

The Pantophonographic Patsy

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Link to film clip in criticalcommons.org: "Performance of "I Lost My Heart in a Drive-In Movie" from THE PATSY"

"... a man animated by machinery ... [a] gibbering, spastic automaton ...
discomposed by every convenience of modern life ... a robot degenerate
overprogrammed . . . , made schizoid . . . "

— David Thomson on Jerry Lewis (1981)

In *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, Theodore Gracyk (1996) uses the phrase "record consciousness" to describe a new listening formation that, he contends, arises with rock culture. With record consciousness, audiences treat sound recording as an art form, as a creative, rather than merely documentary, practice. Gracyk notes that where sound recordings were once presumed to be pale imitations of a pro-phonographic real, with the rise of rock the recording becomes a privileged original, resulting in situations in which fans would go to rock concerts to see how well the band could reproduce the recording in a "live" context. [1] Gracyk understands record consciousness to become dominant with the arrival of rock music in the 1960s. I concur that there was some sort of mid-century shift in dominant listening formations. Moreover, I think this new, mainstream relationship to sound recording is also evident in post-war cinema, particularly in the work of Jerry Lewis and his film *The Patsy* (1964).

Jerry Lewis's repeated use of the phonograph in his comedy is an aspect of the advent of record consciousness, and can thus help us glimpse the historical working out of a popular philosophy of sound recording. Lewis began his career as a nightclub comedian in the early 1940s by comedically lip-synching to well-known recordings—thereby producing what I will call "pantophonography". [2] Synchronizing his bodily movements to popular records produced comedy by inverting the presumed, mimetic relationship of the recorded to the real. Lewis did not merely pantomime the recorded voices,

however. He also incorporated the records' scratches, skips, and speed changes in his "satirical impressions in pantomimicry," as his earliest act was billed. Lewis would memorize all the recorded sounds, including those of the medium itself, and then produce movements that somehow embodied these particular phonographic quirks. [3] In perversely synchronizing a human being to the sound of recording itself, Lewis's pantophonographic performances asked audiences to treat the technology of the phonograph as an object of aesthetic contemplation, to listen to the machine by discerning disjunctions as well as correspondences between recording and reality, sound and image, medium and human.

Lewis's pantophonographic act derived its humour from an oscillation across opposites. From one perspective, Jerry was the copy, a poor imitation of real stars like Frank Sinatra or Carmen Miranda who used their recorded voices to perform a kind of technological drag show. [4] On the other hand, unlike the mechanically-reproduced voices, Jerry was actually, physically co-present with his audience, making him an original, a part of the real. And yet again, when his bodily movements shifted from imitating the "original" singer indexed by the record to imitating the skipping of the needle across its grooves, Jerry's status became ambiguous, as if he had ingested the phonograph and was now being played by it. [5] At this point, distinctions between original and copy, real and recorded, are warped, distorted, deferred. Alongside these amusing inversions and disintegrations, then, Lewis's nightclub act underlined and undermined ontological distinctions between the living human presence of his miming body and the materializing sound indices produced by media machinery. From then on, much of Lewis's comedy would foreground the foibles and failures of reproduction, with sound recording in general, and the phonograph in particular, occupying a privileged place in his work.

Numerous commentators have noted Jerry Lewis's constant return to the theme of the double, with *The Nutty Professor* standing as its apogee (e.g., Selig 1990). If, as Tom Gunning has argued, we view the phonograph as a "technological double" of the human, then Lewis's physical reproductions of the phonograph are also elements of his ongoing explorations of the double. Repeated failures—of synchronization, of technology, of performance—characterize Lewis's attempts to reproduce the phonograph. [6] Indeed, Lewis's comedy more generally highlights repeated failures of reproduction of various kinds. Incompetence in the realm of sexual reproduction, for example, is a recurring theme in Lewis's work. [7] Tied to this are his ongoing attempts—and consistent failures—to emulate and "reproduce" Dean Martin (at times producing monstrosities, as in *The Nutty Professor*; see Stern 2009). In particular, Martin's potent performance of heterosexual masculinity contrasts comically with Lewis's consistent cinematic failure to reproduce (whether that reproduction involves fatherhood or replacing Dino as a matinee idol).

It is precisely Lewis's repeated *failures* to reproduce both a record and a star that make up the bulk of 1964's *The Patsy*. Released as teen rock 'n' roll is reaching a peak and just before rock culture starts to take its ultimate, late-1960s form, the film reveals a distinct view of record consciousness. Located in a final moment of transition between a residual, mimetic conception of sound recording as duplicating or copying and an emergent understanding of phonography as the creation of unique montages and original artworks, *The Patsy* points backwards and forwards simultaneously.

The Patsy is explicitly, repeatedly, obsessively a film about reproduction—and its failures. The film's inside-show business narrative explores the reproduction of a star, the reproduction of a record, the reproduction of previous success. Its romance plot pursues biological reproduction via an attempt to reproduce a failed high school romance, in the hopes that it will lead to procreation after the film ends—but this too fails when the patsy finally falls to his death. The premise of the film is explicitly about recreating a media property: a team of show business professionals seeks a replacement for a star comedian who dies in the opening scene of the film. Upon learning of the death of their meal ticket (not coincidentally due to technological failure—a fiery air crash) and the fact that the star has left no money for them in his will, his team of agents, publicists, writers and wranglers jointly decide to attempt to reproduce the success once enjoyed by their deceased boss—and thus by them, too. In order to demonstrate the power of their collective star-making machinery (in early dialogue they describe themselves as "a well-oiled machine"), they pick the most unlikely candidate they can find: a clumsy bellboy who literally stumbles into their hotel suite as they are hatching their plot. [8] The scheme involves a campaign to build a star persona by manufacturing his looks, jokes, songs, charismatic press relations, etc. These components are then synchronized in order to convince gatekeepers (such as gossip columnists), and then the public, that the dead star's replacement is no mere copy but a genuine

star himself. The first half of the film places special emphasis on sound media as it enumerates and illustrates coordinated efforts at the manufacture of stardom—and their persistent failures.

The theme of reproduction is evident in the film's two titles. Its working title, *Son of Bellboy*, suggested a biological twist on Hollywood's most beloved means of reproducing box office success, the sequel. Its actual title, *The Patsy*, is more oblique in its allusion to the unwitting victim of a conspiracy, a.k.a. a "dupe." A dupe is also a copy of a film, and we thus note the plot's delineation of efforts to create a popular figure out of "some nobody" (as he is called in early dialogue) by teaching him to copy a pre-existing model. Insofar as this is a "makeover" film, *The Patsy* also resembles, if not reproduces, the narrative arc of *The Nutty Professor* (1963)—itself a film filled with musical performances. Indeed, both films might be viewed as technologically-updated remakes of any number of backstage musicals or "star is born" narratives, going back to *Pygmalion* (1913) and looking forward to *Trading Places* (1983). [9] The centrality of music and sound (and their changing technologies) to *The Patsy* is foreshadowed by the name of Lewis's character: "Stanley Belt." [10] "To belt" was an older mode of loud singing that became outdated as the technology of the microphone favoured quieter crooners over noisy belters. While the careers of belters like Jolson were initially amplified and extended by the coming of sound cinema, it was crooners like Crosby who endured longest and reached the greatest levels of success. If Lewis's *The Bellboy* (1960) was a kind of silent film (there is synchronized sound but Lewis's character never speaks), then its belting "Son" turns out to be hyper-sonic cinema.

In *The Patsy*, the dead comedian's name, "Wally", echoes that of "Jerry." This suggests that the star whom Lewis's character, Stanley Belt, will finally fail to reproduce is, paradoxically, Jerry Lewis. [11] At one point in the film Stanley tries to perform Jerry's 1940s pantophonographic act in a nightclub, but is unable to do so because, as he puts it, "the phonograph wasn't good" (thereby displacing his performative failure onto the disobedient subjectivity of a machine). Stanley Belt is utterly inept and despite the massive organizational and technological infrastructure deployed in attempting to make him a star, his twitching, unsynchronized body consistently gives him away as non-star material. The team of show business professionals working with him is repeatedly shown to be displeased, distressed and depressed due to Stanley's failings.

I will now discuss in detail a three-scene sequence that moves from rehearsal, to recording, to reproduction. It retraces the historical evolution of musical production, from a music teacher's studio, to a pop recording studio, to a TV broadcast studio. This is followed by a coda set in an elite nightclub—the apogee of a popular music career at the time. Across this narrative arc, we watch Stanley Belt seemingly move closer to stardom, only to be foiled by a phonograph.

The first scene in the arc begins in the (classical) music room of a longhaired singing teacher, Professor Mueller (played by Hans Conreid). We encounter him alone, practicing his vocables, ably matching his voice to a single grand piano note and self-approvingly saying "perfect, perfect." Upon being introduced to Stanley, Prof. Mueller notes that "Mr. Ferguson's instructions to me were to teach you to sing. Have you any idea why?" to which Stanley replies nonchalantly, "Oh yeah, next week I'm supposed to record a record." The singing coach explodes, "NEXT WEEK! You expect me to teach you to sing in one week!" He immediately proceeds to get down to work, insisting Stanley show him what he can do. Stanley attempts to make musical sounds but all that emerges from his body are weak, adenoidal noises. Conreid tells him he needs "more diaphragmatic breathing, with greater volume from the chest like this" and inhales deeply. We hear a deliberately hyperbolic audio track of close-miked breathing that sounds more like a wind tunnel than a human body. This machine-like sound fails to synchronize at all with the motions of Conreid's body on screen and, as he exhales into Stanley's face, he roars so loudly that Stanley's eyebrows are moved out of place.

With one week in which to learn to sing for posterity, to inter something in sound recording's resonant tomb (Sterne 2003), and notwithstanding his loud name, Belt cannot seem to produce his own sound and cannot find his voice. While he fails to speak properly or originate music, however, he does have a talent for destruction: he will systematically dismantle and destroy his teacher's antique collection and music studio. Standing by his Professor's piano, he accidentally knocks down the lid of the grand piano, which falls and crushes the teacher's hand. The professor's ensuing cries of pain are mistaken by Stanley Belt as instructions on how to sing, and together they produce a dissonant duet of matched screaming that is so loud the noise destroys the plaster on the walls and ceiling, literally bringing down the house. While Stanley fails to reproduce proper singing technique, he can well synchronize his voice with forces of pain and destruction.

The links between disability (the music teacher sounds like he will never play again) and painful noise are revisited in the very next scene. As we dissolve from music teacher's studio to recording studio, a sound bridge ties the piano teacher's screaming, along with the sound of a portion of his ceiling falling on his piano, to the sound of studio musicians playing "I Lost My Heart in a Drive-In Movie," thus linking pain, noise, and destruction with teen rock 'n' roll. [12] Inside the noisy recording studio, Stanley is introduced to the deaf A&R man who runs "Poverty Records", Mayo Sloane. [13] Mayo shouts constantly, hurting Stanley's ears and telling him to "speak up, son!" Discussing his track record as a hit-making producer, Mayo says, "I got a natural ear for it," to which Stanley replies, "Well then you're very grateful." Stanley's proclivity for non-sequiturs underscores his inability to synchronize speech and context, a failure to reproduce the social scripts appropriate to these sorts of banal interactions (see Goffman 1958). At the same time, the harsher non-sequitur here implied is "deaf producer." Leaving the control booth, and entering the tracking room, Stanley meets the session musicians. "Are you Stanley?" the session leader asks, and his answer underlines an identity in flux: "Well, after that I'm not too sure." Stanley makes his way through a clutter of microphones, booms, and cables to an uncooperative music stand. There he mouths lyrics that seem to be from some other song (he appears to move his lips to the words "What the?") yet no vocal sound is heard—once more, Stanley has no voice of his own.

The A&R man then yells "I need more voice from the trio" of backing vocalists, whom we have been hearing without seeing. We cut to a tight shot tracking into the isolation booth, where we initially see microphones, music stands, and moving shadows—but no originating bodies. We do hear Jerry Lewis's "normal" voice counting out the lead in, at which point the music resumes and we again hear the wordless backing vocals of the trio. When this "trio" is finally revealed onscreen, the originating bodies turn out to be Lewis times three, outfitted in especially ugly female drag (that includes blacked out teeth). This scene invokes a complicated relation of sound and image, at once matching and dissonant. The imputed tastelessness of the singing is revealed to match visually displeasing bodies. And yet this drag gag requires the audience to be conscious of a disjuncture between fictional characters and actual performer. It is funny if we recognize Lewis as the sounds' "real" point of origin, even though in the very next scene, where Stanley attempts to lip-synch—itself a kind of technological drag—these will be the same sounds we are asked to hear as somehow *distinct* from his character, as *not* emanating from him.

The recording session functions as the set-up for the third scene in the sonic narrative arc, an appearance on a teen dance TV show. Here Stanley must lip-synch to the record we have (not) seen him record. It has allegedly entered the charts, already heading for number one, and the implication here is that since the teen audience approves of Stanley's voiceless, tasteless singing, perhaps they too are patsies, tasteless cultural dupes equally victimized by a media conspiracy (see Keightley 2003). As his handlers watch the TV show at home, one worriedly asks "Do you think he'll be all right?" to which another replies by stressing the perceived simplicity of the task at hand: "He'll be fine, all he has to do . . . is mouth his record." So lip-synching to a pre-existing track is characterized as requiring little talent, indeed as something that is barely even a performance per se (the line "all he has to do" implies that if a record is a copy of a real performance then lip-synching is a copy of a copy). [14] However, since we have neither seen (nor heard) Stanley record or perform the song, the lip-synch sequence becomes a de facto original of its own.

As Stanley stumbles onstage, a Dick-Clark-like host enthuses, "Welcome to Teenage Dance Time!" to which Stanley replies characteristically, "I always will." This non-sequitur again calls attention to the smooth synchronizations expected in such public interactions. Stanley's physical and verbal failure to respond appropriately mark him as out of step, as misaligned, as precisely out of synch with this new media world. It thus foreshadows the ensuing lip-synch performance, in which synchronizing a moving body to a pre-recorded track is expected to serve as a rite of passage into media stardom (remember, Stanley is doing all of this in order to reproduce the success of the dead star "Wally Brandford"; this "mouthing" session is Stanley's first public appearance as an allegedly professional entertainer).

The TV host is caught off guard by Stanley's utter lack of polish and replies "eeew, yes," unable to conceal his disdain at the patsy's inability to reproduce even the most basic level of banter (at this point, viewing at home, Everett Sloane's manager character screams, "Who the devil told him to talk?"). Consistently a victim of technological ineptitude, Stanley further breaks the rules of media cool by nervously laughing for no reason and yelling into the microphone. He realizes he has mismatched voice to technology and is clearly embarrassed; in other words, we are meant to understand that he is fully conscious of just how bad he is at doing this kind of media work.

As the music track of his song plays its introductory, instrumental section, Stanley mimes playing the guitar on his necktie, whose stripes stand in for strings. The misplaced confidence now evident on Stanley's face as he clumsily plucks the stripe-strings and tries to make eye-contact with members of the audience bodes badly for what will follow—a chaotic melange of female drag vocals, chipmunk singing, car horn SFX and coarse mickey mousing. The stage business with the tie simultaneously serves as a nervous tick (Stanley has to wait for the vocal to enter and is killing time, since he doesn't otherwise know what an appropriate script for this moment might be) but also a reminder that modern media in general, and lip-synching on a teen TV show in particular, are characterized by schizophonia, the separation of source and sound. It is obvious that the source of the guitar sound is not his tie, and so there is an ironic aspect to the plucking, an acknowledgment of the ontological absurdity of all electronic media. [15] This absurdity will then shade into the vocal performance's slippages across subjects and objects. At the same time, the hammy, overstated way in which Stanley imitates guitar playing and mimes smug self-congratulation (after we hear each instance of the hook's guitar riff), come off as hubris.

As it turns out, despite making an authoritative hand gesture reminiscent of a conductor starting a song, Stanley is unable to remember where his vocal starts and misses his cue. Now spectacularly out of synch, he lags behind every single syllable of the first two lines, clearly mouthing words we have already heard. However, Stanley's lip-synching improves at the refrain line, "I lost my heart in a drive-in movie." At this point, he moves his lips in relatively tighter synch to the audio and, moreover, mickey-mouses aspects of the soundfield. At the word "heart," he places his hand over his heart and moves that section of his jacket; at the words "drive-in movie," he makes a movement like steering a car. He then does a pelvic thrust when we hear a honking horn sound effect, reminding us of the automobile's links to teen sexuality at the time (and suggesting what was lost at the drive-in movie may not have been his heart but his virginity). As he proudly concludes the loose synchronization of this brief section of the song, his smile suggests masculine mastery, one that consistently eludes Lewis's characters and which recalls the hubris of the song's intro.

However, synchronization problems return with a vengeance at the self-reflexive opening line of the second verse: "Say, up there on the big screen/A movie star." It is apparently beyond his abilities to even say "movie star," never mind be one (here "saying" and "becoming" are implicitly intertwined with success at synchronization). Again unable to mouth words and make gestures that match the audio, even his refrain line, which he had executed believably previously, is now out of synch (as this is the second time we hear the refrain in the song, it suggests failure at repetition as well as reproduction).

Things turn around somewhat as we reach the bridge of the song (where the melody and musical materials contrast with the first two, verse/refrain sections). The bridge is sung in a new voice, and reveals a much better alignment of sound and image. Interestingly, this new voice—much higher and more hysterical than the vocal timbres of the earlier sections—resembles the iconic voice used by Lewis playing the adenoidal teenager. The bridge's litany of teen consumption ("Say, I bought her a hamburger, a cheeseburger, a tater chips") meshes well with Lewis's onscreen persona in many of his 1950s films. It is what we might call his "Hey lady!" voice and indeed the bridge concludes with a line reading that ramps up into that trademark delivery: "I wasn't a bit hungry/I just wanted to TASTE HER LIP" (at which point he makes an immature, "fish lips" face). The dynamics of gender, generation, and sexuality here ("Hey lady!" is about age as well as gender difference) point back to the theme of (sexual) reproduction, misunderstood as juvenile consumption. Given that kissing is a primal form of human synchronization, tasting her singular "lip" suggests things are quite awry—if not out of whack. [16]

The return to the final verse-refrain section of the song involves relatively greater competence, with a higher degree of tightness, if not smoothness, in sound/image matching. Stanley seems to be, finally, "getting it right." [17] Indeed, the performance shifts so that we begin to appreciate it as a spectacle of unsynchronized incompetence that is, paradoxically, conveyed through cinematic synchresis: Lewis's tight matching of inappropriate sounds and images becomes a virtuosic performance of a human becoming a media-machine (as Thomson, Deleuze, and Bukatman suggest). [18] For example, in the final verse, Stanley moves instantly into a false operatic delivery for the line "suit me right" (we might call this his "Pee Wee Herman" voice, but that would be historically out of synch). Stanley returns to the "Hey Lady" voice for most of the final utterance of the refrain, such as "I played a part in/I lost my heart in a drive-in." But this suddenly gives way to the most confident voice of the performance, a deeper, more resonant timbre suggestive of minstrel "blackvoice." He sings the final word of the refrain, "movie," in this

more assured voice, and then produces a series of tag lines that suggest a new ease: “yeah yeah,” delivered in the style of Louis Armstrong rather than that of the Beatles. A new sense of power emerges with this appropriation of a hipster identity associated with stereotypical black masculinity, heard especially in lines alluding to sexual intercourse (and thus to synchronization leading to reproduction): “right *in* the movie . . . *IN MY CAR!*” The song ends to wild applause, suggesting success has been achieved via the performance of greater synchronization (and greater sexual confidence), here figured by blackvoice and snapping fingers à la Sinatra. [19]

Apart from the backing vocals, Lewis performs in at least four different voices: the main verse voice (presumably “Stanley’s” voice); the adenoidal “Hey Lady!” voice of the bridge; the pseudo-operatic “suits me right” voice; and the faux-swinger, “blackvoice” finale. In addition, there are moments within the song when Lewis’s voice shifts quickly in and out of different registers, and these add to the rich variety—indeed, to the schizophonia—of the vocal performance. This kaleidoscope of vocal sounds recalls the growing use of tape editing, multi-track recording, and overdubbing in the musical culture of the period. Of course, these very technologies were used by Lewis himself to produce this particular performance. As dominant sound recording practice shifts from mimesis to montage, these sorts of sound collages become more commonplace and naturalized. [20] Record consciousness involves an awareness and appreciation of sound recording’s specificity: its facility in producing such multiplicity and complexity as “I Lost My Heart in a Drive-In Movie” at once spectacularizes and satirizes.

As the patsy’s duplications multiply, the complexity of the vocal performance is matched by its complex, contradictory position in the narrative. While on the surface it would seem to represent a triumph for Stanley—he gets it half right, and that’s good enough for applause in a TV studio—his handlers watching at home, and he himself, hear it otherwise. Despite the audible signal of success—applause—Stanley looks stage left and right after the music ends and his confident smile disappears, replaced by a pained, lost look, as if consciousness of his failure to reproduce is being exacerbated by unjustified public approbation. Indeed, he looks like he is either going to cry or flee. His awareness that he does not really have what it takes to be a star is growing, and his next attempt to lip synch, at the Copa Café nightclub, will represent Stanley’s emotional and performative nadir in the film.

Modeled on the Copacabana, the legendary adult playground where Martin and Lewis made their live performance breakthrough in the late 1940s, *The Patsy’s Copa Café* becomes instead the site of Stanley’s greatest failure. [21] This is in part due to the evident contrast between Stanley’s immaturity and the smooth sophistication expected by adult patrons of an upscale nightclub. Jerry Lewis was a star of the pre-rock era; his most successful work comes in the 1950s and early 1960s, and by the time the rock counterculture is established in the late 1960s, he has lost his mojo (Thomson [1981] dates this to his departure from Paramount in 1966, a key year in the maturing of rock culture). Lewis’s characters consistently portray the teenager as Other, but through a funhouse mirror image that flips the admirable alienation of a James Dean, for example. This generational mismatch accounts for some of the humiliation evident on the faces of his team as they endure his act; the overwhelming reason, though, is simply Stanley’s undeniable badness. Sweating and suffering from a bad case of stage fright, Stanley stumbles out on stage to the sound of breaking glass, overturns a table and immediately knocks down the mic stand. The mic falls off its stand but its cable remains connected. As the mic is dropped, picked up, manipulated, and finally hits Stanley in the leg and then head, these unpleasant noises are all mixed disconcertingly high on the soundtrack—something rarely heard to this extent in Hollywood cinema (if slightly more common in live television). For fully the first 30 seconds of this onstage performance—a very long time in the world of standup comedy—we are forced to listen to the sound of a live microphone bumping into things. The film thus bids us listen to amplified noise much in the same way audiences for Lewis’s 1940s record act were implicitly asked to attend to the sound of sound reproduction itself.

After his standup routine bombs, Stanley says to the audience, “I could do a number—my hit record—would anyone like to see that?” verbally mismatching sound and vision. He brings a phonograph out on stage but, as he tries to operate it, all we hear is a needle scratching the vinyl repeatedly, loudly, painfully. He then accidentally throws the record up into the air, breaking it. “And since the phonograph wasn’t good, then maybe I could remember the song by heart—it would be better if I remembered it by mouth,” Stanley ad libs, laughing idiotically at his own mismatched wit. He tries to perform “I Lost My Heart in a Drive-In Movie” a cappella, beginning with nonsense syllables not in the “original” recording, “chung a lung,” to stand in for the instrumental opening, and then half-heartedly singing a garbled version of the lyric. This performance is execrable, missing words, melody, rhythm, and sense (e.g., “I lost my heart in my car while I drove it”). Realizing it is not going well, he stops and starts again: “And

there's more, like that: 'I picked her and I hugged her.'" Realizing no one is enjoying his act (at one point we hear nondiegetic crickets), Stanley starts hitting his face and head with his hand, making popping sounds and saying, "I do noises"—as good a definition of Jerry Lewis's art as you'll find. "Do you wanna hear more of that song?" Stanley asks, and the response is a firing squad that magically appears to put Stanley, and the audience, out of their misery. This scene is undoubtedly among the most naked performances of show business failure in all of Hollywood cinema. It is embarrassing, indeed unpleasant, to watch and it contains absolutely none of the fun or mockery that redeemed the TV-studio version of the song. Despite its clear narrative intent and place within the diegesis, despite its being performed by a character known for his comic incompetence, it is very hard to watch this moment of ugly truth without lapsing into a direct and simple revulsion at the *unfunny*. [22]

And yet, somehow, the narrative suddenly turns upside down. The next day, Stanley is proclaimed a "hit," offered a major contract and, unbelievably, becomes a star. This unmotivated success highlights just how much the micro-narrative of sonic failures and mis-synching we witness across the sound recording sequence (from music room rehearsal to recording session to TV taping to nightclub record act) is itself out of synch with the broader narrative arc of the film. On the one hand, we have been shown repeated failures (Stanley can't schmooze, Stanley can't sing, Stanley can't synch). Yet on the other, he is a success: we are told his record is heading for number one (or is already number one) by the time he makes his first-ever public appearance on "Teen Dance Time"; and after bombing at the Copa, he is offered a prime spot on the *Ed Sullivan Show* (where, as Ed Sullivan himself informs us as he introduces Stanley, "The Beatles [and] Martin and Lewis all made their debuts"). Ironically, Stanley's ultimate star-making success on the Sullivan show will involve a so-called "dumb" act—a silent pantomime. [23]

Thus the film's plot and its constituent elements, like its sound and image, don't synch up smoothly. This helps frame Stanley's seemingly unmotivated success as a critique of stardom not unlike that of Daniel Boorstin's in *The Image*, published three years before the film was released. For Boorstin, modern media manufacture stars who do not, in fact, merit fame. Instead, they are a superficial and talentless lot who are merely "well-known for [their] well-knownness" (1961). As widely circulated rather than deeply respected figures, Boorstin's dismissive view of celebrities as unworthy gods would seem to become cynical-comical fodder for Lewis. *The Patsy* is among Lewis's darkest films, positioning Stanley as an idiot bid speak by star-making-machinery, a dupe victimized by crass industrial forces (recall he will fall off the hotel balcony and die at the conclusion of the film).

In this light, a line of dialogue just before he first lip-synchs the song on TV is key: "I always say buying a record is like owning a possession—if it's yours you can lose it." Note the off-inflection in Lewis's delivery of that last clause—it ends uncomfortably, prematurely, asymmetrically, suggesting incompleteness or, indeed, loss. The song's title, "I Lost My Heart in a Drive-In Movie," views media as a kind of body snatcher. In this vein, Tom Gunning has noted the phonograph's anxiety-producing, alienating qualities at the turn of the 19th into 20th centuries, and Stanley embodies them well. One form of possession is commodification, which enables expropriation. If you become a record, you can lose control of your voice, becoming a site of loss or lack. Or indeed you may "lose it," go mad, as Lewis so often seems to do, goosed along by the phonograph's electricity. [24] As Stanley is about to become possessed by the phonograph on TV, his dialogue about "losing" a record-as-possession reminds us that the team of star-makers chose a dim-witted "patsy" precisely the better to extract surplus value from their pathetic protégé.

And yet, against a reading of *The Patsy* as a dark dismissal of star-making in general and teen music in particular, it can equally be appreciated as a sort of "comedy musical," [25] one that conceives music as a source of energetic fun. As with all humour, the joke is ultimately on reality: the film draws on the historical shift to lip-synching (or "mouthing," as the film calls it) in live television musical performance and the related rise of a new teen listening formation characterized by record consciousness. The song, and its mise en synch, are not only laughable. There is a method to their madness, and a quality to their parody, that produce pleasure as well as insight. In mocking rock 'n' roll, Lewis also creates something punk. His noise, made for laughs, also makes music that can be enjoyed, just as so much of the machine-made madness of his comedy reveals reasons and rhymes that are very good.

Like Beatlemania, *The Patsy* revels in audio anarchy, with Stanley's unpolished performances proposing a pleasurable cult of the amateur resembling that of rock 'n' roll. [26] I take a kind of perverse punk pleasure in his crazy song and its vocal madness, its instability echoing the sonic freedoms being

explored in the recording studios of an emerging rock culture. [27] Record consciousness involved the advent of a popular aesthetic sensibility in which the sound recording is heard less and less as an inferior copy and more and more as an original, indeed a primal, work of art. Jerry Lewis's participation in—and curation of—the pantophonographic tradition is one overlooked element in that historical transition.

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Notes

[1] See also Wurtzler 1992; Lastra 2000; Sterne 2003.

[2] Lewis's record act participated in a longstanding tradition of vaudeville imitations of, or to, phonograph records, arising in the late 19th century and peaking at mid-century (see e.g., “Now It's Phono Panto,” *Billboard* May 8 1943, 4; and “Panto Platters New Pop Gimmick in Cocktaileries,” *Billboard*, October 18 1947, 3). Key pantophonographic sequences are found in the Marx Brothers' *Monkey Business* (1931); Harpo lip-synchs to a Maurice Chevalier record, trying to take on Chevalier's identity to pass through French customs; when the phonograph's speed changes inadvertently, however, Harpo alters his synchronized facial movements accordingly and finally is forced to reveal the source of the sound when he winds up the phonograph mounted on his back); and in the record store scene of 1944's *Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (perky blonde record store clerk Betty Hutton lip-synchs to the excessive masculinity of a basso profundo playing on the phonograph; here lip-synching conceived as mediated masquerade produces a double disjunction—because the sound is both mechanical and male, it is not “her” voice in two senses). Lewis begins performing his version of a pantophonographic act in the 1940s, and it is important to recall the two AFM recording strikes of that decade, which, as Tim Anderson (2006) has shown, were a struggle over the political economic dimensions of this growing naturalization of sound recording. The strikes mark a key moment in the rise of “record consciousness” since the so-called “live” musician “loses out” as recording finally triumphs.

[3] Lewis writes: “I knew where every scratch and skip was on every record, and when they came up, I'd do shtick to them” (2005, p. 14).

[4] Their images are visible on a circa 1946 poster for his “record act,” reproduced in Shawn Levy's (1997) Lewis biography, among the illustrations following p. 176.

[5] See Smith (2008) for a parallel historical situation in which sound technology comes to “master” the human body, and Bukatman (2012) for arguments about Lewis's repeated performances of “becoming media.” An animated precursor is a 1937 Disney cartoon, in which *Donald's Ostrich* ingests a radio and proceeds to reproduce whatever actions are broadcast (thanks to Daniel Goldmark for calling my attention to this film).

[6] cf. Laderman (2010) on punk cinema's investment in “failure”.

[7] e.g., the dialogue in *The Caddy* (1953), when a tough guy doubly mistakes Lewis's gender performance, saying “you're quite a tomboy, aren't you?”

[8] While Lewis's character in the film starts out as a hotel waiter, his uniform and the clear connections to *The Bellboy* (in both films the protagonist is named “Stanley”) motivate my designation of him as a “bellboy” here.

[9] On the key role of sound recording and the phonograph in *My Fair Lady*, for example, see Anderson 2006.

[10] In the DVD commentary to the film, Lewis remarks that “Music to me was always the very spine of all of the comedy I ever did.”

[11] The ending of *The Patsy* draws a sharp distinction between the disappearance of the bellboy character (who falls to his death from the hotel balcony as his fiancée weeps) and the sudden onscreen appearance of the auteur himself. In the final scene, the “real” Jerry Lewis walks into the frame and is called “Mr. Lewis” by an “overacting” character. He notes that “it’s a movie . . . the people in the theatre know I ain’t goin’ to die,” at once identifying with and distinguishing himself from Stanley. He then reassuringly points to the scene’s Hollywood backdrop as merely “wires and lights . . . a dumb city,” suggesting that, even though the story may have been “dumb” sham, now, somehow, “Mr. Lewis” is really speaking to us. The closing balcony fall underlines not Stanley’s rise to stardom but a descent into further abjection—the patsy character chosen to replace the dead star must die, too, and can only be properly replaced by an authentic star, the “real” Jerry Lewis. Thus the film is structured as a parable of repetition, replacement, reproduction.

[12] Composed by Jack Brooks and David Raksin.

[13] “Poverty Records” had been Buddy Love’s record label in *The Nutty Professor* (1963), thus reminding attentive viewers of the similar concern with doubles and doubling in *The Patsy*. The latter’s lip-synching sequence will require Stanley to duplicate his Poverty Records sound recording in a different medium, television. The label’s name may also suggest common record industry practices of withholding royalties as well as invoking the lowest form of Hollywood trash, the output of the so-called “Poverty Row” studios.

[14] For growing period skepticism about sound recording’s “realism,” in the context of an “exposé” of how hit records by teen idols are produced, see Wilson’s “How No Talent Singers ‘Get’ Talent” (1959).

[15] cf. Roland Barthes’s (1981) argument about the photographic uncanny.

[16] In calling attention to the body part that will eventually give its name to this form of media performance, we are again reminded of the self-aware quality of this lip-synched song and the broader record consciousness with which it may be articulated.

[17] This supposedly “starmaking” studio-to-TV sequence is reminiscent of (and perhaps parodies) a common trope in Hollywood’s representations of the recording studio as a site where failure gives way to mastery, as outlined in Peter Doyle’s “Burn me up this time fellas!: When movies represent the recording studio,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 27, no. 6 (2013). In this light it is noteworthy that the patsy’s studio work is only ever made accessible to us via the soundtrack. We never actually see Stanley “sing” this song in the recording studio: we only get to watch him “synch” it in the TV studio. Likewise, we only ever experience “Jerry Lewis” via a media composite of audio recording post-synchronized to film photography and can thus never be sure if the specific physical movements represented onscreen “originated” the sounds we hear.

[18] The importance of synchronized gestures to lip-synching performances becomes apparent in this scene: not only synchronized movements of mouth and lips but also the coordination of hands, head, body movement help constitute a good “mouthing”. Many of the gestures seen here are drawn from a hackneyed tradition of stage pantomime (hand on heart or hands clasped together to express sentimental feeling; arms extended to suggest desire; scratching one’s head to suggest perplexity or frustration; arms moved up and down to signify excitement). However, towards the end of the performance, Lewis adds in more absurd gestures (finger in ear; finger on forehead; fish lips) that seem narratively inappropriate or mismatched, even as the movements themselves are tightly synched up to musical events on the soundtrack.

[19] The salacious insinuation of “in my car” needs to be understood in historical terms. The car was a key site of adolescent sexual activity in the period. As to the accent adopted at this point, with the “r” sound more or less dropped from the word “car,” the appropriation of a stereotypically “southern” or “black” identity is suggested (and has been foreshadowed by one of the first scenes in the film, in which

Scatman Crothers accidentally “blacks up” Stanley’s naked foot with shoe polish in a barbershop). And, in another montage sequence, we see multiple African-American dancers try to teach Stanley tap, to little avail (cf. Clover 1995).

[20] See my discussion of the Beach Boys’ “Our Favorite Recording Sessions” in “Summer of ‘64,” in *Good Vibrations: The Music of Brian Wilson*, Ed. Philip Lambert (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).

[21] The logo for the club, repeated on multiple music stands visible behind Stanley, is “c.c.”, silently taunting Stanley and his efforts to become a carbon copy of another star.

[22] Indeed, this scene may reproduce the experience of viewers who do not find Jerry Lewis funny at all.

[23] Though there is synchronized music, its pastiche of silent film scoring heightens our awareness of the voicelessness of Stanley’s performance

[24] Gilles Deleuze contends that Lewis’s “new burlesque no longer originates in the output of energy by the character . . . It arises from the fact that the character places himself (involuntarily) on an energy band which carries him along and which is precisely movement of world, a new way of dancing, of modulating . . . ” (2013 p. 66).

[25] This turn of phrase is used by Lewis himself to describe *The Nutty Professor* in one of its DVD bonus features.

[26] cf. Ehrenreich et al, 2002. Like the writer-director-star Jerry Lewis, the rise of rock culture will celebrate the integrated singer-songwriter-musician as a triumph over the industrial division of labour characterizing Tin Pan Alley. The ideology of rock authenticity will be closely allied with artistic autonomy as well as record consciousness, and here we see one last parallel in *The Patsy*. Just before the Ed Sullivan gig his professional staff desert him, claiming “the result’s so obvious” that he will bomb. Thus we see a shot of Stanley in his dressing room, clutching a sheaf of papers, despondently asking passersby, “have you seen any of my staff?” That he will then, somehow, go on to “kill” on national TV with a pantomime solely of his own creation suggests a revenge of the *auteur* that rock, too, will savour.

[27] cf. Laderman (2010) on the “writery” text of slip-sync and punk.

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