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From Rage (and Love) to Stage: Musical Reinforcement of Narrative Themes in the Stage Musical American Idiot

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From Rage (and Love) to Stage:
Musical Reinforcement of Narrative Themes in the Stage Musical *American Idiot*

A Thesis Presented

by

JAMES M. DELOREY

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ABSTRACT

FROM RAGE (AND LOVE) TO STAGE:
MUSICAL REINFORCEMENT OF NARRATIVE THEMES IN THE STAGE MUSICAL *AMERICAN IDIOT*

MAY 2014

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American Idiot, the Broadway musical by the band Green Day and theater veteran Michael Mayer, embodies the experience of a generation of Americans. The story revolves around youths coming of age during the presidency of George W. Bush, living through the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, two wars, ever increasing media and technology saturation, and a breakdown of the suburban ideal. As the primary theme and the driving force in the dramatic action of *American Idiot*, the characters' internal struggle between rage and love is reinforced through several devices present in the music. There are four notable ones. First, allusion to a variety of rock styles and songs highlight themes of disillusionment, alienation, and false hope. Second, the use of recurring musical material draws connections in the storyline, promotes continuity, and creates foreshadowing. Third, the modification of songs from their original versions reinforce dramatic climaxes, and fourth, the use of specific styles to represent characters adds to their depth and significance. In order to provide context for the musical, this thesis will examine some of its antecedents and influences. The three most important of these are the history of Green Day and its members, the position of *American Idiot* in the rock opera genre, and the transformation of the original 2004 album into the 2010 Broadway

musical. Finally, an examination of youth and suburbia in America at the turn of the twenty-first century will demonstrate the connection to themes expressed in the narrative of *American Idiot*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS……...iii

ABSTRACT……...iv

LIST OF FIGURES……... vii

CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION……. 1

1. PREVIEWS: BACKGROUND AND HISTORY…… 5

Green Day…….. 5
Rock Opera…… 13
American Idiot..... 20

2. OPENING NIGHT: THE MUSIC OF *AMERICAN IDIOT*…….. 26

Techniques……26
Modified Songs……..27
Repurposed Songs……..32
Recurring Musical Motives……33
Stylistic Allusions…….. 42
Characters Defined by Musical Style…… 49

3. REVIEWS: CULTURAL CONTEXT AND CONNECTIONS……51

APPENDIX: LIST OF SONGS IN *AMERICAN IDIOT*……... 63

BIBLIOGRAPHY……. 65

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. “21 Guns” Song Outline…… 30

2. “American Idiot” Canon…… 32

3. “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” and “Last Night on Earth” Opening Measures...34

4. “Holiday” and “21 Guns” Motives…… 35

5. “City of the Damned” Melody……...36

6. “St. Jimmy” Melody…….. 37

7. “Jesus of Suburbia” Melody…….. 38

8. “American Idiot” Melody…….. 39

9. “Extraordinary Girl” Motive……..40

10. “When It’s Time” and “Wake Me Up When September Ends” Motive……..41

11. “Nobody Likes You” Melody……..41

12. “Jesus of Suburbia” Opening Measures……...43

INTRODUCTION

"I'm the son of rage and love," declares Johnny in the opening line of the song "Jesus of Suburbia." The internal conflict between these emotions becomes the kernel from which the rest of the punk rock stage musical *American Idiot* grows. In fact, rage versus love might be taken as the overall theme of this piece by the band Green Day and theater veteran Michael Mayer. Combined with other elements, most notably the music, characters and setting, this theme generates the show's story and narrative subthemes.

Johnny, *American Idiot*'s main character, is an embodiment of the struggle between these opposing forces. On one hand is the rage which he inherited from his father– a sense of anger, frustration, disillusionment, and chaos; on the other is the love he inherited from his mother– hope, optimism, and wanting to make something of himself. His two friends, Will and Tunny, have similar struggles, but each handles his conflict differently.

The three youths live in a suburban locale called "Jingletown, USA," and while the setting is "the recent past," it is clear from images shown on television screens and snippets of news broadcasts that it takes place during the administration of President George W. Bush. Amid this backdrop of media saturation, war, terrorism, and patriotic fervor, Johnny, Will, and Tunny face problems associated with their declining suburban lifestyle– boredom, neglect, divorce, accidental pregnancy, alcohol, and drugs.

Although the themes of *American Idiot* reach out to encompass general human issues, the show's primary field of criticism is the United States in the twenty-first century. Part of its project is de-idealizing the so-called American Dream; as Michael

Mayer states, "It's not Norman Rockwell. This is a portrait of America today."[1] What makes *American Idiot* successful in conveying its narrative, and therefore exemplary among recent musicals, is the striking ways in which the music itself propels the story forward, expresses narrative themes, and communicates dramatic tone. Furthermore, *American Idiot* is uncommon in that it relies almost entirely on song to tell its story. Spoken word exists only in a few short monologues, letters written by Johnny to his friends, and there is no use of speech-song (recitative) whatsoever. This heavy reliance upon song, and therefore, musical devices, presents an interesting example for scholarly study. A prototypical integrated musical might employ a combination of dialogue, song, and dance to convey its story.[2] Even opera, with its customary recitatives, uses a type of direct storytelling. More recent musicals, such as *Cats* and *Hair*, may be light on spoken word but also abandon a unifying storyline, instead presenting short vignettes or conveying primarily a mood or sentiment. *American Idiot*, on the other hand, presents a complex storyline almost entirely with song. As Mayer notes, "We don't know what to call it. It's not an opera, really, and it's definitely not your parents' Broadway musical."[3]

In addition, my thesis presents a model which may be useful for exploring other late twentieth and early twenty-first century musical-dramatic works that do not fit the traditional mold. Existing scholarship is scant and only pertains indirectly to *American Idiot*. Since the show intersects with rock opera, musical theater, and punk rock, my thesis will bring in work that has already been done, but mainly as a model of study or

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[1] Interview from Doug Hamilton, director, *Broadway Idiot*, iTunes download, produced by Ira Pittelman, (Santa Monica, CA: FilmBuff, 2013).
[2] An "integrated musical" includes music, songs, and dance that support the drama, unlike, for example, a musical revue. *Oklahoma!* is a representative example of the genre.
[3] Interview from *Broadway Idiot*.

method of approach. For example, in her book, *The Megamusical*, Jessica Sternfeld examines ways in which music is used in shows such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Les Misérables*. In addition, I will draw on general approaches to the analysis of dramatic music such as those found in *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* by Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker.[4] Rock opera receives attention in passing from writers studying progressive rock and rock musicals, but nowhere does it receive direct critical or historical treatment.[5] An interesting discussion of general theatricality in rock exists in Stuart Lenig's article "The Theatre of Rock" in *Popular Music and Society*. Regarding larger questions of style and genre, everyone seems to have something to say about punk rock, as the bibliography for the article on punk in the *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* indicates.[6] The discussions of punk that are most relevant in this thesis are drawn mostly from the biographies of Green Day cited in my first chapter. The only scholarship to directly address music from *American Idiot* is an article from *Communication Studies* exploring the effectiveness of rhetorical strategies in the song "Jesus of Suburbia."[7]

Chapter one gives the background information that is important for understanding the context of *American Idiot* and the people who created it. The history of the band Green Day and its members, Billy Joe Armstrong, Mike Dirnt, and Tré Cool, is important for understanding the genesis of the music and the narrative in *American Idiot*, and the

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[4] Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, eds., *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[5] For examples see the article on progressive rock by Allen F. Moore in *Grove Music Online* and Scott Warfield's article "From Hair to Rent: Is 'Rock' a Four-letter Word on Broadway?" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*.

[6] "Punk," *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 10 March 2014.

[7] Lisa M Chuang and John P. Hart, "Suburban American Punks and the Musical Rhetoric of Green Day's 'Jesus of Suburbia,'" *Communication Studies* 59, no. 3 (July–September 2008): 183–201.

biographical knowledge of the group's fans forms an important part of the musical's horizons of interpretation. As the source of many of the songs in the show, Green Day's album *Green Day Presents: American Idiot* merits attention, but is also noteworthy for its status as "the first punk rock opera." Rock opera, for that matter, has its own history that is relevant to an understanding of *American Idiot.* Finally, chapter one will look at how the album was transformed for the stage by director Michael Mayer and music arranger Tom Kitt.

Chapter two examines the music from the show and discusses the specific ways in which it is used to propel the storyline forward and reinforce the narrative themes. Stylistic allusion is an important way in which narrative themes are reinforced, but style is also used to define and enrich the show's characterization. In addition, modifications and adaptations of songs from their original album versions often serve to propel the storyline forward. Last, the use of recurring musical material serves several purposes related to the narrative themes and storyline.

Chapter three looks at *American Idiot* in a historical and cultural context. In order to demonstrate the ways in which the show reflects recent history, youth culture, and suburbia in America, it is important to draw in a discussion of major events and recent trends in the early twenty-first century. This will reveal that *American Idiot*, in addition to telling a culturally and historically relevant story, captures the true spirit of the times in its tone and presentation. Moreover, the show presents its own critique of the cultural and political landscape it portrays, expressed through the voice of the characters and through the music. Ultimately, the songs– their style, musical motives, tonal areas– not dialogue or recitatives, tell the story and express the sentiment in *American Idiot*.

CHAPTER 1

PREVIEWS: BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Green Day

A full understanding of *American Idiot* is not possible without a brief biography of Green Day and its three primary members, Billie Joe Armstrong, Mike Dirnt, and Tré Cool. With popular music in general, an artist's image, shaped by a multitude of outlets such as interviews and fan activity, plays an integral role in the interpretation of his or her music. In the case of Green Day, its history provides important insight into the punk aesthetics and ideology reflected in the music and narrative of the show. Furthermore, events in the band's history can sometimes be tied directly to specific songs. The band members' individual histories and personalities similarly provide important insights that are relevant to *American Idiot.*

There is a wealth of information on Green Day and its members. Several magazines, including *Rolling Stone, Billboard, and Guitar World* have published articles about Green Day's music and performances as well as interviews with the band members. The Internet is, of course, a nearly endless source of information about Green Day and its fans; the most useful are Green Day's official website, greenday.com, as well as greendayauthority.com and greenday.net. In addition, a number of biographies exist, all from the trade-book press. The ones that provide the best insight into the band's history and the personalities of its members include *Green Day: American Idiots and the New Punk Explosion* by Ben Myers, *Green Day: Rebels with a Cause* by Gillian G. Gaar, and *Green Day: The Unauthorized Illustrated History* by Alan di Perna. All three, written by journalists with long histories of covering rock music, contain insightful interviews as

well as photographs, album artwork, and concert posters. Another useful biography is *Nobody Likes You: Inside the Turbulent Life, Times, and Music of Green Day* by author and biographer Marc Spitz. Sorting through all of the information for the most accurate accounts can be challenging. (I should note that none of the sources mentioned above are scholarly accounts or peer-reviewed. Even among the biographies there are discrepancies. When they exist, I have made every effort to correct the mistakes of fact.)

All three members of Green Day were born in the same year, 1972, in northern California. Guitarist and lead singer Billie Joe Armstrong and bassist Mike Dirnt grew up as friends in the town of Rodeo, just north of San Francisco and Berkeley. A small suburban town that once thrived from the California Gold Rush and later, from ranching and meat packing, Rodeo always lived in the shadow of its more populous and prosperous neighbors.[8] The town and the surrounding area have since been known for their oil refineries. Tré Cool, born as Frank Edwin Wright, III, grew up in the rural mountain town of Willets in Mendocino County.[9] Armstrong and Dirnt found friendship in listening and playing music together. Cool used to spend time with his nearest neighbor, Lawrence Livermore, an older musician and punk rock fanzine writer who lived about a mile away.

The three kids fated to become Green Day came from working-class families and, in two cases, broken homes. Armstrong was the youngest of six children born to Ollie, a waitress, and Andy, a truck driver. In 1982, when Billie Joe was ten, Andy died from cancer, possibly caused by carcinogenic chemicals emitted from the oil refineries in the

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[8] Ben Myers, *Green Day: American Idiots and the New Punk Explosion* (New York: The Disinformation Company, 2006), 16.
[9] Ibid., 27.

area. Armstrong remembers that his "parents had been very kid oriented and all of a sudden my mother withdrew and threw herself into waitressing."[10] About a year later, Ollie remarried. Of that time, Armstrong recalled that, "we were as dysfunctional as any family with the death of a father, a stepfather…There was a lot of fighting amongst the siblings…I don't know where the anger came from."[11] Mike Dirnt was born to a heroin addicted mother and an absent father. He was placed by foster care into the home of Cheryl Nasser and Patrick Pritchard, who eventually adopted him.[12] At this time, he was known as Michael Ryan Pritchard. In 1979, his adopted parents divorced. His mother remarried, and while Dirnt did not initially get along with his stepfather, they became close after he and Dirnt's mother divorced. With all the upheaval in his family life, Dirnt estimated that by the age of fifteen, he had moved seven times.[13] Then, when he was seventeen, his stepfather died. Cool, on the other hand, had a relatively stable family life. He and his sister grew up with both parents, Frank, a truck driver, and Linda, a bookkeeper. At times, Cool experienced the boredom and isolation of growing up in a rural home, something he later described as "mind-numbing."[14] Although generally known as an amiable and loving person, his father, a veteran of the Vietnam War, sometimes experienced "dark moments," what today might be considered Post-Traumatic

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[10] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion,* 20.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Marc Spitz, *Nobody Likes You: Inside the Turbulent Life, Times, and Music of Green Day* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 12.
[13] Gillian G. Gaar, *Green Day: Rebels with a Cause* (New York: Music Sales Corporation, 2007), 5.
[14] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 28.

Stress Disorder.[15] For these reasons, Cool would often retreat to his closest neighbor, Lawrence Livermore's house about a mile away.

Armstrong and Dirnt, who met and became friends in 1983, were also influenced by their high school experience. They, along with fellow friend and bandmate Sean Hughes, arranged to transfer to Pinole Valley High School so they could attend school together.[16] Being new to the school, and from the less affluent Rodeo, the three friends were labelled as outcasts, bullied, and made fun of.[17] Eventually they gravitated to a group of students who all felt like outsiders. As Armstrong put it, "we were the suburban punks."[18] Hughes recalls that "we were gunning to be different by then. Punk-rock attire. Punk-rock attitude."[19]

Armstrong, Dirnt, and Cool had a wide variety of musical experiences growing up that would have a lasting effect on the evolution of Green Day. Billie Joe Armstrong started taking music lessons at age four on piano and voice. The store where he took lessons was run by a couple, James and Marie Louise Fiatarone, who were also aspiring songwriters. To help pay for music lessons for him and his sisters, his mother and the Fiatarones worked out an agreement for him to perform on their recordings.[20] At age five they took him to San Francisco to sing on a recording of a song they wrote called "Look for Love." He continued to perform at local nursing homes and Shriner's Hospitals with the Fiatarones, other students, and his father on drums.[21] Armstrong sang everything from

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[15] Spitz, *Nobody Likes You,* 53.
[16] Ibid., 16.
[17] Ibid., 17.
[18] Ibid., 19.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 7.
[21] Ibid., 8.

Christmas carols to Broadway show tunes. His father was a jazz enthusiast and a long-time amateur jazz drummer. His mother, who was from Oklahoma, preferred country western music. It is said that the first album that Armstrong bought was Elvis Presley's *The Sun Sessions*.[22]

Armstrong was also influenced by his siblings' taste in music and his guitar teacher. Around the time of his father's death, his older brother Allen gave him a Beatles album, which he listened to and learned.[23] Allen was also a big fan of The Who. In addition to lessons with the Fiatarones, Billie Joe also took guitar lessons with local teacher George Cole, who helped him with songwriting and taught him songs from Van Halen's *Driver Down*.[24] In fact, the blue Fernandez Stratocaster copy that has become known to Green Day fans actually belonged to Cole and was purchased from him by Armstrong's mother.[25] As Billie Joe became a teenager, his sister Anna got him hooked on punk bands like Hüsker Dü and the Replacements.[26]

Tré Cool also had a musical childhood. He started playing violin at age nine but soon became interested in the drum set at Lawrence Livermore's house. In fact, Livermore asked him to be the drummer in his punk rock band, the Lookouts. By the age of thirteen, Cool had become so good at drums that he was being asked to play in a variety of settings including his own junior high school band as well as high school and college bands and orchestras. He recalls that in sixth grade the music teacher would pick him up and take him to play with the high school band because none of the high school

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[22] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 19.
[23] Spitz, *Nobody Likes You*, 10.
[24] Ibid., 11.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 18.

kids could play jazz.[27] During this time he learned how to play everything from classical and big band music to reggae.[28] In 1987, when he was fifteen, the Lookouts released their first single with Cool on drums.[29]

1987 was also an important year for Armstrong and Dirnt; it was the first time their band, Sweet Children, played for an audience. According to John Goar, one of Armstrong's teachers at John Swett High School, they placed second in a school talent show that spring.[30] Leading up to their first performance, Armstrong and Dirnt had spent hours together becoming friends and sharing their love for music.[31] Both recall listening to recordings of punk bands like the Sex Pistols, the Ramones, and Generation X, but Armstrong also notes that their tastes included Iggy Pop, Blondie, and Etta James.[32] It is because of their friendship that Dirnt started playing guitar. The band that would later become Green Day, Sweet Children, was rounded out by Sean Hughes on the bass and sometime member Raj Punjabi on drums.[33] In the fall of 1988, Sweet Children played a show at Rod's Hickory Pit, where Armstrong's mother was a waitress. It is this show that is generally regarded as the band's first performance.[34] This was, in fact, a warm-up for their show in November at 924 Gilman Street, which was in part secured by their new drummer, John Kiffmeyer, Jr., known by his stage name, Al Sobrante (a reference to the nearby town of El Sobrante). It was not until 1989 that the band changed its name to Green Day. Sean Hughes left the band and Mike Dirnt switched to bass, a move that later

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[27] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 29.
[28] Gaar, *Rebels with a Cause*, 23.
[29] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 29.
[30] Gaar, *Rebels with a Cause*, 10.
[31] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 24.
[32] Gaar, *Rebels with a Cause,* 6–7.
[33] Spitz, *Nobody Likes You*, 15–16.
[34] Ibid., 11.

earned him his stage name "Dirnt," the sound made by an unamplified bass guitar.[35] The following year, Al Sobrante decided to leave the band and Tré Cool was brought on as the new drummer.

The music scene in the East Bay had a strong influence on Green Day. At the center was a music club called 924 Gilman Street, located in North Berkeley. It opened on New Year's Eve in 1986 and was the brain child of two men involved in the local music scene, Tim Yohannan and Victor Hayden.[36] Yohannan, a self-proclaimed former hippie, was founder and editor of the widely read fanzine *Maximum Rock n Roll*. Gilman Street was unique because it was founded as a private member club. Its core principles were equality and respect, which meant no racism, sexism, or homophobia was tolerated.[37] Yohannan also refused a liquor license deliberately so kids of all ages could attend shows. All of the workers with the exception of the bouncers were volunteers, and decisions were made by a vote of the members. While the environment at Gilman Street adhered more to Yohannan's socialist ideology than an effort to be "straight edge" and renounce sex, drugs, and alcohol, it did foster a unique musical scene. According to Ben Myers, it created a punk community that was focused more on a do-it-yourself practicality than empty rhetoric.[38] He claims that Gilman Street tended to keep out the less tolerant "metal-leaning macho hardcore" and instead invite a "poppier brand of punk."[39]

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[35] Spitz, *Nobody Likes You*, 50.
[36] Gaar, *Rebels with a Cause,* 16.
[37] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 32.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 33.

This ended up being a perfect match to Green Day's style from the very beginning. A combination of the band members' family backgrounds, working-class socio-economic status, and high school existence as punk outsiders positioned them to easily identify with the Gilman Street scene. As kids with actual musical training and experience in everything from jazz to progressive rock, they were unusual. For example, their songs tended to be more lyrical and deliberately crafted. Jennifer Finch, former bass player of the band L7 said that "at the time, I just thought of them doing a middle class kind of punk-pop music…which now, as an adult, I realize was just good songwriting."[40] Marc Spitz notes that one thing that set them apart from many of the other punk bands in the Bay Area scene was that they could actually play their instruments.[41] Unlike other punk bands, Green Day incorporated backing vocals, usually supplied by Dirnt, who "recalled the surfy-sounds of early Beach Boys."[42] At the same time, Ben Meyers says that their lyrics played up a sense of alienation, agitation and dissatisfaction with the world.[43]

The final component of the music scene that came to influence Green Day was Lawrence Livermore. (It is unclear whether Livermore is his given last name or a stage name referring to the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories in Livermore, CA.) In any case, he started *Lookout!* in 1984 as a magazine about local news and issues in Mendocino County, but after local pot growers threatened him because he was bringing too much attention to the area, he started focusing on music in the Bay Area.[44] In the

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[40] Gaar, *Rebels with a Cause*, 38.
[41] Spitz, *Nobody Likes You*, 46.
[42] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion,* 43.
[43] Ibid., 22.
[44] Gaar, *Rebels with a Cause*, 22.

years following, he spun *Lookout!* into a band, the Lookouts, and a record label, Lookout! Records. Many bands from Gilman Street released albums under his label. Livermore was responsible for releasing two Green Day EP's (extended plays), "1,000 Hours" and "Slappy" as well as three albums, *39/Smooth, 1,039/Smoothed Out Slappy Hours,* and *Kerplunk!*. Green Day would go on to sign a major label record deal and end ties with Lookout! Records, but the band's relationship with Livermore was crucial for their launching onto the national and international stage. Furthermore, it strengthened their ties to the punk music that would influence the rest of their career, including *American Idiot*.

Rock Opera

As a punk rock opera, the album *Green Day Presents: American Idiot* is part of a tradition that goes back far past 2004. Understanding the history of rock opera is important for appreciating the connections between *American Idiot* and other rock operas. The term "rock opera" has been used to mean many different things. The commonality among all things bearing that name is that they are all a collection of rock songs with a somewhat cohesive narrative. The concept clearly has its origins in what would eventually become known as progressive rock. Several rock bands became associated with both musical movements. Additionally, progressive rock and rock opera share many of the same traits, for example, a shift away from the typical three minute pop song to longer forms and an appropriation of classical music elements.[45] The concept album, in which all of the songs relate to a common theme, is also associated with both progressive rock and rock opera.

[45] Allan F. Moore, "Progressive Rock," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 3 October 2013.

The origins of progressive rock are often linked to the Beatles's *Strawberry Fields Forever* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Procol Harum's *A Whiter Shade of Pale*, all released in 1967.[46] *Sgt. Pepper* is also often claimed to be the first concept album. The Who, another band associated with progressive rock and especially linked to the growing fan base among art school students in England, put out their album, *A Quick One,* in 1966. Included on this album is "A Quick One, While He's Away," a nine minute song in six parts. Pete Townshend later called this song a "mini-opera." This, combined with the song "Rael (1 and 2)," from their 1967 album *The Who Sell Out,* foreshadow what was to come a few years later in the form of *Tommy*. Another notable development of 1967 is the release of a song written by Mark Wirtz and Keith West called "Excerpt from a Teenage Opera" aka "Grocer Jack," which unexpectedly reached number 2 on the UK charts.[47] Wirtz and West originally planned to complete the narrative and turn it into an animated movie, but only two other songs, "Sam," and "(He's Our Dear Old) Weatherman" were ever recorded and released.[48] Coincidently, both *Sgt. Pepper* and "Grocer Jack" were recorded at Abbey Road Studios with engineer Geoff Emerick at about the same time.

The first known use of the term in print predates these songs and albums. The July 4, 1966 issue of the Canadian music industry magazine *RPM Music Weekly*,

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[46] Moore, "Progressive Rock."
[47] "Mark Wirtz," *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 1 October 2013.
[48] "The Mark Wirtz Interview," available from http://www.fufkin.com/columns/pally/pally_07_01.htm; Internet, accessed 1 October 2013.

announced that William Hawkins and Bruce Cockburn were working on a rock opera.[49] No more details are given, and, according to Hawkins, this project never came to fruition.[50] At the time, Hawkins and Cockburn were part of an Ottawa-based folk-rock band called The Children.[51] It is unclear if the term rock opera originated in Canada or was transmitted from England. In the 1960's, Ottawa was home to a well-known coffee house and music venue, Le Hibou.[52] Being a hub for local artists and touring musicians alike, it is possible that the term was brought there from somewhere else but could also have originated there.

The Story of Simon Simonpath: A Science Fiction Pantomime, a full-length album released in 1967 by the band Nirvana, is regarded as the first work self-consciously subtitled as a rock opera.[53] However, it was *Tommy*, by The Who, released two years later, that had the most significant influence on the future of rock opera.[54] These albums had no element of theater yet and were only allegorical song cycles. It was not until 1969 that a concert version of *Tommy* was staged at the Metropolitan Opera as part of a tour by The Who.[55]

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[49] Walt Grealis, ed. "Poet Turned Songwriter." *RPM Music Weekly* 5, no. 19 (July 4, 1966), 1. *RPM* is an abbreviation for *Records, Promotion, Music*.
[50] William Hawkins, e-mail message to author, January 6, 2014.
[51] Grealis, "Poet Turned Songwriter," 1.
[52] "So Who's Hawkins," available from http://www.wmhawkins.com/content/hawkins.html; Internet, accessed 20 November 2013.
[53] John Rockwell, "Rock Opera." *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 3 October 2013. This band, Nirvana, should not be confused with the American band of the 1990's that went by the same name.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

In a 1993 article from *Popular Music and Society* Stuart Lenig suggests that rock opera could be thought of as being a part of a broader term he calls "rock theatre."[56] For him, rock theatre includes more than just long format songs; it includes early music videos, like the ones created by the Beatles for "Penny Lane" and "Strawberry Fields Forever" and live theatrical rock performances, for example, concerts by Pink Floyd.[57] The latter, he calls "performance rock" and includes, among others, Queen, Genesis, David Bowie, Frank Zappa, Roxy Music, *Tommy*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. A second wave of rock theatre emerged in the late 1970's and early 80's, this one being more focused on "glam methods."[58] Alice Cooper, Kiss, and the New York Dolls are included in this group. Lenig goes on to argue that there was a performative, theatrical element to some punk bands. Bands like the Sex Pistols had a deliberate way of performing on stage that involved "thrashing without knowledge, senseless abandon, and bad-humored unintentional, instant self parody."[59]

In many examples mentioned by Lenig, it is easy to see the connection and progression of a theatrical aesthetic in rock. Nevertheless, there is too much of a distinction between his progressive rock and glam rock examples for them to be lumped into the same category. There is a difference between performative rock that has an intrinsic narrative quality and that which creates a flashy façade merely for the sake of spectacle. There are few performers who could straddle the line between the two successfully, David Bowie being perhaps the best example. He also fails to mention Meat

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[56] Stuart Lenig, "The Theatre of Rock," *Popular Music and Society* 17, no. 1 (1993), 1.
[57] Ibid..
[58] Ibid., 12. Glam is a movement in rock from the 1970s characterized by performers with outrageous costumes, make-up, and hair styles.
[59] Ibid., 15.

Loaf, who certainly fits in the category of "rock theatre." The timeline of rock theatre should probably pass right over glam rock, especially as it has continued to veer towards spectacle and away from story.

Nevertheless, rock operas do not end with *Tommy*. Between 1969 and 1976, the Kinks released five rock operas: *Arthur or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire, Preservation Act 1, Preservation Act 2, The Kinks Present: A Soap Opera, and The Kinks Present: Schoolboys in Disgrace*.[60] In 1972, David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* came out. 1974 saw the release of Lou Reed's *Berlin*, and Genesis made its contribution, *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* in 1975. The duo of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice would also try their hand at rock opera.

After the success of their "pop" cantata *Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 1968, the pair worked on the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*.[61] It was first released as a double album in 1970. In 1971, it hit number one on the Billboard charts. Perhaps the most significant difference between *Superstar* and the other rock operas of the time was that it enlisted separate singers for each role, a chorus, a rock band, and an orchestra. The personnel on the album reads like a who's who of musicians: Ian Gillan of Deep Purple, Michael d'Abo of Manfred Mann, Lesley Duncan, Karl Jenkins, both Rice and Webber as well as a host of the best rock session players of the time. Because of its popularity, many live performances sprung up around the United

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[60] "Kinks Discography," available from http://www.kindakinks.net/discography/index.php?ukalbums; Internet, accessed 19 March 2014.

[61] "Jesus Christ Superstar," *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 3 October 2013.

States. The first authorized performance was in July of 1971, and in October, it opened on Broadway. It closed on July 1, 1973 after 711 performances.

Jesus Christ Superstar was the first rock opera to be fully staged on Broadway. However, there remains a mismatch in terminology for those who view *Superstar* primarily as a concept album and those who view it is a stage musical. Most reference books on musical theater lump *Superstar* in with shows like *Hair* and *Godspell* as a rock musical.[62] On the other hand, it is always included in lists of albums belonging to the genre rock opera. Similar problems arise with works like *Tommy*, *Quadraphenia, American Idiot*, and other rock operas that went on to be adapted for stage and film. The term rock opera is mainly used to define albums but not stage or film versions of them. Once a rock opera is staged, it becomes a musical. The album *Tommy* became *The Who's Tommy*, and the album *Green Day Presents: American Idiot* became *American Idiot*. The problem then becomes distinguishing these from other rock musicals. As Scott Warfield states "the 'rock musical' has become an extremely pliable category, capable of embracing a wide range of characteristics."[63] In an attempt to differentiate them, Warfield uses four categories, works self-identified as rock musicals, concept albums which were later staged, works that use rock styles in their music, and works that appropriate old songs or earlier styles.[64] What becomes clear in this categorization is that the term used to label any individual work is largely defined by the horizons of expectations of its intended audience. Warfield suggests that the label "rock musical" is partly intended to

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[62] See, for example, Hischak, Thomas S., *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical: Theatre, Film, and Television*, Oxford University Press, New York: 2008.
[63] Scott Warfield, "From *Hair* to *Rent*: Is 'Rock' a Four-letter Word on Broadway?" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, eds. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 235.
[64] Ibid., 236.

signal a work's outsider status.[65] Warfield's idea could be extended in that a "rock musical" would likely draw a larger audience than a "rock opera." Despite it existing as a term for more than fifty years, there are perhaps still too many associations between "rock opera" and Western art opera. In any case, *Jesus Christ Superstar, Tommy,* and *American Idiot* all fall into Warfield's second category, concept albums which were later staged. Additionally, to this date, they are also the only rock operas ever staged on Broadway.

Many other rock opera albums followed *Superstar* in the 1970's and beyond. The more notable ones include The Who's *Quadraphenia* (1973), Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1979), Frank Zappa's *Joe's Garage* (1979), and *Barcelona* (1987) by Freddie Mercury and Montsarrat Caballé. Rock opera also became a popular genre in progressive metal in the 1980's and 90's.

The most recent significant contribution to rock opera and rock musicals is Green Day's *American Idiot* and *21st Century Breakdown*. As albums, they were self-defined by the band as punk rock operas, making them the first to bear this label. Many of the connections between Green Day and rock opera's past are fairly obvious; others do not apply directly to this discussion. Nevertheless, two deserve mention. Green Day's second EP (extended play), "Sweet Children," released in 1990, contains a cover of The Who's song, "My Generation." Also, Green Day covers The Who's "A Quick One, While He's Away" on the 2009 album *21st Century Breakdown*. These two examples demonstrate the band's familiarity with The Who from an early date and their continued awareness of the connections between their music and the music of The Who. After all, *American Idiot's*

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[65] Warfield, "From *Hair* to *Rent*," 243.

two multi-part songs, “Jesus of Suburbia” and “Homecoming” most closely resemble the so-called mini-opera “A Quick One, While He’s Away” than any other piece associated with rock opera.

American Idiot

The title “American Idiot” refers to three different items that must be distinguished. *Green Day Presents American Idiot* is the title of the album released by the band Green Day in 2004. The first song on this album is also called “American Idiot.” In 2009, *American Idiot* was adapted for the stage and opened on Broadway in 2010. There is significant divergence between the album and the Broadway show. While they contain much of the same material, there are significant differences. But before examining those differences it is worth giving an overview of the assorted "Idiots."

After Green Day’s 2000 studio album *Warning* and compilations in 2001 and 2002, the future of the band was somewhat uncertain. In 2005, bassist Mike Dirnt told *Rolling Stone*, "Breaking up was an option…We were arguing a lot and we were miserable. We needed to shift directions."[66] When Armstrong, Dirnt, and Cool finally got together to record another album, momentum halted upon the disappearance of the master recordings.[67] It is unclear exactly how this happened—there are varying accounts. They may have been misplaced or removed from the studio. They may have been accidentally deleted from a hard drive.[68] It does seem unlikely that these songs were lost completely, but perhaps the missing masters gave the group an excuse to scrap a project that no one was happy with anyway.

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[66] Matt Hendrickson, "Green Day," *Rolling Stone* no. 968 (February 24, 2005): 40-44.
[67] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 191.
[68] Gaar, *Rebels with a Cause*, 212.

Rather than calling it quits, the band decided to write an entirely new album together. According to Mike Dirnt, on a day that he arrived first to the studio, the audio engineer challenged him to write a thirty second song on the spot.[69] When Armstrong and Cool arrived, they wanted to contribute their own songs. After they pieced them together, Cool noted that it was like a rock opera.[70] This is the kernel from which grew two songs, "Jesus of Suburbia" and "Homecoming." These two nine-minute tracks have been compared to the Who's rock opera *Tommy* and its predecessor mini rock opera, "A Quick One While He's Away."[71] Ultimately, the band had thirty five songs with which to choose from for their final product.[72]

Like other rock operas, *American Idiot* has a narrative. It revolves around three characters, Jesus of Suburbia, Whatsername, and St. Jimmy. Jesus of Suburbia is unhappy with his life in the suburbs and decides to move to the city. It is there he meets St. Jimmy and Whatsername. These two characters represent the internal struggle of Jesus of Suburbia between rage and love, respectively. St. Jimmy is a self-destructive punk rocker. Whatsername is a strong, loving soul. Ultimately, she triumphs over St. Jimmy when he commits metaphorical suicide. Jesus of Suburbia returns home, forgetting about Whatsername, but through his struggles, has a stronger sense of himself.

The title song "American Idiot," sets the stage for the narrative by pointing out the heavy influence of the media over the lives of everyday Americans. In the political climate in which the song was released, it was clear that it was referring to George W. Bush and those who went along with his rationale for starting the war in Iraq in 2003.

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[69] Ibid., 220.
[70] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 197.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Gaar, *Green Day: Rebels with a Cause*, 221.

"Jesus of Suburbia," a song in five parts, describes the challenges of growing up in suburbia– kids neglected by their parents left to sit in front of the TV, hang out at the local 7-Eleven, and do drugs; all in therapy or on Ritalin. The resolution to leave it all behind leads into "Holiday." It describes, not a holiday, but a political climate of war, lies, and fear in which those who criticize their government are demonized. Even more critical than "American Idiot," the song contains the most caustic language in lines like, "Sieg heil to the president gasman" and "pulverize the Eiffel Towers who criticize your government."

The next pair of songs, "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" and "Are We The Waiting," describe Jesus of Suburbia's life once he has moved to the city. "St. Jimmy" and "Give Me Novacaine" introduce the character St. Jimmy and his rebellious, self-destructive nature. Then, in "She's A Rebel" and "Extraordinary Girl," Whatsername enters the story. Conflict arises in "Letterbomb," and in "Wake Me Up When September Ends," Jesus of Suburbia waxes about his desire to escape his internal conflict. "Homecoming," the other five part song of the album describes the death of St. Jimmy, Jesus of Suburbia's frustration with his life, and his resolve to return home. Finally, in "Whatsername," he nostalgically recalls the past, but seems to resolve to move forward.

The origins of *American Idiot*, the Broadway musical lie with stage, television, and film director Michael Mayer. As a stage director, Mayer had already established himself with dramas like *Side Man* and *A View from the Bridge* and musicals such as *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, all of which received Tony Awards.[73] He was in the process of staging a new musical adaptation of Frank Wedekind's play *Frühlings Erwachen*

[73] "American Idiot the Musical: Team," available from http://www.americanidiotthemusical.com/team.php; Internet; accessed 18 April 2013.

(*Spring Awakening*) when he made an off-handed remark to a *Variety* reporter about turning the album *American Idiot* into a stage production.[74] When *Spring Awakening* producer Tom Hulce read this quote later, he called Mayer and asked him if he was serious.[75] Not long after that, Mayer was meeting with representatives of Green Day pitching his idea.[76]

The creative team of *American Idiot* was rounded out with arranger and orchestrator Tom Kitt and choreographer Steven Hoggett.[77] Kitt, another Broadway veteran, is best known for composing the music for *Next to Normal*, which won the Pullitzer Prize for drama and two Tony Awards. British choreographer Hoggett, founder of Frantic Assembly Theatre Company, is noted for his unique style of dance that is influenced by his background in physical theater. The production opened at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in September of 2009. In March of 2010 it opend on Broadway at the St. James Theater and ran for just over a year.[78]

It is important to note that the stage adaptation differs significantly from the album, so much so that Michael Mayer is given credit as a co-writer of the book. Along with an altered narrative, several extra Green Day songs are added. The main characters in the stage version are three friends, Johnny, Tunny, and Will, from "Jingletown," a nondescript suburban town. They resolve to leave their boring, ordinary lives behind and

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[74] Steven Winn, "*American Idiot* Awakens at Berkeley Rep," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 August 2009, available from http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/American-Idiot-awakens-at-Berkeley-Rep-3220397.php#page-1; Internet; accessed 1 November 2013.
[75] Steven Winn, "*American Idiot* Awakens at Berkeley Rep."
[76] Ibid.
[77] "American Idiot the Musical: Team."
[78] "The Road to Broadway," available from http://www.americanidiotthemusical.com/road.html; Internet; accessed 18 April 2013.

start anew in the city. However, before they leave, Will's girlfriend, Heather, reveals that she is pregnant, and Will decides to stay behind to be with her and help take care of their baby. Eventually, Will begins neglecting his responsibilities and Heather leaves him. When Johnny and Tunny get to the city, Tunny becomes mesmerized by a patriotic television commercial and enlists in the military. He loses his leg in combat and ends up in a military hospital where he is taken care of by a nurse, the Extraordinary Girl. Johnny, now alone, is persuaded by his alter-ego, St. Jimmy, to pursue a girl, Whatsername, and begin taking drugs. As Johnny develops a drug habit, Whatsername becomes increasingly frustrated. Under the influence of St. Jimmy, Johnny leaves Whatsername. Johnny and Tunny, with the Extraordinary Girl, decide to return to Jingletown where they reunite with Will. They come to terms with their internal struggles, which leaves the possibility of hope for the future.[79]

All of the songs from the album *American Idiot* are included in the stage adaptation. There are seven additional songs. Five of those songs appear on Green Day's 2009 album *21st Century Breakdown*, "Last of the American Girls," "Last Night On Earth," "Before the Lobotomy," "Know Your Enemy," and "21 Guns." Only two songs, "Favorite Son" and "When It's Time," do not appear on either of the albums. "When It's Time" has a copyright date of 2010 so it could not have appeared on either album.[80] Most likely, it was written for the stage version. "Favorite Son" appeared on a 2004 compilation *Rock Against Bush II* but never on one of Green Days albums.[81] The

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[79] Green Day, Billie Joe Armstrong, Michael Mayer, and Tom Kitt, *American Idiot: The Original Broadway Musical: Complete Piano/Vocal Songbook* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred, 2010), 10–11.
[80] Ibid., 138.
[81] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 217.

appendix lists all of the songs with their source albums and keys. Notably, some of the songs are in different keys in the stage musical (highlighted in grey). A preliminary investigation suggests that at least some of the keys were revised to place their melodies in a better range for female voices. This is confirmed by arranger Tom Kitt in a 2010 Rolling Stones article.[82] "Dearly Beloved" and "Letterbomb" are sung mainly by female characters, and the modulations in "21 Guns" follow the alternation between male and female vocal leads. Beyond those songs, the reasoning breaks down. It turns out that not all the revisions in key are not that easily explained. Chapter two will explore, in greater depth, the key revisions.

[82] David Fricke, "Green Day Musical Debts on Broadway," *Rolling Stone* no. 1104 (May 13, 2010), 15–16

CHAPTER 2

OPENING NIGHT: THE MUSIC OF *AMERICAN IDIOT*

Techniques

There are several techniques employed by Green Day and arranger Tom Kitt that serve to heighten dramatic moments, reinforce narrative themes, and propel the storyline forward. Stylistic allusion, in particular, serves many purposes. At times, the style being evoked runs counter to the lyrics, creating a sense of irony. Other times, the style and lyrics reinforce each other. Still at other times, the style serves to create a particular dramatic pace, for example, using an intensified style to lead to a dramatic high point. Another important way the music shapes the narrative is through the modification of songs from their original album version, altering keys and using songs in unexpected narrative contexts. A third technique for highlighting the narrative is the use of recurring musical motives. Jessica Sternfeld's analysis of *Jesus Christ Superstar,* in her book *Megamusical*, notes three different ways they can be used: short motifs or themes used as symbols, sung melodies that return in new contexts, and songs that receive previews before appearing in their full form.[83] In fact, there is one additional technique Sternfeld finds employed in *Superstar* that can also be examined in *American Idiot*, characters being defined by their own musical style or genre.[84] As Sternfeld points out, "each of these techniques brings added emotion and layers of meaning to the story and the characters."[85]

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[83] Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 27.
[84] Ibid., 28.
[85] Ibid., 27.

Modified Songs

Several songs in *American Idiot* undergo modifications from their original versions on the album. For example, some of them are in a different key. As mentioned in chapter one, sometimes the reason for the change is to accommodate female voices. This is true of section four of "Jesus of Suburbia," "Dearly Beloved." Since it is sung entirely by Heather, the key is changed to E flat major from the original, A flat major. "Letterbomb," sung by Whatsername and other females, is changed from E major to B major.

Other key changes made are more difficult to account for or are more complex. The original key of "Favorite Son" is A flat major. In the musical, it is in B flat major, yet it is still primarily sung by a male voice. In the context of the show, the song is a flashy military recruitment television commercial come-to-life with female back-up singers in short sequin dresses. The key modification ends up raising the range of the vocal line, which allows the lead singer to project more powerfully and therefore effectively reflect the sentiment of the song. However, the lyrics in the third verse of the song reveal that the favorite son is "not the All-American that you thought you paid." In order to highlight this change in perspective, Tom Kitt chooses to modulate the third verse to C major. The modulation also creates a better transition into the next song, "Are We the Waiting," in A major, as there is a direct segue from one to the other.

"Last of the American Girls/ She's A Rebel" presents an entirely different situation. As a mash-up of two different songs, it takes on the original key of the predominant song, G major for "She's A Rebel." The song begins with Johnny singing about his new found love, Whatsername. In the scene, he is voicing, in song, a postcard

he has sent to his friends back in Jingletown. His friends interject with their own commentary, “she’s a rebel, she’s a saint” between his lines. Whatsername joins Johnny at the bridge, and St. Jimmy enters during the second chorus, interjecting, “she’s holding on my heart like a hand grenade.” Eventually, Jimmy takes over the song. The key changes to A major, the same key as “St. Jimmy,” and he inserts lyrics from his song as the other voices are overtaken. Rather than merely a key modification for practical purposes, the A major at the end of this song is symbolic of St. Jimmy’s nascent hold over and control of Johnny. It serves as a subtle foreshadowing of what is to come.

The modifications in “Last Night on Earth” are similarly complicated. The album version is in A major, which the musical version eventually reaches, but it starts in F major. The best way to understand the F major is that it serves as a transition between the introductory material, which is in F minor, and the A major. Nevertheless, this modulation within the song also serves to outline the dramatic action in the scene. Johnny and Whatsername have just returned from a night out. They are now shooting up on drugs, and “Last Night” serves as an unconventional love ballad between Whatsername and St. Jimmy. At the change to A major, Heather enters the scene and starts singing–though still in Jingletown with Will. Their baby has just been born, and she is singing to it while Will is visibly annoyed by the added responsibility of taking care of a baby.

The story telling device used in “Too Much Too Soon” creates an interesting scene. Rather than having Heather and Will argue with and take out their frustrations directly on each other, they have apparent alter egos, Theo and Alysha, to do it. The two alter egos are dressed exactly like their counterparts and express their unspoken thoughts while Heather and Will become the back-up singers. As with “Last Night on Earth,” the

revisions in tonality from the album version mainly align with the switch from male voice to female voice. Rather than starting the song in its original album key of B major, the song begins in C major with Theo singing the first verse and chorus. The song modulates to D major for the second verse and chorus, sung by Alysha. After the bridge, the song modulates to B major for the final chorus and ending. This series of modulations not only creates additional interest in the music, it outlines and highlights the back-and-forth of Heather and Will's disagreement. It also puts Alysha in an appropriate vocal range to finish the song with an extended bluesy improvised cadenza. The cadenza emphasizes the climax of the scene: Heather is fed up with Will's juvenile antics now that the baby has arrived, and she decides to leave him. The cadenza is also symbolic of Heather's newfound empowerment.

"Extraordinary Girl" undergoes a key revision in the musical as well. On the album, it is part of the same track as "Letterbomb." "Extraordinary Girl" is in A major, and "Letterbomb" is in E major, creating a tonic-dominant relationship. However, in the musical, "Extraordinary Girl" occurs in a scene sandwiched by "Before the Lobotomy" and then a reprise of "Lobotomy." It is most likely this reason that "Extraordinary Girl" is given the new key of B major, for both versions of "Lobotomy" are in F sharp major. This revision of key from A major to B major, then, creates a closer tonal relationship between the two songs.

The most drastic revision in keys is in "21 Guns," and this is for good reason; "21 Guns" is the dramatic climax of the entire show. At this point Heather has just left Will, Tunny is coming to terms with losing his leg, and Whatsername is fed up with Johnny's drug use. Johnny, under the influence of St. Jimmy, writes a goodbye note to

Whatsername. The original album version of "21 Guns" is in D minor and F major, the verses being in D minor and the choruses in F major. In the musical, to accommodate the female voices, the first verse is in G minor and the chorus in B flat major (Figure 1). The second verse, which is sung by Tunny and Johnny, is in D minor, and the second chorus is in F major. The bridge, sung mainly by Whatsername and Extraordinary Girl, returns to the original G minor, and the final chorus modulates to C major.

Figure 1: "21 Guns" Song Outline

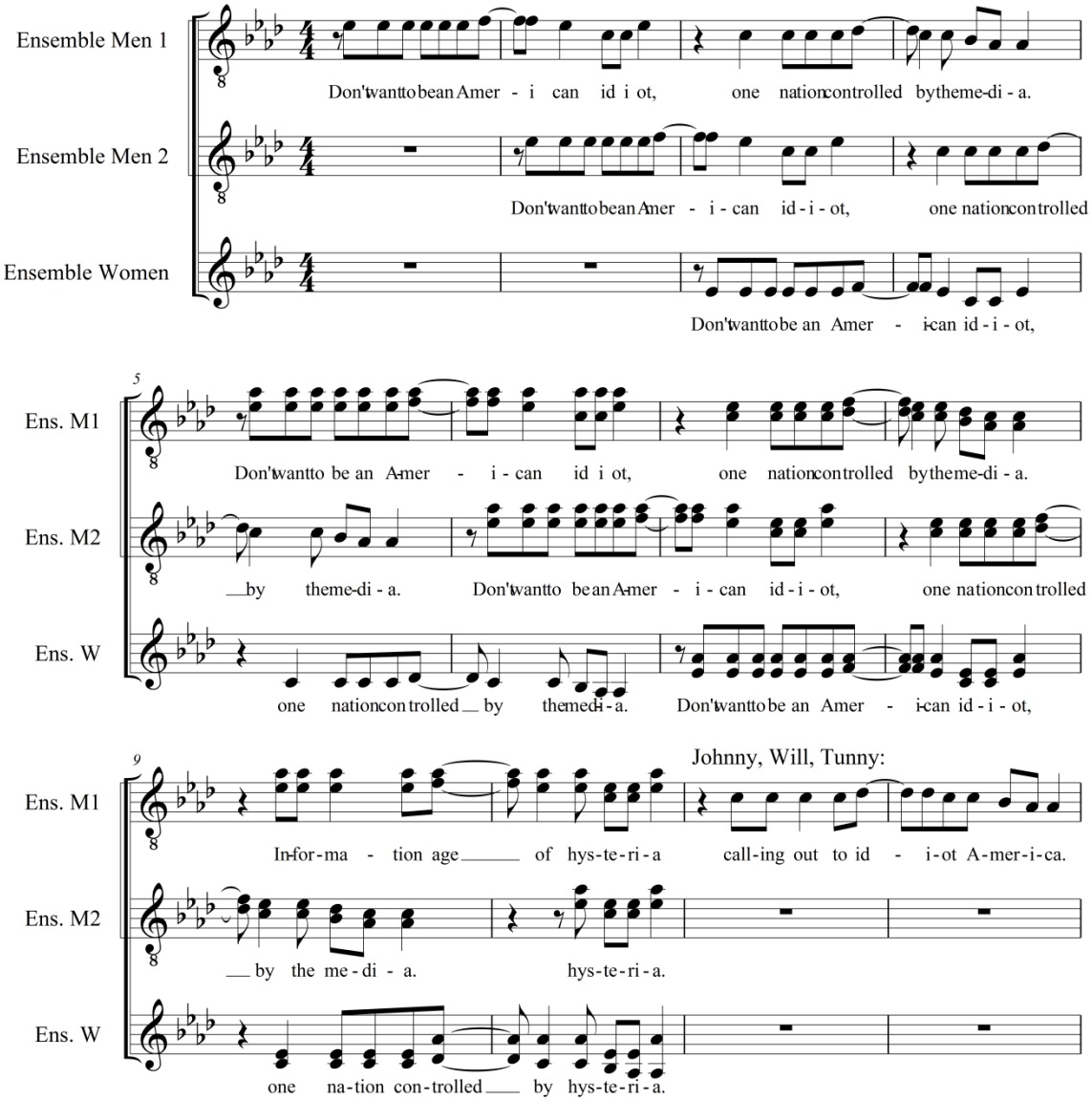
Section	**Characters**	**Key**
Verse 1	Whatsername	G minor
Chorus 1	Extraordinary Girl, Heather	B^b Major
Verse 2	Tunny, Johnny, Will	D minor
Chorus 2	All except Johnny	F Major
Bridge	Whatsername, Extraordinary Girl, Ensemble	G minor
Chorus 3	Ensemble	C Major

The transition from each minor key to its relative major is smooth and already built into the structure of the song. Additionally, the modulation from G minor/B flat major to D minor/F major is an easy transition. These four keys have an interesting relationship; the major keys are related by a fifth and so are the minor keys. In progression, they keys have a third relationship. Nevertheless, the move from the second chorus in F major to the bridge in G minor is very striking as there is little preparation. The same is true of the modulation from G minor to C major. Similar to other songs in *American Idiot* mentioned earlier, the revisions from the original key serve a dual purpose, to accommodate female voices and create greater interest and drama within the song. From the more closely related modulations to the more striking ones, the modulations in "21 Guns" are

particularly laid out in such a way to slowly build tonal and dramatic energy until the final modulation, when the tension is finally released in the key of C major.

There is one other modification that should be noted, made in the song "American Idiot." Rather than a modification of keys, the vocal arrangement of the song has been changed (Figure 2). The third verse consists of a three part canon on the words "don't want to be an American Idiot" punctuated by and ending in which Johnny, Will, and Tunny sing "calling out to idiot America" in unison. The effect is similar to what one might hear in a choral work from the western art music tradition; there is a building of tension during the contrapuntal section which culminates in the unison, emphasizing the text at this point. In addition, the final time through the canon, each part splits and becomes harmonized, creating even more tension.

Figure 2: “American Idiot” Canon



"American Idiot" Canon (reduced from score)

Repurposed Songs

The songs on *Green Day Presents: American Idiot* were already imbued with meaning before they were included in the stage musical. In most instances, their context within the show aligns with their original meaning. Nevertheless, there are a few cases that result in extra layers of meaning when they appear in the show. The most notable

example is "Wake Me Up When September Ends." Green Day fans know that this song is about the death of Billie Joe Armstrong's father.[86] Evan an unknowing listener would be able to discern this message from the lyrics: "Like my father's come to pass, seven years has gone so fast" and "as my memory rests, but never forgets what I lost." When this song is sung in the show, it is about loss in general. Johnny has lost his girlfriend, Will has lost his girlfriend and child, and Tunny has lost his leg. They are mourning the loss of innocence and the passing of time from a "summer" of their lives to a "fall." But for those already familiar with the song or keen on observing the lyrics, the song has an extra layer of meaning and memory.

The same may be true, but in a different way, for a song like "Favorite Son." This song was first heard on the 2004 compilation *Rock Against Bush Volume II*. As heard within this context, it is a satire of George W. Bush and his declining popularity. The lyrics state that "his star was brightly shining" and describe him as "a clean-cut all-American." In the show, the song becomes the musical number for a flashy military recruiting commercial that mesmerizes Tunny and induces him to enlist. The fact that the "Favorite Son," first used to make fun of Bush, is now being used to recruit soldiers for the war that he started would not be lost on anyone with a prior knowledge of the song.

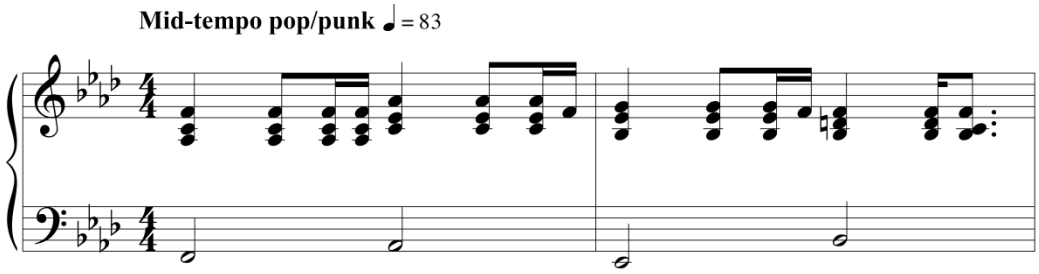
Recurring Musical Motives

Following Sternfeld's model, there are two musical motives that serve as symbols within the narrative. One motive, used in "Boulevard of Broken Dreams" and "Last Night On Earth" is mainly associated with Whatsername (Figure 3). It is essentially a chord

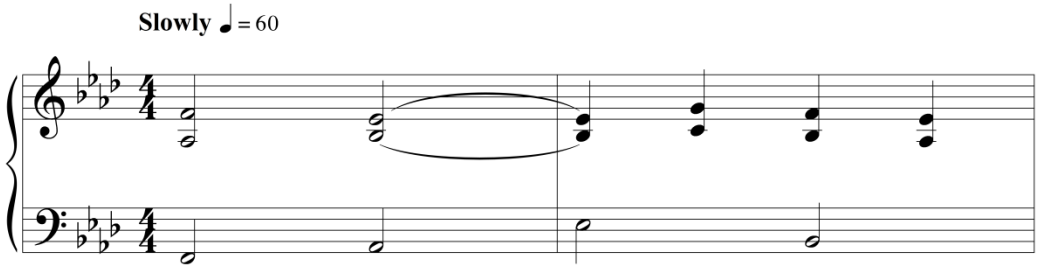
[86] Ben Myers, *Green Day: American Idiots and the New Punk Explosion* (New York: The Disinformation Company, 2006), 199.

progression of i-III-VII-IV, which in both songs, is in the key of F minor. In "Boulevard," it is played initially by a strumming acoustic guitar, but in "Last Night On Earth," it is at a slower tempo and played by strings. It is also harmonically more complex, with anticipations, passing tones, suspensions, and appoggiaturas.

Figure 3: "Boulevard of Broken Dreams and "Last Night on Earth" Opening Measures



"Boulevard of Broken Dreams" opening measures (reduced from score)



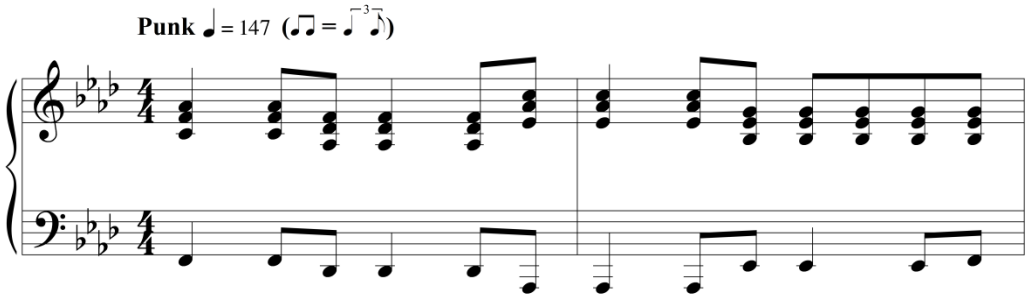
"Last Night on Earth" opening measures (transcribed from recording)

Nevertheless, the dramatic action of the two scenes is quite different. In its initial appearance in "Boulevard," Johnny is walking alone in the streets of the city, and he sees Whatsername for the first time in an open window. He has not met her, so she is still an idealized women viewed at a distance. "Last Night On Earth" begins as a love duet between Whatsername and Johnny's alter-ego, St. Jimmy. The situation has become more real. Whatsername is no longer an ideal viewed from afar; she has become humanized. Ironically, Whatsername is not singing with Johnny himself but with St. Jimmy, Johnny's

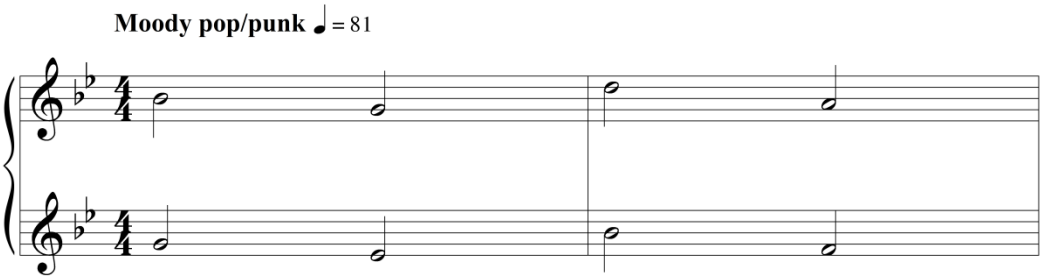
internal devil, which is indicative of Johnny's intentions with Whatsername and a foreshadowing of their eventual break-up.

The second musical motive that serves as a symbol connects "Holiday" with "21 Guns." Like the first motive, it is primarily a set of chord changes, i-VI-III-VII (Figure 4). In "Holiday," it appears in F minor, but in "21 Guns," it is in G minor. Although the tempi of the songs are quite different, the connection between the two is made more audible by a similar voicing in both instances. The chords are in root position, and the top voice moves in a pattern of scale degrees 3-1-5-2.

Figure 4: "Holiday" and "21 Guns" Motives



"Holiday" motive (reduced from score)



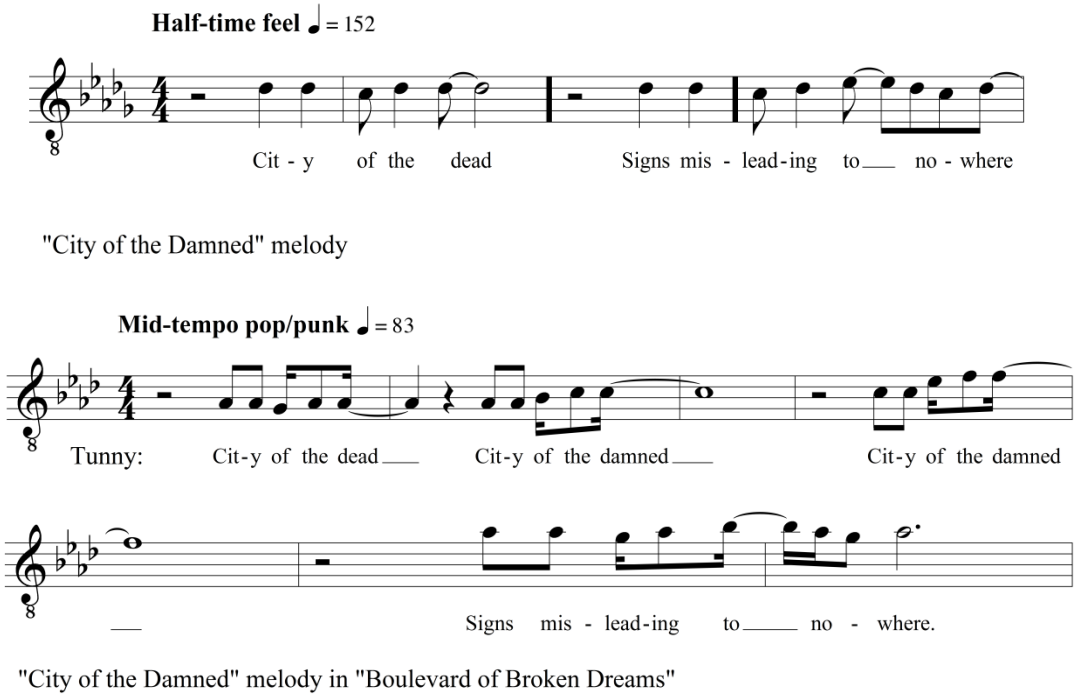
"21 Guns" Motive (transcribed from recording)

In the context of the narrative, these two songs book-end the storyline. "Holiday" is the song in which the trio of friends expresses their frustration with suburbia but pledge to make a new beginning in the city. Despite their disillusionment, they are hopeful. On the other hand, "21 Guns" is the climax of the story, when their dreams seem to start falling

apart. Like the other motive, this one points out the differences between the ideal and reality and the irony that a change of scene does not necessarily lead to a positive change in circumstances.

There are also several instances of recurring sung melodies. In *American Idiot*, they serve mainly to tie elements of the storyline together. For example, at the end of "Boulevard of Broken Dreams," Tunny interjects lyrics from "City of the Damned," part two of "Jesus of Suburbia." In this case, the melody begins the same but then diverges (Figure 5). The rhythm is a diminution of the original.

Figure 5: "City of the Damned" Melody

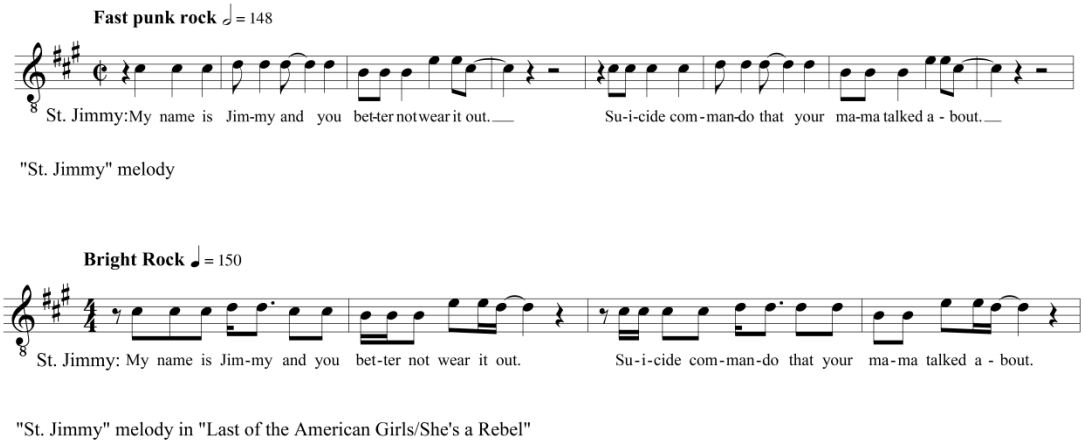


Narratively, this recurrence reminds the audience that while Johnny is wandering the streets of the city discovering his love interest, Tunny is back at their apartment realizing that the city was not the panacea he was expecting. He is half asleep watching television,

and the show is able to move smoothly to the next scene, in which Tunny visualizes a military recruiting commercial come-to-life in “Favorite Son.”

The next melodic recurrence is found in “Last of the American Girls/She’s a Rebel.” As discussed in the previous section on modified songs, this mash-up goes through a series of modulations culminating in A major (Figure 6). It marks not only the return of St. Jimmy’s melody from his song (“St. Jimmy), but also the return of the key as well.

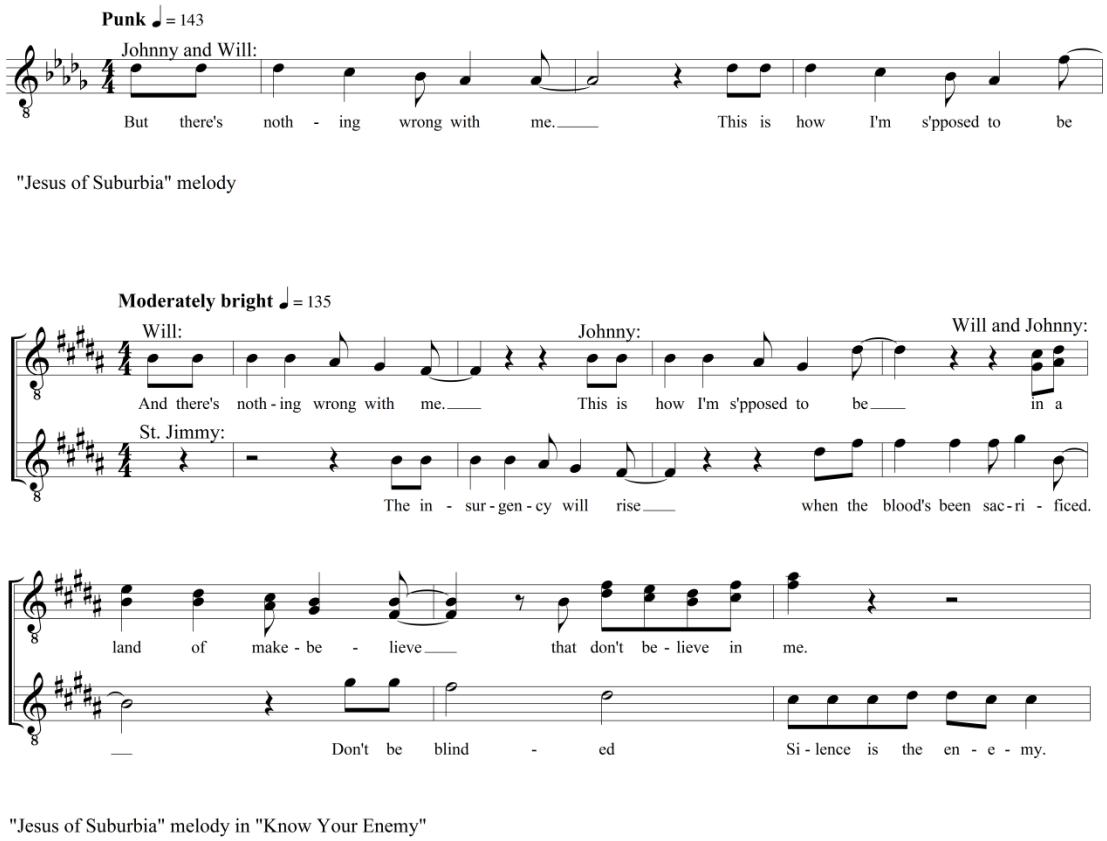
Figure 6: “St. Jimmy” Melody



This symbol of the infectious nature of St. Jimmy’s personality also serves as a transition to the next song, sung between him and Whatsername.Whatsername’s motive returns at the beginning of the next song, “Last Night on Earth,” as discussed above.

In “Know Your Enemy” a melody from “Jesus of Suburbia” emerges (Figure 7). At first, it is sung by St. Jimmy with different lyrics. In this context, it is not very noticeable. Not until Will enters in with the melody and original lyrics does it become apparent where the melody comes from. In the next iteration, it is sung in canon, St. Jimmy singing his lyrics, and Will and Johnny singing their original lyrics from “Jesus of Suburbia.”

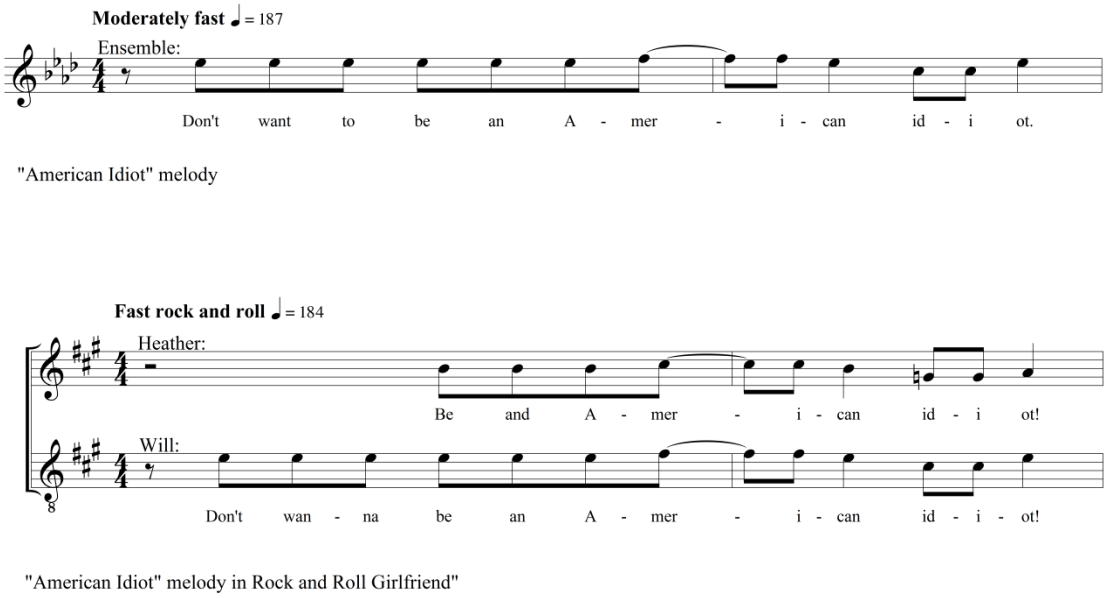
Figure 7: “Jesus of Suburbia” Melody



In the context of the story, both Will and Johnny are at their low points. Will is sitting on his couch at home taking hits from a bong, and Johnny is shooting up in his apartment in the city. Neither seems to be aware of their destructive habits. The return of this melody serves to bring Will, who is seated at the couch, occasionally snacking, taking a beer from the cooler at his side, or smoking pot for nearly the entire show, into the narrative. It also highlights the parallels between his life and Johnny’s, even though they appear to be different. Lastly, it calls into question whether Will or Johnny have made any progress or improvements to their lives since they sang the melody at the beginning of the show or if they are still stuck in the same cycle of frustration and disillusionment.

The last recurring melody is in “Rock and Roll Girlfriend,” part four of “Homecoming” (Figure 8). Heather enters with her new boyfriend and the two sing this section together. Will, who is upset by this, interjects “don’t wanna be an American Idiot” and Heather joins him for “be an American Idiot.”

Figure 8: “American Idiot” Melody



This highlights their present animosity toward each other. In addition, it points toward Will’s realization that he needs to take responsibility for his life and reconcile his differences with Heather.

The third category of recurring musical material is what Sternfeld calls previews of songs that occur before their full form.[87] There are three such instances in *American Idiot*. The first preview occurs in “Before the Lobotomy” (Figure 9). The first five measures of the song preview the opening of “Extraordinary Girl.” This preview is in F sharp major, whereas the full song is in B major.

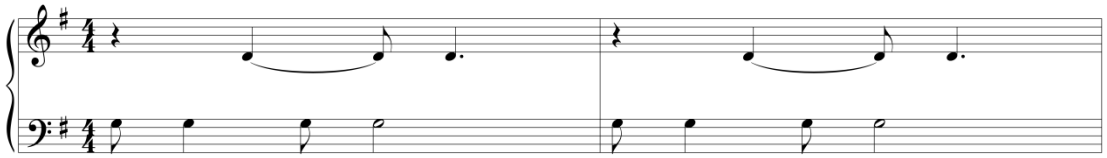
[87] Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 27.

Figure 9: “Extraordinary Girl” Motive

Nevertheless, it serves as a way of tying this long scene together. The scene opens with three wounded veterans in a military hospital singing “Before the Lobotomy.” They are lamenting their losses and expressing their fear and anxiety of what may be ahead. In the midst of this scene, Tunny has a morphine-induced dream/hallucination. He imagines that his nurse, Extraordinary Girl, in a veiled “oriental” costume, sings and dances with him (“Extraordinary Girl”). When the dream is over, the scene returns to the hospital and a reprise of “Before the Lobotomy.”

The second preview has a more complex meaning than the first. “When It’s Time” begins with a simple pattern of tonic and dominant on an acoustic guitar (Figure 10). It is a preview of “Wake Me Up When September Ends” but is also an important structural motive in both songs. Listeners familiar with “Wake Me Up,” one of Green Day’s hit songs from the original album, will immediately recognize the motive.

Figure 10: “When It’s Time” and “Wake Me Up When September Ends” Motive

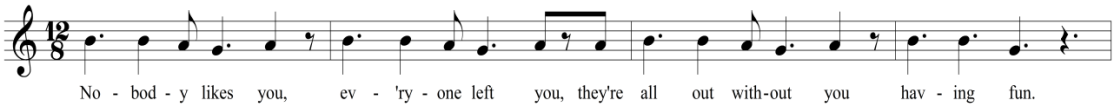


"When It's Time" and "Wake Me Up When September Ends" motive

For this reason, it has a unique function among previews since it evokes a song that audience members already know and have attached meaning to. In addition, this motive is symbolic of Johnny’s love for Whatsername. “When It’s Time” is a song that Johnny has written himself, and he plays and sings it for a sleeping Whatsername; it is diegetic. When the motive returns in “Wake Me Up,” Johnny is lamenting the loss of Whatsername and it becomes non-diegetic, reinforcing its deeper significance to the story.

The final preview occurs at the end of “21 Guns.” Instead of resolving to the tonic, the song remains on the dominant, G major, and Heather sings the melody of “Nobody Likes You” over a held chord (Figure 11).

Figure 11: “Nobody Likes You” Melody



"Nobody Likes You" melody

When “Nobody Likes You” appears in its full iteration, Will is at home on his couch contemplating his loneliness. When the entire cast sings it directly at the audience at the end of “Homecoming” its full meaning is revealed– it is a taunt of self-doubt that we are all inclined to level at ourselves at times.

Stylistic Allusions

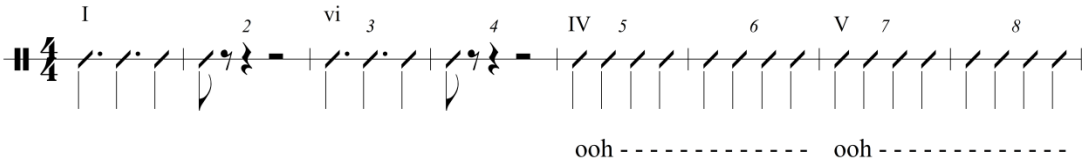
Several songs from the show reference styles of rock beyond punk. There are far too many to include in any detail, and some are outside the realm of this discussion. Nevertheless, a few should be pointed out for the way in which they highlight important narrative themes and heighten dramatic moments. One example from *American Idiot* that exemplifies this is "Jesus of Suburbia." Beyond the surface of what can be understood from the lyrics, it is part of a larger narrative that encompasses the entire album *American Idiot*. Interestingly enough, "Jesus of Suburbia" has a similar construction to "A Quick One, While He's Away," an earlier Who song that Pete Townshend called a "mini-opera." Rob Sheffield, writing in *Rolling Stone* in 2004, describes "Homecoming," another track from *American Idiot*, as "sounding like 'A Quick One, While He's Away' without any of the funny parts."[88] What makes this connection even stronger is that Green Day recorded a cover of that Who song as a bonus track on their 2009 album, *21st Century Breakdown*.

The styles heard in "Jesus of Suburbia" have a postmodern, eclectic quality that call to mind many sub-genres of rock besides punk. In some cases, these allusions appear to have been made to deliberately contrast with the meaning of the lyrics. In addition, the use of "Jesus of Suburbia" in the Broadway musical *American Idiot* in a slightly different narrative context creates an extra layer of meaning. I will focus primarily on stylistic allusions and how they create meaning in conjunction with the text. "Jesus of Suburbia" is a nine-minute song with five parts: Jesus of Suburbia, City of the Damned, I Don't Care, Dearly Beloved, and Tales of Another Broken Home. Each part has its own unique

[88] Rob Sheffield, "Berkeley Calling," *Rolling Stone*, no. 958 (September 30, 2004), 186.

characteristics, but three in particular contain clear stylistic allusions outside of punk. Part one of the song, also titled "Jesus of Suburbia" contains one of the most iconic rock-and-roll chord progressions, I-vi-IV-V (Figure 12). While this is surely not the first use of this progression in punk, it is uncommon. Ever since their 2000 album, *Warning*, Green Day had been experimenting with musical ideas that "strayed from the usual template."[89] In light of this, it would not be a stretch to see this chord progression as a similar experimentation. Besides, the rate at which the progression occurs is much slower than it would be in a traditional punk treatment. There are a few characteristics in this part that make the progression less easily detected. Each chord lasts for two measures. The first measure contains a guitar riff (dotted quarter note, dotted quarter note, quarter note). In the second measure, the guitar drops out, and we hear an unaccompanied vocal statement. The overall effect separates and prolongs each chord to a point that makes the progression less evident. For example, in other songs that use this progression, such as "Earth Angel" and "Blue Moon," the chords change at twice and four times the speed, respectively, and there is no break in the accompaniment. In this section, it is not until the fifth measure that a continuous accompaniment begins. This lasts through the IV and V chords, and then the whole process repeats.

Figure 12: "Jesus of Suburbia" Opening Measures



"Jesus of Suburbia" Opening

The drums during chords IV and V (measures five through eight) have a typical rock

[89] Myers, *The New Punk Explosion*, 162.

backbeat except that the eighth notes occurring on beat 2 are slightly swung. On top of that texture is backing vocals on "ooh" that are held out for two measures each. These characteristics combine to create an overall impression of surf rock. Rob Sheffield, in his *Rolling Stone* article, also notices the influence of the Beach Boys in "Jesus of Suburbia." Additionally, in the documentary *Broadway Idiot,* Tom Kitt identifies the Beach Boys as being an influence on his arrangements in *American Idiot.*[90] This stylistic reference seems to be in direct opposition to the sentiment of the lyrics, which give a pessimistic view on youth in suburbia:

> I'm the son of rage and love,
> The Jesus of Suburbia.
> The Bible of none of the above
> On a steady diet of
>
> Soda pop and Ritalin.
> No one ever died for my
> Sins in hell S'far as I can tell
> 'Least the ones I've gotten away with.

On the other hand, perhaps the meaning is more direct than ironic. Could this part of the song exemplify the deterioration of surf culture into suburban depravity? Either way, the incongruity between the lyrics and the musical style suggest a reality that is different from what it appears to be.

In part two, "City of the Damned," the character changes considerably. Besides the slightly slower tempo, piano is introduced into the guitar, bass, and drums mix. The bass plays a descending line of D^b-C-B^b-A^b-G^b, each note lasting two beats. With the piano mainly emphasizing every half note with a chord, the song suddenly seems to

[90] Doug Hamilton, director, *Broadway Idiot,* iTunes download, produced by Ira Pittelman (Santa Monica, CA: FilmBuff, 2013).

sound more like Meatloaf's "Bat out of Hell." Meatloaf's narrative song style would fit well into a "rock-opera." Perhaps even more convincing are the similarities in sound and chord progression to "All the Young Dudes," written by David Bowie and recorded by Mott the Hoople. Like "City of the Damned," "All the Young Dudes" utilizes a descending bass line of scale degrees 8-7-6-5, but in a different key. In fact, Green Day even uses a similar rhyming scheme in its lyrics. Compare

> At the center of the Earth in a parking lot,
> Of the 7-Eleven where I was taught.
>
> with
>
> Well Billy rapped all night about his suicide,
> How he kick it in the head when he was twenty-five.

The first example is from "City," the second from "Young Dudes." Both sets of lyrics occur over the course of the same descending bass pattern. Unlike part I of the song, the style and lyrics are much more aligned. Also, the main themes of both "City of the Damned" and "All the Young Dudes" are quite similar, mainly addressing disaffected youth. Because of the influence of Mott the Hoople's song on generations of American youth, it is easy to see how it could enter the subconscious of a younger band and be reconstituted in a different form. In another *Rolling Stone* article, Rob Sheffield finds a direct connection between "All the Young Dudes" and "21st Century Breakdown" from Green Day's 2009 album of the same name.[91] While this does not directly link "City of the Damned" to "Young Dudes," based on the connection found by Sheffield, it is safe to

[91] Rob Sheffield, "How to follow *American Idiot*: With an Even Bigger, Three-act Epic," *Rolling Stone* no. 1078 (May 14, 2009), 63.

assume knowledge of Mott the Hoople on the part of Green Day. In this section, the lyrics and style seem more congruent, which distinguishes it from the previous one.

Part three is decidedly more punk than any of the other sections, but part four, "Dearly Beloved," takes the listener to Motown and Phil Spector's "Wall of Sound." The tempo of this section is the quickest so far, with a lively backbeat from the drums. The backing vocal "oohs" reenter but have more motion and melodic contour than heard in "Jesus of Suburbia." The icing on the cake is the punctuation, on certain downbeats, by single glockenspiel notes. Like part two, the stylistic allusions are more in line with the lyrics. The words in this section are more personal and intimate. Even the beginning line, "Dearly beloved are you listening?" recalls a church setting– a further coincidence of the lyrics with a gospel-like Motown feel. Journalists like Matt Hendrickson, in his *Rolling Stone* article from February 2005, have also noticed the influence of Motown soul in *American Idiot*.[92] Of course another song from the show, "She's a Rebel," is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Motown group The Crystal's 1962 hit, "He's a Rebel." Even going further back in punk "genealogy," Motown has been seen as an influence on earlier punk bands like the Clash and the Ramones.[93] Green Day is clearly connecting with its roots in this pastiche.

"Tales of Another Broken Home," the final part of the song, makes another stylistic departure. While it is more difficult to locate this part within a specific style, it takes on a stadium rock feel. Some, like journalist Rob Sheffield have noticed a

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[92] Matt Hendrickson, "Green Day," *Rolling Stone* no. 968 (February 24, 2005), 40-44.
[93] Matt Diehl, *My So-Called Punk: Green Day, Fall Out Boy, the Distillers, Bad Religion: How Neo-Punk Stage-Dived into the Mainstream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 200–201.

Springsteen-style influence.[94] Green Day bassist Mike Dirnt, who probably wrote this part, said that his one goal was to make it as grandiose as possible.[95] The guitars and drums are much more active, their parts being based around a repeating pattern of four dotted eighth notes followed by two eighth notes. The texture is denser as well. The guitar sound is not as clean as the previous four parts, probably with added distortion and reverb, and there is far more use of crash cymbals in the drum part. This is also the first time we hear note against note harmonization of the vocal line and a near blasphemy in punk music, a guitar solo. Eventually, everything drops out except for voice and piano, which allows for a crescendo to a big finish. In this section, it is much more difficult to say whether or not there is an oppositional pull between the style and lyrics. The overall sound is not one of tension. The point of view of the singer remains first person, if slightly less intimate than in "Dearly Beloved." But this is also the high point of the narrative, when Jesus of Suburbia, or Johnny, in the Broadway adaptation, decides to get out of the suburbs. Perhaps it calls for a style slightly more epic than traditional punk.

With all of the stylistic differences between each part of "Jesus of Suburbia" it might be difficult to make sense of the song. At times, the music seems to suit the lyrics, at others, maybe not so much. What does that mean if anything? Each listener will have his/her own experience, but what can be said is that Green Day uses these style changes to great effect. The alternation between sections in which the lyrics and musical style are incongruous and sections in which they are congruous does two things. First it highlights the sections in which the singer is giving a direct narration, such as in section II. Second,

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[94] Sheffield, "Berkeley Calling," 186.
[95] Gillian G. Gaar, *Green Day: Rebels with a Cause* (New York: Music Sales Corporation, 2007), 220.

it indicates when the singer is being more sarcastic, as in section I. Without these stylistic references and their juxtaposition with the lyrics, the meaning of the song would be different and it would have less narrative momentum.

Another song that uses stylistic allusion to great effect is “Last of the American Girls/She’s a Rebel.” The song opens with a string quartet accompaniment playing staccato quarter notes. The vocals have a three eighth note pick-up into the first measure. During pauses in the vocal melody in the third and fourth measures, seventh and eighth measures, and eleventh and twelfth measures, the outside string voices fill in with eighth note lines that are more legato. The combination of the staccato quarter notes and the longer lines interacting with the vocal melody strongly evoke the well-known and landmark Beatles song "Eleanor Rigby." The peculiarity of this allusion is that the lyrics of “Last of the American Girls” seem incongruous with those of "Eleanor Rigby." On one hand is the extolling of virtues of the ideal girlfriend, on the other, a description of lonely, unfortunate souls. It is not until the interjection of the “She’s a Rebel” melody that the allusion is understood. When it enters in measure fifteen, the strings drop out and we hear it sung over nothing but a fast drum beat. The strings come back in two measures later accompanying the “Last of the American Girls” vocal melody. This alternation continues until “She’s a Rebel” finally takes over. It turns out that the purpose of the allusion to "Eleanor Rigby" is to evoke a more art/progressive style of rock, which in turn serves as a contrast to the more punk sounding “She’s a Rebel.” In some sense, "Eleanor Rigby" is the epitome of art rock, as it was one of the first rock songs to use strings and to deal with a somber subject. As one would expect in a struggle between art/progressive rock and punk rock, the rebellious punk wins; in this case, quite literally.

One more example deserves attention. The multi-part "Homecoming" near the end of the show resolves many of the conflicts brewing over the course of the narrative. In order to be effective as a finale, it must have a certain level of grandiosity to it. One way "Homecoming" does this is by evoking other grandiose rock narratives. In part two, "East 12th Street," Johnny has taken a desk job but desperately wants to leave and go back to Jingletown. Near the end of this section, there is a series of two measures phrases. The first measure of each phrase contains only a strumming acoustic guitar. The second measure is the full ensemble singing in harmony, with the accompaniment, including the drums playing the exact rhythm of the vocal line. Each of these second measures also contains a completely resolving chord progression of I-V-IV-V-I. The alternation that occurs in this series of phrases is very reminiscent of the middle section of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." This section begins with a piano accompaniment of the words "I see a little silhouette-o of a man." Each phrase by the vocalist and piano is answered by a Greek-chorus-like response, in harmony, with the entire accompaniment following the rhythm of the chorus. While the example in "East 12th Street" has a solo acoustic guitar with no vocals over it rather than a single voice over a piano accompaniment, the effect is the same and the allusion quite obvious. In addition, the protagonists of both songs are feeling a sense of entrapment trying to find a way of escaping. Nevertheless, the primary effect of the allusion, by evoking Queen and "Bohemian Rhapsody," is to call on listeners to hear "Homecoming" the way they might hear "Bohemian Rhapsody."

Characters Defined by Musical Style

This is one other technique that Jessica Sternfeld mentions as helping to create layers of meaning in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In *American Idiot*, it is not employed

frequently. However, it does apply to one character in the show, St. Jimmy. St. Jimmy is punk. This is not only clear from his entrance song, which begins in a fast punk-rock style, but also in his appearance. From St. Jimmy's eyeliner and hair to the leather, chains, and metal studs that adorn him, the audience is not in doubt about what he represents. While St. Jimmy does not always sing in a punk-rock style, we do see, for example, in "Last of the American Girls/She's a Rebel" that he sometimes interjects his melody and takes over other songs. In another one of his songs "Know Your Enemy," the entire cast is dressed in black hooded sweatshirts with the hoods pulled up, further associating St. Jimmy with punk. In some ways, only having one character associated with a particular style or genre is more effective; it highlights not only the significance of punk to the show but also the significance of St. Jimmy's character: he represents rage, one side of the struggle on the entire show is built.

Of course, no stylistic references would be relatable without proper context. The historical and cultural milieu of *American Idiot* is fundamental to the understanding of its music, narrative arc, and cultural critique. Chapter three aims to discuss these components as they relate to issues prevalent in American culture of the recent past.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEWS: CULTURAL CONTEXT AND CONNECTIONS

American Idiot's greatest significance is its rich depiction of the experience of a generation of Americans. It is a show that will continue to be relevant both for its larger themes as well as its specific portrayals of its era. In order to support this claim, it is important to review the issues surrounding this period of time—one perhaps unusually fraught both politically and socially. *American Idiot* also addresses important cultural issues: the travails of youth culture is its primary preoccupation, but the failings of suburbia and suburban culture are also important elements of its critique. Lastly, in the context of the history of musical styles and genres, *American Idiot*, because of Green Day's history and connection to punk music and subculture, reveals important features of punk's ongoing development.

The first decade of the twenty-first century was eventful for the world but especially the United States. Almost from the very beginning, there was political controversy. The presidential election of 2000 was only the fourth in the history of the United States in which the candidate with the fewer number of popular votes won the election. Furthermore, a controversy over voter ballots and a recount in Florida marred the final results. Because the Supreme Court ordered the recount to stop and allowed the vote certification by the Florida secretary of state to stand, its decision effectively handed the victory to George W. Bush.

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 forever changed the country. The aftermath, particularly Bush's policies going forward, were highly contentious. Under his presidency the United States started two costly wars, one in

Afghanistan and one in Iraq. This was in addition to the so-called "global war on terror." The country also saw the passage of the "Patriot Act," and the institution of other extreme policies of surveillance, covert counter-terrorism operations, unlawful detention, and torture. Bush was criticized for his handling of the war in Iraq and for the deception surrounding the initial reasoning for the invasion. Terms and names such as preemptive war, weapons of mass destruction, Osama Bin Laden, Taliban, "Mission Accomplished," Abu Ghraib prison, waterboarding, enemy combatant, Valerie Plame, and Guantanamo became known to nearly every American.

George W. Bush was also criticized for his handling of the economy, instituting two major tax cuts and presiding over a great recession in which the housing market collapsed over the mishandling of sub-prime mortgages. Social policies promoted by the Bush White House included a Constitutional Amendment banning same-sex marriage and a 2006 veto of a bill to allow Federal funding for stem cell research. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina brought to light problems in the way the Federal government responded to natural disasters. As a result, the issues of race and poverty in American made it to the front pages, prompting Kanye West to declare on national television that "George Bush doesn't care about black people."[96] Hurricane Katrina and other disasters such as the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Pacific brought some urgency to the issues of climate change.

The early twenty-first century was also marked by ever increasing media saturation in everyday life. For example, the popularity of reality television took off in

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[96] "Bush Doesn't Care about Black People," available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIUzLpO1kxI; Internet, accessed 10 March 2014. West stated this during a televised Red Cross fundraising event shortly after Hurricane Katrina.

the first few years of the new millennium. One of the most well-known shows was MTV's *The Real World*, which first began in 1992, but it was not until later that programs like *Survivor* and *American Idol* topped television ratings and became markers of popular culture in the new millennium. In 1999, the first Blackberry smartphone was released, and two years later, the first iPod was introduced. It was not long before white earbuds became ubiquitous in everyday life. Information could be instantaneously shared and discussed. No subject was off-limits. Social media websites like Facebook and MySpace also took off during this time. A new culture was created– new terms like "googling," "tweeting," and "selfie;" emoticons; and texting abbreviations like LOL and OMG.

This was the condition of the country at the turn of the twenty-first century. For those who did not live through it, it might be difficult to imagine a time before such issues were part of everyday life. This is what *American Idiot* attempts to convey in its story, music, and tone. In the opening scene, "American Idiot," the audience is inundated with short video and sound clips shown on television screens mounted around the set. In addition to news footage covering George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, North Korea, natural disasters, HIV, and Haliburton, the audience sees clips of *American Idol*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, Justin Timberlake, Dr. Phil, and Madonna and Britney Spears kissing at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards.

The show quickly moves to "Jesus of Suburbia" to address another main narrative theme, the decline of suburbia and the myth of the suburban ideal. It turns out that the post-war ideal of suburbia no longer exists, or perhaps never did. Billie Joe Armstrong and Mike Dirnt did not need any sociological study to tell them this; they experienced it

for themselves. Regarding suburbanites in California's East Bay, Dirnt observes, "They just sit around and they'd rather work shitty nine-to-five jobs and waste out instead of actually getting out there and doing what they would rather be doing. Their only limitation is that they're in this suburban subculture."[97] This disdain for suburbia, combined with the possibility of "getting out," is exactly the sentiment in the opening of the show, an exemplary depiction of the rage versus love theme.

Social scientists like M.P. Baumgartner and Donna Gaines have described the problems in their observations of suburban life at the turn of the twenty-first century.[98] According to Baumgartner, suburbia tends to engage in what she calls moral minimalism, an aversion to confrontation and conflict.[99] Suburbs tend to have high transiency rates because of a dependence upon jobs.[100] In other words, families move to and from suburbs mainly to be close to where the jobs are. Social institutions within suburbs, despite creating connections, generally mediate and restrict shared experiences rather than encourage close and unrestricted relationships.[101] Therefore, ties within a community are relatively weak. Families are unlikely to intervene in the affairs of their neighbors or others in the community unless it has a direct effect on them. Because of this, suburban communities tolerate a surprising amount of disturbing behavior among friends, and neighbors, and even within families.[102] Gaines describes a similar avoidance of major

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[97] Gillian G. Gaar, *Green Day: Rebels with a Cause* (New York: Music Sales Corporation, 2007), 9.
[98] See M.P. Baumgartner's *The Moral Order of a Suburb* and Donna Gaines's *Teenage Wasteland*.
[99] M.P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 10.
[100] Ibid., 9.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., 11.

conflict in Bergenfield, NJ. That community set up a Juvenile Conference Committee to handle minor juvenile infractions and avoid drawing too much attention to the problem.[103]

Within families, moral minimalism places excessive pressure on children. Conflicts tend to manifest themselves by "dramatized displeasure" with each other and by displays of emotional distress.[104] In young people, the avenues for dramatization often include drug use, promiscuity, petty crime and failure in school.[105] According to Baumgartner, the ultimate display of conflict within suburban families is avoidance, which sometimes results in physical separation or divorce.[106] Along similar lines of avoidance, Gaines notes the tendency of parents to blame domestic discontent on problems outside the home.[107]

In *American Idiot*, "Too Much Too Soon" depicts the kind of moral minimalism Baumgartner describes. Up to this point in the show, Heather and Will exhibit avoidance of the major tension between them, the responsibility of caring for their child. The song ends in the "ultimate display of conflict," their separation. Furthermore, the dramatic action cleverly emphasizes Heather and Will's avoidance by using other characters, the personifications of their subconscious thoughts, to engage in the argument rather than doing it themselves.

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[103] Donna Gaines, *Teenage Wasteland* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 44.
[104] Baumgartner, 30–31.
[105] Ibid., 33.
[106] Baumgartner, 36.
[107] Gaines, 207.

Also in suburbs, the absence of an underclass of poor, racial minorities, and homeless people result in a greater emphasis and spotlight on youth.[108] The combination of fewer recreational and social opportunities for youth and the spotlight on them, exaggerates incidents of delinquency and loitering. In fact, Gaines notes that "the convenience stores of America are the focal point of suburban street culture. Among them, 7-Eleven reigns supreme." [109]Activities of youth that would be overlooked or unseen in an urban setting are under the microscope in suburbia. An undue amount of pressure is exerted on youth in the public arena, while in the home, familial conflicts tend to manifest themselves more in the children, whether it is exhibited through delinquent behavior or mental health problems like depression and obsessive compulsive disorders.

In *American Idiot*, the suburban life of Johnny, Will, and Tunny is stifling. In addition to their tumultuous family lives, the audience sees that there are few opportunities for them, except to hang out at the local 7-Eleven store or get high. Will is the ultimate embodiment of the slacker, stoner youth, or for the purposes of this discussion, the "rage" (disillusionment and frustration). His character spends nearly the entire show seated on a couch downstage right, occasionally snacking, drink a beer, or taking bong hits. Although not entirely autobiographical, such anomistic dilemmas are also found in the personal backgrounds of the three band members, discussed in chapter one. For that matter, it is even evident in their name, Green Day, supposedly a term used for a day spent getting high on marijuana. They have infused their music with their personal stories, which, in the context of *American Idiot*, represent universal stories of youth growing up in America. Yet, despite the "rage" evident in the characters, Will,

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[108] Baumgartner, 110.
[109] Gaines, 46.

Johnny, and Tunny exhibit a sense of hope, as expressed by their drive to leave the suburbs and pursue their own dreams.

Much has been written about youth culture, both in a theoretical sense and in qualitative studies. (Philosophy and statistics both have merits and should exist alongside each other.) Wayne S. Wooden and Randy Blazak, in their book *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws: From Youth Culture to Delinquency*, discuss four theoretical approaches to studying youth: American delinquency theories, British subcultural theories, theories based on concepts of gender, and postmodern theories of youth culture.[110] In *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, edited by David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl, even more nuanced approaches to studying youth culture are set out.[111] My discussion will draw from some of these but also draw in recent studies and reports on youth in America.

Perhaps the most important idea about youth culture to discuss in relation to *American Idiot* is the understanding that youth culture, as it is addressed in the show, is a relatively new, unique phenomenon. Youth is generally associated with a prolonged transition between childhood and adulthood, and, as a social role, "the teen" has only existed in the United States since the end of the post-World War II boom. According to *Coming of Age in America: The Transition to Adulthood in the Twenty-First Century*, there are five markers of adulthood that have traditionally signaled the end of childhood:

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[110] Wayne S. Wooden and Randy Blazak, *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws: From Youth Culture to Delinquency* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2001), 16.

[111] David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl, eds., *The Post-Subcultures Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).

the completion of schooling, a job, leaving home, marriage, and children.[112] Up until the 1950's, there was an increased compression of such markers and events in time.[113] Women who were working during World War II could leave the workplace, and men, because of the post-war boom and government initiatives like the GI Bill, were able to establish themselves at a younger age. But as time passed, more women entered the workforce and de-industrialization in the economy meant that more education was required for many jobs.[114] The result was that people were getting married and having children later. The latter part of the twentieth century was also marked by the decline in the birth rate. In family life, this allowed for less focus on the discipline and parental obedience required in larger families and more focus on the individuality of each child.[115] In other words, as the end of the twentieth century approached, the social conditions created an environment in which youth, as a stage of life, was prolonged and spotlighted and not merely a transitional stage.

One such consequence was a sort of drifting among youth in which they felt more freedom to explore careers without an urgent need to decide quickly or definitively.[116] The traditional markers of adulthood no longer served. For example, in the school year 1999–2000, only twenty-seven percent of college students were following the traditional model, attending a two or four year college directly out of high school with parental

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[112] Mary C. Waters, ed., *Coming of Age in America The Transition to Adulthood in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 172.
[113] Ibid., 12.
[114] Ibid., 13.
[115] Gerhard Falk and Ursula A. Falk, *Youth Culture and the Generation Gap* (New York, NY: Algora, 2005), 24.
[116] Waters, 65.

financial support.[117] In some areas of the country, it was becoming less financially feasible for young adults to move out of their parents' home. Youth as a social category was becoming less and less clearly demarcated.

As cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg has argued, the 1980s brought a war on youth. He observed that "youth itself has become a battlefield upon which the current generation of adolescents, baby boomers, parents and corporate media interests are fighting for control of its meanings, investments and powers, fighting to articulate and thereby construct its experiences, identities, practices, discourses and social differences."[118] This war can be traced to many trends beginning in the 1980s, for example, funding cuts in education and social programs and an increase in the homeless population, especially among families and youth. Social conservatism experienced a rebirth. A prime example of this is the Parents Resource Music Center. Formed in 1985, this organization decried the perceived increase in topics like sex, drugs, and violence in popular music. Ultimately it lead to "parental warning" labels on music with explicit lyrics, which still exist today. The irony of the situation, as noted by Mitchell Morris, is that youths were "at risk," not because of the moral panic caused by the social conservatives, but because of issues such as poverty and social persecution.[119]

Grossberg also points out that government spending on Millenials has been less than on their parents' generation.[120] According to him, kids are increasingly "othered;" or

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[117] Waters, 11.
[118] Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies, The War Against Kids, and the Re-becoming of US Modernity." *Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 3 (November 2003), 332.
[119] Mitchell Morris, "Everyone is Gay: Queer Identities, Abject Desires, and the Construction of Alternative Rock" (conference paper, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH, November 16, 2013).
[120] "Othered" is Grossberg's term, 334. Scapegoated is Morris's term.

put more directly, scapegoated.[121] Political battles and the fight to control public discourse on how America is conceptualized happens at the expense of the well-being of this country's youth. In other words, youth has increasingly become the focus of older generations, but no effort has been made to include them in the conversation– only to study and discuss them, looking from the outside. This can be reflected in more recent examples such as the "No Child Left Behind" educational law, which has come under increasing criticism since its inception. The prolongation of youth and a war on youth has led to neglect and young people being pushed to the margins. The time was ripe for subcultures of disaffected youth. One such subculture is punk.

There has been so much written and said about punk that it would be impossible to do more than scratch the surface. Additionally, punk is defined and discussed differently depending on the context. It may be thought of as a style of music, a fashion trend, a youth subculture, or all three together. In some ways it is impossible to separate the three. How punk is defined tends to be very territorial. British describe and define punk differently than Americans, and in the U.S., punk can be different depending on the area. Nevertheless, the generally accepted narrative is that punk has its origins in the "no-wave" movement on the lower east side of Manhattan.[122] Centered around the music club CBGB (Country, Bluegrass, Blues) and bands such as the Ramones and the New York Dolls, this movement influenced rock music in London through British tours and band manager Malcolm McLaren.[123] McLaren, who managed the New York Dolls and would go on to manage the Sex Pistols, also owned a fashion shop in London, initially called

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[121] Grossberg, 335.
[122] Wooden and Blazak, *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws*, 68.
[123] "Punk," *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 10 March 2014.

Let It Rock, but later changed to SEX.[124] This combination of music and fashion influenced many bands in Britain and the United States. In the U.S., punk movements sprouted up in several cities around the country, most notably in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., but lost ground to heavy metal music in the 1980's.[125] The early 1990's is considered to be the time when punk broke into the mainstream, with bands like Nirvana, the Offspring, Green Day, and Rancid achieving commercial success.

Many cultural values have been associated with punk music and punk subculture. Initially in London, punk had social ties to working class youth whose economic outlook was not very good. Simon Frith claims that punk is about challenging the status quo through primarily three means: breaking down the barrier between artist and audience, challenging commodity production with a do-it-yourself ethic, and questioning the meaning of music.[126] This would also be applicable to punk in the United States, but because of its geography, there are far more variations.

In the California Bay Area, punk was highly influenced by hippies and hippie culture. Frank Portman of the band, the Mr. T Experience noted that "if you strip away the thin veneer of punk in the Bay Area scene, there was always a hippie undercurrent."[127] As mentioned in chapter one, the consequences of this influence were many. The punk scene in the Bay Area was very open and accepting. Rather than being highly rigid about how it defined punk, it was more inclusive. There was a strong do-it-yourself ethic. Anyone could be in a punk band, even with little or no experience. Gilman

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[124] "McLaren, Malcolm," *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed., *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 10 March 2014.
[125] Wooden and Blazak, *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws*, 69.
[126] Ibid., 68.
[127] Marc Spitz, *Nobody Likes You: Inside the Turbulent Life, Times, and Music of Green Day* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 23.

Street was a place where those who did not fit in elsewhere found a home. Ultimately, this was the perfect environment for Green Day to develop and grow. But Green Day was unique in some ways; they could actually play their instruments. They were more culturally, politically, and musically aware of the world around them. It is this combination and environment that eventually bred a work like *American Idiot*.

This study illuminates two important issues with a wider relevance both to musical-dramatic works and musicology. *American Idiot* is almost completely driven by the song. The same might be said of other musical-dramatic works like opera or other Broadway musicals. However, this is not entirely accurate. The format of a typical opera includes both recitatives and arias (songs). Most Broadway musicals rely on a combination of dialogue, song introductions (the equivalent of recitatives), and songs. The songs themselves rarely have connections to one another except through the dialogue. Opera may connect dramatic elements through the use of leitmotifs or tonal areas. But imagine an opera that could tell a complete story only using arias. In essence, this is what *American Idiot* does. While perhaps not entirely unique, this makes *American Idiot* unusual among musical-dramatic works. In addition, my thesis provides a new approach to the study of musical-dramatic works. Drawing upon scholars in musical theater, popular music, and opera, the methods I use point to a more comprehensive process that can be applied to other musical-dramatic works of varying genres.

APPENDIX

LIST OF SONGS IN *AMERICAN IDIOT*

Song	**Key (Musical)**	**Key (Album)**	**Source Album**
American Idiot	A^b Major	A^b Major	American Idiot
Jesus of Suburbia:			
I. Jesus of Suburbia	D^b major	D^b Major	American Idiot
II. City of the Damned	D^b Major	D^b Major	American Idiot
III. I Don't Care	D^b Major	D^b Major	American Idiot
IV. Dearly Beloved	E^b Major	A^b Major	American Idiot
V. Tales of Another Broken Home	A^b Major	A^b Major	American Idiot
Holiday	F Minor	F Minor	American Idiot
Boulevard of Broken Dreams	F Minor	F Minor	American Idiot
Favorite Son	B^b Major-C Major	A^b Major	Rock Against Bush II
Are We The Waiting	A Major	A Major	American Idiot
St. Jimmy	A Major	A Major	American Idiot
Give Me Novacaine	A Major	A Major	American Idiot
Last of the American Girls/She's a Rebel	G Major-A Major	B Major/G Major	21st Century Breakdown/ American Idiot

Last Night On Earth	F Minor-F Major-A Major	A Major	21st Century Breakdown
Too Much Too Soon	C Major-D Major-B Major	B Major	American Idiot
Before the Lobotomy	F# Major	F# Major	21st Century
Extraordinary Girl	B Major	A Major	American Idiot
Before the Lobotomy (Reprise)	F# Major	F# Major	21st Century Breakdown
When It's Time	G Major	None	None
Know Your Enemy	B Major	B Major	21st Century Breakdown
21 Guns	G Minor-Bb Major-D Minor-F Major-G Minor-C Major	D Minor-F Major	21st Century Breakdown
Letterbomb	B Major	E Major	American Idiot
Wake Me Up When September Ends	G Major	G Major	American Idiot
Homecoming:			American Idiot
I. The Death of St. Jimmy	A Major	A Major	American Idiot
II. East 12th Street	A Major-D Major	A Major-D Major	American Idiot
III. Nobody Likes You	D Major	D Major	American Idiot
IV. Rock and Roll Girlfriend	A major	A Major	American Idiot
V. We're Coming Home Again	D major	D Major	American Idiot
Whatsername	D Major	D Major	American Idiot

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