

“Your kids’re gonna like it!”: Functions and significations of music in *Back to the Future*

“Your kids’s gonna like it!”: Função e significação da música em *De volta para o futuro*

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Resumo: De volta para o futuro, dirigido por Robert Zemeckis, é uma das mais icônicas sagas de ficção científica/aventura da história, com um impacto notável na cultura popular. O presente ensaio oferece um tipo de análise quase “cirúrgica”, fragmento a fragmento, que tentará revelar todos os usos da música nos pontos específicos correspondentes do filme. Ao todo, há 40 fragmentos musicais no filme, 12 dos quais são diegéticos, 24 não-diegéticos e 4 contendo elementos diegéticos e não-diegéticos (nos modos que serão ilustrados). O artigo focará nas passagens mais significativas, totalizando 19 episódios musicais, que serão analisados em sua relevância semiótica, musicológica, mas também cultural.

Palavras-chave: Música de filme, Trilha Sonora, Semiótica, De Volta ao Futuro, Sociedade Americana

Abstract: Back to the Future, directed by Robert Zemeckis, is one of the most iconic sci-fi/adventure sagas in history, with a remarkable impact on popular culture. The present essay offers an almost “surgical”, bit by bit type of analysis that will attempt to uncover all the uses of music in the corresponding specific points of the film. All in all, there are 40 musical bits in the movie, 12 of which are diegetic, 24 non-diegetic and 4 containing both diegetic and non-diegetic elements (in ways that shall be illustrated). The article will focus on the most significant passages, amounting to a total of 19 musical episodes, which will be analyzed in their semiotic, musicological but also culturological relevance.

Keywords: Film music, Soundtrack, Semiotics, *Back to the Future*, American society

Introduction

A most iconic sci-fi/adventure saga, and certainly one that had a remarkable impact on popular culture (see the very interesting Fhlainn 2010), the *Back to the Future* trilogy, particularly the first instalment, is also a goldmine for any teacher in film music: rarely, indeed, so many of the various ways music can be used in cinema (or, in general, audiovisuality – see Martinelli 2020) were concentrated into one single text. For this reason, the way I shall approach this movie will be almost surgical, with a “bit by bit” type of analysis in which I will attempt to uncover all the uses of music in the corresponding specific points of the text.

Back to the Future, part I, is an American production released in 1985, directed by Robert Zemeckis, and written by the latter with Bob Gale. Running approximately 111 minutes, it features a cast of actors who somehow defined their careers through this particular performance. That is definitely the case with Michael J. Fox, who became a star after his interpretation of the character of Marty McFly, but also with Christopher Lloyd, since then forever bound to his portrayal of “Doc” Emmett Brown.

The film tells the story of a time travel experience from 1985 to 1955 and back. In 1985, in a town called Hill Valley, the eccentric scientist Emmett Brown invents a time machine out of a DeLorean sports car, operated with cylinders of plutonium that he steals from a group of Libyan terrorists. While embarking on the first experiment in time-travel with the assistance of his young friend Marty, Brown is found by the terrorists and killed. In an attempt to save his own life, Marty jumps in the car and escapes, accidentally reaching the needed speed to break through the time barrier. He then finds himself in 1955, where he bumps into his future parents George and Lorraine, compromising with his appearance what was supposed to be the first meeting between the two, and therefore threatening his own future birth. He finds the younger Brown and explains his situation. After initial incredulity, Brown believes him and agrees to help send him back to 1985. The plan is complicated because there is no plutonium available in the 1950s, and it takes the electrical power of a thunderstorm to propel the same reaction and activate time travel. Besides the arrangement of such a difficult circumstance, Marty also has two more problems: first, he would like to warn Brown of the tragic destiny that awaits him in 1985, but Brown refuses to learn any specific information about the future, for fear of compromising the natural course of events. Marty tries to stick a letter in Brown’s pocket, but the latter finds it and tears it up. Second, Marty needs to act as matchmaker for his parents, due to his involuntary sabotage of their first meeting: despite the pathological shyness of his father and the complication of his mother not being particularly attracted by him (she instead develops a crush for her future son himself), Marty manages to make

the fatal attraction happen, not without some luck, and with the additional challenge of having to confront the local bully gang, led by the hooligan Biff Tannen. George and Lorraine kiss and fall in love at the school ball, where Marty ends up playing the guitar in an iconic scene where he performs Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode” and brings his solo a bit too far for the standards of the 1950s. The trip back to 1985 is again very adventurous, but successful: unfortunately, however, Marty is not in time to save Brown from the Libyan terrorists. Marty, devastated, cries by his friend, but Brown suddenly sits up, alive and kicking. He had after all become curious about his future and had recomposed Marty’s letter of warning. Brown takes Marty home and embarks on a trip into the future (2015, to be exact): Marty remains in 1985, but the day after, to his pleasant surprise, he will find the present significantly improved from how he had left it. After all, he *did* affect the natural course of events, but apparently for the better.

About the soundtrack

The soundtrack of the film was written by Alan Silvestri, a then-emerging composer very clearly influenced by the master of sci-fi music John Williams, from whom he inherited the same epic and dynamic tones: if one compares the main theme for *Back to the Future* with, say, Williams’ main theme for *Indiana Jones*, more than one similarity will emerge.

Besides the soundtrack, an important role within the movie is played by pop-rock songs from the 1980s and the 1950s, including two tracks written specifically for the movie by Huey Lewis & The News (“The Power of Love”, and “Back in Time”), plus songs like Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode”, Eric Clapton’s “Heaven Is One Step Away”, The Four Aces’ “Mr. Sandman” and several others.

All in all, there are 40 musical bits in the movie, 12 of which are diegetic, 24 non-diegetic and 4 containing both diegetic and non-diegetic elements (in ways that I shall of course explain). The piece that we hear more often is obviously the main theme of Silvestri’s soundtrack. This is not only the most recurrent, but also the most important musical bit. Its distinctive John Williams-esque flavor materializes in an epic and adventurous theme, a full orchestral arrangement and an emphasis on brass instruments. It has variable dynamics with dramatic changes from piano to forte or even fortissimo. And it features numerous modulations, which can be read as metaphors of the various changes of time-scenarios during the movie.

A theme is often assigned several functions within a movie (see, for instance, Brown 1994), and this one is no exception. To begin with, we hear it every single time there is a time-travel scene: even in very quick ones, like the initial experiment that Dr. Brown does with his dog Einstein, a hint of the theme is clearly audible. In addition to

that, the theme underlines also the most tense and adventurous of scenes, like, perhaps, Marty's skateboard escape from Biff and his gang. As it often happens, the theme is also offered in alternative arrangements to comment on different emotions and atmospheres. In particular, we also have a "softer" version that is employed in tender or sad scenes (e.g., the moment when Marty writes a letter to Brown to inform him that he will be killed by the terrorists, if he does not take proper precautions).

"The Power of Love"

After the main theme, the musical piece that is probably most important is the song "The Power of Love" by Huey Lewis & The News, a rock band that was in its prime during the 1980s. This song is directly associated with the protagonist of the movie, Marty McFly, a smart and adventurous boy who was initially meant to simply assist Dr. Brown in his time-travel journey, but then – due to the collision with the terrorists – ends up being himself the time traveler. Marty is very much in love with his girlfriend, he is a skilled guitarist and skateboarder, but also comes from a family of unaccomplished gullible parents, and from them he inherits a certain lack of self-confidence and a fear of failure. In the initial sequences of the movie we see him and his band being rejected at an audition for the school ball, leaving him in doubt as to whether he is a worthy musician at all. However, disappointments and family issues aside, he seems to be content to be where he is, and *when* he is.

Now: "The Power of Love" is a song that we hear three times throughout the movie, and always to introduce important features of Marty's life and behavior. On the first occasion we hear it when we learn that Marty is a skillful skater; in the second one, it is performed by Marty himself (along with his band) at the school ball's audition, therefore illustrating Marty's ability as a guitar player and also affection for heavy metal and hard rock (he is rejected exactly on the basis that his band plays "too darn loud"); and finally on the third occasion, we hear the song right after he kisses his girlfriend, Jennifer. These three features are not only defining characteristics of Marty's life, but they are also key elements in the story. Skateboarding is at the core of the most spectacular chase sequence of the movie, when Marty, now in 1955, is run after by Biff and his gang. Guitar playing is what saves his own (future) life, as he replaces the injured guitarist of the band performing at the 1955 school ball, and by doing so he creates the conditions for his parents to exchange their first kiss and fall in love. Jennifer, finally, is his main anchor to 1985, the main reason why he wants to go back at all costs to his own time (and the saga makes a clear point that she is the love of his life: in the future scenario represented in the second instalment, Marty and Jennifer are married). Moreover, it is exactly during the sequence when the two kiss that Marty will be given a flyer by an old lady from a charity

organization which says the exact time a bolt of lightning hit the clock of the municipality building back in 1955, offering the young Dr. Brown the alternative to plutonium to operate the time machine.

Back to the Future, as a saga, is a bit of a celebration of American popular culture. References to pop icons all across the three decades between 1955 and 1985 are countless (including several product placements, of course): from Clint Eastwood to *Star Wars*, from Chuck Berry to Michael Jackson, from Nike to Pepsi... Within this framework, it is no wonder that pop and rock songs play a prominent role in supporting the plot and enriching the scenario. Very often songs are there to offer a better picture of the time we are in, 1985 or 1955: as we shall see, in some cases they are the *first* clue we are given to understand *when we are*. Moreover, and we will see that too, the topical significance that is attributed to the songs goes well beyond the simple "temporal definition" and tells us much more about the social transformations of American society between the two periods.

To conclude, we also have additional non-diegetic bits beyond the main theme. Some of them are in-between actual music and sound effects, and some others are proper musical pieces. Their role is the one we would expect from all non-diegetic music: remarking feelings, creating contrasts, anticipating events, etc.

A bit by bit analysis

As previously mentioned, we can now take a glimpse at specific musically-underlined sequences of the movie to emphasize the role/s music plays in each instance. It was already noted that there are 40 such instances, and of course we do not need to comment on each and all of them, because there are cases where the same function/role is repeated. Still, despite this selection, I shall still talk about 20 sequences, the exact half of the total: this is a testimony to the incredible variety of purposes the authors of this movie employed music for. I will preserve the original counting of the musical bits from 1 to 40, so one can have an idea of when exactly those bits are located in relation to each other. I shall use the abbreviation D for diegetic music, ND for non-diegetic, and X for those "mixed" moments that I have previously mentioned. So, when one reads, for instance, "13 ND", it means that we are talking about the 13th musical bit of the movie (out of the whole 40), and that this particular bit is non-diegetic.

1.

1 D: Clocks ticking + news speaker + dog-food machine.

In this first case, it would probably be more appropriate to talk about simple sound effects than actual music. However, the extended employment and the continuity of these sounds as an actual "background" to the first sequence bears much more the characteristics of musical soundtrack than simple (and usually random) noises. Also, the history of music (particularly popular music) has often offered examples where exactly *these* sounds (ticking clocks, TV/radio news and noisy machines) were used musically. One may think of Pink Floyd's "Time" or Dukes of Stratosphear's "25 o'clock" for the ticking clocks, Simon and Garfunkel's version of "Silent Night" for the news speaker, and the whole genre of industrial music for various machine sounds. For all these reasons, I am more inclined to suggest the denomination of "music" for this opening sequence of the movie.

So, what happens here? The movie opens with some head titles, during which we hear various clocks ticking together. To them, more sounds are added when head titles terminate and we begin seeing the first images of Dr. Brown's lab. Various items are visible (most of which are clues for what will happen later on in the movie) including a TV set, from which we hear the voice of a news speaker announcing, among other things, that some plutonium has been stolen, and a rather bizarre and noisy automatic machine that opens and serves canned food for Brown's dog, Einstein.

This sequence is very important, because it launches several important topics that are crucial in the film. First and foremost, the fact that this movie is about time. The announcement could have not been made more emphatically: not only do we hear clocks as the very first thing, but we also hear them *before* any image actually appears, as if to prove their undisputed centrality in the story. Second, via the early morning TV news we learn that plutonium was stolen from Libyan terrorists, and that turns out to be at the same time the source for the actual time-travelling (Marty uses the time machine to escape the terrorists), and for the most dramatic moment of the movie (when Brown is apparently killed by the terrorists). Third, via the funny dog food machine, we learn that this movie is about science and technology, but not exactly in the most institutional, NASA-like, sense: it is a homemade, and nutty enough, type of science, made by an unconventional scientist whose main collaborators are a dog and a teenager.

2. 2 D: A heavy guitar chord blows up the amplifier.

Marty enters Brown's lab, but he does not find anybody. As he calls both his friend "Doc" and the dog Einstein, he decides to jam with his guitar and a gigantic amplifying system that evidently Brown had built for him. As he turns up and switches on every

possible knob and button available (we hear an increasing background noise that conveys very well the idea that something extremely loud is about to be heard), Marty hits a power chord on his guitar only to blow the whole thing up and be hurled against the wall by the huge feedback generated.

That power chord (the musical bit) and also the ensuing explosion (this time a proper sound effect) are there to announce that music, too, will have an important role in the movie, that Marty is fascinated by “heavy” sounds (what will be behind some important decisions during the story), and that finally Marty, too, is crazy enough to befriend someone like Brown. However, we have not yet learned how *good* Marty is, as a musician (the single chord he managed to play before the explosion is not really enough to assess his abilities): as we mentioned, the role of announcing Marty’s skills is assigned to the song “The Power of Love”. We shall see that later.

3. 3 D: The clocks ring all together.

Again, this is mostly a sound effect, but its employment has more to do with a musical characterization. Indeed, as they announce the first of a series of time-paradoxes, these clocks sound like medieval fanfares played by trumpets to announce the entrance of a king. Ladies and gentlemen, his majesty “time travelling” is entering the scene. Specifically, Brown has arranged that the clocks are 25 minutes late: in learning this, Marty realizes he is very late for school.

4. 4 X: Marty skates to school – “The Power of Love”.

Marty tries to reach his school by skating, and he does so with great mastery of the skateboard. The introduction of one of Marty’s main skills, as we said, calls for the main song “The Power of Love”, and so it is: Marty goes out from Brown’s lab, grabs his skateboard and leaves – the song starts. Interestingly, while the track is clearly audible in a non-diegetic way, as “soundtrack”, we also see Marty wearing headphones and listening to a “Walkman” cassette player. The suggestion, thus, is that Marty may actually be listening to this very song, providing the latter with a diegetic value as well. The hypothesis makes sense also because Marty and his band are about to perform the very song at the school ball’s audition, on the same day: it is only reasonable that he would like to go through the song one more time to make sure he remembers all the parts. For this reason, I assign the symbol “X” to this bit: there are both diegetic and non-diegetic elements involved.

5. 5 D: Marty's band plays "The Power of Love".

Marty and his group are attempting to be among the performers at the annual ball, an event that has a long tradition in Marty's school: it was indeed already running in the 1950s, at the time both Marty's parents were attending the school, and where they kissed for the first time. Marty launches his band into a rendition of Huey Lewis's song that is actually significantly heavier and guitar-driven in sound than the original. After a few seconds, the jury committee of the audition stops the band and informs the musicians that they are "too darn loud" for the purpose and that therefore they are excused, leaving Marty speechless. The film authors at this point insert a rather amusing inside joke: the very committee gentleman who interrupts and rejects the band is Huey Lewis himself, who makes a "cameo" appearance in the movie, in the part of one of the conservative jury members. This is like saying "sorry guys, but *my* version of 'The Power of Love' – the *original* version – was not so loud: how dare you change it like this!".

Albeit interrupted after a few seconds on this occasion Marty has the chance to display his excellent musical abilities: we now learn that he is a real heavy metal virtuoso. Like skateboarding, this is an important "skill" of the protagonist: once more, it is "The Power of Love" that underlines that.

6. 7 ND: Marty and Jennifer kiss – "The Power of Love".

We now skip the musical bit n. 6 and proceed to n.7, when we see Marty and his girlfriend Jennifer talking and then kissing. The two are shown as very fond of each other and, as we know from the second instalment of the saga, their love is deep and will eventually lead to marriage. It is therefore safe to say that this is another important characteristic of Marty, that – once again – calls for Huey Lewis's song. The so-called "hook" of the song (the most memorable/attractive part), that is, the very moment when the music stops and Lewis sings "that's the power of love!" is made to coincide with the very kiss exchanged by the couple, as if to, indeed, underline what the power of love is about.

But there is more, as we have already mentioned earlier. While attempting to kiss a first time, the two are interrupted by an old lady who is fundraising to preserve an odd tradition of Hill Valley: 30 years earlier, a lightning bolt had struck the city hall disabling the big clock on the front of the building. The clock has never been repaired since, but the new mayor, apparently, wants to fix that, while instead the old lady leads a preservation society that intends to keep things as they were (that is: with the clock still disabled). For this purpose, she asks Marty and Jennifer for a contribution. Bothered by the interruption and anxious to return to more pleasant activities, Marty offers a coin to the lady and gets

a campaign flyer in return: on that flyer there is a short history of the thunder incident with a specific date and time. Jennifer will use the back of the flyer to write a telephone number for Marty, so he stores it in his pocket. This occurrence will be of enormous importance later in the story, when Marty, lost in 1955 and hoping for the younger Dr. Brown to send him back to 1985, is told by the latter that only the strike of a lightning bolt can match the plutonium to generate the needed reaction for time travelling. Thanks to the flier, Marty is able to give Doc the exact circumstances and times when the thunder will hit the city hall, earning a serious chance to succeed.

7. 8 ND: The DeLorean time machine appears, we hear a short “futuristic” bit.

As we shall also see in the “13 ND” example, sometimes a simple cluster, lick or chord performed with the right sound can enhance the atmosphere/mood of a given situation. In this case, we have the fancy DeLorean sports car making its first appearance in the film, as it comes out of a truck. The scene takes place at the parking area of the local shopping mall. It is late night, so the area is empty and there is enough space for the car to accumulate sufficient speed to activate the needed reaction. Marty, a compulsory latecomer, had fallen asleep in his bed before the appointment, so he is woken up by Brown’s phone call. Marty’s sleeping position is rather peculiar and designed by the authors to be remembered as a Chekhov’s rifle: dressed in his clothes, with no blanket on, sleeping on his left side with the hands peculiarly placed behind his back. We will need this detail later.

Once on his feet, Marty quickly reaches the mall with his skateboard. Brown is ready to show the DeLorean time machine to his young friend. Such an appearance has to be an “entrance in style”, and must therefore be rendered with an epic “sci-fi” tone. For that purpose the authors employ various strategies: first, we see the truck back door opening slowly and automatically, almost like a theatre curtain; second, as the truck opens, we see a pall of white smoke dissipating and slowly revealing the car. Thirdly and importantly for us, we hear a sound performed with an electronic keyboard: my guess would be a Yamaha DX7, a very popular synthesizer in those days, but I am far from sure.

It is a simple and very short bit, but, as it is performed with an electronically produced timbre that has nothing in common with traditional, acoustic instruments, it strongly enhances the “futuristic/hi-tech” atmosphere that was called for by this sequence.

8. 9 ND: The car goes one minute into the future – short fragment of Silvestri's main theme.

As mentioned, every single instance of time travelling is underlined by the soundtrack's main theme. This is the first instance: we see Dr. Brown performing his very first time travelling test, using his dog Einstein in the car, and driving the latter with a remote control. The experiment is only meant to send Einstein one minute into the future, so what we have here is a very short sequence, that is meant to be less adventurous and spectacular than the ones that will follow. And yet, even in these very few seconds, the unmistakable Lydian melody of the theme can be heard.

9. 10 ND: Doc is ready to embark on his time travel – "tense" musical background.

This is a particularly interesting use of music in film. The test with the dog Einstein has been successful, everything seems to be ready for Dr. Brown to travel in time. The moment is solemn: Doc asks Marty to film him with a camera as he announces triumphally his groundbreaking discovery. And yet, the soundtrack is telling us something completely different. No solemnity and no happiness: what we hear is a rather tense and threatening background, of the "something terrible is about to happen" type. As the volume of the music grows (therefore increasing the tension), we also see Einstein barking at something in the distance: it is an additional warning. Doc checks the source of Einstein's distress and finds out that the Libyan terrorists, to whom he had stolen the plutonium, have found him. Doc and Marty try to escape but the terrorists manage to corner and kill the scientist. Marty, too, is trapped, but one terrorist's Kalashnikov jams, and he has time to run into the car and escape. A chase will follow, in which the panicking Marty will reach the necessary speed to travel in time (needless to say, the musical bit that we hear at this point is the main theme), beginning his adventure in 1955.

In this sequence, thus, we witness an open conflict between the visual part, which presents the triumphant Brown ready to embark on his time travel, and the musical part, which warns us about an upcoming danger. What do we trust more? The music, of course: even if we "see" a cheerful situation, we realize, thanks to the music, that we will soon witness something terrible. Approaching film music in terms of multimodality as well, this is clearly a case of non-redundancy between the mode A (the visual part in this case) and the mode B (the musical part), in which one outscored the other, producing a result that in multimodality is called of "dominance" (Partan and Marler 1999, 1273) . We see a happy visual part, contrasted with a threatening musical part, but only the threatening part prevails ("dominates") in our perception.

What is intriguing is that, in the great majority of similar situations, it is always the music that we trust: if someone falls and hurts themselves, but the music is comical, we will not feel sorry for that person, but we will laugh. If someone is walking in a sunny country field but the music is sad, we will not concentrate on the beauty of the scenery but on the loneliness of the character. And so forth. Exceptions occur mostly (if not only) in openly parodic sequences. On the psychological reasons why music seems to be more trustworthy than images, we can make a lot of conjectures, but one thing that seems to be pretty reasonable is that it is much easier to deceive with images than with music. As we already said, as an animal species, human beings have come to base most of their perception (especially in a social and cultural sense) through visual stimuli: visuality, thus, is where we are most specialized and where we are able to catch tiny nuances. With music, unless one is a specialist we cannot afford too many subtleties, so an author has less freedom to manipulate our perception.

10. 13 ND: Marty, now in 1955, stops the car where his house was supposed to be and finds nude land – “sci-fi” type of musical bit.

At this point of the story, Marty, whose escape from the terrorists has thrown him 30 years into the past, is still not quite sure where/when he is, and at this stage he is more inclined to believe that he is dreaming, so he drives towards home, on the outskirts, the residential area of Lyon Estates. What awaits him, however, is an empty land with a simple billboard advertising a big project for a residential settlement. As Marty's jaw drops before this unexpected landscape, another “sci-fi” bit is audible, in a similar vein as 8 ND. While however, the latter was meant to offer a “wow” effect over a hi-tech item (the DeLorean car) in a positive way, this time the wow effect is more disturbing, almost “apocalyptic”. Marty sees this landscape as a *Star Trek* character would see an unknown and completely desert planet, not knowing yet how safe or dangerous it is. In the eyes of the disoriented Marty, the past is here compared to outer space.

11. 14 X: Marty reaches the city center – “Mr. Sandman”.

This is another particularly significant sequence. As we have seen, when Marty is thrown back to 1955, for the initial part he feels like he is having a terrible, but realistic nightmare: he has been where his house was supposed to be, only to find waste land. It is not until he reaches the town hall square that he is finally convinced that he indeed traveled back in time (having the final confirmation when checking the date on a daily newspaper). The moment when the urban scenery appears before his eyes is ingeniously

prepared by the authors, by having Marty turn the corner of a secondary street, and the square opening up like a fantasy land from a fairy tale – another “wow effect”. To an extent, this can be described as a “Baroque” moment. It was typical of Baroque architecture to shift from tiny, small spaces to big and grand ones, in order to put even more of an accent to that sense of wonder that those picturesque and richly-decorated buildings were designed to inspire. Now: although the wow effect is already rather impressive in the visual sense, it is given a great push by the music chosen for this sequence. It is an old 1950s success called “Mr. Sandman”, a mid-tempo ballad with a soft flavor reminiscent of the Tin Pan Alley tradition of Irving Berlin in particular, and bearing that type of so-called barbershop vocal harmonies that were very typical of those days. Several versions of the song were released around those years, starting from 1954 (when the song was written): the version we hear is by a group called The Four Aces.

The song, I believe, was chosen for two fundamental reasons. The first one is exactly related to this wow effect: the song opens with the voices alone, slowly harmonizing the title: “Mr. Saaandmaaaan...”. This slow intro literally “opens up” the song before it takes its basic tempo and all the instruments join in, serving as a perfect support to the other “opening up” – that of the scenery, in a perfect image-sound coordination that, still using multimodality terms, creates an effect of “enhancement” of the message. The second important reason why this song was chosen lies, I believe, in its intrinsic “innocence”. A leitmotif of the whole movie will be the contrast between Marty’s more emancipated and disinhibited personality and the more naïve and provincial mentality of the people of the 1950s. I shall elaborate on this later, because I believe there is also a specific socio-cultural point made by the movie which goes well beyond the literal 30-year gap. However, for the point we are making here, a song like “Mr.Sandman” is perfect to set the tones to that naïvety and fairytalesque component by which the 1950s version of Hill Valley is portrayed: it is simple, unpretentious, catchy and cheerful in a childlike kind of way; and, while it plays, we see inhabitants of Hill Valley moving around almost like cartoon characters and cars, objects and colors that look like toys.

Finally, as one may have noticed, this example is marked with an X, so it has both non-diegetic and diegetic features. Just like the use of “The Power of Love” in segment 4 X, “Mr.Sandman” too is heard in a very clean and distinct manner that clearly suggests a non-diegetic dimension. Also, the manner in which the song is placed in the montage (with the intro coinciding perfectly with Marty’s arrival in the city center, and so on) hints in the direction of a typical non-diegetic employment of the piece. Except that, as the images of the city square unfold, we also see a record shop with an active MPA system and posters advertising new releases (and “Mr. Sandman” was back then a new release, as The Four Aces recorded it in late 1954). The assumption, thus, is that the song may ideally be played from the record shop, just like, in 4 X, we may assume that what Marty hears in his headphones is “The Power of Love”.

12. 19 D: Marty breaks into George's room and plays Van Halen's "Out the Window".

We now skip four more musical segments and we get to n.19. The story has developed a bit, and at this point Marty, who attempts to be a matchmaker between his two future parents, has discovered that his father George is a pathologically introverted nerd who is totally incapable of communicating with women, and seems exclusively interested in science fiction stories. With that in mind, Marty elaborates a bizarre plan to visit George in the night pretending he is an alien who will vaporize him unless he asks Lorraine for a date. Wearing the anti-radiation yellow suit that was stored in the time machine car, and giving himself the (not so) fictional name of Darth Vader, Marty breaks into George's room in this disguise. However, to make things more credible and scary, he wakes his father up by playing a loud heavy metal song (Van Halen's "Out the Window") through his Walkman. The trick works: George awakens deafened and terrified and obeys Darth Vader's command. As one may imagine, the interesting thing, here, is that 1980s heavy metal music sounds so distant from 1950s musical standards that Marty can actually use it as an "extraterrestrial" sound and get away with it.

13. 20 X: Music from the cafeteria's jukebox.

The morning after the extraterrestrial experience, George runs to Marty, explaining that he is now fully convinced that he has to invite Lorraine to the school ball. Lorraine is sitting at a cafeteria with her girlfriends, and George summons up the courage to step in and approach her. The cafeteria, as customary in those days, has a jukebox, and we hear some music coming from it. Unfortunately, as George tries his best to impress Lorraine, the bully Biff and his gang break into the place, immediately calling out their favorite victim. What happens to the jukebox music at this point is rather curious for a diegetic musical bit: the song can be heard being abruptly interrupted as if the jukebox is unplugged, or a power cut is occurring: instead, what seems to happen is that the music itself "got scared" when Biff broke in and grew silent. It is a metaphor of that "the fun is over" feeling that kids have when they are having a good time and suddenly some bully appears.

As we know from the movie, at this point Marty will intervene in defense of his father, and the skateboard chase scene will follow with Alan Silvestri's main theme as soundtrack (21 ND). However, we have already offered an example of this kind, so we can proceed further.

14. 22 ND: Sad version of the theme.

As mentioned, the main theme of a soundtrack is often offered in different versions, with the purpose of underlining different moods and different tones. In this sequence, Marty, who has been trying in vain to inform Dr. Brown that a terrible fate is awaiting him in 1985 (Brown, as we have seen, is totally opposed to learn important information about the future, for fear of compromising the natural course of events), attempts now another strategy: he writes a letter where he warns Doc about the terrorists, and seals it in an envelope that reads "Do not open until 1985". Later, he will try to stick the letter into Brown's pocket, hoping that the latter will not find it until at least Marty is back in 1985, avoiding direct confrontation. What we hear while Marty writes the letter is what we may call a "sad version" of the theme: the melody is recognizable, but it is slower in tempo, lower in dynamics, and performed with strings rather than brass instruments – and strings, as we shall also see in the next point, are much more apt to describe "softer" emotions than brass instruments.

15. 29 X: Marty joins The Starlighters to play "Earth Angel".

Ironically, after being rejected at the audition for the school ball in 1985, Marty ends up playing for the 1955 edition of the ball, here entitled "Enchantment under the sea". The band on the bill is called "The Starlighters" and it is an Afro-American group led by a person who we will turn out to be Chuck Berry's cousin, Marvin Berry. At this point of the story, Marty elaborates a complicated plan to make his father and mother fall for each other: he will pretend to harass Lorraine, so that George can intervene and prove himself to Lorraine as a strong and courageous man (qualities that, as we know, he had not managed to display). However, the plan is ruined by Biff and his friends, who find Marty first, punch him in the stomach and smash him into a car's trunk, while Biff remains with Lorraine and harass her for real. That car happens to belong to Marvin Berry who, along with his band, is taking a break during their concert at the ball. While trying to open the trunk, Marvin injures his hand, but eventually manages to release Marty who runs back towards Lorraine. The scene appearing before his eyes is the most surprising: George has arrived and, despite finding Biff instead of Marty, manages to overcome his weakness and knock the bully out, rescuing the terrified Lorraine: we can see from her gaze that for the first time she is *really* impressed by George. An enthusiastic Marty returns now to Marvin Berry, trying to convince him to play the second part of the show, but the injured guitarist is unable to play. Marty offers himself as a replacement, in order to allow the party to continue (he needs that to happen in order for his parents to kiss).

As the second part of the show begins we see Marty on the stage with The Starlighters performing the song "Earth Angel" (a doo-wop hit released by a band called The Penguins in late 1954), while George and Lorraine are tenderly dancing, as their future son had hoped. For the guitar enthusiasts among the readers, we may here mention a slight anachronism: the guitar that Marty plays is a red Gibson ES-355, a model which was actually put on the market only in 1959. The action, as we know, takes place in 1955. It is a tiny detail, of course: the guitar was certainly scripted in because it became the iconic instrument of Chuck Berry himself.

As the song goes on, another intruder tries to interfere with George's and Lorraine's romance, demanding to dance with the girl. George seems again intimidated and for some time does not intervene. During this time, Marty starts feeling sick: if his parents are separated and do not fall in love, his future existence is in doubt. He can hardly stand on his feet and is now unable to play. Musically speaking, such discomfort is captured in a significant manner, that says a lot about the way we perceive music. Logic would demand that if one is about to faint (as Marty appears to be), they would rather *not* play at all, and rest until they feel better. Instead, Marty keeps on playing, or at least he tries to: what comes out is random and unpleasant clusters out of tempo, that he hits in the desperate attempt to play the right chords. The thing is, silence would have been much less effective in representing sickness, than these dissonant sounds, at least in traditional, Western standards (we may assume that within other cultures, or in avant-garde-friendly musical environments such clusters could even be perceived as the quintessence of health). The dissonance of the chords, here, is a direct reference to the "dissonance" of Marty's situation: his future is endangered – he may live or he may not.

Fortunately for him, George regains his recently-discovered courage and gets rid of the intruder. He gently grabs Lorraine and finally kisses her. Immediately, Marty recovers from his collapse and resumes playing correctly. These two events are made to coincide with the climax of the "Earth Angel" song (that is, the last chorus before the coda), and what happens now is more typical of musicals than any other genres, justifying the reason why this musical segment is marked with X rather than D: as the climax is reached, we do not only hear the (diegetic) parts played by The Starlighters (voice, guitar, bass, sax and drums, for the record), but also a (non-diegetic) full string orchestra, which of course gives an extra emphasis to the song, with a special romantic accent (as strings tend to provide, as opposed to – for example – brass instruments or percussions). This strategy, as mentioned, is typical of musicals: we see – say – Gene Kelly dancing in a street during a rainy night and performing "Singin' in the Rain", and his voice is the only diegetic musical part we can "see". Except that there is a full orchestra accompanying him *somewhere* in the magic world of non-diegesis, and we hear that very well, too.

16. 32 D: Marty and The Starlighters play "Johnny B. Goode".

Despite the short accident in the middle, the performance of "Earth Angel" has been a success: the audience is enthusiastic, and the band is impressed by Marty's playing. Marvin asks Marty to play one more song, something really energetic. Marty chooses Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode", not realizing that a) the song has not been released yet (it will be in 1958), and incidentally b) Chuck's cousin is right there next to him. There is no need for many instructions, though: The Starlighters are an Afro-American group, they know very well how to play a blues progression, albeit a bit faster than what they may be accustomed to. The audience seems to appreciate the "kick", but then – as we all know – things get out of hand: Marty, in a state of trance, begins playing and performing in ways that are far too audacious and dissonant for a 1950s audience. The rest of the band stops playing, and the audience stops dancing: Marty leaves the stage in embarrassment.

What happens here, however, is more than just an amusing sequence, and to my mind it calls for a serious sociological reflection on the role played by rock'n'roll in shaping Western society (see also Altschuler 2005). As the song starts, we see the audience enjoying the song, and cheerfully dancing to it. In fact, while they had been dancing in a rather composed manner until then, "Johnny B. Goode" seems to literally unchain them, and now they are moving with increasing excitement and hints of actual eroticism. It is my conviction that one of the main cultural processes that the movie intentionally portrays is the impact of rock 'n' roll on American middle class white youth. It is late 1955, Hill Valley is a small, provincial town in Northern California, and the dynamics between the white and the Afro-American communities are pretty much discriminatory: black people only appear as "serving" whites (we have The Starlighters themselves playing for an audience that is predominantly white, or we have the cafeteria boy, Goldie Wilson, whom we see cleaning the floor in 1955 and becoming mayor in 1985). At the same time, in the whole of America, rock'n'roll is taking its very first steps: only in 1954, Elvis Presley has released his first single, which is commonly regarded as the completion of that process of hybridization between Afro-American blues and white country music known indeed as rock'n'roll. That single bears the blues "That's Alright Mama" as A-side and the country "Blue Moon of Kentucky" as B-side, and – more importantly – they are performed in such a homogeneous way that they really sound as if they belong to the same, new genre, and not to – literally – different cultural universes. Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock", which is usually referred to as the first rock'n'roll song to be consciously written as rock'n'roll (unlike, indeed, Elvis's single, which was reusing old songs from other repertoires) also was released in 1954, but it received general attention (and top positions in the charts) only in a re-release dated May 1955. Finally, the real explosion of the rock'n'roll fashion occurred in 1956 as all the great acts of the genre (Little Richards, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Buddy Holly, the same Chuck Berry

and many others) began to dominate the charts and replace other genres in people's musical taste.

The consequences of this revolution are countless: for the first time, teenagers became an actual "social class", with their own tastes, their own culture, their own fashion; for the first time, black artists were cool and popular, and often cooler and more popular than whites, setting the bases for racial desegregation; boys and girls started interacting in more disinhibited ways, initiating what later will be known as the sexual revolution; and so on.

Now. The assumption conveyed in *Back to the Future* is that a small town like Hill Valley, in 1955, had not started its own rock'n'roll revolution, but was getting ready for it, and that this boy (a teenager, indeed, not an adult) from a far future serves as catalyst to prepare that community for their immediate future. Marty plays a piece of "mature" rock'n'roll, so to speak, a song that was released in 1958 when the genre had already been enjoying its peak of popularity for a couple of years (although, mind you: Chuck Berry wrote "Johnny B. Goode" in 1955, but of course performance, production and post production of the song are all typical of later years). In doing so, he pushes the boundaries of his audience's taste, but – as we can see in the movie – he succeeds in having his little rock'n'roll revolution on the spot: the boys and the girls, after initial hesitation start getting into the song and dance in an increasingly audacious way. Marvin Berry runs at the phone to call his cousin Chuck, suggesting that this is the direction his music should take (and, indeed, as we said, "Johnny B. Goode" was actually written in 1955!).

So, is the small town of Hill Valley going to be in the frontline of the American rock'n'roll revolution? Well, almost. The problem is that Marty gets carried away a bit too much. While playing his solo he, so to speak, anticipates too much of the future, performing techniques like the "tapping" (whose introduction in rock is commonly attributed to Steve Hackett from Genesis, in 1971) and spectacular acts like kicking the amplifier or playing over the head that were to be seen only in late 1960s, thanks to the likes of Pete Townshend or Jimi Hendrix. To an extent, that solo is a micro history of rock, beginning indeed as a rock and roll solo, then evolving into chronologically successive genres like mod, psychedelia, hard rock and heavy metal. As Marty's playing becomes increasingly dissonant and loud, and his movements more extrovert and theatrical, the audience (and the band!) do not follow him anymore and simply stop to stare at this weirdo crawling on the stage and almost simulating sex with his guitar. As he leaves the stage, Marty delivers to the audience one of the best remembered lines of the movie: "I guess you're not ready for this yet – but your kids're gonna love it!". The sensation, sociomusicologically speaking, is that Marty *prepares the ground* for the rock'n'roll revolution in Hill Valley, but it will still take the Elvis phenomenon or releases like "Tutti Frutti" or "Blue Suede Shoes" to make that revolution really happen.

The point, however, is well made: rock'n'roll may not be the sole reason for the generational gap between a teenager from the mid-1980s and one from the mid-1950s, but it is certainly constructed here as the main factor. The fact that Marty seems to be more self-aware, self-confident and resourceful than his peers from the past do not seem to have a lot to do with more predictable characteristics: not family, for sure, as the beginning of the movie presents his family as literally a bunch of losers; not school, since we are also given the hint that, albeit intelligent, Marty is not madly brilliant or motivated at school. No: Marty seems to be like this mostly due to the fact that he is a kid who has grown up during and *within* the rock'n'roll culture.

17. 33-34 ND: A melancholic bit merging into a tense bit.

I shall now treat two musical segments in one single body as the two are tied as one, but also because this allows us to underline how music can be extremely effective in turning moods and atmosphere. Marty has just left the stage after his "controversial" performance. He has a chance to say goodbye to his future parents, who by now are a couple in all respects. Lorraine diplomatically labels his rendition of "Johnny B. Goode" as "interesting" (the classic word we use for art that we do not like), but both she and George openly state their gratitude to this strange young man who has managed to turn their lives upside down in just a few days. As the three are parting we hear a soft, tender musical background, as we would expect, but as soon as Marty walks out the exit door, the music turns immediately tense and slightly thrilling. Marty has made an enormous effort to secure a natural course for the future of his family, but this is only half of the job: he now has to physically come back to the future, and after all the vicissitudes and adventures of the last few hours he realizes he is quite late for the appointment with Dr. Brown, who, meanwhile, is preparing the time machine to be hit by the thunder. *Back to the Future* is a movie filled with sudden changes of scenery and action: this is one of those moments – and the music is very effective in dramatically turning a happy/melancholic moment into a "hurry-up" scene.

18. 36 D: "Heaven Is One Step Away" is heard from a portable radio.

One more travel in time has been performed. We see the car disappearing in a flash in 1955, and the young Dr. Brown celebrating like a footballer who has just scored a goal. The images crossfade into the city hall: did Marty really come back to 1985? It is sounds that tell us. The first that we hear is that of a helicopter, and that feels more like a clue than an assurance: yes, a helicopter flying over civilian areas is a much more frequent

occurrence in the 1980s than in the 1950s, but modern helicopters had already been operative since the Second World War, so – albeit unlikely – the possibility that a helicopter is flying over Hill Valley in 1955 is not to be ruled out. What proves without doubt that Marty's return to his age was successful is what we hear right after: a portable transistor radio of a drunken *clochard* who is sleeping on a nearby bench is airing Eric Clapton's "Heaven Is One Step Away". Hardly Clapton's best-known song, what really helps the association between this musical segment and the 1980s is not the familiarity of the tune, but the arrangement and the production – what we usually call "the sound" of a song. Despite being audible through a small portable radio, we hear elements that are unmistakably typical of this decade: the use of a synth, drier acoustics, more compression, etc. Just as "Mr. Sandman" had announced the 1950s, "Heaven Is One Step Away" now declares officially that the protagonist is back in the 1980s.

19. 39 D: "Back in Time" from the alarm-radio.

At this point of the story, despite Marty's failed attempts to save his scientist friend, we find out that Doc had, after all, read the warning letter and when performing the time travel experiment for the first time he had worn a bulletproof jacket, expecting the terrorists to come. The adventure has ended well and Brown is now ready to embark on what was supposed to happen from the start: *his own* time travelling experience, in the future, this time. It is late night, Marty heads home and the two friends part on Brown's promise that he will take care of his younger friend while in the future. The DeLorean disappears in the sky, headed to 2015, and Marty goes home to sleep.

The morning after we see him sleeping in the very same position we mentioned in the musical bit 8 ND: Marty is sleeping with his clothes on, with no blanket, on the side and with his hands behind his back. Everything looks identical and the camera also takes care to frame the shot in exactly the same manner as the other scene. What this Chekhov's rifle is supposed to hint to us is a doubt: the previous time we saw Marty sleeping in that position was right before the incredible adventure he experienced, and now we see him again sleeping: was this all a dream, actually? Did the whole adventure really happen?

Marty is awakened by an alarm radio, playing the other of the two songs that Huey Lewis & The News wrote for the film. This one is called "Back in Time", and curiously was the first track that Lewis submitted to the film producers as a candidate for the main song. The producers were not madly persuaded that "Back in Time" was catchy enough to play such an important role, so they asked Lewis to come up with something else, expecting anyway to use this first submission somewhere in the movie, albeit indeed less prominently. Lewis, as we know, will eventually submit "The Power of Love" and in retrospective we can all agree that the producers were right and this second submission

had much more, well, “power” than the first. At any rate, with “The Power of Love” getting the spotlight, “Back in Time” is still given plenty of attention, being featured in the scene we are now describing and, more importantly, during the end titles of the movie.

The song awakes Marty, shedding – as we said – the suspicion that the whole adventure happened in Marty’s dreams (suspicion teased even more by the lyrics of the song: “back in time” indeed!). As we know, however, Marty will get up and find his house and relatives completely changed. The “bunch of losers” that had appeared at the beginning of the movie has now turned into a very successful and good looking family. The house is big and beautifully furnished, his brother wears a suit before going to work (in the beginning of the movie, he was presented as working in a fast food store), his sister is an attractive young woman with many suitors (in the beginning, she was presented as the opposite), and George and Lorraine are a beautiful young-looking couple that is still very much in love (while of course we were given a very depressing picture in the first few minutes of the film).

In the most typical tradition of American mainstream cinema the movie ends thus with what we may call an “extended” happy ending: not only the adventure itself ends positively with Marty’s safe return home, but also his interference with the natural course of the events has changed for the better all the circumstances and people surrounding him. As that Tears for Fears song goes, "watching Mother Nature's knees bending, everybody loves a happy ending".

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