

Pure and Simple: Music as a Personal and Comedic Resource in *Car Share*

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Abstract

This chapter examines *Peter Kay's Car Share* (BBC1, 2015) to consider the ways it represents pop music as both a resource which the characters draw on to make sense of their lives and, by virtue of this, a fertile site for comedy. One way the programme does this is by showing how pop functions as a marker of taste and a resource for the enactment of cultural snobbery. Here we suggest that the programme's comedy can – in certain respects – be understood via the superiority theory of humour. However, we also go on to argue that superiority is not, in fact, the key way in which humour functions in the series. Rather, what might at first appear to be a comedy which mocks the granting of undue significance to pop music, instead ultimately offers up as humorous attempts to deny the powerful personal emotional resonances that such supposedly simple culture can facilitate.

Introduction

Peter Kay's Car Share (BBC1, 2015¹; hereafter *Car Share*) is a sitcom about two supermarket workers who end up car-sharing for their daily commute as a result of a scheme inaugurated by their employer. The car's driver is John, who works in management at the supermarket; the person he gives lifts to is Kayleigh who works in the aisles doing a range of activities. Over its six episodes the programme depicts them moving from sharing the car for the first time and therefore getting to know one another, to a deepening friendship. In the final episode they car share for the last time, as Kayleigh's personal circumstances mean that she is moving house to a location where it no longer makes sense for her to commute with John. Both characters are single, with Kayleigh repeatedly stating her desire to be in a

¹ Unusually for a BBC comedy, the programme was first released as a whole series on the corporation's online service, iPlayer, in April 2015. It began a weekly broadcast on BBC1 a week later. This was part of the BBC's strategy to develop its online provision. When released on the iPlayer *Car Share* became "the most watched series to premiere as a box set on the service to date", with 2.8 million views in 4 days (Wyatt 2015).

relationship, while John purports to be happy on his own. The first series was a critical and ratings success, with a second reported in late 2015 to be in production (Warner 2015).

The series is very rigid in its narrative structure. Each episode takes place in a single day and is split into two halves, with the first depicting John and Kayleigh's commute to work and the second, their journey home. For the majority of each episode we simply see their conversation and reactions within the car; we do not see inside their homes (indeed, we never see where John lives) nor are we shown the interior of the supermarket where they work. While some episodes include other speaking characters – such as fellow supermarket workers chatting to John or Kayleigh outside their work's staff entrance – the vast majority of every episode depicts simply two people in a car together journeying to and from work. Within each episode there is little narrative impetus, and instead the focus is upon the everyday, mundane interactions between the two characters. The humour of the series therefore arises from their discussions of everyday topics such as marriage, death and love, and in doing so it draws on the "British social–realist soap opera tradition" interested in "bringing to light a generalised 'human' behaviour" (Krewani 2015, 255, 263). Such a tradition can be seen in British sitcoms such as *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1, 1965-75; see Bebber 2014), *Early Doors* (BBC2, 2003-4; see Baker 2013) and *The Royle Family* (BBC2/1, 1998-2012; see Krewani 2015) all of which find humour in the everyday interactions of groups of people in domestic and mundane settings, and therefore invite audiences to find comic pleasure in the programmes' similarity to their own experiences and lives.

While the 'generalised human behaviour' examined in *The Royle Family* is that which takes place in the front of the television, *Car Share* instead depicts the behaviour in cars. And in its ambition of finding comedy in the ordinary and mundane, *Car Share* includes what Peter Kay has referred to as "a strong third character" (quoted in Jefferies 2015); the car's radio. In the programme John and Kayleigh listen to Forever FM, a fictional local radio station with the tagline, 'timeless hits now and forever'. The station plays pop music predominantly from the 1980s and 1990s and is heard playing from the car's speakers pretty much constantly. While sometimes functioning as merely background noise, Forever FM also, however, is integral both to the actions of the characters and episode narratives. As we show below, much of the programme is taken up with the two characters discussing the songs that are

being played, laughing at the poor quality of the adverts on the station, and being reminded of significant moments in the lives by particular songs. The station is therefore not merely background noise intended to signify a realist depiction; it is integral to the functioning of the comedy and the depiction of the characters. Indeed, the programme eschews a theme tune and non-diegetic incidental music, with the sounds of Forever FM instead serving as the programme's soundtrack.²

Given its prominence within the series, this chapter will examine *Car Share* to examine how it depicts music as a resource the characters draw on to make sense of their lives. In doing so the programme meaningfully depicts pop music as an everyday social tool capable of encouraging strong reactions of reminiscence and nostalgia. Furthermore, given that John and Kayleigh are depicted as having different levels of acceptance of Forever FM's output, the programme also shows how music can function as a marker of taste and is a resource for the enactment of cultural snobbery. In doing so it could be argued the comedy can be understood via the superiority theory of humour, whereby jokes enable feelings of "sudden glory" (Hobbes 2005 [1651]: 45) in those who tell them, who use comedy to mock others they intend to categorise as inferior. Yet we suggest such superiority is not the key way in which humour functions in the *Car Share* given that the programme also depicts pop music as mundane and everyday, often serving as background noise filling the silences in John and Kayleigh's conversation. This means such music is both resolutely ordinary and highly meaningful, and over the series John learns to appreciate and vocalise what this music might, and does, mean for him. The programme can thus be understood as a celebration of music that is often maligned, finding meaning in "ordinariness" (Dunleavy 2005: 372; Gibson 2001: 276) which has been a recurring goal of British social realist culture. It therefore comes out of a tradition of observational comedy, in which humour is "simply about everyday life" (Zoglin 2009: 219) and the pleasures such comedy offers therefore rests on the extent to which audiences' experiences align with those depicted onscreen.

² Peter Kay has often drawn on popular music throughout his career in both his stand-up and television work. His most famous stand-up routine concerns misheard pop song lyrics (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ukn2YT5jeM>), while *Peter Kay's Phoenix Nights* (Channel 4, 2001-2) and *Peter Kay's Britain's Got the Pop Factor... and Possibly a New Celebrity Jesus Christ Soapstar Superstar Strictly on Ice* (Channel 4, 2008) depict different aspects of the music and entertainment industries.

Car Share and Sitcom Conventions

In order to demonstrate the ways in which *Car Share* draws on cultural understandings of pop music for comic purposes it is necessary to consider the norms and expectations of the sitcom more broadly. For Larry Mintz, a sitcom is “a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise” (1985, 114). In *Car Share* the characters do indeed recur, with fewer peripheral characters than is typical for much sitcom. But it is worth exploring the idea of ‘premise’ here, which for Mintz concerns the place within which the series is set and therefore the rationale that exists for the characters’ interactions. In its first episode the programme depicts John and Kayleigh recounting that they are involved in the car share scheme because they have been encouraged to do so by their employer, and that they did not choose one another to share the commute. Indeed, they later discuss whether they are going to request to change partners, agreeing that they won’t. Much analysis of the sitcom has argued that the genre’s focus on recurring characters in unchanging premises responds to their episodic nature as a part of serial television (for a summary see Mills 2009: 24-49). But this episodic aspect also means that “The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored” (Mintz 1985, 115); that is, while individual episode narratives recount threats to the programme’s premise these are resolved at the end. Such endings are presented as positive, happy ones, meaning that sitcom depicts unchanging scenarios as preferable. Critics such as David Grote (1983) see this as highly problematic, arguing that sitcom’s depiction of the return of the status quo as a positive narrative outcome blunts comedy’s role as a social critic and renders humour as nothing more than entertainment. For Grote, *Car Share*’s ‘cyclical nature’ would represent an abandonment of comedy’s powerful social force, particularly considering each episode so resolutely returns the characters to the place they left at the start.

But we argue here that the cultural analysis that comedy is capable of undertaking can occur *despite* cyclical narratives seemingly consigning depictions to circular repetition. Furthermore, it is this circular, repetitive nature that enables this depiction to make sense, for it is precisely within routinised practices such as commuting to and from work, radio station schedules, and everyday conversations between friends that pop music can function

as an unspectacular but highly resonant resource between and for individuals. In depicting how pop music can function in a liberatory fashion for characters carrying out repetitive work commutes, *Car Share* demonstrates that the sitcom's circular episodic nature is a suitable structure for the comic exploration of the repetitive. That is, recurring narrative structure enables the depiction of routine and repetition; and *Car Share* employs this structure to similarly depicts popular music's relationships with routine and repetition.

As noted above, *Car Share* aligns neatly with typical definitions of the sitcom; this is not a programme that seeks to foreground any radical or experimental elements it may have³. Indeed, the use of music in the programme for comic effect functions in a manner comparable to the sitcom traditions recurrent in the genre. This is evident in the portrayal of John's masculinity, which in his attempts to present himself as superior via his musical taste aligns him with many comic depictions of men in sitcom. Such depictions typically offer up for ridicule "a type of self-sufficiency that practically excludes any sort of social, sexual or fraternal bonds" (Neville 2009, 238), repeatedly demonstrating that such independence is highly flawed and problematic to sustain. It is therefore the male character's insistence on such self-sufficiency in the face of contrary evidence which is offered up as humorous. Neville sees evidence of this in the *Mr Bean* series (ITV 1990-5), while McEachern (1999) finds it in *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991-9) and Butsch (1992) traces it across four decades of American sitcom. In John's insistence on attempting to portray a version of himself which is supposedly more cultured he belongs to a heritage of British sitcom characters such as Tony Hancock in *Hancock's Half-Hour* (BBC, 1954-61) and Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* (BBC2, 1975-9). Kayleigh, meanwhile, makes no such pretensions in relation to her mainstream, populist tastes. In their differences they represent typical comic odd couples required to find ways to get along because circumstances have entrapped them, in a manner similar to series such as *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1, 1962-74) and *Red Dwarf* (BBC2/Dave, 1988-). Yet while at its outset *Car Share* might appear to be likely to mine John and Kayleigh's musical differences for comic effect, as will

³ The interview with Peter Kay in Jefferies (2015) shows the programme is experimental in technical terms, given that a special rig had to be created that could film inside a car to such an extent. But there's little in the programme that encourages a viewer to marvel at such technical feats, and the series instead does as much as it can to ensure this aspect does not become apparent.

be demonstrated in what follows, it instead offers up pop music as a site of shared nostalgia, enabling them to communicate with one another by drawing on a communal cultural history. So what might at first glance appear to be a comedy mocking undue significance applied to pop music instead offers up as humorous the attempt to deny the powerful personal emotional resonances such supposedly simple culture facilitates.

“Timeless Hits, Now and Forever”

Several early scenes from the series’ first episode provide an excellent way into a consideration of how the show intricately folds music into humour whilst, at the same time, fleshing out the developing relationship between its two central characters. As Kayleigh settles into the passenger seat for the first time, she admits, in a paradoxically confident manner: “I’m actually a bit nervous. [I’ve] never been in a car with a stranger before. Well, I know you’re not a stranger, but you know what I mean”. John half-grunts a response of recognition, before Kayleigh asks, “Do you mind if I turn the radio on?”. “Go for it,” John replies. Already then, the viewer is presented with a quite mundane (yet – as will become increasingly apparent – quite significant) instance of the car radio’s (and music’s) social usefulness, given how it promises to provide the ‘noise’ capable of overwriting potentially awkward silences, a prop for burgeoning attempts at conversation and a means of mediating the rhythms of their first journey together. It also shows how for this series music represents the ‘sit’ of the ‘sitcom’, a fundamental part of the situation upon which the programmes “comic impetus” (Mills 2009: 5) relies.

The station summoned, as a cutaway to the car’s digital dashboard display shows us, is BBC Radio 5Live (a *real* news, talk and sports focussed channel). Within seconds Kayleigh hits a button on the radio to dial in the fictional Forever FM just as the upbeat opening synth stabs and vocal whoops of ‘Martika’s Kitchen’ (Martika) kick in. “I love this,” Kayleigh enthuses, as John turns his gaze from her to the road with a forlorn expression on his face. A moment passes before Kayleigh asks, “So do you think this carshare thingy is going to work?” “Not if we have to listen to this everyday,” comes the response. “I love Forever FM,” offers Kayleigh, “they play timeless hits now and forever,” echoing what viewers are yet to learn is the station’s tagline. “I wouldn’t say ‘Martika’s Kitchen’ was timeless,” John replies, shrewdly indicating his pop knowledge (nothing from the radio has indicated what track this

is yet) yet also apparent distaste. “Well you remembered it,” Kayleigh replies, a lingering shot of her mischievous grin bringing their first exchanges in the show to close. Kayleigh’s statement works comically in that she achieves a “sudden glory” (Hobbes 2005 [1651]: 45) by puncturing John’s performed pomposity.

Several elements in this opening sequence merit attention. Firstly, Kayleigh’s unabashed pleasure in pop music is immediately foregrounded. Further though, her willing submission to its commercially packaged format – as evidenced through her verbatim repetition of the station’s tagline – is further suggestive of an unselfconscious and unencumbered relationship with pop. This sets Kayleigh apart from John, who – certainly at the series’ outset – is presented as adopting a somewhat more cynical stance towards pop music and its pleasures. Such a difference between the protagonists provides a basis for a comedic engagement with questions about musical taste. Secondly, there is a noteworthy gendered component to Kayleigh’s switch of station from BBC Radio 5Live (a station often nicknamed ‘radio bloke’ because of its perceived male-centricity [Glennie 2015]) to Forever FM, whose musical content and tagline-jingle (*always* delivered by a female voice across the series) appear to orient it towards a female listenership. In a sense then, it might be suggested that Kayleigh’s first meaningful gesture is to feminise the car’s auditory space. Here the particular nature of the carshare – as an undertaking both *in* and *of* the show – reveals its potential for not just the further comic interaction to come (both in terms of the show’s central characters and music’s role in mediating their relationship), but indeed the kind of everyday social awkwardness facilitated by ‘the car’ as interior space. That is to say, the way that cars can function as not just personal spaces, but also intimately shared spaces whilst, at the same time being both publicly visible and physically pervious in various ways (windows, doors, etc.), whilst presenting a semblance of privacy, opens the way for questions about the private/public, especially in terms of social etiquette, to be comically explored within the series. As Laurier *et al.* note, “car-pooling is an arrangement that at least in the UK draws upon, even as it threatens to erase or confuse, the private–public space distinction” (2008: 15).

As the passenger, the onus appears to fall upon Kayleigh to initiate and perhaps sustain conversation in the first instance. This remains the case despite “the relationships of host and guest, driver and passenger” (Laurier et al., 2008: 15) which typically emerge in carsharing practices. The negotiation of roles is a complex one however, given how “drivers are normally responsible for the entertainment, which is usually and simply the radio/CD player” (ibid). What all of this suggests is that while Kayleigh’s decision to retune from John’s pre-set radio station (BBC Radio 5Live) to Forever FM might seem rather bold, on one hand, it is also something of a brave gesture of self-disclosure, especially when followed by the statement, “I love this”. This is, in essence, Kayleigh implying something like, ‘this is me, I like this’ and, given the implicit demands of the passenger-driver relationship, asking John to step out of his comfort zone somewhat. The significance of this scene for what follows, in terms of establishing aspects of both the nature of John and Kayleigh’s relationships to music (John as *more* circumspect vis-à-vis expressions of musical enjoyment) and one another (John as *more* reserved and guarded about his feelings in general), cannot be overstated.

It is also worth noting how this potentially awkward first carsharing interaction is skilfully negotiated by both John and Kayleigh. In John’s case this takes the form of his decision to display his familiarity with Kayleigh’s musical taste (he might, after all, have chosen to express *only* his distaste). In Kayleigh’s case, meanwhile, it takes the shape of responding to this gesture of John’s, this expression of familiarity with her tastes, to light-heartedly point to the fact that it provides them with some basis, however negligible at this stage in proceedings, upon which their relationship might develop. The further significance of the role of music in providing such a basis for their rapport is really driven home later in this scene however, when, after further frivolous pleasantries have been exchanged, John somewhat surprisingly – albeit quite mutedly – sings along with the last line of the still-diegetic song’s chorus: “...in Martika’s kitchen baby”. That the audience is shown that John knows a song he has previously mocked suggests this comic moment can be understood via the incongruity theory of humour, in which comedy arises from the incongruity between what is expected and what occurs (for a summary see Mills 2009: 82-8). Indeed, John’s comic masculinity is often predicated on the incongruity between how he presents himself

and the truths he reveals, and many of these incongruities concern the difference between his stated musical taste and the quite different taste he reveals via his actions.

Taken alone, this sequence already alerts us to the way in which music, in terms of both its sonic-aesthetic qualities (with their broader taste-correlates) and its lyrical content is being woven into the fabric of the unfurling on-screen action. This is taken to an even greater level of narrative significance in the sequence which immediately follows. Here, with 'Martika's Kitchen' still playing – unedited – in the background, we see Kayleigh attempt to fit her squeeze-top plastic water bottle into the car's cup holder. The contents of the bottle – which turn out to be Kayleigh's urine sample – inadvertently spray out to soak John. What is of particular interest for our purposes is the way that, just as this scene comes to a close, with John clearly angered and Kayleigh struggling to stifle her amusement, 'Martika's Kitchen' rises back up in the audio mix precisely as Martika breathily intones, in the song's bridge, "...the oven is hot" (as if to suggest that being around Kayleigh will not be without its challenges for John).

As the series progresses numerous other instances of music's intimate synchrony with on-screen action, at particular moments, occur. Consider, for example, the scene in Episode 5 which sees John dash from the driver's seat of the car as it sits in a traffic queue, to post a birthday card in a letterbox. As he triumphantly jogs back to the car, his fist-pump coinciding perfectly with the lyric "and everything's good in the world" ('When Smokey Sings' by ABC), his subsequent trip and fall syncs exactly with the further word, delivered by the singer after a brief pause, "...tonight". Such a temporary suspension of the song's vocal delivery thus adds to the force of the laugh by heightening viewers' attention to both the precise moment of John's tumble and, further, by setting this in contrast with the idea that 'everything's good in the world'. Another example comes in Episode 6 when, with tensions somewhat raised on this last journey home from work together, a row erupts between Kayleigh and John. All the while 'Never be Lonely' (The Feeling) is playing in the background. As the scene comes to a close, their heated exchanges having dissipated into shared laughter, the track is brought to the foreground of the audio mix just as the lyric "I'll never be the same without you" is delivered.

A further way musical content is folded into the action is through the use of tightly-synced visual cuts, such as in the opening sequence from Episode 2, where four consecutive snare hits from the introduction to 'Birdhouse in Your Soul' (They Might be Giants) – a song we subsequently see John and Kayleigh sing along to together – provide visual edit points. Elsewhere, in instances where on-screen action is less tightly synchronised with the always-diegetic music, the songs playing on Forever FM appear to simply reflect conversational themes taken up by John and Kayleigh; the melancholic sounds and lyrics from Johnny Hates Jazz's "Turn Back the Clock" provide a tone of reflective poignancy for talk of a recently-deceased colleague in Episode 2 (as John and Kayleigh travel in the funeral cortege), while later in the same episode the plaintive tenor of Duran Duran's 'Ordinary World' (whose lyrics concern the loss of a loved one) deepens the mood further as John opens up to Kayleigh about the death of his father. In a similar vein, lyrics like "trying to catch your heart is like trying to catch a star" from Boy Meets Girl's 'Waiting for a Star to Fall' ring out in the background of John and Kayleigh's first meaningful row (Episode 3).

In other instances though, Forever FM's music is employed less as sympathetic sonic backing to John and Kayleigh's talk than it is foregrounded in the audio mix and explicitly connected to particular visual images. Exemplar in this respect are the upbeat boyband tracks ('All Rise' by Blue, 'I Wanna Sex You Up' by Color Me Badd) which, in timely fashion, accompany lingering shots of the supermarket's occasionally shirtless and sexy new employee (the trolleyboy often referred to as 'Ted 2'), who can be seen almost swaying in time to the music as, in slow-motion, he shunts a heavy load of trolleys across the carpark. In the ironic way that such scenes combine sexualizing sounds ('Bump and Grind' by R.Kelly is used to similar effect in Episode 4), with images of someone working in a supermarket carpark the comedy here is of an altogether different order than many other sequences, for the way music works with (or, indeed, *against*) imagery to produce particular comedic effects. That said, as the following section explores, the range of novel ways in which the series *plays* with and occasionally reinscribes pop, suggest not only the latter's comedic potential but also, as the show would seem keen to illustrate, something whose meaning and significance is often paramount within everyday life.

"Rush Hour"

Surveying *Car Share* as a whole, it is not too difficult to discern a range of ways in which popular music functions quite powerfully, despite the circumstances of its consumption appearing decidedly commonplace and mundane. In this respect, the programme appears keen to challenge understandings of popular music as frivolous, uncomplicated or lacking in social force. Indeed, in quite pointed ways *Car Share* exploits the multifarious uses of popular music and especially its role as a highly meaningful resource in everyday life. In certain respects then, it echoes the perspectives of scholars such as Tia DeNora (2000) and Simon Frith (1996). In her work, DeNora foregrounds popular music's role in enabling listeners to achieve particular subjective states and organise experience within daily life (DeNora 2000). As such, she suggests, music should be understood both as a potentially constitutive feature of human agency and an active resource in the construction of social life. Frith, meanwhile, has written widely on the power(s) of popular music, often foregrounding its ability to inform social identities and relations (Frith 1996). Indeed, far from being of marginal concern, people's widely and sometimes powerfully held relationships with popular music not only provide us with valued meanings and inform our sense of self, but tells us a great deal about wider values – both our own and those of others.

One of the ways the show attributes such force to music is in terms of the significance of taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Hennion, 2007; Savage and Gayo 2011). Here we can note how individuals' music taste is read by characters in the show as signifying a great deal about them. Indeed, the issue of musical taste emerges early in the series (as described above) as something which might set John and Kayleigh apart. John is, after all, a member of the supermarket's management team and in certain respects his slightly higher social status – when compared to that of Kayleigh who works on the shop floor – corresponds with a somewhat snobbish rejection of certain *kinds* of pop music on his part (not just 'Martika's Kitchen' but also, as is explored further below, Hear'Say's 'Pure and Simple').

Echoing the interests of both DeNora and Frith, popular music's ability to function as an expressive resource, to be drawn upon for a range of communicative purposes, is also foregrounded in the show, and especially in terms of the potential significance and meanings bound up with singing and dancing along with pop. For example, immediately

following the sequence of cutaway shots which separate John and Kayleigh's first argument (Episode 3, as above) from the subsequent scene, we see Kayleigh asleep in the passenger seat for the first time – something John also notices. At this point the radio is playing 'Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want' by The Smiths. In singing along here (albeit quietly), John appears to temporarily access the despondent mood of the track and wallow – perhaps cathartically – in his own gloom⁴. This episode began with John, alone in the car, openly flirting with a female VW driver (the first and only time we see him belie his claim to be "happy on my own" in the series). This closing scene therefore works to tragicomic effect, as we discover that the long-haired VW driver in the adjacent traffic lane – who both John and viewer assumes to be the same woman – this time turns out to be a bearded (male) hipster. This scene comes in sharp contrast to that at the beginning of Episode 6 however, when we see John euphorically accompany 'You're The Voice' by John Farnham, something he ultimately ends up embarrassed by however, as a younger male driver in the adjacent traffic lane overhears and laughs. This moment is comic less because John is singing and more because he is seen to be doing so by a fellow commuter; in doing so it shows how a space which John is treating as private is in fact a public, observable one, and therefore this scene can be aligned with the recurring comic trope of depicting "the difficulties of ever-present observation" and the "fear of being *laughed at*" (Mills 2008: 64, italics in original).

More common within the show though, are scenes in which John and Kayleigh are shown enjoying the experience of singing along together. In the opening sequence from Episode 2, not only do John and Kayleigh exuberantly accompany 'Birdhouse in Your Soul' (They Might Be Giants), but Kayleigh even briefly interrupts the rendition to suggest how they should sing different harmonic vocal lines, with this moment being rendered comic because of the incongruity of the seriousness with which she invests this mundane act. Further instances of the protagonists demonstrating shared music taste, knowledge (of lyrics) and an embodied engagement with Forever FM's output come in Episode 4 ('Everybody Wants to Rule The

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World' by Tears For Fears), Episode 6 ('Ebony and Ivory' by Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder) and again in Episode 5 when they enthusiastically throw themselves into INXS's 'New Sensation'. So much so in fact, on this occasion, that for the first time we see John – despite the damage done to his elbow resulting from his earlier letterbox stumble – attempt to execute one of singer Michael Hutchence's dance moves with his other, still functioning arm. Here we are not encouraged to mock John's engagement with the song, but to read it as meaningful. This much seems evident in Kayleigh's reaction, which takes the form of a broad smile. She knows, as much as the viewer is encouraged to, that John's relatively non-expressive and self-sufficient exterior is slowly softening, and popular music appears to be the catalyst. Of course, it has taken several instances of Kayleigh's pop-fuelled pleasure in dance (such as her performance of a Beyoncé-*homage* dance routine at the beginning of Episode 4), to encourage John to overcome some of his inhibitions. In instances such as these then, it is music's "affordances" (DeNora 2000: 44), the various resources it puts before listeners in their meaning-making activities (to be selectively taken up in particular circumstances), which come to the fore and which, in the context of John and Kayleigh's developing closeness, take on an explicitly expressive form⁵. Music is thereby shown, in such moments, to enable them to signify what might otherwise go unexpressed.

Besides the sonic properties and broader physical associations taken up by John and Kayleigh, the textual, lyrical and more broadly representational content of pop provides a further set of meaning-making resources which are repeatedly exploited across the series. This occurs in a range of ways, from John and Kayleigh's discussions about the meaning of particular songs' lyrics (such as The Stereophonics' 'Have A Nice Day' in Episode 5) to a consideration of what it means for a man to dance to Gloria Gaynor's 'I Am What I Am' (Episode 1) or Kayleigh's story of using music to take revenge on an unpleasant ex-boyfriend (by parking outside his workplace, with her car windows open, loudly playing Alanis Morissette's 'You Oughta Know'). On other occasions, Forever FM's regular 'In Which Year?' questions allow John to display his knowledge of pop 'facts', something which also consistently reminds viewers that the potency in much of John and Kayleigh's employment

⁵ This much is evident in their pop dance moves when, rather than trying to offer faithful emulations, their performances (Michael Hutchence, Beyoncé), are intentionally silly and undertaken for one another.

of pop-cultural references resides in their basis in shared generational experiences. The out-dated technologies of music storage and retrieval to which they occasionally refer serve a similar purpose. Thus we hear Kayleigh say of INXS's 'New Sensation', "I had this on cassette" (Episode 5). Similarly, John notes, between verses in their rendition of Tears for Fears' 'Everybody Want to Rule the World' (Episode 4), "And then they had two black lads dancing in the video... I used to watch it all the time in a pub in town. They used to have a video jukebox".

Perhaps the most explicit and expository way in which the wide-ranging resourcefulness of popular music is exemplified in the show though, comes in the form of five separate daydream sequences. These daydreams, springing from Forever FM's music and always shown from the perspective of the (sensorily unencumbered) person occupying the passenger seat, remove us from the 'reality' of the commute. In three cases, we see the daydreamer taking the place of the performing artist in an imagined (and thereby not wholly, if largely faithful) and appended reconstruction of the original songs' music videos. Thus we see Kayleigh performing as Anastasia in 'I'm Outta Love' (Episode 1), Kayleigh again as Cindy Lauper in 'True Colours' (Episode 2) and John as Cliff Richard in 'Devil Woman' (Episode 5). Where the show has elsewhere shown Kayleigh and John drawing on pop's lyrics, sounds and their associated meanings, in instances like this, its visual dimensions – and especially those connected to the performances of stars – are brought into play. While there is incongruity in seeing these characters in recreations of existing pop videos, the programme does not exaggerate this for comic effect, and instead the comedy functions in an observational mode which encourages viewers to acknowledge that they too may have similarly imagined themselves to be pop stars.

The other two daydream sequences depart from presentations of the daydreamer taking the place of the performing artist however. One emerges less through dreamy imaginings than an urge for psychological self-preservation, as Kayleigh's aquaphobia leads her to hyperventilate violently when they enter an automatic carwash (Episode 4). As a panicked John exhorts her to, "think happy thoughts", a visual dissolve transitions from the bubbles and sweeping blue brushes of the carwash into the deep blue of an animated underwater sequence, strongly reminiscent of that which accompanies 'The Beautiful Briny Sea' in

Bedknobs and Broomsticks (Stevenson, 1971). Entertaining as this may be on a visual level, it is clear that Forever FM's output (this time 'MMMBop' by Hanson) is once again powerfully informing the daydreamer's "happy thoughts" (we see racing seahorses, dancing crabs and so on), since the Hanson brothers are incongruously depicted as animated fish, performing their undeniably jaunty number on musical instruments⁶. The final daydream sequence in the series (Episode 6), springing once again from Kayleigh's fertile imagination, portrays herself and John in a neatly choreographed dance routine (set around an automobile theme) to 'Rush Hour' (Jane Wiedlin). This dream sequence more explicitly links reality and fantasy, given how the song's lyrics offer a romantic reading of John and Kayleigh's carsharing ("It's so good, baby, when you're at the wheel"). This is also the only dream sequence in which John and Kayleigh not only duet (alternately delivering lyrical lines before singing in tandem), but also engaging in a choreographed dance sequence. While previous daydream sequences in the series have typically seen music taken up, by John and Kayleigh, as a resource enabling them to escape each other's company, here instead it facilitates their (imaginative) unison. Evident here is the possibility for popular music to fulfil a social and romantic function, not an escape but a celebration of the ways in which music has enabled John and Kayleigh to communicate, understand one another, and become close.

'Pure and Simple'

Music's role in socially significant rituals is a recurrent theme across the series. At the first mention of Christmas (Episode 1) for example, Kayleigh notes, "I love it, I've started my Christmas CD already," (although the festive day is, as we are told, "184 sleeps" away). Immediately she offers up summary renditions of 'Step into Christmas' (Elton John), 'Christmas Wrapping' (The Waitresses) and 'Driving Home for Christmas' (Chris Rea). In Episode 2 meanwhile, John and Kayleigh discuss, largely at the latter's behest, the relative suitability of certain songs for their use at funerals (both those of other people and their own). A similar discussion occurs in Episode 5, this time concerned with musical choices for weddings. As much as the show consistently foregrounds how pop music disposes of a certain flexibility and lightness then – in terms of how it might be variously taken up – it is also made clear that music's ritual functions matter.

⁶ The original music video, although not set underwater at any point, nevertheless shows the band members frolicking in the surf on a California beach at various points.

In the last episode of the series, it is within the ritual of gift giving (and receiving) that music once again comes to the fore. John and Kayleigh are car sharing for the final time, since Kayleigh is about to move house to another part of town. With the episode drawing to a close, the two appear hesitant and sad, as if unsure of how best to mark the occasion. It transpires that each has bought the other a present. John has got Kayleigh a heart-shaped lamp she had mentioned she liked. But Kayleigh has bought John the music compilation CD 'Now 48'. Earlier in the series she remarked that it was her favourite album of all time, much to John's consternation. This gesture therefore acts to remind us of John's enduringly snobbish attitude towards aspects of Kayleigh's musical taste. Indeed, for both John and the show's viewers, Kayleigh appears to be breaking a number of the unwritten 'rules' of music fandom. Not only is her favourite album a compilation⁷ (as opposed to a thematically-coherent piece from a canonical artist), but it is one made up of numerous one-hit wonders and notable commercial hits⁸, all of which are brought together only by virtue of the year in which they were released. As she says "I love it. [It] reminds me of the summer I worked in River Island"⁹ (Episode 2). All of this points to the ways Kayleigh primarily locates musical value in the context of *her* uses of it, its meaningfulness *for her* (rather than as part of an effort to demonstrate cultural capital, which seems more the case with John). While this choice of Kayleigh's *might* be read as comically incongruous however, the way it resurfaces at the close of the series appears to disavow such a reading, especially in light of the emotional response which this gift eventually elicits from John.

Having dropped Kayleigh off at her home we see John continue with his commute home, stuck in traffic. He opens the CD and sees a note from Kayleigh telling him to play track two. He puts the CD in his player, skips past the first track, and we discover from its opening beats that Kayleigh's chosen song is Hear'Say's 'Pure and Simple'. John responds, after listening to the opening bars, by saying, "Load of shite". But then the lyrics begin. The first

⁷ As John put it back in Episode 2, "No, no, I'm sorry, you can't have a compilation as your favourite album".

⁸ In this regard, Kayleigh's choice runs counter to what Frith (1983) has referred to as the 'ideology of rock', whose notion of 'authenticity' eschews the equation of 'value' with commercial success.

⁹ A high street fashion brand with over 300 stores in the UK at the time of writing.

line states, “You’ve been saying that I’m driving you crazy”; John nods and says, “Yes”, clearly seeing its relevance to his and Kayleigh’s relationship. Now he is actively listening to the song’s lyrics – the first time in the series that a character is presented as attending to a song at a moment when *new* meanings, unfurling here against the backdrop of their ritual exchange, are being made. John nods some more, making noises signalling his dawning realisation of why Kayleigh should see this track as appropriate. And, like many other times in the series, he joins in with some of the lyrics, singing the “baby, baby” refrain and, in the chorus, mimicking some of the head movements he recalls from the choreography of the original Hear’Say video. Throughout the series John has consistently been shown to have a largely retrospective engagement with musical meanings. Kayleigh, on the other hand is shown – through, for instance, her recent attendance at a Beyoncé concert – to have her finger somewhat closer to the pulse of contemporary pop. Given the slowly developing romantic underpinnings of the show’s narrative, a broader metaphor comes clearly into focus at this stage in proceedings. That is, Kayleigh, as we know from her activity on dating websites, continues to pursue a meaningful romantic relationship, despite numerous setbacks. John’s claimed self-sufficiency (“I’m happy on my own”) meanwhile, is exposed as little more than a front, since he has, on an emotional and interpersonal level, simply shut down out of a fear of being hurt (again). His relationship with musical meaning-making thus echoes the sense of stagnation pervading his personal life¹⁰. But on this occasion, instead, alone, actively listening, he realises that new meaningful connections are still there to be pleasurably made, in music as much as romance. As a now-beaming John sings along to the song’s chorus at the series’ close then (“Wherever you go... whatever you do... it’s pure and simple... I’ll be there for you”) his words appear no less relevant to his relationship with music than that with Kayleigh.

In this way, the show’s final sequence mirrors that of Kayleigh first entering the car; there she first introduced a reluctant and reticent John to Forever FM, and here she shows him – again through music – that he retains the ability to forge meaningful new bonds. The

¹⁰ Indeed, although we learn in Episode 6 that John is a practising amateur musician (“That was my big dream, music”), the duo in which he performs, “just do covers mainly”. The fact that he goes on to say that he has “written a few songs” – far from indicating an *ongoing* engagement with musical meaning making (note the past tense) – actually draws his relationship to music making into line with that of his romantic life.

message of the song is itself 'pure and simple' as is Kayleigh's intended statement through its usage. While it may be tempting to read such a use of music as somewhat trite, its placement within the series' closing sequence disavows that reading, instead inviting viewers to relish, and agree with John's realisation that the 'pure and simple' can – in both music and life – sometimes be the most meaningful.

As was noted at the outset of this chapter, in its episodic structure, recurring characters and settings, and mismatched character types, *Car Share* aligns with the conventions of the majority of sitcom. Yet in its use of music both as comic material and as a commentator on the actions and the characters it demonstrates the multifarious ways in which pop music can, even in the most mundane of settings, function powerfully within people's lives. Furthermore, its realist setting and observational comedy invites audiences to see parallels between what is depicted onscreen and their own lived experiences. That is, rather than John and Kayleigh's engagement with pop music being depicted as comically odd, both the show's comedy *and* its emotional resonance arise out of the specificity of the meanings these characters ascribe to music, not, as might otherwise have been the case, the fact that they use it in this way in the first place. In doing so it demonstrates how popular music can be drawn upon as a comic resource precisely because it constitutes a shared experience, thereby positioning the audience as one for whom this musical heritage is similarly shared. Given that all comedy is required to draw on social norms in order for comic incongruities to be comprehensible, *Car Share* can be seen to present popular music as social norm for the characters within the programme but also for the audiences who find comic pleasure in it.

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