

The Sonic Bildungsroman: Coming-of-Age Narratives in Album Form

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Abstract

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The *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age story, deals with the transitional period of adolescence. Although initially conceived in the novel form, the *Bildungsroman* has since found expression in various media. This thesis expands the scope of the genre by describing the “sonic *Bildungsroman*,” or coming-of-age album, and exploring a few key examples of this previously undefined concept. Furthermore, the record as a medium affords musicians narrative agency critical to their identity development, so this project positions the coming-of-age album squarely in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* as a tool for self-cultivation.

This thesis examines two albums in great detail: *Pure Heroine* by Lorde and *Channel Orange* by Frank Ocean. In these records, Lorde and Ocean lyrically, musically, and visually portray their journeys toward self-actualization. While the works show thematic similarities in their respective presentations of the adolescent experience, Lorde and Ocean craft stories colored by their unique identities. In this way, the two albums capture distinct approaches to constructing coming-of-age narratives in album form, yet both represent foundational examples of the genre due to their subject matter, narrative trajectory, and careful composition. From this basis, this project offers a framework for understanding how popular musicians construct coming-of-age stories in their albums—and for understanding how these stories affect us as listeners.

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Introduction: The Sonic *Bildungsroman*

*The kids want to be so hard
But in my dreams, we're still screaming
And running through the yard*

-Arcade Fire, "The Suburbs"

The coming-of-age story has detailed the universal experience of growing up and the struggles of this journey for more than two centuries. The genre traces its roots to the development of the *Bildungsroman*, or "novel of human emergence," in the late eighteenth century. Thematically, this novel follows the protagonist as they develop physically, morally, and psychologically. According to literary critic M. M. Bakhtin, rather than feature a "ready-made" hero, the *Bildungsroman* portrays "the image of a man in the process of becoming."¹ In other words, the narrative tracks the hero through a formative time marked by tremendous personal growth to the point of self-realization. In this introductory chapter, I will investigate the history of the *Bildungsroman* before exploring the modern American construction of the genre in film, literature, and ultimately albums of recorded music.²

Bakhtin's genre analysis suggests adolescence, or the transitional phase during which a child becomes an adult, as the period central to the *Bildungsroman*. Thomas Jeffers supports this interpretation when he puts Bakhtin in conversation with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's treatise *Emile* (1762), a critical work in educating eighteenth-century Europe on the differences between children and adults.³ As Rosseau states in the preface of *Emile*,

¹ M. M. Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 19-21.

² For brevity, I will refer to albums of recorded music as "albums" or "records" moving forward.

³ Thomas L. Jeffers, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2. Hereafter cited as "*Apprenticeships*."

“They [the wisest writers] are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man.”⁴ In addition to stressing the importance of viewing children as children rather than as to-be adults, Rousseau acknowledges that an individual must “become” in order to bridge the gap from childhood to adulthood. As the interim period between these two stages in human development, adolescence encapsulates this “becoming.” Thus, per the generic ideal of “a man in the process of becoming,” the novel of human emergence necessarily deals with adolescence.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-96) serves as the foundation for succeeding coming-of-age narratives. The text grapples with “the recurring preoccupations of novels about growing up—for example, the young person’s affective development, from his relations with his parents to those with friends of both sexes, or the development of his particular talents, which may help him decide what sort of work he will do in the wider world.” The consideration of the eponymous hero’s interpersonal and vocational growth reflects the adolescent’s journey to define their identity in relation to other people and to a greater community, respectively. Goethe also looks at the protagonist as an individual rather than as a part of a whole, for “Goethe’s deeper preoccupations lay in questions about eros, parental responsibility, and freedom of choice.” As a result, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* weighs both “inward and outward concerns” to paint adolescence as a period of self-discovery simultaneously independent of and relative to society.⁵

From this thematic basis, the inward-outward balance of the *Bildungsroman* varied across cultures moving into the nineteenth century. English authors sought to preserve this

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London & Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1921; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1921), 1.

⁵ Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, 3-5.

equilibrium out of the belief that “one’s development as an *I* depended not only on the richness of one’s inner life, but on the affiliations one had with the people...who constituted and shared one’s social environment.” On the other hand, German authors “tended to focus attention on the individual’s cultivation” and resultingly prioritized their protagonists’ inward concerns. As for American authors, they located their works somewhere between the English and German approaches: “Nineteenth-century Americans could be civically responsible, but material conditions—from the greater privacy afforded people within a largely rural or small town population, to the cushion provided by widely shared wealth—favored a Germanic sort of profundity about the individual self.”⁶

The unique positioning of the American *Bildungsroman* influenced the evolution of the genre in the United States from its initial state to its modern form. In fact, even as the previously mentioned “material conditions” changed or altogether disappeared—partly due to rapid urbanization during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—the American coming-of-age story continued to prioritize the self while throwing the civic responsibilities of adulthood into question. This trend began in the 1950s when “public attention was focused on teens to an unprecedented degree in American culture.”⁷ Perhaps in response, several high-profile coming-of-age stories emerged during this decade. In literature, J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) captured the quintessential American teenager in Holden Caulfield. Throughout the novel, Holden does not seek to participate as a functional member of society; rather, he engages in diversions to alleviate a deep-seated sense of alienation. In this way, *The Catcher in the Rye* turns a cynical eye toward “the bumbling, artificial, and

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Lucy Rollin, *Twentieth-Century Teen Culture by the Decades: A Reference Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 147.

sometimes cold-hearted adult world” for failing to protect American youth. Regarding self-determination in the novel, Holden exercises control over the narrative “in his own voice, full of slang, profanity, and digressions.” This agency grants Holden space for growth and self-discovery as an adolescent, and his unfiltered manner of speech uniquely resonated with teenagers at the time. For these reasons, *The Catcher in the Rye* experienced widespread success among teenage audiences as “the first accurate representation of real teen pain and real teen literature in American culture.”⁸

Contemporaneously, the American coming-of-age story developed in film. Most famously, director Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) shocked audiences—specifically older viewers—in its depiction of teenage delinquents emerging from the middle-class suburbs, a more accessible environment than the prep schools and cities of *The Catcher in the Rye*. The film argues that, in spite of the material goods both available and affordable to post-war adolescents, a stifling home environment comes at the expense of teenagers’ stability. In an iconic indictment of adult failure, James Dean’s character Jim Stark screams, “You’re tearing me apart,” succinctly distilling how parents’ shortcomings in the domestic sphere affect the well-being of their children (fig. 1). Much as in *The Catcher in the Rye*, the adolescents in *Rebel Without a Cause* pursue distractions from their crushing loneliness. However, their violent pastimes of knife fights and games of “chicken” result in injury and even death, demonstrating how far the teenagers will go to feel anything. As evidence of the growing distance between teen and adult cultures, the volatile actions of the main characters intrigued teens while disturbing parents.⁹ Regardless of the film’s intent to elicit this outcome, the split response to *Rebel Without a Cause* highlights how teenagers

⁸ Ibid., 191-192.

⁹ Ibid., 187.

identified with coming-of-age protagonists in their rejection of adult expectations and search for personal meaning.



Fig. 1: Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*

From these foundational texts, the coming-of-age story popularly exploded in the United States. As the quintessential example, *The Catcher in the Rye* inspired countless texts in overt homage to or otherwise influenced by Salinger's novel.¹⁰ Even when later works departed from depicting the disaffected teenager as a moral hero when compared to adults, *The Catcher and the Rye* and *Rebel Without a Cause* cemented the tradition from which to break. Kirk Curnutt critically examines coming-of-age novels from the 1980s and 1990s, noting that teens from these works "do not rebel or struggle against aged adult cants" as their predecessors did "but bewail their [the adults'] disappearance."¹¹ Although Curnutt argues for the reformation of the coming-of-age genre, he relies on language from *Rebel Without a Cause* by virtue of citation to substantiate his claim: "If the cry of the teenager in the 1950s and 1960s was 'You're tearing me apart!' the cry of the modern teen is 'You're leaving me

¹⁰ Critics have made connections to texts as disparate as John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* (1959), Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), and Gus Van Sant's *Good Will Hunting* (1997).

¹¹ Kirk Curnutt, "Teenage Wasteland: Coming-of-Age Novels in the 1980s and 1990s," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary* 43, no. 1 (2001): 101.

alone!”¹² While coming-of-age texts undoubtedly evolved after the 1950s, the same aspects of the teenage experience—namely, frustration with society and a pervasive sense of alienation—recur in the genre regardless of time period.

As this brief history suggests, the modern coming-of-age story exists as an established genre with prominent examples in both literature and film. Yet, despite the proliferation of these narratives, scholars have neglected to explore other media in which the genre operates. As a result, scholarship has ignored a key vehicle for the coming-of-age story: albums. Popular culture already recognizes the record as a mode for musical artists to reflect upon the trials and tribulations of getting older. For example, Donna-Claire Chesman asserts that coming-of-age albums “are able to step out of time and have a permanent hold on us.”¹³ Rather than ignore the claims of music writers and critics, academics would do well to consider the record along with other media when discussing coming-of-age works.

Popular musicians have poignantly tackled the topic of growing up for decades. For example, Joni Mitchell’s song “The Circle Game” from her record *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970) follows a boy—inspired by fellow musician and friend Neil Young—as he progresses from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood (fig. 2). The song employs metaphor to capture the melancholy quality of getting older, with the cyclical passage of time compared to a carousel turning. The carousel motif features prominently in the chorus, so Mitchell returns to the image of the rotating mechanism again and again throughout the song:

And the seasons, they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return, we can only look

¹² Ibid., by citation of Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 237.

¹³ Donna-Claire Chesman, “The Art of the Coming-of-Age Album,” *DJ Booth*, July 24, 2018, <https://djbooth.net/features/2018-07-24-the-art-of-the-coming-of-age-album>.

Behind from where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game

Lyricaly, the song makes the comparison of the carousel and the passage of time quite clear. In the first two lines, Mitchell initially describes the recurring seasonal cycle and then the motion of horse statues moving up and down as they would on a rotating carousel. In the following line, she brings the descriptions together by commenting on the “carousel of time.” This part-by-part approach strengthens the metaphor by separately describing the cyclical nature of the seasons and evoking the image of a perpetually spinning carousel before putting these apparently unlike objects next to one another. However, the first two lines already draw similarities even if Mitchell does not make a direct comparison until the third line. To be specific, the parallel structure of the lines’ beginnings (“And the seasons...” followed by “And the painted ponies...”) puts the concepts into comparison before the lyrics make the connection explicit. Even Mitchell breathlessly flowing “round and round” into the next line links the images of the seasons and the rotating ponies. Due to the careful composition and how Mitchell sings the section, the chorus presents time as a carousel: perpetual, repetitive, and moving ever forward.



Fig. 2: Mitchell performing with Neil Young, her inspiration for “The Circle Game”

The greater structure of the song has the same effect as the isolated chorus of creating a temporal pattern. “The Circle Game” repeats in verse-chorus form. First, Mitchell sings a verse about the unnamed boy at a given point in time. Then, she moves to the chorus. Once she finishes the chorus, she proceeds to the next verse at a later point in time than in the previous verse. As a result, the main character’s aging from early childhood to 20 years old follows the song’s cyclical pattern. This parallel between the narrative and the structure reinforces the notion of the passage of time as a recurrent phenomenon, or as something that operates circularly.

The musical accompaniment also lends to the song’s cyclicity. Once Mitchell begins singing, the two guitars complementing the lyrics almost never deviate in their rhythmic and melodic pattern. In fact, the guitars only break form during the final chorus when Mitchell slows down and repeats, “And go round and round and round / In the circle game.” At this point, they slow to meet her speed before ending with a few back-and-forth strums. Otherwise, the accompaniment adheres to the same cyclical pattern as the verse-chorus lyrical structure, furthering strengthening the notion of endless, circular time. In fact, had Mitchell not chosen to end the song with a repeated phrase and a *ritardando*, the music could have reasonably continued *ad infinitum*.

In addition to emphasizing the cyclical nature of time, the song highlights the universal impact of the seasons’ relentless progression. As Mitchell sings in the third line of the chorus, “We’re captive on the carousel of time.” The subject of this observation is not the individual at the center of the song’s narrative; rather, Mitchell notes that *we* are on the carousel. Through her careful diction, she qualifies the passage of time as characteristic of the human experience. Additionally, the choice of “captive,” which the Oxford English

Dictionary (OED) defines as “kept in confinement or bondage,” suggests the riders of the metaphorical carousel lack agency.¹⁴ The constraints of time confine all people and prevent escape even if someone desired release from its cycle. In other words, human beings do not have the choice whether to get older even though some people might not wish to grow up.

The lyrics in the chorus touch on what makes aging such a painful process: no one can go backward. As Mitchell notes, “We can’t return, we can only look / Behind from where we came.” Time operates cyclically, but the years push forward. Youthful experiences become memories, or events we can only access if we choose to “look behind.” The lyrics dwell on the melancholy of leaving the past behind. For example, the plaintive “we can’t return” carries the unspoken pain of someone who might like to go back. However, just because human beings cannot revisit the past does not mean that events which have already occurred hold no weight in the present. Mitchell acknowledges that the past represents “from where we came.” Thus, the gesture of looking backward allows an individual to not only remember, but also to actively engage with the past. To reflect on what happened “then” informs one’s decisions “now,” so each time “round and round” the carousel necessarily influences an individual’s actions in the present day.

Furthermore, the carousel as a metaphorical object bases every moment in the past. The typical carousel captures the essence of childhood with its jolly music and colorfully painted animals. Therefore, to use the carousel to represent the progression of time has the competing effects of carrying the rider ever forward away from their starting point—that is, their youth—while also symbolically surrounding the rider with their childhood. However, this ostensible paradox makes sense since human beings’ pre-adult experiences provide the

¹⁴ “captive, adj. and n.,” *OED Online*, January 2019, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/27651>.

foundations for their entire lives. Metaphorically, no matter how many spins a person takes around the carousel, they are still riding that painted horse. More literally, no matter how many spins we take around the sun, the events of our youths continue to impact us.

Clearly, popular musicians have crafted projects that tackle coming-of-age themes, yet scholars have not given these works the same attention that they have shown to other media. Hesitancy to explore the album as a storytelling device, much less as a medium for conveying coming-of-age stories, comes at least in part from the academic denial of music as such a device. As David Nicholls points out, music does not figure among Roland Barthes' extensive list of narrative genres, which includes "myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, *drame* [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings...stained glass windows, movies, local news, [and] conversation."¹⁵ While music's notable absence on Barthes' list undermines the medium's storytelling ability, other scholars go further by claiming that music lacks narrative function on its own. Jean-Jacques Nattiez makes a particularly striking condemnation: "*In itself*...music is not a narrative and...any description of its formal structure in terms of narrativity is nothing but superfluous metaphor."¹⁶ This interpretation renders any analysis of purported musical narrativity a moot point, offering scholars little incentive to examine the storytelling capabilities of inherently musical works.

Admittedly, critics have a solid argument when they question the merits of music as a standalone narrative technique. Per Nicholas Reyland, "Any piece of music can inspire 'musical narrativization,' an interpretative act in which a listener invents an explanatory

¹⁵ David Nicholls, "Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts," *Music & Letters* 88, no. 2 (2007): 297. Hereafter cited as "Popular Music Texts." In conversation with Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (1975): 237.

¹⁶ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?" *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 115, no. 2 (1990): 257. Hereafter cited as "Narrativity in Music."

response to events in a composition.”¹⁷ Narrativization occurs automatically, painting scenes in the listener’s mind based on the emotional evocations of the music. In this way, “the narrative...is not *in* the music, but *in the plot imagined and constructed by the listeners*,” and rebuffing the critics’ assertion becomes a difficult task.¹⁸ As opposed to the other narrative genres on Barthes’ list, musical works thrust the onus of developing a concrete progression of events upon the listener. As a result, every individual that interacts with the piece has free reign to interpret and imagine the plot however they like, suggesting that music on its own lacks a definitive narrative.

Even acknowledging the validity of this argument, musical works can still function as narrative genres. While records inherently possess a musical component, this aspect only comprises one dimension of a multifaceted medium. In popular music, songs necessarily feature lyrics, and records include album art and other unique elements clearly tied to a narrative function.¹⁹ Packaged together, these components establish albums as a complex device with clear storytelling potential. Furthermore, simply because music does not serve an independent narrative function does not mean that it possesses no narrative function. More specifically, “music can *become* part of a narrative discourse...in those instances...where it interacts with one or more other media.”²⁰ That is to say, music interacts with words and images to build a more nuanced narrative than any of these elements could achieve alone, making musical accompaniment an indispensable storytelling feature of any album.

¹⁷ Nicholas Reyland, “‘Akcja’ and narrativity in the music of Witold Lutoslawski,” (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2005.)

¹⁸ Nattiez, “Narrativity in Music,” 249.

¹⁹ The variations are too many to enumerate. Some of my favorite examples include the track listing for Rosalía’s *El Mal Querer* (structured as *capítulos*, which translates to chapters or episodes) and visual albums such as Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* and Tierra Whack’s *Whack World*.

²⁰ Nicholls, “Popular Music Texts,” 300-301.

In fact, the album demonstrates tremendous potential as a narrative genre due to its composite character. While songs like “The Circle Game” inarguably tell compelling stories in a compact timeframe, well-crafted records construct broader narrative arcs as anthologies of songs.²¹ Per Nicholls, “The application of narrative theory to popular music truly comes into its own in relation to the analysis of larger units, whether these be extended tracks or, more particularly, albums containing a large number of individual songs that are in some way related to each other.”²² In defense of narrativity in popular music, any “larger unit”—a definition which includes longer songs—merits analysis since these units have space to develop a self-contained narrative. However, Nicholls considers the album to be the ideal medium in this regard because records link musical and lyrical themes across a greater work. Compounded with the visual aspect inherent to the cover art, albums afford musicians a format far superior to individual songs to craft and present complex narratives.

The narrative arcs of many albums cement the storytelling capabilities of the medium by aligning the record with established narrative genres. For example, Robert McKee discusses narrative structure in the screenplay in his book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. To be more specific, McKee explores the “controlling idea,” which he defines as the explanation of “how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning [of a text] to another at the end.”²³ The controlling idea gives direction to the story since each scene, sequence, or act must progress the plot

²¹ I make the qualification of “well-crafted” because not every album treats individual songs as parts of a whole. Similarly, not all collections of short stories or anthologies of poems build cohesive narratives. In my project, I focus on records with successful narrative functions, so “well-crafted” applies to every work that I examine.

²² Nicholls, “Popular Music Texts,” 308.

²³ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, (New York: ReganBooks, 1997), 115. Hereafter cited as *Story*.

from beginning to end according to this defined idea. Furthermore, McKee outlines how the narrative trajectory develops through the interaction of the controlling idea and the counter idea, or the negative reflection of the controlling idea. Over the course of the story, these ideas compete with one another and build in intensity until either the controlling idea overwhelms the counter idea or vice versa. In effect, this struggle gives the text narrative purpose as a series of collisions between “the positive and negative assertions of the same idea” that vie for narrative dominance.²⁴

Although McKee writes exclusively on the screenplay, his analysis also applies to the album due to the structural similarities between the two media.²⁵ Like screenplays, albums are continuous, time-constrained works. Time as a limiting factor distinguishes screenplays and records from works of literature or visual art that may have a timeline but need not tell a story within a set amount of time. The temporal element necessitates a method to structure time as the story plays out and to pace the story in an appropriate and compelling manner. Resultingly, the narrative arc that McKee outlines for the screenplay—that is, the sequenced competition between the controlling idea and the counter idea—offers a framework for analyzing the album. In addition, the structural similarity of the record and the screenplay reinforces the former’s claim to narrativity since the latter lends its storytelling function to film, which features on Barthes’ list. Thus, the point of intersection between the two media strongly affirms the record as a narrative genre.

²⁴ Ibid., 119.

²⁵ Additionally, McKee’s book on screenwriting bears an interesting relationship with popular music because his work recognizes the art of the screenplay while simultaneously operating as a guide on how to produce a profitable product. Popular music standards similarly require the album to straddle the realms of commerce and art, for successful records elicit both commercial and critical acclaim.

Furthermore, the album shows unique ability to organize coming-of-age narratives by virtue of the medium's autobiographical quality. Holden Caulfield captivated teenage readers because he recounted his story without censorship, and his agency in *The Catcher in the Rye* allowed him to stumble upon insights during his coming-of-age journey. To an even greater degree than Salinger displayed with the fictional protagonist of his novel, musicians can employ the album to structure autobiographical tales that describe as well as actualize their adolescent growth. The album as a tool for self-actualization derives from the concept of the reminiscence bump, a phenomenon that "enhances memory recall from approximately 10-30 years of age by people over the age of 30." Although researchers have not conclusively determined the cause of the reminiscence bump, the narrative/identity theoretical account claims "events occurring during adolescence and early adulthood are vital to the development of an individual's adult identity" and therefore "are integrated into an individual's lifelong narratives."²⁶ By this account, adolescence figure critically in identity formation, effectively establishing an individual's character for the remainder of their life.

To extend the narrative/identity account one step further, adolescents and young adults can take control of their narratives to actively shape their adult identity. Individuals provide coherence to their lives through narrative identity, or "the internalized and changing story of your life that you begin to work on in the emerging adult years." Narrative identity allows people to organize their experiences into meaningful narratives, but the process only begins in late adolescence. This delay occurs for two reasons. First, an individual must have sufficient time to accumulate experiences and sufficient intellectual fitness to contemplate

²⁶ Khadeeja Munawar, Sara K. Kuhn, and Shamsul Haque, "Understanding the Reminiscence Bump: A Systematic Review," *PLoS One* 13, no. 12 (2018): 1-2.

daunting psychological questions.²⁷ In addition, an individual must have developed causal coherence, or the ability to “link different life scenes into extended and realistic causal narratives,” and thematic coherence, or the ability “to derive a general theme or principle about the self based on a narrated sequence of events,” in early adolescence. Once an individual possesses these cognitive skills, they can start building their narrative identity by threading together “the reconstructed past, experienced present, and imagined future,” giving meaning and direction to their life in the process.²⁸

From the concept of narrative identity, the critical role that the coming-of-age album plays in identity formation comes into focus. Through the record, popular musicians can construct a cohesive account of their lives. For adolescent and young-adult musicians, this creative endeavor affords not only the opportunity to reflect upon their past, but also to develop a lens through which they can view their present and future. In this way, musicians can self-actualize by deliberately constructing their musical autobiography, so the coming-of-age album allows the young musician to realize their coming of age via the album.

With regard to self-actualization, the coming-of-age album falls squarely in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. Returning to the foundational example of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, the *Bildungsroman* encourages growth in the reader through the act of engaging with the text. As Jeffers notes, Goethe's novel exemplifies “how a novelist could allow his hero to cultivate himself with wide open eyes and ears, and thereby could prompt

²⁷ The questions at hand include the following: What do I want to do when I grow up? What do I truly believe in? Where is my life headed? Where has my life been? What is the relation between where I have been and where I am going? How am I going to get there? What is the meaning of my life? What gives my life purpose and coherence?

²⁸ Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 83-87.

us, his readers, to cultivate *ourselves*.”²⁹ Through the construction of a narrative arc based in personal growth, popular musicians induce a similar effect in the listener with the coming-of-age album. For younger listeners, this genre of record instructs them in organizing their life stories and using the resultant narratives to develop themselves. As for older listeners, they can refresh their worldview by revisiting the formative experience of growing up. In either case, a degree of self-cultivation occurs in listening to coming-of-age albums just as popular musicians cultivate themselves when they create coming-of-age albums. Clearly, these works operate in the same vein as the genre that Bakhtin called the novel of human emergence, and as such I christen the coming-of-age album with a second name: the sonic *Bildungsroman*.

In the following chapters, I will give model examples of the sonic *Bildungsroman* that demonstrate the capability of the genre for storytelling and self-actualization. To do so, I will explore two albums in detail—namely, Lorde’s *Pure Heroine* and Frank Ocean’s *Channel Orange*. Regarding the former, *Pure Heroine* portrays a cynical adolescent torn apart by overwhelming contradictions. Lorde must grapple with the yearning to grow up as quickly as possible with the longing to preserve her innocence, the desire to fit in with her peers and the disdain for the zeitgeist of the era, and the craving to cultivate meaningful relationships while operating in overwhelmingly superficial environments. The album follows Lorde’s efforts to move past these conflicts and to find genuine fulfillment. Additionally, Lorde’s identity merits consideration, for she is a teenage girl from New Zealand telling a coming-of-age story contextualized by American culture to an American audience. To what degree Lorde’s unique position influences the narrative in *Pure Heroine* figures significantly in my investigation of her work.

²⁹ Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, 9.

As for *Channel Orange*, the record also deviates from the traditional coming-of-age story due to Frank Ocean's identity as a queer person. In this regard, the work focuses disproportionately on romantic relationships and sexual attraction. While Ocean still deals with teenage feelings of angst and isolation, his sexual self-discovery and search for his place in the world color these sentiments. At times, his sexual identity brings him closer to self-acceptance; at other points, it pushes him further into deep loneliness. In this way, *Channel Orange* firmly establishes itself as a queer coming-of-age album in both content and theme.

After establishing the standard for the sonic *Bildungsroman* through these two exemplary cases, I will expand the narrative analysis to other coming-of-age albums. The records in question will come from periods before and after the two-year timeframe when Lorde and Ocean released their respective albums. In this pursuit, I will revisit Mitchell's *Ladies of the Canyon* and analyze Ryan Beatty's *Boy in Jeans* (2018). Although I will only explore these works in broad strokes, the snapshots will demonstrate the narrative richness of the coming-of-age album across time and musical genre.

In summary, I seek to create a conversation around coming-of-age albums where one has never before existed. Working on this project, I have struggled to find research on the album as a narrative device, much less on coming-of-age albums. Due to this lack of scholarship, I have pulled from sources on literary studies, musicology, and psychology to contextualize the coming-of-age story and apply this genre to the record format. I have also engaged with sources beyond academic texts including journalistic pieces, artist interviews, and podcasts to supplement my argument. Currently, these sources constitute some of the few spaces where serious conversations about popular music occur, so I would do my project a tremendous disservice if I ignored them. By pulling both from existing scholarship and

non-academic sources where these conversations are actually happening, I hope to start an interdisciplinary dialogue on the album as a narrative genre that will speak to academic and journalistic communities alike.

Pure Heroine by Lorde: Chasing the Old and Confronting the New

*And I've never felt more alone
It feels so scary, getting old*

-Lorde, "Ribs"

Lorde's debut album, *Pure Heroine* (2013), catapulted her to international renown at the tender age of 16 (fig. 1). The 10-track record achieved acclaim across all metrics. Commercially, the album sold over one million copies within five months. In addition to praise from critics, *Pure Heroine* garnered positive attention from music legends, both new and old: "David Bowie clutched her [Lorde's] hand and told her that listening to her music 'felt like listening to tomorrow. Lady Gaga called it [*Pure Heroine*] one of 'the albums of 2013.'"³⁰ Ironically, in the album that brought Lorde such fame, the young singer-songwriter scathingly critiques American celebrity. This contradiction—becoming famous from a work that looks at fame skeptically—constitutes the thematic core of *Pure Heroine*, but the paradox also extends to Lorde's desire to cling to her youth while inexorably getting older. In this chapter, I will investigate the relationship between these intertwined themes in *Pure Heroine*. As part of my analysis, I will take into account Lorde's identity as a girl from New Zealand and determine how this deviation from the "typical" coming-of-age story affects how she constructs her narrative. Then, after exploring these topics in depth, I will trace Lorde's developmental trajectory throughout the record in order to assert that she indeed actualizes the coming-of-age experience that she details.

³⁰ Alex Morris, "Lorde's Growing Pains: How Pop's Favorite Outsider Wrote Her Next Album," *Rolling Stone*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lordes-growing-pains-how-pops-favorite-outsider-wrote-her-next-chapter-127944/>. Hereafter cited as "Lorde's Growing Pains."



Fig. 1: Ella Yelich-O'Connor, popularly known as Lorde

As a coming-of-age album, *Pure Heroine* deals with adolescence as the confluence of childhood and adulthood. In the song “Ribs,” Lorde vulnerably tackles this subject on a record otherwise punctuated by her cool aloofness. The bridge and outro (or conclusion) of the record’s fourth track prove particularly powerful in this regard.³¹ Lamenting growing older, Lorde expresses a sense of incompleteness due to the loss of her childhood condition:

I want 'em back (I want 'em back)
The minds we had (the minds we had)
How all the thoughts (how all the thoughts)
Moved 'round our heads (moved 'round our heads)
I want 'em back (I want 'em back)
The minds we had (the minds we had)
It's not enough to feel the lack
I want 'em back, I want 'em back, I want 'em-

You're the only friend I need (you're the only friend I need)

³¹ In popular music of the 1940s and 1950s, the term “bridge” referred to the contrasting “B” material of the 32-bar AABA form. Beginning in the 1960s, the contrasting verse-chorus form emerged, and the bridge later evolved to refer to the middle section of compound AABA forms that combined the AABA and verse-chorus formal types. Since these complicated forms continue to dominate the charts today, the later definition of the bridge still applies to modern pop/rock music. However, the function of the section in context is more important than precise terminology. As de Clercq notes, “Instead of asking, ‘Does this song have a bridge?,’ we may be better served by asking, ‘How is the bridge role manifested in this song?’”

Sharing beds like little kids (sharing beds like little kids)
And laughing 'til our ribs get tough (laughing 'til our ribs get tough)
But that will never be enough (but that will never be enough)
You're the only friend I need (you're the only friend I need)
Sharing beds like little kids (sharing beds like little kids)
And laughing 'til our ribs get tough (laughing 'til our ribs get tough)
But that will never be enough (but that will never be enough)

By juxtaposing past and present in the bridge, Lorde highlights what she lacks in the present. Formerly, Lorde's mind functioned differently. She establishes this fact through verb tense, describing "the minds we had" and how the thoughts "moved 'round our heads." Lorde no longer has the mind she used to have, nor do her thoughts move as they once moved. In the process of growing up, Lorde has unconsciously lost an aspect of herself, something she now seeks to reclaim.

Structurally, the bridge emphasizes Lorde's desire to return to her previous state through repetition. Lorde repeats herself in each of the first six lines, effectively making each statement twice. This format draws attention to the lyrical content—in this case, Lorde's demand for the mind and thoughts she once possessed. Additionally, the fifth and sixth lines repeat the first and second lines verbatim, specifically naming what Lorde lacks ("the minds we had") and the result she seeks ("I want 'em back"). By restating these lines, she gives greater weight to lyrics, presenting her words as an urgent demand to reclaim her childhood condition rather than a mere yearning for the past.

Despite the lyrical similarity, the repeated lines differ in their second utterance due to the more distant layered vocals. Initially, two voices, both belonging to Lorde, harmonize within the parameters of the song's E major key signature. The melody voice ascends the scale on the notes E, F#, and G# before returning to E. The harmony voice follows the same pattern but along the notes G#, A, and B. Together, the two voices produce an imperfect

consonance through alternating major and minor thirds, so the aural result suggests stability. Accompanying the incompleteness that Lorde expresses lyrically, this musical accord might read as out of place. However, the instability comes across in Lorde's splintering vocals as she breaks down from one voice to two voices and then to many voices with "it's not enough to feel the lack." This vocal fragmentation addresses the ostensible paradox between the lyrics and the production, for these separate voices cry out in harmony for the same thing: a reclamation of Lorde's fleeting youth.

The growing number of voices also parallels the mounting emotional intensity of Lorde's message, especially when she makes an unhinged return to the repetitive structure of the bridge in the section's final line. Instead of following the established pattern of making each statement twice, she starts to say "I want 'em back" a third time. However, she only manages to shout "I want 'em," an incomplete phrase that mirrors her internal fragmentation. While "I want 'em back" sounds like a confident demand at the beginning of the section, the bridge's structural destabilization following from Lorde's breakdown in composure transforms her words into a desperate plea.

The outro offers the idea of completeness in the companionship Lorde describes. At the section's beginning, she tells an unnamed individual, "You're the only friend I need." If Lorde found all the support she requires in a single individual, then she would not need to pursue less meaningful relationships to find fulfillment. However, she ties this completeness to her childhood with the line "sharing beds like little kids." By making this statement, Lorde introduces the possibility that her friend does not entirely address the lack she feels. Rather, the childlike act of laughing in her bed with someone—as opposed to the adult act of using the bed for sexual intercourse—helps her feel as if she has reclaimed an aspect of childhood.

Although Lorde can emulate how children behave, she recognizes that replication does not equate to reclamation with her admission that such behavior “will never be enough.” Her choice of “will never” instead of “is” makes the statement far more definitive by extending her incompleteness indefinitely into the future. As well as indicating her despondency, the verb tense makes logical sense. After all, moving forward in time will only carry Lorde further from her childhood state.

While Lorde does not explicitly identify her companion, the outro’s production suggests that she directs the message toward herself. The lyrics lead the listener to believe that Lorde speaks to another person with whom she can platonically share a bed and laugh until their ribs ache. Indeed, Lorde refers to someone earlier in the song who spilled their drink on her, so evidence exists to support this interpretation. However, the vocals layered in octaves, or intervals containing eight notes, offer a different reading. Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding, the hosts of the podcast *Switched on Pop*, discuss how the two voices singing an octave apart produce the effect of multiple iterations of Lorde chanting the same words from different points in time: the low voice represents the “more mature and knowing” Lorde of the present day while the high voice represents the “innocent” Lorde of the past.³² Sloan and Harding point to this production choice in the first verse, but the vocal effect contextualizes key moments throughout “Ribs”. In the outro, these voices do not just sing with one another but to one another, for the octaves occur throughout the entire section starting with the line “you’re the only friend I need.” As a result, the production portrays Lorde as clinging to her

³² Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding, April 20, 2018, “Listening Differently to Lorde | with MARIAN HILL,” podcast audio, *Switched on Pop*, Vox Media. The careful analysis of “Ribs” from *Switched on Pop* helped me to drive serious insights in my own interpretation of the song, so I take this footnote to express my sincerest gratitude to Sloan and Harding as well as Samantha Gongol and Jeremy Lloyd, featured guests on the episode and members of the songwriting duo Marian Hill.

younger self across the boundaries of time, seeking solace in her carefree youth as a “friend” when confronted with the anxieties of getting older.

Unfortunately for Lorde, she finds no escape in the past. Similar to the bridge, each line in the outro repeats. Here, the high voice provides the ethereal echoes. Quieter and less defined than the first utterance of each line, the words sound far away from the listener and parallel the insurmountable gap between Lorde and her childhood. The song ends with the repeated utterances of “that will never be enough” as the lyrics grow increasingly distant. Finally, the words trail off completely as if Lorde slowly loses—or perhaps releases—her grip on her past self. As the track fades out, the unresolved ending leaves the listener without closure in a parallel to Lorde’s inability to find the completeness she craves.

In “Ribs,” Lorde appears to neatly fit into the conventional coming-of-age experience, battling insecurity and alienation as she navigates adolescence. However, a key aspect of Lorde’s identity differentiates her from other coming-of-age protagonists in the present day. Whereas some of the most iconic coming-of-age stories today take place in the United States and focus on American characters, Lorde hails from New Zealand. Tavi Gevinson, editor-in-chief of *Rookie* magazine, notes this important distinction, commenting on the “fact that [Lorde is] from New Zealand and not just an outsider to American pop but also to how important and ubiquitous celebrity is.”³³ In this regard, Lorde can take a unique stance in critiquing modern American youth for the celebrity worship that characterizes the adolescent experience in the United States.³⁴

³³ Morris, “Lorde’s Growing Pains.”

³⁴ Lorde does so quite effectively. As Morris remarked, “Lorde was hailed far and wide as pop’s antidote to its own artifice” following the release of *Pure Heroine*.

Within the narrative of *Pure Heroine*, Lorde struggles with the outsider status her nationality confers upon her. On the album's sixth track, "Team", she recognizes New Zealand's obscurity in the global imagination: "We live in cities you'll never see onscreen / Not very pretty, but we sure know how to run things." Lorde distinguishes "we" from "you," but she does not explicitly identify the object of either pronoun. Regarding "we," Lorde references potential members of the group earlier in the song: "ladies...[with] a hundred jewels between teeth" and "boys...[with] skin in craters like the moon." In other words, her peers consist of pubescent girls and boys with orthodontics that shine in their mouths like jewels and skin cratered by acne. This harsh description demonstrates Lorde's fixation on unattractive appearances—an obsession she reinforces when she remarks upon the "not very pretty" cities of New Zealand—and reveals, perhaps, her hidden self-loathing. That is to say, Lorde's projecting ugliness on both her companions and her home country evidences that she may feel shame as a result of her background.

As for "you," the absence of a defined second-person object in the text suggests that Lorde addresses the listener directly. The line "we live in cities you'll never see onscreen" supports this reading as Lorde acknowledges the foreignness of her hometown to her global audience. While Lorde and her peers may indeed "know how to run things" in their home environment, the international community lacks reference points to relate to New Zealand teenagers' experiences—a problem these adolescents would not face if they lived in a large American city that often appears in feature-length films.³⁵ Thus, Lorde recognizes the

³⁵ In an interview with *Billboard*, Lorde cites "Team" when discussing the role that media exposure plays in constructing the image of a physical place and the people who live there: "'We live in cities you'll never see onscreen,' which is like, no one comes to New Zealand, no one knows anything about New Zealand, and here I am, trying to grow up and become a person. I've been countering that with going to New York and seeing this place that's in every movie and every TV show."

relative inaccessibility of her narrative as a coming-of-age protagonist who does not hail from the United States.

This outsider perspective also manifests in Lorde's preoccupation with teeth as a metaphor. Throughout *Pure Heroine*, the symbol adopts multiple meanings. For example, on "Team," the line "a hundred jewels between teeth" references dental braces and alludes to teeth as a fixture of the coming-of-age experience. However, several songs on the record use teeth to represent affluence. As Lorde muses on "400 Lux," second on the track listing, she dreams of "clean teeth" while living in the suburbs of New Zealand before her rise to fame.³⁶ In a single line, Lorde simultaneously makes two statements. Literally, she desires the beaming smile that celebrities flash in photos. Metaphorically, she wants what that smile represents: fame, wealth, and an escape from routine boredom. With the metaphor, she intertwines the ideas of beautiful teeth and socioeconomic status, suggesting that the former implies the latter and that the latter begets the former.

In contrast with the luxurious lives that celebrities lead, Lorde depicts herself as coming from a humble background (fig. 1). In the lyrics of "Buzzcut Season," the fifth track on *Pure Heroine*, she briefly describes taking public transportation: "We ride the bus with our knees pulled in / People should see how we're living." By mentioning how she contorts her body, Lorde paints a picture of riding on a crowded bus. Following this description with the somber "people should see how we're living," she represents this commute as a typical moment in her everyday life, not just a one-time occurrence. In doing so, she differentiates herself from those individuals with "clean teeth" that she references on "400 Lux."³⁷

³⁶ Lux is the SI derived unit of illuminance, or the intensity of light falling on a surface. On a clear day, the light of a sunrise or sunset measures about 400 lux.

³⁷ Lorde's presenting herself as coming from a less-privileged background functions more as a narrative tool than a matter of fact. In her youth, she attended Takapuna Grammar School in the well-

Lorde returns to the subject of teeth on *Pure Heroine* for the appropriately titled ninth track, “White Teeth Teens.” In this song, she has left her modest beginnings to join the ranks of the rich and famous: “We got the glow in our mouths / White teeth teens are out / White teeth teens are up for it.” With her glowing white smile, Lorde now hangs out with the cool crowd. In fact, Lorde runs the shots for this crew, deciding where they spend their nights and referring to herself as “the empress.” From the outside, she has the popularity and influence she envisioned on “400 Lux.” However, she confides a secret to the listener: she does not feel that she belongs among the elite clique of white teeth teens. She speaks of the inherent differences between her and the group; a certain something about her peers makes them a foreign species to her. At the song’s end, when she repeats the line “white teeth teens are out,” she emphatically rejects the group despite her previous desire to figure among its ranks. Her gaining access to the cool crowd did not provide her the fulfillment she expected, so she asserts her place outside the mainstream.

Lorde’s disaffiliation from the “white teeth teens” represents a dismissal of a larger phenomenon, namely flamboyant displays of wealth in Western—and especially American—media. Popular music in particular captured and contributed to the maximalist zeitgeist of the early 2010s. Superstar rappers Jay-Z and Kanye West crafted the period’s quintessential album with their cooperative *Watch the Throne*, a record dripping with excess in every aspect (fig. 2). The project settled for nothing less than unparalleled extravagance as exemplified by the track “N*ggas in Paris.” Lyrically, the rappers boast of the over-the-top lifestyles that tremendous wealth has afforded them: “Let’s get faded / Le Meurice for like six days / Gold

to-do North Shore area of Auckland. While her attendance does not necessarily mean that she comes from significant wealth, this biographical feature does call into question how different in background she is from the “clean teeth” crowd.

bottles, scold models / Spillin' Ace on my sick J's." Within about five seconds, Jay-Z mentions staying at the five-star Parisian hotel Le Meurice for nearly a week, drinking the gold-bottled Armand de Brignac (nicknamed "Ace of Spades") champagne, and wearing the iconic Air Jordan basketball shoes. Beyond the surface-level swagger of the lyrics, Jay-Z loads his words with deeper meaning that further emphasizes his grandiose existence: the rap duo recorded "N*ggas in Paris" at Le Meurice according to the liner notes of *Watch the Throne*, and Jay-Z earned "millions of dollars per year for his association with Armand de Brignac."³⁸ Through both the surface-level and hidden layers of meaning in the lyrics, the track builds the image of Jay-Z as a man of limitless means while glamorizing the opulent life that he leads.



Fig. 2: Jay-Z (left, with a bottle of Armand de Brignac) and West

Sonically, the production aligns with the lyrics to create a full maximalist effect.

Throughout the track, Jay-Z and West alternate rapping about the world they occupy, one

³⁸ Zack O'Malley Greenburg, *Empire State of Mind: How Jay-Z Went from Street Corner to Corner Office* (New York: Portfolio / Penguin, 2011), 132-133. In an even greater flex of his fortune, Jay-Z acquired the champagne brand in 2014.

where superfluous wealth has distorted the value of money and material goods.³⁹ During their verses, percussive beats and synthesizer notes keep the direction driving forward without distracting from the rappers' braggadocio. In the outro, when the lyrical boasting begins to subside, the production takes over. This dance between words and sounds on "N*ggas in Paris" offers no opportunity for aural rest. Aggressive static, a distorted bassline, a haunting choir, and pounding piano chords form an overwhelming wall of sound. Excess inundates the listener and impresses upon them the thesis of the track: the high-profile status belonging to these celebrity rappers derives from their unrestrained materialism. Furthermore, *Watch the Throne* presents a format to follow these behaviors to the American teenagers who comprise the album's audience.

As an artist, Lorde pushes against this exact celebrity worship, and she seeks to define her coming-of-age experience outside of this phenomenon. No track on *Pure Heroine* offers a more scathing indictment of luxe and drama than "Royals," her smash-hit single and the third song on the album. On this song, she takes aim at the materialism of "N*ggas in Paris" when she chants, "But every song's like gold teeth, Grey Goose, trippin' in the bathroom / Bloodstains, ball gowns, trashin' the hotel room / We don't care." In the pre-chorus, Lorde enumerates several symbols of luxury prominent in 2010s popular music: expensive alcohol, elegant clothing, and parties at hotels, to name a few. She even revisits the economics of teeth, describing a gold-plated veneer that connects wealth and physical form via the mouth. After meticulously compiling this list, she dismisses the elements altogether with the curt "we don't care." Unlike other teenagers tempted by such objects, Lorde and her clique—presumably the same group of youngsters from "Team"—demonstrate no interest in these

³⁹ Jay-Z does not even have a reference point for how expensive \$50,000 is: "What's 50 grand to a motherfucker like me? / Can you please remind me?"

trappings. Through this rejection, Lorde elects to exclude herself from the scramble for socioeconomic status that Jay-Z and West popularize in their work.

The production on “Royals” similarly rejects the maximalist spirit of the times through its minimalist character.⁴⁰ Regarding the accompaniment, percussive elements figure much more heavily than harmonic elements. Crisp snaps, drumbeats, and a pounding bass offer a steady rhythm for the lyrics. Lorde’s multilayered vocals and the call-and-response of the chorus constitute what little harmonies exist on the song. Together, the reduced sonic landscape and Lorde’s self-harmonization create an a cappella effect that further highlights the song’s minimalism. Embellishments occur infrequently on “Royals,” and the flourishes in production that do exist possess a distinctly ironic quality. For example, whenever Lorde sings “royals” during the chorus, a gong bangs in the background. Such an over-the-top addition in an otherwise simple song grabs the listener’s attention as an out-of-place feature, but the pairing of the sound effect with “royals” (especially when prefaced with “and we’ll never be...”) indicates Lorde’s flippant disregard for a life of luxury. Thus, the lyrics and production work together to present Lorde as adamant in defining herself apart from intoxicating wealth and maximalism in popular culture.

Even in the album-cover art, *Pure Heroine* starkly contrasts with the aesthetics of other early 2010s records (fig. 3). The minimalist cover features only three words: on top, *Lorde*, and on bottom, *Pure Heroine*. The text jumps out due to the juxtaposition of the large, silver font against the black background, ensuring that her name and her work draw full attention. On the other hand, Jay-Z and Kanye West place their grandiose lifestyle front and center with the cover of *Watch the Throne* (fig. 4). On the outside, the record features neither

⁴⁰ This feature of the song did not escape critics. NPR’s Laura Snapes described the “defiantly simple beat” as “a huge flex amid 2012’s maximalist pop scaffolding.”

rapper's name nor the name of the work. (Apparently, the duo believes that consumers will not need this information to identify *Watch the Throne*.) Rather, Givenchy creative director Riccardo Tisci designed a solid gold exterior coated in intricate embellishments.⁴¹ Both via the actual design and the designer's identity, the album-cover art captures the maximalist attitude characteristic of the entire project. Side by side, these records differ greatly in their respective appearances and messages. While *Watch the Throne* celebrates celebrity through maximalism, *Pure Heroine* challenges this mainstream ideology by virtue of minimalism.



Fig. 3: *Pure Heroine* by Lorde, and **Fig. 4:** *Watch the Throne* by Jay-Z and Kanye West

When comparing *Watch the Throne* and *Pure Heroine*, it is essential to take into account how race plays into the interaction between the works. Jay-Z and West weave their identities as black men into the fabric of their album. For example, “Made in America” draws parallels between prominent civil rights leaders and religious figures: “Sweet king Martin, sweet queen Coretta / Sweet brother Malcolm, sweet queen Betty / Sweet Mother Mary, sweet father Joseph / Sweet Jesus, we made it in America.” Returning to “N*ggas in Paris,”

⁴¹ Alvin Blanco, “Jay-Z, Kanye Get to Work in *Watch the Throne* Studio Pics,” *MTV News*, July 14, 2011, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1667314/jay-z-kanye-west-watch-the-throne/>.

the title alone brings race to the forefront. Furthermore, the use of the reclaimed pejorative emphasizes that the white elite still view Jay-Z and West as outcasts despite the pair's newfound wealth. This reading of *Watch the Throne* complicates Lorde's efforts to position herself as an outsider. After all, she is a young white woman trying to distinguish herself from material success best embodied by two black men. However, this interpretation also introduces the reading that Lorde seeks to differentiate herself from white American youths who voraciously consume black media. Bill Yousman recognizes that rap music appeals to white suburban teenagers, and he traces white America's obsession with (and fear of) blackness to the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century. In the modern day, white consumption and emulation of hip hop culture proves problematic in a similar regard by allowing "Whites to contain their fears and animosities toward Blacks through rituals not of ridicule...but of adoration."⁴² Thus, when Lorde rejects celebrity worship and materialism in her album, she also critiques the white American adolescent's coming-of-age experience.

For all this rebellious bravado, Lorde still fixates on socioeconomic status. She makes this admission in "Royals," stating in the first verse, "And I'm not proud of my address / In a torn-up town, no post code envy." Lorde carries a sense of shame for not coming from a more prestigious background. She hails from New Zealand, not a lavish American city, and she recognizes that most people do not envy her upbringing. Furthermore, her fascination with the lives of the rich and famous suggests that she envies these individuals. Despite her performative indifference toward ostentatious opulence, Lorde's nonchalant façade cracks during the pre-chorus of "Royals." Specifically, her alliteration on strong consonants ("gold," "Grey Goose," and "gowns"; "teeth," "trippin'," and "trashin';" "bathroom," "bloodstains,"

⁴² Bill Yousman, "Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy," *Communication Theory* 13, no. 4 (2003): 367-369.

and “ball gowns” once again) phonetically betrays a restrained aggression toward the lifestyle represented in the lyrics. Lorde’s emotional response could stem from a disdain for materialism in excess. Alternatively, she may covet these status symbols that she cannot afford. In either case, she grapples with an attraction to the in-crowd despite her concerted effort to position herself as an outsider.

The conflict in “Royals” distills the struggle pervasive throughout the album—that is, Lorde’s battle to remain uniquely herself while indulging her craving for fame. The differing interpretations of the album’s title, *Pure Heroine*, reflect this turmoil. In the literal sense, Lorde embodies the titular “pure heroine.” Per the OED, “heroine” refers to “the central female character in a story, play, film.”⁴³ As for “pure,” the OED defines the word as “free from corruption or defilement” both morally and sexually.⁴⁴ When combined, the two words form a phrase that describes Lorde: a young woman at the center of album’s narrative who has yet to lose her innocence. Returning to the album art, Lorde proudly assumes the role of the “pure heroine” by placing her name alone above the title. In this way, she stamps the work with her identity and declares from what perspective she will tell her story.

The title also carries a sinister double entendre as “heroine” and “heroin” are homophones. Therefore, when spoken aloud, *Pure Heroine* sounds like “pure heroin,” and the colloquial use of “pure” as “unadulterated or uncut heroin” transforms coincidence in pronunciation into deliberate second meaning.⁴⁵ By slyly referencing heroin, Lorde evokes the idea of narcotics and all-consuming addiction, a craving so intense as to overpower the

⁴³ “heroine, n.,” *OED Online*, February 2019, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/86311>.

⁴⁴ “pure, adj., adv., and n.,” *OED Online*, February 2019, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/154843>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

human faculty of reason. In Lorde's case, she develops a dependence not to opioids, but to the allure of celebrity. Contrasting with the outsider narrative that she crafts for herself, her fascination with fame pushes her into the very world she claims to oppose—and this world threatens to corrupt her innocence.

Rather than privilege one reading of *Pure Heroine* over the other, the text provides ample room for both to exist. Considering the literal interpretation, Lorde introduces a gendered dynamic on the first track. In “Tennis Court,” she describes a tableau that borrows from high school tropes: “Baby, be the class clown, I’ll be the beauty queen in tears / It’s a new art form showing people how little we care.” In this line, Lorde paints herself as the beauty queen. Even beyond the name, this role genders her due to the feminine qualities associated with pageantry such as glamour, elegance, and coquettishness. As for the class clown, Lorde never states this individual’s gender outright, but male characters have typically assumed the role.⁴⁶ Thus, Lorde creates a scene based in adolescent archetypes where she plays the main female part (for beauty queens typically number among the most popular girls in the class) alongside a male counterpart. While this derivative tableau alone does not constitute “a new art form,” the concerted effort to show “people how little we care” does. Rather than assert her status, Lorde is content to star as the protagonist of her own story, even on a scale as small as high school. By assuming the beauty queen trope and declaring her immunity to prestige’s allure, she effectively characterizes herself as the record’s unbothered heroine.

⁴⁶ Think Xander Harris from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the Weasley twins from the *Harry Potter* series, and Martin Addison from *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*.

Regarding the “pure” aspect of the title, Lorde demonstrates her innocence when navigating romantic relationships. The most striking instance plays out on “400 Lux” when she speaks directly to the object of her affections:

(And I like you) I love these roads where the houses don't change
(And I like you) Where we can talk like there's something to say
(And I like you) I'm glad that we stopped kissing the tar on the highway
(And I like you) We move in the tree streets
I'd like it if you stayed

In the chorus, Lorde never admits to this individual that she has feelings for them. While Lorde muses about the physical landscape (“roads where the houses don't change,” “tar on the highway,” “tree streets”) and how the pair occupies their time in these settings, a chorus of layered vocals in her own voice professes the simple truth: “I like you.” These overlapping parts capture Lorde's outer and inner monologues, demonstrating the discrepancy between what she actually says and what she wants to say. Even at the end of the chorus when Lorde declares “I'd like it if you stayed,” she doesn't divulge the depth of her emotions to the other person. Her inability to articulate her romantic feelings betrays Lorde's naivety in the realm of love. Since she has never before confronted a situation like the one in “400 Lux,” she lacks the reference points to properly navigate her emotions. By virtue of Lorde's bashful approach to love, the lyrics remind the listener of her limited worldly experience and, by extension, her youthful innocence.

Regarding the interpretation of *Pure Heroine* as a metaphor for fame's allure, the album supports the reading that Lorde indeed craves the spotlight. Aside from the envy that bubbles to the surface on “Royals,” Lorde reveals on “Glory and Gore”, the record's seventh song, that the celebrity lifestyle privately thrills her: “Wide awake in bed, words in my brain, ‘Secretly you love this / Do you even wanna go free?’ / Let me in the ring, I'll show you

what that big word means.” Presumably, “this” refers to the intertwined concepts of glory and gore, a pair Lorde connects first in the track’s title and again in the chorus when she proclaims, “Glory and gore go hand in hand.” By linking the concepts of glory and gore, Lorde acknowledges the darker side of fame, yet she cannot resist the lifestyle. Dependent on this fast-paced existence, she gives herself over to “addiction” when she demands to return to “the ring,” or the public stage, in order to perform for society’s attention—the same society she critiques elsewhere on the album. Consumed by the pursuit of fame, Lorde begins to compromise her personal values and even her freedom in order to feed her craving.

The tension on *Pure Heroine* between yearning for material success and wanting to remain outside the world of fame represents an extreme version of the general coming-of-age journey, more specifically the desire to cling to the past while confronting the future. Lorde makes this analogy quite clear in “Still Sane,” the eighth track on the album. She begins the song by describing her conflicted emotions toward aging: “Today is my birthday, and I’m riding high / Hair is dripping, hiding that I’m terrified.” Lorde describes feeling exuberant—she declares that she is “riding high”—and secretly “terrified” at the same time. She ties this inner turmoil to her birthday in the first line, suggesting that getting older represents a source of excitement and anxiety to her.

Lorde feels ambivalent about growing up, and she expresses the same uncertainty regarding her impending celebrity status. On the one hand, she affirms her morals despite entering a world that threatens to compromise her character: “I still like hotels, but I think that’ll change / Still like hotels, and my newfound fame / Hey, promise I can stay good.” Here, Lorde acknowledges that she enjoys the glamor of her new life, but she also believes that her attraction to luxe will wane over time. Regardless of this “newfound fame” or how

she feels about it, Lorde assures the listener that she will preserve her values and “stay good.” However, she simultaneously expresses concern that she has already fallen from grace, for she poses the question, “Only bad people live to see their likeness set in stone / What does that make me?” Lorde constructs a simple logical framework: an individual must be a bad person if they have achieved fame, or “seen their likeness set in stone.” Having cultivated worldwide renown, Lorde turns a critical eye on herself and wonders if she has compromised her morals along the way. Furthermore, she intertwines the pursuit of fame and growing up when she claims that only immoral folks “live to see,” or get old enough to witness, their image immortalized. Through this comparison, Lorde not only voices her reservations on the allure of fame, but also bemoans how the aging process strips people of their innocence.

While “Still Sane” distills the thesis of *Pure Heroine*, all the songs together paint a more complete picture of Lorde’s coming-of-age struggle and show her growth from the album’s beginning to its end. From the notion of the controlling idea, McKee offers a system to track Lorde’s progression with his models of the idealistic controlling idea, the pessimistic controlling idea, and the ironic controlling idea. Each of these models follows a trend. For example, a screenplay with an idealistic controlling idea swings back and forth between positive and negative scenes before settling on a positive note in the last act climax, thus creating “up-ending stories” that express the “optimism, hopes, and dreams of mankind.”⁴⁷

When applied to *Pure Heroine*, McKee’s framework allows the listener to map the trajectory of Lorde’s conflict between embracing or rejecting fame—and how she navigates adolescence by extension. For example, her relationship with teeth as a socioeconomic symbol changes drastically from the album’s earlier songs to “White Teeth Teens” near the

⁴⁷ McKee, *Story*, 123.

end. Due to their respective positions as the second and third tracks, “400 Lux” and “Royals” present conflicting attitudes toward the celebrity lifestyle behind the dental metaphor. In the former, she professes “dreams of clean teeth,” but she spurns popular culture’s fixation on gold teeth in the latter. In addition to depicting Lorde as volatile and immature, this rapid-fire contradiction hints at her jealousy, for she muses about the luxurious lifestyle of the rich and famous before affecting aloofness in the next song. However, Lorde displays tremendous growth in “White Teeth Teens.” When she reveals her secret to the listener—“I’ll let you in on something big / I am not a white teeth teen”—she speaks sincerely rather than from behind a façade. She also displays enough maturity and self-confidence to know that she does not belong among the group and to react calmly rather than with emotional indecision. In this way, Lorde proves that she has moved past both her mercurial outlook on fame and the fear of not belonging that derives from teenage insecurity.

Looking at the first and last songs of *Pure Heroine*, “Tennis Court” and “World Alone,” Lorde’s coming-of-age journey as a fully realized experience comes into focus.⁴⁸ “Tennis Court” starts with the line “don’t you think that it’s boring how people talk,” and “World Alone” ends with Lorde stating “let them talk.” There is a clear link between these two songs. In the first track, Lorde preoccupies herself with her peers’ petty gossip despite her air of nonchalance. In the final song, she curtly expresses her indifference toward others’ conversation as the noise of people chattering plays in the background. Over the course of the album, something has clearly shifted. Lorde has developed from the adolescent condition of

⁴⁸ These two songs constitute the first and the last songs on the standard version of the album. The extended version includes five more songs from Lorde’s extended play *The Love Club EP*, which she released on the online music sharing service SoundCloud in 2012 and which Universal Music Group and Virgin Records released commercially in 2013. Although the extended play thematically aligns with and marks the precursor to *Pure Heroine*, I have chosen not to consider the five songs in my analysis of the ordered track listing due to their later addition.

concerning oneself with the opinions of one's peers. In doing so, she discovers an inner peace that frees her from what other people think. Thematically, the loop closes, and Lorde finds herself more secure and less anxious at the end of *Pure Heroine* than at the album's beginning. In short, she has gracefully matured.

To the casual listener, Lorde appears to embody the ready-made heroine from a different genre of story. Seemingly above teenage preoccupations, she casually dismisses the celebrity that tantalizes her generation on many a song in *Pure Heroine*. Even recognizing the album as a coming-of-age work, one may try to categorize Lorde as another Holden Caulfield derivative who attacks "phonies" out of their own insecurity. However, the talented artist behind this modern masterpiece tells a story all her own. While Lorde is inarguably precocious and grapples with the characteristic anxieties of adolescence, she undergoes a transformation as a result of the conflict she endures and the questions she asks. Now a self-assured young woman rather than a conflicted girl at the crossroads of fame, she has found her place in and is ready to tackle the world. As she makes clear in "Still Sane," "I'm little, but I'm coming for the crown."

Channel Orange by Frank Ocean: Navigating Summer and Sexuality

*Yes, of course, I remember, how could I forget how you feel?
You know you were my first time, a new feel*

-Frank Ocean, "Thinkin Bout You"

In his debut album, *Channel Orange* (2012), Frank Ocean explores his identity as a queer man (fig. 1).⁴⁹ What makes the record even more impactful is that, prior to the week leading up to its release, Ocean had never publicly addressed his sexuality. Given the homophobia historically prevalent in hip hop culture, this reticence makes complete sense.⁵⁰ Rappers have expressed intolerance toward the LGBTQ+ community as far back as the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight," the first hip hop single to become a Top 40 hit in 1979. Describing Superman as a "fairy" who flies "through the air in pantyhose," the group set the tone for the entire genre by using a homophobic slur and mocking the fictional character for his clothing choices. Into the present day, hip hop artists have continued to belittle or directly attack queer folk in their lyrics.⁵¹ Due to this landscape, Ocean's artistic consideration of his sexuality marks an act of rebellion. However, his coming out also represents a more personal journey, and the album allows Ocean to move from self-exploration to self-acceptance. In this chapter, I analyze *Channel Orange* as a coming-of-age album. Above all else, I focus on Ocean's sexual orientation as his narrative trajectory closely adheres to this aspect of his

⁴⁹ I use the term "queer" because Ocean has actively resisted assigning a term to his sexual identity. For example, in response to Amy Wallace's inquiry, "So do you consider yourself bisexual?" he answered, "You can move to the next question...I'm not a centerfold. I'm not trying to sell you sex. People should pay attention to that in the letter: I didn't need to label it for it to have an impact."

⁵⁰ Ocean specializes in alternative R&B, but his ties to the collective Odd Future links him to hip hop.

⁵¹ In 2017, Offset from the rap group Migos rapped the offensive line "I cannot vibe with queers" in "Boss Life" by YFN Lucci. Eminem also used the censored pejorative "f*ggot" to refer to fellow rapper Tyler, the Creator in the 2018 track "Fall".

identity. By tracking the album's key themes—notably, nostalgia and looking toward the past—I aim to show how Ocean grows into his sexual identity.



Fig. 1: Christopher Breaux, popularly known as Frank Ocean

Channel Orange opens with a scene, not a song. As listeners, we first hear soft laughter and a voice state, “They look like twins.” When the first voice makes this comment, a second voice begins to laugh, establishing the presence of two figures. The original iPhone text tone sounds, and the original voice comments, “That was embarrassing.” From there, the conversation continues indistinctly, and the second character breaks from contained laughter into a cackle. An ostensibly mundane moment, and yet the interaction possesses a surreal quality. The scene opens *in media res* and provides no context as to the figures’ identities, the nature of their relationship, or their physical location and how they came to arrive there. An ethereal drone underscores the exchange, and the audible dialogue at the beginning collapses into distant, echoing laughter toward the end. From these unsettling cues, the first eight seconds of “Start,” the aptly titled opening track, establish that everything is not as it seems.⁵²

⁵² I have never encountered an opening track to a record denser than “Start.” Just this small segment required dozens of repeated listens to fully digest.

At this point, an intake of breath cuts the scene abruptly short. The vibrant landscape we initially heard—the two voices, the text tone, the ceaseless whirring—disappears without explanation, and stark silence replaces the noise. For the next 10 seconds, only the sound of gentle rustling competes with the overwhelming quiet for our attention. Then, a television set flickers to life, and an original PlayStation powers on.⁵³ To function, both these electronic devices require inputs—someone to turn the machines on—indicating a human presence in this new environment. Toward the track’s end, we hear sound effects from an installation in the *Street Fighter* series, a fighting video game franchise from Japanese game developer and publisher Capcom. Then, just after the 45-second mark, “Start” comes to a close.

Despite its brevity, the opening skit to *Channel Orange* introduces themes of youth, memory, and nostalgia that permeate the entirety of the album, and no moment figures more critically in this regard than the break at the eight-second mark. Prior to that instant, the interaction between the two figures could have occurred in a present reality. Notwithstanding the distorted voices and eerie drone, several true-to-life elements effectively ground the scene in the realistic rather than the fantastical. However, the sharp breath shatters the illusion as someone “starts,” which the OED defines as “to awakens abruptly out of sleep, a daze, etc., esp. abruptly.”⁵⁴ Considering this alternative reading of the title, the eight-second mark divides “Start” into two distinct sections—reverie and reality—and positions the dreamlike escape from the present at the album’s beginning.

Furthermore, the iPhone message notification helps to locate the reverie in real time, indicating that the “dreamer” pulls the events from memory. Apple released the first iPhone

⁵³ The PlayStation is a home video game console. To play games on the device, one must connect the system to a television for output.

⁵⁴ “start, v.,” *OED Online*, December 2018, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/189183>.

on June 29, 2007.⁵⁵ The release date suggests that the reverie calls back to an event that happened sometime after June 2007, and Ocean's open letter in which he acknowledges his queerness provides extratextual evidence that further fleshes out the timeline. Posted to his blog, Ocean's letter reads, "4 summers ago, I met somebody. I was 19 years old. He was too. We spent that summer, and the summer after, together... It was my first love. It changed my life."⁵⁶ Given the age he provides in the open letter and his birthdate of October 28, 1987, Ocean discovered his first love in the summer of 2007.⁵⁷ Thus, the iPhone—released that same summer—links the watershed season when Ocean had to reckon with his sexuality to the dreamlike recollection in "Start" and implies memories from that period serve as the basis for the album's opening scene.

The reality-based second half of "Start" also dives into the past—specifically, to Ocean's childhood. Since the reverie recalls a moment from the summer of 2007, the events of the "present day" must necessarily take place after this period. As such, when the dreamer starts to play *Street Fighter* on the PlayStation, they are using a dated console.⁵⁸ Considering that the peak of the PlayStation's popularity and Ocean's prepubescent years aligned in the 1990s, the choice to include a PlayStation represents another form of escape.⁵⁹ With the reverie broken, the dreamer must rely on the tangible diversion of childhood video games to

⁵⁵ Apple, "iPhone premieres this Friday night at Apple retail stores," last modified June 28, 2007, www.apple.com/newsroom/2007/06/28iPhone-Premieres-This-Friday-Night-at-Apple-Retail-Stores/.

⁵⁶ Christopher Breaux, "thank you's [*sic*]," *Frank Ocean* (blog), July 4, 2012, frankocean.tumblr.com/post/26473798723. Hereafter cited as "The Open Letter."

⁵⁷ David Renshaw, "Frank Ocean's 30th Birthday Party Looked Amazing," *The Fader*, October 30, 2017, www.thefader.com/2017/10/30/frank-oceans-30-party.

⁵⁸ Sony Interactive Entertainment released the original PlayStation in the United States in 1995. Five years later, they released the next model: the PlayStation 2.

⁵⁹ The PlayStation also indicates Ocean's intended audience: young men about his age. While individuals who owned original PlayStations would immediately recognize the start-up sound, anyone unfamiliar with the classic console would not recognize this detail. At 10 years Ocean's junior, I had to conduct research to discover from where he had sampled the sound effect.

return to the past—not unlike Lorde’s attempt to reclaim her youth in “Ribs” by “sharing beds like little kids.”

The careful, layered construction of the 55-minute album’s first few seconds signals the critical role the thematic elements of “Start” will play throughout the entirety of *Channel Orange*. The track positions the past at the beginning of the work, and—while video-game relics from the 1990s feature prominently—the content of Ocean’s open letter combined with the dreamlike reverie at the track’s start centers the album around one period in particular: the summer of 2007. That time in Ocean’s youth forced him to reckon with his identity, and the man that emerged from those few months differs from the individual that existed before. As Ocean states in his letter, “I won’t forget the summer. I’ll remember who I was when I met you.” Enshrined in his memory, that season reminds Ocean of the personal transition he made in his adolescence—his coming-of-age experience, in fact—and in his attempt “to channel [these] overwhelming emotions” he created *Channel Orange*.⁶⁰

Although *Channel Orange* carries unique weight in Ocean’s body of work, he links the album artistically to his mixtape *Nostalgia, Ultra* (2011). For example, on the track “Strawberry Swing,” he creates a break between reverie and reality in a similar fashion as the eight-second mark on “Start.” Lyrically and sonically, “Strawberry Swing” borrows from the earlier Coldplay track of the same name, and both tracks take thematic inspiration from the Beatles’ “Strawberry Fields Forever” in their describing childhood scenes that occurred in the outdoors.⁶¹ Toward the end of Ocean’s song, a blaring alarm clock progressively grows in

⁶⁰ The Open Letter.

⁶¹ In fact, John Lennon lifted the name Strawberry Fields directly from a beloved childhood location: “Strawberry Fields is a real place. After I stopped living at Penny Lane, I moved in with my auntie who lived in the suburbs in a nice semidetached place... Near that home was Strawberry Fields, a house near a boys' reformatory where I used to go to garden parties as a kid with my friends Nigel and Pete... We always had fun at Strawberry Fields. So that's where I got the name.”

volume, initially disrupting the song’s peaceful sound before drowning out both the lyrics and music. When the song fades away entirely, someone takes a deep breath, yawns, and turns the alarm off. The track then ends with gentle rustling and the awakened individual’s breathing. Through this recurring motif, Ocean demonstrates a thematic interest in nostalgia, especially by virtue of childhood memories.

The similarities between *Nostalgia, Ultra* and *Channel Orange* extend to aesthetics as well. Looking at the cover art for the albums, intersections immediately emerge when comparing the titles (figs. 2 and 3). Regarding the typography, the two-word names of both works appear almost identical to one another. A bold, serif font captures the first word of each record, and these words (“nostalgia” and “channel”) are entirely lowercase. On the other hand, the thin, all-caps presentation of “ultra” and “orange” distinguish this pair from their respective preceding terms. The titles even share the same inverted word order—that is, noun followed by adjective rather than the typical construction of adjective before noun. From these notable points of comparison, Ocean develops a dialogue between his mixtape and his album literally in name alone.

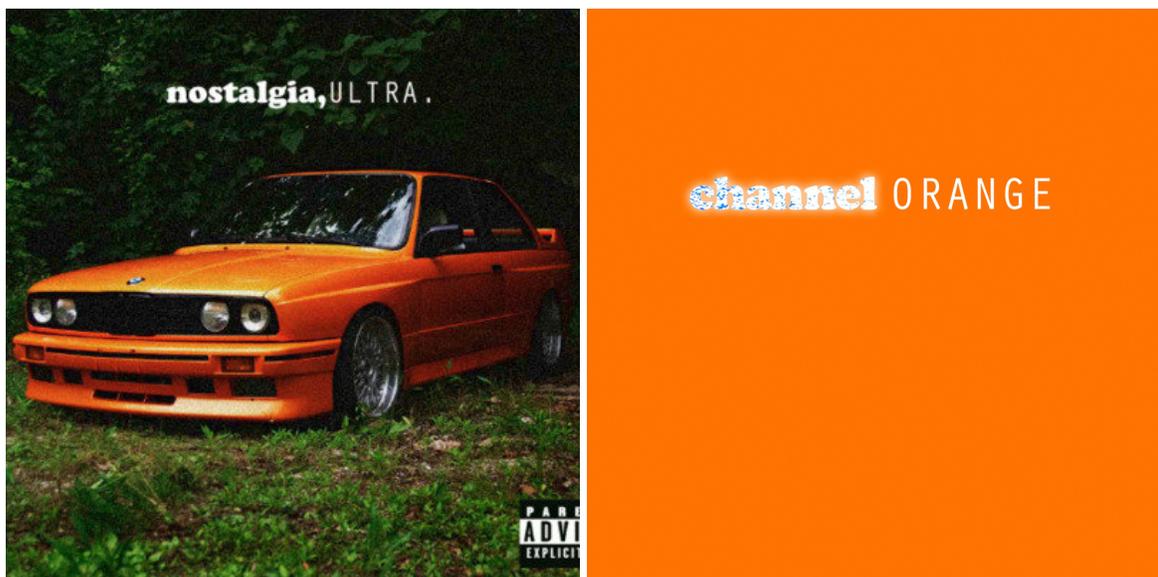


Fig. 2: *Nostalgia, Ultra* and **Fig. 3:** *Channel Orange* by Frank Ocean

However, key differences in the titles establish *Nostalgia, Ultra* and *Channel Orange* as distinct works instead of as exact copies. For example, *Nostalgia, Ultra* utilizes punctuation—properly stylized, the title reads as “nostalgia, ULTRA.”—whereas *Channel Orange* does not. The mixtape’s use of a comma and a period creates a few dissimilarities with the album. First, the punctuation changes the emphasis in the two titles. The comma between “nostalgia” and “ultra” causes a clear break between the two terms, and the period gives the title a definitive end. As a result, the two words in the mixtape’s name receive marked stress on their own rather than as a unit. On the other hand, “channel” and “orange” read cohesively in spite of the typographical distinction because no foreign object interrupts the pair of words. This seamlessness helps to establish “channel orange” as a unified concept, and the static effect on “channel” (which *Nostalgia, Ultra* does not feature) furthers this reading by connecting the title to the television motif introduced on “Start.”

To grasp the conceptual significance of *Channel Orange* as an album name, we must first understand the symbolism behind the color orange. The color features prominently on the album-cover art of the record and *Nostalgia, Ultra*. Starting with the mixtape, orange physically manifests in the form of a BMW E30 M3, which Pitchfork’s Ryan Dombal calls Ocean’s “dream car.”⁶² Dombal provides no citation to support his claim, but the eye-catching position of the vehicle on *Nostalgia, Ultra* bolsters the plausibility of the assertion. Assuming the E30 M3 on display is indeed Ocean’s dream car, then the bold color choice suggests that orange appeals to him in a special way, a hypothesis Ocean confirmed on his blog: “Orange reminds me of the summer I first fell in love.”⁶³ To Ocean, orange possesses a

⁶² Ryan Dombal, “Frank Ocean: Nostalgia, Ultra.,” *Pitchfork*, March 4, 2011, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15172-nostalgia-ultra/>.

⁶³ Christopher Breaux, “Orange reminds me...,” *Frank Ocean* (blog), June 28, 2012, <http://frankocean.tumblr.com/post/26082678988/orange-reminds-me-of-the-summer-i-first-fell-in/>.

nostalgic quality, so his use of the color on the appropriately titled *Nostalgia, Ultra* makes sense. However, orange douses the cover and features in the title of *Channel Orange*, so Ocean indicates that his album tackles the subjects of sexuality and the past in even greater detail than in his previous work.

As early as “Start,” Ocean alludes to his sexual identity as the focal point of *Channel Orange*, but he affirms the subject matter on “Thinkin Bout You,” the following track and the first song of the album. Ocean identifies his love interest as a man in the first verse: “My eyes don’t shed tears, but boy, they pour when / I’m thinkin’ bout you.” Here, Ocean speaks directly to someone who stirs such great emotion in him, and he refers to this individual as a boy. This line alone reveals the extent of Ocean’s feelings for the unnamed individual as merely thinking about the other person reduces him to tears. From this reaction, the lyrics betray Ocean’s romantic attraction to another man rather than painting the relationship as a friendship. Admittedly, the alternative definition of “boy” as “expressing shock, surprise, excitement, [or] appreciation” allows the listener to read the word as adding emphasis to the line, especially since the exclamation often stresses the statement to come—in this case, Ocean stating that his eyes pour rather than shed tears.⁶⁴ I cannot refute this interpretation, but the listener cannot ignore the queer implications of Ocean’s use of “boy” even given the validity of the other reading. From his meticulous arrangement of “Start,” Ocean has shown that every aspect of *Channel Orange* serves a deliberate rhetorical purpose. Therefore, if he uses the word “boy” rather than some other exclamation, then homoerotic implications undoubtedly exist in the text.

Through the lens of Hinduism, this association is even more interesting since the second chakra Svadhithana relates to both the color orange and sexuality.

⁶⁴ “boy, n.1 and int.,” *OED Online*, March 2019, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/view/Entry/22323>.

Although Ocean acknowledges he has feelings for another man, he vacillates in how he expresses these emotions. Structurally, the song shows this inner turmoil via an alternating verse-chorus formal type. With regard to the content of these sections, Ocean tells outrageous lies in each verse before moving to heartfelt musings during the pre-chorus and chorus:

No, I don't like you, I just thought you were cool enough to kick it
Got a beach house I could sell you in Idaho
Since you think I don't love you, I just thought you were cute
That's why I kissed you
Got a fighter jet, I don't get to fly it though, I'm lying down

Thinkin' 'bout you (Oh no, no, no)
I've been thinkin' 'bout you (You know, know, know)
I've been thinkin' 'bout you, do you think about me still?
Do ya, do ya?

Or do you not think so far ahead?
Cause I been thinkin' 'bout forever
Or do you not think so far ahead?
Cause I been thinkin' 'bout forever

Looking first at the verse, Ocean spins unbelievable lies. These assertions merit incredulity, and the section in general throws Ocean's reliability as a narrator into question. For example, Ocean claims to harbor no romantic feelings for the unnamed individual, yet he already mentioned in a previous verse that he cries when he thinks about them. Additionally, he follows every innocuous statement ("No, I don't like you...") with an outlandish claim such as owning a beach house in Idaho, a geographical impossibility in the landlocked state. At every lyrical turn, Ocean contradicts himself, preventing the listener from knowing when he speaks truthfully. This inability to articulate his emotions harkens back to Lorde's similar plight in "400 Lux." In both songs, the artist cannot verbalize how they feel to their love interest. However, whereas Lorde cannot manage to put her feelings into words, Ocean struggles to present his emotions honestly.

Although unreliable throughout the verse, Ocean's character shifts when the song moves to the pre-chorus. In this instance, the major catalyst for this change is "I'm lying down / Thinkin' 'bout you." This line has two interrelated and important interpretations. To start, Ocean's describing the physical act of lying down and thinking about someone allows for a seamless transition between the verse and the pre-chorus. In fact, he does not even take a breath between the two sections when he sings this part. While the listener might expect Ocean's unreliable narration to similarly flow into the pre-chorus, the second reading of the line mitigates this concern. As Ocean finishes the verse, the wordplay of "I'm lying" suggests that he acknowledges his earlier dishonesty before moving to the next section. Looking back at the verse, "I'm lying" signals the first time Ocean has unequivocally told the truth, for we know he misrepresented his emotions and what possessions he owns. Even though he makes this point obliquely, Ocean's coded truthfulness gives the listener a reason to believe what he has to say moving forward.

If any listeners still doubt Ocean, the raw emotion of the pre-chorus and chorus does well to convince remaining skeptics of the artist's credibility. The repetition of the phrase "thinkin' 'bout you" three times in a row shows the magnitude of Ocean's infatuation and, in turn, exposes his earlier aloofness as performance. He employs repetition again shortly thereafter to ask, "Do you think about me still? / Do ya, do ya?" His posing the question multiple times shows an intense desire for the unnamed individual to return his affections—that is, to think about Ocean as much as Ocean thinks about him. Clearly, Ocean loads each line with emotional weight, and these feelings burst forth vocally in the chorus. During this section, he sings in falsetto, pushing his voice to the upper limit. This shift aligns with Ocean making the realization that while he has "been thinkin' 'bout forever" with the other person,

they might “not think so far ahead.” Confronting the painful possibility of unrequited love, Ocean reckons with his romantic feelings head on—a feat he could not accomplish only a few seconds earlier.

Over the course of “Thinkin Bout You”—or rather, throughout a few sections within this one song—Ocean reveals the source of his anxieties and insecurities. More specifically, he grapples to come to terms with his sexuality as evidenced by his slippery lyricism. Ocean relies on contradictions and veiled messages in the verses to obscure how he feels for another man. By twisting phrases, he hides his sexual orientation from himself and the world. Thus, he refrains from actualizing this aspect of identity by refusing to coherently speak it into existence. However, he still suffers in spite (or perhaps because of) his hesitance to voice his queerness, hence his dramatic pleading and confessions in the pre-chorus and chorus. While this outburst brings Ocean’s sexuality to the forefront of the narrative, the pre-chorus and chorus show how heavily the unrequited love weighs on him. These conflicts—namely, the struggle for self-realization and the agony stemming from a one-sided romance—characterize Ocean’s journey and, as such, recur in defining moments throughout *Channel Orange*.

Shifting attention to the album’s end, we see these same unresolved issues on “Bad Religion,” the album’s fourteenth track.⁶⁵ As Cole Cuchna points out on his podcast *Dissect*, the tension in the track predominantly comes from notes that do not accord with the song’s E major key signature. Furthermore, these instances of sonic conflict align with Ocean’s moments of personal turmoil. For example, when describing the pain of his romantic situation, Ocean laments, “If it brings me to my knees / It’s a bad religion / This unrequited

⁶⁵ While “Bad Religion” marks the fourteenth track on *Channel Orange*, it is important to note that it is not the fourteenth song. Ocean’s 17-track record includes several scenes and interludes, so the album only features 12 songs, among which “Bad Religion” numbers tenth.

love / To me it's nothing but a one-man cult." In these few lines, he compares not having his love returned to "a bad religion" or a "one-man cult" where he obsessively worships his beloved. As if Ocean had not painted a vivid picture with his words, the discordant notes of this section emphasize his sorrow to an even greater degree. For example, Ocean sings a high G-natural on "knees" as an A-sharp diminished seventh chord plays in the background. In this dramatic moment where he describes falling to the ground out of sorrow, both the G-natural and the diminished seventh clash fall outside the key signature. As a result, Ocean conveys his angst sonically as well as verbally. In addition, the song modulates, or changes key signatures, after "it's a bad religion" to E minor. Thus, when Ocean plaintively compares his love to a cult, the accompaniment echoes his tone with a crestfallen quality.⁶⁶

To bring Cuchna's analysis of "Bad Religion" into the greater conversation of this project, Ocean again fails to move past his unrequited affections to find fulfillment. In fact, several elements in this song portray his agony as even greater than it was in "Thinkin Bout You." The music adds an extra layer to Ocean's suffering, but the track's title evokes another point of shame for him as a queer person. While he only alludes to malicious religious groups such as cults, all his talk about "bad religion" invites consideration for what a "good religion" might look like for a man attracted to other men. In religious spaces, people typically find community, but Ocean's sexuality may preclude him from finding this sense of belonging. In fact, he extends the concern to society at large: "I can't tell you the truth about my disguise / I can't trust no one." These two lines demonstrate Ocean's crippling fear of revealing the person beyond his "disguise," presumably due to the societal ostracization he might

⁶⁶ Cole Cuchna, June 15, 2018, "Bad Religion by Frank Ocean," podcast audio, *Dissect*, Spotify Studios. Although I do not agree entirely with Cuchna's reading of the text, he provides invaluable musical analysis in this podcast.

experience if he revealed his sexual identity. Given hip hop culture's established reputation as homophobic, Ocean bases his concerns in an all-too-plausible reality. However, his self-imposed isolation produces the same effect, for hiding his sexual identity keeps this mistrust alive. Thus, Ocean's inability to "tell...the truth" leaves him alienated from the world and fosters the self-perpetuating loneliness that continues to hold him back.

Although he makes slow progress, Ocean manages to embrace his sexuality by the album's penultimate track, "Forrest Gump." The song uses the titular character from Robert Zemeckis' film *Forrest Gump* (1994) as a stand-in for Ocean's love interest. Ocean again ties his sexual awakening to his past—this time by virtue of a movie released in his childhood—but this song distinguishes itself from previous tracks due to how he expresses his feelings for the man he loves. In the first iteration of the chorus, he plainly states, "You run on my mind, boy / Running on my mind, boy / Forrest Gump." Of immediate note, Ocean unequivocally genders his love interest both by representing him as Forrest Gump and referring to him as "boy" twice. In addition to Ocean's straightforward acknowledgement of his sexuality, he also demonstrates growth in how he thinks about this individual. The line "you run on my mind" recalls the earlier "I've been thinkin' 'bout you" since both phrases repeat and deal with Ocean's mental preoccupation with his love interest. However, Ocean's delivery of these lines differs greatly. In "Thinkin Bout You", his admission of having the other person on his mind breaks down into a persistent demand for reciprocity with "do you think about me still?" On the other hand, Ocean asks no such question in "Forrest Gump," and he sings his lines in even tempo. This point of similarity between the two songs followed by a marked distinction evidences that Ocean has reached a level of emotional maturity where he no longer craves validation from his love interest.

The production of “Forrest Gump” also points to Ocean as having grown over the course of *Channel Orange*. In the background of the track, several sound effects construct the sonic landscape of a football game. A woman cheers, a whistle blows, and a muffled voice presumably narrates the action on the fictional field. Certainly, these features nod to the movie character Forrest Gump’s football career, but they also locate Ocean in a public environment (fig. 4). Ocean’s physical position in a crowded area attests to his development, for he now has the confidence to speak of his love interest with other people around. In addition, the second iteration of the chorus features several voices joining Ocean to create an effect like a gospel choir. The presence of other individuals implies a community supporting Ocean in his declaration of love. This element shows Ocean embracing a group and vice versa—exactly what he thought he would lose by revealing his sexual identity—thus freeing himself from the deep-seated loneliness he previously battled.



Fig. 4: Tom Hanks as Forrest Gump

While he makes significant strides in self-acceptance throughout this track, no section indicates Ocean’s embracing his sexuality more than the outro. In some of the last lyrics he sings on the album, Ocean tells his love interest, “I’m remembering you / If this is love, I

know it's true / I won't forget you." Unlike in "Bad Religion" in which he compared his romantic feelings to a cult, he now recognizes his love as true. This realization demonstrates two important points of growth from Ocean at the album's end: he accepts unrequited love as love nonetheless, and he accepts his love for another man as valid. From all his turmoil and self-loathing, Ocean has finally reached a point where he values how and who he loves. Furthermore, in an act of self-awareness, he enshrines this experience by declaring "I won't forget you" to his love interest and, more importantly to himself. In this way, he affirms to carry this coming-of-age journey with him as he continues to live his life as a queer man.

Conclusion: Building on the Sonic *Bildungsroman*

*Need you for the old me, need you for my sanity
Need you to remind me where I come from*

-SZA, "Garden (Say It Like Dat)"

As exemplary models of the sonic *Bildungsroman*, *Pure Heroine* and *Channel Orange* provide the foundation on which to expand a recognition of the genre to other albums. These works prove especially useful in this regard because they capture the journeys of two individuals with distinct backgrounds: Lorde must contend with getting famous and getting older as a young woman from New Zealand, and Ocean comes to terms with his sexuality as a queer man. In their application of unique identities to the universal coming-of-age experience, *Pure Heroine* and *Channel Orange* have allowed me to build a broad understanding of the sonic *Bildungsroman*.⁶⁷ With this knowledge, I will briefly examine Joni Mitchell's *Ladies of the Canyon* and Ryan Beatty's *Boy in Jeans* through the lens of the coming-of-age album. With regard to release date, these works respectively come from well before and shortly after the two foundational albums. However, the generic constants of the sonic *Bildungsroman* and my framework for narrative analysis will enable me to analyze these records.

To return to *Ladies of the Canyon*, Mitchell named the album after the Laurel Canyon neighborhood of Los Angeles where she had moved in the late 1960s. The album art portrays a black-and-white sketch of Mitchell holding a colorful shawl depicting a bustling scene of

⁶⁷ In making this statement, I do not seek to ignore the similarities between the albums, nor do I aim to downplay their importance. I simply mean to say that I can bring other dissimilar records into the conversation because I have looked at the differences between *Pure Heroine* and *Channel Orange*.

the community (fig. 1). By making her neighborhood the visual centerpiece of *Ladies of the Canyon*, Mitchell presents her California home as the focus of the record. However, the artistic choice also ties the physical place to the growth she experienced during these critical years. On the cover, Mitchell exists as a simple sketch, but Laurel Canyon gives her life color and detail through the experiences and friendships she developed while living there.⁶⁸ In this way, the album as a portrait of this Los Angeles community also functions as an ode to Mitchell's coming-of-age experience.

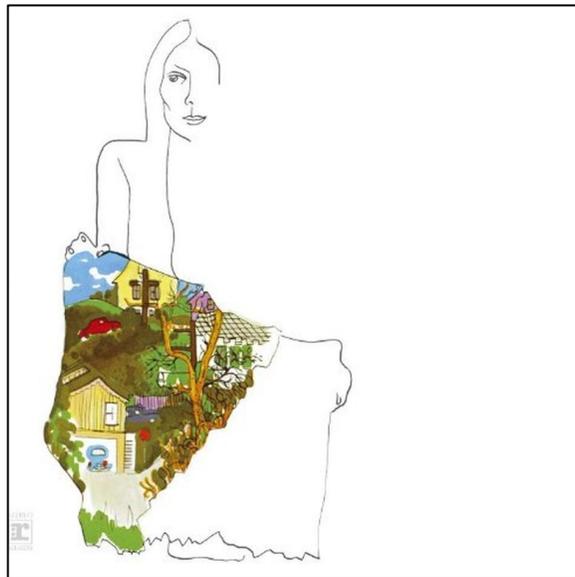


Fig. 1: *Ladies of the Canyon* by Joni Mitchell

Similar to Lorde, Mitchell explores the relationship between fame and losing touch with one's background. On "For Free," the second track of the album, she compares herself to a man playing clarinet on a street corner. As a famous musician who sleeps in hotels and shops for jewels, she describes how she will only perform "if you have the money / or if you're a friend to me." On the other hand, the one-man band plays his instrument "real good for free," and he continues even when "nobody stop to hear him." By juxtaposing herself

⁶⁸ Most notably, Mitchell fostered relationships with fellow musicians Young, David Crosby, and Stephen Stills during this time.

with this street performer, Mitchell demonstrates how fame has changed her as she has aged. Once, she might have made music for her own enjoyment like the clarinet player, but now she sees her songs as commercial transactions or as gifts for her loved ones. Musically, the song makes the same argument, for an improvised clarinet solo closes out the track after Mitchell finishes the last verse. She only performs up to an established ending point while the clarinetist plays without regard for the song's structure. Due to her celebrity, Mitchell has lost the artistic freedom of the clarinetist—presumably a freedom she possessed as a young musician. In this way, “For Free” acts as a self-aware critique of the fame that most musicians pursue and that Mitchell already possesses.

Despite this rather dreary outlook on growing into fame, Mitchell displays a mature outlook on growing up. For example, Mitchell wrote “The Circle Game” for Young to console him about the aging process:

He [Young] had just newly turned 21, and that meant that in Winnipeg he was no longer allowed into his favorite haunt, which was kind of a teeny-bopper club and once you're over 21 you couldn't get back in there anymore, so he was really feeling terrible...because he was over the hill...So he wrote this song that was called, "Oh, to live on sugar mountain," and it was a lament for his lost youth... And I thought, God, you know, if we get to 21 and there's nothing after that, that's a pretty bleak future, so I wrote a song for him, and for myself just to give me some hope.⁶⁹

Although she intended “The Circle Game” for Young, Mitchell recognizes how her music helped her come to terms with her coming-of-age experience. By creating a cyclical song that explores different stages in a person's development, she does not privilege childhood over adolescence or even adulthood; rather, she presents all these periods on equal footing. In addition, she suggests that no one ever loses their youth on the childlike “carousel of time.” To Mitchell, lived experiences starting from a young age provide the basis for an individual's

⁶⁹ From Mitchell's performance at Royal Albert Hall in 1970.

entire life, and she helps herself (and hopefully Young) to make this realization by putting her story into song.

As for Ryan Beatty, his debut album *Boy in Jeans* represents a marked departure from his background as a pop singer curated to be “the next Justin Bieber” (fig. 2 and 3). As he stated in an interview with *The Fader*, “A lot of back then was me compromising with what I felt like people wanted from me, including the people I was working with...Anything that I wanted to do creatively I felt like I couldn’t because I was being told to play up what was expected of me.”⁷⁰ Aside from compromising himself artistically, Beatty also compromised his identity as a gay man for several years before coming out in 2016. When he freed himself from these constraints, he took his narrative into his own hands with *Boy in Jeans*, a mature R&B record that traces his coming-of-age experience.



Figs. 2 and 3: Ryan Beatty over the years

As early as “Haircut,” the first track on the record, Beatty declares that he will no longer let other people’s expectations limit him. In the second verse, he states, “Controlled

⁷⁰ Malcolm Musoni, “Ryan Beatty Writes Really Good Pop Songs About Boys,” *The Fader*, July 24, 2018, <https://www.thefader.com/2018/07/24/ryan-beatty-boy-jeans-interview>.

myself, realized I couldn't / Too special to stay on the track." Here, he references his past spent trying to fit in, or "control himself." Beatty used to adhere to many explicit and implicit rules, including what music to make and how to define his sexuality. However, he found this task impossible ("realized I couldn't...stay on the track"), and he ties his inability to do so to a "special" quality that he possesses. Given his capability as a singer, Beatty might mean that he would not allow anyone to restrict his creativity. Alternatively, he could mean that his sexuality makes him unique and that he can no longer hide this integral aspect of himself. In either case, Beatty's firm declaration in the chorus of "it starts right now" signals that he seeks to reclaim his life, and he plans to use his album to actualize this ambition.

Although also dealing with queer subject matter, *Boy in Jeans* differs from *Channel Orange* in that Beatty had announced his sexuality before releasing the album. As such, his coming-of-age narrative focuses more on his sexual experiences as a gay teenager rather than on his coming to terms with his identity. On "Cupid," he has a sexual encounter in a baseball field; on "Bruise," he sneaks away from his prom date to meet a love interest in the boys' bathroom; and on "Powerslide," he paints the picture of a summer romance. Admittedly, currents of sexual repression manifest in the album, even in the aforementioned tracks. For example, Beatty's sexual partner in "Cupid" has a girlfriend, and Beatty originally attends prom with a girl in "Bruise." While we must recognize that these elements exist, they do not cause the same turmoil in *Boy in Jeans* as sexual experimentation did for Ocean in *Channel Orange*. Rather than preoccupying himself with the pain of hiding his sexuality, the number of romantic entanglements Beatty describes suggests that he revels in his ability to speak openly about his identity. In other words, he derives fulfillment from telling the coming-of-age story he has waited years to share.

These two snapshots offer glimpses into coming-of-age album that share some similarities with *Pure Heroine* and *Channel Orange* while still capturing entirely unique stories. In its essence, that is the beauty of the sonic *Bildungsroman*. While universal characteristics of the adolescent experience certainly exist, the record gives musicians full reign to construct their story how they desire. In each individual's effort to divine their own insights from their teenage years, no two works will look—or rather, sound—identical. *Ladies of the Canyon* is not *Pure Heroine*, *Boy in Jeans* is not *Channel Orange*, Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998) is not Kendrick Lamar's *Good Kid, M.A.A.d City* (2012), and so on and so forth. Furthermore, from listening to these varied works, we can learn from others' journeys and connect to our own experiences in the process. Thus, although we move ever forward on the carousel of time, the sonic *Bildungsroman* allows the past, present, and future to intersect with each listen.

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Biography

Dallas Thomas Killeen in Dallas, Texas, in 1996. Upon graduating from Plano West Senior High School, he decided to attend the University of Texas at Austin. During his time at UT Austin, he studied English Honors, Plan II, and Business Honors. In addition to academics, he participated in a wide range of organizations such as the Undergraduate Business Council, the men's service organization Texas Blazers, the Business Honors Peer Mentor Program, and the music publication Afterglow, and he had the opportunity to study abroad in Hong Kong for a summer and in Madrid for a semester. After graduation, he plans to move back to Dallas to work for the digital marketing firm PMG in their Graduate Leadership Program.