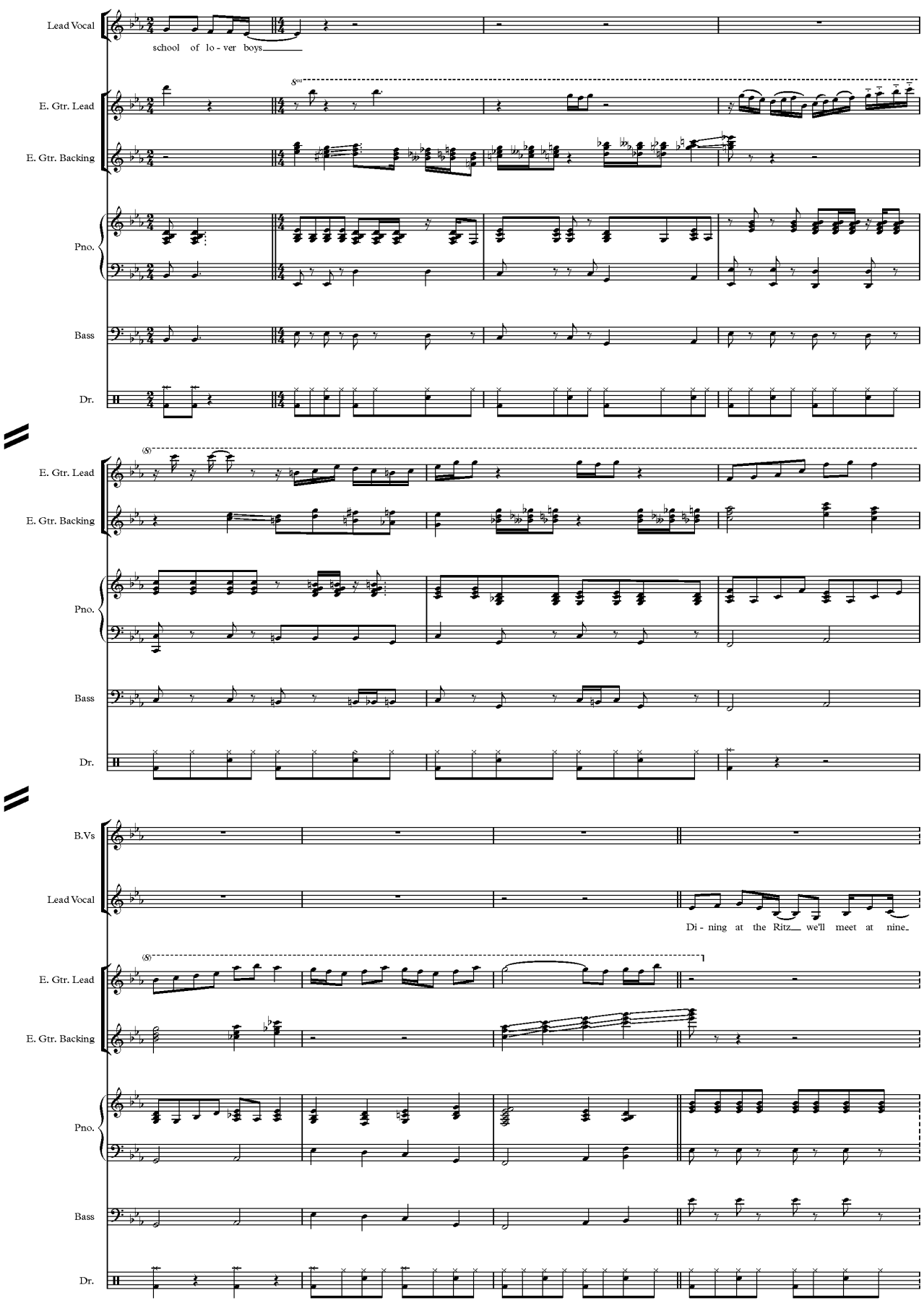
Figure 5. 'Somebody to Love' (1976), Guitar Spectrogram, Instrumental, 2'04"-2'21"

The final example is the second bridge and instrumental sections from 'Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy,' in which each different forms of gestural unity types are evident. **Example 13** is a transcription of the two sections. Several points are worth noting. Mercury begins the second bridge with an arpeggiated figure and introduces an innocuous semiquaver idea in the right hand; in the following bar, Deacon adopts the rhythmic pattern as part of a turn figure. This figuration occurs frequently in the next twenty-three bars. Brian May uses it decoratively as a counter-melody to the lead vocal; in the instrumental section, the motif becomes a focal point, as the lead guitar and multi-tracked guitar choir call and respond to one another.

Further to this, in the vocal section, May's counter-melodies respond to Mercury's vocal line; on the line "Think of you always," both players ascend a sixth. In the subsequent phrase, May follows the arpeggiated contour of the vocal line. Finally, one can draw a parallel between the articulation gestures of the guitar choir and the backing vocalists from earlier in the song. In the first bridge section, the vocal parts slide between harmonies, in contrast to the semi-detached articulation of Mercury. In bars 2-4 of the instrumental section, one can hear an almost identical relationship — the lead guitar bounces along the

melodic line, while the backing guitars slide between the harmonies. This articulation relationship, therefore, appears as a recurring trait through the song.





Example 13. 'Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy' (1976), Bridge II and Instrumental, 1'18"-2'17"

To conclude, it is worth considering the broader implications of these findings. There is scope and necessity for examining these findings in relation to other rock and pop artists, although for now, I will place them only in a wider Queen context. One must be careful of drawing grand conclusions from, relatively speaking, limited evidence, but some ideas can be put forth tentatively. The first two sections of analysis looked at how, Queen, in part, treated surface chromaticism and syncopation. Neither technique is particularly remarkable in the popular music repertoire, given their commonplace usage; in saying that, against a tonal and regular rhythmic background, both can act as devices that colour and embellish progressions and phrases. What makes the Queen examples notable is that such colouring devices are magnified; Brian May amplifies John Deacon' chromatic lines, the whole band marks and emphasizes the points of syncopation. In her thesis on Queen, de Boer connects Mercury's 'flamboyant and dramatic' persona with the band's image (de Boer, 1999, pp. 34-5). It is not unreasonable to go one step further and suggest that Queen developed particular gestures that resonated strongly with their own aesthetic presentation. This, therefore, would appear to be a key factor in the 'greater-than-the-sum-of-their-parts' appraisals.

The third part of the analysis looked at articulation relationships between the band members, with a particular focus on Brian May's imitation of techniques from the lead and backing vocalists. As 'Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy' demonstrated, these articulation relationships were often combined with other motivic devices. This feature gains its significance when related to the formal designs of Queen's songs. Instead of verse-chorus structures, many songs are better viewed as a tapestry of interrelated musical ideas. When this is combined with dense arrangements and a rich harmonic language, one might say that Queen wrote songs brimming with musical information. Arguably, the common articulation gestures served to provide coherence within these songs. Furthermore, on a number of occasions (notably, 'Millionaire Waltz,' 'My Fairy King,' and 'The March of the Black Queen'), the relationship between Mercury and May is extended, as the guitar emerges, structurally and sonically, out of the vocal melody. These gestures, therefore, also enabled Queen to weave together multiple sections that were otherwise disparate, in terms of key, harmonic progressions, or texture.

Finally, one of the challenges for the analyst of Queen is dealing with the band's stylistic diversity and frequent recourse to pastiche; both these factors undermine the notion of a singular, definable idiolect. In this paper, the examples cited, arguably, do not belong to the pastiche category of Queen's output, even if there are clear stylistic reference points. The songs I have discussed here are, arguably, as close as one is ever going to get to a 'classic' Queen sound. If this is the case, then it appears that gestural unity, in terms of pitch, rhythm, and articulation, is a key component of Queen's musical idiolect.

Appendix A. Analytical Questions

For Freddie Mercury (and the other lead vocalists), the questions are:

1. Is he singing in a head or chest voice?
2. Does he use vibrato on held notes?
3. Are pitches approached directly or scooped; are notes ended with pitch inflections?
4. Are there consistent rhythmic inflections, such as hitting notes before or after the beat?
5. Are the melodies punctuated by accents, staccato or other articulation gestures?
6. Are the vocal parts sung, spoken or a combination? Are there non-lyrical utterances?

For Brian May, as a guitarist, the questions are:

1. Are the guitar parts based on single notes or chords?
2. Are the guitar parts melodic or harmonic?
3. Are there rhythmic inflections, as per the vocals?
4. Are there consistent types of articulation, such as bending the string, or tapping?
5. Are the guitar parts phrased in a particular way?

For the piano parts, mostly played by Freddie Mercury, the questions are:

1. What is the right-hand playing, such as broken chords, full chords, single notes, etc.?
2. What is the left-hand playing?
3. Is either hand marked by specific articulation, such as staccato or accents?
4. Is the piano part melodic or harmonic?

For the bass guitar parts, mostly played by John Deacon, the questions are:

1. Does the bass guitar play chordal notes or a riff-type pattern?
2. Is the bass line embellished?
3. Does the bass line have melodic qualities?
4. Are the bass line's rhythmic qualities related to other parts?

For the drum parts, played by Roger Taylor, the questions are:

1. Do the styles of beat change within a song?
2. How do the drum parts compare with the normative kick-snare-hi-hat patterns of rock music?
3. Are fills and embellishments consistently played on particular parts of the kit?

For the backing vocalists, the questions are:

1. Do the parts sing in conjunction with, or against the lead vocal?
2. Are there consistent types of articulation, such as slides or turns?
3. Are there consistent rhythmic inflections?

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