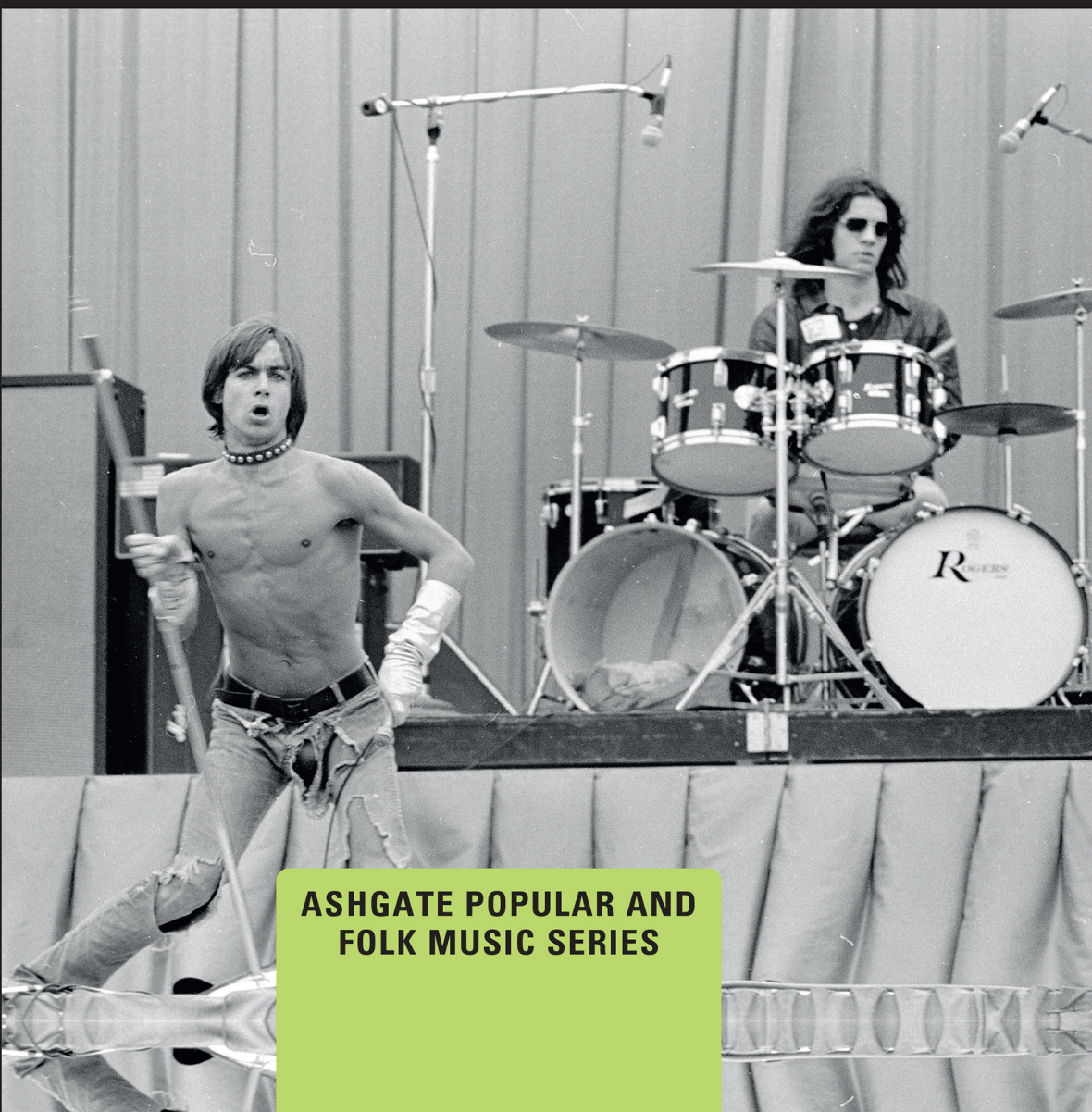
Michael S. Begnal

The Music and Noise of the Stooges, 1967–71

Lost in the Future



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The Music and Noise of the Stooges, 1967–71

The Stooges have come to be considered one of the most important rock bands, especially in regard to the formation of punk. By emphasizing their influence on later developments, however, critics tend to overlook the significance of the band in their own context and era. *The Music and Noise of the Stooges, 1967–71* addresses such oversights.

Utilizing the lenses of cultural criticism and sound studies (drawing on the thinking of Theodor Adorno, Jacques Attali, and Pierre Bourdieu, among others), this extensively researched study analyzes the trajectory and musical output of the original Stooges. During the late 1960s and early 70s, a moment when the dissonant energy of rock'n'roll was more than ever being subsumed by the record industry, the Stooges were initially commercial failures, with the band's "noisy" music and singer Iggy Pop's "bizarre" onstage performances confusing their label, Elektra Records. As Begnal argues, the Stooges embodied a tension between market forces and an innovative, avant-garde artistic vision, as they sought to liberate audiences from passivity and stimulate an immanent joy in the rock'n'roll moment.

This book, which includes new material gleaned from first-person interviews and engages with less-trodden archival texts, offers a fresh perspective on the Stooges that will appeal both to rock fans and scholars (especially those in the fields of cultural studies, punk studies, and performance studies).

Michael S. Begnal teaches writing in the English Department at Ball State University, Indiana, USA. He is a poet as well as a scholar.

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Michael S. Begnal

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Introduction

"A Strange Type of Life"

In an interview by David Walley for *Jazz & Pop* magazine, conducted in September 1969, shortly after the release of the Stooges' self-titled first album on Elektra Records, Walley asked the band's singer Iggy Pop about their apparent success. Pop (then known as Iggy Stooge) replied,

> We're considered a successful band, but no more successful than a hundred other bands. I don't care. There's a tremendous amount of push when we play, but it's not a push to succeed. It's a push for something else. I don't know what it is. A strange type of life.[1]

This statement sums up a number of the contradictions that run through any consideration of the Stooges. For example, it turned out that the band were actually not very successful in their own time, in terms of record sales and broader, popular appeal. Whereas their first album had at least reached number 106 on the Billboard 200, their second, *Fun House* (1970), didn't even crack the chart, and the group was dropped from Elektra in the summer of 1971, the option for a third being refused. Did Iggy, or the Stooges as a band, really not care about all of that? Of course they did, in the sense that any musician wants to be successful enough to continue working, playing shows, and recording their music. At the same time, though, the Stooges often seemed uninterested in doing the things they needed to do if they really wanted that kind of success, as their singer indicates ("I don't care"). In another interview, conducted in February 1970 for *Crawdaddy*, Jean-Charles Costa suggested that whereas some people prefer "syrupy" music, the Stooges are "stark." Iggy retorts, "Look at me, man, I'm stark. I ain't trying to sell it, that's other people's job to sell it. Why should I have to be with this whole record company here?"[2] Yet, there he was in the Elektra office in New York, doing press and publicity work—perhaps not a "push to succeed" in the typical sense, but a seizing of the opportunity to set out the Stooges' own vision of "a strange type of life" as embodied in their "stark" and original music.

Like the Velvet Underground, the MC5, and the New York Dolls, the Stooges—originally, Iggy on vocals, Ron Asheton on guitar, his brother Scott Asheton on drums, and Dave Alexander on bass—are considered highly

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influential now but were commercial failures in their heyday. Based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a 45-minute drive from Detroit, the band started out in 1967 almost as something of a performance-art project, experimenting with sound and sometimes playing unconventional instruments. It was only after getting signed to Elektra in 1968 (at the urging of Danny Fields, who was then working for the label as their publicity director, with a purview something like a roving talent scout) that they began writing the songs that would feature on *The Stooges*. They did not fully round out that album's repertoire until they arrived in New York to record with John Cale as producer in the spring of 1969. Here, one could say, is where the band most obviously conceded to the demands of being on a commercial record label, which required music that would be recognized as songs, as opposed to their originally more open-ended jams (not that the songs they came up with were especially commercial). Over the following year, though, they phased out their existing set and wrote all-new and even heavier material, adding Steve Mackay on tenor saxophone before heading to Los Angeles to record *Fun House*. The constant evolution of their music is one of the Stooges' hallmarks, and it often confounded audience expectations. As great as the first album remains, *Fun House* represented a giant step forward. Part metallic energy, part psychedelic funk, part jagged blues, part free jazz, part avant noise, that second record captures the band at their most extreme and challenging—but also at their most cohesive and brilliant. As works of sonic art, both albums have endured and have increasingly risen in stature over time. Moving into 1971, the band (now sans Mackay) added James Williamson on second guitar, composed and toured another completely new batch of songs—arguably the equal of the first two albums—but then imploded that summer, being dropped without producing a third Elektra album.

Certainly, the Stooges are esteemed now, but what accounts for their popular disesteem in 1969 or 1970, when the records were out, the music critics were covering them, and the original band was at the height of their powers? In this book, I argue that the group indexes the tension between the marketplace and artistic vision, as record companies were adopting increasingly corporate approaches to the wide variety of innovative rock music(s) flourishing at this time. Bringing the lens of cultural criticism to bear (drawing on the work of critical theorists Theodor Adorno, Jacques Attali, and Pierre Bourdieu, among others), along with lesser-trodden archival texts and new personal interviews with figures who were close to the Stooges, I elucidate the ways in which the band put forward their unique and transformative vision and the costs incurred by their refusal to compromise it. Though embroiled in the "culture industry,"[3] the band did not conform to commercial expectations and undertook instead to create a noise-laden, new form of rock music, which still often drew on past musical traditions but, in its sound, was received as anomalous or even freakish. The music itself, in turn, encapsulates a cultural stance that aspires to "a strange type of life," counter to the bourgeois or mainstream American values of the era.

Too often, however, the Stooges are framed primarily as influences, precursors to some eventual apotheosis of their sound in future bands or movements, especially in regard to later punk rock. Though it's worth noting that music critics such as Lester Bangs, Dave Marsh, and Greg Shaw were already theorizing and elaborating a musical aesthetic they called "punk" from about 1970 onward,[4] this was not widely understood at the time or in quite the same way that punk would be when it came to prominence several years later, codified into a more particular sound and style of dress. Too often, contemporary fans and record-label marketing teams buy into the notion that the Stooges had little to do with the moment in which they actually lived and lazily deem them "punk" or, worse, "proto-punk." Consequently, many tend to emphasize the punk-like shock value of Iggy's onstage actions and the perceived simplicity of the group's music.

This is not to say that the Stooges were not shocking—of course, they quite often were—but the aim of this study is to take account of the reasons why and to provide a more sustained analysis of their musical innovation, performances, and aesthetic approach in the wider sociocultural context of their own era. In subtitling the book *Lost in the Future* (after the *Fun House* outtake track of that name), my intent is, on the one hand, to reflect (or refract) the popular conception of the Stooges as a "posthumous" influence: for many, the Stooges as they lived in their own moment are "lost" by primarily valuing their futurity. But, on the other hand, it's also to complicate the picture by highlighting the irony of that futurity. If they were fated only to receive their rightful due in the future (our present), then they were therefore more aptly "lost" in their own present (our past). In fact, either of these views is only partly correct. The Stooges were an important part of a thriving Ann Arbor and Detroit cultural scene in the late 1960s and early 70s. They don't need to be justified by subsequent trends in music history in order to be taken seriously, though their influence on these is certainly part of their legacy too.

The Stooges in Context

Inescapably, though, the band were as much *of* their time as they may have been ahead of it. Though they are frequently depicted as reacting against the hippie idealism that putatively defined the 60s,[5] that idealism was already on the wane around the time they and other groups considered influential to punk were forming. As Evan Rapport argues in *Damaged: Musicality and Race in Early American Punk* (2020), both in terms of their ethos and even some of their musical strategies, the Stooges were ineluctably formed by the (counter)culture of their moment. Citing the disillusionment embodied in late-60s albums by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Doors, Rapport suggests, "Given this climate, groups widely referenced as 'proto-punk' bands, including the Stooges and the Velvet Underground, were hardly alone in their bleak outlook, although they are often singled out for it."[6] Moreover,

Rapport notes that the Stooges and the MC5 "were enmeshed in the racial and cultural conversations of the 1960s [and] they heavily based their music on the riff-based country blues increasingly considered authentic" at that time, going on to observe that they differentiated themselves from other white rock groups in part via the types of blues resources they chose to draw from.[7] Their rejection of more recognizable (e.g. twelve-bar) blues forms further allows audiences to imagine that the Stooges were disconnected from the late-Sixties zeitgeist, but as Rapport suggests, engaging the Stooges as "enmeshed in the racial and cultural conversations" of their time results in more fruitful analyses than the ahistorical approaches some have previously taken.

As historians and other commentators have widely pointed out, the late 1960s was a period of social change and political upheaval, and rock was undergoing change itself, both in regard to musical style(s) and the ways in which it intersected with consumer culture and the record industry. In an essay about *Creem*, the Detroit music and countercultural magazine whose early existence was closely connected with the rise of the Stooges, Michael J. Kramer sums up the situation like this:

> Detroit itself gained infamy from the 1967 riots, which were the culmination of years of decaying race relations. More broadly, during the late 1960s and into the 1970s the United States sustained what many felt was an unjust war in Vietnam. On the domestic scene, the country experienced the contested implementation of Johnson's Great Society, [while] the counterculture *Creem* sought to define faced its own problems: attempting to imagine an alternative social structure that was more harmonious than the technology-driven, mass-consumer order dominant in the Cold War years, the counterculture wound up associated at one extreme with violence and failure … and at the other, less dangerously, coopted in "lite" form by television shows and Pepsi commercials.[8]

Though associated with the MC5, the Stooges did not subscribe to the more militant rhetoric of the White Panther Party (founded by MC5 manager John Sinclair, and modeled after the Black Panther Party), yet neither did they put forward a musical product that easily lent itself to being coopted by the mainstream. In a 1988 interview, Ron Asheton was asked about whether the Stooges, as well as having an "expansive aspect," had a "destructive aspect" to their sound, as opposed to the hippie scene that was happening at the time. Asheton counters that "We never thought we were destructive" and even affirms that the band was to a large extent in synch with the mood of the era—"the Sixties, cultural revolution, trying to throw off the 'chains and yoke of repression' by the police and society."[9] While he gives the phrase "chains and yoke of repression" an intonation that suggests the perspective of a now-middle-aged man looking back on the zeal of his youth, Asheton acknowledges that these countercultural currents informed the band's thinking and intent.

At the same time, it would be foolish to overlook the Stooges' simultaneous immersion in pop culture—their name comes from the physical comedy of the Three Stooges films, and part of the routine in the communal band house, according to Stooges roadie Leo Beattie, was to watch *Star Trek* on TV.[10] Nonetheless, Pop's Stooges lyrics do not express a celebration of mass media, but rather a sense of boredom, isolation, or desperation that required an intensity of feeling and human connection as a means of counteracting it. As Kramer writes, the *Creem* critics were interested in the Stooges and other Detroit bands because:

> these rock groups were full of a crackling energy that, in spite of their apparently ephemeral quality, might be capable of providing enormous sustenance. They wrote about these performers as political not because their music contained a programmatic call to arms, but instead because these "high-energy" bands became political at the deep levels of self and social consciousness, at the point where experiences of consumer and civic identity intersected.[11]

This opens up new ways of thinking about the Stooges, whose fans are often quick to argue were not political all, unlike the MC5 (whose politics are inevitably portrayed as foolish). The Stooges' manager Jimmy Silver told me,

> They didn't have a political outlook, but they did have a kind of penetrating social vision, and Jim [Iggy] was a good social psychologist. He could see what motivated people and what their failings and habits were (other people, not himself), even in a short period of time.[12]

Thus, instead of seeing the two bands as opposites—the MC5 under the sway of the supposedly domineering left-winger John Sinclair and the Stooges merely as nihilists—it's worth considering the ways in which, for example, the Stooges' expressions of boredom (especially on their first album, in songs like "1969" and "No Fun") constitute a "social vision" that is not "programmatic" but is in its own way, loosely speaking, a political critique. The philosopher Lars Svendsen asserts that:

> Boredom always contains a critical element, because it expresses the idea that a given situation or existence as a whole is deeply unsatisfying.... If boredom increases, it means that there is a serious fault in society or culture as a conveyor of meaning.[13]

The Stooges, though their critique was not explicit, did register a sense of deep dissatisfaction with, as Bangs put it in his famous 1970 review of *Fun House*, the "thicket of some of the worst personal, interpersonal, and national confusion we've seen."[14] While Bangs derides "the new social systems the Panthers and Yips are cookin' up"[15] (indeed, Bangs is largely

responsible for the facile "radical-movements-bad, teen-kitsch-good" dichotomy that still hangs over much of the music criticism on this period), he nonetheless identifies a strong sociopolitical context that gives rise to the Stooges, situating them as being in rebellion against a kind of mass-cultural neurosis, alienated from modern society even as they could not help but be part of it.

Whether the counterculture of the late 1960s expressed itself in more overtly political terms or was only political "at the deep levels of self" (as Kramer puts it), mainstream record labels had come to see it as a market that they could exploit, initiating what historian Kevin Mattson calls the "quintessential 'hip capitalism' where corporate record producers posed as the all-knowing, generous providers of youth rebellion willing to take it to 'the man.'"[16] This allowed for a number of interesting signings, as record executives began listening to their "company freak" (as Danny Fields has been called in regard to Elektra) and took their chances on bands that otherwise might never have been signed to a major label. In this regard, Devon Powers argues that:

> company freaks should be thought about as not just bridges *between* cultures oppositionally defined as "counter" and "corporate"; rather, they were forgers of a common culture—namely, an environment in which rock music, the capital of major labels, and the individuals who transacted that relationship made sense together.[17]

So it was that the Stooges were given a recording contract, along with the MC5. Elektra Records was smaller than some labels, and its founder and president Jac Holzman tended to take a personal interest in the groups he signed. Unfortunately, however, the organization never figured out how to properly support the Stooges, despite the existence of fanbases in Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, and other urban centers with strong local rock scenes. Holzman later admitted,

> Danny talked me into the signing despite my puzzlement as to what I was going to do with them.... Bill [Harvey, Elektra's art director] could not fathom how I allowed them on the label. Mel Posner [head of distribution] had not the slightest idea how he was going to sell those albums.[18]

It appears, then, that the relationship did not in fact always make sense together, and part of that had to do with Elektra's own ambivalence about the band to begin with.

The Stooges and the Culture Industry

The story of the Stooges thus inevitably involves the uncomfortable tension between market forces and serious art. Echoing his earlier comments to

Walley and Costa, Iggy told Dave Marsh in an April 1970 interview for *Creem* that he was not concerned with "mass recognition"; instead, he said, "Fame and notoriety and money and all those things are attractive. But they're not really [as] attractive to me as the musical forest in which I live. I'm not gonna come out of my musical forest for anybody."[19] While not immune to the prospects of fame and money, for Pop and presumably the rest of the Stooges, these must not come at the sacrifice of the intensity of their art, of the necessity of inhabiting their own "musical forest" separate from economic concerns. Adorno elaborates on this kind of conflict in his 1938 essay "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," which analyzes popular music as part of the wider capitalist culture industry. He argues that already by the early twentieth century (with the advent of radio) there had arisen a polarization between a commodified "light" popular music and "serious" artistic music, with the latter becoming increasingly unviable as its marketability shrinks to nothing. Adorno writes that "all contemporary musical life is dominated by the commodity form: the last pre-capitalist residues have been eliminated."[20] For Adorno, the very existence of a music *industry* makes it difficult for "serious" (i.e. non-commercial) music to exist because the record label's sales figures will always be of greater concern than the music itself. Perhaps, being inured to living in a consumer society, this comes as no big surprise to the contemporary reader, but the inescapable consequence is that the relationship between the Stooges, who certainly did not make radio-friendly "light" music, and Elektra Records was always going to be precarious (and ultimately ended badly).

In regard to Adorno's thinking, some things need to be clarified if it is to be part of a conversation about the Stooges. As is well known, Adorno harbored a deep animosity to jazz, by which he meant not only the swing-era jazz of his day but popular music generally, his attack on which would have undoubtedly also extended to rock'n'roll in all of its forms. Therefore, it is clear that Adorno himself would never have accepted the Stooges as "serious" music. However, this does not preclude us from drawing upon his insights, affirming his broader critique of the culture industry on the one hand, while interrogating his assumptions about musical form on the other. On form, Theodore Gracyk points out that Adorno is biased toward a Eurocentric tradition that values the written score as the essence of all music, to the detriment of performance, orality, and improvisation, the modalities of which both jazz and rock employ to one extent or another—and that therefore Adorno's "own fetishism lies in focusing on structure at the expense of other musical values."[21] For Gracyk, jazz and rock are defined not so much by the composition of their songs but by the *sound* of the individual musicians and the interplay of those voices in group performance, musical values that simply did not figure for Adorno as capable of facilitating work that might run counter to the dictates of the market. Robert W. Witkin takes things a step further and argues that "Adorno failed to recognize the autonomy of jazz culture even in the midst of its integral involvement with

popular song and dance music and that he underestimated the potential of jazz, from within the culture industry, to develop its own forms of resistance."[22] This is not to say that Adorno's critique of the culture industry is any less valuable as a guiding principle, but that his ideas about what constitutes "serious" versus "light" music might need to be recalibrated. As Simon Frith avers, "the aesthetic impulse that Adorno recognized in high art must be part of low art too."[23] While continuing to engage with Adorno, these critics recognize that out of so-called popular music can spring new forms or iterations that challenge hegemonic narratives of capitalism or that, at the very least, resist their own commercialization.

While it's important to acknowledge the cultural and racial dynamics that distinguish the different origins and histories of jazz and rock, the musical analogue with jazz is especially apt for the Stooges, because they were directly influenced by the free jazz of the 1960s—musicians such as John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Archie Shepp—and themselves recorded unstructured, "free" pieces ("Asthma Attack" and "L.A. Blues"), frequently ending their live sets in similar fashion. So, with the nuances offered by Witkin and Frith, Adorno's argument about commercial and non-commercial music can be retained, with the Stooges for the most part falling in the latter category—i.e., during their initial existence, they did not sell very much; they were not actually commercially "popular." Furthermore, their music was challenging, disruptive, deeply *serious*, and potentially even a "form of resistance." As David E. James argues, although commodity culture predominates in a capitalist society, it "coexists with other, marginal modes that have other functions and can mobilize other values" and that, while the predominant system of power may attempt to control these marginal modes, "it does not always extinguish them."[24] The relevance to the discussion of the Stooges is that, as personal as the expression may be, their art also embodies "other values" that may resist commodity culture, especially in regard to a record industry that ultimately could not control them.

In this light, it seems no mere coincidence that the Stooges took their name from the filmic Three Stooges, who also challenged the institutional center (the dominant culture) from its own fringes (the "low," or the marginal). Emphasizing transgressive violence as the primary aspect of the Three Stooges and their concomitant refusal "to submit to a system of rules that regulate meaning," Peter Brunette contends,

> In the refusal to have meaning, to *make* sense, the [Three] Stooges' violence in fact constitutes an anti-narrative. It is precisely their violence, as an "originary" writing, that both allows for and destroys narrative and thus allows for and destroys meaning itself.[25]

Brunette means "originary" in the sense that the violent or the irrational precedes the rational order that is meant to contain it, and there is certainly an assertion of the irrational in the Stooges (the band), with their focus on

emotion and the body, both in their songs and in their attitude onstage. For Brunette, the existence of the literally violent Three Stooges at the "low" end of popular culture does a kind of metaphorical violence to the "meaningful" cultural narratives of the mainstream, and this provides a useful framework especially for understanding the band. The idea of using the (Three) Stooges as a band name came from Ron Asheton, who described his interest in these films as a teenager:

> My friends were guys that were into watching movies, and we were deeply into the Three Stooges. We'd go around with Three Stooges haircuts: one guy had a Curly crew cut, I would secretly put my hair down in bangs like Moe as soon as I left the house, and the other guy had a Larry-kind-of wig that his ma had rigged up for him. We pretended we really were them. I got my dad to buy me a 1931 Chevy. We'd get in there and smack each other around in this old car. It was perfect. We'd act out bits pretending cops were chasing us and we'd throw pies.[26]

For Asheton, imitating the Three Stooges was transgressive—he could only display his Moe hairstyle in secret (away from the supervision of parents), and the friends imagined themselves hounded by the police. If it is possible to create art on the margins of the culture industry that functions in opposition to it, then for Asheton the Three Stooges embodied a form of resistance against the mores of mainstream society, constituting an early way of creating his own "strange type of life" (as Iggy, in the *Jazz & Pop* interview, told Walley was the group's real aim, as opposed to "success"). When the Stooges became a band, the ethos they put forward was one that similarly "violently" resisted being turned into saleable pop product by the culture industry.

This also goes some way toward elucidating Iggy's approach to performance. Further operative in the Stooges' lack of mass appeal was the perception of their live shows as literally violent or frightening. To many, the primary (if voyeuristic) attraction of the band lay not in their music (the artistry behind it often went unnoticed), but rather in Pop's sometimes shocking performances, which included frequent forays into the audience and an intense awareness of his own body. As John Mendelssohn wrote, "he *has* extended the idea of physical liberation through rock and roll performance light-years past where he found it."[27] This often helped draw people to shows but did not easily translate to album sales. Scott Asheton, reflecting on the label's decision to drop the band the year after *Fun House* was released, contended that:

> People were afraid of [us], what we represented, or what people thought we represented. Elektra associated us closely with the MC5 [who they had also dropped], and they had reasons to be wary of them, because they were so blatantly political. We scared people in a different way. Iggy

> was different, really wild, and he did things that more normal people would never think of.[28]

There is an element of sadomasochism in Iggy's using his own body in the ways that he did, vaunting himself as a triumphant figure in one moment (e.g., standing on the hands of the crowd, baiting or sometimes attacking audience members) but inflicting self-pain the next (pulling at or cutting his skin).

An additional means by which Iggy unsettled mainstream sensibilities was in his disruption of gender expectations onstage. Though he did not avail himself of the overt cross-dressing strategies that some of the more successful acts were just beginning to use at this time (e.g., Alice Cooper, David Bowie), as Steve Waksman argues, "the restlessly metamorphosing configurations that [Iggy] assumed conferred on his body a sense of ambiguity that was of a piece with the sexually confusing impulses of glam."[29] If glam can be said to have been codified by Alice Cooper, T. Rex, and Bowie in their 1970–71 performances and albums,[30] then the Stooges were right there at the start of it—with Iggy attracting the attention of drag queens Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd, who discussed him in an issue of *Gay Power*, and wearing elbow-length silver lamé gloves beginning in February 1970 (first photographed during a session with Jack Robinson that month) and on into the fall of the year. In response to a question from Costa about his "interplay with the women in the audience," Iggy replies, "Just the women? Women and men are no different to me."[31] Waksman notes, however, that Iggy "lacked the commitment to artifice that drove so much glam performance," though he "could be made into camp."[32] In other words, his attitude toward gender roles and sexuality at this time was not just a pose—in these moments, he was genuinely, intuitively exploring and at times disrupting both his own and audiences' perceptions about gender.[33] In this light, Scott Asheton's comment ("We scared people in a different way") locates another radical aspect of the band that has sociopolitical implications, though again they are not expressed in the more overtly ideological mode of the MC5 or the White Panther Party.

Given these off-putting (from a culture-industry perspective) aspects of the Stooges, perhaps we should just be grateful to Fields for talking Holzman into signing them, for without that, we would not have the Stooges recordings that we have, nor likely would they have written all of the songs that they did. In this sense, the encounter with the record business partially stimulated the production of the Stooges' music, and so one cannot simply dismiss the intersection between art and industry. In the introduction to her essay collection *Beginning to See the Light* (1981), Ellen Willis makes the point that "In fact, the mass media helped to spread rebellion, and the system obligingly marketed products that encouraged it, for the simple reason that there was money to be made from rebels who were also consumers."[34] Here, her analysis of the marketplace corresponds with Mattson's more recent

observations about "hip capitalism," which allowed bands like the Stooges and the MC5 to be signed to record deals in the first place, but Willis also argues that:

> the subversive element in mass culture is not just a matter of content, of explicit invitations to indulge and/or rebel; it also has to do with the formal properties of mass art.... the sexual rhythms, tight construction, irresistible hook lines, and insistent repetition of rock-and-roll songs [which] have an autonomous aesthetic existence.[35]

Thus, where Adorno takes a trenchant stance against all popular culture as commodified, Willis sees it as a means of transmitting valuable new modes of expression, even "rebellion," to a wide audience. However, listeners would probably not have heard the Stooges on the radio, and it is difficult to frame them as popular or mass art to begin with, except inasmuch as rock'n'roll is considered a popular (as opposed to elite) form.

Some, though, would have us dispense with such concerns about the commodification of art as naïve or pointless, since we are seemingly all inextricably embroiled in pop culture and the capitalist marketplace anyway. Willis, pouring scorn on the 1960s left, argues just that:

> Instead, radicals tended to evade the issue by making distinctions between "commercial" and "serious" rock. That serious rock was as commercial as the other kind did not deter some movement folk from making extravagant claims for it as revolutionary people's music. Others, unable to avoid noticing that rock was big business, complained about its "co-optation" by the music industry, as if the two had ever been separate.[36]

Of course, they had never been separate in that rock was propagated by the medium of records and radio, and these were manufactured, advertised, or broadcast by companies. But if, as James and Witkin contend, radical work can exist on the margins of the commercial, then they are not exactly the same thing; certain kinds of rock simply are not in fact as commercial as the other kind, and maybe not even commercial at all. Frith goes so far as to argue that "Culture as transformation … must challenge experience, must be difficult, must be *unpopular*."[37] In other words, as listeners (and cultural critics) we are not required to continually revel in commercial pop. It can certainly have its pleasures, but, as Frith suggests, the challenge of difficult, unpopular art might be even more fruitful, both personally and intellectually.

Accordingly, it is a contention of this study that not all rock music is inherently pop music, and that the Stooges, despite the precarity of their project, were attempting to create a body of art that might be transformative and challenging—with the understanding that such a binary between art and commerce is of course complicated. As Joe Carducci puts it in his aptly titled

book *Rock and the Pop Narcotic* (1990), "What is frequently forgotten by critics and radio programmers … is that rock music has never been about the construction of safe, tight, punchy little ditties. Rock music has always been about the construction and stoking of a runaway train."[38] For Carducci, the suggestion that we should treat all rock'n'roll as nothing more than mass-market pop is dangerous and detrimental because doing so

> compromises its attempts at art and so yields exploitation and finally, cynicism.... A rock band is a tenuous proposition [and] when the very media that perverts its players' aesthetic impulse are necessary to reach an audience, then we are at an impasse.[39]

This is the impasse at which the Stooges found themselves in relation to the record industry, but they forged ahead with their own aesthetic impulses nonetheless, with very little concession to commercial pressures. The sense that comes across in Iggy's interviews of 1969–70 as band spokesperson is that the Stooges are going to do what they do and hope that people like it, in the knowledge that many may not understand it, or might even see it as phony or sensationalist. Iggy responded to this charge in May 1970, telling Mendelssohn, "I couldn't call it artificial—I feel it's so real. I know that in my songs I'm using my verbal capabilities and musical sophistication to their utmost."[40] After decades of rock critics framing the Stooges' music as simplistic expressions of post-teen angst made by boorish street toughs, to speak of their "musical sophistication" seems almost shocking in itself.

The Art of the Stooges

In fact, the Stooges were quite deliberate in the cultivation of their art, even if Bangs cheekily contended in his *Creem* review of *Fun House* that "you better never call it art or you may wind up with a deluxe pie in the face."[41] This sentiment was expressed by a number of critics at the time, that the Stooges or rock in general should actually *not* be accorded the lofty mantle of "art." For many, rock-as-art was the ethos of *Rolling Stone* magazine, *Creem*'s competitor. Kramer notes, "As a cultural critic, Bangs set out to explain how the trashiest depths of mass-consumer culture—rather than straightforward politics or serious-minded rock 'art'—could yield important insights about the state of American life."[42] There is of course much to be said for Bangs's project, but while it's true that the Stooges mostly did not go in for "straightforward politics," neither did they posit a trash aesthetic nor celebrate mass-consumer culture (Ron Asheton's Three Stooges obsession notwithstanding). If anything, that was the province of the radical MC5, whose second album, *Back in the USA* (1970), took its title from their cover version of Chuck Berry's ode to freeways, drive-ins, jukeboxes, and sizzling hamburgers. Not so for the Stooges, however, for whom contemporary mainstream society was either boring or deeply alienating. Instead of