

Modeling Masculinity in Frank Ocean's *Blonde* and the Music of Elliott Smith

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Abstract

This paper examines performance(s) of **masculinity** in the music of Frank Ocean and Elliott Smith. The primary focus of analysis is Frank Ocean's sophomore release *Blonde* (2016) while Elliott Smith's solo career is used as a point of comparison. Important to this paper are opinions of each artist from fans and critics alike. Performances by both artists are analyzed in detail to delineate the way both musicians, in different ways, *fail* to fit into **popular music** performance standards. **Non-academic** reviews and opinions of *Blonde* are used as bases for analysis, such as the glaring lack of drums on the album which represents a certain ambivalence toward the commonly understood sexuality of popular music. Both Ocean and Smith perform **alternatives** to popular masculinity in both their recorded music and performances—these alternatives can also be understood as **failures** to be productive in a normative manner.

1. Introduction

Pop artists have been forced to develop more rigid, rehearsed, and extravagant show routines over time. There have been many examples of artists who work contrary to this hyper-stylized and “perfected” template, but none so effective and contrary as Frank Ocean and the late Elliott Smith. Frank invokes Smith prominently during the climax of his song “Seigfried” from *Blonde* (2016), by singing a line from the chorus of “Fond Farewell” from Elliott's posthumous release, *From a Basement on the Hill* (2004). Thus, I consider Smith as one of the many possible models for Frank Ocean's anti-masculine performance style. On stage, Ocean and Smith both perform “poorly” but please their audiences thoroughly, and through this represent new ways of being a man on stage. One of Elliott's solo concerts will serve as an exaggeration of underperformance and a point of comparison to Frank.

2. “Drums” Criticism

Hip-hop commentator Joe Budden called Frank Ocean's 2016 album *Blonde* “trash” in 2017 on *Everyday Struggle*, Complex Magazine's “Hip-hop debate show.” Initially he did not disparage the album by name, but referred to it as “Frank [*sic*] last album.” His co-hosts responded in shock almost in unison: “no it wasn't—*Blonde*?” and “which one, *Blonde*?” Budden responds to their surprise with “the one with no drums on it,” as if that communicates concisely that he is correct in his judgement. The other two hosts raise two different arguments in response: one being “you need drums, though?” and the other being “have you continued to listen to it?” The first point is answered affirmatively. The real issue is that there *are* “drums” on the album. The first track prominently has a programmed drum groove throughout. But something in Budden's criticism kept both hosts from mentioning that there are obviously drums present on the album. The fact that drums are not ubiquitous on the album means—to Budden, that is—that there are *no* drums at all. Of the seventeen tracks, three have drums throughout. “Nights” and “Pink and White,” two of the

three, are also the first two tracks listed under “Popular” on Ocean’s Spotify page. Is Budden then simply relaying the interests of Ocean’s loyal fanbase?

No—Budden is referring to the lack in reference to how *he* perceives Frank and the traditions in which he works (or has worked). Prior to *Blonde*, Frank released *Nostalgia, Ultra* in 2011 and *Channel Orange* in 2012, both with drums on almost every track. These albums fit quite well into R&B and Pop expectations. So it would only make sense for Budden and other fans to assume that Frank’s highly anticipated 2016 release would fit the bill as well. The fact that it does not is what frustrates Joe Budden. If *Blonde* had been Frank’s first ever release, such backlash may not have occurred. How can we understand Frank Ocean’s removal of drums in terms of common music analysis?

Simon Frith discusses (in *Performing Rites*) sonata form as pitting the masculine fast, forceful sections against the feminine slow, feeble ones.³ In keeping with Frith’s acknowledgement of this musicological understanding of classical music, Joe Budden’s feeling that the lack of drums ruins the album may be seen as an issue of emasculation. Lack itself comes to have many meanings. Elliott Smith, similarly to Ocean, was once part of a tight-knit, masculine music scene and suddenly departed to do something entirely new. Elliott’s solo recordings featured a higher-pitched, whisper-like vocal style that was totally the opposite of what he did publicly in his scene. Once his close friend and bandmate Neil Gust heard the new style of singing in Elliott’s solo material, he laughed. But perhaps Neil laughed less at how Elliott’s voice sounded and more at how it didn’t sound. It lacked edge, grit, volume. This lack, again, comes to mean something on its own. Using lack as creation is a distinctly anti-pop and even anti-corporate music industry gesture, employed to great effect by both Elliott and Frank.

3. Repurposing Oneself

Enough about lack—what do Elliott and Frank do in place of using drums? They repurpose the guitar. For context, in the 1960s the guitar gained popular recognition as a symbol of sexual might with the help of performers like Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix. Today, most concertgoers and musicians alike are aware of the guitar-as-phallus and either exploit or shun this imagery.

Elliott Smith had been releasing solo music (whisper-quiet vocals and acoustic guitar only) for two years prior to his departure from the band. The instrumentation of the group (two electric guitars, drums, and electric bass) did not allow Elliott to sing the way he preferred to. Heatmiser functioned in a common rock band formula: two primary songwriters who are often at each other’s throats. Smith was one writer and guitarist/frontman, and Neil Gust was the other. The two would sing their own compositions, as is also relatively commonplace for bands with shared songwriter duties. Neil’s vocal quality is quite different from his counterpart in both speech and performance—where Elliott’s is a tenor, thin one, Neil’s is deep and rich. Despite his stronger voice, Gust seems to lack a developed ear for singing melodies. He often speak-sings, a style choice that has a rich history in the pop, rock, and folk traditions. Elliott had a penchant for dense harmony, irregular form, and non-conventional melody. Take for example his focus on the scale degree flat five (b 5) (a pitch which is outside of both major and minor scales) as heard prominently in his songs “Going Nowhere”⁴ and “the Fix is In.”⁵

A direct analogue between Ocean and Smith can be seen in their use of the guitar. Elliott almost exclusively played electric with Heatmiser but rarely did in his solo recordings. On Frank’s first two releases, the few uses of guitar are not prominent or particularly memorable. However, the important difference between these albums and *Blonde* (and Heatmiser’s use of guitar compared to Elliott’s use of it in his first solo release *Roman Candle* from 1994) is that on the latter, the guitar functions as expressing not only harmony but melody and rhythm. At the outset of *Roman Candle*, Elliott plays the guitar in his quick, light finger-strumming style. This technique makes for deep bass notes (helped by his tendency to play in D standard tuning, a whole step lower than standard tuning) and wispy treble notes that are never harsh to the ears. The highest pitched sounds that occur in Smith’s guitar/vocals solo recordings is the sliding of his left hand around the neck of the guitar. This use of the guitar is in stark contrast to rock practice.

As Frith discusses *singing-black* and primitivity in expressions of rhythm, the issue of the guitar in rock music is understood but not acknowledged.⁶ The analysis concerns the phenomenon of white performers appropriating and exaggerating black art such as the blues and rock ‘n’ roll so much as to force black musicians into resembling stereotypes. In the 1960s the guitar gained popular recognition as a symbol of sexual might with the help of performers like Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix. This symbolism had maintained ground through the early 90s.

Elliott Smith’s turn from wearing an electric guitar at his knees to sitting and playing an old Yamaha acoustic represents more than a rebellion against rock and its absurdity. Elliott choosing to be independent—to transform his guitar into an orchestra—demonstrates not a yearning for individualism but one for truth and transparency in the transmission of a song (story). *Roman Candle* (1994), *Elliott Smith* (1995), and *Either/Or* (1997) all feature Elliott alone, playing several instruments on each. The important piece here is Elliott’s choice *not* to find a new band to play

his music with—he seemed to, instead, repurpose his guitar entirely, giving himself total control over how his stories are told. Frank Ocean does the same with *Blonde* by the very nature of its release: Frank famously broke from DefJam records (associated primarily with hip-hop and R&B) to release the album independently, through a label aptly named “Boys Don’t Cry,” taking full control of the project. Where was Frank led once he had full control of the album? Frank liberates the album of the obligation forced onto most pop albums: an obligation to help the listener have fun or dance. How does he liberate his music of this expectation?

In “Ivy,” the guitar is the only instrument besides Ocean’s voice featured throughout. The guitar has a distinct bass part and treble part, as well as a persistent pulse, similar to Elliott’s style. Allowing rhythm to be expressed through the guitar exclusively without the help of percussion or drums is a brave gesture for someone writing, seemingly, in the R&B or Pop tradition. (In trying to find an example to counter this claim in the Pop tradition, Simon & Garfunkel appears as a potential argument but their albums *Bridge* (1970), *Sounds* (1966), and *Parsley, Sage* (1966) each feature more songs with percussion or drum parts than without.) If drums and percussion allow listeners to “have fun” (dance, nod one’s head, etc.) while listening to an album or song, what opportunity does an overwhelming lack of drums grant the listener?

Simon Frith acknowledges fun as being considered the opposite of “art.” He goes on to mention performance of fun music: “rock audiences remain uneasy about musical instruments that appear to require no effort to be played.”⁷ Little effort appears to be required throughout Frank Ocean’s performance at Fuck Yeah Fest (henceforth FYF) 2017. The star has a band seated onstage with him—each member of the band wears studio headphones and faces toward each other, away from the audience. Frank walks casually around the stage with coy bravado and sings languidly to his loyal fanbase. It seems the entire stadium is singing along.⁸ They seem to be enjoying this anti-climatic show passionately, similarly to Elliott’s audiences at his low-key performances. Performances by Smith and Ocean do not read as particularly strong or impressive in a traditional “pop” sense—no fireworks, surprises, or dance routines. The performances of Ocean and Smith can then be interpreted as *failures*—failures to present music in the popularly prescribed “meaningful” way.

4. Performance

Legendary and innovative saxophonist Ornette Coleman said in 1966: “All the failure I’ve had has been, um, related to my sex life, to my race, and to the kind of music I’m playing... and I can’t change neither one.”⁹ Failure, then, is a necessary part of the musician’s life. There exists a common-sense narrative (especially within circles of working musicians) that posits painful and frequent failure as a necessary step toward “success.” Elliott Smith and Frank Ocean both redefine this dichotomy by *successfully* failing throughout their performances—that is, they fail *well*. This sentiment must be discussed with gratitude to Jack Halberstam and his book, *the Queer Art of Failure*.¹⁰

A trademark of Elliott Smith’s solo performances is his frequent musical missteps and awkward banter in between songs. In his performance at Henry Fonda Theater in 2003, months before his death (which could itself be interpreted as a failure), Elliott presents his strange and distinctly anti-pop and anti-rock stage demeanor in great relief. About halfway through the performance, following a heart-warming choir of friends joining the lonesome singer on stage, a concert-goer yells “get a backbone” at Elliott. Speaking sideways into the mic, he responds with “I’m playing almost nothing... I could tell you a dream I had last night otherwise I couldn’t be more fucking for real,” as he angrily bangs out G and C chords on his Yamaha acoustic.¹¹ The lone performer’s response to this moment seems to communicate that the fact of what he is doing is in itself a triumph of sorts: sitting on stage alone and playing personal songs. Elliott could be read as saying, “I might suck at this but at least I am doing it.”

Throughout his concert, Elliott, in great contrast with Frank Ocean at FYF, acknowledges his audience with great specificity, as he did here. Whereas Frank wore isolation headphones over his in-ear monitors to escape the roar of the crowd, Elliott asks fans which songs they would like to hear next throughout the concert. During Frank’s performance, fans yell requests, demands, recommendations, ideas, for songs. The singer meets these demands sometimes by coincidence but never invites them.¹²

For Elliott, song requests are not just that: they are invitations to feel or to tell particular stories. As Elliott descends again to his chair after returning for an encore, a fan asks sweetly to play ‘Pitseleh,’ to which the singer responds: “Pitseleh is long and boring, in my opinion.” Shortly thereafter, another fan requests another George Harrison song (the previous set had ended with one) and Smith says “I don’t wanna do a George Harrison song and fuck it up—I’d want to go through it first, out of respect... you know what I mean.” Elliott is displaying here a desire for quality—he knows that he is capable of being embarrassed, failing on stage, and perhaps he expects it constantly, hence his response to the “backbone” insult. After this exchange, Elliott starts into “No Name #1,” one of his oldest songs—in response, a fan squeals like a Beatles fangirl at Shea Stadium before the end of the second bar. Through Elliott’s stilted

and confrontational stage banter (generally considered the sign of an unprofessional performer), he still holds the audience's attention and pleases them with each choice, no matter how accidental or careless.

This demonstrates that while Elliott is open to fan intervention, recommendation, participation, he maintains a certain confidence in his own preferred (practiced?) repertoire and this confidence is well-informed through his substantial performance experience. The singer often apologizes for mistakes after finishing a song, defending (or perhaps deprecating—where is the difference?) himself by communicating ‘look, I know what I did *wrong*, so don't worry about it, I'll try and do better next time.’ The self-defense in these apologies is quite the opposite of Frank Ocean's faux-carelessness on stage.

It seems as if Frank has little reason to defend himself—the only times he explains why he's playing a song at FYF is when he performs a cover, such as “Only You.” He may have to defend himself because the audience is unfamiliar with the material, and thus doesn't trust its merit. Frank introduces the song, an obscure eighties pop song by Steve Monite, a Nigerian vocalist, saying “...I really wanted to sing it cause I thought it was fun, so... uh, that's what I'm bout to do.” Frank then performs a casual, non-committal relationship to the concert, implying that he's singing off the cuff, as if he's in his bedroom. This song is the only one of the night in which it appears that Frank is reading a lyric sheet on a music stand, as seen in the video. He refrains from his usual coy walk around the stage and instead stays in front of the stand, nearly for the whole duration of the song. In keeping with Frith's analysis of performance as being a public construction of the private, here the singer almost appears to be practicing or spending time with friends, playing a tune, based on its selection and his introduction (rather than his reading a lyric sheet). This type fabrication of casual comfort is perhaps the most important piece of Frank's performance at FYF. For example, before singing the first line of the night, the enigmatic singer says humbly, “thanks for comin' out,” as if the crowd of thousands is a group of friends leaving his apartment after a small party. Frith asserts that “if we are moved by a performer we are moved by what we *immediately* hear and see,”¹³ but what about the artist whose gestures appear to mean very little? Ocean is such a performer—throughout the 2017 concert at FYF, Frank underperforms. If pop music and media has produced such “over-the-top” artists as Prince, Michael Jackson, Jimi Hendrix, and others, how does Frank Ocean fit into the pop paradigm (since he apparently does, according to his iTunes profile)? *Blonde* itself is an underperformance, a study in lack.

4.1. Lack as Creation

One user's comment on an article collecting quotes about *Blonde* from a week after its release reads, “I've seen a lot of people complain about the lack of drums, but I really like the...atmosphere it creates.” Many artists of the avant-garde have used a lack to create something new: Picasso eventually lacked form and perspective; Ornette Coleman's famous quartets lacked harmonic accompaniment; and Schönberg lacked recognizable tonality. Lizzie Plaugic, quoted in the same article, says concisely that “*Blonde* is both full and empty; love is never allowed to exist without lack.”¹⁴ This writer's imagery mirrors the strange structure of almost every song on the album—a distinct A / B split. Of course, dichotomy is well understood to be an important part (if not the most important part) of Western music—tension and release, masculine versus feminine, slow versus fast, et cetera. But what is interesting about *Blonde*'s use of A and B is that there is rarely any type of return “home.” That is, its compositions tend to be linear with reference to the songs' superstructures. Further, these superstructures *lack* that which normally creates the structure of popular music, the repetition of a verse and chorus.

Dramatic shifts in harmony and orchestration mark separations between A and B on the album. The “B” sections tend to involve more dense arrangements and vocal harmonies. Two especially dramatic instances of these shifts are in “Seigfried” and “White Ferrari.” Examples from the latter are below.

1) "White Ferrari" harmony, played on synth pads
0:00-1:27

CA E- FΔ

2) "Ferrari" harmony, acoustic guitar
2:13-2:37, climax of song

3) "Ferrari" harmony, acoustic guitar & keyboard
3:07-3:50, outro (reprise/reworking of original harmony)

FΔ EΔ GΔ CA GΔ FΔ

The image shows two musical staves in G-flat major (one flat). The first staff, labeled '1) "White Ferrari" harmony, played on synth pads' with a time range of 0:00-1:27, shows a chord progression of CA, E-, and FΔ. The second staff, labeled '2) "Ferrari" harmony, acoustic guitar' with a time range of 2:13-2:37, shows a progression of FΔ, EΔ, and GΔ. The third staff, labeled '3) "Ferrari" harmony, acoustic guitar & keyboard' with a time range of 3:07-3:50, shows a progression of CA, GΔ, and FΔ. All staves use a treble clef and a key signature of one flat.

Figure 1. Three harmonic progressions from “White Ferrari.”
Note: this piece is *not* in A-flat major, as indicated by its key signature.

The song’s harmony eventually returns “home,” or to the original key center, in example 3. Though there is a return to the original, stable key center established in the beginning of the song, its harmonic rhythm is doubled. If Frith’s analysis (a popular one) of sonata form, that the masculine and feminine are essentially two drastically different sections fighting, is correct, how does Frank’s forms fit into this frame? (It should be noted that sonata form influence the popular song form established in the 20s of AABA—this has become somewhat standardized in much of popular music since.) In “Ferrari,” the climax (emotional, musical, lyrical, volume) happens during the section with a semi-vague tonal center and is quite brief in comparison to the song’s other sections. Ocean’s form and harmonic structures when allowed to be themselves agents of storytelling, as they must be, suggest that *things change*. Even that with which you find yourself familiar, the I–iii–IV chord progression in the key of C in “Ferrari” for example, changes in subtle ways after going through emotional turmoil. Ocean tells us to move past the hardship.

5. Pulse

Frith writes that “rhythm, like dance, is always about bodily control (not the lack of it).”¹⁵ Does a lack of drums (and therefore a clearly stated rhythm) then imply a lack of bodily control? It represents less a lack of control of the body and more a control of the mind that is *allowed* by the lack of bodily interest. The listener is given *space* to focus on harmony, the interaction of melody with accompaniment, and lyric. Frith refers to Jonathan Kramer on p. 149: “Once music is ‘unencumbered’ by plot, character, narrative...then it really is only about time, about ‘tonal relationships existing and transforming in time.’”¹⁶ If this is true, the inverse may be true as well: that music unencumbered by time (overt expression of a pulse through drums, that is) is more openly be “about” plot, character, et cetera. Songs generally understood to be “about” plot are known as ballads—slow songs with beautiful melodies and harmony. But Frank and Elliott don’t need a slow pulse to create a story-song.

Take Elliott Smith’s self-titled album from 1995 in comparison with *Blonde*, for example. Neither album is populated entirely with slow songs that ache but even the artists’ more uptempo compositions retain a *duality* of pulse. That is, when instrumentation is sparse (only chordal accompaniment and vocals in both cases), pulse can be heard as being in a number of places. In Elliott’s case, the tension between two frames placed on top of one another is his folk or country inspired two-beat feel, as heard in “Single File” and “the Biggest Lie” and his rock backbeat (with accents on beats 2 and 4) groove featured on “Coming Up Roses,” “Clementine,” and “Christian Brothers.”¹⁷ (Important to note is that the latter three feature percussion tracks which produce the pulse clearly and tells the listener where to hear the phrasing throughout. Similarly, the three songs on *Blonde* with drums stay true to their expressed pulse, for the most part.)

“Ivy,” the second track on *Blonde*, features two distinct electric guitar tracks, as previously mentioned. In discussing the song’s pulse, where would one place a backbeat (the backbone, so to speak, of popular music in the U.S. since the 1960s, most commonly expressed by a snare drum) in this song if a band with a drummer were to cover the song? The song’s tempo does not lend itself especially well to a half-time groove as in “Nights” or “Nikes.” But if the beat were

expressed more quickly, it would sound like an indie rock song. Adding drums to a recording clarify—the clearly stated rhythmic drive gives the listener a lifejacket so they need not drown in the sensations brought about that do not have to do with the body. Just as in the jazz tradition, during a ballad a drummer will tend to play brushes in a slow scrape, adding a constant white noise to the landscape of the song. It can be difficult in a jazz band to agree on an underlying pulse for a ballad—a drummer may imply a triplet 6/8 feel, the bassist might play straight eighth notes, and the singer may be singing swung eighth notes. To avoid percussion’s aggressive assertion of pulse, Frank liberates “Ivy” of drums entirely. This lack acts as its own instrument, the absence is heard, as Joe Budden points out. But how does Frank utilize drums prominently on the album?

Frank’s “Nights” appears aware of the power of different ways to express pulse. The song begins with a lightly swinging half-time groove that doesn’t help drive the song due to its lack of syncopation—the guitar and vocals drive the song, rather. About a quarter of the way through the song, the guitar disappears for the most part and is replaced by a synth that holds chords out at length, with no break between (and thus no expressed rhythm!). With this switch of accompaniment, the drums earn a syncopated kick drum and the swung rhythm of the hihat disappears as it is cut in half. Frank’s vocal phrasing changes completely, as well. The first lines sung that accompany this section support my previous observation that *Blonde*’s linear forms communicate a yearning for freshness, a moving on: “new beginnings.” After an interlude that focuses in on the lyric (because the drums drop out and all rhythm seems to fade away in a wash of synthesizer pads and strings), distorted guitars fade in that seem to end the song. But it is a false ending: suddenly, a short piano sample starts with a trap-style half-time groove.

Frank’s use of several different pulses and rhythmic frames on this track represent his awareness that a groove is a bias—a watering down of the complexity of interpretation on the part of the listener (and performer). Perhaps in the writing of the song, Ocean could not decide which pulse to settle on, so he included each. If pulse is bias, Frank allows the story of this song to be told from several angles in the form of a pulse or new bias. But—again—he chooses to leave drums out throughout the album. Does this indicate a more truthful expression of the stories told? Or is the listener experiencing the stories firsthand? Perhaps the stories are not intended to be understood but felt, seen, experienced.

5.1. Restraint

As we now see, *Blonde*’s lack of drums is not a complete lack. Frank mostly chooses to delineate rhythm through electric guitars and keyboards on the album. But only on a few tracks do these harmonic instruments actually display a steady pulse—Frank’s voice is the primary rhythmic guide on the album, for the most part. “Solo,” for example, is built on a harmonically interesting organ track but its rhythm almost exclusively whole, half, and quarter notes at a slow tempo. Ocean’s vocals however drive the song in its half-sung, half-rapped verses. This song matches a few memorable melodies with dense rhythmic figures, sung in tandem.

In *the Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson ruminates on her and her partner’s bodies, marred seemingly forever by childbirth and sexual transition respectively. She asks, “can fragility feel as hot as bravado?” and answers in the affirmative immediately, if with some confusion as to how.¹⁹ If we allow “hot” to mean not just attractive but affirming and present, *Blonde* answers with a resounding “yes” as well, with its lack of bravado in the form of overwhelming pulse biases expressed by percussion or drums. But how does Frank’s fragility appear to stand on its own like a hot pink-red flower barely beginning to wilt? In imagining the esteemed male performer as fragile, there exists potential representatives in various traditions: Paul Motian, Robert Fripp, Jonny Greenwood, Elliott Smith of course, and others. Unconventional restraint in some form is the common thread among each of these players, as it is in Frank’s album and performance.

The sometimes violent collision of listeners’ expectations with reality creates this image of restraint. We would not necessarily consider, say, Ahmad Jamal especially restrained if the history of the jazz piano were not one of incredible displays of virtuosity and might. Jamal’s insistence on playing famous tunes scantily expresses a cool, careless demeanor in comparison to Art Tatum’s grandiose treatment. Frank Ocean’s skin color itself works as a frame by which listeners may (and certainly do) develop expectations around how his music may sound. One may ask: in listening to a new album, how could you bring racial prejudice to the music immediately?

Black men are frequently reduced to their aggression, sexuality, and appearance in media. Rock ‘n’ roll music has done quite well at this—in *Instruments of Desire*, a book centered around Rock music and the electric guitar, Steve Waksman expands on the fetishization of black art and style by citing luminary black thinker Frantz Fanon: “[he] has described how black maleness has been reduced historically not only to a body but to a penis, which is in turn amplified to superhuman proportions.”²⁰ Ocean fights against this fetishizing of blackness by refusing to focus on drums—that essential element that demands bodily awareness, control, and ultimately, movement in dance. With their linear forms, “Nights” and “White Ferrari” indicate that Frank is asking his audience to move forward, to feel then move on—not to

dwel. Whereas the standard pop design of repeating verse and chorus with driving drums asks us to dance and feel the same things over and over, *Blonde* overwhelmingly tells us to sit down, cry for a few minutes, and move on.

American masculine culture often bars men (especially black men) from crying, however. To cry is to forfeit restraint and control—to give in to suffering and let it pour out of your eyes. Frank references the act of crying a few times on the album such as the line “eat some shrooms, maybe have a good cry about you,” in “Seigfried.” Here crying has a particular function, to help cope with the dissolution of a relationship, presumably. No matter what the specifics of the “good cry” are, Frank describes it as being a momentary thing: something that is available and useful, helpful. The album’s few references to tears are accentuated by the fact that Frank’s independent label through which he released *Blonde* is named “Boys Don’t Cry.”

6. Audience Buy-In

In an article investigating Frank Ocean’s performance at FYF, a writer for Pitchfork asserted: “that people were watching and cheering for him was almost beside the point,” implying that Frank was performing for himself.²¹ This is an informative reading, but even more informative is that they compare Frank’s vocal delivery to Björk’s the night before.

This is an inappropriate comparison as Björk’s performance is marked by extravagance in dress and stage show (fireworks included) instrumentation, constant vocal invention, and total detachedness from the audience whereas Frank sings over already placed vocal tracks, breaks his performance seemingly at random, to allow the recordings to lead the show, and refuses to dance in any strong manner. He wears a t-shirt, blue pants, and sneakers. Björk dons an outfit that looks like it could have been made of huge amounts of colored tissue paper.²² The Pitchfork writer’s acknowledgement of Frank’s strong performance only in terms of its adjacency to Björk’s proves that much of his performance was in fact rather shallow in its own right. The article that asks “was it worth it,” (Frank’s first U.S. show in years) answers the question by describing the setting rather than the performance itself.

Overwhelmingly, Frank’s performance at FYF Fest aims to replicate the way his recordings sound. Frith acknowledges that performances are “emergent structure(s).”²³ Throughout his set, Frank attempts to reframe himself and his music by having all of it played live, as in “Ivy” or “Good Guy,” only vocals (along with lush backing vocal tracks) performed live as in “Nikes,” or adding in new material as in the intro to “Self Control.” One of the most interesting moments is Frank’s performance of “Good Guy,” which is a rather insignificant track on the album. The singer plays keyboard live and improvises widely as his band comes on stage for the first time. The audience seems impressed at Ocean’s new material but once the sequence ends, Frank turns to his keyboardist and says, “we’re gonna do that sequence over, I wasn’t really stoked on that, so I’m gonna do it again.” And he and his band do just that—the same thing, again. The audience doesn’t seem to mind and quiets down once he starts up again. Repeating an entire song because it wasn’t good enough is rather rare and could be considered as much of a failure as someone could possibly have on stage. Once his band finishes their part, Ocean says into the mic, “I think that was better.” The audience erupts into applause.

This instance is different from Elliott Smith’s constant self-deprecation and implication that his attempting to play a George Harrison song without practicing first would be *disrespectful* to the dead singer. Where Elliott is concerned with showing respect to the composition and the composers, Frank implies that his desire is to make the audience happy only. But there is a glaring problem in this desire in that the singer, as evidenced by the “Good Guy” episode, can do no wrong. The audience response proves that pop performance is much more about the fact of the event and smaller events contained therein (songs, jokes, etc.) than the tiny events contained in the drunken hands of Smith struggling to find chord shapes or the insistently lazy walk of Ocean across the stage.

6.1. Self Control

As Frith states, the rules that bind the Pop concert are on always on display during a the performance itself.²⁴ Consider the difficulty with which one must purchase tickets (expensive ones) online months and months in advance in order to be present at most large-scale Pop concerts. Oftentimes, for especially popular shows, one must jump onto a site as soon as the tickets go on sale to have the slightest chance of getting any. This obnoxious experience is well-known by concert goers by this point and without a doubt influences our feelings about seeing concerts in general and especially if we manage to earn access to a show that was highly sought after. The phrase “I can’t believe I paid money for this” could represent a special kind of entitlement endemic in concertgoers who become disappointed by a particular performance. The issue here, of course, is expectation versus reality.

The case of “Self Control” is an interesting one—normally the song has a simple three-bar intro that establishes the key of A-flat major, as seen in the example (Figure 1) below. Live at FYF Fest (immediately following the proud failure of “Good Guy”) Frank’s band performs a vamp that loops those first two chords. This repetition recontextualizes the harmony of the song and effectively puts it into the key of B-flat minor by repeating the “two five” (ii – V7) relationship over and over, thus creating the sound of a “one four” (i – IV7) relationship, as seen in the second example (Figure 2), below.

1) "Self Control" intro from *Blonde*, once guitar enters

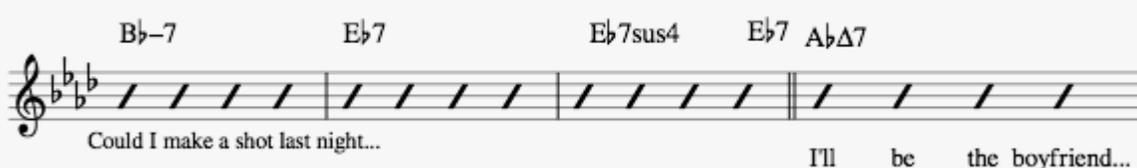


Figure 1. Recorded introduction to “Self Control” from *Blonde*.

2) "Self Control" intro from FYF 2017

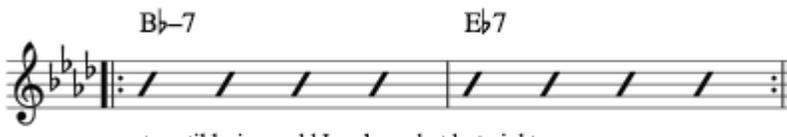


Figure 2. Live introduction to “Self Control” from FYF.

This loop allows Frank to deliver a rap verse not heard on the album. His verse functions much the same as one from the 30s: repetitive, uninteresting harmony that tells a brief yet relevant story that gives more power to the “chorus.” Ocean, then, is giving new, *black* life to the early twentieth century show tune’s verse. The excitement gifted to the audience when Ocean finally says “poolside convo” (the lyric that begins the track on the album) is palpable even from watching the video. One user’s comment on a different post of the same performance reads: “When I heard “Poolside Convo” my soul really left my body.” This moment is one of the few in which Frank chooses to excite his audience with something new—by and large, he chooses to use ways he (and they) know already to be entertaining.

Frank’s performance at FYF and Elliott’s at Henry Fonda both demonstrate a certain ambivalence toward performance but their ambivalences differ. Where Elliott tries to tell the stories he wants to tell (i.e. saying “Pitseleh” is boring and refusing to play it), Frank implies that he “simply” wants to please the audience. But there is a glaring problem in this desire—the singer, as evidenced by the “Good Guy” episode and the Pitchfork article, can do no wrong according to his fans. The positive audience response proves that pop performance is much more about the *fact* of the macro-event and smaller events contained therein than the micro-events contained in the drunken hands of Smith struggling to find chord shapes or Frank’s voice cracking. This shows that how these artists perform is almost irrelevant to whether their audiences enjoy the show. The quality of the products they put out and *represent* on stage is enough to please listeners inherently.

While Elliott Smith may be a useful example of unmasculine performance for comparison to Ocean, there are many others—Frank actually invokes the Beatles in much the same way he does Elliott in the song “White Ferrari.” The Beatles (despite their controversial relationships to domestic abuse) could be thought of as doing similar work as Frank and Elliott in their choice not to tour for years, while releasing several hit albums. Important to note is that I chose not to engage discussion of the place of women in this analysis of performance, as this is an extremely important that begs for deep research. I aim to inspire future research on failed performances by women, children, and every other group (as I feel certain that there exist examples of such underperformances in any population).

7. Conclusion

Frank Ocean and Elliott Smith, in their recorded solo material as well as in their performances, actively break down the structures within which they operate *as* they operate within them. The structures broken down and redeveloped are Pop music and masculinity. My intention to analyze the masculinities represented by these two artists was halted

in its tracks quickly as I saw how little I cared to critique was was not there. Instead, a big portion of the investigation centered around the lack of drums, pulse, and thus, overt sexuality.

Ocean's second album, *Blonde*, does this by refusing to use drums to "excite" its compositions as is completely routine on Pop and R&B records. Elliott Smith did this similarly by leaving his alternative-rock band Heatmiser and doing away with yelling as was routine on Rock records. In their respective departures, both stripped orchestrations away and in doing so, revealed truer, more difficult means of storytelling. In a 2012 interview with the BBC, Frank claims about his composition, that "it's about the stories...so if I write fourteen stories that I love, then the next step is to get the environment of the music around it to best...envelop the story." *Blonde* does away with everything that does not help with storytelling, as did Elliott. And in both of their performances, they make mistakes throughout. But their audiences for the most part already know the stories (as is nearly inherent in the construction of a Pop concert in the 21st century), and so mistakes are practically irrelevant to communicating stories to listeners, as the stage is not at all the place to actually relay stories. Instead, it is the place to *remind* audience members of the stories and to conjure the feelings of these tales. This approach to performance is a distinctly studio-reliant one, that is to say, without modern recording technology, expecting an audience to know your stories would be ridiculous.

Elliott and Frank represent an ambivalence to stage performance that is both empowering to younger musicians and exciting—Pop artists' fiercely designed acts could be seen as an analog to currents in computation and the ever-increasing replacement of human jobs with machines that "do a good job." Failure and mistake-making are key parts of aesthetic communication and Smith and Ocean fought and are fighting, respectively, to preserve that.

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