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## **'My tongue gets t-t-t': Words, Sense and Vocal Presence in Van Morrison's *It's Too Late to Stop Now***

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Perhaps unsurprisingly for a singer-songwriter whose career spans more than half a century, Van Morrison has taken the opportunity to try on many voices. At some points the voice has seemed to burst forth from a body that could barely contain it; at others it has been a languid croon that countered its bullying other with caress and seduction. It has been fully articulate and curtly coded, open and constricted, American and Irish, has straddled genres and negotiated a variety of instrumental regimes. Like other singers and songwriters with whom he could be compared – Bob Dylan, James Brown, Joni Mitchell, Nina Simone among them – Morrison long ago became a 'veteran' artist, one whose early brilliance could be traced by critics and commentators via a subsequent maturity of style, a broadening and deepening of artistic vision. And if he seemed to possess, even in his youth, a voice that spoke of experience and 'lateness', such qualities have become even more evident with his longevity. In saying that Morrison has 'tried on' many voices, I do not mean to suggest that he has not displayed his own singular voice. On the contrary, that voice has remained distinctive and immediately recognizable throughout his career, its sharp edge and keen bite combining with a gentler, more reassuring tone. I do, however, wish to underline the ways in which language can be heard as performance in Morrison's voice(s), as something caught between the natural and the unnatural, the given and the artificial. Whether as exponent of Belfast R&B, stream of consciousness jazz-folk or the famous 'Caledonian soul', Morrison has shown himself to be a master at estranging and deconstructing the English language in song, transforming his own and others' compositions into new vocal shapes that border at times on glossolalia.

While Morrison's voice can be heard to notable effect on recordings from across his long career, in this article I will mainly focus on the vocal performances to be found on his 1974 live album *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, and in particular the song that acts as the album's climax, 'Cyprus Avenue'. My purpose is to locate connections between sense and vocal presence and to account for some of the ways Van Morrison works with words and phrases as he voices them in performance, often leading to significant alterations and mutations in the journey from page to stage. Having already provided a notable vocal performance of 'Cyprus Avenue' on the 1968 studio album *Astral Weeks*, Morrison subsequently revisited the song in his 1970s concerts as a climactic emotional workout. The ten and a half minute version which appears on the 1974 live album finds the singer using a variety of vocal devices – shouting, whispering, strangled falsetto, repetition of words and phonemes, tutting and stammering, rushing, slurring, roaring and barking – to forge a masterful display of stop-start dynamics that lock singer, band members, and audience into a tense and audibly thrilling relationship.

At the song's close, having let the expectation build to the moment when the whole performance might break apart, Morrison deals the pay-off line – 'It's too late to stop now!' – and the band play him off the stage. This line, which had previously appeared at the end of 'Into the Mystic', the fifth track of the 1970 album *Moondance*, serves both to name Morrison's first live album and to summarise the energy and momentum provided by the singer and his band.

Morrison's live version of 'Cyprus Avenue' offers a classic example of the authority of his voice, how it leads and demands submission from musicians, songs and audience. It is a voice that seems to *know*, in the sense of communicating experience, and to know that it will be listened to. As a voice of experience, it constantly suggests that it is coming after something important, and this 'coming after' can be understood both as an attempt to capture something (a mood, a feeling, a truth) and as a post-hoc witnessing or testimony: it has something to find and something to pass on. In the words of rock critic Lester Bangs, it is an example of 'the great search, fueled by the belief that through these musical and mental processes illumination is attainable.'<sup>1</sup> In reflecting on this search as witnessed in the recorded document of *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, I first offer a discussion of the voice that places particular emphasis on its location, understood as being of the body but also of particular places and histories. I then move on to reflections on Morrison's voice, paying attention to the relationship between the performing voice as producer of sound, noise, and music and the poetic voice that provides the words and visions upon which the performing voice goes to work. I finish by focussing on a fascinating moment within 'Cyprus Avenue' where Morrison performs the act of being tongue-tied at the moment in the song when the lyric seems to demand it. Throughout I am also interested in how other voices (particularly those of rock critics) connect to Morrison's voice by attempting to describe it, re-perform it, or explain it.

While a certain amount of what is said here could be said for other voices and other vocal examples, I have chosen *It's Too Late to Stop Now* as my main focus due to its heightened sense of vocal presence and also because the use of a live album encourages reflection on debates around liveness and recorded sound. The album was famous for having no overdubs, a fact that has been used to make various claims to its authenticity, its seeming ability to deliver its listeners to the original event as if unmediated. Like any live album, however, and like any live event in which sophisticated manipulation of sound is possible (a situation that has been around for far longer than recorded sound), we can never really pin down from where the sound originates. Inasmuch as similar points have been made regarding voice itself, I am interested in the role played by the 'live' voice in the mediations between presence, absence, place, memory, and experience. If, as M. Mark writes, Van Morrison 'needs a measure of distance to come close' to his audience, then such mediations provide a potentially safer, more controlled meeting point for performer and audience; 'records allow Van to obliterate distance.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lester Bangs, 'Astral Weeks', in *Stranded: Rock and Roll for a Desert Island*, ed. Greil Marcus (New York: Da Capo, 2007), 181.

<sup>2</sup> M. Mark, 'It's Too Late to Stop Now', in Marcus (ed.), *Stranded*, 17.

## Voice

Our voices give us away. They do so when someone we know recognizes us from only the sound of our greeting (on the phone, for example, or calling from another room), but they also give away more than identity: voices expose the way we are feeling, the mood we are in, the level of familiarity, comfort, happiness or anger we feel in the presence of others. In what we often think of as voice's immediate presence – the voice which makes a sound – we may posit the auditory as the prime arena for communication, but voice should also be understood as communication of the self by a variety of mediums, including writing; in this more general meaning, voice is that which mediates our desire to connect to the world beyond us. But if our voices give us away, we also learn ways to mask that exposure or to only expose particular aspects of ourselves and our feelings, to put on performances. And in listening to voices, we recognize these qualities too and, while making sense of what others are saying (or singing) to us, we also make perhaps unconscious decisions as to how we feel about those voices and their messages. We decide whether we trust them, believe them, are moved or turned off by them. In listening to a voice, whether or not it is directed at me, I become aware of the act of human communication and of a real or imagined human on the other end of that communication. As Italo Calvino memorably put it, 'A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices. A voice involves the throat, saliva, infancy, the patina of experienced life, the mind's intentions, the pleasure of giving a personal form to sound waves.'<sup>3</sup>

This 'personal form' implies uniqueness and therefore a multiplicity of unique voices making up what Adriana Cavarero calls 'the relational valence of the vocal sphere', a public arena in which voices and listeners provide each other with 'a reciprocity of pleasure'.<sup>4</sup> This pleasure is given and sought in a noisy terrain and it is one of the paradoxes of modern life that, with ever greater awareness of multitudinous noise, of countless voices vying for our attention, we nevertheless are able to locate those moments of intimate listening where we can give ourselves over to particular rather than general vocal relationships. To use two metaphors for this process that are perhaps anachronistic in today's audiovisual realm, we might think of tuning into a particular radio station or putting on a particular record. Such references have never been far from Van Morrison's lyrical world, whether the singer is instructing his listener to turn up the radio, namechecking Mahalia Jackson coming through the ether, or recalling the epiphany of hearing jazz and blues records as a youth.<sup>5</sup> In the live performances captured on *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, Morrison tunes into – or drops the needle on – a panoply of musical references and ethereal transcriptions as he conducts his vocal and verbal games with his material.

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<sup>3</sup> Italo Calvino, *Under the Jaguar Sun*, trans. William Weaver (London: Penguin, 2002), 54.

<sup>4</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 7. Cavarero offers a brilliant reading of Calvino's short story 'A King Listens' at the start of her book.

<sup>5</sup> I am alluding here to the following songs respectively: 'Caravan' (from *Moondance*, 1970, also on *It's Too Late to Stop Now*), 'Summertime in England' (*Common One*, 1980) and 'On Hyndford Street' (*Hymns to the Silence*, 1991).

A number of theories of the voice, Cavarero's among them, have focussed their attention on the sense of distinction we exhibit when choosing one voice over another. A related distinction is that often made between the sound of the voice and the semantic content of what is being spoken or sung. One of Cavarero's aims is to challenge what she sees as the dominant focus on the semantic content of the voice and to listen instead for the sound of voices beyond language. While I would agree that the vocal can be distinguished from the semantic, I also contend that we listen to both together, especially when encountering popular music. We may not always understand what we hear – and the confusion between sense and nonsense is one of the themes of this article – but I suggest that we do distinguish voices which sound as though they are trying to communicate something to us and that we do so by recourse to what we can call a voice's language. Similarly, I believe that we attach such communicative voices to real or imagined owners to the extent that we provide 'unseen' voices (like those of the radio or record player) with what Steven Connor calls a 'vocalic body'. This body is 'a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice.'<sup>6</sup> Connor relates this process to the mental connection of hearing and seeing, and of ear and eye. Hearing a voice whose source is not immediately apparent, we create a vocalic body, either in our mind's eye or by projecting the source onto (or into) a visible, believable object.

Bodily awareness is also central to Roland Barthes's influential essay 'The Grain of the Voice', in which a distinction is made between what Barthes calls the pheno-song and geno-song. Pheno-song includes 'all the features which derive from the structure of the sung language, from the coded form of the melisma, the idiolect, the composer, the style of interpretation: in short, everything which, in the performance, is at the service of communication, of representation, of expression'. This also includes supposedly 'subjective' qualities such as expressivity and vocal personality. Geno-song is 'the space in which the significations germinate' and 'that culmination (or depth) of production where melody actually works on language—not what it says but the voluptuous pleasure of its signifier-sounds, of its letters'.<sup>7</sup> Barthes uses this distinction to try and ascertain why he is more moved by one particular singer than another; why, to return to my earlier analogy, he would choose to tune into one and not the other. It is not a matter of professional technique, for which mastery of the pheno-song (acquired typically through musical training) would be sufficient; rather, it is something in excess of (or perhaps in subtraction from) technical perfection that forms a more intimate relationship between listener and speaker/singer. For Barthes the essence of the geno-song lies in 'the grain of the voice', which he defines as

the body in the singing voice, in the writing hand, the performing limb. If I perceive the 'grain' of this music and if I attribute to this 'grain' a theoretical value (this is the

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 270-71.

assumption of the text in the work), I cannot help making a new scheme of evaluation for myself, individual no doubt, since I am determined to listen to my relation to the body of someone who is singing or playing and since that relation is an erotic one.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of an insistence on the relationship between voice and listener, Barthes and Cavarero have much in common, even though the latter criticizes the former for an over-reliance on the semantic content of the singer's song. In considering these theorists alongside an artist who is a singer and songwriter whose language I share, I maintain a certain allegiance to the word. I try to do so, however, within a framework that can acknowledge the insights gained from invoking nonsemantic sound: in Van Morrison's case, the hard edge of his Belfast tones working with and against the American R&B voices he channels; the rasp of the voice and the hiss of the whisper; the breaking down of words into repeated syllables, phonemes, and stuttered consonants; the occasional substitution of words with grunts, growls, and barks; the conjuring of various types of silence. Listening to what Morrison does with words and phrases and other communicative noises, I am drawn beyond the word as unproblematic carrier of semantic value and recognize the play of the semantic with the non-semantic, and of sense and nonsense. Steven Connor notes in his recent study of voice beyond words that, while he wishes to focus on sound rather than semantic sense, to 'those features of speech that seem to reach outside its enchanted phonemic domain', he is drawn to such 'noisiness' not as merely phonetic features, but rather to 'the crossovers that result between the meaningless and the meaningful in vocal noise'.<sup>9</sup> I read in such an intention a recognition that sound and sense are always implicated in each other in one form or another. This is, after all, why we can detect a 'logic of sense' in most so-called nonsense literature and in the nonsense language so crucial to many forms of pop music.<sup>10</sup> M. Mark gets at some of the paradoxes of sense and sound when she writes of Van Morrison that 'he takes songs apart in order to make them whole, isolates words and syllables, repeats them, scatters them in the air.'<sup>11</sup>

### Placing Van Morrison's Voice

If to listen to any voice is, as Mladen Dolar argues, to be placed in a position of obedience, then we might think of ourselves as being subjects to those in control, however briefly, of the vocal sphere.<sup>12</sup> In discussions of popular song, issues relating to the power of voices are regularly rehearsed and revised and such accounts serve as crucial ways in which subjects are

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<sup>8</sup> Barthes, *Responsibility of Forms*, 276.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and other Vocalizations* (London: Reaktion, 2014), 10.

<sup>10</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stival (London: the Athlone Press, 1990), in which the author notes the logical structure of nonsense literature in writers such as Lewis Carroll. For a discussion of the relationship between nonsense literature and popular music, see Richard Elliott, 'You Can't Just Say "Words": Literature and Nonsense in the Work of Robert Wyatt', in *Litpop: Writing and Popular Music*, ed. Rachel Carroll and Adam Hansen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 49-62.

<sup>11</sup> Mark, 'It's Too Late', 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 70,

always already implicated in what Richard Middleton calls the 'voicing' of the popular.<sup>13</sup> They also attest to the difficulty of speaking and writing about voices. As Dolar notes, 'It is not that our vocabulary is scanty and its deficiency should be remedied: faced with the voice, words structurally fail.'<sup>14</sup> This does not, of course, prevent us from trying to come to terms with the voice, especially the voices of those who have moved us. One way to do this is to attempt to place the voice. Does this voice belong to, or relate to, someone I know? Can I place its source purely on its connection in my mind to a certain person? We know we are capable of recognizing voices of those we cannot see from the briefest of greetings and this ability extends to the voices of singers we know and whom we can often recognize from just a few sung words. Of those singing voices that are new to us, we may be able to place them according to language, nationality and region. This is particularly the case with popular music and, to a certain extent, an important differentiator from voice in classical music where such 'giveaway' identifiers are likely to have been reduced or removed altogether. That said, there are a large number of popular music styles in which voices, though they may sound 'natural' and 'untrained', are the result of considerable artifice such that, even with such regional styles as American country music, a listener cannot be sure whether they are listening to a 'genuine' southerner.<sup>15</sup> Such things are easier to put on in singing, which is one reason why connecting to the musicality of speech can be a good way to learn a foreign language: singing foreign words also acts as a good mnemonic device. In a brief analysis of Morrison's 'Listen to the Lion', Ritchie Yorke writes of the singer's 'schooling in the art of R&B repetition' and catalogues the singer's use of 'altered inflections, delicate shading, a slight change in the lyric, over and over again, laying it down on top of you, implanting the message firmly in your mind'.<sup>16</sup> Morrison can be heard to have learned the lessons of his 'teachers' – Mahalia Jackson, say, or Ray Charles or James Brown – and this places his styles and mannerisms as part of a wider vocal sphere. His combinations, though, are his own and, far from being heard as a copyist, he is more likely to be hailed as a unique medium. As a possessor of a singular mode of performative possession, Morrison exemplifies a dichotomy at work in many secular and religious contexts: an individual drawn from the community as a typical representative takes on the 'voice of the people' in such superlative style as to be deemed exceptional.

Popular singers channel place and history as they attach themselves to musical genres, influences and precursors that carry long stylistic traditions. As they bend their 'natural' voices and accents to those that have become associated with particular musics through the hardening of regional delivery into style, singers can produce interesting hybrid voices that may be heard to emanate from specific places, multiple places or no place in particular. Van Morrison's voice carries strong markers of his Belfast background, particularly notable when he speaks in occasional interviews, onstage commentary and spoken narratives on studio

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Middleton, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Dolar, *A Voice*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> For a useful analysis of how this authenticating work operates in rock, see Richard Middleton, 'Rock Singing', in *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*, ed. John Potter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 28-41.

<sup>16</sup> Ritchie Yorke, *Van Morrison: Into the Music* (London: Charisma/Futura, 1975), 96.

recordings such as 'Raglan Road' (*Irish Heartbeat*, 1988) and 'Coney Island' (*Avalon Sunset*, 1989). The accent can still be heard when Morrison sings, but in singing his voice attaches itself to a broader variety of places and spaces associated with the musics that have inspired him and whose styles he has adopted: American blues, jazz, soul, R&B and country. Thus his biographer Steve Turner can write of 'the unexpected blackness of the sound that emanates from this small Ulsterman' and this 'blackness' can be understood as referring to the geographies, traditions, and styles of African American music.<sup>17</sup> Martin Buzacott and Andrew Ford highlight the range of voices that Morrison has produced over his career, providing an example of the metaphorical strategies many writers have adopted in attempting to describe such voices:

To start with, there's Morrison the belter, his largish chest heaving for deep breath as he screams into 'Here Comes the Night' ... It's a bull's roar of a thing, a kind of refined primal scream. Or we have guttural Van, gruffly burbling his way through a whole concert, with little change in pitch except to express dissatisfaction ... Growling is another part of it. When combined, wordlessly, with heavy breathing, it becomes an extended 'harrumph' that can sustain entire songs.

At the opposite end of the vocal spectrum is the angelic falsetto, clear and pure, that we hear on 'Crazy Love' ... It's a head voice that he sometimes adopts in combination with the guttural timbre, where the changes in style balance each other and create an entire world of sound.<sup>18</sup>

The authors also go on to list whispers, speaking, speech-singing and keening as other devices used by Morrison. Peter Mills, the writer who has attended most carefully and thoroughly to Morrison's music, describes the career of his subject's voice over several pages of his book *Hymns to the Silence*, from which I offer the following edit, with representative recordings or historical periods listed:

a bad-pup snarl, full of juice and r'n'b kickback ... adolescent fury [Morrison's early career as the singer with Them] ... a new way of singing, of pacing delivery, of *breathing* [*Astral Weeks*, 1968] ... the singer-songwriter voice [*Moondance to Tupelo Honey*, early 1970s] ... restless, malcontent spirit [*Saint Dominic's Preview, Hard Nose the Highway*, early-mid 1970s] ... His 'American' voice reaches a kind of apotheosis on *A Period of Transition* and *Wavelength* [1977-1978] ... a European (if not obviously Irish) tone re-emerges on *Into the Music* [1979], leading into the stunning cauldron of audacious experiment represented by the vocal performances on *Common One* [1980] ... the telescopic precision of his style on *Beautiful Vision* through to *A Sense of Wonder* [early to mid-1980s] ... a very characteristic extended vowel sound ... and what Paddy Moloney [of Irish band The Chieftains] called 'his

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<sup>17</sup> Steve Turner, *Van Morrison: Too Late to Stop Now*. London: Bloomsbury, 1993).178.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Buzacott and Andrew Ford. *Speaking in Tongues: The Songs of Van Morrison* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2005), 4.

traditional West of Ireland keening' [*Irish Heartbeat*, late 1980s] ... jazz and blues voice [1990s] ... dry, tight British jazz and 'country and Irish' voice [1990s-mid 2000s] ... finally the open, more revealing and plaintive voice [*Keep It Simple*, 2008].<sup>19</sup>

Voices become layered and can carry residues of earlier articulations, particularly when attached to words and lines that were articulated a particular way and became relatively fixed in recording and performance. This varies with performers of course and Morrison, like Bob Dylan, has been known to adopt quite different voices and to use quite different phrasing and articulation in later performances of earlier songs. Even so, the voice carries its previous history with it and this is one of the things we witness in the late voice.<sup>20</sup> Lateness may be associated with vocal deficit – as when Mike Fish, in an otherwise celebratory account of Morrison's work, writes of his 'unchained wildness throttled by age into a congested, slobbish instrument' – or may be celebrated as the weathering that accompanies and communicates experience.<sup>21</sup> Lateness can be found at many stages in a singer's career, such as when Buzacott and Ford describe the twenty-three year old Morrison of *Astral Weeks* as sounding 'like a baccy-spitting, hard bitten blues legend' or when Mills describes Morrison's *It's Too Late to Stop Now* as the 'confluence' and 'ultimate realisation' of the voices Morrison had adopted thus far.<sup>22</sup> As mentioned earlier, Morrison sounded experienced from his very earliest recordings, due no doubt to the combination of lyrical themes and the hard edge of his voice, though this shouldn't obscure his subsequent fascination with pastoral themes and the 'sense of wonder' referred to in the title of a 1985 album. Indeed, to borrow a phrase from one of Morrison's prime poetic influences, William Blake, his catalogue comprises 'songs of innocence and of experience' in equal measure.

### Poetic Champions and Critics Compose

While my main interest here is on what Van Morrison does with his performing voice, it is important to mention the poetic voice for a number of reasons. Firstly, poetry and song are obviously connected and what a singer does with his or her voice will generally be connected to words in one way or another. Secondly, Morrison has clearly felt at times that not enough attention is given to the words he writes, with most critics focussing on his vocals.<sup>23</sup> Thirdly, Morrison is linked to a lineage of visionary poets for whom inner and outer dialogues are part of the stream of consciousness, while poetry and song join in making perceptible the 'inarticulate speech of the heart' (another Morrison album title). It is also worth reflecting on

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Mills, *Hymns to the Silence: Inside the Words and Music of Van Morrison* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 142-5.

<sup>20</sup> See Richard Elliott, *The Late Voice: Time, Age and Experience in Popular Music* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Mike Fish, 'Listening to the Lion', *The Wire* 92 (October 1991), 41. For a brief account of this and other critiques of Morrison's late voice, see Johnny Rogan, *Van Morrison: No Surrender* (London: Vintage, 2006), 471-2.

<sup>22</sup> Buzacott and Ford, *Speaking in Tongues*, 9; Mills, *Hymns to the Silence*, 144.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Anthony DeCurtis, *In Other Words: Artists Talk about Life and Work* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2005), 88-99.

the often poetic work that critics have created in their attempts to describe or represent Morrison's voice, some examples of which have already been presented. They offer a reminder of what Adriana Cavarero calls the 'relational valence of the vocal sphere' in that subjected listeners become active subjects by speaking back, by adding their own voices to the public discussion around musical and poetic experience.

Morrison's reviewers and biographers have offered a variety of opinions regarding his position as a poet, making claims that his work has roots in old epic poetry (especially Celtic and bardic traditions), highlighting debts to the Romantic poets whom he has regularly cited in songs and interviews (Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats), noting the influence of modern Irish poetry in its visionary and earthy aspects (Yeats, Kavanagh, Heaney), and suggesting connections to the symbolist and beat poetry that influenced peers such as Bob Dylan (from Baudelaire and Rimbaud to Kerouac and Ginsberg). Yet, while the work of all the aforementioned poets has sat as successfully on the page as on the tongues of reciters (and sometimes more so), it has been more difficult to see Morrison's work as printed poetry than it has with contemporaries such as Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, or Dylan. When placed on the page, Morrison's words – especially the early songs he wrote for the group Them – can seem bereft of the rhythm and mutation which he brings to them in sounded performance and it can be hard to face them as poems on the page when one knows them so well as works of sound. Perhaps this is why it took until 2014 for the publication of Morrison's selected lyrics as a major artistic statement, even if, when they did appear, they were set as poetry and published by poetry specialists Faber & Faber.<sup>24</sup> As the lines collected in *Lit Up Inside* make clear, it is possible to read Morrison as a poet, albeit a particularly 'vocal' and multi-voiced one who has taken on variety of roles.

What we think of now as song has always been associated with poetry and this relationship continues in poetry's reliance on sound as much as space. The sound of words frequently clashes with the representation of words on the page, as is evident in the misheard lyric or deliberately vague usage of homophones. These are often found in Van Morrison's work, for example when 'Cyprus Avenue' is written as 'Cypress Avenue', as it was on the sleeve of Morrison's 1974 live album and in Ritchie Yorke's 1975 book. In conversation with Yorke, Morrison discussed the changing nature of words when moving between lyrics, voicing, and the official recording of titles and lyrics (such as when labelling master tapes or sending information to record companies) and noted that the way that 'Madame George' had begun life as 'Madam Joy' and 'Into the Mystic' as 'Into the Misty'. Morrison admitted to a certain amount of ambiguity when sending lyrics for the latter song to Warner Bros.:

I couldn't figure out just what to send them. Because really the song has two sets of lyrics. For example there's 'I was born before the wind' and 'I was borne before the wind' ... and 'Also younger than the son, Ere the bonny boat was one' and 'All so

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<sup>24</sup> Van Morrison, *Lit Up Inside: Selected Lyrics* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

younger than the son, Ere the bonny boat was won.' It had all these different meanings and they were all in there: whatever one you want is in the song.<sup>25</sup>

Morrison here seems to be recognizing the inevitability that a perceiver can and will perceive what they wish in the words they hear.<sup>26</sup> From the perspectives of voice and word, the homophone serves as a useful reminder that the voice, as well as re-shaping words in vocal performance, can also cause confusion even when delivering a word perfectly 'straight'.<sup>27</sup>

One 'poetic champion' not mentioned above is James Joyce, a writer whose work does not always sit as easily on the page as it does in the ear. This is most notable in Joyce's massive novels *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, both of which make extensive use of homophones, riddles, musicalized language, repetition and puns; these works take language apart and highlight the use of sound in the construction, maintenance and disruption of sense and meaning. Morrison can be seen as following in a Joycean tradition not only through intertextual references in the former's work – such as the mention of Joyce in 'Summertime in England' and 'Too Long in Exile' – but more importantly through his explorations of the mutability of language in spoken and sung performance. When, for example, Morrison recasts 'born before the wind' as 'borne before the wind', or when he sings 'leavinahmebehinduh' and 'bringitonbringitonbringiton home to me' in his performance of 'Bring It On Home to Me' on *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, he partakes in what Joyce self-referentially called 'variously inflected, differently pronounced, otherwise spelled, changeably meaning vocable scriptsigns'.<sup>28</sup>

Song lyrics can be strange on the page but often their very strangeness, or stillness, can highlight something important in the voiced words. For example, to read the line 'Sha la la la la la la la lala dee dah' in the printed lyric of Morrison's hit song 'Brown Eyed Girl' is to be reminded of the importance of nonsense syllables to pop music in a starker manner than when listening to the song, where the musicalized sounds seem far more normal and hence less noticeable. This is not to deny the sheer catchiness and singalong nature of this part of the song but rather to wonder at its strangeness as words. Similarly, to see the word 'no' and a comma written twenty nine times in succession over three lines – as in the printed lyric to 'Rave on, John Donne/Rave on, Part Two' in *Lit Up Inside* – is to be alerted to a verbal event that seems somewhat less strange when heard in sung performance. This is one of the affective qualities of Lester Bangs's evocative analysis of *Astral Weeks*, when he transcribes Morrison's 'set of verbal tics' into written narrative:

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<sup>25</sup> Morrison quoted in Yorke, *Into the Music*, 76 (ellipsis in original).

<sup>26</sup> At one point Morrison says to Yorke, 'It's whatever it means to you. That's all there is'. Yorke, *Into the Music*, 169.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, one has to wonder whether Yorke has transcribed Morrison's spoken words about 'Into the Mystic' accurately given that 'Also younger than the sun' is the line Yorke uses when setting out the song lyrics in his book; this is also the line used most often in online lyric sites and formally recorded in *Lit Up Inside*.

<sup>28</sup> James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 2000), 118.

four rushed repeats of the phrases 'you breathe in, you breathe out' and 'you turn around' in 'Beside You;' in 'Cyprus Avenue,' twelve 'way up on' s, 'baby' sung out thirteen times in a row sounding like someone running ecstatically downhill towards one's love, and the heartbreaking way he stretches 'one by one' in the third verse; most of all in 'Madame George,' where he sings the word 'dry' and then 'your eye' twenty times in a twirling arc so beautiful it steals your own breath, and then this occurs: 'And the love that loves the love that loves the love that loves the love that loves to love the love that loves to love the love that loves.'<sup>29</sup>

Having already created the affect of the recorded song, here, in this crazy quoting, Morrison's vocal extemporization infects Bangs's written text and their voices merge on the page. This becomes even more explicit later in Bangs's essay, when he starts to interpolate Morrison's lyrical turns of phrase from *Astral Weeks* into his own account of the album's meaning and importance. The 'love that loves the love' section of 'Madam George' also appears as quoted lyrics in Ritchie Yorke's *Into the Music* and Johnny Rogan's *No Surrender*, and as written poetry in *Lit Up Inside*.<sup>30</sup> In each case the words stand out as remarkable in one way or another, though their settings lack the narrative tension which Bangs adds and which makes his description so startling when read in the context of his essay. To observe this is to be reminded that 'voice' in popular music also encompasses the voice of discourse around the music, the ways in which critics, fans and musicians try to get at what is special in musical affect. Such efforts contribute to the 'liveness' and the 'nowness' of musical experience, the ways in which such experience is unfolded as a continuing and dynamic process. Because this too has implications for how we think of voice in popular music, I will return to the notion of liveness below. First, however, it is necessary to consider the voice of the performer as it sounds the poetic vision.

### **From word to sound and page to stage**

For many critics, Morrison is more convincing as a sound poet than as a writer of words. Biographer Steve Turner highlights 'his ability to create poetry in performance out of otherwise mundane collections of words', while M. Mark focuses her analysis on what the voice does with familiar words, describing Morrison as 'a master of dynamics – from a whisper to a scream or from a line as fluid as the ocean to a percussive staccato. He pushes and pulls at words, he scats and wails and stutters'.<sup>31</sup> For Greil Marcus, 'Morrison seems to turn away from the word, from words altogether, as if only fools actually believe that phonemes can signify, that a word is what it names, that there's any chance of understanding anything at all.'<sup>32</sup> Marcus quotes Morrison as saying 'The only time I actually work with

<sup>29</sup> Bangs, 'Astral Weeks', 180.

<sup>30</sup> Yorke, *Into the Music*, 60; Rogan, *No Surrender*, 244; Morrison, *Lit Up Inside*, 24. For more on Morrison as poet of word and sound, see Rogan, *No Surrender*, 469-85, and Peter Mills, 'Into the mystic: the aural poetry of Van Morrison', *Popular Music* 13/1 (1994), 91-103.

<sup>31</sup> Steve Turner, *Van Morrison: Too Late to Stop Now* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 101; Mark, 'It's Too Late', 17.

<sup>32</sup> Greil Marcus, *Listening to Van Morrison* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 16.

words is when I'm writing a song. After it's written, I release the words; and every time I'm singing, I'm singing syllables.'<sup>33</sup> Lester Bangs recognizes something of this process in his own description of Morrison's vocal art:

Van Morrison is interested, obsessed with how much musical or verbal information he can compress into a small space, and, almost, conversely, how far he can spread one note, word, sound, or picture. To capture one moment, be it a caress or a twitch. He repeats certain phrases to extremes that from anybody else would seem ridiculous, because he's waiting for a vision to unfold, trying as unobtrusively as possible to nudge it along.<sup>34</sup>

It is perhaps worth thinking of Morrison's real poetic voice as a performed voice, or at least to consider the poetic and the performed as inextricably bound in his work. Performance is also the point where notions of possession become most apparent, partly because of the excitement and energy created by live performance, partly because of the possibilities for artist and audience interaction, and partly because the body of the performer is visible to those present (and 'visible' as a vocalic body to those listening in). Susan Stewart, discussing Plato's account of poetry, writes that 'The meaning of possession [in Plato] does not reside simply in the idea that the poet's utterances are not original or reasoned. Rather, such utterances pass through the speaker by means of an external force'.<sup>35</sup> Morrison has frequently spoken of himself as a channel through which songs pass, a notion that has been put forward by other dynamic performers. To take just one example of a performer whose live work can be compared to Morrison's, Nina Simone would often use the idea of channelling music from elsewhere as she took possession of her material while also seeming to be possessed by it.<sup>36</sup> Simone's stage craft also made explicit the important connections between popular music performance, religion, and ritual, while Morrison's delivery has been compared by one writer to the 'mad testifying' of certain Protestant traditions.<sup>37</sup>

Many of those writing on Morrison's voice have been drawn to his performances of 'Listen to the Lion', a song which appeared on his 1972 album *Saint Dominic's Preview* and again on *It's Too Late to Stop Now*. While it would be conventional to describe the former version as a studio recording and the latter as a live recording, such a distinction would seem to be particularly problematic here given that the first recording has a heightened live presence due to the way Morrison stages the song, taking its simple words and structure and subjecting them to a bewildering range of trials and mutations. The performance, as Steve Turner writes, 'continued his experimentation with vocal sounds that began as words and then splintered into grunts, moans and yelps as he sought after a language beyond words. He pictured a lion,

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<sup>33</sup> Morrison quoted in Marcus, *Listening to Van Morrison*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Bangs, 'Astral Weeks', 180-81.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 112.

<sup>36</sup> See Richard Elliott, *Nina Simone* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 74-103.

<sup>37</sup> Sean O'Hagen, quoted in Rogan, *No Surrender*, 346. Rogan and O'Hagen pursue a connection between Morrison's voice and that of Ian Paisley.



tempered band, a PA system and a set of gospel, blues and jazz conventions – to urge its auditors to *listen*.

All the foregoing interpretations of Morrison's vocal art (my own included) settle, at one point or another, on what we might call, invoking a Barthesian vocabulary, moments of vocal grain, geno-song, *jouissance* or *punctum*, those moments where something stands out from the surrounding vocal text.<sup>43</sup> In the introduction to his study of Morrison's music, Greil Marcus uses a particularly regionalized version of these moments of recognition by using the concept of the 'yarragh', which he takes from the critic Ralph Gleason, who in turn took it from the Irish tenor John McCormack. In a 1970 review of Morrison's *Moondance*, Gleason described a biopic of McCormack in which the singer, playing himself, 'explained to his accompanist that the element necessary to mark the important voice off from the other good ones was very specific. "You have to have," he said, "the yarragh in your voice".' Like Barthes's grain, this yarragh is simultaneously understandable on an intuitive level – one can get what McCormack meant in the film, just as one can get why Gleason and Marcus would want to invoke the term – and actually quite non-specific in that it only offers yet another word for what is special in the voice. Marcus builds on Gleason's usage to suggest that Morrison's music is

an attempt to surrender to the yarragh, or to make it surrender to him; to find the music it wants; to bury it; to dig it out of the ground. The yarragh is his version of the art that has touched him: of blues and jazz, for that matter of Yeats and Lead Belly, the voice that strikes a note so exalted you can't believe a mere human being is responsible for it.<sup>44</sup>

Marcus here seems to move the account of the yarragh by McCormack and Gleason from a Barthesian distinction between technically gifted singers and those in whom vocal grain betrays the body to a suggestion that the song is singing the singer and that body is unimportant except as vessel. Elsewhere, Marcus seems closer to Barthes, as when he describes the yarragh as the 'breach' in the song from which excessive meaning escapes, a notion that has a parallel in Barthes's *punctum*.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, when Marcus later invokes the metaphor of gunshot, there is the suggestion of something violent in particular vocal moments, something edged (like Barthes's voice that 'caresses' but also 'grates' and 'cuts'<sup>46</sup>), and again something that, like the lion, may turn malevolent.

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<sup>43</sup> In many of Barthes's text the distinction between *plaisir* and *jouissance* can be understood as that between 'mere' pleasure and ecstasy or bliss. *Studium* and *punctum* were concepts deployed by Barthes to analyse photographs; the *studium* is the cultural 'participat[ion] in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions' of a scene, while the *punctum* is the 'element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me'. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 26.

<sup>44</sup> Marcus, *Listening to Van Morrison*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> Marcus, *Listening to Van Morrison*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and

### **Liveness: It's Turned On Already**

In critical attempts to get to grips with Morrison's music, we find a re-performance of the music via the written text. In the passage where Bangs 'performs' the key lyrical/vocal moments of 'Madame George', he adds a narrative tension to the printing of the words that is lacking from their replication elsewhere. This is notable in the brief but important introductory phrase he uses, 'then this happens: ...' This simple literary device suddenly brings the song alive again by recasting the lyric within an unfolding textual narrative. Bangs is recounting the song as a gripping story, trying to grasp in his writing, as Greil Marcus will do later, what it feels like to be in the presence of Morrison's voice. Where Morrison shows what can be turned in the passage of the word from the page to the stage, these writers show what may need to be done to effectively transfer the singer's performance back to the written text.

As Antoine Hennion has noted, music itself can be seen as mediation between the musician and the listener; in the voice of rock criticism we witness an extension of this mediation to include the critic and the reader.<sup>47</sup> These two parties may or may not share the experience of listening to the music, for the reader may read the critic before listening. In any case the critic's voice becomes another mediating voice between the musician, the music and the listener. This adds to the layering of voice(s) in music and its attendant discourse, such that, when Paul Williams writes of Morrison's 'Brown Eyed Girl' as 'a song about singing', he provides us with a text about a song about singing and, as critic, he becomes part of a palimpsest, to which I add my own layer by subsequently writing about him.<sup>48</sup> Other ways in which this layering takes place include cover versions, so that Patti Smith's cover of Morrison's 'Gloria' acts as both a kind of 'criticism' (not least because, at the time of recording it, Smith had been combining the roles of poet, rock critic, and singer) and as an opportunity for intertextual play.<sup>49</sup>

If rock criticism and cover versions are two ways in which music is made 'live' again, a more obvious way is the artist's own interpretation of their material in the live concert. As we witness on *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, Morrison's concerts – in this case those recorded in 1973 at the Troubadour in Los Angeles, the Civic Auditorium in Santa Monica and the Rainbow in London and featuring Morrison backed by the eleven-strong Caledonian Soul Orchestra – were an opportunity for Morrison to not only perform his earlier material, but also to submit it to his own intense interrogation and, perhaps, criticism. Indeed, if one of the things that criticism does is to remake the object under analysis, then Morrison can be heard

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Wang, 1975, 67.

<sup>47</sup> Antoine Hennion, 'Music and Mediation: Toward a New Sociology of Music', in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edn, ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert and Richard Middleton (New York: Routledge, 2012), 249-60.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Williams, *Rock and Roll: The 100 Best Singles* (Encinitas: Entwhistle Books, 1993), 123.

<sup>49</sup> See Mike Daley, 'Patti Smith's "Gloria": intertextual play in a rock vocal performance', *Popular Music* 16/3 (1997), 235-253.

as a serious, and seriously involved, critic of his material. The criticism was continued when Morrison selected the recordings that would be used on the subsequent live album, famously removing a version of 'Moondance' due to a wrong note. The fact that *It's Too Late to Stop Now* is a live album only adds further to the levels of mediation already highlighted, for it is not, of course, the live event itself but 'merely' a transcription of a range of live events, a way of getting the stage experience back onto the 'page'. Yet, as writers such as Steve Wurtzler and Philip Auslander have shown, the notion of the live event as some form of 'pure', unmediated original is highly problematic.<sup>50</sup> Liveness as experienced on the rock stage is intimately implicated with a variety of mediating technologies, including musical instruments, amplification, and sound recording, and it is implicated in such a manner that the 'presence' and lack of 'artifice' so valued by enthusiasts of live music are, to a large extent, fabricated. This is not to say that live events cannot be thrillingly exciting; they place us in the presence of musicians we may admire a great deal and show us those musicians at work. But the veracity of the liveness of any such event is as unprovable and unlocatable, in its own way, as the grain of the voice. This connection between liveness and 'real voice' is one I wish to stress as the hinge upon which many of my observations in this article are turning. Furthermore, in the same way I have indicated my sympathy towards Barthes's notion that one can hear particular bodies in particular voices, so I would suggest that listeners can and do hear very real performers in the highly mediated channels of the rock concert and that this process continues into the artefact of the live album. The privacy allowed by the live album in contrast to the concert may even extend the possibilities of such authentication processes. If Van Morrison's concerts are notable for being, as Peter Mills writes, 'a private exploration, made public', then the albums *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, *Live at the Grand Opera House Belfast* (1984), and *A Night in San Francisco* (1994) allow the public to be made private again.<sup>51</sup>

To consider these issues in more detail, I wish to turn to the performance of 'Cyprus Avenue' that provides the climactic moment of *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, as it did for many of Morrison's shows in the early 1970s. As suggested earlier, the close of the song and album – when Morrison shouts 'It's too late to stop now!' and abandons the microphone to let the band bring the show to a crashing conclusion – is a particularly celebrated moment. That said, there are many other startling parts to the live 'Cyprus Avenue' and considering some of them allows us to note some of the live dynamics utilized by Morrison and his band. For while I would agree with Lester Bangs that Morrison gives a convincing impression of 'ruling the room' with his voice,<sup>52</sup> it is important to note that he does so within a framework and context that allows such dominance: the backing of a well-rehearsed band, the general

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<sup>50</sup> Steve Wurtzler, "'She sang live, but the microphone was turned off': The live, the recorded and the subject of representation', in *Sound Theory Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992) 87–103; Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>51</sup> Mills, *Hymns to the Silence*, 204. Mills devotes a chapter of his book to liveness and the recording studio (203–49).

<sup>52</sup> Bangs, 'Astral Weeks', 179. Bangs is referring to a televised performance from 1970 when Morrison closed with 'Cyprus Avenue'.

machinery of the rock concert (what we might think of as a technology of dominance), the audience as 'subjects' to Morrison's 'ruler' and their knowledge, or his expectation of their knowledge of and familiarity with, the material that he is performing. Then there are the forms and structures of the songs themselves. 'Cyprus Avenue', based on a 12-bar blues form and an AAB line structure, carries a history of tradition, expectation and innovation. Mostly, though, it is the words of the song – doubtless known to many of the concert audience and to those listening to the recording – that undergo severe tests, revisions, elisions, and mutations as Morrison goes about his syllable work. Sometimes words are run together à la Joyce, often in combination with the slowing and stretching, over-emphasis or breaking-down of surrounding words, as in 'allthelittlegirls rhyme // some-thing' (1:03-1:07), 'my insides shake justlikealeafonatree' (2:00-2:08), and the sped-up bingo-caller delivery of 'sixwhitehorsesinacarriage' (3:26). Sometimes words or word groups are repeated in ways that emphasize the poetic quality of a phrase. For example, any use of the phrase 'one by one' models the thing it describes through the following of 'one' with another 'one'. Morrison extends this poetic quality by singing 'the leaves fall one by one' (1:21-1:26), to the extent that one might imagine him surrounded by falling leaves. In a particularly evocative example of modelling what the lyric is saying, he performs a blocked articulation by failing to complete the lines 'my tongue gets tied / every time I try to speak'; instead, we get 'my tongue gets t-t-t- / ev'ry t-', followed by further failed attempts to say or sing the words 'every' and 'time' (1:33-2:01). Here and elsewhere, Morrison seems to reduce words to nonsense. Sometimes this occurs via the addition of a nonsense syllable, such as when the second iteration of the line 'yonder comes my lady / rainbow ribbons in her hair' mutates into the obsessively repeated 'rain-a-bo rain-a-bo rain-a-bo rain-a-bo' (3:14-3:18).

The live album also adds other voices or 'conversations', such as the singer's communication to the band or his interaction with the crowd. On *It's Too Late to Stop Now*, we hear a number of shout outs and instructions to band members such as those directed at saxophonist Jack Schroer. In 'Cyprus Avenue', Morrison calls 'Railroad!' at the point in the song where the band are to move into the verse that begins 'If I go walkin' by the railroad' (2:15-2:51). This is immediately followed by the 'rainbow ribbons' section, which Morrison initiates by shouting 'wait a minute, wait a minute, catch up!'; it's unclear from the live album whether this is an instruction to the band, to the audience, to the listener at home, or a part of the extemporized verse. These two sections ('railroad' and 'rainbow ribbons') are distinguished by distinct musical accompaniments, the first utilizing a jagged horn-focussed riff and the second an initially calm orchestral string section (which seems appropriate for the elegant, if archaic, 'yonder comes my lady' line), offering a reminder of Morrison's use of his voice to conduct the textures of the song.

The crowd on this album, like many live albums, are most commonly heard cheering, clapping and whistling, sometimes singing along, but also in occasional collective chants or solo interjections. 'Cyprus Avenue' contains the much-quoted exchange between Morrison and an audience member when the latter shouts 'Turn it on!', to which Morrison retorts 'It's turned on already!' and launches the band into the climax of the song (and the show) with his

instruction 'It's too late to stop now!' The use of silence is crucial here, as is the stop-start dynamic. The following schematic gives a summary of some of the key points, though only listening to the recording itself will unearth the full dynamics:

<u>MORRISON</u>	<u>BAND / AUDIENCE</u>
you say 'in France'	Yes! Oui! [?]
you say 'in France'	France!
you say 'in France'!	France!
[growling] you say 'in France'!	France!
me whistlin'	[wolf whistle, blown whistle]
and you were standin' there	[saxophone figure, rolling piano figure]
and you were standin' there	where? [sax, piano]
and you were standin'	[crowd noise, horn/drum stabs in 'conversation', piano trills, shouts]
there	[bass, electric guitar, increasing crowd cheers, shouts, clapping]
and you were standin'	[piano, strings, drum]
[long pause]	
in all your revelation	[continuously rolling piano, 'edgy' guitar]
[whispered] in all your revelation	['chugging' guitar]
[whispered] in all your revelation	[piano]
in all your	[guitar, sax]
in all your	[sax]
in all your	[guitar, sax]
revelation	[guitar, sax]
in all your	[clapping, piano, sax]
[long pause]	[slow clapping]
[shouting] in all your revelayshun!	[horn stabs]
[...]	
I said bay [simultaneous instrumental stab] ['bay'/stab repeated forty times]	
I said	[instrumental stab, cheering clapping]
bay-ay-by!	[stab]
bay-ay-by!	[stab]
I said	alright!
mama!	[stab] [audience] mummy! papa! [laughing] go on Van! come on Van!
ahhright	[stab]
	[audience members] Turn it on! Get down!
It's turned on already	
I said	[squawking sax]
over there?	[audience] No no no! Yeah! Over here! Over here!
It's too <i>late</i> to <u>stop</u> now!	

This part of the performance lasts for four and a half minutes (4:46-9:26), after which there are thirty seconds of instrumental outro and thirty seconds of crowd noise. This means that the 'song' part of 'Cyprus Avenue' lasts for less than half the duration of the performance, with the rest taken up by extemporization and interaction. To make such a distinction seems false, however, given the continual dynamics of music, sound, and words that construct this new 'song'.

### **Tongue-tied**

I want to return to the moment in 'Cyprus Avenue' when Morrison performs the failed articulation of the line 'my tongue gets tied / every time I try to speak'. Here is Greil Marcus's account of that moment:

'And my tongue gets tied' is what he sang when he recorded the song. But that's too easy. Now it's 'And my tongue gets t—, t—' – and the act is convincing, the break in the song so violent, the drawbridge opening so that the only way to cross it is to back up, floor the accelerator, and pray, that the whole show is sucked into that suspended moment. It's as if there's no way out – in the instant, you might be plunged back into memories of the times you sat nervously with a stuttering friend, and how you ached with everything you had for him to get the word he was trying to say out of his mouth, to the point where you could see yourself reaching your hand down his throat and grabbing it.<sup>53</sup>

Marcus goes on to make a direct connection between the lyrical content of Morrison's song and stuttering as a condition associated with anxiety, shame, and bewilderment. In other words, he reads the song as Morrison undergoing the experience of the song's protagonist right there on the stage in front of thousands of audience members. At the very least, he reads the stuttering section as Morrison acting out the protagonist's dilemma or channelling the memory of a similar feeling in a kind of method acting. I too am interested in the way in which the voice is the vehicle for the bringing together of an enunciated text – the story of a presumably male protagonist of indeterminate age struck silent as he watches a young girl with whom he is infatuated – and a dramatic act of enunciation. In thinking about how we understand this act, how we might be, as Marcus is, drawn to conflating singer and protagonist in a moment of heightened vocal presence, it is worth thinking briefly about the artistic appropriation of the stutter.

The stammer or stutter might be thought of as both the not-yet and the beyond of language, the site of an intervention on the word's journey to being formed, but also something that comes after, such as the trauma or repression of an earlier event. However we figure it, we are accustomed to the fact that stuttering is both an actual thing that people suffer and a device which people make use of regardless of whether or not they have a stutter. We are thus able, for the most part, to navigate between these different aspects when confronted with

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<sup>53</sup> Marcus, *Listening to Van Morrison*, 88-9.

examples. What we might call 'aesthetic stutter' can therefore be understood as a way of representing an event such as speechlessness in the face of trauma, wonder, awe, or some other experience. We are also used to the notion that the voice gives us away, or gives away information about us. This is clear when we think about nerves putting a tremor or hesitation in the voice, or becoming speechless when surprised, shocked or nervous. The voice gives away emotions, levels of familiarity and comfort or discomfort. It is also tempting to think that those who have worked on this via training (for example in the media, the performing arts, politics or education) may give less of themselves away. Yet they give away the fact of their having been trained or prepared and this already tells us something about them; we may feel alienated by politicians who answer every question or make every speech with calm, calculated sound bites. In a lot of popular music, singers and instrumentalists are encouraged to downplay any training they have had. This is part of the projection of authenticity based on a romantic notion of pure expression. But these are voices that *work*, not only in the sense that the projection of authenticity is successful, but also in that they are put to work continuously and repeatedly. Van Morrison has often highlighted this aspect of performance as labour in interviews and refers to it in songs such as 'I've Been Working'. When we witness his stuttering act in 'Cyprus Avenue' we have to remember that it is indeed an act and one into which a vocal actor has put considerable labour.

This raises interesting questions as to the ethical dimensions of pretending to have a speech impediment for aesthetic effect. In his study of stuttering, Marc Shell notes artistic uses of the stutter, including what he calls 'stutter writing', and offers a critique of writers who have used stuttering or stammering as metaphor. Having considered a range of examples, Shell suggests, 'Whether such representations of stuttering in writing are adequate to the thinking of stuttering as a speech impediment is a question perhaps best left to thinkers who ... have the purported advantage of actually stuttering when they speak.'<sup>54</sup> He then goes on to discuss writing as a way of communicating for those who have suffered from stuttering. Writing, like singing, has been thought of as a way of getting over the obstacles that tie up the voice in regular speech. For my own purposes this is interesting in that it highlights the way we might project the figures of the writer, the singer, the actor, and the actual stutterer onto an artist such as Van Morrison (or onto the Who's Roger Daltrey and the 'f-f-f-fade away' of 'My Generation', or onto David Bowie and his 'ch-ch-ch-changes'). What binds most accounts of the recorded performance of 'Cyprus Avenue' is the highlighting of what Steven Connor calls 'the pathos and finesse of the voice that gives out', the voice that is not celebrated for fullness but heard as emptiness.<sup>55</sup>

It is worth briefly comparing Morrison's stutter song to a few other lyrics about being tongue-tied, beginning with the one from which Morrison has adapted the two key lines in the 'stammering section' of 'Cyprus Avenue'. In Elvis Presley's 'All Shook Up' (1957), the singer sings, but doesn't stammer, the lines 'My tongue gets tied when I try to speak / My insides shake like a leaf on a tree'. Ironically, this is one of the few moments in the song

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<sup>54</sup> Marc Shell, *Stutter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>55</sup> Connor, *Beyond Words*, 32.

where Presley does not seem tongue-tied, where the clear and direct singing of the lines is not interrupted by his trademark hesitations, 'uh-huh', stuttering, or rock'n'roll phonemes. Touching down a bit more recently we might light on the Inner Circle song 'Sweat' (1992), which features a repeated lyric about becoming tongue-tied and is known for its stuttering nonsense line (and subtitle) 'a la la la la long'. Again, the account of being vocally stalled or blocked comes at a different point to the delivery of the nonsensical syllables. Furthermore, the song offers a reminder of the importance both of nonsense and inarticulacy in pop song and of pop's perennial obsession with trying to get through (to a lover, to an audience). It might be more accurate to present this as a dynamic tension, or dialectic, between articulacy and inarticulacy. Other songs deal with the issue without the inarticulacy. 'I try to speak, but my tongue gets tied', sings Beverley Knight in the chorus to her song 'First Time' (2004), but there's no hesitancy, no stammering, no inarticulacy of speech or heart in her delivery of the lyric; the smoothness only seems to be slightly endangered as the song works its way towards a typically melismatic climax. Even at that point, there is little vocal drama, none of the breaking down of a word into countless micro-syllables that, by this time, had become common in mainstream soul and R&B vocals. But Knight does offer another useful lyric to rhyme with the earlier line: 'My will is weak, 'cause my soul's resigned / It's like I'm seeing you for the first time'. This other pop perennial, the awe when confronted with the object of one's affection or obsession, is what we also witness in the lyrics of 'Cyprus Avenue', which tell of a silenced, tongue-tied witness, 'conquered in a car seat', unable to process the evidence in front of him. Just as Presley had followed up his admission of vocal and bodily anxiety with the lines 'There's only one cure for this body of mine / That's to have that girl that I love so fine', so we get the sense that Morrison's protagonist is after a cure, perhaps the drinking of cherry wine (another blues-influenced lyric used in the song) or, in faithful blues fashion, the obsessive singing-out of the problem. However we read Morrison's lyrics, we are given, in his live recording, a tale about a tongue being tied told by a tongue-tied teller, bringing together enunciation and enunciated and thus aiding those who would see Morrison as telling 'his' story and dealing with 'his' trauma.

Stuttering alerts us to a kind of unwilling alliteration, as consonants are repeated willingly or unwillingly. When used willingly – as in aesthetic stutter – we might be reminded of the importance of onomatopoeia in poetry and song. If we use up the interpretive window opened up by pausing at the stuttered section of 'Cyprus Avenue', we may wish to note that the 't-t-t' that is heard is not only the sound of the tongue-tied man attempting to say 'tongue-tied', but is also the 't-t-t', or *tap tap tap*, of drumstick on cymbal.<sup>56</sup> The tapped or clapped percussion instrument is an essential component of jazz music, the gently insistent rhythmic undertow to countless classic jams and improvisations. The idiophonic components of the drum kit could be thought of as the consonants to the membranophonic vowels. It has been noted in many times and places that drums have speech-like qualities and we can think of the drums in popular music as providing a vital, if coded, message though their talking. Or if, as Steven Connor informs us, 'vowels have sometimes been thought of as the life and soul of

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<sup>56</sup> We might also think of the 'tapping tapping' heard in Poe's classic of alliteration, 'The Raven'.

speech itself' and, as Benjamin Wells noted, 'consonants are the skeleton of a language', we might conclude that all that is left in Morrison's 't-t-t' is a vocalic skeleton.<sup>57</sup> In his 1974 performance of 'Cyprus Avenue', Morrison hollows out the song and, as the voice breaks down, we are left with a revelation of the bodily labour it takes to make songs and sense seem whole again.

### Conclusion

While it could be argued that there is an emphasis on the metaphysics of presence operating in this article, I believe it is worth pointing out that it is precisely Morrison's presence that *should* be highlighted here, for it is a presence that seems even more obvious with the absence or failure of the word (and, when listening to the live album, with the absence or 'failure' of the performer). As the singer falters into silence, he is even more obviously *there*, that is *here*. If notions of presence and absence are problematic, they nevertheless have a place in attempts to engage with voice, writing, liveness, technology, and musical mediation. When rock writer Bill Flanagan suggested in an interview with Van Morrison that 'Your concerts can be riveting. On a good night you seem to go so far into yourself', Morrison interrupted to assert 'It's exactly the opposite. You go out of yourself. But it *appears* you're going in.' Then, referring to his shyness, he continued 'To perform I almost have to assume another identity. I have to almost play a part and get psyched up to walk onstage. Otherwise I couldn't do it.'<sup>58</sup> What I have attempted to highlight in this article is the end result of such labour, where the working of a vocal actor of Morrison's ability can open our ears to the play of sound, sense and nonsense in musical performance and where the voice emerges as both devourer and devoured. If voice, speech and song are foregrounded here, it is not at the expense of the written word, however, and the challenge to match voices, sounds, words and texts remains one to be continued in earnest.

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<sup>57</sup> Connor, *Beyond Words*, 37, where Wells is also quoted.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Flanagan, *Written in My Soul: Candid Interviews with Rock's Great Songwriters* (London: Omnibus, 1990), 420.

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