EXPERIENCING ALBUM FORMS AND DIALECTICS OF GENDER THROUGH SLEATER-KINNEY'S *THE WOODS*[1]

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Very rarely is an album not about something. Even when artists present their albums as arbitrary collections of songs, listeners limn from their tracks a sense of narrative, space, or discourse. But how do we understand the mechanics of this effect? This is a large question; to offer one possible point of entry, I will focus on interactions between album forms and gender.

I chose this connection for a few reasons. First, all album-listening experiences are fundamentally subjective. Acknowledging this situates the listener at the center, and allows for their listening to be informed by their own lived experiences. Consciously or not, this includes aspects of their gender identity, just as albums encode gender information through the performances they contain. This is well-trod ground; much discourse on gender and popular music has explored questions of gender expression with far greater subtlety than I can discuss here.[2] Suffice it to say that every musical parameter can be gendered, and in infinite ways. This profound flexibility is what makes the album-mediated interface between listeners and performers so fascinating: it can be through uncanny, surprising, or prosaic means that albums mediate the gender experiences of listeners and performers.

Importantly, this mediation occurs at all levels of the album experience. Certainly it can be manifested in a single song, but it is also worked out over the course of an entire album. Taking a more synoptic perspective makes it possible to synthesize more complex gender dialectics than are likely to be

[1] This paper was originally presented at the 44th Annual Meeting of the Society of Music Theory, November 2021. It is currently undergoing revision and expansion, in preparation for journal submissions.

[2] E.g. Burns & LaFrance, Duguay, Guck, Heidemann, Lavengood, Lochhead, Malawey, Whitely.

found in individual songs. Each of the albums I will be discussing demonstrates this point: it is through their full structures that we gain access to a rich discourse of gender expression.

Sleater-Kinney's 2005 album, *The Woods*, is an ideal case study. At the time of its release, the band consisted of drummer Janet Weiss along with co-lead singers and guitarists Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein; Weiss left the band in 2019. All three members identify as female, and have consistently positioned their work as a challenge to masculine norms of hard rock. Early in their career, this was often made explicit: having emerged from the riot grrrl movement, their songs tackled issues of sexism and violence against women, along with anthems of female empowerment. But by the time of *The Woods,* their sound and lyrics had evolved considerably. Pivotal to their development was a string of performances in support of Pearl Jam's 2003 tour. This brought them access to the protected masculine spaces of arenas, opportunities for making extremely loud music (though Sleater-Kinney has never been a quiet band), and direct contact with mass audiences for the first time.

Their reaction to the latter was perhaps counterintuitive. Brownstein described a need "to turn inward…to count on one another as the source of joy and givers of the only rewards." (197) This, she says, was a function of having "inserted ourselves into the landscape;" explaining that "we walked onstage each night with the stakes high…we were unknown here – we felt brand-new, untested, unloved." (196-197)

Brownstein directly attributes the creation of *The Woods* to this revelation, suggesting it may not have existed otherwise. (199) Part of what makes it a remarkable album, though, is the extent to which gender, or the bands' otherness in a hard rock context, is *not* a primary topic of concern for most of the songs. The forms of music-making they developed during the Pearl Jam tour led to an album that addresses an astonishing array of topics, which are summarized in Table 1. Making an album of such breadth, and some remove from direct confrontations with gender, was a hard-won goal for the band. For years, they had "wanted to expand the notion of what it means to be female. The notion of 'female' should be so sprawling and complex that it becomes divorced from gender itself." (168) Janet Weiss echoed this sentiment in more personal terms, specifically addressing her motivation for being in the band: "I feel like that's part of my

role of being a musician…to show women an alternative to the cultural norms…we're supposed to be…demure and quiet and motherly…To see three very powerful, independent, creative women who are not operating within a box is enticing." (PBS)

From these remarks, we can begin to understand *The Woods* as a site of discourse of feminine identity, or gender more generally. But since the album's lyrics make few engagements with the topic, we must look for cues elsewhere.

The good news is that albums are complicated! The other parameters listed on Table 1 (and all subsequent tables in the handout) suggest an array of information streams that contribute to our listening experiences. The table is low-resolution and not comprehensive. Detail is sacrificed, condensing each song into a complete ontological unit, to better reveal large-scale structures and foreground the overall experience as I understand it.

Figure 1 graphically renders some of Table 1's experiential data. I have chosen the constellation of parameters that are most germane to my own listening. When seen together on this multiparametric map, complex forms become apparent. Since these emergent forms are borne by the interactions of disparate parametric streams, I refer to this analytical methodology as *experiential counterpoint*.

But to connect this to gender requires some heavy lifting. Before exploring the figure's full meaning, I will first discuss precursors to *The Woods* by Led Zeppelin and the B-52's, each of which presents a contrasting formal model and gender dialectic.

Led Zeppelin has been cited as a major influence on Sleater-Kinney many times. Aside from the fact that the members of Sleater-Kinney listened to lots of Zeppelin during the off-hours of their sessions for *The Woods*, it isn't hard to hear aspects of John Bonham's drums, Robert Plant's singing, or Jimmy Page's guitar wizardry in the musicianship of Janet Weiss, Corin Tucker, and Carrie Brownstein, respectively. It seems reasonable that 1971's unpronounceable fourth album (which I'll just call *"Four")* was played at least once during the sessions, and it was certainly known by the band. In 2005, the same year *The Woods* was released, a book on the album by Erik Davis was published as part of the 33 1/3 series. In it, Davis offers a narrative

analysis of *Four* that follows the journey of an invented protagonist named Percy. The basic thrust is Percy's quest for the ideal woman, who, in a surprise to no one, doesn't exist, ultimately leading Percy to a life of ruin. For the record, Davis's reading, and Led Zeppelin's music, is far more nuanced than this. Davis extracted the narrative from a sophisticated interweaving of background about technology, magic and the occult, and the gender messaging of Plant's lyrics and singing. He works *against* the sexist construct of a mythical feminine ideal, and presents Percy's downfall as, knowingly so, of his own making.

In Figure 2, I have visualized my own hearing of how *Four* supports Davis's narrative. At the bottom of all figures are the streams of key and tempo. I have considered these as fundamental elements; though I myself do not always perceive key structures consciously, they certainly affect feelings of continuity over an album. In this case, the conspicuous appearance of F minor – the album's only excursion into flat territory – significantly marks "When the Levee Breaks" as something from outside the A-heavy world of the rest of the album. Tempo, meanwhile, is a critical conduit for bodily engagement, physically drawing us into the listening experience.[3] In the case of *Four*, meter mediates tempo in interesting ways. As shown in the background colors, Most of the album's songs fit into a quadruple-meter framework; even the polymetric incursions of "Black Dog" are done in reference to a staunch 4/4 beat. But "Four Sticks" is clearly an outlier. Its quintuple meter, fast tempo, and new key mark it as something strange. Davis picked up on this, hearing the song as signifying the inevitability of Percy's end. "Stairway to Heaven's" duple-meter beginning is also anomalous, but less beguilingly so, as it smoothly prepares the album's climactic confrontation between mythical masculine and feminine forces. Finally, I have used "sound" to denote three basic modes of instrumentation, which I have summarized as rock, folk, and blues. In this scheme, I should note a degree of inelegance; not only are these terms imprecise, but mapping them in this way can be read as suggesting a hierarchization between stylistic registers. Assigning relative value to stylistic traditions is not my intent. Rather, I am merely alluding to the album's stylistic spectrum. If folk signifies the ethereal, then

[3] See Kozack

the blues suggest the elemental – two sides of a coin minted in the stuff of human experience. It was this sort of thinking that lead Davis to interpret "When the Levee Breaks," especially given its historical flood imagery, as conveying Percy's fate – his dissolution into the elements.

Taking all this together, we can see how the narrative's shape emerges from these parametric interactions. "Stairway to Heaven" beginnings at a contrapuntal nadir; It can only be up from this point, and certainly the song conveys "upness." But the promise of "Stairway's" rise is thwarted by the action of the B-side. Both "Misty Mountain Hop" and "Four Sticks" reup the tempo, though the latter's metric anomalies undercut the effect. Coupled with coordinated declines in sound, tempo, and tonality over the remainder of the album, the B-side systematically undoes the A-side's gains.

So Davis, and scores of other listeners, are certainly justified in hearing a traditional narrative structure emerge from *Four*. But this structure, and the connections Davis makes between it and gender, open substantial room for critique. For starters, it relies on the traditionally masculine archetypes of goal-seeking, conflict, and release. Moreover, by presenting a fundamentally binary dialectic between male and female, one that is characterized by opposition and irreconcilability, only a short leap is needed to reinterpret the album in misogynistic terms. To be clear, this is not how Davis sees it; in fact, he does a good job of acknowledging and avoiding such a reading. But the challenges are hard to ignore. Even allowing for nuanced perspectives on masculinity and femininity, *Four* structurally reinforces traditional gender tropes.

Eighteen years later, around the time high school-aged Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker independently saw them in concert, The B-52's would provide us with a different construction of gender dialectics on their album *Cosmic Thing*. Its form, which I have not read in narrative terms, conveys a message of universal transcendence; the traditional gender binary remains stubbornly present in the album's lyrics, but becomes disembodied and generalized.

As shown in Figure 3, this stems from a different constellation of parameters, which makes sense: *Cosmic Thing* and *Four* speak different experiential languages. Key and tempo again occupy foundational

positions. Meter is dealt with much less dynamically, so I have omitted it. Sound is even more vaguely defined here than with Zeppelin. The lines between "pop," "exotic," and "cosmic" are hard to draw in objective terms. The band self-consciously and unironically traffics in space-age kitsch, their very name transitively alluding to a Cold War-era hairstyle and heavy bomber. The determination of values for sound was thus largely a matter of subjective interpretation. Topic, however, can be gleaned directly from each song's lyrics. A common theme of escape is developed; the nature, cause, or destination of this escape informed how I schematized topic.

With just these parameters, those of greatest importance to my own listening, it is possible to discern an album form quite different from that of *Four*. The interactions are more complex, creating a less overtly coordinated (patriarchal?) experience. But this changes towards the end of the album: all parameters begin to diverge during the anti-tech mania of "Channel Z," pointing to infinity by the wordless "Follow Your Bliss."

Now, this wordlessness is significant. Essential to the B-52's sonic identity are the voices of Kate Pierson, Fred Schneider, and Cindy Wilson. The blend between Pierson and Wilson is as legendary as it is uncanny, while Schneider's nasal sprechstimme is similarly unmistakable. This contrast – between genders, timbre, and pitch-precision – affords the group a uniquely versatile vocal repertory. As suggested by Figure 3's multicolored backgrounds, they liberally explore this asset in diverse configurations. In so doing, we grow to hear the trio not in terms of a male/female dichotomy, but as co-creators of this escapist space. The persistent "boys" and "girls" of their lyrics thus become universalized to a certain degree; we grow to understand that gender equity is the band's *sine qua non*. That "Follow Your Bliss" should have an almost negligible vocal presence – just a few muted "Ah's" – indicates an escape from the album, the bodies of the people who made it, and even our own. This egress is mirrored by the stepping-down of tempo over the album's B-side, a topical ascent to the cosmos, and even in the last-minute apprehension of a duple meter, lulling us into transcendence. All this begs a question: if we can escape from the mundane, why not also from mundane constraints of gender?

The B-52's would, for the most part, leave that question open; we are, after all, each following our own bliss. But Sleater-Kinney, was keen to tackle it head-on. If *Cosmic Thing* explicitly thematized escape, *The Woods* implicitly thematizes disruption. The tremendous dynamism of every parameter shown in Figure 1 highlights the album's formal instability. In a beautiful motivic parallelism, singer, sound, topic, tempo, and even key each follow their own rollercoaster-like impulses, creating a far more intricate set of interactions than in either *Four* or *Cosmic Thing*. What exists on *The Woods* is, consequently, a space of conflicts.[4] No one parameter dominates, and their interactions suggest no single point of agreement, save perhaps the explosive beginning and exasperated end. Each stream rises and falls independently, constantly vying for attention. In other words, it's a highly polyphonic experiential texture, and the resultant form eschews a large-scale sense of goal-orientation. This puts it in direct contrast with the masculine-coded formal concepts of *Four,* and offers a deeper form of liberation than that suggested by *Cosmic Thing*: one arising from the challenge of gender non-conformance rather than escapism.

Noise is one of Sleater-Kinney's most well-developed tools of non-conformance; *The Woods* was mastered hot, with clipping baked into every song, on top of dense distortion and signal processing, a saturated mix, and dizzying use of the stereo field. Undergirding it all is Janet Weiss's virtuosic drumming, which is itself quite noisy. Further complicating the album's sound is the fact that none of these noisy elements is static – each makes a living contribution to the album, rendering layers of information with as much vitality as any other parameter. And they certainly do so more strongly than their counterparts on *Four* and *Cosmic Thing.*[5]

The chief effect of all this noise is to moderate the intelligibility of the text. I interpret this act of self-obfuscation as a deliberate gambit: it asks us to give energy to the artistic experience, even if it's just a fraction of the artists' emotional investment (a topic explored on the song "Entertain"). Resisting is basically

[4] This is even suggested by its title and artwork; the latter coming from a series of paintings by Michael Brophy that similarly problematize conformity and destruction.
[5] Hence I felt it necessary to render the map of Figure 1 in slightly higher resolution; it would have been misleading to reduce each song's sound to a single value.

futile; *The Woods* makes very poor background music. Instead, one is drawn in by the noise's compelling pressures, and the windows of clarity left artfully open. Sleater-Kinney insists on being heard not only through the noise, but because of it.

The act of self-disruption imposed by noise is mirrored in the band's treatment of tempo and tonality. No obvious pattern globally organizes either along traditional lines.[6] Moreover, three important passages exist where both are rendered indeterminate. "The Fox" is one hell of a first track – aside from establishing peaks in sound and tempo, it's allegiance to D-flat major is dubious, ultimately yielding to nearly twenty seconds of feedback. This foreshadows the atonal break of "What's Mine Is Yours," and the anarchic jam of "Let's Call It Love." Together, this triad establishes disruption of traditional musical grammar as a structural element. When combined with the persistence of noise (plus a number of very abrupt internal shifts and song endings) disruption is elevated to an essential thematic status.

Operating against this disruption, as familiar-feeling agents of humanity, are the vocal presences of Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein.[7] The two musicians operate equitably, as both guitarists and singers, echoing the B-52's ensemble strategy. When it comes to voice, though, the ways in which they *differ* alter the gender dynamics. Without the clearly contrasting sound of, say, a Fred Schneider, or the inimitable blend of Cindy Wilson and Kate Pierson (the voices of Corin and Carrie are easily distinguishable), *The Woods'* vocal space is marked by diverse yet cooperative feminine perspectives. This is part of what makes the unison singing on "Jumpers" so significant – for what is the most dire song on the album, each singer compromised their vocal individuality to present a crystal-clear and empathetic eisegesis on societal pressures and suicide.

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[6] Though much of the album suggest centricity around E. This can imply an inversion of *Four's* tonal structure, placing the tonal anomalies first rather than last. This begins the album on unstable ground, casting a tonal pall on the remainder that is never fully shaken. These are also "difficult" keys.

[7] Janet Weiss also has a vocal presence on the album, as a backup singer on a number of songs. Furthermore, the physicality, distinctiveness, and intricacy of her drumming is itself a significant conduit for human relatability.

"Jumpers" is also a notable example of the band members' abilities to displace their own gender from the spotlight. On this song, and many others, gendered pronouns are strictly avoided. At the same time, the lines between fictional, personal, and expository modes are left blurry. It is never obvious whose experiences the band is singing about, which leaves open a substantial dialectic space. When gender *is* explicitly invoked, as on "The Fox," "Modern Girl," and "Let's Call It Love," it is usually to question the boundaries of femininity.

"Let's Call It Love," by containing the album's longest period of voicelessness, has a particularly important function in the life of the album. Like the B-52's "Follow Your Bliss," the abandonment of voice on "Let's Call It Love" is apotheotic. The song begins with an expression of female erotic bravado; the protagonist repeatedly affirms that she has "a long time for love." Fittingly, Sleater-Kinney then absolves itself of textual, formal, or sonic responsibility during the ensuing jam – this is liberated music. But unlike "Follow Your Bliss" it remains aggressively engaged, creating an extended plateau of steady pulse and sexual energy. This is no ordinary cock rock moment – it's the culmination of a group effort in search of itself. This search, it turns out, never ends; the sound melts into "Night Light," ending the album not with a sense of achievement, defeat, or arrival, but an aching expression of real-world struggle.

This is how, despite its liberation, "Let's Call It Love" bears the weight of the album's preceding forty minutes. All of its struggles – lyrical, sonic, and physical – are exhausting, harrowing. Abandonment of the voice is another surrender to the elements, but unlike Percy's demise on *Four,* this surrender is not the end. It is instead a signal, or maybe a symbol,[8] of broader struggles that transcend questions of gender. Simultaneously, it is not detached from gender, for we don't lose sight of the agents of *The Woods.* On the contrary, we're acutely aware of Janet's, Carrie's and Corin's presence and skill. This is crucial: *The Woods* formally embodies their complex experiences of the world, distilling them into this messy landscape. They create a space for everyone to make sense of, escape to, hide in, or in which to find resonances, new

[8] A night light?

perspectives, and pathways towards greater understanding by embracing collective individuality and the constructiveness of defying expectations.

The work of The Woods, the work of Sleater-Kinney, never really ends. Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein have spoken of the band's inevitability; Janet Weiss's departure notwithstanding, or perhaps in light of it, they're "still running." What I hope I have shown is how this album works out that running through its full form, and how other albums engage in related dialectics through their own forms. What I hope I have not done is any injustice to these artists or their works, and I hope you can forgive and help me correct any such errors. Finally, I hope I have adequately expressed the broad value of considering album forms in this manner. It's exciting to think about the myriad maps that could be made for these albums (and any others!), and the larger points that can be derived from them. This is only a starting point, and an open one at that, on the journey of understanding how albums work their magic.

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	Side A				Side B				Side C	
Song	The Fox	Wilderness	What's Mine Is Yours	Jumpers	Modern Girl	Entertain	Rollercoaster	Steep Air	Let's Call It Love	Night Light
Key	D-flat M(?)	G-flat M	G-flat M(?)	EM	BM	EM	GM	Am	Em	Em
Singer	Corin	Carrie/Corin	Corin/Carrie	Corin+Carrie	Carrie	Carrie/Corin	Corin/Carrie	Carrie/Corin	Corin/Carrie	Corin
Topic	Anti-Love (Predatorial)	Anti-Love (Relationship Failure)	Love (Us vs. The World)	Suicide	Anti(?)-Love (Angst)	The Commodification of Art	Anti(?)-Love (Fickleness of Desire)	Anti-Love (Indifference)	Love (Sexual Desire)	Search for Stability and Strength
Meter	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple(?)	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Duple	Duple/Quadruple	Quadruple
Tempo	195	120	155→?→80→155	150	135	150	145	70	80/160	95
Sound (noise)	High	Med. High/Low	Low→High→Low	Low→High	Low→High	Med. High/Low	Low→High→Low	Med. Low	M. High/High	Med. High
Space	Public	Social/Public	Public	Social/Public	Social	Public	Public	Public	Public	Public
Duration	3'25"	3'41"	4'58"	4'25"	3'02"	4'56"	4'55"	4'05"	11'02"	3'40"

Table 1: summary of basic parameters for *The Woods*. In this, and all other tables, space conveys proxemic zone following Moore, Schmidt, and Dockwray (2011). Tempi shown are approximate beats per minute. Lead vocal responsibilities are often shared; the singer listed first is considered primary. On "Jumpers," Corin and Carrie sing in unison. Question marks applied to tempo and key reflect passages that abandon normative modes of organization. Noise measurements were determined by ear and reflect the relative extent of distortion and aural saturation. The LP's side D does not contain any music.

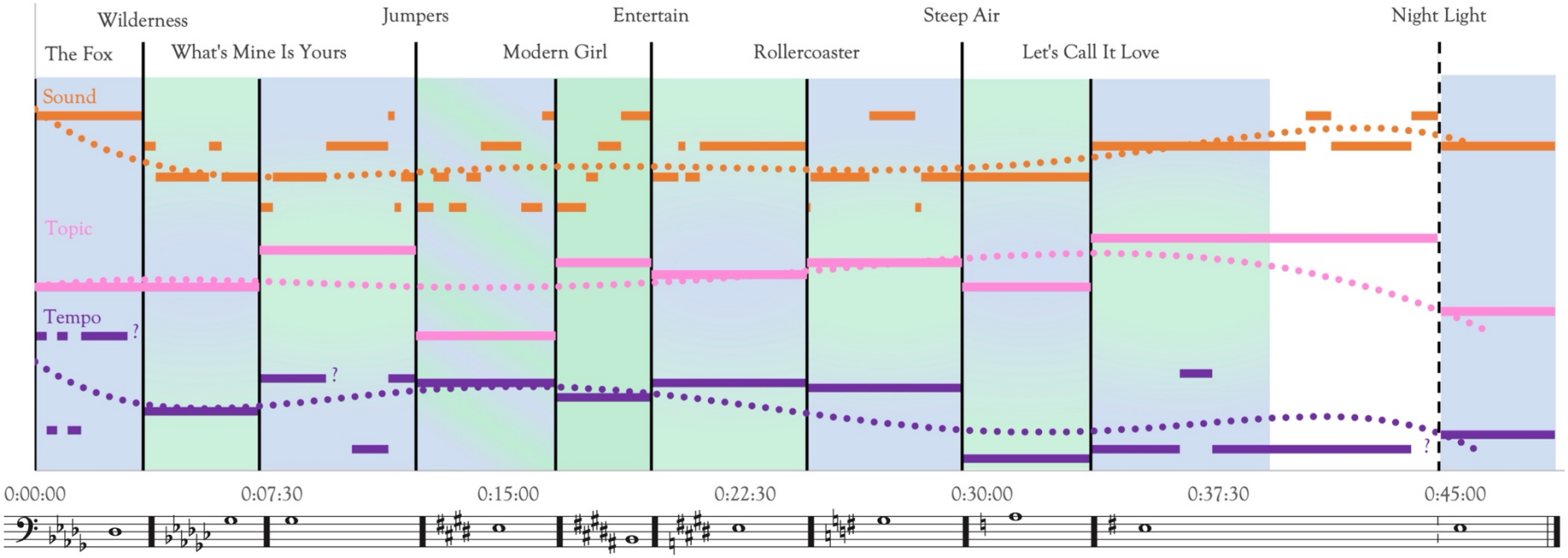

Figure 1: graphic representation of select experiential parameters on *The Woods*. Background colors represent who sings; the primary singer's color is placed on the outside. About half of "Let's Call It Love" is instrumental only. Sound is schematized from more (high) to less (low) noise. Schematization of topic reflects a subjective and approximate interpretation of the lyric's relative emotional temperature from positive/content (high) to negative/concerned (low). On all figures, values have been normalized for comparison, and a high-order polynomial best-fit curve is included to clarify each parameter's overall trajectory.

	Side A				Side B			
Song	Black Dog	Rock & Roll	The Battle of Evermore	Stairway to Heaven	Misty Mountain Hop	Four Sticks	Going to California	When the Levee Breaks
Key	AM/m	AM	Am	Am	AM	Em	DM	Fm
Topic	Demonization of Male Lust	Exuberant Pop Honesty	Search for Elemental Balance	"Apotheosis of the 'Ultimate Boon'"	Confrontation Between Spiritual and Earthly Pleasures	The Hero's "Spiritual funk"	Surrendering to Earthly Pleasures	The Hero is Lost to the Elements
Meter	Quadruple(?)	Quadruple	Quadruple	Duple→Quadruple	Quadruple	Quintuple	Quadruple	Quadruple
Tempo	165	180	140	70→80→170→200	135	205	150	140
Sound (instrumentation)	Rock	Rock	Folk (+Female Vocals)	Folk→Rock	Rock	Rock	Folk	Rock(+Blues)
Space	Public	Public	Social	Social→**Public**	Public	Public	Personal/Public	Public
Duration	5'00"	3'43"	5'54"	8'04"	4'41"	4'47"	3'38"	7'08"

Table 2: summary of basic parameters for ZoSoIV. Tempi shown are approximate beats per measure. Topic descriptions are based on a narrative analysis by Erik Davis (2005). All songs sung primarily by Robert Plant.

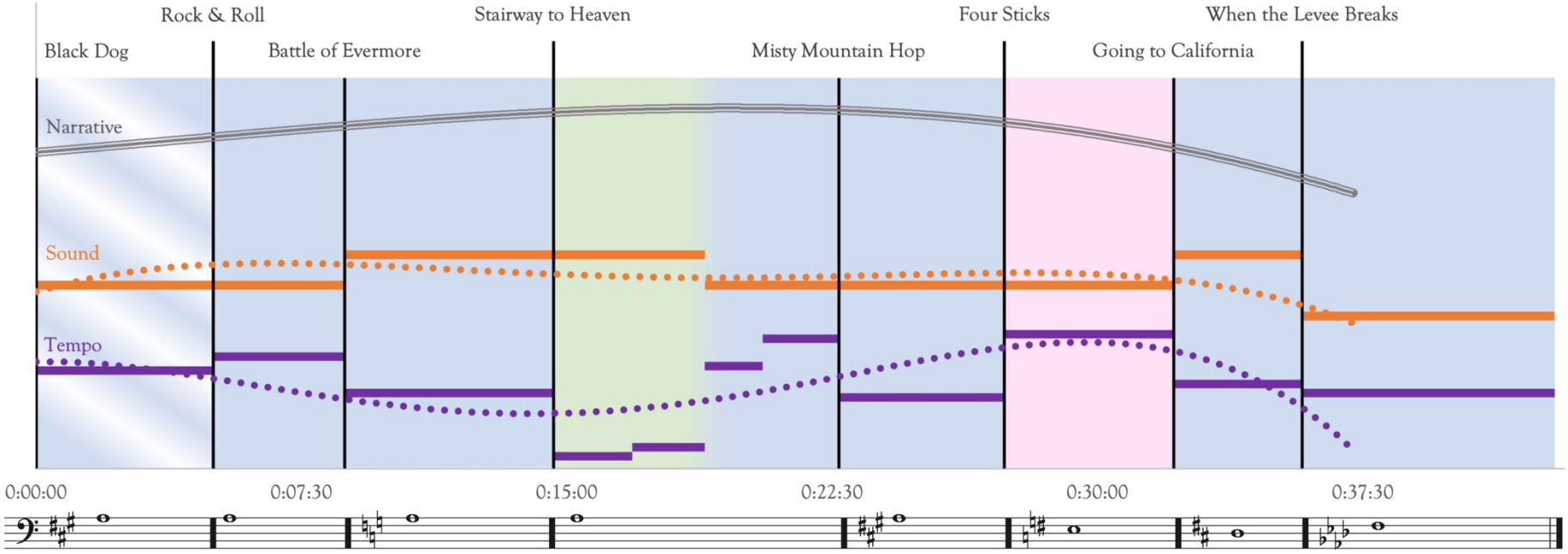

Figure 2: graphic representation of select experiential parameters on ZoSoIV. Background colors correspond to meter; "Black Dog" is richly polymetric, though a quadruple meter is maintained by John Bonham's drumming throughout. A stereotypical narrative arc is included as a visual aid, roughly following the trajectory described by Davis (2005). Sound is schematized as: folk (high), rock (middle), blues (low).

	Side A					Side B				
Song	Cosmic Thing	Dry County	Deadbeat Club	Love Shack	June Bug	Roam	Bushfire	Channel Z	Topaz	Follow Your Bliss
Key	B♭M	CM	D♭M	CM	BM	EM	EM	E♭M	Bm/GM	E♭M
Singer	Fred/Cindy +Kate	Trio	Cindy+Kate/ Fred	Trio	Trio	Kate/Cindy	Trio	Trio	Cindy+Kate /Fred	–
Topic	Dance	Escape (Mundane)	Escape (Mundane)	Party	Wilderness	Escape (Mundane)	Anti-Escape (Grounding)	Escape (Mundane)	Escape (Cosmic)	Transcendence
Meter	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Quadruple	Duple
Tempo	200	117	125	130	195	135	150	135	120	100
Sound (style)	Cosmic	Cosmic	Pop	Pop	Exotic	Pop	Pop	Cosmic	Pop	Cosmic
Duration	3'53"	4'55"	4'48"	5'22"	5'08"	4'55"	4'57"	4'50"	4'21"	4'09"

Table 3: summary of basic parameters for *Cosmic Thing*. As on *The Woods*, vocal responsibilities are shared; the orders shown here reflects an equivalent distribution of roles as in Table 1. Tempi shown are approximate beats per measure. All songs occupy a social space.

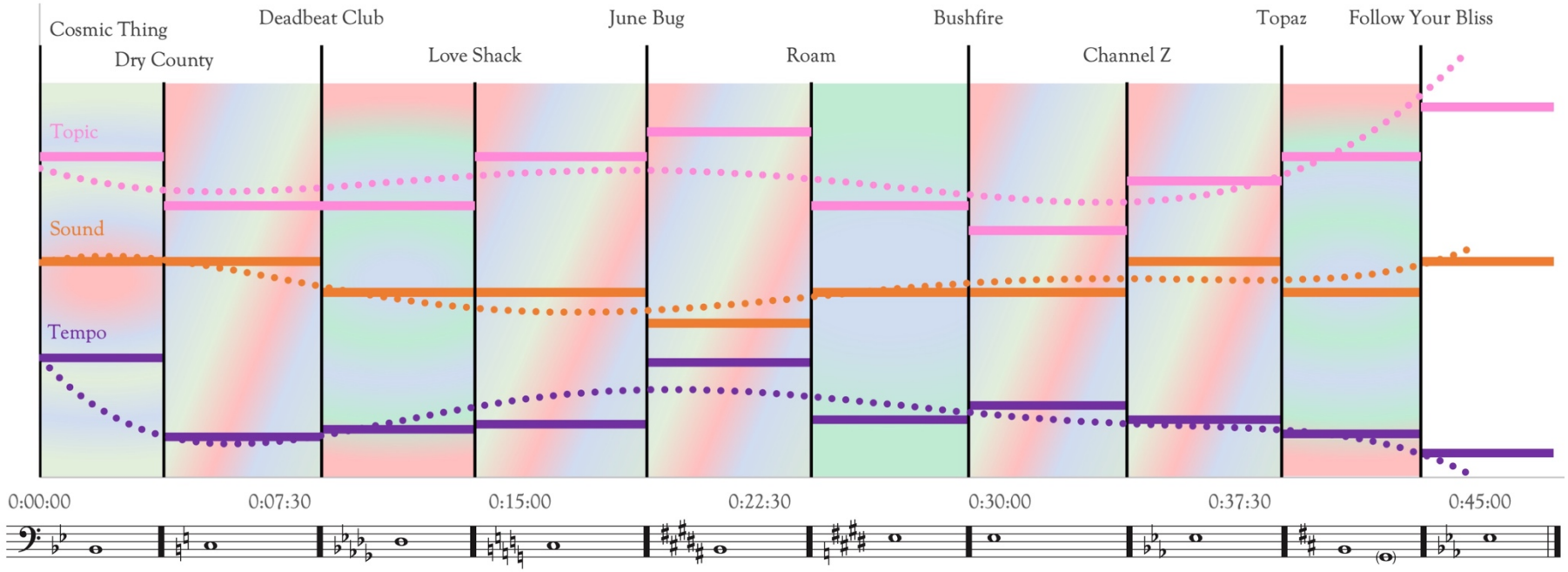

Figure 3: graphic representation of select experiential parameters on *Cosmic Thing*. Background colors represent vocalists, distributed as in Figure 1. Topic schematizes each song's degree of fantasy, from the most personally everyday (low) to the most universally transcendent (high). Sound is schematized as cosmic (high), pop (middle), and exotic (low).