

SYNTHESIZER AND SHOWINESS: THE EVOLUTION OF 1980S NEW WAVE AND  
SYNTH POP

by  
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## Introduction

*For years, the general view was that the early Eighties was all about Thatcherism, greed and excess, but it was an incredibly exciting time. ...People were more open then to extravagant, flamboyant ideas.*<sup>1</sup> ~Nick Rhodes of Duran Duran

If one were to look back at the 1980s' most notable relics—TV shows, fashion magazines, and celebrity tabloids, to name a few—one would never guess that the United States was going through a massive economic crisis. The 1982 recession and the 1987 stock market crash were all neatly masked beneath a gilded exterior of hairspray, blue eyeshadow, and catchy pop music, conveying a false sense of middle-class opulence. Exacerbating the disparity between pop culture and reality were the ongoing tensions of the Cold War, the flames of which were stoked in no small part by newly elected President Ronald Reagan. Children still practiced bomb drills by hiding under their desks—a near futile endeavor in defense against a nuclear attack—while people carried on with their lives as if the financial and international crises simply did not exist. This sentiment of ignorance, willful or not, was reflected in the social and popular trends with which Americans engaged.

As can be seen by the development of shopping malls, consumerism reached an all-time high in the 1980s. Television commercials like those for Fabergé perfume or the Sony Walkman bolstered the sentiment that having more material goods (or other purchasable commodities) equated to greater happiness. Women's makeup was defined by bold colors; both men and women's clothes were "trendy," sporting bright neon colors and lots of detail, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Rhodes, quoted in Robert Sandall, "Duran Duran: The Old Romantics," *The Independent*, September 17, 2004 (accessed March 24, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/duran-duran-the-old-romantics>.

hair was very, *very* big. In fact, in the 1980s, bigger was always better, and no realm of popular media confirmed this ethos better than some of the most popular music styles of that time: new wave and synth pop.

To understand why the 1980s was such a crucial decade for increasing musical showiness, we need to contrast it with what came socially, politically, and musically prior. A seemingly less musically turbulent era in many ways, the 1970s reflected a more understated and individualistic side of American culture. Some of the most prominent musical styles included the understated singer-songwriter tradition, folksy soft rock, and the often-minimalistic punk rock. These styles, although important and influential, underwent serious modifications to reflect the new opulence of the 1980s. Rock, for example, metamorphosized into various substyles such as “hair metal,” which by name alone demonstrates the increasingly gaudy nature of 1980s music. Punk, meanwhile, intertwined with disco (arguably the visually and sonically flashiest of the 1970s music styles) to create an innovative musical fusion: new wave.

Yet merging disco and punk alone was not the only crucial element to new wave’s development. What finally solidified the style’s identity was the introduction of a relatively new instrument into new wave: the synthesizer. This enabled musicians to create glittery pop tunes that invaded the charts and nightclubs, greatly increasing new wave’s danceability and making the style glitzier. I argue that the synthesizer is the primary element of new wave’s transformation into synth pop and consequently its increasing showiness. Furthermore, this increasing showiness occurred because of changing consumer tastes in the 1980s, coinciding with equally showy changes in fashion, makeup, and visual media (like film and music videos).

Because the lines between new wave and synth pop are somewhat blurry, I will discuss how these terms have been defined by various scholars. Musicologist Theo Cateforis defines new



wave as having a “cleaner, more commercially viable sound than punk’s noisy, distorted style, while still retaining punk’s edgy, irreverent attitude and determinedly antiromantic lyrical stance.”<sup>2</sup> MusicFestNews’ Rick Munroe states that punk rock is the musical and aesthetic origin of new wave, citing The Clash and The Ramones as influential predecessors of new wave and emphasizing punk rock’s interest in “non-conformity.”<sup>3</sup> Munroe also points out, however, that while some bands such as The Police and The Cars were occasionally associated with the new wave style (or were outright labelled as “new wave” bands), they do not uphold the tenets of the style as defined by Cateforis. Indeed, “new wave” is a problematic term because it is often too broad or too vague, referring to sonically unrelated songs and bands. Cateforis demonstrates this by citing sonically dissimilar bands as examples of new wave’s wide-ranging sound: the B-52s, the Knack, and the Human League. In this thesis, then, I will use “new wave” to refer to musicians from the late 1970s and early 1980s who emerged directly from the punk rock scene.

Synth pop is another term commonly used in popular parlance in the 1980s that refers to new wave-derived pop music that relies on the synthesizer as its most prominent instrument. As the name implies, synth pop (sometimes hyphenated) incorporates elements of more commercial, popular styles of music—such as catchy hooks and danceable beats—to new wave. Crucially, synth pop artists integrated more synthesizers into their music, creating new timbres absent from early new wave music. Munroe stated that “the new wave bands of that brief era shared a new

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<sup>2</sup> Theo Cateforis, “New Wave,” *Grove Music Online*, September 3, 2014 (accessed March 23, 2023), <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002267342?rskey=c68PpU&result=1>.

<sup>3</sup> Rick Munroe, “New Wave: A Forgotten Era in Music History,” October 1, 2019 (accessed March 23, 2023), <https://musicfestnews.com/2019/10/new-wave-a-forgotten-era-in-music-history/>.

instrument that would forever change music: the synthesizer. This instrument created the unique progressive sounds that ultimately created a subgenre of music known as synthesizer pop.”<sup>4</sup>

Cateforis, too, stated that “these synthesizer-based groups ...brought a distinct disco and funk influenced flavor to their music,” coinciding with the rise of “rock discos.”<sup>5</sup> As such, synth pop was even more commercially successful than its predecessor new wave. Music journalist J.D. Considine somewhat cynically noted, however, that “The message of the new British synth-pop is anybody with a tune and a portable keyboard can hit the charts.”<sup>6</sup>

The transition from new wave to synth pop sparked an uptick in sonic and visual showiness. Scholars and critics have recognized this shift in abstract terms but have not deeply examined the causes of this phenomenon. Music journalist Robert Sandall, for example, called the early 1980s the “brash-flash era,” while music critic Jim Sullivan of *The Boston Globe* said that artists like Roxy Music “blazed a dazzling trail” in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Synth pop performances consisted of ostentatious outfits, dancing, and stage lighting, whereas synth pop music videos mirrored such new, over-the-top trends representative of 1980s consumer culture as ostentatious clothing and makeup.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the terms “showy” or “showiness” to describe this sonic and visual shift from new wave to synth pop. “Spectacle” has been used by some to

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<sup>4</sup> Munroe, “New Wave.”

<sup>5</sup> Cateforis, “New Wave,” *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>6</sup> J.D. Considine, “Human League et al: Synth-Pop,” *Musician*, August 1982 (accessed March 26, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/human-league-iet-ali-synth-pop>.

<sup>7</sup> Sandall, “The Old Romantics,” and Jim Sullivan, “Out of the Blue, Roxy Music is Back,” *Boston Globe*, July 15, 2001 (accessed March 26, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/out-of-the-blue-roxy-music-is-back>.

describe the 1980s popular music aesthetic. However, the term “spectacle” typically denotes something visual. Although an element of synth pop’s showy nature the visual is not the only factor relevant to this thesis; the music is as well. “Bombast” or “bombastic” could be used, then, to describe the sonic changes from new wave to synth pop. Indeed, synth pop music is characterized by loud volumes, a somewhat quick, danceable beat, dense instrumentation, innovative and sometimes sharp timbres, and active melodic lines, especially in the synthesizer parts. However, “bombast” is often used pejoratively. This term, then, would prove unhelpful as a descriptor because it would suggest that the sonic qualities of synth pop are heard negatively. As such, I propose the term “showiness” to best describe the sonic and visual shifts between presentations of new wave and synth pop occurring in the 1980s. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines “showiness” as “the quality of trying to be noticed or to attract a lot of attention,” whereas The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “showy” as being “performed or displayed for show, or so as to attract attention or admiration.”<sup>8</sup> Although some definitions of “showy” carry negative connotations, such as *Dictionary.com*’s definition, the Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries’ definitions pertain to function rather than value, which is more useful for the purposes of this study.<sup>9</sup>

In this thesis, I explore the transition—and increasing showiness—from new wave to synth pop in the 1980s through an analysis of the music of new wave band Blondie and the synth

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<sup>8</sup> N.A., “Showiness,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary*, N.D. (accessed March 26, 2023),

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/showy>, and Michael Proffitt, ed., “Showy,” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, March 2017 (accessed March 26, 2023),

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/178776?redirectedFrom=showy#eid>.

<sup>9</sup> The definition of “showy” on *Dictionary.com* is “making an imposing display” or “pompous; ostentatious; gaudy.”

N.A., “Showy,” in *Dictionary.com*, N.D. (accessed April 23, 2023), <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/showy>.

pop band Duran Duran, two influential bands in their respective styles. More specifically, I analyze three albums from each band: Blondie's *Parallel Lines* (1978), *Eat to the Beat* (1979), and *Autoamerican* (1980), and Duran Duran's *Duran Duran* (1981), *Rio* (1982), and *Seven and the Ragged Tiger* (1983). I use musicologist Allan Moore's model of four functional layers of pop music textures to measure the increasing role of the synthesizer with each successive album released first by Blondie and then by Duran Duran. Moore states that, in a pop song, the four textural layers are:

1. The explicit beat layer, usually consisting of a drum set or a drum machine,
2. The functional bass layer, which combined with the explicit beat layer to create what Moore calls the "groove" of a song,
3. The melodic layer, primarily performed by the singer but occasionally performed by the guitar or synthesizer, and
4. The harmonic filler layer, which is supposed "to fill the registral space between [the functional bass and melody] layer."<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, I consider music theorist Megan Lavengood's proposed fifth layer: the novelty layer, which "functions in opposition to the melodic layer [and] comprises instruments whose timbral characteristics are more resistant to blending with the rest of the ensemble."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, I assess the role and importance of the synthesizer through its timbre and relative volume within the audio mix of a given song. The audio mix refers to the overall palette of the song, including

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<sup>10</sup> Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Megan Lavengood, "The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis: A Case Study in 1980s Pop Music, Texture, and Narrative," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 3 (September 2020), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.3/mto.20.26.3.lavengood.html>.

the volumes and timbres of each instrument, and any additional sound effects added to an instrument or the entire song (i.e., reverberation). I support my analyses with evidence drawn from an array of music criticism, live performances, interviews, critical reviews, and retrospective fan opinions from *YouTube* comments. Because the popular reception of these bands and their music is ill-documented in scholarly and popular resources, I use *YouTube* comments to supplement my arguments and highlight longtime fan opinions.

In Chapter 1, I first begin by examining the visual and sonic expression of new wave through the lens of Blondie's career from 1978 to 1980. I address the synthesizer's infancy in new wave and the provocative nature of lead singer Debbie Harry. In Chapter 2, I show increasing showiness in the rise of synth pop via the career of Duran Duran. Here, I show the maturation of the synthesizer in synth pop and the increasingly grandiose visual elements of 1980s artists. Lastly, I conclude with a discussion of new wave's transformation into synth pop and the implications of the two styles' incremental showiness.

## Chapter 1: Blondie, New Wave, and Female Sex Appeal

*...like desert dunes, [Debbie Harry] changes and shifts into a new topography, completely different from the one that preceded it. Flamboyant, outrageous, street-crawler sexy, little girl lost, Miss Innocent, all materialise and then disappear. Her contrasting moods and personas, whose friction gives her that enigmatic fire, mesh perfectly.*<sup>12</sup> ~Sheila Rock

New wave music originated from punk rock, a garage rock-derived style of music concerned with raw, unfussy music and anti-establishment messages. The punk rock style, or punk for short, arose in the mid-1970s in response to two emerging perceptions. Firstly, some musicians believed that rock 'n roll was becoming too complicated and ostentatious. Secondly, younger generations of people felt animosity toward the then-current conservative political governments in both the United States and the United Kingdom, and, unlike the hippies of the 1960s, they reacted with equally political beliefs.<sup>13</sup> Most punk rockers adopted a rebellious aura in both their presentation and their music. Anger directed toward (and in protest of) political and corporate entities came across in songs that were fast and driving, featuring minimal textures and raucous singing styles. This musical style went against most contemporary rock styles, which were either soft and smooth or rowdy and flashy. The back-to-basics, homegrown musical style

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<sup>12</sup> Sheila Rock, "She's The Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell," 19, October 1977, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Christgau, review of *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* by Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, July 28, 1996 (accessed March 24, 2023),

<https://web.archive.org/web/20191020182250/http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/bkrev/mcneil-nyt.php>.

and rebellious attitude of punk rock appealed to many young musicians, especially those that were already located in punk music hotspots.

In this chapter, I first provide a brief history tracing Blondie's formation. Next, I analyze how the electric organ and the synthesizer are used in Blondie's three most successful albums: *Parallel Lines*, *Eat to the Beat*, and *Autoamerican*. Then, I discuss Blondie's musical reception as well as Debbie Harry's sexuality and how it contributed to Blondie's overall showiness. Finally, I show how Blondie's music and Harry's visual appeal were both facets of new wave's evolution and increasing showiness.

### **The Formation of Blondie**

Guitarist Chris Stein, a young aspiring musician, attended a 1973 concert for the punk girl group The Stilettos, one of the many punk bands based in New York City. Stein met one of the singers, Debbie Harry, after the show. He soon joined the band and entered a romantic relationship with Harry. Due to the limited commercial success of the Stilettos, Stein and Harry left the band in 1974 to form a new group. They temporarily recruited a bassist and a drummer, calling themselves Angel and the Snake. Harry, meanwhile, found herself repeatedly catcalled and harassed. After truck drivers allegedly yelled "Hey, Blondie!" at Harry, the band decided to rename themselves.<sup>14</sup> Their decision to go by Blondie immediately made Harry the face of the band and set up her legacy as *being* Blondie.

Harry's band soon became regular performers at the famous CBGB, a club that had developed as a hotspot for other punk and new wave bands such as Talking Heads and The

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<sup>14</sup> Historic Films Stock Footage Library, "CD: UK Debbie Harry (Blondie) Interview 1999," *YouTube* video, 2:05, March 27, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHYPsx9qx4E4>.

Ramones<sup>15</sup>. Both Blondie's first single, "X Offender," and their eponymous debut album achieved little commercial success.<sup>16</sup> Even so, other musicians took notice of the burgeoning young band, and the notable band Television invited Blondie to tour with them. Blondie would later tour with other notable musicians such as Iggy Pop and David Bowie.

Both "X Offender" and much of Blondie's self-titled album encapsulate the transitory nature of punk music into new wave music. As is typical of punk rock, the texture of Blondie's songs is simple, with each instrument heard clearly and cleanly. Each musician plays in a tight, uncomplicated manner. Similarly, Harry's vocal style lacks virtuosic displays, with many passages hovering between speaking and singing.<sup>17</sup> Despite the apparent simplicity of the band's music, however, the lyrics of "X Offender" discuss a controversial subject: a prostitute who falls in love with the police officer who arrested her.<sup>18</sup> Songs like "X Offender" paved the way for increasingly taboo lyrics and song topics as new wave developed throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Although songs such as "In the Sun" and "Kung Fu Girls" feature the fast, driving grooves then common to punk, some elements of *Blondie* are much more indebted to the burgeoning pop-oriented new wave style. Indeed, much of the album is reminiscent of 1960s pop

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<sup>15</sup> For more info, see <https://www.cbgb.com/about>.

<sup>16</sup> Billboard, "Chart History: Blondie," N.D. (accessed January 22, 2023), <https://www.billboard.com/artist/blondie/chart-history/hsi/>. Neither "X Offender" nor *Blondie* appear on the main page of this list.

<sup>17</sup> This is especially apparent on tracks such as "Rip Her to Shreds" and "Rifle Range."

<sup>18</sup> The original song title was supposed to be "Sex Offender," heightening the song's controversial nature. Frank Mastropolo, "The Story of Blondie's First Single, 'X Offender,'" June 17, 2016 (accessed March 24, 2023), <https://diffuser.fm/blondie-x-offender/>.



rock, emphasizing more pop music sensibilities than most punk music did at that time. For example, the songs have standard pop harmonies and tuneful melodies. Moreover, the lyrics do not always conform to the political nature of punk lyrics, often discussing love and sex in very coy yet conventional, pop-friendly ways. “In the Flesh,” for example, has lyrics such as “Darling, I can’t wait to see you” and “Those girls that you run with, they bring my head down.” Even the warbling guitars on “In the Flesh” and the faint synthesizers on “Look Good in Blue” are more derivative of pop than of punk music. “A Shark in Jets Clothing,” for example, relies heavily on the buzzing synthesizer as the harmonic filler layer, while a brief synthesizer solo appears in “Man Overboard.” Their pop-influenced music and relatable lyrics all hinted at Blondie’s eventual shift to more synth-driven new wave sounds and increasing popularity with mainstream audiences.

### **Blondie’s Launch to Superstardom**

Interestingly, a mistake launched Blondie’s superstardom. In 1977, an Australian music television show was set to play “X Offender,” but DJ Molly Meldrum played the B-side, “In the Flesh,” instead. As Stein recounted in a 1998 interview with music critic Paul Cashmere:

The legend is [Meldrum] played the B side thinking it was the A side and the reality is ‘X Offender’ would not have been a hit because it was too aggressive and crazy. So they played the B side which was ‘In The Flesh’ and that became a hit. It was really not representative of any punk sensibility ...Over the years, I’ve thought they probably played both things but liked one better. That’s all.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Cashmere, “The Blondie Interview.” N.D. (accessed January 22, 2023),

<https://web.archive.org/web/20061231163913/http://www.undercover.com.au/idol/blondie.html>.

This accident led to the commercial success of both songs—“X Offender” and “In the Flesh”—and Blondie in Australia. The band headlined their first tour in the country the same year. In 1978, Blondie released their second album, *Plastic Letters*, which achieved immense commercial success in the United Kingdom and led to a successful headlining tour there. Between 1974 and 1978, Blondie’s personnel underwent several changes. Clem Burke became the band’s drummer in 1975, and synthesizer player Jimmy Destri joined the same year. Frank Infante joined Stein on the guitar, and, after Blondie finished recording *Plastic Letters*, Nigel Harrison became the band’s bassist in 1978. This group of musicians became the official Blondie lineup until the band’s dissolution in 1982.

With this lineup in place, Blondie released one of their most internationally successful albums, *Parallel Lines* (1978). This album demonstrates a shift in the band’s sound. The album encompassed multiple styles, including punk, power rock, and 1960s-era rock ‘n roll. Songs like “11:59” and “Will Anything Happen,” for example, are quintessentially punk in nature, while other songs such as “Pretty Baby” and “Sunday Girl” evoke the sounds of 1960s surf rock. Others, like “Fade and Radiate” and “Just Go Away” are reminiscent of the sound of power rock bands such as Cheap Trick. As music critic Lester Bangs proclaimed, “The thing that makes *Parallel Lines* so assuredly avant-garde is precisely that it’s so airtight and multiple-choice,” referring to the album’s well-constructed songs and wide array of styles.<sup>20</sup> Music journalist Steve Pafford added that “the success of *Parallel Lines* is down to a mixture of sweet ‘60s girl-group

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<sup>20</sup> Lester Bangs, quoted in Steve Pafford, “It was 40 Years Ago Today: The Story of Blondie’s *Parallel Lines*,” in *The Mojo Collection: The Ultimate Music Companion* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), accessed March 24, 2023, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/it-was-40-years-ago-today-the-story-of-blondies-iparallel-linesi>.

harmonies and edgy New Wave arrangements.”<sup>21</sup> Much of Blondie’s “sweet harmonies” and “edgy arrangements” derive from two crucial instruments: the synthesizer, and its predecessor in new wave music, the electric organ.

### **Blondie’s Electric Organ and Synthesizer: Transitioning to New Wave**

As new wave’s style changed, the synthesizer took over for the electric organ, which had been used in rock music since the 1960s. Electric organs produce natural (un-synthesized) sound by electric means rather than producing completely synthesized sound. Because the electric organ had become a fairly standard instrument in rock, Blondie’s use of the organ was rather typical according to 1970s musical standards. In Blondie’s *Parallel Lines*, for example, Destri used a Farfisa organ, which is the most prominent keyboard heard throughout the album. His keyboard lineup also included an RMI electric piano, a Roland synthesizer, a Polymoog synthesizer, and a grand piano.<sup>22</sup> The organ consistently remains at the harmonic filler layer, usually at a reduced volume, except tracks like “11:59,” which has an organ solo in the melodic layer. One track on *Parallel Lines*, however, teases the development of Blondie’s increasing use of the synthesizer—and their consequent increase in showiness.

“Heart of Glass” stands out among *Parallel Line*’s eclectic mix of songs. It is the only disco-influenced track and therefore is much more dance-oriented than the rest of the album’s

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<sup>21</sup> Pafford, “It was 40 Years Ago Today: The Story of Blondie’s *Parallel Lines*.”

<sup>22</sup> N.A., “Blondie—Live at Beat Club,” *Moog*, N.D. (accessed March 23, 2023),

[https://www.moogmusic.com/news/blondie-live-beat-](https://www.moogmusic.com/news/blondie-live-beat-club#:~:text=On%20Blondie%2C%20Jimmy%20Destri%20used,for%20recording%20and%20live%20performances)

[club#:~:text=On%20Blondie%2C%20Jimmy%20Destri%20used,for%20recording%20and%20live%20performances](https://www.moogmusic.com/news/blondie-live-beat-club#:~:text=On%20Blondie%2C%20Jimmy%20Destri%20used,for%20recording%20and%20live%20performances)

tracks. Because of this, the role of the synthesizer in “Heart of Glass” more closely mirrors its role in disco music rather than traditional rock or punk music. As in typical disco tracks, “Heart of Glass” uses space-age synthesizers, mostly between the verses and the choruses, in the novelty layer. These “novel” sounds, more than the organ, continue trends that emerged with new wave. Indeed, the futuristic, tinny timbre of synthesizers dominated new wave music, slowly transitioning from a track’s novelty layer to its harmonic filler and melodic layers.

“Heart of Glass” was a breakout hit, much to the band’s surprise. Stein, for example, said, “[Blondie] didn’t expect the song to be that big. [It was] a novelty item to put more diversity into the record. But it [turned out to be] a mark in history ... We weren’t thinking about selling out, we were thinking about [*sic*] Kraftwerk and Eurodisco.”<sup>23</sup> Considering how successful—and profitable—this disco/rock fusion turned out to be, it is no surprise that Blondie continued using elements from “Heart of Glass” in their later songs, including danceable beats and, of course, the synthesizer.<sup>24</sup>

*Eat to the Beat* debuted in 1979, only a year after Blondie’s first internationally successful album. *Eat to the Beat* peaked lower on the Billboard 200 Album Charts, but it still reached platinum certification and hinted at Blondie’s stylistic evolution.<sup>25</sup> The album maintained the same musical eclecticism that Blondie was known for, featuring both a funk song and a reggae song, but the project looked toward new wave much more than its predecessor. *Eat*

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<sup>23</sup> Pafford, “It was 40 Years Ago Today: The Story of Blondie’s *Parallel Lines*.”

<sup>24</sup> Billboard, “Chart History: Blondie.”

<sup>25</sup> Best Selling Albums, “*Eat to the Beat* by Blondie Sales and Awards,” N.D. (accessed March 24, 2023), <https://bestsellingalbums.org/album/5604>. Platinum certification is an award granted to albums for receiving high sales figures.

*to the Beat* left much of the group's 1960s instrumentation and stylings behind. Although the band still heavily relied on Destri's organs—perhaps now more than ever—they implemented more synthesizers reminiscent of those used in “Heart of Glass.” These sonic markers (organ and prominent synthesizer) demonstrate the band's transition from punk to new wave.

Blondie's apparent use of synthesizers in *Eat to the Beat* affirms its new wave sensibilities. Many of the album's tracks, for example, showcase the synthesizer. For example, “Accidents Never Happen,” “Victor,” and “Atomic” all have synthesizers in their instrumentation. In “Shayla,” the synthesizer simply bolsters the organ part. In a similar vein, the synth on “Sound-a-Sleep,” the album's lullaby, reinforces the guitar line. However, “Accidents Never Happen” and “Victor” use the synthesizer in the harmonic filler layer, meaning that the synth is a crucial instrument to the song's composition rather than a novel addition to an already complete-sounding song.

*Eat to the Beat* also introduces new synthesizer timbres to Blondie's music. “Atomic” and “The Hardest Part,” for example, both use mid-range, staccato synth sounds in the novelty layer during transitional moments meant to build or maintain excitement. In other words, the synthesizer plays a critical role in hyping the songs up and through their respective choruses. This is a prime example of how the instrument increases excitement in new wave music.

### **Further Developments of New Wave and the Synthesizer's Showiness**

Another good example of the synthesizer's correlation with showiness—both in Blondie's music and in new wave music in general—is how it is used in “Union City Blue.” Most pop songs build excitement so that the listeners maintain interest in the song and listen to it all the way to the end. As such, songs tend to escalate in showiness, eliciting listener excitement through the end of the

song. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as increasing the song's tempo, changing keys, or changing the instrumentation, either by adding an instrument or making an already-present instrument louder.

A prime example of this escalation is in "Union City Blue," the third track off *Eat to the Beat*. As the song begins, faint high-pitched warping synthesizers ground the novelty layer (like they do in "Heart of Glass"). When Harry sings the line "tunnel to the other side," another synthesizer timbre akin to electric harpsichord doubles Harry's vocal melody. This new timbre operates to build excitement through the end of the first verse, wherein the cycle is repeated once more. Furthermore, during the final verse and outro of the song, the warping synthesizer crescendos and becomes increasingly prominent with each repeated line. This prevents the listener from tiring of the repetitive nature of the outro. The guitar, meanwhile, plays the melody over and over again at a consistent volume. Consequently, the synthesizer is critical to building this song's level of excitement and showiness.

The same phenomenon occurs on the next track, "Shayla." This time, the synthesizer occupies the harmonic filler layer, meaning it is even more crucial to the construction of this song than in "Union City Blue." The synth enters quietly in the second half of each verse. As the song progresses through each verse, the synth grows noticeably louder, generating more showiness with each successive verse and over the course of the song itself. Toward the end of "Shayla," another more piercing synthesizer enters in the novelty layer, growing fuller throughout the final verse and outro to bring the song to its climax. Blondie would develop these synthesizer modes further in both their single release, "Call Me," and their 1980 album release, *Autoamerican*.

“Call Me” is one of Blondie’s most popular and well-known hits. The song falls in a transitional period between the style of *Eat to the Beat* and *Autoamerican*, and it was used as the theme for the film *American Gigolo* (1980). The song’s synthesizer perhaps best demonstrates Blondie’s transition to the new styles present on *Autoamerican*. Not only is it featured as a solo instrument—the most extensive synth solo in Blondie’s music up to this point—but it provides the entire bass layer (plucky, robotic synthesizer triplets) of the song. “Call Me” also utilizes octave-jumping synthesizers in the novelty layer of the final chorus; they ultimately overtake Harry’s singing, reaffirming Blondie’s technique of adding synths to close songs in a showy way.

*Autoamerican* carried the torch of “Call Me,” ultimately showing how Blondie used the instrument in increasingly diverse ways in their music. Some of the album uses the synthesizer in previously established ways. For example, the synthesizer doubles the melody in the final chorus of “Walk Like Me,” while the brief melodic layer synth appears alongside the guitar solo and final verse in “T-Birds.” “Live it Up” uses the synthesizer more frequently throughout the song; a piercing, high-pitched, octave-jumping synthesizer occupies much of the novelty layer, while a low-pitched, buzzing synthesizer supports the guitar in the harmonic filler layer of the chorus. The outro of “Live It Up” even brings back the shrill octave jumps prevalent in “Call Me” and amplifies the volume, leading the song to a showy finish.

Importantly, however, several songs on *Autoamerican* rely on the synthesizer as their primary instrument. “Do the Dark,” for example, opens with synthesizers in multiple layers—a theremin-like synthesizer plays the closest thing to a melody in the intro, warbling through a solo, while another synthesizer mimics a glockenspiel arpeggio in the novelty layer. Yet another, more muted synthesizer comprises the harmonic filler layer. Many synthesizer solos occur

during the song's fadeout, replacing the standard guitar or organ solos expected in most 1970s rock music. Here, the organ and guitar are mostly relegated to the novelty layer. *Autoamerican* thus marks one of the earliest instances where the synthesizer is more important to the construction of a Blondie song than either the guitar or organ.

The synth is also crucial to the construction of "Rapture" and "Follow Me," both of which feature synthesizers as the central harmonic instrument. In the sax solo of "Rapture," the synthesizer dies away while the saxophones and bass grow more prominent. However, as the feature continues and leads into Harry's second rap verse, the synth steadily grows louder, cuing the beginning of a new section. A similar phenomenon occurs during the song's guitar solo; making space for the guitar, the synth switches to a half-note pattern before returning to its normal accompaniment through the outro. "Follow Me," meanwhile, features minimal accompaniment; outside of a few guitar accents in the novelty layer, the synthesizers are the only accompaniment for most of the song's duration. Here, the synth both doubles Harry's melody and provides chordal accompaniment, culminating in a short synth solo.

Finally, "Angels on the Balcony" provides perhaps the most diverse array of synthesizer usage in a single Blondie song. A mild, warping synth comprises most of the harmonic filler layer, growing louder and more noticeable in every "ah" section. Another, more piercing synthesizer arpeggiates in the novelty layer. Upon the key change, a middle-pitched synth with a buzzing timbre assumes prominence in the harmonic filler layer. Yet another, more sweeping and grandiose synthesizer appears on the third and fourth repetitions of the guitar lick, making each subsequent phrase more and more showy. A very shrill and high-pitched synth appears on that fourth repetition, adding further interest for the listener. Once Harry ceases singing in the



outro, the sweeping synthesizer takes center stage as the song fades out. Songs like “Angels on the Balcony” also represented Blondie’s newer, more synth-infused brand of punky new wave.

### **Critical Reception**

Critics viewed Blondie and their new wave sound rather positively, especially once they embraced their commercial and populist musical tendencies. Music journalist Steve Pafford described the band’s rise to fame: “Despite an early reputation as a bit of a novelty act (fellow CBGB act Patti Smith told them to ‘get the fuck out of rock ‘n roll’), UK hits ‘Denis’ and (‘I’m Always Touched By Your) Presence, Dear’ (from 1978’s *Plastic Letters*) showed that a bunch of punks written off in their own city could cross over into the uncertain arena of pop.”<sup>26</sup>

Blondie made no effort to maintain appearances as an “authentic” punk band, and, as a result, listeners took them for what they wanted to be heard as: a commercialized adaptation of punk rock music. Sheila Rock of *19* magazine, in an interview with Harry, described Blondie’s music as “dynamite, high energy rock ‘n roll that is studded with simple riffs and melodies, reminiscent of all the old favourite tunes from any late ‘Sixties’ radio station—only an updated 1977 punk version.”<sup>27</sup> Thematically, she added, “Their songs are an odd synthesis of pop, sex, oblique statements about teenage hang-ups and American technology ... The lyrics reflect a generation exposed to media overkill; they’re satires on mass culture. Blondie is the embodiment of the Blank Generation—kids brought up on television.”

Evidently, Blondie sought to encapsulate and even glorify the increasingly corporate and consumerist environment, which is a strictly anti-punk attitude. Harry corroborated this, saying,

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<sup>26</sup> Pafford, “It was 40 Years Ago Today: The Story of Blondie’s *Parallel Lines*.”

<sup>27</sup> Rock, “Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell,” 75.

“Blondie reflects the video-conscious society because we’re so attuned to it—so we’re a product of instant media.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Harry always kept the commercialist principles of music-making on her mind, although other members of the band thought differently: “Way back in Blondie, Chris [Stein] always used to worry if it was enough just to entertain people. But I always argued that it was, it was enough to take someone out of their particular mundane reality for five minutes, even five seconds.”<sup>29</sup>

Critics even began referring to Blondie as a new wave band. For example, Albert Gayol of *19* magazine described Blondie as “a band that emerged out of the new wave, with its musical vocabulary firmly entrenched in a rough and read rock and roll tradition.”<sup>30</sup> Joanne Jeri Russo also stated, “New York-based Blondie has long grown beyond its image as just another New Wave band.”<sup>31</sup> As early as 1978, then, some critics considered Blondie not a punk band, but a new wave band—and a quality new wave band at that. “Lead vocalist Debbie Harry is sounding better than ever on such sure-bet songs as ‘Detroit 442,’” Russo added.

Fans likewise enjoyed Blondie’s new wave music, appreciating both the punk and pop elements of their music. A fan responding to a *YouTube* video of a 1979 concert directly cited Harry’s origins in punk music and how it impacted her performance of this non-punk music: “Her punk rock roots show tremendously in this concert, and it’s wondrous... strait [*sic*] tone in her voice [with] very little to no tremolo to hide imperfections. She and the band [are] a very

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<sup>28</sup> Rock, “Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell,” 75.

<sup>29</sup> Cynthia Rose, “Bottle Debbie Harry,” *Creem*, April 1984 (accessed March 24, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/bottle-debbie-harry>.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Gayol, “Music,” *19*, October 1981, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Joanne Jeri Russo, “Rapping on Records,” *Teen*, May 1978, 36.

unique talent that stays with you awhile.”<sup>32</sup> Another fan described Blondie’s music as “punk energy with strong pop writing.”<sup>33</sup>

Blondie’s blending of musical styles—not simply punk and pop, but also rap, disco, rocksteady, jazz, and others—catapulted them into worldwide fame. Dylan Siegler of *Billboard* magazine asserted that “Blondie was arguably a main impetus behind the pastiche pop sensibility of many of the past decade’s artists and helped whet the mainstream’s appetite for accessible rock in the age of disco.”<sup>34</sup> Despite labelling the band as “punk pop,” he also added that Blondie had numerous “genre-busting tendencies,” referring to the band’s fusion of multiple styles. Bob Bell of music store franchise Warehouse Entertainment agreed. Referencing Blondie’s 1980 song “Rapture,” Bell said: “Blondie absolutely influenced a whole variety of bands, female artists, and alternative artists who incorporated rap and other elements into their music. Blondie as a band never really got old, and their back catalog sales show that.”<sup>35</sup> Although I have highlighted how the synthesizer was used to amplify Blondie’s musical showiness, most critics recognized a lack of flashy musicality and production. They even noted that it was crucial to the identity of the band. As Rock, for example, claimed: “...one of the most important things about early Blondie was the lack of artistic pretension about what was basically [their] extension of Pop Art into pop.”<sup>36</sup> **Debbie Harry’s Sexuality and Showiness**

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<sup>32</sup> Joracer1, comment on *YouTube* video, Blondie on MV, “Blondie–Full Concert–07/07/79 (Early Show)–Convention Hall (Official),” *YouTube* video, 1:01:07, November 11, 2014, <https://youtu.be/9RIXAprKWHY>.

<sup>33</sup> Petal Aggression, comment on *YouTube* video, Blondie on MV, “Blondie–Full Concert–07/07/79 (Early Show)–Convention Hall (Official).”

<sup>34</sup> Dylan Siegler, “Blondie Returns After 17 Years with Beyond Set,” *Billboard*, January 9, 1999, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Bob Bell, quoted in Siegler, “Blondie Returns,” 74.

<sup>36</sup> Rose, “Bottle Debbie Harry.”

What fans and critics *do* recognize as showy is Debbie Harry herself. Harry’s identity as Blondie—both the character and the band itself—made her the center of attention. Moreover, as the only female member of Blondie, Harry stood out from the rest of the band for a variety of reasons. Fans today even frequently praise Harry for her beauty in the comment section of Blondie concert videos. In one *YouTube* video, one commenter remarks, “She was a breathtakingly beautiful woman.”<sup>37</sup> A younger commenter mentions, “I see why my dad had such a crush on her. Not only did she have talent but what a fox.”<sup>38</sup> Another user elaborated, “Debbie Harry is a ball of energy, sweet and sinister at the same time, fitting that she prowls the stage on ‘One Way or Another,’ very natural and unnerving.”<sup>39</sup> Even Harry’s female fans, who comment less frequently on these videos, admire her beauty. One female user comments: “FANTASTIC. The best female lead singer of any group post 1969/70. Absolutely gorgeous ...Deborah Harry [is] fit as F\*ck. She still is and always will be to me ...My Girl Crush, Dream Come True.”<sup>40</sup>

Although Harry was usually praised only for her good looks, some fans praised both her appearance and her musical talent. One fan described discovering and falling in love with Blondie: “Debbie Harry commands a great band with that fantastic voice and perfect looks. At

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<sup>37</sup> TheFirestag, comment on *YouTube* video, P72, “Blondie Heart of Glass Live Midnight Special,” *YouTube* video, 4:07, April 27, 2009, <https://youtu.be/b09misjV1ek>.

<sup>38</sup> Maggotemilio, comment on *YouTube* video, P72, “Blondie Heart of Glass Live Midnight Special.”

<sup>39</sup> Neil Power, comment on *YouTube* video, Blondie on MV, “Blondie—Full Concert—07/07/79 (Early Show)—Convention Hall (OFFICIAL).”

<sup>40</sup> Clareons, comment on *YouTube* video, P72, “Blondie Heart of Glass Live Midnight Special.”

67, I still crank it up here.”<sup>41</sup> Another fan mirrored these thoughts: “Here’s a beautiful woman with a great sense of humor and a powerful voice [that] she’s never been given credit for.”<sup>42</sup>

These perspectives are not uncommon. More than that, many people direct their focus to Harry instead of the other members of the band, both for her beauty and how talented a singer she is.

One commenter, for example, says, “Debbie didn’t look too shabby back in the day but most and foremost she is just an excellent singer!”<sup>43</sup>

Many critics corroborated this present-day perception. Gayol, for example, called Harry “the obvious focal point of the band,” saying “Harry *is* Blondie.”<sup>44</sup> “The Disco Elite!” reinforced this idea as well, saying, “Blondie is Debbie Harry ...or is it? For a long while the name of the group only conjured up the image of the beautiful blonde at the microphone.”<sup>45</sup> Music journalist Steve Pafford described the band as “ex-Playboy Bunny girl Debbie Harry and her mop-topped male colleagues.”<sup>46</sup> Even her so-called “mop-topped male colleagues” took notice of this phenomenon; Burke, the drummer for Blondie, stated in “The Disco Elite!” that “The rest of us aren’t just a backing band, we don’t really feel that people view us as such. But it’s not something we think about very much, although we realize that Debbie is bound to attract a lot of

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<sup>41</sup> John Schreiber, comment on *YouTube* video, Blondie on MV, “Blondie–Full Concert–07/07/79 (Early Show)–Convention Hall (Official).”

<sup>42</sup> Richard Walker, comment on *YouTube* video, Blondie on MV, “Blondie–Full Concert–07/07/79 (Early Show)–Convention Hall (Official).”

<sup>43</sup> Rolf Brenner, comment on *YouTube* video, Blondie on MV, “Blondie–Full Concert–07/07/79 (Early Show)–Convention Hall (Official).”

<sup>44</sup> Gayol, “Music,” 13. My emphasis.

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Young and Debbie Hawes, “The Disco Elite!,” *Fabulous* 208, June 2, 1979, 38.

<sup>46</sup> Pafford, “It was 40 Years Ago Today: The Story of Blondie’s Parallel Lines.”

attention.”<sup>47</sup> However, recent comments by a fan suggest that Burke’s fears may have been well-founded, saying “I never appreciated how tight of a band Blondie was. We didn’t realize just how good a band they were cause we were all so in love with Debbie. I was anyway. I never really saw them as more than a back up for her till I got older and realized just how good they really were. Sorry Blondie.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, many fans, often heterosexual males, flocked to Blondie performances because they thought Harry was sexually appealing.<sup>49</sup> Rock recounted, “She says she always gets cat calls during her shows from a large male contingent and more and more girls come up to her afterwards and encourage her to strut her stuff.”<sup>50</sup> Rock described the precise visual appeal that Harry had onstage:

She’s the acclaimed punk rock blonde bombshell, the teen ingenue who pouts and poses and exudes street-corner sex appeal. The image is familiar. The all-American, girl-next-door gone wrong. A small, gamine face. High cheekbones. Black eye make-up caked several inches too thick. Bleached hair a la Marilyn Monroe. Mini-skirts and pale pink lips. She has the ever favourite, bad-girl good looks that have a timeless appeal ...Sex appeal and her Sandra Dee baby face is what she’s selling.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Young and Hawes, “The Disco Elite!,” 38.

<sup>48</sup> Ant knee, comment on *YouTube* video, Blondie on MV, “Blondie–Full Concert–07/07/79 (Early Show)–Convention Hall (Official).”

<sup>49</sup> Blondie on MV, “Blondie–Full Concert–07/07/79 (Early Show)–Convention Hall (Official).” Note that most of the commenters under this video are male.

<sup>50</sup> Rock, “Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell,” 75.

<sup>51</sup> Rock, “Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell,” 75.

Gayol likewise stated that Harry's typical visual appeal was an "alluring combination of vamp and innocence, sweetness and mischief."<sup>52</sup>

Harry actively embraced her sexuality and used it to her advantage. Even at a young age, she was conscious of how she looked—and others were likewise conscious of how she looked as well. Rock stated that Harry's adoptive mother "was kidded by the adoption agency about her tiny daughter's 'bedroom eyes.'"<sup>53</sup> Notably, Harry saw herself as a kindred spirit to actress and sex symbol Marilyn Monroe: "I felt physically related to [Monroe] long before I knew she had been adopted herself."<sup>54</sup> Rock further clarified how Harry represented the band's main element of visual showiness:

On stage, Debbie Harry is in command; she's the flashing centre of Blondie's music.

Sometimes suggestively pornographic, violent, funny and original, this glacial nymphette tears trough [*sic*] songs like 'Rip Her to Shreds' and 'X Offender' with brazen toughness and razor-sharp glares. Other times she purrs and coos like a kitten starved of affection ...she can assume many shapes and forms and becomes any mask she sees fit.<sup>55</sup>

Although her persona was marked by a variety of provocative attitudes, Harry was never particularly showy in her physical mannerisms onstage. For example, in a 1979 performance of "Heart of Glass," Harry dances in place during an instrumental interlude, not occupying much space either with her arms or her movements. Her expression is neutral, even a little deadpan. A fan who watched this performance on *YouTube* directly praises this moment, saying, "I love the

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<sup>52</sup> Gayol, "Music," 13.

<sup>53</sup> Rock, "Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell," 75.

<sup>54</sup> Rose, "Bottle Debbie Harry."

<sup>55</sup> Rock, "Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell," 75.

dance at 03:15. Amazing hips and mic-technique.”<sup>56</sup> This commenter, however, is likely addressing the sexual nature of Harry rather than the quality of the dance; she is clad in a tight bodysuit that shows off her hips and rear, occasionally using the microphone to mimic thrusting or perform other subdued but sexual dance moves. The camera even pans to a shot behind Harry that shows off her body. Not only does this shot appeal to Harry’s male fans, but it also likely appealed to the camera operator, who was probably a man operating under the male gaze.<sup>57</sup>

Harry was aware of how she performed, conscious of her performances’ simultaneously minimalist yet sexual style. “I’d like to be a little crazier onstage, but I don’t want to be too clichéd,” Harry said. “Rock singers all swing their hands around, swing their mike around, lunge on the floor and stuff like that. It’s all been done before. Sex is the biggest thing, I guess.” She elaborated, “I’m into using that sexuality ...It’s a good way of getting attention and a good thing to sell. It’s an obvious thing for a girl to do. If you can do it, why not? I think it’s cool.”<sup>58</sup> Harry was clearly cognizant of her appeal to her fans and consumers. When Rock asked her what she thought fans would like to hear her talk about in magazine articles, she confidently answered, “Oh, sex. ‘Sex,’ of course. It’s always the easiest approach to sales; particularly for a woman.”<sup>59</sup> She added, however, that she was “not putting down my own sexuality,” suggesting that she was proud of her persona and controlled her decision to be openly provocative.

Music programmers and DJs took into account the extramusical elements of appeal and fandom when planning playlists for listeners and fans. As Tony Mascaro, a radio music director,

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<sup>56</sup> Jonas Nilsson, comment on *YouTube* video, P72, “Blondie Heart of Glass Live Midnight Special.”

<sup>57</sup> In the 1970s, most people working in the entertainment industry were men.

<sup>58</sup> Rock, “Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell,” 75.

<sup>59</sup> Rose, “Bottle Debbie Harry.”



said, “Debbie Harry has a kind of mystique about her.”<sup>60</sup> Rock further postulates that “Ironically, the personal Debbie is unlike her rock image. She is quiet, shy, and sometimes even a bit awkward . . . Perhaps it is this air of detachment and innate shyness which gives her that mysterious quality, that certain look, that distinctive face in the crowd.”<sup>61</sup> Because Harry was so distinct from her contemporaries—and so attractive to her many male fans—listeners conjured her image in their mind every time a Blondie song came on the radio, further solidifying the connections between Harry and Blondie songs.

Despite fans’ praise, sexism pervades critical response to Blondie’s success. Some critics, for example, implied that Harry’s appearance was what made her famous. Describing the album cover for Harry’s debut solo album *KooKoo*, Gayol claimed: “In designing the album sleeve, [artist H.R.] Giger tampers with the one single factor that contributes mostly to Harry’s appeal—her looks.”<sup>62</sup> In another review, he denigrated Harry’s talent while praising her appearance, chiding that “she [does] not sing as well as she looks.”<sup>63</sup> Further, he primarily focused on Harry’s visual appeal when discussing her contributions to the band and their music: “Debbie Harry’s competent voice combines well with her air of ‘Sixties’ girlie, baby-doll innocence cut with a sardonic lyricism to remind you that, despite the appearance, she’s very much a ‘Seventies’ artist.”<sup>64</sup> Words like “girlie,” “baby-doll,” and “innocence” clearly were used here to infantilize Harry and cheapen her success as a female artist.

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<sup>60</sup> Tony Mascaro, quoted in Siegler, “Blondie Returns,” 74.

<sup>61</sup> Rock, “Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell,” 75.

<sup>62</sup> Gayol, “Music,” 13.

<sup>63</sup> Albert Gayol, “Pop: Blondie,” *19*, November 1978, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Gayol, “Pop: Blondie,” 20.

Some listeners lamented that Harry was the face of Blondie, overshadowing the other three male members of the band. One magazine directly positioned Harry against her bandmates for being a beautiful yet less-talented woman, saying “These three talented young man [*sic*] are overshadowed by their lead ‘singer’ Debbie Harry who, unfortunately, can wail louder than they play their guitars ... Maybe once Chris and Debbie ‘tie the knot,’ people will realise that the rest of the band are just as talented as their stunning blonde singer!”<sup>65</sup> Notice here that this author suggested that marriage could neutralize Harry’s role as the band’s “front man,” allowing the rest of the band’s members to assume their “rightful” place as equally valid artists.

### **Blondie Signifies the Transition to Synth Pop through Increasing Showiness**

So why is Blondie critical to the development of new wave music’s showiness? Although Blondie was not nearly as musically showy as many later bands—they were still entrenched in punk and early new wave musical traditions, meaning their music naturally upheld some of those styles’ distinctly minimalist tenets—their music grew increasingly showy in tandem with changing musical and social trends. As I have shown through the analysis of *Parallel Lines*, *Eat to the Beat*, and *Autoamerican*, Destri’s synthesizer took on a more prominent role in each successive album as synthesizers became more common in the popular music scene, even though the synthesizer was rarely the most important instrument to any given Blondie song.

What *was* overtly showy about Blondie, however, was Debbie Harry. She was not an ostentatious or bombastic performer; neither were her mop-topped bandmates. Rather, Harry’s sexuality was the tool Blondie most regularly used to be showy. She was the center of media and fan attention both as a lead singer and as an attractive woman. Whether on stage, in promotional

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<sup>65</sup> N.A., “Blondie: Not Just a Pretty Face,” *Fabulous* 208, October 14, 1978, 3.

materials, or in person, Harry promoted the band by marketing her appearance, flaunting her good looks and sexuality to attract more viewers and listeners—that is, until such strategies no longer worked without the support of showy, synth-laden music.

*The Hunter* (1982), Blondie’s final album with Chrysalis, attempted to blend Blondie’s known style with more emergent and over-the-top new wave trends. Some songs, such as the albums’ “Orchid Club” or “War Child,” prominently use Destri’s synthesizers in then-contemporary ways. Other songs, such as “(Can I) Find the Right Words (To Say),” are more reminiscent of Blondie’s late 1970s style, making them sound dated in comparison to the then-cutting-edge proto-synth pop hits of the day, such as “Don’t You Want Me” by The Human League.

Following three consecutive Platinum-certified albums in the United States, *The Hunter* only managed to reach #33 on the U.S. Billboard Album charts. Similarly, only the album’s leadoff single, “Island of Lost Souls,” managed to chart on the Billboard Weekly Song charts, peaking at #37.<sup>66</sup> There are a few reasons why fans did not embrace this album like previous album releases. First, Blondie may have lost some of their momentum during their 1981 break, in which both Harry and Destri focused on solo projects. Second, unlike Blondie’s previous albums, *The Hunter* is a self-proclaimed “concept album” about “searching, hunting, or pursuing one’s own Mt. Everest,” leading to a thematic ambiguity that many fans may not have been able to connect with.<sup>67</sup> Third, “Island of Lost Souls” was an unusual choice for a single release because it features elements of calypso, which was neither a mainstream popular music style in

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<sup>66</sup> Billboard, “Chart History: Blondie.” By comparison, both singles from *Autoamerican* peaked at #1.

<sup>67</sup> Rip Her to Shreds, “The Hunter USA Press Kit: 1982,” N.D. (accessed February 6, 2023),

[https://web.archive.org/web/20160914005336/http://rip-her-to-shreds.com/archive\\_press\\_others\\_thehunter\\_usa.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20160914005336/http://rip-her-to-shreds.com/archive_press_others_thehunter_usa.php).

1982 nor a recurring style featured on the album. These factors contributed to the album's lukewarm critical reception. Indeed, music critic Parke Puterbaugh of *Rolling Stone* gave the album three out of five stars, saying, "it'll have you wondering just how far an erstwhile new wave pop group can row itself away from the mainstream before it finds itself out of the current altogether."<sup>68</sup>

The band's working environment grew increasingly tense as time passed, leading to frequent infighting and an unfocused vision for the band's future creative enterprises. Many of the band members were frustrated by the press' continual focus on Harry rather than the band as a unit. Some of the band members, too, abused heroin, further exacerbating the band's social and financial issues. Perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back was Stein's diagnosis with pemphigus, a potentially fatal skin disease. The band dissolved in 1982, with Stein and Harry working to resolve Stein's illness, while the other members pursued musical opportunities elsewhere.

Ultimately, Blondie was unable to keep up with the rapidly developing transition from new wave to synth pop. By 1982, they were perceived as dated, lingering too much within their punk and rock roots and not adapting to the popular new wave and synth pop styles, commercially outclassed by their final tour's opening act: Duran Duran. The rest of the 1980s' popular music scene would become dominated by more driving synthesizers featuring glittery or shrill tones. In other words, it would embrace new wave's pop influences over its punk origins. Blondie's legacy in pop culture, meanwhile, remained with the showiness of Debbie Harry, who

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<sup>68</sup> Parke Puterbaugh, "Blondie: *The Hunter*," July 9, 1986 (accessed February 6, 2023),

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/the-hunter-2-255377/>.

was, as Rock succinctly put, “a locker-room teen-dream and definitely the stuff myths are made of.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Rock, “Punk Rock Blonde Bombshell,” 75.

## Chapter 2: Duran Duran, Synth Pop, and Teen Idols

*After the anger and gloom of the punk era ...along came five pretty boys who wrote and sang bumptiously catchy songs that seemed preoccupied with sex, travel and impenetrable sci-fi fantasies. It was rock with no obvious message, no social conscience and a disconcertingly large clothing budget.<sup>70</sup> ~Robert Sandall*

Rock 'n roll was one of the earliest styles of American popular music specifically aimed at teenage audiences. Although many musical styles—such as ragtime or swing—appealed to younger audiences, none had what made rock so appealing to teenagers in the 1950s: lyrics about issues only *they* faced.<sup>71</sup> With songs of young love (e.g., “Heartbeat” by Buddy Holly) or young people’s strife (e.g., “School Days” by Chuck Berry), teenagers finally had a style of music all to themselves. Record executives cashed in on the rock 'n roll phenomenon, devising new strategies for marketing the music to the teenage demographic. One of their strategies targeted young heterosexual women in particular. They found that young women were drawn to love songs performed by young, attractive men.<sup>72</sup> As such, the teen idol was born.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Robert Sandall, “The Old Romantics.”

<sup>71</sup> John Kovach and Andrew Flory, *What’s That Sound?* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), 79-81. Kovach and Flory note that the concept of the “teenager” was a new phenomenon in the post-war era. Before then, a person was either perceived as a child or an adult.

<sup>72</sup> Kovach and Flory, *What’s That Sound?* 115-116.

<sup>73</sup> The “teen idol” is a musician with an explicitly, if not exclusively, teenaged demographic, with many young female fans that were romantically attracted to them. This is a new phenomenon with rock 'n roll in the 1950s; teenagers idolized previous musicians such as Frank Sinatra, but such musicians had a universal appeal and a fanbase of all ages.

Although artists such as Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly appear on the roster of the earliest American teen idols, some of the most prolific teen idols came in a package deal—as a boy band.<sup>74</sup> Starting in the 1960s, band managers promoted their all-male bands not simply as musicians but also heartthrobs. Teen girls of differing tastes were likely to be attracted to at least one member of the band, driving them to buy records simply because they thought a member was attractive. The most notable example of this phenomenon is The Beatles, who garnered mobs of young female fans at the height of the so-called Beatlemania. Although they were a collective featuring clean-cut youngsters singing charming love songs, each member had their own appeal and appropriate label. For example, Paul McCartney became known as “the cute Beatle,” while Ringo Starr was “the funny Beatle,” and so forth.<sup>75</sup> Young fans could therefore idolize a specific member for a specific reason—and the 1960s press and label executives capitalized on this element of fandom.<sup>76</sup> Years later, many boy bands would attempt to capture this kind of fame through employing similar marketing tactics. Duran Duran was no exception.

In this chapter, I begin with a brief history tracing Duran Duran’s formation. Then, I analyze the band’s first three albums—*Duran Duran*, *Rio*, and *Seven and the Ragged Tiger*—paying particular attention to the band’s use of the synthesizer as an indicator of new wave’s heightened showiness. Next, I interrogate how Duran Duran’s showiness manifested in three visual ways: 1) through their fashion choices and association with the New Romantics, 2)

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<sup>74</sup> The 1960s “boy band” was merely an all-male band that attracted young female fans. Some examples of 1960s boy bands include the Beatles and the Monkees. These bands are unlike the boy bands of the 1990s, such New Kids on the Block or The Backstreet Boys.

<sup>75</sup> The Howard Stern Show, “Why Paul McCartney Didn’t Like Being Called the ‘Cute One’ in the Beatles,” *YouTube* video, 1:09. December 16, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qZxSKOupEw>.

<sup>76</sup> Earl Leaf, “Beatle Close Ups,” *Teen*, December 1964, 32-36.

through their live performances' aesthetics, and 3) through the construction of their music videos, particularly in association with MTV. The chapter culminates in an overview of Duran Duran's consumer and critical reception, as well as an examination of the band's teen idol status.

### **The Formation of Duran Duran**

Founding members John Taylor and Nick Rhodes formed a band called Duran Duran in Birmingham, U.K. The band name derived from a sci-fi film called *Barbarella* (1968), which featured a character named Dr. Durand Durand.<sup>77</sup> Early on, Duran Duran underwent various personnel changes, although Taylor and Rhodes remained consistent members. Drummer Roger Taylor joined the band in 1979, and Duran Duran became the house band for a nightclub called the Rum Runner a year later.<sup>78</sup> That same year, in 1980, Andy Taylor saw their advertisement for a new guitarist and soon joined the band.<sup>79</sup> Shortly thereafter, a Rum Runner employee recommended that Simon Le Bon become the band's new lead singer.<sup>80</sup> Allegedly, Duran Duran brought Le Bon on when the other members saw his "pink leopard-skin trousers," pointing to the

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<sup>77</sup> N.A., "Pop's Dynamic Duran Duran," *Teen*, April 1984, 56.

<sup>78</sup> Tom Eames, "Duran Duran Facts," Smooth Radio, March 21, 2019 (accessed March 2, 2023), <https://www.smoothradio.com/features/duran-duran-facts-songs-members-name/#:~:text=John%20Taylor%20and%20Nick%20Rhodes,the%20sci%2Dfi%20movie%20Barbarella.>

<sup>79</sup> N.A., "Duran Duran Timeline," Duran Duran, N.D. (accessed March 2, 2023), <https://duranduran.com/duran-duran-timeline-1980-1995/#:~:text=Nick%20Rhodes%20and%20John%20Taylor%20form%20Duran%20Duran%20in%20the%20late%2070s.&text=In%20early%201980%2C%20the%20band,have%20to%20take%20day%20jobs.>

<sup>80</sup> N.A., "Duran Duran Timeline."



band's penchant for showy clothing.<sup>81</sup> Duran Duran solidified its roster with John Taylor on bass guitar and Rhodes on the synthesizer.

Duran Duran's initial goals are unclear, with different members voicing different origin stories. Rhodes, for example, explained that "We had every intention of being this art-college peculiarity [an avant-garde, young adult-oriented band]," which led to the band's confusion when their shows garnered "fourteen-year-old girls screaming at us" instead of a more nuanced, adult demographic.<sup>82</sup> John Taylor, on the other hand, claimed that "we never wanted to be anything but a perfect pop group," directly contradicting Rhodes just three years later.<sup>83</sup> Yet another journalist said their musical manifesto was "the Sex Pistols meet Chic," referring to a fusion of punk rock (like the Sex Pistols) and disco (like Chic).<sup>84</sup>

Regardless of whether they were aiming at cultivating "art college peculiarity" or "perfect pop," Duran Duran cut two demo tapes and opened for another new wave artist, Hazel O'Connor, on a 1980 tour. Multiple record companies soon took notice of their music, and Duran Duran eventually signed a record deal with EMI.<sup>85</sup> With EMI's backing, they released their first album, *Duran Duran*, in 1981.

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<sup>81</sup> Nick Rhodes, quotes in N.A., "Pop's Dynamic Duran Duran," 57.

<sup>82</sup> Nick Rhodes, quoted in David Keeps, "Duran Duran: Ordinary People," *Details*, April 1993 (accessed March 24, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/duran-duran-ordinary-people>.

<sup>83</sup> John Taylor, quoted in N.A., "The Single Life," *19*, June 1986, 28.

<sup>84</sup> Keeps, "Ordinary People."

<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, EMI was also the former label of the Beatles.

## Synthesizer Style in Duran Duran's Early Albums, 1981–1986

Even in their earliest days, Duran Duran was eager to experiment with new synthesizer sounds in their songs. As Rhodes once said, “We have all the melodies worked out when we go in the studio, but the gloss gets put on later. I knew two of the synth parts I was going to put on this number we’ve just been doing, then suddenly I found this fantastic whizzo noise and I’ve just had to put it on. I just love pressing things and hearing what they sound like.”<sup>86</sup> John Taylor elaborated further, “We’re also trying to get a quadraphonic thing going with the synths, so you get a whole swirl, and a whole load of atmosphere.”<sup>87</sup> This passion for “atmosphere” can be found in their eponymous album from 1981.

The crucial difference between the synthesizers in new wave (like Blondie’s music) and in synth pop (like Duran Duran) is its pervasive use in multiple layers of a given song. Not only are synth pop synthesizers present throughout an entire song, but they also appear in any of the melodic, harmonic, bass, or novelty layers. Sometimes they appear all at once, or sometimes they move between those layers seemingly at will. Blondie frequently used synthesizers in the novelty layer of their songs and occasionally in the melodic layer, but very rarely did their synthesizers occupy the harmonic or bass layer. This means that, if Blondie removed the synthesizers from their songs, the songs would still sound whole and complete, like nothing was missing at all.

This is not the case for Duran Duran’s songs. Very often the synths appear in the harmonic layer

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<sup>86</sup> Nick Rhodes, quoted in Chris Salewicz, “Duran Duran: Just Fine and Dandy,” *New Musical Express*, January 31, 1981 (accessed March 24, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/duran-duran-just-fine-and-dandy>.

<sup>87</sup> John Taylor, quoted in Salewicz, “Just Fine and Dandy.”

(and to a lesser extent the bass layer), meaning that, without the synthesizer, the song would sound hollow and incomplete, devoid of essential song layers and harmonic structure.

Furthermore, in new wave, the most prominent melodic solo instrument (other than the voice) is usually the guitar, which often showcases an extended solo after the second chorus of a given song. This means that, in most cases, the guitar is more crucial to the construction of new wave music than the synth because the guitar is a crucial melodic instrument; the synth is usually not so. For example, Chris Stein and Nigel Harrison's guitars featured more importantly than Jimmy Destri's synths in most Blondie songs, although this became less apparent with the release of each successive album. By contrast, the primary solo instrument in synth pop is, unsurprisingly, the synthesizer. As new wave transitioned to synth pop, then, the synthesizer took over the soloistic role of the guitar. Although Andy Taylor played the occasional guitar solo Duran Duran's early songs, *most* of the band's songs feature a lengthy synth solo after the second chorus. This phenomenon became more frequent with each successive Duran Duran album, greatly minimizing the role of Taylor's guitars. Unlike Blondie's synthesizers, then, Duran Duran's were functionally malleable and essential, marking the transition from new wave to synth pop as early as *Duran Duran* (1981).

Although *Duran Duran*'s opener, "Girls on Film," may be one of the band's least synth-laden songs, it still shows how Duran Duran's synthesizers occupy multiple layers, making the synth crucial to their song construction. A tinny, warping synthesizer appears in the melodic layer every chorus, doubling the main melody; it also appears in the instrumental interlude. Its most blatant appearance occurs in the third verse: prominent chords anchor the harmonic filler layer, overtaking the guitar and bass in the mix. (See Table 1)

<b>Section</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Melodic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Novelty Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Bass Layer Instrument(s)</b>
Introduction 1	0:00	N/A	Guitar (0:10)	N/A	Bass guitar (0:10)
Verse 1	0:17	Voice	Guitar	Guitar riffs	Bass guitar
Chorus 1	0:46	Voice (synth doubles)	Guitar	N/A	Bass guitar
Introduction 2	1:04	N/A	Guitar	Guitar riffs	Bass guitar
Verse 2	1:10	Voice	Guitar	Guitar riffs (more frequent)	Bass guitar
Chorus 2	1:40	Voice (synth doubles)	Guitar	Voice (“two minutes later”)	Bass guitar
Interlude	1:56	Synth (mimics chorus melody)	Guitar	N/A	Bass guitar
Verse 3	2:24	Voice	Synth chords (louder), guitar	Guitar riffs	Bass guitar
Chorus 3 (Outro)	2:54	Voice (synth doubles louder)	Guitar	Voice (“two minutes later”)	Bass guitar

**Table 1: Song chart for “Girls on Film.”**

This same synthesizer timbre returns in “Anyone Out There,” albeit in an even flashier way. It is particularly noticeable because it is the first (and only) instrument occupying the harmonic filler layer. As more instruments are layered in, however, this synthesizer assumes a more novelty function; the guitar and voices ultimately provide more harmonic information than the synthesizer. The synthesizer once again becomes more prominent in the interlude and third verse due to its increased volume and transposition up an octave. Finally, a slightly different synthesizer enters in the harmonic layer of coda; this synth bends pitch, making the typical pop chordal structure of the song more dubious to the listener. Because the synth provides crucial harmonic information—or, in this case, remove such information—this means the synth is crucial to the construction of “Anyone Out There.” (See Table 2)

<b>Section</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Melodic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Novelty Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Bass Layer Instrument(s)</b>
Introduction 1	0:00	N/A	Synthesizer chords	Guitar	Bass guitar
Verse 1 (first half)	0:28	Voice	Synthesizer chords	Guitar	Bass guitar
Verse 1 (second half)	0:43	Voice	Guitar, synthesizer chords	N/A	Bass guitar
Chorus 1	0:57	Voice	Guitar	Synthesizer, muted guitar riff	Bass guitar
Introduction 2	1:25	N/A	Synthesizer chords	Guitar	Bass guitar
Verse 2 (first half)	1:38	Voice	Synthesizer chords	Guitar	Bass guitar
Verse 2 (second half)	1:53	Voice	Guitar, synthesizer chords	N/A	Bass guitar
Chorus 2	2:07	Voice	Guitar	Synthesizer, muted guitar riff	Bass guitar
Interlude	2:35	N/A	Synthesizer chords (higher pitched)	N/A	Bass guitar
Verse 3 (first half)	2:50	Voice	Synthesizer chords (higher pitched)	N/A	Bass guitar
Verse 3 (second half)	3:03	Voice	Synth chords (louder), guitar	N/A	Bass guitar
Coda	3:17	Voice	Synthesizer chords (bends pitches)	Guitar (faint)	Bass guitar

**Table 2: Song chart for “Anyone Out There.”**

Not only does the synth occupy many roles in Duran Duran songs, but they also can transition between these roles or occupy multiple roles at once. “Careless Memories” is a prime example of the synthesizer assuming many roles, even though it is less synth-heavy than the “typical” Duran Duran song. During the interlude, an accordion-like synth provides chords for the harmonic layer, while a violin-mimicking synth outlines arpeggios in the outro’s novelty layer. The most interesting synthesizer, however, is the chorus synth. This synthesizer fills multiple roles; on the one hand, Rhodes plays a melodic line against Le Bon’s vocal line, making it sound like a novelty layer synth. At the same time, however, it could also exist within the harmonic filler layer because there are no other harmonic instruments playing. (See Table 3)

This multilayering, along with the first synthesizer role in “Anyone Out There,” shows the development of the synthesizer into a more robust instrument in a rapidly maturing musical style.

<b>Section</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Melodic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Novelty Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Bass Layer Instrument(s)</b>
Introduction 1	0:00	N/A	Guitar (0:07)	N/A	Bass guitar (0:07)
Verse 1	0:19	Voice	Guitar	N/A	Bass guitar
Chorus 1	0:33	Voice	Guitar (enters after synth)	Synthesizer	Bass guitar
Introduction 2	0:57	N/A	Guitar	N/A	Bass guitar
Verse 2	1:04	Voice	Guitar	N/A	Bass guitar
Chorus 2	1:31	Voice	Guitar (enters after synth)	Synthesizer	Bass guitar
Interlude	2:00	N/A	Synth (accordion-like), guitar	Guitar (topmost note)	Bass guitar
Verse 3	2:34	Voice	Guitar	Guitar repeated note	Bass guitar
Chorus 3	2:51	Voice	Guitar (enters right away)	Synthesizer	Bass guitar
Outro	3:27	N/A	Guitar (continued pattern)	Synth arpeggio (3:30), voice, guitar pitch bend	Bass guitar

**Table 3: Song chart for “Careless Memories.”**

Both “Planet Earth” and “To the Shore” demonstrate how crucial synthesizers are to the construction of Duran Duran songs. Both songs open with a synth fade-in. “Planet Earth” starts with only novelty layer synths, but another warping synthesizer occupies the harmonic layer once the rest of the instruments (the guitar, bass, and drums) enter. Additionally, a bell-like synthesizer plays a descending arpeggio in the chorus’ novelty layer. (See Table 4)

<b>Section</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Melodic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Novelty Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Bass Layer Instrument(s)</b>
Introduction 1	0:00	Guitar (0:12)	Synthesizer (0:12)	Synthesizer	Bass guitar (0:12)
Verse 1	0:26	Voice	Synthesizer	Guitar (former melody)	Bass guitar
Chorus 1	0:55	Voice	Guitar	Synthesizer (bell-like arpeggio)	Bass guitar
Introduction 2	1:27	Guitar	Synthesizer	N/A	Bass guitar
Verse 2	1:34	Voice	Synthesizer	Guitar (former melody)	Bass guitar
Chorus 2	2:03	Voice	Guitar	Synthesizer (bell-like arpeggio)	Bass guitar
Interlude	2:35	Guitar (2:56)	Synthesizer (2:56, louder)	N/A	Bass guitar
Chorus 3 (Outro)	3:11	Voice	Synth chords, guitar (3:26)	Synthesizer (bell-like arpeggio)	Bass guitar

**Table 4: Song chart for “Planet Earth.”**

For its part, “To the Shore” uses much buzzy timbres of synthesizers, especially during the fade-in, where one synthesizer pitch bends in the novelty layer and another plays chords in the harmonic layer. A synthesizer duet from 0:00 to 0:39 occurs with little interruption. Another bell-like arpeggiating synthesizer enters the novelty layer after the lyric “and breathe,” which combines with the harmonic buzzing synths to comprise most of the outro’s soundscape, overtaking the other instruments such as the guitar and bass. (See Table 5)

Lyric	Time	Melodic Layer Instrument(s)	Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)	Novelty Layer Instrument(s)	Bass Layer Instrument(s)
[Instrumental Introduction]	0:00	N/A	Synthesizer chords	Synthesizer pitch bends	N/A (possibly lowest synth note)
“Oh when your nine day feed...”	0:39	Voice	Synthesizer chords	Synthesizer pitch bends	Bass guitar (very faint)
“Words are falling...”	1:20	Voice	Synthesizer chords	Guitar (becomes more active at 1:50)	Bass guitar
“...and breathe” [Instrumental]	2:34	N/A	Guitar	Synths (bell-like open fifths), guitar (2:44)	Bass guitar
“Oh” section	3:01	Voice	Synthesizer chords (louder)	Guitar (faint)	Bass guitar
[Instrumental Fade-out]	3:36	N/A	Synthesizer chords (exit by 3:59)	Synthesizer (bell-like open fifths)	N/A

**Table 5: Song chart for “To the Shore.”<sup>88</sup>**

“Sound of Thunder” is one of a few Duran Duran songs where the synthesizer appears in the bass layer, which is significant because the synthesizer takes over the role of the ever-present bass guitar for the first time. Despite the synthesizer’s prominence in the group’s instrumentation, the bass guitar usually comprises the bass layer in its entirety during most songs. On top of the introductory bass, a pitch-bending synthesizer is also present in the introductory novelty layer. When the first verse begins, a different synth riff plays in the novelty layer, which then alternates with an arpeggiated voice-like synth in the second half of the verse. Yet another synthesizer has a lengthy solo, comprising both the melody and the supporting harmonies. In the outro, to build showiness and excitement, Rhodes adds a synth on the third repetition of the song’s final lyrics. (See Table 6)

<sup>88</sup> Because the song lacks a verse-chorus structure, each section is denoted by its first lyric.



<b>Section</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Melodic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Novelty Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Bass Layer Instrument(s)</b>
Introduction 1	0:00	N/A	N/A	Synthesizer (pitch bending)	Synthesizer
Verse 1	0:27	Voice	Guitar	Synth 1 (descending line), synth 2 (voice like, 0:59)	Bass guitar
Chorus	1:13	Voice	Guitar	Synth 1 (descending line)	Bass guitar
Verse 2	1:30	Voice	Guitar	Synth 1 (descending line), synth 2 (voice like, 1:44)	Bass guitar
Interlude	1:59	N/A	Guitar	Guitar (pitch bending)	Bass guitar
Solo	2:21	Synthesizer	Synthesizer	N/A	Bass guitar
Verse 3	2:37	Voice	Guitar	Synth 1 (descending line)	Bass guitar
Outro	3:08	Voice	Guitar	Synthesizer (3:22), guitar (faint, 3:37)	Bass guitar

**Table 6: Song chart for “Sound of Thunder.”**

Many of Duran Duran’s synths increase the song’s showiness by contributing to swelling dynamics within the phrase. “Friends of Mine,” for example, has a wide variety of novelty layer synth timbres that aid in transitioning from one section to the next. The song begins with the chopping sounds of a helicopter’s blades spinning alongside a chord that bends in pitch. This combination of sounds underscores the synth’s novelty function (rather than a harmonic function). An octave-jumping staccato synth enters next, followed by a brief appearance from an alarm-like synth that coincides with the guitar’s entrance. At this point, the pitch-bending synth settles into a static chord that serves as a high-pitched drone. A buzzy synth chord plays a single note after every eight beats of the first verse, accenting the song’s strong downbeat. Later, a reverb-laced buzzy synth provides a short melodic layer solo during the song’s interlude, which transitions to the novelty layer once the third verse begins. The only non-novelty layer synths

play both during the bridge (where low synth octaves double the bass part) and during the short guitar solo (wherein a synthesizer chord slowly builds in the harmonic layer). (See Table 7)

<b>Section</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Melodic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Novelty Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Bass Layer Instrument(s)</b>
Introduction 1	0:00	N/A	Guitar (0:39)	Synth 1 (chords), synth 2 (octaves, 0:31), synth 3 (drone)	Bass guitar (0:39)
Verse 1 (first half)	0:55	Voice	Guitar	Synth 2 (octaves), synth 1 (chord, every 8 beats)	Bass guitar
Interlude 1	1:10	Guitar (solo)	Synth (stacking chord)	N/A	Bass guitar
Verse 1 (second half)	1:18	Voice	Guitar	Synth 2 (octaves), synth 1 (chord, every 8 beats)	Bass guitar
Chorus	1:34	Voice	Guitar	Synth 2 (octaves)	Bass guitar
Verse 2 (first half)	2:05	Voice	Guitar	Synth 2 (octaves), synth 1 (chord, every 8 beats)	Bass guitar
Interlude 2	2:27	Guitar (solo)	Synth (stacking chord)	Synth 2 (octaves)	Bass guitar
Verse 2 (second half)	2:35	Voice	Guitar	Synth 2 (octaves), synth 1 (chord, every 8 beats)	Bass guitar
Chorus 2	2:51	Voice	Guitar	Synth 2 (octaves)	Bass guitar
Interlude	3:22	Synth 4 (stepping line, 3:54)	N/A	Synth 2 (octaves), voice (3:30)	Bass guitar
Verse 3 (first half)	4:01	Voice	Guitar	Synth 2 (octaves), synth 4 (stepping line), synth 1 (chord, every 8 beats)	Bass guitar
Interlude 3	4:16	Guitar (solo)	Synth (stacking chord)	Synth 2 (octaves)	Bass guitar
Verse 3 (second half)	4:24	Voice	Guitar	Synth 2 (octaves), synth 1 (chord, every 8 beats)	Bass guitar
Chorus 3 (Outro)	4:39	Voice, guitar (solo, 5:26)	Synth chords, guitar	Synth 2 (octaves)	Bass guitar

**Table 7: Song chart for “Friends of Mine.”**

Another synthesizer-heavy track is “Night Boat.” Most of the synthesizers here share a similar, buzzy timbre. A pitch-bending synthesizer kicks off the song, remaining constant

throughout every verse. Next comes a buzzy synth, which comprises the harmonic filler layer. It emulates a secondary melody to the voice until the guitar strums enter. A second buzzy synth drones in the bass layer, supplementing the bass guitar and building in volume throughout the verse. The chorus contains a high-pitched, buzzy warping synthesizer in the novelty layer, whereas the second introduction contains a mid-range buzzy synth in the harmonic filler layer, the latter of which is the most prominent instrument in the mix for the entire phrase. During the interlude, a synthesizer again doubles as a melodic and harmonic instrument. Lastly, a high-pitched buzzy synth drones in the novelty layer of the outro. The wide variety of synthesizer functions once again show how crucial synthesizers are to the construction of Duran Duran songs. (See Table 8)

<b>Section</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Melodic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Novelty Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Bass Layer Instrument(s)</b>
Introduction 1	0:00	N/A	Synthesizer (buzzy, 0:13), guitar (0:51, crescendos)	Synthesizer (stacking chord)	Synthesizer drone, Bass guitar (0:59)
Verse 1	2:17	Voice	Guitar (minimal)	Synthesizer (stacking chord)	Synthesizer drone, bass guitar
Chorus 1	2:48	Voice	Guitar	Synthesizer (dissonant chord)	Bass guitar
Introduction 2	3:02	N/A	Synthesizer (descending chord), guitar	Synthesizer (stacking chord)	Bass guitar, synthesizer drone
Verse 2	3:17	Voice	N/A	Synthesizer (stacking chord)	Bass guitar
Chorus 2	3:32	Voice	Guitar	Synthesizer (dissonant chord)	Bass guitar
Interlude	3:48	Synthesizer (4:02), voice (4:17)	Guitar, synthesizer (4:02)	Synthesizer (stacking chord)	Bass guitar, synthesizer drone
Chorus 3	4:33	Voice	Guitar	Synthesizer (dissonant chord)	Bass guitar
Outro	4:48	Voice	Guitar (drops at 5:03), synthesizer (to end)	Synthesizer (stacking chord), synth drone	Bass guitar (drops at 5:03)

**Table 8: Song chart for “Night Boat.”**

The album closer, “Tel Aviv,” is a quintessential example of how the synthesizer adds showiness to a song, especially leading toward a song’s conclusion. “Tel Aviv” is *Duran Duran*’s only instrumental track, which also distinguishes it from the rest of the tracks on the album. It begins with two synthesizer timbres: a futuristic synth in the novelty layer, and a plinking open fifth synth in the bass layer. A synth chord swells into the harmonic layer, eventually transitioning smoothly into the guitar melody. Eventually, the guitar and bass drop out, leaving only the bass synth, which anchors a “ah” vocal part. This instrumental reduction occurs multiple times throughout the song; after the second drop, a warping synthesizer enters and sustains the novelty layer as the other instruments re-enter. Multiple synthesizers build the song’s climactic showiness to its end, with a buzzy synth filling out the harmonic layer while the warping synths increase in volume until the fadeout. (See Table 9)

Section	Time	Melodic Layer Instrument(s)	Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)	Novelty Layer Instrument(s)	Bass Layer Instrument(s)
Introduction	0:00	N/A	Synthesizer (chord)	N/A	Synthesizer (open fifths)
Guitar entrance	0:25	Guitar	Synthesizer (chord)	Strings (0:41, countermelody)	Synthesizer (open fifths)
Drum entrance	0:55	Guitar	Guitar	Strings (countermelody)	Synthesizer
Snare drum exit	1:27	Guitar (1:41)	Synthesizer (chord)	Voice, strings (1:41)	Synthesizer (open fifths)
Snare drum reentrance	2:12	Guitar	Synthesizer (chord)	Voice, strings	Synthesizer
Snare drum exit 2	2:47	N/A	Synthesizer (chord)	Voice (2:52)	Synthesizer (open fifths)
Snare drum reentrance 2	3:05	Guitar	Guitar, synthesizer (chord)	Strings (3:16), voice (3:18)	Synthesizer (open fifths)
String and guitar solos	3:35	Strings, guitar (3:51)	Synthesizer (chord)	Strings (4:19, during guitar solo)	Synthesizer (open fifths)
Guitar and string duet	4:22	Guitar	Synthesizer (chords)	Strings	Synthesizer (open fifths)
Outro	4:44	N/A	Synthesizer (chords)	Voice (4:54), strings (5:10)	Synthesizer (open fifths)

**Table 9: Song chart for “Tel Aviv.”<sup>89</sup>**

<sup>89</sup> Because this song is an instrumental, sections are labelled with musical landmarks.

Clearly, the synthesizer wears many hats in a Duran Duran album. The multifaceted use of the synthesizer continued with their second album *Rio*, released in 1982. There are many similarities between *Rio* and *Duran Duran*—particularly in the song forms and uses of synthesizer—but the primary difference between the two albums is the prominence of the lead guitar. Duran Duran never fully abandons Andy Taylor’s guitars, but as mentioned previously, they become less noticeable and/or important with each successive album. In *Rio*, for example, the guitar often assumes a novelty role instead of a harmonic function.

One notable song from *Rio* is the single “Hungry Like the Wolf.” Like “Tel Aviv” from *Duran Duran*, “Hungry Like the Wolf” is a prime example of the group’s use of synthesizers to build excitement and showiness throughout a song. “Hungry Like the Wolf” opens with a high-pitched beeping synthesizer in the novelty layer. A buzzy synthesizer swells in the harmonic layer when the band sings the “doo” section of the verse. This same buzzy synth appears in the chorus’ harmonic layer, growing subtly louder with each repetition of the chorus and culminating in an octave jump in the third chorus. This octave jump provides a more prominent role for the synthesizer and increases the song’s showiness. In the final chorus, this synth crescendos one last time, making it one of the only audible instruments as the song fades out. (See Table 10)

<b>Section</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Melodic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Novelty Layer Instrument(s)</b>	<b>Bass Layer Instrument(s)</b>
Introduction 1	0:00	N/A	Guitar	Synthesizer (beeping)	Bass guitar
Verse 1	0:09	Voice	Guitar, synthesizer (buzzy, 0:16 and 0:31)	Synthesizer (beeping)	Bass guitar
Chorus 1	0:39	Voice	Guitar, synthesizer (chord, faint)	Synthesizer (beeping)	Bass guitar
Verse 2	1:13	Voice	Guitar, synthesizer (buzzy, 1:21 and 1:36)	Synthesizer (beeping)	Bass guitar
Chorus 2	1:43	Voice	Guitar, synthesizer (chord, louder)	Synthesizer (beeping)	Bass guitar
Interlude	2:14	N/A	N/A	Guitar, synthesizer (2:32)	Bass guitar
Chorus 3	2:44	Voice	Guitar (faint), synthesizer (chord, higher and louder)	Synthesizer (beeping)	Bass guitar

**Table 10: Song chart for “Hungry Like the Wolf.”**

In the album’s title track “Rio,” the first notable synthesizer is a twinkling synth that flutters in the novelty layer throughout the entire song. Shortly thereafter, buzzy synth chords reinforce the guitar chords in the harmonic layer. Midway through the chorus, another buzzy synth enters the novelty layer to outline the main vocal melody. The band highlights these three synths as prominent instrumental features by either minimizing or eradicating all other instrumental support. (See Table 11)

Section	Time	Melodic Layer Instrument(s)	Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)	Novelty Layer Instrument(s)	Bass Layer Instrument(s)
Introduction 1	0:00	N/A	Synth chords (0:22), guitar (0:26)	Synthesizer (twinkling, 0:20)	Bass guitar (0:20)
Verse 1	0:40	Voice (drops at 1:07)	Guitar, synthesizer (both drop at 1:07)	Synthesizer (twinkling)	Bass guitar (drops at 1:07)
Chorus 1	1:11	Voice	Guitar	Synth 1 (twinkling), synth 2 (buzzy, outlines melody)	Bass guitar
Introduction 2	1:38	N/A	Guitar, synthesizer	Synthesizer (twinkling)	Bass guitar
Verse 2	1:52	Voice (drops at 2:19)	Guitar, synthesizer (both drop at 2:19)	Synthesizer (twinkling)	Bass guitar (drops at 2:19)
Chorus 2	2:22	Voice	Guitar	Synth 1 (twinkling), synth 2 (buzzy, outlines melody)	Bass guitar
Interlude	2:50	Saxophone (3:03)	Synth chords, guitar (3:18)	N/A	Bass guitar
Bridge	3:45	Voice	Synth chords	Guitar (3:58), flute-like synth (4:05), twinkling synth (4:13)	Bass guitar
Chorus 3	4:16	Voice	Guitar (drops at 4:43), buzzy synth takes over	Synth 1 (twinkling), synth 2 (buzzy, outlines melody)	Bass guitar
Outro	5:11	Saxophone	Synth chords	Voice “doo” (5:25)	Bass guitar

**Table 11: Song chart for “Rio.”**

Duran Duran’s third album, *Seven and the Ragged Tiger* (1983), builds further upon the trends from *Rio*, minimizing the guitar’s role while adding more synthesizer timbres and leaning further into pop song structures. The most famous single from this album is “The Reflex,” which opens the album on an extremely synth-heavy note. During the verses, the synthesizer prominently plays chords in the harmonic layer. Any time the band is not singing, too, another synthesizer solos to maintain listener interest. The chorus features buzzy synthesizers in its harmonic layer. A synthesizer countermelody appears in the second chorus’s novelty layer,

which, along with the buzzy synth chords, crescendo with each subsequent chorus. (See Table 12)

Section	Time	Melodic Layer Instrument(s)	Harmonic Layer Instrument(s)	Novelty Layer Instrument(s)	Bass Layer Instrument(s)
Introduction 1	0:00	Voice	Voice	N/A	N/A
Verse 1	0:16	Voice	Synthesizer (chords)	Guitar (chords and countermelody)	Bass guitar
Pre-chorus 1	0:47	Voice	Guitar	Guitar (high riffs), synth (repeated note, 0:59 and 1:14)	Bass guitar (faint)
Chorus 1	1:18	Voice	Synthesizer (chords)	Guitar	Bass guitar (faint)
Introduction 2	1:48	N/A	Synthesizer (chords)	Guitar (eventual countermelody)	Bass guitar
Verse 2	1:55	Voice	Synthesizer (chords)	Guitar (countermelody)	Bass guitar
Pre-chorus 2	2:10	Voice	Guitar (drops at 2:22)	Guitar (high riffs), synth (repeated note, 2:22)	Bass guitar
Chorus 2	2:41	Voice	Synthesizer (chords, louder)	Guitar, high synth countermelody	Bass guitar
Interlude	3:11	Guitar	Synthesizer (chords)	N/A	Bass guitar
Synthesizer solo	3:19	Trumpet-like synth (3:22)	Synthesizer (chords)	N/A	Saxophone
Pre-chorus 3	3:26	Voice	Guitar	Saxophone, synth (repeated note, 3:37)	Bass guitar
Chorus 3 (Outro)	3:42	Voice	Synthesizer (chords, even louder), backup vocals	High synth countermelody	Bass guitar

**Table 12: Song chart for “The Reflex.”**

Although “The Reflex” used synthesizer timbres previously heard in other Duran Duran songs, many of the album’s tracks introduced a wide berth of new timbres to Rhodes’s synth palette as a means of piquing the listener’s interest. “New Moon on Monday,” for example, opens with bell-like synthesizers similar to those heard later in the *Harry Potter* theme created by John Williams for *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (2001). “New Moon on Monday”



and “Shadows on Your Side,” too, both use synthesized xylophone timbres. Although not unusual, this is an interesting creative choice when considering that “New Religion” and “Last Chance on the Stairway” both utilized real percussion keyboards. “(I’m Looking For) Cracks in the Pavement” also offered a new synth timbre, featuring a distinctively icy, reverberating synthesizer glissando. “I Take the Dice” uses synthesizers that mimic other traditional instruments’ timbres, namely sitar and flute, while “Of Crime and Passion” uses synthesizers reminiscent of the beeps of an 8-bit video game console similar to the Nintendo Entertainment System. “Shadows on Your Side,” perhaps the track with the densest layers of synthesizers, introduces a synthesizer mimicking a French horn as well as a siren-like synth akin to the one used later for the *Law and Order: SVU* (1999–present) theme by Mike Post.

### **Increasing Musical Showiness: From New Wave to Synth Pop**

Unlike the Blondie albums, Duran Duran’s albums are synth-laden and remarkably consistent in style and musical form. Moreover, the synthesizer appears in every layer (except the rhythmic layer) at some point in their debut album’s tracks, although it most frequently appears in the harmonic filler layer and the novelty layer. Rhodes also used a wide variety of synthesizer timbres, both across the album and within specific tracks. *Duran Duran* therefore is more representative of the synth pop style than Blondie’s first foray into the style.

Duran Duran openly leaned more into the pop, dance, and techno styles of music than Blondie did, making their music more radio- and nightclub-friendly. Bassist John Taylor outright described Duran Duran’s music as “European white disco.”<sup>90</sup> As Rhodes elaborated, “We’re just trying to make a much more interesting dance music, as well as keeping one foot well lodged in

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<sup>90</sup> John Taylor, quoted in Salewicz, “Just Fine and Dandy.”

the obscure end of things.”<sup>91</sup> Pop and disco are showier styles of music than punk because of their functions and the intentions of their respective creators. Pop is consciously showy in order to attract new listeners and garner record sales and radio plays, whereas disco is showy so as to inspire listeners to dance in nightclubs. In this vein, Duran Duran’s music is showier than Blondie’s due to stylistic tendencies alone.

Duran Duran’s music marks a new level of showiness in 1980s popular music due to the pervasive use of the relatively new, unusual synthesizer. As with Blondie’s music, the synthesizer in Duran Duran’s often amplifies levels of volume or becomes more prominent as a given song progresses with the goal of increasing a song’s showiness. Unlike Blondie’s music, however, Duran Duran’s music usually highlights synthesizers from the very beginning of a given song. Although the synth gets progressively louder over the course of a song, it also remains a constant presence for its duration. Rhodes’s synth timbres further bolster Duran Duran’s musical showiness because of their striking and diverse timbres, which attract the listener’s attention or surprises them with every new effect.

### **Duran Duran’s Reception**

Most writers agreed that, although rooted in rock ‘n roll, Duran Duran’s music was decidedly more pop- and dance-centric. David Keeps of the men’s magazine *Details* tellingly called the band’s music “hyperkinetic synthesizer pop,” referring to their single “Planet Earth” as “a futurist swirl of synthesizers, funk rhythms, and pop hooks.”<sup>92</sup> The youth-oriented magazine *Teen* described the band’s music as merging “the rhythms of disco with the energy and vitality of

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<sup>91</sup> Nick Rhodes, quoted in Salewicz, “Just Fine and Dandy.”

<sup>92</sup> Keeps, “Ordinary People.”

classic rock and roll.”<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile, Robert Sandall said that their music belonged in “brash-flash era of the early 1980s,”<sup>94</sup> emphasizing the bombastic or *showy* nature of both their music and the times.

Fans adored Duran Duran’s music, enjoying the burgeoning style of synth pop while appreciating the musicianship of each band member.<sup>95</sup> Looking back on a 1982 concert recording, *YouTube* commenters lauded every band member for their musical skills, although Le Bon and Roger Taylor seemed to receive standout attention.<sup>96</sup> For example, one commenter said, “Roger Taylor, most underrated drummer ever. Solid rhythm always and precision ... Great drummer and all around cool guy.”<sup>97</sup> Another noted that “It’s amazing how well Simon can sing, even when performing live and dancing around!”<sup>98</sup> One teen magazine author called them “polished musicians ... with a beat that’s definitely stealing the show!”<sup>99</sup>

Many critics similarly found merit in Duran Duran’s music, despite some initial opposition to the band’s artistic value. In his album review, critic Ira Robbins claims that “[*Duran Duran*] contains more creative and diverse noises and thoughts than all the real and

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<sup>93</sup> N.A., “Pop’s Dynamic Duran Duran,” 57.

<sup>94</sup> Sandall, “The Old Romantics.”

<sup>95</sup> Saltykrug, comment on *YouTube* video, Duran Duran on MV, “Duran Duran–Full Concert–12/31/82–Palladium (Official),” *YouTube* video, 42:20, November 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4dKTblXrF4>.

<sup>96</sup> Duran Duran on MV, “Duran Duran–Full Concert–12/31/82–Palladium (Official),” *YouTube* video.

<sup>97</sup> Davidcoffman4747, comment on *YouTube* video, Duran Duran on MV, “Duran Duran–Full Concert–12/31/82–Palladium (Official).”

<sup>98</sup> Amara\_the\_god2145, comment on *YouTube* video, Duran Duran on MV, “Duran Duran–Full Concert–12/31/82–Palladium (Official).”

<sup>99</sup> N.A., “Pop’s Dynamic Duran Duran,” 57.

would-be Spandau Ballets put together ...Duran Duran has substance sorely lacking in their stylemates [such as Spandau Ballet or Culture Club].”<sup>100</sup> Chris Salewicz of *Creem* magazine conceded that, despite his initial impression of them, the band was made up of “closet serious musicians.”<sup>101</sup> In a later article, Salewicz proclaimed that “Duran Duran are an exceptionally good group.”<sup>102</sup> Robbins similarly admitted, “Unpredictable and unfettered—that, evidently, is Duran Duran.”<sup>103</sup>

Despite this praise, many other critics thought very little of the band and their synth-driven pop tunes. Albert Gayol, in a review of Duran Duran’s self-titled debut, described the band’s music as “a disco-rock foundation ...swelled by synthesizers and guitars to produce a rather uncomfortable, foggy and monotonous sound.”<sup>104</sup> Ira Robbins agreed, saying that “some [songs from *Duran Duran*] have as little musical worth as KC and the Sunshine Band’s greatest hit,” specifically calling one single “a wretchedly tedious piece of routine ass-wag.”<sup>105</sup> Long after Duran Duran’s peak success, Steven Van Zandt still called the band’s music “mindless, emotionless, meaningless crap.”<sup>106</sup> Further insults abound. Keeps, for example, likened Le Bon’s

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<sup>100</sup> Ira Robbins, “Duran Duran: *Duran Duran*,” *Trouser Press*, September 1981 (accessed March 25, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/duran-duran-iduran-durani-harvest-st12158>.

<sup>101</sup> Salewicz, “Just Fine and Dandy.”

<sup>102</sup> Chris Salewicz, “Duran Duran: Am What They Yam: And That’s the Snakes...” *Creem*, April 1984 (accessed March 25, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/duran-duran-am-what-they-yam-and-thats-the-snakes>.

<sup>103</sup> Robbins, “*Duran Duran*.”

<sup>104</sup> Albert Gayol, “Pop,” *19*, September 1981, 14-15.

<sup>105</sup> Robbins, “*Duran Duran*.”

<sup>106</sup> Steven Van Zandt, “Garage Rock,” *Billboard*, August 18, 2007, 18.

vocal performance to “the howl of a perpetually horny teenage boy,”<sup>107</sup> while Robert Sandall recalled that “British club DJs ...used to turn their noses up at bouncy–some said cheesy– anthems such as ‘Rio’ and ‘Girls on Film.’”<sup>108</sup>

Other extramusical factors likely made critics pan Duran Duran. Cookie Amerson, an author for *Teen* magazine, wrote, for example:

Critics have been attacking the members’ musical abilities and claim that they hide their weakness behind slick commercial packaging, exotic locations, special effects and grease paint. One English magazine went so far as to state bluntly, ‘The worst thing about their success is that they don’t deserve a penny of it.’<sup>109</sup>

The “slick packaging” mentioned above in reference to Duran Duran’s personal and artistic image proved controversial, demonstrating that some elements of showiness proved to some to go a little too far.

### **Fashion and Image**

A flamboyant fashion movement called the New Romantic Movement emerged in the late 1970s and developed further in the 1980s. The New Romantics frequently wore clothes with striking patterns, “clad in frilled shirts and cummerbunds,” and styled their hair to be voluminous or otherwise visually prominent.<sup>110</sup> They even occasionally wore makeup, contradicting the normative expectations for men’s mainstream fashion in the 1980s. Duran Duran became

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<sup>107</sup> Keeps, “Ordinary People.”

<sup>108</sup> Sandall, “The Old Romantics.”

<sup>109</sup> Cookie Amerson, “Duran Duran: The Wild Boys Branch Out,” *Teen*, April 1985, 46.

<sup>110</sup> Salewicz, “Am What They Yam.”

associated with this movement early on in their career. As *Blender* writer Johnny Black put it, Duran Duran was “the carefully coiffed quintet of New Romantic clotheshorses.”<sup>111</sup> Sandall called them “men in strange costumes and lots of make-up.”<sup>112</sup> However, this flashy image attracted (or at the very least did not deter) a large fanbase; in his album review, Gayol said that fans “will doubtlessly delight over the high gloss cover of *Duran Duran* (EMI), with the lads dressed in all their chic finery, posing moodily like seasoned peacocks.”<sup>113</sup>

The band’s fashion sense has even transcended time to become a critical part of Duran Duran’s legacy. Keeps’ 1993 interview, for instance, included descriptions of what each member was wearing by way of introduction to each section of the interview.<sup>114</sup> As an article in *I9* prophetically said, “Pop music has always been in the business of marketing images as well as music, but never more so than now. However good [Duran Duran] might sound, it’s their visual images that have made the real impact.”<sup>115</sup>

The members of Duran Duran themselves, however, never seemed to align with the New Romantic movement or any of the movement’s other associated members like Boy George or Spandau Ballet. Rhodes, for example, chided Spandau Ballet, describing the band members as having “funny shirts and jackets with braiding on, and tight trousers.”<sup>116</sup> Perhaps Duran Duran wanted to avoid being seen as followers of a popular trend, thereby making them appear more

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<sup>104</sup> Johnny Black, “‘Hungry Like the Wolf,’” *Blender*, 2003 (accessed March 25, 2023), <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/duran-duran-hungry-like-the-wolf>.

<sup>112</sup> Sandall, “The Old Romantics.”

<sup>113</sup> Gayol, “Pop,” 14.

<sup>114</sup> Keeps, “Ordinary People.”

<sup>115</sup> N.A., “The Image Makers,” *I9*, November 1, 1984, 79.

<sup>116</sup> Salewicz, “Just Fine and Dandy.”

visually cutting-edge than they really were. Record executives certainly wanted Duran Duran to seem unique and individualistic, with one EMI representative saying, “Bands these days are well aware of the importance of image, and they create their own style before they even get a recording contract ...Duran Duran were fashion leaders in the Midlands long before we signed them up.”<sup>117</sup>

The band was aware that their visual appeal did not stop with how they looked: they needed to carry that appeal onto the stage. As Andy Taylor said, “I know I have to compromise live quite a bit, because if we did the songs exactly as we’re recording them, we’d just be standing there twiddling knobs all night, and all the excitement would disappear. There’d be no visual at all.”<sup>118</sup> In one 1982 performance at the Palladium, available currently on *YouTube*, the camera captures Le Bon and Andy Taylor bounding onto and across the stage throughout the show, all while multicolored lights flash around them.<sup>119</sup> (See Figure 1)

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<sup>117</sup> N.A., “The Image Makers,” 79.

<sup>118</sup> Salewicz, “Just Fine and Dandy.”

<sup>119</sup> Duran Duran on MV, “Duran Duran–Full Concert–12/31/82–Palladium (Official).”



*Figure 1: A screenshot of a Duran Duran performance from 1982. Le Bon is gesturing along with the song, and lights are flashing.*

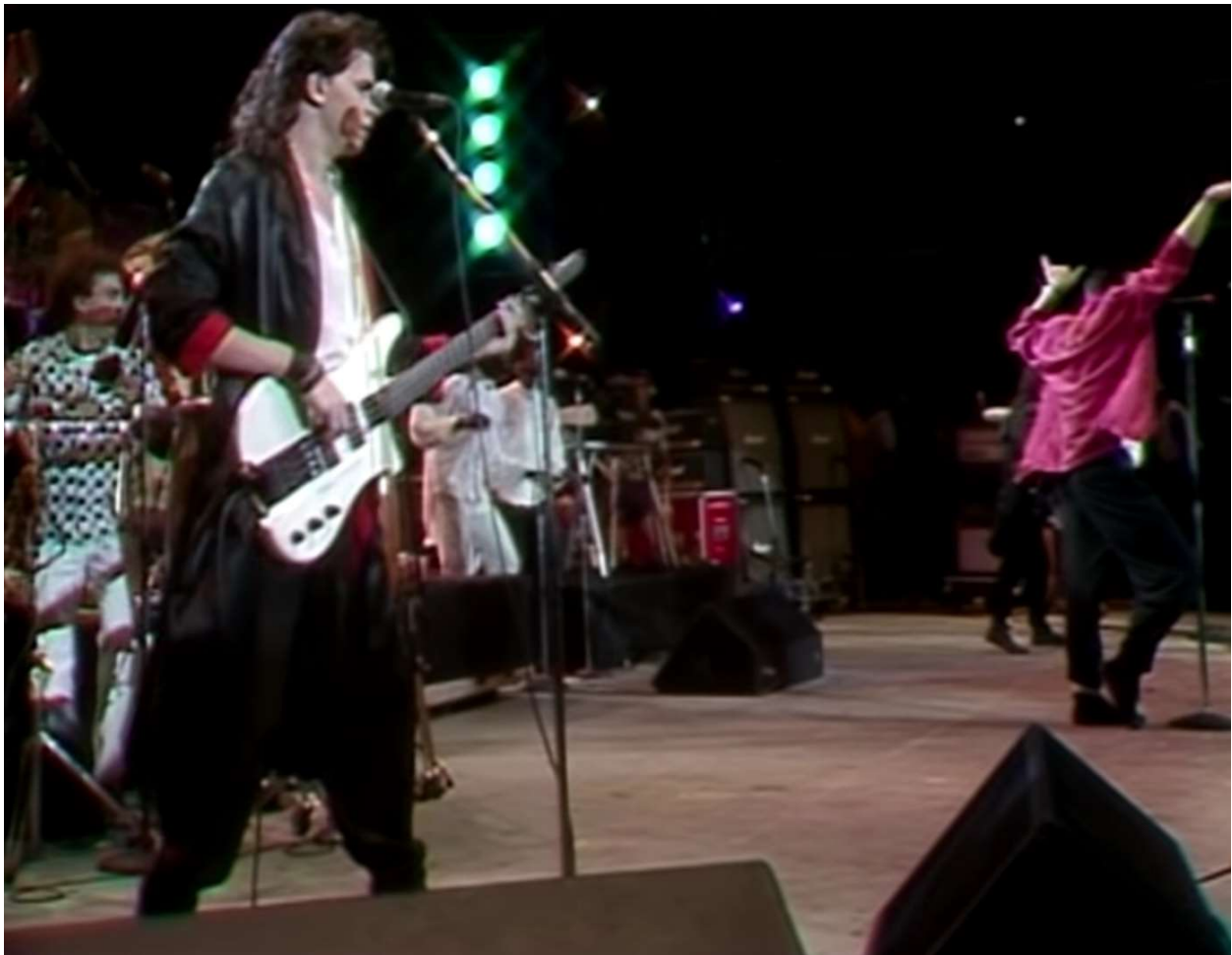
Le Bon and the guitar players also frequently danced or jumped around, especially in sections where they were not playing an active part. Mirroring the lyrics “Maybe catch her, don't know how” from their song “New Religion,” for example, Le Bon dramatically mimed catching something out of thin air, making an exaggerated facial expression as he opened his empty hand.<sup>120</sup> Even during the slower songs, such as “Save a Prayer,” Le Bon engaged the audience by making pouty or smoldering expressions. Later, as evidenced in a 1985 performance (also

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, at 00:11:25.



available on *YouTube*), Le Bon had moved on to choreographed dance moves; moreover, the addition of a trio of backup singers can be seen dancing along to the song.<sup>121</sup> (See Figure 2) Increasing showiness in performance style can be seen in Duran Duran’s 1988 concert, which opened with a large samba ensemble’s performance before launching into the band’s more



*Figure 2: A screenshot of a 1985 Duran Duran performance. Le Bon (right) is dancing more wildly than in the 1982 performance, and the green lights above are flashing brighter. In the back are a trio of backup singers.*

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<sup>121</sup> Live Aid, “Duran Duran–The Reflex (Live Aid 1985),” *YouTube* video, 6:12, October 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNLMdYHHv3c>.

standard performance, complete with flashing, colored lights and accompanied by lots of dancing.<sup>122</sup> (See Figure 3)



Figure 3: A screenshot of multiple samba dancers and drummers at a 1988 Duran Duran concert.

As with the critical responses to Duran Duran’s music, some critics demeaned their image. Robbins, for instance, called the band “yet another entrant in the let’s-play-synth-disco-with-silly-costumes chart sweepstakes,”<sup>123</sup> while Keeps described their “their frilly pirate shirts

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<sup>122</sup> David, “Duran Duran—Entire Concert—Working for the Skin Trade,” *YouTube* video, 57:11, November 17, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3aXgnTgngg>.

<sup>123</sup> Robbins, “*Duran Duran*.”

and sashes, their inadvisable hairstyles and colors, [and] their fondness for cosmetics” as “something to be embarrassed about.”<sup>124</sup> Music journalist Chris Salewicz said it was “perhaps not surprising that they should have become involved with the same New Narcissists’ High Fashion scene.”<sup>125</sup> He lambasted the appearance of each band member, describing them with such qualifiers as “troglydyte-like,” “gum-chewing,” “subtly podgy,” and “[having] a Muffin the Mule-like thatch of dyed blond hair dangling in his eyes which, along with his mascara, manages to make him look (and is probably making him) cross-eyed.” Ironically, Salewicz would defend the band from such brutal criticism just three years later, saying Duran Duran had a “deliberately glamorous image (which has always been a part of rock ‘n roll, so what’s the big deal?).”<sup>126</sup>

### **Music Videos and MTV**

Arguably, the most important contributor to Duran Duran’s success in the U.S. was their music videos, or, as Keeps called them, “their champagne-soaked video extravaganzas.”<sup>127</sup> Music videos, like synth pop, were a fairly new phenomenon in the early 1980s, and they became exponentially more popular with the advent of the Music Television channel (MTV). With 1981’s “Video Killed the Radio Star” by The Buggles, MTV became the established hotspot for music videos.<sup>128</sup> Many music videos, at least early on, typically contained clips of the performers

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<sup>124</sup> Keeps, “Ordinary People.”

<sup>125</sup> Salewicz, “Just Fine and Dandy.” Salewicz refers to the New Romantic fashion scene, which he believed was full of vain, inane young people focused on their looks instead of their music.

<sup>126</sup> Salewicz, “Am What They Yam.”

<sup>127</sup> Keeps, “Ordinary People.”

<sup>128</sup> Jason Ankeny, “Buggles Biography,” AllMusic, N.D. (accessed February 27, 2023), <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/buggles-mn0000629417/biography>.

in some kind of stage setting intercut with other footage. Music videos offered popular artists new creative and marketing opportunities, and Duran Duran became one of many bands to capitalize on the nascent television channel in promoting their music.

A rendition of one of their earliest singles, “Girls on Film,” became Duran Duran’s first successful music video. It immediately attracted controversy due to the video’s overt sexual nature: scantily clad and topless women perform suggestive acts, such as sliding on whipped cream-covered poles or massaging men, all intercut with clips of Duran Duran obliviously performing. Parental and media outrage resulted in a censored version of the music video, which cut entire scenes as well as specific shots of naked women’s bodies. (See Figure 4) However, the original uncut version of the music video proved to be a clever marketing tool for the “Girls on Film” song; teenagers clamored around the television late at night to see the fabled uncensored version. As one *YouTube* user commented, “My dad told me that when he was a teen and this would come on MTV he and his friends would always call each other to just say ‘GIRLS ON FILM IS ON MTV!!!!!’ because they all loved the video so much.”<sup>129</sup> Even if critics and parents negatively responded to the racy music video, Duran Duran became a household name because of it.

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<sup>129</sup> Chels4723, comment on *YouTube* video, Duran Duran, “Duran Duran–‘Girls on Film’ (Official Music Video),” 3:24, November 16, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCjMZMxNr-0>.



*Figure 4: A screenshot of a woman sensually massages a man in the “Girls on Film” music video.*

Kevin Godley, the co-director for the “Girls on Film” video, further elaborated on its appeal: “It had glamour, it had polish, it had sex, it had good-looking boys, girls sliding on poles. It was a dirty film. In hindsight, it had the ingredients that became MTV-able.”<sup>130</sup> Duran Duran bassist John Taylor phrased it more succinctly: “It’s like Penthouse or Hustler. It’s cheesy!”

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<sup>130</sup> Kevin Godley and John Taylor, quoted in Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, “How Five Groundbreaking, Teen-Intoxicating Videos Got Made,” October 17, 2011 (accessed March 25, 2023), <https://nymag.com/arts/popmusic/features/mtv-2011-10/>.

Taylor also claimed in that same article that Duran Duran—perhaps regrettably from a current perspective—made the sexualization of cisgender women’s bodies “a staple of music videos.”

Not all of Duran Duran’s videos were quite as controversial as “Girls on Film,” but all of them were showy to some degree. Their “Rio” video, for example, exuded showiness through its exotic filming location, its unusual footage, and its flashy editing techniques. Director Russell Mulcahy, for example, mixed shots of pink telephones presented on silver platters with reversed footage of breaking mirrors, all interspersed with footage of Duran Duran frolicking with attractive women on the beach. Instead of simple cuts or fades between these images, Mulcahy used unusual editing transitions to merge these clips in innovative ways. (See Figure 5)



*Figure 5: A screenshot from the “Rio” music video. A woman poses on the beach of Antigua while the band members walk behind her.*

Flashy music videos were a marketing gamble that ultimately paid off for the band. “They were one of the first bands to embrace the video at a time when MTV was a tiny

operation, desperate for content,” Sandall said.<sup>131</sup> Duran Duran provided MTV valuable programming, and, in turn, the band’s sales increased. Their music videos also reinforced the band’s particular image and fashion sense, showing teen viewers just how cool it was to listen to, and look like, Duran Duran. “Ever since music videos have popped onto the screen, music is inspiring more than fun and funky dance steps—musical artists are composing new waves of fashion as well,” one journalist claimed.<sup>132</sup>

Alongside Duran Duran’s music videos’ commercial success came fan acclaim. Amerson proclaimed that the band “charted new territory when it came to videos by orchestrating new cinematographic techniques, innovative storylines and intriguing locations in their filming,”<sup>133</sup> further heralding their videos’ “formula of glamour and high style” while calling them “courageous explorations into new areas of performance.” Fans today recall similar responses. As one fan said, retrospectively commenting on the “Rio” video, they “want to permanently live in this music video.”<sup>134</sup> Another fan called the same video “sexy, exotic & brilliant!”<sup>135</sup> Nostalgically, a third fan recalled, “MTV was my home as kid and Duran Duran was the wallpaper. They were colorful, everywhere and made that home an appealing place to always be.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Sandall, “The Old Romantics.”

<sup>132</sup> N.A. “High School USA: Teen Trends from Coast to Coast,” *Teen*, December 1984, 76.

<sup>133</sup> Amerson, “The Wild Boys Branch Out,” 46.

<sup>134</sup> OldWorldRadioBoston, comment on *YouTube* video, Duran Duran, “Duran Duran–‘Rio’ (Official Music Video),” 5:04, July 5, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTizYn3-QN0>.

<sup>135</sup> Aramant, comment on *YouTube* video, Duran Duran, “Duran Duran–Rio (Official Music Video).”

<sup>136</sup> Melissanunez2540, comment on *YouTube* video, Duran Duran, “Duran Duran–Rio (Official Music Video).”

Critics, unsurprisingly, reacted to Duran Duran's music videos negatively, sometimes creatively making up reasons as to why they were not a "good" band. Black, for example, commented that "Duran Duran quickly became so closely identified with MTV that their abilities as pop craftsmen were often overlooked, if not openly derided."<sup>137</sup> Backhanded compliments also appear in critical commentary. For example, Sandall claimed that "Even when they did innovative things, like making the first-ever extended video for 'Girls on Film,' they did it in a way that outraged the moralistic rock establishment. Back in 1981, filming your band larking about with loads of naked girls was seen as neither funny nor clever."<sup>138</sup> Nonetheless, these provocative videos caught the eye of many viewers.

### **"Durandemonium": Duran Duran's Teen Idol Status**

Duran Duran garnered a notable fanbase of young people primarily consisting of young women. As Sandall recalls, "Girls loved them to distraction; boys weren't so sure."<sup>139</sup> A poll in *Teen* magazine reinforces this recollection; their readers voted Duran Duran to be their favorite or second favorite band (depending on their geographic region).<sup>140</sup> Duran Duran's band members were the subject of many youth-oriented magazine articles, which often described them as attractive teen idols. For example, one article cited Le Bon in a discussion about celebrity crushes.<sup>141</sup> Another article suggested that "being a teen idol is what [Duran Duran] fans (and

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<sup>137</sup> Black, "'Hungry Like the Wolf.'"

<sup>138</sup> Sandall, "The Old Romantics."

<sup>139</sup> Sandall, "The Old Romantics."

<sup>140</sup> N.A., "High School USA," 76.

<sup>141</sup> N.A., "Celebrity Crushes: Handling That Starry-Eyed State," *Teen*, October 1984, 72.



even the press) know and love [them] for.”<sup>142</sup> Makeup advertisements, fashion articles, and modeling contests—all targeting young women—bookended these Duran Duran articles.<sup>143</sup>

The verbiage many writers used to describe the band—particularly as seen in teen magazines—reinforced Duran Duran’s teen idol status. One such magazine article, for example, proposed that “[Simon] definitely adds to the group both in terms of his singing and his good looks,”<sup>144</sup> positioning both Simon’s musical talent and his appearance as equally important in the eyes of the magazine’s young readership. Many teen magazines also sprinkled in fun facts, such as the members’ ages and birthdays, to foster a one-sided sense of closeness between the readers and the band members.<sup>145</sup>

Although the members each received fan adoration, John Taylor and his “perfect cheekbones” seemed to get the most media and fangirl attention.<sup>146</sup> One article called him “the most handsome man in the world,” telling their readers outright, “Yes, girls, John Taylor really is as charming, amiable and good-looking as he’s supposed to be.”<sup>147</sup> Black further called him a “heartthrob-in-chief,” while Keeps described him as “the most beautiful and charming band

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<sup>142</sup> N.A., “The Single Life,” *I9*, June 1986, 28.

<sup>143</sup> See N.A., “Advertisement: Lipservice by Blisteze,” *I9*, June 1986, 30; N.A., “Advertisement: Made Up by Duran Duran,” *I9*, November 1988, 25-27; Gayol, “Pop,” 15; and N.A., “Record Rap Up: English Exports,” *Teen*, March 1984, 57-58.

<sup>144</sup> N.A., “Pop’s Dynamic Duran Duran,” 57.

<sup>145</sup> N.A., “Pop’s Dynamic Duran Duran,” 56-57, and N.A., “Duran Duran: *Notorious* Boys Are Back!,” *Teen*, March 1989, 51.

<sup>146</sup> Salewicz, “Am What They Yam.”

<sup>147</sup> N.A., “The Single Life,” 30.

member.”<sup>148</sup> Keeps resolutely affirmed that “John has much experience with the unconditional love of young ladies.”<sup>149</sup>

Although such comments may appear hollow at first glance, many fans truly adored the dreamy Duran Duran heartthrobs, as can be evidenced by *YouTube* comments made nostalgically almost forty years later. One *YouTube* commenter describes why they love Le Bon and Rhodes: “Simon has to be one of the most confident front men, but I love Nick and his intelligence.”<sup>150</sup> Not every commenter was outright infatuated with the band; one user simply reminisced that “Duran Duran was the coolest band of them all ...every kid wished they were them.”<sup>151</sup> Nevertheless, for many commenters, the band represented the ultimate quintet of teenage dreamboats.

Some fans even created their own privately circulating media outlets to express their love for Duran Duran, offering a more concentrated version of the information that typical teen magazines provided about the band. Keeps described one example and its author as follows:

Twenty-five-year-old Melinda Evans is a true believer, not a fair-weather fan. The editor of *For Duranies Only*, Melinda started publishing in 1986, when Duran Duran needed her most. To date she has completed ten issues filled with news (Simon’s launched a men’s grooming line! Nick reportedly turned down the role of Andy Warhol in a TV movie!), snapshots taken by fans and, occasionally, band members, and a column written by Simon’s mother, Ann, called ‘Mums the Word.’

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<sup>148</sup> Black, “‘Hungry Like the Wolf,’” and Keeps, “Ordinary People.”

<sup>149</sup> Keeps, “Ordinary People.”

<sup>150</sup> IronAngelsFitClub, comment on *YouTube* video, Live Aid, “Duran Duran–The Reflex (Live Aid 1985).”

<sup>151</sup> Gustinn3509, comment on *YouTube* video, Live Aid, “Duran Duran–The Reflex (Live Aid 1985).”

Commenting on such fan-produced media, David Wild also observed that “During the heyday of these pioneering video rockers in the early and mid-Eighties, their massive popularity ...landed them on the cover of *Rolling Stone* as well as countless teen bibles, even for a time evoking comparisons to Beatlemania. There were bestselling Duran Duran posters, T-shirts, buttons and just about everything else young female Duranheads could buy.”<sup>152</sup> Sandall concurred, recounting that “When they first appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in 1985, Duran Duran were described as the Fab Five. Yes, a nod to The Beatles, but also a clear suggestion that this lot were a throwback to the pre-rock era, when groups were met by screaming hordes at airports and chased out of hotels.”<sup>153</sup>

Not unlike The Beatles, Duran Duran was constantly surrounded by screaming young female fans, both onstage and in public. The screaming may have been a bit much for some fans, however. As Alannah Currie of the new wave band Thompson Twins once complained, “We went to a Duran Duran concert and all you could hear was the screaming.”<sup>154</sup> In an interview with Le Bon, Salewicz even commented on the sheer volume of the nearby fangirl screams: “It seems that every time a chambermaid adjusts a curtain in one of the front-facing bedrooms, this gaggle of girls is given cause to erupt with audible hysteria.”<sup>155</sup> Upon further reflection, he added that John Taylor inspired even more screams than Le Bon. It was then, allegedly, that Salewicz realized “there really is such a phenomenon as Duran Duran-mania.” Roger Taylor, however,

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<sup>152</sup> David Wild, “Out of the Ordinary,” *Rolling Stone*, April 1, 1993, 20.

<sup>153</sup> Sandall, “The Old Romantics.”

<sup>154</sup> Vanessa Feltz, “Twin Souls,” *19*, July 1, 1984, 95.

<sup>155</sup> Salewicz, “Am What They Yam.”

noted that this mania was not always pleasant to deal with; fans found and swarmed his house in the middle of his family's move-in.<sup>156</sup>

Indeed, Duran Duran's fame led to a notable invasion of their privacy, mainly through 1980s tabloid coverage. As Sandall declared, somewhat incorrectly, "Nobody can precisely date the point at which ogling the celebrity lifestyle came to dominate the public's interest in planet pop, but one thing is sure: Duran Duran were there at the beginning."<sup>157</sup> Magazines and tabloids were profiting extensively from fueling the Duran Duran frenzy. Teen magazine *19* claimed that Duran Duran's "Everest-high profile sells more newspapers than records."<sup>158</sup> Many magazines and tabloids invasively followed the romantic lives of each member, drawing many an infatuated reader to wait anxiously for the next "kiss-and-tell" story from some lucky young lady or for their favorite member's untimely divorce.<sup>159</sup> A gossip column from the music magazine *Q* once claimed the band was rife with infighting and cocaine abuse, saying the members were "losing their grip."<sup>160</sup> Yet even negative press did not keep fans from obsessing over the band. Although the adversities of constant tabloid coverage were immense, and the frenzy surrounding their every appearance was sometimes frustrating to the band members, they still benefitted immensely from such levels of attention.<sup>161</sup> John Taylor claimed that, by being the last unmarried

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<sup>156</sup> Amerson, "The Wild Boys Branch Out," 45.

<sup>157</sup> Sandall, "The Old Romantics."

<sup>158</sup> N.A., "The Single Life," 28.

<sup>159</sup> See N.A., "The Single Life," 30; N.A., "Pop's Dynamic Duran Duran," 57; and N.A., "The Single Life," 28; Keeps, "Ordinary People."

<sup>160</sup> Black, "'Hungry Like the Wolf.'"

<sup>161</sup> Salewicz, "Am What They Yam."

member of the band, he “[made] more money out of merchandising than the rest of them put together” because of how many female fans bought his merchandise.<sup>162</sup>

### **So What Made Duran Duran Showy?**

Duran Duran epitomized 1980s showiness in every aspect of their musical aesthetic and performance style. On the one hand, their consistent use of pervasive and multifunctional synthesizers advanced the synth pop style. On the other, they greatly elevated the style’s showiness through their song structure and varied synth timbres. Their fashion sense, especially in the early years of their career, was extremely showy, drawing the eye through their ostentatious clothes, makeup, and hair. Their live performances further ushered in a new era of extravagant concerts with their energetic stage presence, flashy lighting, and unusual guest features. Their music videos extended this showiness to another artistic medium, using eye-catching visual elements combined with innovative videographic and editing techniques.

Furthermore, their natural good looks led to their status as teen idols. Teenaged girls loved this group of heartthrobs creating innovative, showy music and videos. As the band created more and more showy material, more fans flocked to them. And as more fans flocked to them, the more of a spectacle the band became. With mobs of screaming teenagers and adoring fans following their (seemingly) every move, Duran Duran always attracted attention wherever they went. To maintain this level of stardom, however, they needed to create an increasingly showy product. They did so for the remainder of their time in the limelight.

Even if their fame was confined to the early 1980s, Duran Duran brought many young people great joy. One anecdote shows just how much this band meant to some adoring fans.

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<sup>162</sup> N.A., “The Single Life,” 30.

Keeps asked Evans why she remained a fan of Duran Duran for so long, and Evans's response spoke to the sense of freedom she found in the band's music and lifestyle: "they were there for me at a time when I needed them. I had been really rebellious. Duran Duran made me realize I could do things with my life."<sup>163</sup>

Duran Duran's career trajectory is encapsulated by Keeps's comment that "Duran Duran spent one half of the '80s as international pop playboys and the other half surviving the experience."<sup>164</sup> After releasing *Seven and the Ragged Tiger*, the band did not release another album until three years later, losing fan traction in the meantime. Two band members quit before the release of their fourth album: Andy Taylor wanted to pursue a solo career, while Roger Taylor was simply exhausted after the band's busy recording and touring schedule.<sup>165</sup> Because of these losses—combined with a radically different, more funk-derived musical style—Duran Duran's fourth album *Notorious* was not as commercially successful in comparison to their previous releases. For example, their first three albums all peaked in the top 10 of the U.S. album charts, whereas *Notorious* only reached #12.<sup>166</sup> From then on, the band's new material declined in popularity as new wave music gave way to more muted styles such as adult alternative or grunge in the 1990s. Le Bon bleakly described in an interview: "To an extent, the 1980s was all about the party, whereas the 1990s was all about the hangover."

Although Duran Duran never disbanded fully, they also never saw the same level of success that they achieved in the early 1980s. Their legacy of flashy music and teen idol status,

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<sup>163</sup> Melissa Evans, quoted in Keeps, "Ordinary People."

<sup>164</sup> Keeps, "Ordinary People."

<sup>165</sup> Steve Malins, *Duran Duran, Notorious: The Unauthorised Biography* (London: André Deutsch, 2005), 181.

<sup>166</sup> N.A., "Duran Duran," N.D. (accessed February 28, 2023), <https://musicchartsarchive.com/artists/duran-duran>.

however, remains important to the history of new wave and its increasing showiness. For now, as Sandall said, “The teenage girls who flocked around them in the Eighties and are now drifting into sensible middle age and ...can relive the days when Duran epitomised romantic irresponsibility, bouffant hair and many other aspects of an enjoyably misspent youth.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Sandall, “The Old Romantics.”

## Conclusion

*The last thing in the world we're ever going to sing about is bad times. We want to be the band that's playing when the Titanic goes down.*<sup>168</sup> ~John Taylor of *Duran Duran*

At the beginning of this thesis, I stated that the synthesizer was crucial in the transformation of new wave to its showier successor, synth pop. As evidenced by Chapter 1 and 2's song analyses, synthesizer usage greatly increased from Blondie's music to Duran Duran's music, and, by extension, from new wave to synth pop. Not only was the synthesizer more pervasive in Duran Duran's music, it also occupied multiple song layers, making it *critical* to Duran Duran's musical composition. With its novel timbres and associations with dance, the synthesizer monumentally increased a song's showiness.

Why this occurred precisely in the 1980s is unsurprising—the decade, as Nick Rhodes stated, was rife with “excess,” an element that bled into all aspects of culture and media.<sup>169</sup> 1980s fashion was markedly bold for both everyday people and celebrities, consisting of bright colors, garish patterns, and excess detail (e.g. numerous zippers and pockets). The science fiction film style became more popular at this time as well, increasing the showiness—and the special effects budget—of movies. With the perceived economic boom associated with the Reaganomics era, people enjoyed lavish lifestyles that flaunted their wealth. Gordon Cruickshank of *Motorsport* magazine sums this phenomenon up:

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<sup>168</sup> N.A., “Pop’s Dynamic Duran Duran,” 56.

<sup>169</sup> Sandall, “The Old Romantics.”



Whereas the 1970s had been about ‘look at me,’ the ‘80s became about ‘look at what I’ve got.’ The yuppie phenomenon, burgeoning banker bonuses and Gordon Gekko’s glorification of greed meant that if you had the cash you walked into a Porsche showroom and drove out in a 911 Turbo. If your next bonus was even bigger and all your mates had Turbos too, you paid someone to make yours look a bit special—never mind the taste.<sup>170</sup>

This brand of opulence bled into 1980s popular music, but perhaps none more so than new wave music. The synthesizer enabled the creation of flashy, loud, danceable synth pop songs with new timbres and just a bit of punk edge left over from new wave. Art mirrors life, and if consumers lived an opulent lifestyle, they likely wanted an equally opulent soundtrack to accompany it.

This thesis opens the door for further exploration of showiness in popular music studies. Indeed, 1980s popular music styles like hair metal and funk include elements of showiness that have yet to be extensively researched. The 1980s was a time of extravagant musical showiness, so why did this showiness die out in the 1990s? By the 1990s, many former yuppies seemingly grew tired of their endless 1980s party, retreating from their glittery synth pop in lieu of more grounded, sometimes darker, styles of music like adult alternative and grunge. The 1980s Titanic indeed sank, and new wave and synth pop went down with it.

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<sup>170</sup> Gordon Cruickshank, “‘80s Month: A Decade of Glorious Excess,” *Motorsport*, February 12, 2018, updated September 19, 2019, <https://www.motorsportmagazine.com/articles/road-cars/80s-month-decade-glorious-excess/?v=79cba1185463>.

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## **Education**

- Master of Music, Musicology – Texas Christian University – Fort Worth, TX – *May 2023*
- Bachelor of Music Education, Vocal emphasis – Texas Christian University – Fort Worth, TX – *May 2021*
- High school diploma – Creekview High School – Carrollton, TX – *June 2017*

## **Work History**

### **Academic Experience**

- TA for Dr. William McGinney at Texas Christian University – “Survey of Rock Music” for non-music majors – *Fall 2022 and Spring 2023*
- TA for Dr. Stuart Cheney at Texas Christian University – “Bibliography and Research Techniques” for graduate music students – *Spring 2023*
- TA for Dr. Stuart Cheney at Texas Christian University – “History of Western Music II” for undergraduate music majors – *Fall 2022*
- TA for Dr. Timothy Watkins at Texas Christian University – “World Music” for non-music majors – *Fall 2021 and Spring 2022*

### **Teaching Experience**

- Student teacher at Coppell Middle School North with Sarah Nordgren – middle school choir – *Spring 2021*
- Student teacher at Wilson Elementary School with Eric Hanson – elementary music – *Spring 2021*

## **Awards**

- Michael B. Winesanker award – *Fall 2021*  
This award is given to graduate-level musicology students to aid in their research and other academic endeavors. The recipient is selected based on academic merit. This recipient receives \$10,040 split across two semesters.



## **ABSTRACT**

### **SYNTHESIZER AND SHOWINESS: THE EVOLUTION OF 1980S NEW WAVE AND SYNTH POP**

by

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Master of Music, 2023  
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This thesis explores the relationship between the synthesizer and what I call “showiness” in 1970s and 1980s new wave and synth pop music. I first define what showiness is in music. Then, I analyze the music of new wave band Blondie and synth pop band Duran Duran to find the correlation between the synth and showiness. Furthermore, I explore extramusical elements of showiness in both bands, including sexuality, fashion, stage performances, and music videos. I supplement my own observations with those of journalists and fans through archival research, focusing on the opinions of 1970s and 1980s critics and consumers. I relate elements of these bands’ showiness to the culture of 1980s America, which I argue is a showy decade in fashion, entertainment, and music. This thesis opens the discussion of showiness in all forms of popular music by defining the concept and exploring it in depth within two musical styles.