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»AIN'T THAT EASY« PERCEPTIONS OF CONFLICT IN THE MUSIC OF D'ANGELO AND THE VANGUARD

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Released without prior promotion in December 2014, *Black Messiah* by D'Angelo and the Vanguard was the long-awaited studio album that marked the return of neo-soul icon D'Angelo to the international music charts. The album was released after a fourteen-year hiatus following the critically revered *Voodoo* (2000), during which time D'Angelo's tumultuous personal life received more attention than his music. Reports of substance abuse and other problems seemed soon forgotten, however, when *Black Messiah* was met with widespread acclaim, with critics and fans alike praising both its musical experimentation and its political significance.

The release coincided with a period of turbulence in US social relations: vigorous debate and nationwide protests were brought on, in part, by the fatal shooting of unarmed African American teenager, Michael Brown, by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in August, 2014. The incident reportedly expedited the release of the album (Coscarelli 2014), and is referenced in the CD liner notes, where it is declared that »*Black Messiah* is about people rising up in Ferguson … and in every place where a community has had enough and decides to make change happen« (D'Angelo and the Vanguard 2014). This sentiment of uprising and revolt is mirrored by the eye-catching monochromatic album cover, which depicts a large gathering of people, hands and fists raised to the sky.

Black Messiah opens with »Ain't That Easy«, a soulful track blending rock, r&b and funk in a warm and resonant soundscape with a powerful and unusual

groove. Considering the circumstances surrounding the release of the album, as well as numerous reflections on both the music and our approach to its analysis, we take conflict as an entry point for interrogating a plurality of aspects related to this rich and intricate track. After a brief exploration of the relationship between music and conflict, our analysis excavates the particularities of style, production aesthetics and lyrics. Here our discussion focuses on how »Ain't That Easy« relates to both collective political struggle and internal discord in a variety of ways. We proceed to study matters of processual development, (micro)rhythm, (micro)tonality and harmony, before concluding with a deliberation on the potential benefits and pitfalls of collaborative musical analysis.

APPROACHING MUSIC AND CONFLICT

Within the context of »Ain't That Easy«, the notion of conflict surfaced as a means to identify common ground with regards to our early listening impressions, which revealed certain differences in perception. Conflict here should not simply be understood as negative dialogue characterised by opposing interests, but also as representing what David Victor (2012) terms the »collaboration resolution strategy«, in which conflict is seen as a creative opportunity, driven by an active concern for both pro-social and pro-self behaviour. Indeed, as ethnomusicologist John M. O'Connell argues, music can be utilised »both to escalate conflict and to promote conflict resolution« (2010: 12). Analysing music thus provides an opportunity to explore the nature of conflict, as well as the various ways it is understood in both the conceptual and applied domains (*ibid.*). The situation within which four researchers with differing educational backgrounds and methodological preferences attempt to collaborate towards a mutual goal affords conflict on numerous levels, but also raises a challenging question: was the group compelled to identify and gravitate around the notion of conflict because it is fundamental to the record, or because doing so allowed us to circumvent, accommodate, explain or justify our perceptual differences?

Interpreting conflict in recorded popular song also implicates the controversial nature of the relationship between music theory and ideology, and its convergence in popular music studies. As Nicholas Cook (2007) has demonstrated through his study of The Schenker Project, music theory has to be understood via its links with particular political and social agendas in different historical contexts. Music analysis is no exception in this matter, since it constitutes a political practice (see Buch / Donin et al. 2013). If con-

flict is an interactive state, manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (Rahim 2011: 16), we find the interaction between music, its analysis, and the various socio-political contexts in which these can be located, an important consideration. Initially, then, we approach »Ain't That Easy« by investigating matters of style and production aesthetics.

STYLE AND PRODUCTION AESTHETICS

In light of the aforementioned details surrounding the album and its release, *Black Messiah* inserts itself into a long-standing tradition of popular music as a means of translating political conflict into an accessible idiom that facilitates the sharing of a collective vision (see Shuker [1994] 2008: 241-2). By considering *Black Messiah* as participating in a genealogy of protest recordings we raise the issue of how, if at all, such narratives of resistance can be recognised in »Ain't That Easy«. In this regard, stylistic cues and lyrics are pertinent features for interpretation. Initially, we tackle the former as a way of examining how »Ain't That Easy« might mobilise related notions of protest and conflict in various ways.

The track draws together a wealth of stylistic traits alluding to various genres, a strategy that some listeners would identify as a feature of D'Angelo's idiolect.[1] However, as is also evidenced by the diversity of *Black Messiah*, his stylistic signature varies so broadly that what happens on the level of each individual track is never predictable. »Ain't That Easy« opens with several tracks of feedback, one of which is placed at the front centre of the mix whilst two others are panned to each side. The use of feedback implies a stylistic anchoring in rock, where it has been commonplace since the 1960s.[2] An early example of the use of feedback to open a track is The Beatles' »I Feel Fine« (1964). Since then, it has been diversely employed to open numerous rock recordings, including Jimi Hendrix's »Foxy Lady« (1967), which provides a particularly strong intertextual reference: though Hendrix starts with a fretted note, a similar type of feedback characterised by strong vibrato builds in a slow crescendo on both tracks. Another link to Hendrix resides in the fact that the majority of *Black Messiah* was recorded at Electric Lady Studios, established by Hendrix. The choice of recording studio recalls

1 The matter of idiolect is discussed by Moore (2012: 166-7).

2 See also Kennedy's *Strange Brew: Metaphors of Magic and Science in Rock Music*, which cites the intentional use of feedback as one of the »staples of the sixties rock sound« (2013: 24).

the mythology surrounding Hendrix and Romantic notions of creativity and auteurship, in turn situating »Ain't That Easy« within a rock tradition (and a particular era of that tradition). As the track progresses however, a range of musical styles are weaved together in a way that confounds simple ideas of genre.

»Ain't That Easy« can be described as a guitar-driven track. Throughout, several guitars contest for prominence in the mix, resulting in an intricate tapestry of various guitar sounds and styles. The rhythm guitar of the verses, placed toward the left of the mix,[3] is characterised by a crunchy overdriven sound reminiscent of Hendrix on »Stone Free« (1966) or Pete Townshend of The Who on »Won't Get Fooled Again« (1971). It plays palm-muted power chords and emphasises each quaver, a gesture that is idiomatic to rock. Other guitar parts, however, draw on stylistic traits common to other genres. First appearing towards the end of the first verse, short bursts of lead guitar are interspersed throughout the rest of the track. Some of the more melodic licks (for example at approximately 1:03 and 2:04) are played with a cleaner sound in the upper mid-register, and recall the lead guitar work of Mabon »Teenie« Hodges on, for example, soul musician Al Green's »Here I Am (Come and Take Me)« (1973). More percussive guitar licks and riffs, featured prominently during the choruses, allude to the funk stylings of Phelps »Catfish« Collins on Parliament's »Flash Light« (1977) or Prince on »I Wanna Be Your Lover« (1979). Stylistic references to funk can also be found in the way that D'Angelo employs his voice at certain points. Focusing on the lead vocals in the second part of the verses and the choruses, his inflections and guttural shouts and noises bring to mind the vocal stylings of James Brown. Specifically, this pertains to how D'Angelo's vocal phrases are accentuated by short »uh« and »ah« sounds—particularly evident in the second part of the verses—which recall Brown on »Papa's Got a Brand New Bag« (1965) or »Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine« (1970).

From these initial investigations, it should be evident that the track is stylistically anchored in idioms associated with the period of the 1960s and 70s. Granted that style operates on various levels (see Moore 2012: 120), including that of production, it is significant to note that, according to Ben Kane who co-engineered the album, *Black Messiah* was recorded and mixed entirely on analogue equipment (Zelechowski 2015). This point is also emphasised in the album's liner notes, and the choice to utilise analogue

3 This positioning of instruments at the extremities of the stereo field recalls the production conventions of rock music in the 1960s and 70s. See, for example, Bennett's (2016) study into Gus Dudgeon's sonic signature and the development of the glam rock sound aesthetic.

technologies (and stating so explicitly) contributes to an ideological positioning: it can be interpreted simultaneously as a sign of resisting contemporary popular music practices, where digital recording and mixing processes are ubiquitous, and a way of aligning *Black Messiah* with the albums from which D'Angelo draws his influence. The choice of recording technology is mirrored in the sound of »Ain't That Easy«: the intentionally retro sound aligns the track aesthetically with many of the examples discussed so far.[4]

The retro sound aesthetic is however disrupted by the placement of the bass drum as the second most prominent element in the mix, second only to D'Angelo's lead vocal.[5] The prominence of the bass drum, and the spatial positioning in the mix of the individual drums and cymbals, implies that they have been close-miked individually using modern recording practices. This contributes to a rich low end, characteristic of modern hip hop and r&b. In turn, the various production techniques and eclectic sounds of »Ain't That Easy« upset any notion of an »authentic« 1960s or 70s recording,[6] and imply conflicting notions of era and style.

Contributing to a stylistic expression that is hard to pin down, verse vocals are multi-layered in different registers and placed to the extreme left and right of the stereo field. Transgressing the conventions of most contemporary popular music, the dense vocal layers verge on making it difficult for the listener to clearly distinguish D'Angelo's lead voice, and carry the potential to evoke chaos or confusion.[7] Similarly dense vocal layering is found frequently in Prince recordings, with some notable examples including »I Feel for You« (1979), »When Doves Cry« (1984) and »Thieves in the Temple« (1990). Bridging the gap between 1960s and 70s rock, soul, and funk references, and

4 One production trait that contributes to such a retro aesthetic is the fact that the track fades out, a technique which is prominent in records of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, though all but abandoned on contemporary recordings. See Weir (2014), who demonstrates this based on statistics from the *Billboard* Year End Top Ten charts, which show that all songs on the 1985 chart faded out, whilst only a single song on the 2011, 2012 and 2013 charts combined did the same.

5 Thanks to Samantha Bennett for pointing this out.

6 The influence of recordists in shaping the aesthetics of sound recordings have generally received little attention in academia, although there is a growing body of scholarly work in the area of recording and production analysis. For some noteworthy studies, see Milner (2009), Zagorski-Thomas (2014), and Zak (2001).

7 Coscarelli (2014) references the difficulty experienced by creative agency AFROPUNK in »deciphering the dense, distorted vocals for a lyric booklet«. The selection of AFROPUNK to direct the artwork and marketing materials for *Black Messiah* may provide further evidence of D'Angelo's support for marginalised communities, as its online manifesto alludes to a desire to make alternative music available »beyond the predictable Caucasian audience« (Afropunk 2013).

an innovative, contemporary style, Prince should be noted as a strong influence on D'Angelo.

The verse vocals of »Ain't That Easy« also recall the pioneering vocal layering of Marvin Gaye in the early 1970s, as heard on »Mercy, Mercy Me (the Ecology)« and »Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)« from the album *What's Going On* (1971). Studying the entwinement of popular music and political struggle, Mark Anthony Neal identifies *What's Going On* as the seminal black protest recording—suggesting that it synthesised many African-American narratives of struggle—and argues that 1968-72 was »probably the most significant period for music devoted to the dominant themes of black struggle and social movement« (1999: 61-2). Commenting on the political potential of Gaye's recordings at a time when the black social movement was increasingly fractured and disjointed, Neal suggests that his vocal layering resulted in a metaphorical and aural reconstruction of the »various communities of resistance which undergirded black social movement in this era« (ibid.: 63). The plurality of voices found in »Ain't That Easy« could similarly be interpreted as representing a community of resistance, which is made all the more significant if one considers this aesthetic alignment to Gaye's recordings in light of the sentiment of social uprising found in *Black Messiah*'s liner notes.

As »Ain't That Easy« brings disparate eras and styles into collision, something original emerges. On the matter of how pop artists articulate their subjectivities through performance, Stan Hawkins argues that »[c]ontours of musical genre, style, and idiom invariably pull together all that we make sense of in a pop performance« (2009: 38). In light of Hawkins' argument, the particularities of style and aesthetics in »Ain't That Easy« can be interpreted as an effort by D'Angelo to position himself in relation to, or perhaps as an extension of, the rock, soul and funk styles of the 1960s and 70s, a point which is substantiated by the fact that the album was recorded at Electric Lady Studios. For some listeners, D'Angelo's musical stylisation recalls the political ideologies that the particular musicians he references are commonly seen to represent: Neal identifies Gaye and Brown in particular as contributing to the commodification of the black protest tradition, and observes that Hendrix, like Brown, »rejected the aesthetic limitations placed upon black musicians« (1999: 113). For other listeners, the significance of a song can be located within the lyrics. Indeed, as Simon Frith (1996: 158) has pointed out, most people when asked about the meaning of a song refer to its words, which suggests that any investigation into potential interpretations of a song would benefit from a closer analysis of these.

LYRICS

Lyrically the song evokes a psychological conflict located in the difficulty of leaving, yet whilst the alias »baby« implies a lover may represent the point of departure, the opening line allows for alternative readings. »Take a toke of smoke from me as you dream inside« is phrased such to suggest the anthropomorphism of a joint,[8] an interpretation that is sustained through numerous other lines in the song. The phrase »feed your mind« in the second verse recalls Grace Slick's lyric »feed your head« from Jefferson Airplane's psychedelic rock song »White Rabbit« (1967), whose allusions to mushrooms and hookah-smoking caterpillars from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) resonated with the sensibilities of the 1960s counter-culture, for which permissive attitudes towards drug use were fundamental.[9] Furthermore the opening line of the second verse includes the word »hit«—which colloquially denotes a single unit or inhalation of an illegal substance—this time directly within the context of a psychological struggle: »[e]ver hit with a choice that you can't decide?«

Although somewhat understated, such references may be particularly significant within the context of the racially-charged socio-political circumstances surrounding the release of the album. It has been repeatedly demonstrated across multiple fields that the »War on Drugs«, a set of US governmental policies and law-enforcement practices designed to inhibit the production, distribution and consumption of illegal substances, harbours significant racial disparities.[10] Kenneth Nunn suggests that the »war on blacks« is thus a more accurate designation, and synthesises numerous studies to demonstrate that »African Americans have been disproportionately investigated, detained, searched, arrested and charged with the use, possession and sale of illegal drugs« (2002: 381). He details several impacts of this disparity, from re-enforcing effects caused by the perception of a relationship between delinquency and race by those implementing the criminal justice system, to an increase in African American distrust towards authority caused by targeted law enforcement practices. He also reveals

8 Although »toke« may refer generally to the inhalation of smoke it often pertains specifically to marijuana. Lyrics are credited in the CD liner notes to D'Angelo, Q-Tip and Kendra Foster.

9 »Take a toke of smoke from me« is somewhat reminiscent of the cakes and potions in Carroll's tale that are labelled »eat me« and »drink me« respectively.

10 See for example Bush-Baskette (1998), Chin (2002) and Fellner et al. (2009) among others.

how conceptualising drug-use within a metaphor of war has led to a militarisation of the police, a resulting »warrior mentality« (Nunn 2002: 407), and an increase in police brutality. Representing a site of conflict in which discrimination against black citizens catalyses racial inequality in the US, the War on Drugs is just one window into the world of social unrest referenced in the *Black Messiah* liner notes, and a particularly prominent one considering it is afforded by the opening line of the first track on the album, immediately succeeding the crescendo of guitar feedback offering a clear nod to Hendrix, whose own drug-use is well documented.[11]

Other musical allusions to psychedelia reside in the lurching groove of the intro and in the richly textured soundscape with its marked use of overdrive. Whilst music analysis cannot determine irrefutably whether drug references in »Ain't That Easy« speak of D'Angelo's personal experience with illicit substances or demonstrate solidarity with black communities disenfranchised through targeted implementation of drug laws (among other readings), Joe Coscarelli's (2014) article on *Black Messiah* in *The New York Times* highlights the importance D'Angelo places on commenting on police brutality. It claims the events in Ferguson forced numerous compromises on not only the musical production but some of the finer details of the album artwork. Jocelyn Cooper, who signed D'Angelo to her music publishing company in 1993, for example comments that D'Angelo found the font used on the album materials »too clean and structured« such that it did not adequately reflect »urgency and revolution« (Coscarelli 2014). Reportedly, he »wanted to tweak it a lot more« (ibid.) but opted to release *Black Messiah* as soon as possible—rather than in 2015 as RCA had planned—in order to engage with the nationwide protests. Such a narrative could certainly influence a listener's interpretation of the lyrics, for example by lending support to the notion that »Ain't That Easy« situates drug use as a site of racial conflict explored throughout the album. Similarly, however, a media focus on D'Angelo's personal problems with illicit substances could equally guide their interpretation in another direction.

In addition to the drug references that suggest substance abuse might be the locus of conflict, we might also consider the usual culprit of popular song misery: love.[12] Perception of the vocals is no doubt a key factor deter-

11 Conspicuous drug references were similarly a feature of D'Angelo's debut album (1995), whose title *Brown Sugar* is evocative of numerous illicit substances including heroin and brown MDMA in crystal form.

12 Indeed, the title track of D'Angelo's *Brown Sugar* (1995) album can simultaneously be interpreted as a song about love for drugs and/or a person. The lyrics here make notable use of the word »hit«—which in addition to the connotations described above has a dual sexual meaning—and include phrases that render the object of the singer's love

mining possible ways in which listeners may interpret the lyrics. Although our collaborative analytical efforts reached a general consensus that the vocals in the verse were dense and multi-layered for example, it was more problematic to determine how they had been recorded. Whilst some analysts heard a multi-tracked D'Angelo overdubbed numerous times, others heard a group of performers surrounding a single microphone in gang vocal style, or a combination of these two approaches. Such interpretations have varying hermeneutic implications. The use of gang vocals, for example, carries for some listeners its own ideological resonances: the blending of various performers convolutes the identification of a single protagonist and thus places greater prominence on the concept of community.[13] Such perception of the vocals might lend greater support to a lyrical interpretation of the song as a comment on the War on Drugs, emphasising the need for solidarity in the face of racial discrimination: as stated in the liner notes, *Black Messiah* is »not about praising one charismatic leader but celebrating thousands of them« (D'Angelo and the Vanguard 2014). Furthermore, a gang vocal approach recalls earlier popular music traditions—from the blues to the practice of recording multiple performers to a single track when analogue technology limited the number of available tracks—whereas the distinctively spatialised placement of drums within the soundbox evokes more recent styles (such as hip hop). A listener perceiving this chronological disjuncture—a blend of the old and the new—might be more inclined to interpret the lyrics in a manner resonating with the potential of psychedelic drugs to destabilise a subject's perception of time than a listener who hears only the coherent whole of modern recording practices. They may furthermore cite additional details of the track to support this interpretation, such as the temporally destabilising manner in which the vocals in the verse lag behind the drums, bass and guitars, and how their high placement in the mix enables them to contest the dominance of these conflicting elements as a locus for the listener's metric orientation. This observation leads us to the specifics of articulation and accentuation, which can be assisted by first analysing more broadly the ways in which the instrumental and vocal lines progress and interrelate over time on different listening levels.

difficult to identify (for example, »I gets high off your love«, and »[s]ee, we be making love constantly / that's why my eyes are a shade blood burgundy«).

13 See Floyd (1995), who refers to the role of individuals within African communities and suggests how such social structures are mirrored in African musical practice. See also Hughes (2003), who elaborates on this concept within the context of funk and the music of Stevie Wonder.

MUSICAL PROCESSUAL DEVELOPMENT

One way to explore decisive musical »conflict indicators« is to first examine the surface level of the song and then to retrace how it progresses from moment to moment, without restricting oneself to a specific musical parameter beforehand. This approach is referred to here as analysis of the song's processual development. Musical process is thus not understood in the Schenkerian sense, as the elaboration from the deep structure of a piece to its surface, but as a more flexible principle. Whereas traditional methods often tend to »freeze« a piece of music with the purpose of making statements about its abstract-from-time entirety, process-oriented analyses take into account more strongly findings from cognitive psychology, and focus on fluctuating aspects of the immediate listening experience (see for example Berry 1987, Narmour 1990, Hasty 1997, and Fuß 2005).

To approach such an analysis systematically,[14] the analyst can identify song-constituting groupings (for example sections, phrases, motives, events), and then examine how they are segmented and if they succeed in a way that is generally predictable or surprising—the latter, for example, possibly indicating that the protagonist of the song is struggling with decisions. Changes in intensity may also enable interpretations of the psychological state of the protagonist (a slow decrease may imply relaxation and acceptance or alternatively despondency and disillusion) and thus the negotiation of inner conflicts. Another methodology is to concentrate on which musical movements occur in a song and how they concur.[15] Simultaneously sounding patterns with, for example, differently positioned emphases and slightly unaligned starting points can cause a feeling of ambiguity and disorientation in the listener, as well as confusion with regards to how to physically react to this perceived unstable musical unit. This phenomenon has been addressed by Anne Danielsen (2010: 21) in relation to issues of microrhythmic organisation and shifts contributing to the »seasick time-feel« of another D'Angelo track, »Left and Right« (2000). The following chart schematises the overall processual development of »Ain't That Easy«:

14 See also the process-oriented subjects of analysis (*grouping effects, progression tendencies, intensity curves, movement patterns*) proposed by Steinbrecher 2016.

15 For the concept of »musical movement« see for example Middleton 1993, Zeiner-Henriksen 2010, and Godøy/Leman 2010.

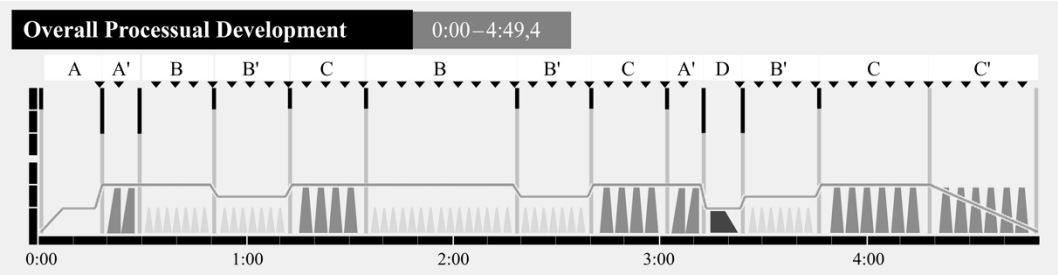

Figure 1: Overall processual development of »Ain't That Easy«

The vertical grey lines denote the beginnings and endings of the sections (named with letters here), and the lengths of the shorter black lines indicate, in generally three possible gradations, the progression tendencies—short: weak delimited (e.g. B to B'), medium: medium strong delimited (e.g. A to A'), long: strong delimited (not pictured in this figure since there are no particularly strong breaks perceived in the song).

It can be seen that the sections run quite smoothly into one another, the only minor exception being the transitions from the salient guitar riffing in sections A' into the subsequent verse (B) and bridge (D). The predominantly steady intensity curve (indicated by the horizontal line) supports this observation, showing that the bridge (D) is the only part of the song where the intensity considerably decreases, interpretable as a short rest period. Regarding dynamics it should be noted that the first parts of the verses (B) have a slightly higher RMS (Root Mean Square) level than the choruses (C).16 A comparatively lower volume in the choruses is quite uncommon, and mostly ascribable to the missing rhythm guitar, but in this case does not really result in a perceivable decrease in intensity because the texture of the chorus differs from the verse and is filled in the higher frequency ranges by a background choir.

Continuously repeated musical events can help the listener to find their bearings throughout a song. Such cues exist in »Ain't That Easy« in the form of handclap sounds (represented by small black triangles in Figure 1), which appear in every second measure on beat four, with the exception of a short segment in the bridge (D), where the claps are replaced by a much less prominent snare drum. If we mark out aspects of motion more extensively, the grey graphs below the intensity curves schematise how listeners may corporeally lock onto the song's sections, for example with the help of sound-accompanying gestures (like head-bobbing). The graphs refer to the size, speed, and orientation of holistically experienced low movement level

16 In an audio-technical context, the RMS level, which is based on physical-acoustic measurements, relates to the average loudness over a defined time window.

synchronisations, proposing that »Ain't That Easy« evokes, most of the time, relatively central movements (trapezes without inclination). Only section A' has a »displaced« or »laid back« character, as the guitar riffs are emphasised towards their ends (trapezes inclined towards the right). A slight difference between verse and chorus concerns the size of the imaginary movement patterns. The music in the verses (B and B') proceeds in short and small movements, determined by straight-lined quaver chains from the guitar and bass, whilst the choruses (C) consist of more cantilevered patterns, which are influenced by the relatively loose up-and-down melodic motives of the bass, the missing rhythm guitar and the more generous filling of verbal space (see Griffiths 2003). These general analytical findings suggest that conflicts are negotiated in the song not through clear differences or obvious discrepancies in musical process, but rather in a subtler way, for example by specifics in articulation, accentuation and (micro)tonality.

CONFLICTS UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

The following graphics, which are based on sonograms, emphasise the most intense frequency gains of time precise events, happening at the beginning of the first verse and first chorus. Below these articulation graphs there are visualisations of the imaginary pulse layer and the phenomenal accents of the significantly involved voices.[17]

First of all, it is noticeable that the bass (playing tones at circa 100 Hz) and guitar (circa 100-200 Hz) do not exactly play continuous quaver chains, as supposed above. These stringed instruments rather establish two-tone groupings (the first tone being slightly longer than the second), which are separated by breaks of about 200 ms. This unsteadiness strongly relates to the playing techniques: both instruments perform upward and downward strokes. Additionally, the guitarist uses a palm-mute technique, which causes fairly »blurred« attack points (the gradients within the graphical elements denote such envelope specifics). These micro-rhythmic effects are not ostensibly appreciable, and therefore do not disturb the overall even flow of the phrases, firstly because the dominantly mixed bass drum occu-

17 The visualisation via layers and dots is derived from Jackendoff and Lerdahl's (1983) conception of metrical-rhythmical organisation. »Significantly involved voices« excludes the solo guitar(s) here, which have been addressed in the »Style and production aesthetics« section of this article. Figures generated in Adobe Audition and Adobe Photoshop.

pies the same frequency range, and secondly because the placement of the hi hats fills out the gaps between the two-tone groupings.

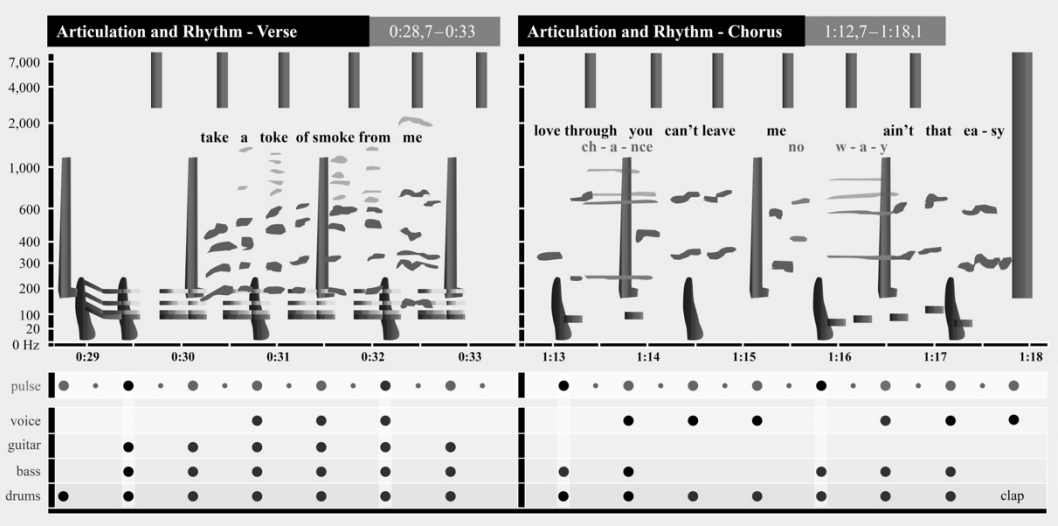

Figure 2: Articulation and rhythm graphs of verse and chorus in »Ain't That Easy«

Furthermore, it can be said that the sequence hi-hat—bass/guitar—snare drum (or bass drum)/bass/guitar, which happens within one crotchet (circa 500 ms), constitutes the fundamental pattern of the verses. The fact that this pattern starts on weak quaver off-beats contributes to a feeling of subtle instability. If we consider the participating voices on their own, this encounters some friction with the rather stable positioning of their phenomenal accents, which all appear regularly on, or as will be demonstrated later on, near to the pulse beats (symbolised by large dots). A closer examination of the chorus phrase confirms the aforementioned observations with regards to a looser structure caused by more cantilevered movement patterns. Contrary to what might be expected, this looseness does not further undermine the stability of the music. Instead, the omission of the unsettling effects caused by the bass and guitar quaver chains, which turned out to be slightly uneven, enables the listener to orient themselves more strongly on the metronome-like accents of the bass- and snare drums.

It is also worth examining the specifics of the singing voice, which determine the build-up of phrases within the song. From a micro-rhythmic, »metronomic model« perspective, D'Angelo does not sing »in time«. This is exemplified at the beginnings of the verse and chorus phrases, where the first words »take« and »you« are placed shortly (circa 50 ms) after the pulse-aligned accents of the other instruments. Additionally, most of the other syllables are not pronounced exactly in accordance with the underlying beat structure. However, again, that does not mean that the singing voice is

rhythmically completely in opposition to the metrical framework. Although the phrases in the verses (B) and choruses (C) do not start on the strong first downbeat of the measures (as opposed to their placement in the more stable B' sections), the stressed syllables are generally oriented towards the pulse, for example »toke« (beat 3), »smoke« (4), »me« (1) or »you« (2), »leave« (3), »me« (4).

Another possible source of conflict arises from the (micro)tonal design of D'Angelo's singing. The verses in particular lack an easily identifiable singalong melody. A polyphonic impression is caused by the way the vocals are multi-layered, resulting in a combination of three to four rather independent lines of relatively equal loudness. The precise tone pitches are not always easy to place within the diatonic scale because of the extensive use of microtonal slides and vibratos, and because the stressed syllables particularly tend to roam up and down between half- or even whole tones. In terms of harmonics, the resulting chords are rich with overtones and, at times, contain unresolved tones which do not belong to the local or even the underlying tonal harmony—most strikingly the very high registered c7 in the word »me«.[18] A more common approach is again to be found in the chorus, where the focus is on one clearly identifiable vocal line, supported by a background choir. Both draw their tones from the underlying scale E♭m and gravitate towards its tonic. This leads to the question of whether there are generally clear tonal relationships in »Ain't That Easy« or if there is a certain lack of clarity in this regard too, another factor reinforcing the lyrically implied »druggy« atmosphere of the track.

CONFLICT AND HARMONY: A POLYPHONIC DECLARATION

Recalling an aforementioned sentence from the liner notes, it becomes evident that D'Angelo's *Black Messiah* entails a polyphonic declaration: it is »not one man« but rather »a feeling that, collectively, we are all that leader«. This embrace of multiple voices accommodates conflicting perceptions of tension and resolution within various harmonic and melodic patterns. Whilst O'Connell suggests that »harmony is often a metaphor for conflict resolution« and that »consonance and dissonance are significant principles in theoretical discourse especially for the musical traditions of Asia and Europe« (2010: 5), it is sometimes hard to assert a precise binomial link between

18 An analytical approach to melodic-harmonic divorce in rock music is presented by Temperley (2007).

dissonance/conflict and consonance/resolution. Considering the first two notes of the introduction to »Ain't That Easy«—b♭1 and c♭2, played in octaves (b♭1-b♭2, c♭2-c♭3) after the feedback effect—as an example: in this semitone interval, which note represents the tension and which the resolution? If some listeners will perceive inside a major diatonic scale, hearing b♭-c♭ as leading-tone and tonic respectively, others, inside the realm of the Phrygian mode, will feel relaxation in b♭ and tension in c♭.

In the search for a particular tonal centre in »Ain't That Easy«, E♭m is probably a reasonable option, but none of the sections present a clear tonal functional process. The only clear cadence—from the point of view of functional tonality—is placed in the transition from the pre-chorus to the chorus, in which the B♭^{maj7} chord could act as a dominant of the tonic E♭m^{maj7}. In the intro (A') and its almost identical repetition before the bridge (D), instead of E♭m, D'Angelo employs an augmented ninth chord, E♭m$^{+9/maj7}$—the so-called »Hendrix chord«—which occupies the function of tonic. It is common in the music of Jimi Hendrix for the seventh and sharp ninth to simply colour the tonic rather than act as tension requiring resolution (see Van der Bliek 2007: 346-8). If, as Aimé J. Ellis suggests, »D'Angelo's embrace of the spirit lives of other black male musicians provides telling alternatives for imagining new possibilities of black manhood in hip hop and contemporary black popular culture« (2009: 298), it is notable how this significant harmonic reference to Hendrix plays an important role in the musical construction of D'Angelo's identity.

The harmony of the verses comprises several elements that can be studied under the umbrella of conflict. Even when the chords of the first verse could be interpreted in E♭m (as ♭III-VI-V), or in its relative major as G♭ (as I-IV-III), the interdependence between harmonic and timbral elements such as the use of distorted power chords or the multi-layered backing vocals are key here, since they establish a relative autonomy of the fragment. The power chords pattern G♭^{5}-C♭^{5}-B♭^{5} acts as a layer that allows a sense of harmonic ambiguity through the dialogue between different melodic lines. Despite the blurring harmony created by the different multi-layered vocals, a melodic line close to a major mode can be heard. We point out that this section may be interpreted as a particular harmonic recreation of the so-called blue note, which confers a sense of ambiguity, since its sonority oscillates between the minor third (d♭) and the major third (d♮).

In the verses, the lyrics »inside« (circa 0:35), »ride« (circa 0:48), »decide« (circa 1:41) and »inside« (circa 1:53)—which coincide with the B♭^{5} chord—are sung around the d♮, but they are not clearly perceived as major thirds because of the use of a characteristic blues vibrato. This negotiation can also

be observed in the short lead vocal and instrumental interventions above the B♭5 chord: the electric guitar ornamentation in verse 1 (circa 0:40) uses the major third (d♮), whilst minor thirds (d♭) can be heard in the lead vocal ornamentations of verse 2 (for example »which direction«, circa 1:45). In this sense, we find useful Hans Weisethaunet's (2001: 102-4) consideration of blue notes as participatory discrepancies, whereby »blue harmony« has to be analysed as an interaction between individual performers of a band and different layers, which also involves notions of sound and texture. In the case of »Ain't That Easy«, however, since Weisethaunet rejects a direct association between blue notes and dissonance, and also states that for blues performers and listeners, dissonance is perceived when major thirds are played over major chords (2001: 105), an interpretation in terms of instability by virtue of harmonic ambiguity depends on factors such as the stylistic competence of the listener.

Exploring the relationship between the verses and the sections that precede them—the intro (A') for verse 1 and the first chorus (C) for verse 2—through the idea of expectation is another useful approach to analyse instability and the negotiation of conflict. Since section A' finishes with a rhythmic interruption around a short tonicisation in C♭, the relationship between the C♭ and G♭5 chords can be understood as the beginning of a prototypical Mixolydian loop, revealing some similarities with the turnaround in Hendrix's »The Wind Cries Mary« (1967): from F as the last chord of the intro to a C-B♭-F pattern in the verse.[19] However, in D'Angelo's song, the fleeting sense of a Mixolydian turnaround is immediately broken with an unexpected harmonic pattern in the verse. Our perception of the first chord of verse 2 changes as a result of its relationship with the B♭m chord used as the last chord of the preceding chorus, and makes it possible to perceive the power chords G♭5-C♭5-B♭5 as an Aeolian harmonic pattern common in rock music (♭VI-I, but with the inclusion of a passing ♭II, outside of the realm of the Aeolian mode).[20] From this point of view, the power chords of verse 1 could be heard as I-(IV)-III, suggesting a possible stability in I (G♭) and instability in III (B♭), whilst verse 2 could be interpreted as ♭VI-(♭II)-I, involving instability in ♭VI (G♭) and stability in I (B♭).

The final chorus (C') also represents an interesting example of the various symbolic ways to avoid or resolve conflict. Since this section is built with an

19 For a discussion on Ionian-Mixolydian loops and turnaround chord changes, see Tagg 2014: 421-32.

20 For a discussion of different Aeolian harmonic patterns in rock music, see Biamonte 2010. For a detailed description of the use of in rock songs, not only in Phrygian mode, but also in other harmonic contexts, see Everett 2009: for example 193-4).

E♭m^{maj7}-D♭-F$^{maj9/maj7}$(replaced by G♭^{maj7} in the second turn)-F^{maj7}-B♭^{maj7} loop that is repeated until the end of the song, the question is at which chord should the loop be stopped? This decision is avoided in the studio version of »Ain't That Easy« by use of a fade-out which corresponds with one of the three typologies described by Reinhard Kopiez et al.: a »decrescendo plus a repeated chorus plus interspersed short vocal or instrumental improvisations« (2015: 360). However, an eluded resolution is like *Don Giovanni*'s Stone Guest: it will come to us in the future. That is why the »alternative endings« chosen by D'Angelo in various live performances are useful in order to attend to the unresolved conflict in the studio recording. Two variations are prevalent: the employment of the intro material (A') as an outro, ending in C♭ with a *ritardando* after the repetition of the final chorus,[21] or, the use of a new riff in B♭—the improvisatory »Vanguard Theme«—after the F^{maj7} chord used in the loop (E♭^{maj7}-D♭-G♭^{maj7}-F^{maj7}) to finish.[22]

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have examined »Ain't That Easy« from a range of perspectives. By investigating both the song and track in the context of the circumstances surrounding the release of *Black Messiah*,[23] we have engaged with issues of socio-political potential: a seemingly logical approach considering the album is widely held as a protest album and appraised in relation to its ideological capacity (Hodgkinson 2014, Lester 2014). In light of D'Angelo's evocation of the Ferguson unrest and call for change, we have suggested that »Ain't That Easy« can be aligned with eras and styles of music where notions of protest were central. Particularly strong are the links to the musical expressions of Jimi Hendrix and Marvin Gaye, who have been viewed as emblematic of particular Black popular music traditions, which in turn carry their own political implications. By building on familiar musical idioms to carve out a unique and elusive style, then, D'Angelo can be seen as revitalising previous articulations of protest in popular music within a con-

21 See for example live performances of »Ain't That Easy« at Le Zénith, Paris (2012) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oExhFN06eOY; and at Brixton O2 Academy, London (2012) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gO1PNuBk7m0 (both accessed 18 August 2023).

22 See for example live performances of »Ain't That Easy« at North Sea Jazz Festival, Rotterdam (2015) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Nzkx8GYxsg (accessed 18 August 2023).

23 See Moore (2012: 15) on this distinction.

temporary context imbued with racial disparity, in turn extending them into a future riddled with uncertainty.

On a musical level, our findings identify several elements that attest to the relevance of conflict to »Ain't That Easy« in different ways, from the ideological (such as how narratives of socio-political discord are associated with inherent stylistic references) to the corporeal (a listener's physical response to the music as microrhythmic details provide conflicting loci for metric orientation). The production of the track introduces contesting notions of era and style, the lyrics deal with conflict quite literally while simultaneously inviting disparate interpretations, microrhythmic and microtonal features carry the potential to evoke a sense of instability on the part of the listener, and harmonic ambiguity opens up for opposing perceptions of harmony. In the end, it is as if the individual elements resist their participation in the greater whole, resulting in a track that in many ways defies obvious categorisation.

Yet whilst conflict may appear readily evident within »Ain't That Easy« across several planes, our collaborative approach to musical analysis revealed key differences in perception. The practice of collectively analysing with researchers from differing cultural and educational backgrounds and with various methodological and musical preferences constitutes an important learning process in which the singular authoritative voice is relocated to a new point of view with the help of the contribution of others. Such a situation can often entail discord, which is understandable considering that music analysis has traditionally been conceptualised as an individual activity. The fact that we chose conflict as our main key to open up interpretations of »Ain't That Easy« can, from this perspective, be understood as an accumulated projection of our internal disagreements with regards to the song.[24] With these discussions in mind, we have aspired to acknowledge the limitations and implications of our own perceptions by openly addressing them throughout the course of this chapter.

However, despite the fact that our approach is not necessarily reliant on complete consensus with regards to our perceptual or methodological criteria, our differing interpretations were not so incompatible that they *necessitated* a focus on conflict. We can rather conclude that our decision to address this notion provided the opportunity to link together various aspects of the song, which suggests that conflict does indeed play a significant role in »Ain't That Easy«. As Stephen Blum has suggested in his discussion of the musical enactment of attitudes towards antagonism in the US, »[t]he mul-

24 A similar focus is adopted by Carter et al. (2015) in their analysis of Fleet Foxes' »Helplessness Blues« (2011).

ticultural reality of the nation requires multiple approaches to making, hearing, and reflecting on music—an inevitable source of controversy and conflict, in which we can hope to discover possibilities for constructive change« (2010: 241). In a sense, then, both the music and its analysis were simultaneously a source of conflict, and the means to negotiate it through the collaboration resolution strategy.

Ultimately, whilst this article has drawn together the individual and shared interpretations of four researchers, we can only hope that it inspires other listeners to conceptualise and contemplate their own impressions. Paraphrasing D'Angelo's ambition for *Black Messiah* as an idea to which all struggling communities can aspire: we have not tried to uncover any one, true way of understanding »Ain't That Easy«, but have rather attempted to celebrate thousands of them.

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