Memory Lane: The Tonal Language of Elliott Smith

by

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CHAPTER 1

A Statement of Purpose: Tonal Idioms in Pop/Rock Music

Introduction: Framing Guitar-Centricity

Ever since I started playing the guitar, I was amazed at the ability of guitarists to be such prolific songwriters. I could surprise teachers and peers with my ease of learning playing techniques, reproducing songs, and finding tone-styles. However, I was stumped by the difficulties I encountered trying to write my own music. I assumed I was alone in this dilemma. Eventually, I realized that my problem was not in understanding the broad techniques that guitarists use to write music, but the nuances that allowed them to forge unique combinations between melody and harmony.

These experiences inevitably led me to the following questions: what are the conventions of exceptional songwriting? Where are the gaps between my knowledge of music theory and the skills I needed to compose music on the guitar that I could take pride in? These conventions, which I will refer to as guitar-centric, began with the integration of the guitar as a cardinal instrument for writing popular music – as seen with the success of groups like the Beatles. Although the Beatles were no strangers to structural harmony, as much popular music from the 1950s and 60s was firmly rooted in tonal structures, their rise to stardom coincided with and helped beget
the acceptance of the guitar into mainstream music.\textsuperscript{1} Drawing influence from the blues, jazz, and “non-Western” genres, guitar-centric songwriting arose as an amalgamation of playing styles, some of which developed their own conventions largely independent from those of tonal harmony (and each other). This accounts, in part, as to why the analysis of Western popular and rock music has taken so long to be accepted in mainstream musicology.\textsuperscript{2}

One disclaimer that should be made is that guitar-centric songwriting is not a rejection of the traditions of structural harmony or even a calculated diversion from it. A guitar-centric paradigm often includes conventions of tonal harmony. Perfect cadences, secondary dominants, mode-mixture, smooth voice leading, and scale-chord harmonization are all techniques and concepts used in guitar-centric music. However, appearances of these concepts often take a different shape and present idiosyncratic deviations from the principles of tonal harmony.

In trying to explain the conventions of guitar-centric songwriting that are specific to performing, I will use a phenomenological paradigm that is informed by my encounters with neo-Riemannian and Schenkerian methods of analysis. This involves the transcription and analysis of a number of selected pieces, with the goal of embodying the performative aspects of guitar playing and songwriting while examining structural aspects of this music that easily emerge. The discussion will draw specifically upon the work of Elliott Smith, with a few exceptions, in order to explain the use of tonality through techniques like centricity, mode mixture, chromaticism, and contour. Though these techniques are analyzed in transcribed

\textsuperscript{1} Nicole Biamonte, “Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music,” 97.

\textsuperscript{2} Biamonte, 97 & David Blake, “Timbre as Differentiation in Indie Music,” 1.
examples, their appearance in pop/rock music, particularly Smith’s, conveys their application in less formal contexts as well.

This idea of using phenomenological analysis, descriptive analysis based on modes of perception, stems principally from the research of David Lewin. In his seminal work, *Generalized Musical Intervals and Transformations* (1987), Lewin applies algebraic distances and group theory set classes to analyze pitch classes, rhythm and meter, and even timbre using his “transformational theory.” The goal of this formalized process was to provide theories rich in descriptive phenomenology, relating the “transformations” he found to perceptive analyses. Studying transformational theory, I realized that the descriptive syntax Lewin applied to music more generally could apply well to the specifics of guitar playing. The spirit of transformational theory pervades this research, even if not explicitly named, in large part because of my own goals in exploring what I hear, reconciling what I hear with the instrument I play, and the tonal conventions I find exciting when used and also subverted.

**Tonal Idioms of Guitar Centricity and Pop/Rock Styles**

I consider guitar to be a good case study for descriptive analysis for two key reasons. First, the instrument’s tuning makes the voicing of triads and other intervals necessarily distinct from other instruments based on the piano-keyboard intervallic tuning. Second, and perhaps more importantly, many guitarists across the spectrum of

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artistic and commercial success are untrained when it comes to learned music theory and tonal harmony. These two reasons, in combination, give credence to the idea that an implicit, informal set of idioms for songwriting would eventually develop for the guitar. A phenomenological outlook provides common ground for these idioms to be analyzed by academics as well as guitarists who may be less conversant in western music theory syntax.

Physicality in Guitar-Playing

Timothy Koozin explores some of these idioms in his article “Guitar Voicing in Pop-Rock Music,” particularly by focusing on how “patterns of physical motion…” [reveal] how chords and figurations characteristic of pop-rock music can be understood as instances of more generalized hand position shapes and motions indexed to intervalllic differences on the fretboard” (2011). Koozin’s interest in “fretboard topography” and transformational paths eventually reveals just how influential hand positioning and motion are to the tonal conventions that are now accepted as specific to pop-rock.⁴ One major hand position is the Barre chord, which in its most typical form involves the performer holding down her index finger across the same fret of all six strings while the other three fingers are free to play specific notes down the fretboard from the “Barre.” Koozin rightly points out that the hand position for a root six Barre chord⁵ includes all the notes for playing the parallel minor pentatonic scale (in fact all five notes are in the Barre or the open strings). Because of this, Koozin sees a “correspondence between fretboard design and

⁴ Koozin, 1.
⁵ “Root six” implies a chord in the shape of open E, with the sixth (lowest) string being the root.
idiomatic patterns of blues-rock guitar music that often feature chromatic third-related modal colorations and subdominant-driven harmony.\textsuperscript{6}

These chromatic third-related “modal colorations” are the central focus of Chris McDonald’s article “Exploring Modal Subversions in Alternative Music,” with examples that display a major tonic transposed up a minor third (I - bIII), or two power chords (root and 5\textsuperscript{th}) related the same way, often with a major \(\hat{3}\) in the melody making the mode unclear (2000). McDonald goes on to refute those who criticize pop/rock harmony for its simplicity or an inability to explain much about the overall derivative style, claiming that the diverse roots of music written on the guitar lend themselves to diverse methods of harmonization.\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, his refuting aspersions on the basis of perceived simplicity characterizes the very heart of my interest in exploring pop/rock harmony.

**Common Harmonic Conventions in Pop/Rock**

The study of pop-rock harmony enables us to realize some of these conventions that the guitar’s physicality has influenced. Take, for example, the aforementioned subdominant-driven harmony. The [IV] chord has a history of use for cadential closure, but has more recently been analyzed as a cadence as important as the authentic cadence in pop/rock.\textsuperscript{8} For example, the Beatles – who also used authentic cadences and by no means represent the culmination of guitar-centric conventions – used the cadential [IV] chord in many of their compositions. One

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\textsuperscript{6} Koozin, 2.
\textsuperscript{7} Chris McDonald, “Exploring Modal Subversions in Alternative Rock, 355.
\textsuperscript{8} Drew Nobile, “Form and Voice-Leading in Early Beatles Songs,” 4.
plagal cadence found in many of their songs made use of the chromatic II chord as well (acting as a V/V). This combination creates a cyclical chord progression [I-II-IV-I] still used in pop/rock today (this is also an aspect of blues harmony).

It is interesting to think of the sonic characteristics of the plagal cadence in this context as an equal to the authentic cadence. As an inversion of the authentic cadence, the transformational gravity in a [IV - I] cadence could be seen as the opposite of the [V - I] progression. While the authentic cadence suggests upward voice leading from the “unstable” ˆ7 and ˆ2 scale degrees, the plagal cadence evokes a downward release, with scale degrees ˆ6 and ˆ4 falling gently to their respective chord tones. The plagal resolution is natural for many guitar players, as many suspensions are played with the eventual chord tones fingered simultaneously behind the suspensions.

Figure 1.1 Double-Plagal Progressions – Reproduced with permission from Nicole Biamonte’s “Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music,” 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Progression</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighboring</td>
<td>I–(IV)–I</td>
<td>Buddy Holly and the Crickets, “Not Fade Away” (1957)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I–IV–(VII–Ⅳ)–IV</td>
<td>Talking Heads, “And She Was” (1985), chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing</td>
<td>I–(VII)–IV–(VII)</td>
<td>Bob Seeger, “Night Moves” (1976), verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I–(VII)–IV–(VII)</td>
<td>Simple Minds, “Don’t You Forget About Me” (1985), verse and chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I–Ⅳ–Ⅶ–Ⅳ–I</td>
<td>Steve Miller, “Rock’n’Me” (1976), verse and chorus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The prominence of the cadential [IV] chord in pop and rock music can also be explained by the frequent use of diatonic modes other than major and minor, particularly Dorian and Mixolydian. In Dorian, the minor key’s flat sixth is natural, making the [IV] chord major. Many Dorian chord progressions are centered around this [i - IV] relation. Also prevalent is what Nicole Biamonte (2010), in her article “Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music,” refers to as double-plagal progressions, that is, [I - bVII - IV - I] (See Figure 1.1). This chord progression makes use of the Mixolydian mode in what has become a hallmark of rock chord progressions. Though the progression is in Mixolydian, there are many examples of songs that use these chords to harmonize a minor pentatonic riff or solo. Once again, the double-plagal progression’s cadential effect clearly differs from the driving gravity of the authentic cadence found in functional harmony. In this case, [bVII - IV - I] is a retrograde inversion of [ii - V - I] harmonic motion.9

One way that pop musicians, especially from a guitar-centric background, try to stand out is through altering a song’s diatonic scale degrees while keeping the tonic decidedly the same. Mode mixture, prevalent in tonal music since the classical era, is frequently encountered, and often in contexts that one might not consider dissonant. This is particularly true in harmonic contexts in which the tonic does not resolve, a harmonic trait used in diverse pop/rock categories. The prevalence of Dorian and Mixolydian modes in pop/rock allows subtle colorations of a song’s tonality that stay in comfortable territory maintaining an overall tonal centricity.

9 Biamonte, 98
I argue that the prevalence of pentatonicism in rock styles has enabled many alterations of diatonic mode to be relatively consonant within a stable pentatonic key. For example, The Weeknd’s track “Wicked Games” features an unchanging harmonic structure that displays chromatic motion in the bassline. The $\hat{1} - b\hat{7} - \hat{6} - b\hat{6}$ descent of the bassline implies Dorian, then Aeolian, modes on B; however, it would be hard to describe the harmonic motion as dissonant. The song’s stability owes much to the melody, which never leaves B pentatonic minor. The consistent pentatonic sound of the melody – along with the repetition of the harmonies (See Figure 1.2) – allows the Weeknd to use something of a “supermode” for the song, in which the different $\hat{6}$ scale degrees do not seem to clash.

### Structural Conventions

Another typical convention that departs from structural harmony involves tonal and sectional centricity within pop-rock songs. Since Elvis Presley first made waves with “Jailhouse Rock,” there is a long history in pop-rock music of changes in
centricity (though not necessarily in key or mode) between a song’s verse and its chorus. Often it is the [IV] chord that ends up being the first chord of a song’s chorus, briefly displacing the listener’s sense of centricity before resolving to the tonic, often through the dominant chord. However, some pop-rock songs seem to give equal weight to two or more keys, either between sections or globally. This kind of harmony, dubbed “sectional tonality” by Guy Capuzzo, seems to go against the grain of functional harmony (2009). The idea of a single tonic governing all tonal music was backed by the theories of Schoenberg and Schenker, though in contrast, the Beatles’ “Good Day Sunshine” tonicizes a number of different keys corresponding to the sections of the song. Though not all keys have equal weight, their individual dominance over particular sections gives the piece a “multitonal” bent.

This possibility for sectional tonality or tonal pairing in pop-rock music is supported by the increased role of the submediant [vi] chord. The [vi] chord’s rise in popularity can be attributed to multiple reasons, but from a guitar-centric perspective, one needs only to lift a finger to transform a tonic triad into a submediant triad in some hand positions. Because the major and minor keys are the most popular in tonal music, and because the two have a relative [I - vi] relation, one can understand why the tonal gravity of a composition would lend itself to one or the other as the tonic. However, in songs that feature both harmonies, naming the key can be more difficult. In the Beatles’ “And I Love Her,” for example, the chord progression of a verse is [ii - vi] x3 - [IV - V7 - I], causing a sense of centric confusion at first. It is not until the

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12 Ibid., 159.
13 Nobile, 6.
voice leading over the [IV - V7 - I] cadence that the listener senses the pull towards the tonic E-Major and not C#-minor or F#-minor.

It would be a vain and tortuous task to list and rank all of the tonal conventions of pop-rock music that diverge from the idioms of structural harmony. However, it seems unquestionable that, through this diversion of conventions, pop-rock music and other kinds of guitar-centric songwriting have a set of idioms to call their own. It is with this in mind that I consider the reward of analyzing such music. Guitar-centric styles of pop-rock, as well as older conventions of tonal harmony, seem to have integrated into an accessible but rich set of harmonic and formal idioms. By examining these idioms in practice and in theory, my hope is to create a mutually beneficial relationship between the ideas of diverse musical minds: guitarists, academics, and songwriters of any Western musical background. Through studying these conventions I hope to find those that contribute to an artist’s ability to craft his or her own unique musical voice. Over the course of my own musical studies as a guitarist, composer, and recent theorist, I’ve come to appreciate these conventions (as well as their subversions) in the work of many modern singer-songwriters. One composer/performer whose work I have found particularly influential, and whom I will focus on in detail for the purposes of this research, is Elliott Smith.

**Elliott Smith: A Case Study**

Elliott Smith is an artist whose work provides a rich area for study in this context. His vast body of work draws upon many different backgrounds through
which guitar-centric songwriting has grown. Smith’s diverse styles of production, arrangement, and embodiment of his music reveals a passion for the divergence he fulfilled. Many journalists have tried to analyze the career of Elliott Smith through the context of a tragic life cut short by an apparent suicide, drawing lines from his lyrics to his actions or assuming his narrative intent based on his personal story. I am interested in Smith’s career and personal story as well as the narrative intent of all great songwriters. However, my goal is to analyze Smith’s music as a befitting case study of the nuanced range of styles that the integration of guitar-centric and pop-rock conventions has recently inspired. Nevertheless, a small amount of biographical detail is relevant.

Steven Paul Smith was born on August 6, 1969 in Omaha, Nebraska, though he spent most of his early formative years in Duncanville, Texas with his mother and stepfather. At age fourteen, Smith moved to Portland, Oregon, where his biological father lived. His father had bought him a guitar when he was ten, and it was in high school that he started writing music on the instrument. Smith, a very closed-off child, began to make friends and play in bands. He went to Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, where he got a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and political science. It was at Hampshire where he met Neil Gust, one of Smith’s lifelong friends and songwriting partner in a band they would later call Heatmiser. The two performed together in Northampton clubs and brought their music back to Portland after graduation, working a variety of odd jobs at the same time. The group released three albums from 1992 to 1996, but tensions within the band caused a rift between the two songwriters
while Smith’s first two solo albums, *Roman Candle* (1994) and *Elliott Smith* (1995), were met with surprise success.¹⁴

These first two albums, the first of which Smith recorded on a four-track tape player in a basement, showcased bare-boned arrangements, careful fingerpicking, and a haunting vocal delivery that contrasted with loud grunge stylings of Heatmiser. Smith would release three more albums during his life, *Either/Or* (1997), *XO* (1998), and *Figure 8* (2000). After his death in 2003, unreleased tracks for Smith’s next project *From a Basement on a Hill* (2004) were mixed and produced by Rob Schnapf, who produced *Either/Or* and *XO*.¹⁵ Another posthumous collection, *New Moon* (2007), was released compiling earlier compositions recorded from 1994-1997.

**Creative Arc**

Smith’s progression as a recording artist is most apparent in the different production styles and techniques that he embraced throughout his career. The first two albums, despite the simplicity in their delivery, are noteworthy for displaying his tendency to multi-track his guitar and voice. All of the songs have at least two guitar tracks that carefully interweave, blurring a more typical lead/rhythm hierarchy. This fluidity between voices is further enhanced through overdubbed vocals, sometimes with noticeable differences in the delivery of the lyrics. *Roman Candle* is particularly reminiscent of both punk rock and lo-fi music, featuring the trademark hiss of a four-track tape recorder. Smith’s delicate acoustic guitar almost sounds out of place

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¹⁵ All credits compiled from http://www.allmusic.com/artist/elliott-smith-mn0000172167
playing such music, but his precise fingerpicking and urgent lyrics display his talent nonetheless.

The surprising success of *Roman Candle* garnered Smith some attention, and he was later noticed by Kill Rock Stars, a label known for recording punk and grunge bands in the Northwest. His first release on the label, *Elliott Smith*, showed the same instrumentation and urgency of *Roman Candle*, though with some evident growth from the previous album. The prevalence of pentatonic song styles in *Roman Candle* gave way to a more diverse harmonic array, and traditional verse-chorus forms became more noticeable on his self-titled album.\(^{16}\)

Though the musical style on *Roman Candle* and *Elliott Smith* may have been a much-needed diversion for Smith from the sound of Heatmiser’s, eventually he began building gradually bigger arrangements with greater spectral density. After introducing some drum tracks on *Elliott Smith*, Smith uses *Either/Or* to showcase his ability as a multi-instrumentalist and budding arranger. Most of the tracks have drums and bass, and a few songs have keyboard tracks as well, all played by Smith. *Either/Or* was also released by Kill Rock Stars, who were becoming known at the same time for promoting feminist punk artists like Sleater-Kinney and folk music from the Pacific Northwest.\(^ {17}\)

Smith caught his biggest break when director Gus Van Sant, a fellow resident of Portland, choose Smith’s music to comprise part of the soundtrack to his film *Goodwill Hunting*. Along with four tracks from *Either/Or* and one from *Roman Candle*, the film featured a new song, “Miss Misery,” whose success greatly

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\(^{16}\) Elizabeth Newton, “Between the Bars,” 18.

\(^{17}\) http://altmusic.about.com/od/recordlabels/a/killrockstars.htm
magnified Smith’s growing popularity.\textsuperscript{18} The film was a hit, winning two Academy Awards, and “Miss Misery” was nominated for Best Original Song. Smith played the song on March 5, 1998 on \textit{Late Night with Conan O’Brien}, his television debut, and two weeks later would play it at the Academy Awards ceremony.

Following the success of his first three albums and “Miss Misery,” Smith was signed to DreamWorks Records, a major label founded by David Geffen and Steven Spielberg. It was on DreamWorks that Smith, now living in Brooklyn, released his final two albums, \textit{XO} and \textit{Figure 8}. Although most tracks were still centered on his double-tracked vocals and angular acoustic guitars, the breadth of the instrumentation expanded noticeably. On \textit{XO}, Smith employs brass instruments, a chamberlain keyboard, and vibraphone on some tracks, and the album has his most pronounced use of electric guitar to date.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Figure 8} takes the ornamentation even further, with orchestral tracks and a wide variety of sound styles. Universally acclaimed, the album’s tracks juxtapose style after style: the electric “Junk Bond Trader,” acoustic “Everything Reminds Me of Her” and piano-and-voice “Everything Means Nothing To Me” showcase the many styles that Smith tries on the album. This variety of timbral styles makes an analytical study of the music all the more interesting. Though the styles of arrangement do not directly inform the tonal decisions that Smith makes, they speak to a body of work open to a wide range of musical conventions.

With the goal of illustrating Elliott Smith’s influence on the symbiosis between guitar-centric conventions and those of tonal harmony, the focus of my

\textsuperscript{18} \url{http://web.archive.org/web/20060408160745/http://undertheradarmag.com/es.html}
\textsuperscript{19} \url{http://www.allmusic.com/album/xo-mw0000039329/credits}
analysis will be on tonality, and especially harmony. However, I do not want to
discount the influence of timbre, arrangement, and production on Smith’s songwriting
process. My purpose, though, is to point out how a self-taught guitarist like Smith can
illuminate so much about the syntax we use to describe tonality, particularly in
pop/rock music. Because of the deep influence his harmonic and melodic choices
have had on my own songwriting, much of this syntax will be descriptive and/or
subjective. Nevertheless, I hope to convey the far-reaching influence that Smith’s
work has to offer any musician.
CHAPTER 2

Harmonic Conventions in Smith’s Catalog

Introduction

My interest in Elliott Smith’s music, especially in the context of my musical studies, stems from my immediate fascination with his intuition for harmony, particularly his chord changes and modal alterations. His pervasive use of mode mixture colors harmonic progressions that at different times display guitar-centric and/or tonal conventions. His tendency to transpose a major tonic up by minor third and to other harmonies from its parallel modes is reminiscent of Chris McDonald’s “modal subversions,” while his chromatic embellishments like secondary dominants and chord substitutions display proficient, if unintentional, use of tonal conventions. Also, his ability to obfuscate the tonal centricity of a piece, even while staying in one diatonic set of pitches, exemplifies the tendency of rock harmony and form to include changes of the perceived tonic that Guy Capuzzo sees as characteristic of pop/rock music.20

Smith’s known fascination with harmonic progressions was not held back by his lack of formal training on the guitar. Indeed, frequent chord changes are a characteristic of his style, and incorporate mode mixture and chromaticism in striking manners. Elizabeth Newton (2010) points to a gradual move to “more traditional”

20 Capuzzo’s focus is mostly on the changes in tonal centricity between sections of a song. But some of Smith’s repertoire includes obfuscation of a tonic within a section of a composition.
harmonies through the course of his career, attributing to his later music “staples of rock harmony” as well as chromatic harmony that appears in a more “controlled manner in predictable places like a bridge or transition.”\textsuperscript{21} However, through my analysis – focusing on songs found between Either/Or (1997) and From a Basement on a Hill (2004) – I aim to illustrate Smith’s continued diversion from a consistent set of idioms and various ways of interpreting his imaginative harmonic progressions.

Modality and Centricity

A major hallmark of Smith’s music, as well pop/rock more generally, is the obscuration of the tonal and modal centers in his compositions; sometimes briefly, sometimes sectionally, and sometimes over an entire track. For these analyses, I distinguish tonal centricity from modal centricity by using tonal centricity to refer to the perceived tonic and modal centricity discuss the collection of pitches perceived to be in play at any time. In many songs Smith disrupts the perceived centricity through the use of harmonic and formal tools that draw from guitar-centric as well as conventions of functional harmony. I will be examining three separate songs, each of which uses techniques to create tension through the subversion of tonal centers or chromatic colorations within a tonic key.

\textsuperscript{21} Newton, 41
The clash between tonic and submediant tonal centers appears many times in pop/rock repertoire, but there are also examples of Smith’s capacity to push the ear to tonal centers that are less closely related. In the case of “Speed Trials,” the opening track from his third album Either/Or, we see Smith using motifs characteristic of both E-minor and C-Major, keys related by 5th transposition and the relativity of major and minor keys. In this case, Smith pulls the listener to E-minor through the use of a pentatonic “tattoo” characteristic of guitar-centric songwriting (Figure 2.1). This tattoo is a riff that repeats itself for much of the song.

The tattoo provides an unmistakable feeling of a minor pentatonic center around E. This creates the expectation that the song will be in an E-minor mode; however, entrance of the rhythm guitar immediately confounds these expectations. The C-Major chord played repeatedly behind the vocal melody in the verse makes E-minor a much weaker centric key. However, it does little to stabilize the piece around C-Major because of the persistence of the tattoo’s tonal gravity. The B note that ends the tattoo does not sound like a leading tone to C, as the pedal point E in the tattoo is

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22 Doll, 5
out of place with the intent to tonicize C-Major. This clash of tonal centers defines the verse and gives it an edge that would not exist if it had a clear tonic.

**Figure 2.2 “Speed Trials” Verse, Reduction by Rob Schultz**

It is not until Smith breaks from the C-Major chord of the rhythm guitar that he begins to develop centric clarity in “Speed Trials.” By reaching the Ab-Major chord in measure 3 and then moving to the G, Smith uses a long-used chromatic device similar to an augmented sixth chord to harmonize C-Major. The chromatic motion down to G sets the stage for the chorus (**Figure 2.3**), which has stronger C-Major centricity and a more functional chord progression [I - II - IV - V]. The F-Major7 chord is especially revealing, subverting expectations for the song to continue its E-minor trajectory despite the pedal point E in the melody.

**Figure 2.3 “Speed Trials” Chorus, Reduction by Rob Schultz**
“Speed Trials” exemplifies the unidiomatic nature of Smith’s songwriting conventions. Though I aim to reveal common threads between the structural functions of many of his harmonic techniques, “Speed Trials” helps to explain why changes in sectional centricity like this were not considered to be a hallmark of structural harmony. In this case, a convention of guitar-centric songwriting – the repeated E-minor pentatonic tattoo – causes such a strong sense of tonality at the beginning of “Speed Trials” that the functional harmony used in Smith’s chord progressions is not enough to sway the ear towards a clear tonic. In the next two examples, Smith uses chromatic and functional tools that have a more decided role in the pop/rock lexicon.

**Waltz #2 (XO)**

**Figure 2.4 “Waltz #2 (XO)’” Refrain, Chord Progression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bb-Major</th>
<th>Gm x 4 (intro)</th>
<th>Gm</th>
<th>Bb</th>
<th>Eb</th>
<th>Bb</th>
<th>Eb</th>
<th>Bb</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Bb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>vi</td>
<td>vi</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>I</td>
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<td>VI</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>VII</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The title track from Smith’s third album, *XO*, “Waltz #2 (XO)” exemplifies Smith’s tendency to stretch the listener between relative major/minor tonal centers. It also displays the tonicizing support of the [IV] chord in this style of music. The piece starts off with a few measures of solo drums and then four measures of G-minor on the guitar, seemingly making G-minor the unequivocal tonic (see Figure 2.4). The refrain of the song starts on G-minor and moves to the relative major Bb, but there is

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24 Capuzzo, 159.
no real centric gravity towards Bb major until Smith moves to subdominant Eb-
Major, resolves back to Bb, and then repeats. The preeminence of the Bb-Major 
sonority in this section is then affirmed by the authentic cadence from F to Bb in 
closing out the refrain.

**Figure 2.5 “Waltz #2 (XO)” Verse Reduction**

Smith starts the verse of the song back on G-
minor, shifting the tonal weight 
once again (Figure 2.5). The first four measures are split between G-minor and Bb-
major harmonies, keeping the centric direction indistinct. In measures 5-8 and 9-16, 
Smith uses very similar chromatic devices to tonicize Bb-Major and G-minor, 
respectively. Coming out of the Bb-Major chord in mm. 3-4, Smith harmonizes the 
major mode with a functional [(I) - IV - II6/4 - V] chord progression that moves 
toward its perfect cadence through the chromatic motion of the bassline [♯4 - ♯4 - ♪5].

The strong centric pull towards Bb, realized by measure 7, ends up being 
subverted by the surprising turn to C-minor in measure 9. Again, there is a shift in 
centricity that begins with a subdominant chord (this time in G-minor). This shift is 
confirmed as the C-minor chord changes to a G-minor in measure 11, and reinforced 
by a cadence in the last four measures. The A7 - E7 progression, similar to the C - F 
movement in mm. 6-7, provides a [V/V - V] tonicization of G minor the pushes all 
the centric gravity in that direction. Because the verse repeats itself, this dominant
resolves strongly to G minor, continuing its centricity for at least two measures. These two chord progressions, [I - IV - II - V] and [iv - i - II - V], show Smith’s ability to use functional harmony even in the context of toying with its conventions through major-minor dual tonality.

“L.A.”

In contrast to the centric back-and-forth between relative major and minor keys, Smith shows an interesting interplay between parallel major and minor modes in his song “L.A.” from his final DreamWorks album, Figure 8. Though the production is much sleeker on Figure 8 and the arrangements more full, Smith does not forget his guitar-centric syntax entirely. On “L.A.,” he harmonizes both E-Major and E-minor in each section of the song, causing the gravity of the tonic to remain stable on E but the other modal colorations to vary. The mood of the lyrics is appropriately bittersweet; Smith contrasts emotive lyrical phrases, both upbeat (“It’s a beautiful day”) and ominous (“Last night I was about to throw it all away.”) in his homage to Los Angeles, where he lived to record Figure 8 and the tracks that would become From a Basement on the Hill.25

Almost immediately Smith uses modal ambiguity in the song, the first example very characteristic of blues/rock tonality (Figure 2.6): after playing a short opening in E-major using different suspensions of the chord before resolving to a major triad, Smith plays a riff on the other guitar track that implies E-minor.

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25 Nugent, 163
Figure 2.6 “L.A.” Guitar Intro Transcription

The actual establishment and shift in mode does not come until the last measure, as the use of suspended chords delays the sense of arrival of an apparent key (Figure 2.6) After a consonant descent down notes of the major pentatonic scale, [1 - b6 - 5] Smith ends with a very common pentatonic resolution from the minor third (G) to the tonic. Not trying to linger on E-minor, he then subverts the minor modality by starting his verse back on E-Major. However, this brief detour into the minor modality is a sign of things to come in the rest of the song.

Figure 2.7 “L.A.,” Verse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>ii</th>
<th>i</th>
<th>bVI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>F#m</td>
<td>Em</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gentleman’s in the lane</td>
<td>Spinning his hat on a cane.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IV</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
<th>bII</th>
<th>i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Em</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepping out, out for a change. Good morning to all, it’s a beautiful day.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the harmonic structure of “L.A.” the sudden turn to E-minor in the third measure conceives a moment of strong surprise (Figure 2.7). Opening the verse with E-Major and F#-minor, Smith seems to set a firm E-Major modality, playing the first six notes of the E-Major scale. By moving to E-minor – as well as playing it in
the same hand position as he did the E-Major chord – all harmonic expectations are thrown off.

The rest of the harmonies do not stray far from the E-minor modality, but the motion of the chord changes slightly compromises the centric pull towards the tonic E itself. The A - C chord progression displays chromaticism in E-minor but is not surprising as they at can both harmonize an E-minor pentatonic centricity. The D - F progression, when Smith sings “it’s a beautiful day,” is a little more surprising. Like in measures 5 and 6 before it, though, Smith is uses major chord transposition up a minor 3rd, a technique he uses in many compositions. Making sure this [IV - VI - VII - bII] progression fits the E-minor centricity he has established, Smith adds a ninth measure to the verse, allowing the Neapolitan chord to fall gracefully into the E-minor tonic. In the ninth measure of the verse, measure he plays the riff from the intro (Figure 2.6) to transition back to the next verse and its major modality. In the chorus (not shown here), he also starts with the chords E-Major and F#-minor before once again using strictly chords strictly to harmonize E-minor. That all three sections display E-Major modality first and end in E-minor seems like an intension Smith’s to use chords that supported both keys, so long as the centricity towards E was still strong.

The drastically different chord progressions of these three examples serve to convey the diverse idioms available for making harmonic and structural tension in pop/rock music. Of the three, “L.A,” displays the strongest centricity to its tonic, E, while also using the most chromatic chords borrowed from parallel modes. “Waltz #2,” on the other hand, uses no chromatic chords except for secondary dominants.
However, those chords are used to emphasize the *shifts of centricity* between relative minor and major scales rather than resolving into the new tonic. Finally, tonal ambiguity in “Speed Trials” is conducted less through harmonic movement than through the repetition of chords and motifs that point towards E-minor and C-Major centricities. What these examples reveal is Smith’s flexible approach to tonal centricity, and a variety of methods for creating a sense of tension and release.

**“Memory Lane” Analysis**

I choose the track “Memory Lane” from his first posthumous release, *From a Basement on the Hill*, as my central case study for a few reasons. The only instruments in the piece are guitar and voice. For analytical purposes, this provides a level of tonal clarity that some of his more layered arrangements can make harder to transcribe or understand. Despite this, there is a more abstract division of parts or voices; Smith’s fingerpicking technique allows him to sometimes separate a plucked melody from the chords themselves, while the vocal lines also contribute melodies that interact with the guitar lines in an interesting way.

Also noteworthy is the weight of his vocal presence on account of his trademark overdubbing. The immersive space taken up by his multi-track vocal panning is a surprising contrast to the sparse arrangement of “Memory Lane.” The song can also be distinguished from the guitar-and-voice work from Smith’s first two albums because of crisp sound quality that reflects a different recording process. Though *From a Basement on a Hill* was mixed by the more hands-off Anti-Records,
as opposed to DreamWorks for whom he began writing the album, the need for multi-tracking and heavy mixing on many of the other more layered compositions supports the idea that “Memory Lane” would also sound a bit fresher than his early guitar-and-voice work.

Shifting the focus back to tonality, “Memory Lane” is important because its examples of harmonic movement and subversion involve techniques that have already been analyzed. The refrain of the song contains heavy mode mixture, but over relatively functional harmonies, channeling the tonal centricity of E-Major despite the amount of chromatic tones used (see Figure 2.8). It also displays the smooth, chromatic voice leading of melodies that cause tension and resolution while avoiding all-out dissonance, a convention that will reveal itself in later examples as well. In the verse, Smith’s fast-moving chord changes use both diatomic and borrowed chords (such as applied dominants) to shift the perceived centrality the tonic key. As these examples come up, patterns begins to reveal themselves – despite Smith’s lack of formal knowledge of a specific tonal syntax, the results of his structural conventions show similarities between the techniques that he uses. Upon further analysis, there may be a set of idioms that could be called his own.
The introduction of the song immediately exhibits repeated chromaticism but is also much more centrically focused on the tonic E-Major than the verses and bridge are. In fact, while the only clear harmonies outlined are [I, vi, IV, iv, and V], all tones are used except for the minor 2nd, F, an uncommon feat in the folk genre to say the least. The descending melodic sequence in the first two measures (Figure 2.8) displays mode mixture in E similar to that seen in other examples, with a linear 7 - b6 melody guiding the harmonic feel of the chorus. What is more surprising, though, is the way this upper voice moves in mm. 3-4, continuing down while skipping the perfect fourth interval, ( 5 - 4 - 3), strangely enough, with scale degree 3 landing on the IV harmony in m. 4 (A-Major7).

In m. 5, Smith plays C# minor, the submediant and key of the relative minor, through a g-g# melody, subtly implying a V/V harmonization of the relative minor
key. In the second half of the measure, a similar line (g-g#) is played over the [V] chord (B-Major) leading back to the tonic E-Major. This gives the chromatic line two different colors within a measure. The first as #\[^4\] - \[^5\] in C# minor, and the second as the first two notes in a \[^3\] - #\[^2\] - \[^2\] - \[^1\] melody that leads back to the tonic E major.

The \[^1\], though begins in the final sixteenth of measure 5 (Figure 2.8), causing a brief suspension before the [V] chord resolves decisively to the first beat of measure 6, when the tonic is played in the lowest register. This tactic of adding brief delays in resolution (found in many of Smith’s vocal melodies) causes a feeling of rhythmic and harmonic displacement over his chord changes. Smith’s brief suspension of harmony works will as a syncopated introduction to the next chord. Moreover, Smith uses the same rhythmic “push” during the second beat of measure 7, playing a B – scale degree \[^5\] – a sixteenth before the third beat starts with a D# (\[^7\]) in the bass. Though both this B sonority is a chord tone of both C-minor7 and B, its rhythmic role between both harmonies serves as a pivot for the change between the chords in beats 2-3 of measure 7 (Figure 2.8). This tendency to use suspensions, both harmonically and metrically, gives what would be a simple [vi - V6/4 - I] progression a sense of displacement, providing a composition played only on one instrument with a distinct color through the interaction of its voices.

Smith’s harmonic choices are very important to the emotional affections of his compositions. There is a very noticeable difference between harmonies of the refrain and verse. Despite the evident chromaticism in the refrain, Smith does not obstruct the clear centricity of E-Major. On the other hand, Smith’s chord changes in the verse
(Figure 2.9) reveal many moments of perceived centric instability, even though many of them have diatonic function in E Major. This in part a result of the metric placement of his harmonies, especially when analyzed in linear relation to their adjacent chords.

**Harmony and Centricity in the Verse**

**Figure 2.9 “Memory Lane” Verse**

The harmonic framework Smith uses in the verse, in contrast to the refrain, is a dizzying exercise in locating a stable point. Though the global key remains in E-Major for the verse, Smith’s choice to start on the mediant G#-minor chord sets the tone for a lack of centricity in the verse (Figure 2.9). Sectional centricity never really exists until the verse’s final two measures, in which F#-minor [ii] and B [V] build prolonged tension to the coming E harmony, implicating the arrival of a tonic on E for the start of the chorus. However, in the verse, E-Major only appears two times out of the sixteen chords used, and it is found in less metrically weighted positions.

Smith establishes the lack of centricity as well as his continued determination to mix modes in the first two measures of the verse. The harmonic line – G#-minor7 - A-Major - C-Major - E-Major – quickly runs through 9 tones, all those diatonic to E major as well as its minor third and sixth. Most of the common modal subversions to
which Chris McDonald refers involve a major [I] to a major [bIII] chord or tonic power chord that is harmonized with a major third in the melody before shifting to a [bIII] chord. What makes the subversion in mm. 9-10 distinct, though, is the fullness of the chords (played on all six strings), as well as the chord from which the diatonic key is subverted. After the first two chords – [iii7] and [IV] of E-Major – cover the entire diatonic scale, the minor third subversion comes from the movement of the [IV] chord A-Major, going to the [bVI] C-Major, before finally settling on the tonic E-Major chord for the first time. The [IV - bVI] chord progression is utilized many times throughout Smith’s repertoire. It is seen in the verse of “L.A.,” (Figure 2.7), but in “Memory Lane” the chromatic effect is more jarring because the key is major instead of minor.

This sense of centric arrival that occurs at the end of the first two measures is thrown into confusion once again in mm. 11-12 (Figure 2.9). The first chord, F#-half-diminished seventh, is a harmony borrowed from the parallel minor scale [iiø7]. This is followed by a G#7 chord, another mode mixture chord that harmonizes the relative minor C# (V/vi), which becomes apparent when a C#-minor chord, immediately follows. These surprising mode mixture chords, which seemingly have disparate purposes for producing chromatic tension, end up combining quite well to tonicize the key of the relative minor, as seen in the voice leading they produce.

The introduction of the C#-minor gives sounds significant enough that it briefly becomes tonicized. With C# minor as a possible tonic, the chords in m. 11 form a cadential resolve, [ivø7 - V7 - i]. Though Smith was most likely unaware, this

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26 McDonald, 357.
chord progression is used often in jazz music, with the [ivø7] seen as more of an substitution for [iiø7], a secondary pre-dominant in a harmonic minor cadence. Thus, he manages to subvert the centricity of the verse to the relative minor, but disguises the simple relation of the keys with chromatic chords that briefly bring about a moment of confused dissonance.

This pattern of subversion-then-resolution continues in m. 12 (see Figure 2.9). The just-tonicized C#-minor is given only the first beat of the measure before Smith brings the verse back to E-Major diatonicism by changing the function of C#-minor – the harmonic minor key that was tonicized with chromatic voice leading is transformed in an instant to Aeolian, as seen by the [i - VII - VI] harmonic decent in measure 12. As soon as Smith plays the B major and A-Major chords, the listener is brought out of a pull to C#-minor centricity and goes back to assuming a pull towards E-Major. This Aeolian descent is therefore transformed on the spot to a plagal cadence [V-IV] that resolves after repeating itself – the two chords this time filling the whole of m. 13 (two beats each) – before resolving to the E-Major tonic at the beginning of m. 14.

This “pull” towards E-Major is clinched by mm. 14-16. In measure 14 Smith fingerpicks rapid but traditional chord changes, [I - V6/4 - vi]. Then, in mm. 15-16, he finally provides concrete disclosure that his unbounded display of harmonic movement will resolve, both formally (the listener expects a transition or repetition after 8 or 16 bars) and tonally (though it is nearly a surprise to hear a perfect authentic cadence after his earlier tonal ambiguity). The [ii - V - I] cadence – the I chord occurring in the refrain (m. 17) – is also the only time in the verse in which Smith
allows chords to take up whole measures. For the longest span in the song, there is both tonal and modal centricity.

Elision in the Bridge

Figure 2.10 “Memory Lane” Bridge

Smith also bucks rhythmic expectations between the second refrain and the bridge. In measure 39 (Figure 2.10), Smith sets up the resolution of his chorus with the same [vi - V6/4] progression that he uses to lead to the tonic chord, but this time breaks his form with a deceptive cadence and elision directly into the bridge, which starts in m. 40. Despite some mode mixture, the harmonies themselves are not unusual for pop music – [i - V6/4 - III - IV - bVI - bvi] in the key of C#-minor. Aside from the sudden entrance, what makes the bridge alarming more than the harmonies used are the five and a half measures over which he plays them. Starting with two beats per chord, Smith decides to play the IV chord for a whole measure, going from the second half of m. 41 into the first half of m. 42, which boosts the Dorian feel of
the bridge. Instead of sticking with expected Dorian tonality, he plays the bVI and bvi harmonies for one and two whole measures respectively, leaving the listener with a rocky sense of imbalance going into the final verse.

**Conclusion**

Through the four compositions analyzed there are patterns that emerge through Smith’s harmonies. For example, though his songs display diverse use of centricity and chromaticism, much of the time the diversion of his harmonic structures indicate simultaneous transitions between sections or changing dynamics. His mode mixture chords often reveal smooth chromatic voice leading like $\hat{7} - \hat{6} - b\hat{6}$ (“Memory Lane” and “L.A.”) that provides surprisingly smooth movement over his modal subversions. On the other hand, Smith proves capable of disrupting tonal centricity even when using diatonic harmonies (“Speed Trials” and “Memory Lane” verse). This tendency displays the importance of where he places his chords relative to the each other and not just what their function is within one key.

To draw too much intent from Smith’s harmonic decisions would be counterproductive to the ubiquity of his contributions to pop/rock syntax. Indeed, if we are to believe that he had no formal background in music theory, Smith’s chord progressions are a wonderful lesson in the boundless opportunities available to a guitarist. Some of his most difficult examples to explain, like the chords in “L.A.” (Figure 2.7) seem to prove his claim to be simply writing “what sounds good.”²⁷ On the other hand, the chord progressions found in the verse of “Waltz #2 (XO),”

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²⁷ Newton, 40.
(Figure 2.5) display an astounding, if unaware, grasp of the tools of tonal harmony. His ability to fuse all of these idioms into a very recognizable syntax is a crucial manner in which Smith’s work stands out among his contemporaries.

At the same time, his ability to obscure the centricity of a tonic or the preeminence of a mode displays a formal aspect of pop/rock music that has become omnipresent. In a musical age where explicit knowledge of theory does not parallel artistic or commercial success, this is one facet of pop/rock syntax that can be learned informally. Moving between Dorian and Aeolian modes via [IV - bVI] harmonic motion does not need to be called a modal subversion or even a dissonance. A song that has a clear major tonic for its verse and then a strong relative minor tonic in the chorus does not need to be called anything but tonal. Smith’s body of work helps to illustrate how far pop/rock tonality has come in producing a distinct set of idioms that can be learned in a variety of ways.
CHAPTER 3

Melodic Guides in Smith’s Tonal Structures

Introduction

Although my analysis of the tonal conventions found in Elliott Smith’s music is necessarily focused on harmonic structures, Smith’s diverse range of melodies form a major facet of his tonal expression. His vocal melodies, in conjunction with his lyrics, work to create perhaps the most common thread of appreciation among his listeners. With his wide vocal range, distinctive contour and rhythm, and intricate guitar tracks, Smith’s melodies tend to guide the tonal framework of his compositions in a number of important ways.

Smith’s use of various melodic contours on his vocal tracks often guides the sectional structures of his tunes. Oscillation, arpeggiation, pedal tones, and surprising intervallic leaps are all found in his works, and they distinguish sections through Smith’s disparate usage of such devices. His changes in section often coincide with changes in such techniques, similarly to his use of varied harmonic idioms. Also, Smith’s tendency to put at least two guitar tracks on a song allow him to use the instrument for further melodic embellishment. His riffs and pedal tones give his songs tonal cues, often in spite of his complex chord changes that obscure harmonic clarity. Independent of a given harmonic context, many of Smith’s compositions have precise yet simple melodic guitar motives that provide memorable thematic substance to his repertoire.
Leading with Melody: Riffs and Pedal Tones

In many cases in the pop/rock lexicon, a guitar riff – especially one in a pentatonic key – can be a stabilizing force that keeps a song’s tonal and modal centricity clear despite the prevalence of mode mixture. At other times; however, it can serve the opposite purpose, contradicting the tonal or modal centricity of a harmonic figure. Aside from harmonic development, Smith’s guitar lines sometimes sound like more than just complementary tonal matter. For example, in the case of “Happiness,” a track from Figure 8, the lead guitar line of the refrain has a crucial thematic role, providing a tonal and metric shape that guides a quick-moving, complex chord progression.

“Happiness” - Melodic Guitar Riffs

Figure 3.1 “Happiness” Refrain Reduction (Lead Guitar & Chords)

The chord progression in the refrain (Figure 3.1) runs through a number of harmonies borrowed from other modes and displays some particularly interesting groupings of adjacent chords. After moving from the tonic E-Major to mediant G#-minor, the major modality is subverted by the presence of the [bVII] D-Major chord.
What makes this subversion especially jarring is the movement of the bassline by tritone (g# - d). The other chromatic chords that appear in the refrain are the [bVI] C-Major chord, borrowed from the parallel minor key, and the [II] chord F#-Major, typically used as a secondary dominant for the [V] chord, B-Major, which is absent from the chord progression. Even in the chromaticism, there is harmonic motion that should be familiar by this point. The [bVII - IV] progression is a double-plagal progression that still fits the tonic centricity of E, and the last five chords [IV - bVI - I - II - IV] display two transpositions of major chord up a minor third, which we have seen multiple times already in Smith’s music.

Despite the heavy use of chord changes, I find it likely Smith came up with the guitar melody of this section before the intricate chord progression that it fits so well into. This is because the contours of Smith’s lead guitar lines give the refrain its thematic shape as well as the centric glue that keeps the section firmly in E while borrowing tones from its parallel modes at the same time. One way that Smith is able to mask the two-voice contours I perceive and is through crossing the contours as well as noticeably panning the separate guitar strings.

Figure 3.2 “Happiness Riff” with voice-crossed contours.
In Figure 3.2, I mark the two contours that I see whose roles are very distinct in terms of intervallic motion and tonic harmonization in “Happiness.” The voice that starts at the top has diamond heads, while the second line is has stars in the circular heads. In this figure, the top voice is simply an eight-note chromatic descent downward, from E to A. In contrast, the bottom voice stays true to E-Major, starting with chord tones G# and B, the major and minor third of the first two chords, respectively. In the final three measures, as the top voice makes its daring drop from A to D, the bottom voice (actually the higher notes in these three measures) repeats the same figure, F# - E (\( \hat{2} - \hat{1} \)), anchoring the bold chromatic voice to E-Major with sort of a “pedal riff.” In this way, we can see the tonality of the refrain in a much simpler light than the chromatic, Roman Numeral progression might have us believe. Rather, two relatively simple guitar lines outline most of the harmonic material through their interaction.

I consider the refrain of “Happiness” to be special for two reasons. First, Smith’s ability to harmonize eight consecutive chromatic tones without losing tonal centricity around E shows his capacity for inventiveness within the pop/rock genre. Second, his ability to mask the roles of the two melodies by crossing the voices, swapping their rhythmic positions (1/6\(^{th}\) of a beat apart), makes what looks like two simple contours in Figure 3.2 sound like a maze of chromaticism around a still-powerful E tonic. Though Smith may not have written the song with these contours in mind, “Happiness” displays the thematic guidance that such a simple guitar line can bring to a composition.
“Speed Trials” - Melodic Influence on Centricity

In other cases, the use of melodic devices can be strong enough to seemingly contradict a song’s harmonic influence on tonal centricity. Melodic direction and gravity sometimes create sharp points of conflict between different tonal centers. “Speed Trials” is most interesting because of what I perceive to be a consistent fight for tonal centricity between the E-minor pentatonic and C-Major keys. As discussed at the beginning of Chapter 2, the guitar tattoo that begins the song (Figure 2.1) sets a clear centricity toward E-minor, but the entrance of C-Major on the guitar immediately obscures the centricity between the two keys.

Figure 3.3 “Speed Trials” Verse

What makes the search for centricity all the more confusing in the verse is the repetition of the pedal tone E in the vocal line (Figure 3.3). The only other notes that Smith sings over the C-Major chord is a brief ascending melody from C to E in the last beat ahead of the repeat. Upon reaching the E, Smith descends an octave, singing a lower E six times before reaching the C - E movement in the last beat. Altogether, that’s twenty-one repetitions of E and only six other notes total. Were “Speed Trials” definitively in C-Major, this pedal tone would not be problematic in the harmonization of C-Major. However, the repetition of E in the vocal line along with the low E that is sustained throughout the guitar tattoo gives it a drone-like quality.
Smith finally effects a change in the centric muddiness of the chorus by moving to the Ab - G progression that gives a little more gravity to the C-Major tonic. Aside from the conventionality of the chromatic progression, [bVI - V] in C-Major (Figure 3.3), Smith conveys a structural shift through the vocal melody’s oscillation between C, Bb, and B, breaking from the E melody at the same time that he stops playing the tattoo. Still, the question of the cardinal tonic in the piece remains unanswered, and the B that the vocal oscillation ends on does not sound like it will resolve to C, and indeed it does not.

Figure 3.4 “Speed Trials” Chorus

The chord progression in the chorus is the closest thing to functional harmony that appears in “Speed Trials.” The G7 that leads into the section harmonizes a C-Major tonic, and the progression in the chorus – [I - II(sus2) - IVMaj7 - V] – is more characteristic of C-Major than any other diatonic key. However, any hope for a clear end to the centric confusion is thrown back into doubt by the reemergence of the E pedal tone. This time staying in the upper register, the E is held over on the guitar as well, producing gravity around it despite the fact that an E-minor chord is never played. The melodic descent in the last two measures from this E down to B does little to change the murky centricity of the chorus, especially when it moves down to G instead of resolving upward to C like a leading tone. And the placement of C on
the fourth beat of the final measure does it no favors in the context of tonicization, as Smith quickly moves past it in ascending back to his pedal tone E.

Like Smith’s array of harmonic devices analyzed in **Chapter 2**, the diverse melodic styles used in “Happiness” and “Speed Trials” displays his penchant for arousing emotional intensity through variation of such techniques. Structurally, a change from vocal repetition to oscillation or arpeggiation tends to instigate a change in section, dynamic, or arrangement. On the guitar, the use of riffs and other captivating leads can reveal a lot about the thematic structure of a track. In contrast, these same techniques may, at other times, subvert the expected structure entirely. These examples, stressing the different roles that can be played by a single one of Smith’s melodies, provoke my interest in how Smith varies the relationships between melodies.

**Vocal Counterpoint: Unexpected Harmonies and Motion**

Smith's multi-tracked vocals are one of the most recognizable aspects of his overall sound. Much of the time this technique simply adds depth to create an immersive musical environment. But it also allows him to approach vocal harmonies from an interesting perspective. In most popular music, there is either an identical second track in terms of melody or a track heard only when harmonizing with the main melody. Smith uses his overdubbed vocals more loosely; often two tracks stay together for much of a song, but then diverge in ways that do not always convey a clear separation of melody and harmony tracks. Through a contrapuntal study of his vocal layering, we see a number of voices whose range of intervals and varied motion
serve to build tension and resolution in his compositions. In a similar way to the formal cues given by the varied contour of a single track, Smith’s use of different relationships between vocal tracks often guides the structural differences between sections.

**Say Yes**

In the case of “Say Yes,” the final track of *Either/Or*, Smith uses the divergence of his two vocal tracks to signify a new section. The eight-measure verse that Smith begins the song with is repeated almost entirely through the song. During each verse the two tracks stay in unison. Smith repeats the form of the verse, both harmonically and melodically, seven times until he signifies a bridge through the noticeable divergence of his vocal melodies (m. 1 in Figure 3.5.) In the bridge he uses many different interval qualities, not repeating one until the third measure. The trajectory of the intervals – a roughly linear path from m2 to M6 – is set off in the first measure by the unison C/C becoming a C/C#, an enthralling dissonance over a passing F-augmented chord that gives the listener an understanding that the song is taking off into new territory.
Smith creates independence between his two vocal tracks in the bridge by holding over or repeating most of the notes in the top voice, creating oblique motion. In this case he uses the lower melody more functionally, with chord and passing tones that are all diatonic to F-Major. In contrast, the higher melody introduces chromatic passing tones, increasing the tension in the bridge by drawing attention to the diversion of the voices. After the first interval, a jump from A to C, the melody in his top track rises chromatically in the first two measures with lots of repetition (Figure 3.5). First C# creates the brief F+ chord, then it slides up to the D-minor chord in the second measure. This voice continues to creep up to Eb, harmonizing the [bVII] chord, before returning to D-minor. He then moves the voice down by whole tone (D - C - Bb), using succinct voice leading to harmonize D-minor, F-Major and Bb-Major. In mm. 5-8 the melody proceeds mostly the same way, with one exception: the whole step descent from D to Bb in the upper voice is transposed down an octave,
giving the bridge a sense of warmth and closure as the two voices go back into unison for the last measure of the bridge.

**Waltz #2 (XO)**

“Waltz #2 (XO),” compared to the other examples of melodic counterpoint, has the largest presence of instrumental texture and density – at least two guitars, two vocals, a bass, and a piano track are featured in each section. Similar his manipulation of structure of “Say Yes,” though, Smith keeps his vocal tracks in unison for the verses and choruses. It is once again through the separation and independence of the vocal tracks that Smith draws attention to the new section of the piece. While other sections of the song either begin on G-minor or Bb-Major (Figures 2.4 + 2.5), the bridge is distinguished through Smith’s landing on the [iv] chord, C-minor, which subverts the expectation for some immediate tonic centricity to start the section.

**Figure 3.6 Waltz #2 (2:45)**

Unlike “Say Yes,” in which two vocal tracks share all the lyrics in the bridge, there is a clear hierarchy between these voices. In “Waltz #2,” the top vocal is meant
to be decorative to the melody in the lower voice. This “decorative” distinction that marks the bridge is launched in the last measure of the preceding chorus, as multiple wordless vocal tracks lead into the bridge with legato “ooohs” that immediately add texture to the transition between sections.

The listener is immediately drawn to the bridge by the chromatic pick-up (Bb-B-C), led by the multi-tracked vocals, while the main melody with lyrics emerges from that same note one beat later, giving the vocals an immersive ambience that the interaction of the tracks makes possible (Figure 3.6). Over the Eb9 chord, the melody is harmonized by minor third and minor second “ahhhh’s in the higher register, building tension and conveying a rise to the climax of the song. The “on, and on, and on” lyrics signify the apex of dynamics and register, but the harmony in the top voice interestingly descends below the main vocal track. Taking a back seat to the high notes (and emotional delivery) of the main track, the harmony track also moves in different intervals from the main one, building tension through its similar motion. In measure 8, though, the upper voice returns to the higher register, returning to its supporting role by settling into diatonic thirds, as Smith laments, “I’m tired,” and the dynamic energy ebbs back into another verse.

Both “Say Yes” and “Waltz #2” display diversions of vocal tracks that take place as each song moves to a bridge. In the other sections of these two compositions, the vocal tracks stay in unison for the entirety of each song until the transition to the bridge sections analyzed in Figures 3.5 - 3.6. In the case of “Tomorrow Tomorrow,” another track from XO, Smith approaches the role of his vocal tracks quite differently. Rather than staying in unison for most of the song, Smith’s vocals
gradually begin to increase in terms of the number of tracks and their decorative functions. These melodic embellishments help to carry out Smith’s tonal framework, which is very similar across sections. Like “L.A.” and “Happiness,” the track is characterized by a variety of mode mixture chords and melodies, but the tonal centricity does not move from D. Interestingly, most of the chords used in “Tomorrow Tomorrow” harmonize D-minor, but each section of the piece resolves to D-Major.

**Tomorrow Tomorrow**

Figure 3.7 “Tomorrow Tomorrow,” Interlude

The song’s second section introduces the second vocal track, a harmony voice the serves mostly to create embellishment. By the chorus, there are two contrapuntal voices and a third track for similar embellishment, which leads into a wordless interlude in which the three voices interact very nicely. This interlude, shown in **Figure 3.7** comes between two choruses, during the first of which Smith starts to use overdubbed harmonies in a decorative manner similar to those in “Waltz #2.” This wordless section is different, though, because the three tracks have equal weight and function.
One of the global functions of this interlude is to reinforce the tension between D-Major and its parallel minor. Many of the chords in the song (except for the [I] and [V] chords) harmonize D-minor, though the sections always resolve to D-Major. These three tracks work together – two are held in long tones while one moves in eighth, quarter, or half tones – to intricately paint a shifting modal picture and also make Smith’s guitar chords easier to distinguish. Smith uses the vocal lines to lead into and embellish the important chords in this section, and the lines that he uses for each chord begin at least a beat before the end of the proceeding measure. His choice of counterpoint, particularly in mm. 6-8, breaks from the voice leading conventions of tonal harmony, displaying parallel fifths and octaves (Figure 3.7). But the effect is very successful here, particularly in measure 7. The two triads in the measure pieced together spell out [A- C# - E - F] an A major b6 chord, a kind of “altered” dominant seen more commonly in jazz but often used to harmonize keys of ambiguous mode.

**Figure 3.8 “Tomorrow Tomorrow” Chorus 2**

In the second chorus of the song (Figure 3.8), Smith’s higher track, decorative in the first chorus, becomes a word-for-word melody similar to the upper
voice in “Say Yes.” While the lower voice has the contour and effect of a main melody, it actually does not contain chord tones in the first two measures. As a result, the upper voice, with a b 7 - 6 - b 6 contour in mm. 9-14, sings the same notes as the lowest voice of Smith’s guitar, providing a crucial guide for the [bVII - IV6/4 - bVI] chord progression. Because of the repetition in the upper voice within a harmony, the interaction of these voices produces some interesting oblique motion. In measure 11, for example, Smith drives home his statement, “I’ve got static in my head,” by going back and forth between F and G in the lower voice while a B is held in the upper voice, causing a back and forth between an alarming, dissonant tritone and a consonant major third (see Fig. 3.8). The only divergence from this contrapuntal dichotomy occurs in the final line of the section, in which the higher voice moves up an augmented fifth from Bb to F#. A major sixth above the lower voice (F#/A), the upper voice – previously used to embellish the chord’s chromaticism through repetition – signifies the modal shift back to D-Major through reaching chord tones. This subtle interplay between the collective vocal tracks throughout the song sets “Tomorrow Tomorrow” apart, especially given their shared presence in the mix with only a guitar track.

**Conclusion**

One thing that this chapter’s examples show is that, even in an analysis focused on melodic movement, frequent chord changes often play a prominent role in Smith’s compositions. However, it is also clear that Smith was not one to neglect melodic ornamentation, especially for the purpose of adding texture to the
arrangements of his pieces. Furthermore, “Happiness” and “Speed Trials” display
significant thematic contributions from his guitar melodies, whose function in the
form of riffs as opposed to full chord progressions set these songs apart.

Even when his melodies take a back seat to harmonic authority, they tend to
guide the harmonic techniques used by Smith to subvert simple diatonic tonality. His
use of chromatic voice leading in the highest guitar and vocal harmonies in the
refrains of “Memory Lane” and “Tomorrow Tomorrow,” respectively, display his
implicit understanding of techniques necessary to subvert his harmonic structures
without sounding abrasive. Furthermore, his tendency to change melodic contour
between sections of his compositions adds clarity the to harmonic choices in
structural variations. Clearly, melody and harmony are inextricably linked in Smith’s
music.
Final Thoughts

Elliott Smith’s ten-year solo career (1994-2003) was, without a doubt, an exploration of diverse sonic elements in pop/rock music. The stylistic changes of his creative output over these ten years reveal a musician not content to stick with one sound, and his growth as an artist is also apparent through the evolution of his production and arrangement styles. From the lo-fi four-track urgency of *Roman Candle* to the orchestral elegance of *Figure 8*, Smith’s willingness to transcend the aesthetic molds of the genres most closely associated with him speaks to the lasting influence his music has on new and old fans.

Alongside Smith’s stylistic flexibility in terms of timbre and genre, the range of tonal conventions found in his music portrays a unique set of idioms that cannot be analyzed consistently in the paradigm of any other style but his own. His prowess for writing songs full of clever chord changes and interplay between multiple tracks leads me to challenge the intensity of critical focus on his lyrics and melodies. Smith’s music excites strong feelings through his idiosyncratic conventions – his tonal devices are simultaneously impressionistic, surprising, and indicative of a recognizable sound that continues to draw listeners.

The musical world lost Elliott Smith too soon for a number of reasons. One can only imagine how his continued musical explorations would have influenced ten more years of his music. Perhaps most tragically, his sudden passing limited the influence that his sense of tonality, rich with idiomatic divergence, has had on expanding the musical vocabulary for performers and listeners alike. Through this analysis, I hope have revealed not only the abounding creativity of Elliott Smith’s
tonal conventions, but also their high place in a rich set of idioms that exist for pop/rock and guitar-centric music more generally. Although Smith’s talents were one of a kind, their lasting influence proves the eclectic means of finding one’s artistic voice within pop-rock styles.
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