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# 'Standing still . . . in a moving place' – reassessing lyrics and the spaces they construct through the musical landscapes of The Blue Nile

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## ABSTRACT

This paper calls for a recalibration of how cultural geography engages with music, lyrics, motion, and emotion. Within existing geographical work on music, research on the music itself remains scarce, with reflection on lyrics rarer still. This paper addresses this via a close reading of the work of the Glaswegian group, The Blue Nile. It examines how the trio – and especially their principal songwriter, Paul Buchanan – used lyrics as a means for articulating distinctive conceptions of movement and stillness. The significance of song-words themselves is considered, but so too is their mode of delivery, and their relationship to the enveloping musical settings they are embedded in. The importance of time, space and place in The Blue Nile's work is analysed and the methods by which they are evoked is investigated. The paper moves discussion on from well-covered terrain regarding music as a conduit for expressing youth focussed tropes, such as rebellion and speed, focusing instead on music's facility for voicing ideas of slowness and *immobility*, particularly in urban settings. In doing so, it demonstrates popular music's value for articulating sensations that are now being encountered with ever greater frequency, including those of stasis, drift, and disconnection.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo llama a una recalibración de cómo la geografía cultural se relaciona con la música, las letras, el movimiento y la emoción. Dentro del trabajo geográfico existente sobre la música, la investigación sobre la música en sí sigue siendo escasa, y la reflexión sobre las letras es aún más rara. Este documento aborda esto a través de una lectura detallada del trabajo del grupo de Glasgow, The Blue Nile. Examina cómo el trío, y especialmente su principal compositor, Paul Buchanan, utilizó las letras como un medio para articular concepciones distintivas de movimiento y quietud. Se considera la importancia de las palabras de las canciones en sí mismas, pero también su forma de entrega y su relación con los escenarios musicales envolventes en los que están incrustadas. Se analiza la importancia del tiempo, el espacio y el lugar en el trabajo de The Blue Nile y los métodos por los cuales son evocados son investigados. El documento avanza en la discusión

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desde un terreno bien cubierto sobre la música como un conducto para expresar figuras enfocadas en la juventud, como la rebelión y la velocidad, centrándose en cambio en la facilidad de la música para expresar ideas de lentitud e inmovilidad, particularmente en entornos urbanos. Al hacerlo, demuestra el valor de la música popular para articular sensaciones que ahora se encuentran con una frecuencia cada vez mayor, incluidas las del enlentecimiento, deriva y desconexión.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article revendique la nécessité d'un rééquilibrage pour l'engagement de la géographie culturelle envers la musique, les paroles, le mouvement et l'émotion. Au sein des travaux de géographie en existence sur la musique, la recherche sur celle-ci en soi est limitée, et les études sur les paroles sont encore plus rares. Cet article aborde cette question par une lecture approfondie de l'œuvre du groupe The Blue Nile, qui est originaire de Glasgow. Il étudie la manière dont ce trio, et plus particulièrement leur principal auteur-compositeur, Paul Buchanan, se sert des paroles pour articuler des concepts distinctifs de mouvement et d'immobilité. On prend en compte l'importance des paroles et des chansons à part entière, mais aussi leurs modes d'interprétation et leurs rapports avec les paramètres musicaux dans lesquels elles se trouvent. On effectue une analyse de l'importance du temps, de l'espace et du lieu dans l'œuvre des Blue Nile et on recherche les méthodes qui sont utilisées pour les évoquer. Cet article entraîne le débat par-delà un terrain qui a été bien étudié et qui concerne la musique en tant que conduit pour l'expression de tropes centrés sur la jeunesse, telles que la rébellion et la vitesse, et se focalise plutôt sur l'aisance de la musique quand il s'agit d'articuler des idées de lenteur et d'immobilité, surtout en milieu urbain. Ce faisant, il démontre la valeur de la musique pop pour traduire des sensations que l'on rencontre de plus en plus fréquemment de nos jours, notamment celles de stagnation, de dérive et de déconnexion.

## Introduction

### *Geographic approaches to music*

This paper examines how The Blue Nile – a Scottish ambient-pop group – conveyed ideas of movement and stillness in a manner that was distinctive within popular music. Via a close reading of the band's lyrics, the performance of them and the musical settings they were situated in, it assesses how they displayed a particular sensitivity towards conceptions of stasis and motion, dwelling and flight, and space and place. In working through these ideas, the paper provides new insights into how actions and inactions relating to movement and non-movement are framed, represented, and interpreted.

In 2001, Gillian Rose asserted that 'the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies' (Rose, 2001, p. 6). Inherent in the statement was an implication that the non-visual, including the aural, were marginal to such constructions. Such marginality was reflected in geographical enquiry into popular culture, an arena of study that, like geographical enquiry more broadly, has been invariably orientated more around scopic than non-scopic epistemologies. A demonstration of this

was provided by Cresswell and Dixon (2002, p. 4), via their research into film, mobility, and identity. In this wide-ranging work, they noted that film, 'a visual representation of a mobile world ... is also rendered a distinct geographic object of enquiry through its diversity of mobilities, and it is this very characteristic that invites scrutiny' (ibid., p. 4). This paper contends that a similar scrutiny of mobilities (and immobilities) called for by Cresswell and Dixon regarding the visual can, and should, be applied to the aural. It asserts that popular music can be used to investigate relationships between music, movement, and metropolitan spaces, and stresses that music more generally offers a rich and varied, but still often untapped, resource for social and cultural geographers.

This paper also foregrounds the importance of emotions in popular culture texts. The variety of means available for relating to music – performing it, listening to it, playing it in the background, and dancing to it – means that music arguably engages with emotional registers in more ways than other aspects of popular culture, and as such, it helps to enable a 'way of being' (Smith, 2000, p. 630). This way of being, which can include coping with one's circumstances and surroundings, was particularly apparent during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic; at this time, music provided a much-needed source of comfort, but the absence of in-person live performance caused distress to many. In such periods a deepening appreciation of music's ineffable power occurs, a power that emanates from its facility to express 'the unspoken and unspeakable: the emotionally precious, the personal' (Wood et al., 2007, p. 885).

In the decade or so prior to that comment being made considerable investigation took place, including within geography, into the affective responses music can generate. One example was Wood and Smith's (2004) study on music as therapy and on music's construction of the self and impact on self-worth. Another was Anderson's (2002) exploration of behaviours related to the everydayness of listening to popular music on the radio, often whilst alone, which additionally highlighted how music helps to structure time and space. Revill's (2004) work on performances of French folk music also stressed music's wellbeing benefits, derived in that instance in a communal setting rather than a solitary one.

However, during the last 15 years or so, a shift in geography has occurred, away from the study of music's emotional and affective dimensions. In its place, new strands of research have emerged largely focussed on practices and cultures associated with the music *industry*, and with music scenes. Notable work has been undertaken on how technological change has impacted different branches of the music ecosystem. This has traced music's evolving trajectory from creator to consumer and has interrogated the ways that digitization has transformed the spaces and practices of music production and distribution (Leyshon, 2014; Watson, 2015), and music retail and consumption (Hracs and Jansson, 2020). Much of this research has drawn on aspects of economic geography, a sub-discipline that has also been utilised to analyse urban policy makers' often uncritical embrace of regeneration and tourism ventures shaped by the now widespread 'Music Cities' agenda (Ballico and Watson, 2020).

To some extent, 'Music Cities' studies connect with existing geographic work on music scenes; the latter has usefully invited comparison of music making and consumption processes between and within genres, and in contrasting locations, including Guangzhou (Liu and Cal, 2014), Dutch cities of varying sizes (Brandellero and Pfeffer, 2015), and London (Willment, 2019). As welcome as such studies have been, relatively little of this

work has engaged in depth with the actual music played, heard, and sold in such places. And, when it has, examinations of the output of specific acts and/or 'name' performers have been rare. Nonetheless, a handful of musician focussed studies by geographers have been undertaken; these include: Kruse's (2005) work on relationships between representations of The Beatles and the Liverpool sites associated with the band – which can be read in tandem with Daniels's (2006) study of Lennon and McCartney's enrolling of childhood city memories into a suburban pastoral aesthetic in 'Strawberry Fields Forever' and 'Penny Lane'; Johansson's (2013) consideration of the role of rock band Kent in debates on Swedishness, class, provincialism, and the rendering of tangible and intangible landscapes through music; Harris's (2014) positioning of Bark Psychosis' 'post-rock' music as being expressive of London's eastern 'edgelands'; Gunderman and Harty's (2017) account of The Grateful Dead's ongoing afterlife in America's cultural and physical landscapes; my own analysis of Frank Sinatra's concept album, *Come Fly With Me*, and what it revealed about travel, gender, class and status in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century USA (Milburn, 2019); and, Tweed and Watson's (2019) reflections on the relationship between Iceland's *Of Monsters and Men* and extant discourses on the Icelandic geographical imaginary.

The lack of geographic engagement on named music acts is part of a wider neglect in the discipline toward popular culture figures. Indeed, so scant have been the number of geographic publications on popular culture acts and releases that Horton (2019) made an explicit call in this journal for greater research to be undertaken into the geographic significance of iconic popular culture texts and figures. Whilst it is doubtful that even the staunchest Blue Nile fan would put the group into that category, this article does attempt to partially answer Horton's call, and demonstrates how close reading provides a strategy for how this might be undertaken. It asserts that a focus on a single and, in this case, singular, popular culture act can yield fresh critical insights, which include, in this instance: a re-framing of taken for granted assumptions regarding connections between music and movement, and a re-assertion of why lyrics merit cultural geographic analysis.

A consequence of the lack of geographical research on specific musicians and music texts has been a concomitant dearth of studies on lyrics within the discipline. Again, there are exceptions, such as: Moss's (1992) work on Bruce Springsteen, class, and gender; Gold's research (1998) on Woody Guthrie, protest, and landscape mythologies; and Rhodes and Post's (2021) investigation into labour-focussed songs, which highlights lyrics' powerful facility for articulating and promoting social resistance.

As valuable as these geographical analyses have been, they have paid relatively little attention to the critical role of *performance* in how lyrics generate meaning and convey and trigger emotional responses. Additionally, studies which foreground the social settings lyrics respond to – and periodically shape – often insufficiently acknowledge the significance of songs' *musical* settings for framing and giving substance to lyrics. This is regrettable since, as Leyshon et al. (1998, p. 22) identify:

an analysis of music's power cannot remain with words. Greil Marcus (1989) provides a classic study of word and rhythm in discussing Jonathan Richman's 'Road Runner', the song following and breaking a beat, describing a drive in the way that, say, a crayon describes a line, producing as it moves.

As this example demonstrates, it is how words, voice, melody, rhythm, and harmony combine that gives popular music its potency. Lyrics written down only hint at the power

potentially encoded within them; their full power is only realized through performance, whether in a studio or onstage. The way that lyrics are delivered, how they are mixed, and where they are placed within the arc of a song, are all as significant as the words' overt linguistic meaning when it comes to relaying feeling, emotion, and 'truth'.

The remainder of this study will analyse the words used in Blue Nile songs but will also reflect on how those words are used. Furthermore, it will assess influences from non-musical spheres on lyrical themes in Blue Nile songs; examine how the pacing and rhythm of The Blue Nile's music reinforced the impact of their songs' words; and consider how the airy sense of space that characterizes many Blue Nile songs intensified the impact of the words. Additionally, it will demonstrate how The Blue Nile – by blending lyrical elements, largely synthesizer driven musical arrangements, extended instrumental passages, moments of silence or near silence, and samples of city sounds – sketched a new, emotive language that responded to those vicissitudes of space and time and movement and stillness encountered daily in urban settings.

### **The Blue Nile: the back story**

The case study of this paper is the Glasgow based trio, The Blue Nile. The group was comprised of Paul Buchanan, Robert Bell, and PJ Moore. The musical roles of the three members were fluid but the most common set-up involved Bell on bass, Moore on keyboards and synthesizers, and Buchanan, the chief songwriter, on vocals and guitar. Between 1981 and 2004, they released four albums and a handful of singles and b-sides.

The Blue Nile's debut album, *A Walk Across the Rooftops*, was released in 1984. Initially, its sales impact was slight. However, principally due to word-of-mouth recommendation and a very favourable response in the music press, interest in it gradually grew. The extent of praise accorded to it was later highlighted when *The Scotsman* newspaper (The Scotsman, 2003) judged it to be the fourth best Scottish album of all time. The band's second album, *Hats*, released in 1989, was another critical success; it was also a commercial breakthrough for the group, reaching number 12 in the UK charts. *Hats*, like its predecessor, was released by Linn, a Scottish hi-fi electronics firm who considered The Blue Nile's records to be an ideal showcase for their high-end products' sonic capabilities.

Following *Hats'* release, The Blue Nile undertook short tours for the first time. The group's Glasgow date revealed the esteem with which they were held in in their home city, with the concert being selected for the official opening of the Royal Concert Hall, the venue launch marking a key moment in Glasgow's reign as 'European City of Culture' in 1990. Two further albums followed: *Peace at Last*, in 1996, and *High*, in 2004. Due to relationships within the group becoming increasingly fraught, PJ Moore chose to depart shortly before *High's* release. Buchanan and Bell performed together for a short time thereafter, the pair giving their last concert as 'The Blue Nile' in 2008.

Despite, or possibly because of, only releasing four albums in 20 years, and touring with commensurate infrequency, The Blue Nile cultivated a loyal, patient, and devoted fan base; BBC Radio 1's 'In Concert' programme went so far as to claim the trio were 'perhaps the ultimate cult band of the '80s' (Radcliffe, 1990). The music that instigated this idolatry incorporated aspects of ambient, pop, soul, electronica, and romantic balladry. It has often been interpreted, by fans and critics alike, as a commentary on coming together and drifting apart, on memory and modernity, and of falling in and out of love – both in the

metropolis, and with the metropolis. Much of their material, for example, 'Headlights on the Parade' and 'Downtown Lights', is also characterized by recurring motifs of movement – or sometimes by a clear yearning to move, but then not doing so. These pervasive lyrical themes and the push and pull involved within them, were often allied to skittish, anxious rhythms – as heard on 'Stay', recorded early in the band's existence, and 'She Saw the World', recorded near the end of it. The wavering lyrics and agitated percussion created a sense that Blue Nile records were "made by, and about, people emotionally tied to one city (Irvin, 1996, p. 42), whilst also, simultaneously, expressing 'some kind of restlessness' (ibid.).

Reflecting on the group's principal aim when recording music, Paul Buchanan stated it was:

to make every note of it mean something emotionally, and not to add to or subtract from that ... We're always trying to reach that same part of people – the part that reacts to true things, be it literature, art, somebody speaking to them on the street, whatever. The important moments" (Roberts, 1990, pp. 45-46).

These important moments were not always necessarily happy ones, as Tim Jonze (2009) noted when talking about The Blue Nile on *The Guardian's* 'Music Weekly' podcast:

Buchanan's soulful vocals and stark lyrics worked hand-in-hand with his wonderful music, hitting you firmly in the gut with an emotional impact few other acts could manage. Who, for instance, can forget the climax of 'Downtown Lights' when Buchanan breaks down and agonisingly sings "I'm tired of crying on the stairs".

This statement gives credence to Glaswegian writer and broadcaster Stuart Cosgrove's belief that during the 1980s 'there was a kind of emotionalist moment in Scottish pop music. They [the groups active in that period] were unashamedly about emotions, and they were unashamedly about stating things like love and memory and loss' (interviewed by Maclaverty, 2008). But rather than relying on, say, nostalgia triggering string arrangements to convey such concerns – an approach adopted by Sheffield singer-songwriter Richard Hawley when lamenting landscapes lost to the city but not to its collective memory – The Blue Nile chose instead to explore such affective concerns by using overtly electronic instrumentation. This despite that fact that electronic music was commonly heard at the time as a metonym for bleak urban modernity, for rendering J.G. Ballard ideas in Korg or Casio form, as demonstrated by early releases from The Human League, The Normal, and others.

The Blue Nile's receptivity towards new technology was demonstrated by the group's early embrace of what was then a still relatively novel and rarely used piece of equipment: the sampler. Openness to this device's possibilities enabled them to incorporate elements of Glasgow's natural and manmade score into their music. This was achieved by the three members recording sounds from throughout the conurbation, as Robert Bell, who co-wrote The Blue Nile's debut album with Buchanan, revealed to reporter Nicola Stanbridge (2008) in an interview for BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme:

Stanbridge: "The band has collected sounds summing up Glasgow for nearly three decades. Rehearsing in the city's concert hall Robert Bell reveals his cache of synthed-up Glasgow city sound effects..."



Bell: "... This is the backdrop to the 'Walk Across The Rooftops' track ... We did the first album with a great deal of indoor and outdoor sampling; we must have hit every object within a 10 mile radius of the studio. This is rainfall." [sound of rain is played]

These ambient sounds were augmented by the trio's musical contributions. The result: noise framed as music imperceptibly blended with music disguised as noise – music as 'Automobile Noise'. At times, melody, harmony, and chords were sacrificed to foreground the emotional possibilities the trio detected in the city's hum, buzz and drone, as heard on 'The Wires are Down' and 'Heatwave'.

### The Blue Nile's music as texture and atmosphere

The acclaimed producer and musician, Brian Eno, contends that frequently what matters most 'in modern music is not the part you can write down, the words and the tune, but the rest, the texture, the atmosphere, the references and associations' (interviewed by Roberts, 2010). Some evidence for this argument has just been outlined, and the remainder of this article will further demonstrate that The Blue Nile understood better than most the importance of 'the rest', but it will also assert that lyrics too were integral to The Blue Nile's appeal and success, and hence will reveal that Eno's binary view does not apply in every instance.

The Blue Nile's sound was instantly recognizable to those familiar with the group's output. Contributing to this distinctiveness were the following factors: their evocative, subtly layered textures, painstakingly assembled with engineer, Calum Malcolm; the unusual combination of influences the group drew upon – with Kraftwerk, Marvin Gaye, Tony Bennett, and Gustav Mahler all being key touchpoints; Paul Buchanan's lyrics, and his emotive and, at times, almost pained delivery of those lyrics; an alternating mood of melancholy and euphoria (sometimes within the same verse); and the unconventional structure of many of their songs, songs that frequently lasted six minutes or longer, twice the length of what is the norm in popular music.

Another popular music expectation that The Blue Nile routinely transgressed was the assumed need for songwriters to grasp listeners' attention within a song's opening bars – or from the first note, in the age of streaming platforms. By contrast, many Blue Nile's songs announce themselves to listeners in a gradual, understated manner, one more akin to that often encountered in classical music. An example of this is the elongated introduction to 'A Walk Across the Rooftops', the first song on their debut album of the same name. After a period of apparent silence at the start of the song, the sound of an electric keyboard, resembling distant church bells carried by the wind, drifts in. At first, this sound is quiet, but almost imperceptibly it builds. The fade-in is remarkably slow and provides a striking introduction to the trio's distinctive style, creating as it does 'dramatic intensity by slow accretion and repetition, backing into the limelight' (Dalton, 2008). Gradually, these distant sounds appear to get closer, a reminder that 'space is made through sound as well as sight' (Smith, 2000, p. 615). As the sonic layers build so too does the impression of the city encroaching upon the listener. The balm-like aural environment is then ruptured by two bursts of noise. The first resembles glass smashing on metal, the second, a jarring blast, owes more to *musique concrète*<sup>1</sup> than to conventional percussion. These sounds of the everyday in the city abruptly disrupt the reverie created by the gently ascending



opening to the song. A 'muted' trumpet, perhaps the most voice-like of instruments, is then introduced. It calms the nerves and heralds the entrance, finally, of a voice, an undeniable human presence. During the preceding 40 seconds a rare intimacy has been created, both between performer and place and between performer and listener.

In the lengthy introduction to this song the metropolis is represented not by words but by instrumental passages punctuated by abstract phonic shards. This scene-setting approach was carefully considered, as Paul Buchanan revealed to *Mojo* magazine:

We started to think if we put that sound with this other rhythm track it makes you think about a mountain or a little city, and we got very interested in that – the visual aspect – using the instruments to represent the context of the song . . . the album's distinctive, cinematic quality emerged from those early "visualisation" experiments. For example, the bass on the song 'A Walk Across the Rooftops' sounded vertical to us, as if it was going down in a zig-zag line, like a fire escape – the general hubbub outside your window. We avoided anything that the listener would think was just a guy playing a solo on a Gibson or a Telecaster. (Irvin, 1996: 42)

The group's efforts in this respect did not go unnoticed. Speaking 25 years after the release of The Blue Nile's debut album, journalist Tim Jonze (2009) commended the band for how they 'injected their state-of-the-art sound with intelligence and emotion. Solitary guitar twangs, lonely piano lines and the use of empty space helped conjure up the feeling of melancholy and loneliness.'

As a result of provoking such feelings, comparisons have been made – perhaps unsurprisingly given Buchanan's 'visualisation' ambitions – between The Blue Nile and an artist operating in a different time, place, and medium, but who nonetheless addressed similar concerns: Edward Hopper. One person to make this connection was Jim Kerr, frontman of one of Glasgow's most successful groups, Simple Minds. In a eulogy to The Blue Nile, published on Simple Minds' blog, Kerr (2008) stated: 'the voice of lead singer Paul Buchanan . . . conjures up the voices of heartbreak and loneliness that are the only things missing from Edward Hopper's canvases.' Much of Hopper's work addresses his subjects' seemingly constant vacillation between engagement with, and alienation from, the surrounding landscape. It has been said of the figures in his paintings that they seem 'anonymous and withdrawn . . . Hopper's work reveals the loneliness . . . and also the unexpected beauty of the modern world' (Butler et al., 1994, p. 230). These characteristics, encountered in Hopper paintings such as 'Gas', 'Nighthawks', and 'Automat', are, as Kerr identifies, also discernible in The Blue Nile's work. One example is 'Because of Toledo', a poignant, quiet piece of music whose "glorious descending melody . . . carries a western narrative full of fractured, inconclusive images: 'Girl leans on a jukebox / Says "I don't live here / But I don't really live anywhere"' (Williams, 2004). The song, via its reference to pick-ups, coffee, waitresses, lipstick, shadows, mirrors, and motel signs, foregrounds objects and subjects that populate Hopper's portrayals of the American landscape and of lives lived in its quiet spaces.

Several of the motifs present in 'Because of Toledo', from the group's final album, *High*, had been evident throughout their career. David Quantick (1989, p. 40), reviewing second album, *Hats*, identified that 'love is a popular theme, as are headlights, rain and travel'. Frequently supplementing these themes, on *Hats* and elsewhere, are other Buchanan lyrical tropes: trains, rivers, traffic and traffic lights, streets and streetlights, parades (whether as events – 'Easter Parade' – or as streets – 'Headlights on The Parade'), stations,

automobile noise, bikes, fire engines, highways, subway trains, exit signs, railroads, cars, postcards, ferries, pavements, roadsides, and alleyways. This litany of largely urban materiality, again redolent of much of Hopper's output, is even more noteworthy considering the group released just four albums in their career.

As well as owing a debt to a visual art predecessor, one can also identify literary antecedents in Buchanan's approach to lyric writing. For example, similarities exist between Buchanan's methods and the city writing strategies used by Walter Benjamin in *One Way Street* (1928), a collage-like text written as

a series of aphorisms, many of which were titled around typically urban sights such as 'filling station', 'underground works', 'caution: steps' and so forth. He uses urban wandering as a device on which to hang a series of reflections which seem to be triggered by phenomena of the urban built environment. (Savage, 2000, p. 35)

In The Blue Nile's work, aphorisms and reflections 'triggered by the phenomena of the built environment' can likewise be heard as responses to public outdoor spaces, but also to private indoor ones. Thus, their material speaks to the experience of urban assemblage and dwelling (McFarlane, 2011) whilst also providing a meditation on domestic detritus and memory (DeSilvey, 2007).

Irrespective though of the type of space Paul Buchanan is in, he frequently appears to be engaged in a quest to convey a scene's 'essence' and the 'moment' as directly as possible, confirming his aforementioned principal aim in making music (Roberts, 1990). One song that showcases the almost haiku-like approach to lyric writing used to achieve this is 'Holy Love':

*I stand and watch the windows raise  
The flowers cut  
I'm still looking ...  
Stocking tops. The coffee cups*

Here, a still life tableau of the everyday is presented to the listener, along with different ways of viewing the everyday: from voyeuristic to prosaic. Again, echoes of Benjamin reverberate, given that writer's

resistance to the presentation of an overarching, integrated, coherent view of the city as a whole. The imagistic approach highlights the fleeting, fluid character of modern metropolitan existence. It denies a systematic, stable perspective. The representation of the city demands a discontinuous, fragmented literary form and style. (Gilloch, 1996, p. 18)

Such an approach lends itself too to popular music, a realm in which 'uncomplicated' lyrics invariably communicate meaning and emotion with greater success than more 'wordy' lyrics. As poet Simon Armitage (2011) identified, verbosity is a trait that 'song lyrics don't require ... because they're working in combination with music, which can make what on paper would be a very facile statement become very powerful.' This view has been endorsed in relation to The Blue Nile: 'the imagery evoked by Paul Buchanan verges on the hackneyed, but the gleaming music and Buchanan's weary yet yearning voice transcend the clichés' (Fulford-Jones, 2008, p. 117). Journalist Jim Irvin (1996, p. 42) meanwhile, commenting on The Blue Nile's trademark 'noun-packed lyrics', observed it was Buchanan's remarkably committed delivery that 'imbued these incantations of the mundane – typewriters, headlights, railway stations, rivers in the distance – with a noble profundity' (ibid.). Through these 'incantations' the singer sketched in

song-form a built environment that was simultaneously familiar and strange, comforting and unsettling.

'Family Life', from *Peace at Last*, is a song whose lyrics appear at first glance to be little more than a recital of quotidian ephemera of the kind Irwin identified. However, when performed, either on record or in a live setting, the song becomes a rare attempt in popular music to dwell on the auratic qualities of everyday life and objects. This is achieved in part through Buchanan's vocals: 'It's hard to exaggerate the emotional punch "Family Life" packs. When Buchanan's voice pulls up short before "*Wipe the tears from her eyes*" it's almost too much to bear' (Maconie, 1996, p. 117), a view also expressed in a chapter dedicated to the song in Marcello Carlin's (2011) novel, *The Blue in the Air*. 'Family Life' sets marital strife – 'No more shout / No more fight' – against fondly remembered scenes from childhood: '*Starlight, do you know me? / Please, don't look at me now / I'm falling apart / Silver on the window / Like the bike I once had / At home in the yard*'. Like 'Holy Love', 'Family Life' is set in a domestic space, one where an uneasy, quiet truce has broken out late on Christmas Eve. But even here, inside, amidst the discarded coffee, the forlorn stillness of '*the flowers on the table*', and the all-too-telling '*separate chairs in separate rooms*' Buchanan draws the listener's attention to motion, to '*the cars going by, the north and the south*'. Movement in opposite directions an apt metaphor for the couple's estrangement and the lengthening distance between their past joy and present antipathy.

### **Stop, go / Stop, go / Stop, go / I don't know**

Blue Nile songs are often characterized by an absence of a clear start, middle and finish. Instead, the listener frequently encounters ascending chord sequences that never resolve, an approach that gives their 'songs both tension and exhilaration' (Irvin, 1996, p. 42). The resulting sense of unease is heightened by the band's fondness for repetition, discernible from 'Rags to Riches' on their first album, through to 'She Saw the World' on their last. In the latter song, Buchanan sings of '*people walking towards me . . . gangsters in traffic surround you . . . letters and numbers surround you*', locating his vocals in unconventional melodic lines and repetitious rhythmic patterns. The discomfort and confusion conveyed by the words is amplified and 'propelled by the kind of mid-tempo 4/4 that pushes ahead of the beat (think of The Beatles' 'Things We Said Today' or the Stones' 'Honky Tonk Woman') (Williams, 2004). Once more in a Blue Nile song, themes of movement, restlessness, and disquiet are suggested not just by the lyrics, but also by the delivery of the lyrics, and by how those lyrics mesh with the accompanying music.

Songs such as 'Broken Loves' and 'Rags to Riches' also demonstrate the central role rhythm plays in transmitting meaning. Lefebvre (2004), in his 'Music and Rhythms' chapter in *Rhythmanalysis*, argues the study of rhythm has been neglected, which he sees as particularly problematic given that 'music presupposes a unity of time and space, an alliance. In and through rhythm' (ibid., p. 60). He continues: 'time and space without energy remain inert . . . Energy animates, reconnects, renders space and time conflictual' (ibid.). And it is this tension, of alliance and conflict between space and time, that permeates much of The Blue Nile's output. It finds expression for instance, in 'The Days of Our Lives', where an apparently middle-aged woman's feelings of domestic entrapment are conveyed lyrically and rhythmically, the alignment of words and unease inducing time-signature deftly relays the monotony of repetitious time and the palpable fear of remaining time's ceaseless contraction.

In Blue Nile songs listeners are often assailed by nameless, faceless people coming and going. But despite this, the main subject of those songs consistently gives the impression of being reluctant to move, let alone to 'move away', despite frequently airing escapist daydreams. This sense of mind and body being in a state of oscillation is captured in 'Automobile Noise', another song that reflects on movement from a position of stasis:

*Automobile noise  
Out in the traffic  
Black cars and blue cars go by  
Backwards and forward  
The names and places I know  
Alright, I cross the same old ground*

Such words prompt reflection on Wilson's (1991, p. 3) work, and especially her description of the city 'as a maze ... one image of the discovery of the city ... [is as] an endlessly circular journey, and of the retracing of the same pathways over time.' 'Electronica', a genre label sometimes used to describe The Blue Nile's output, is particularly well suited to conveying this sensation. Simon Reynolds (2007, p. 314) has described how in electronica 'the music becomes an intricate, maze-like environment, or an abstract machine taking the listener on a journey through a soundscape'. 'Automobile Noise' is an example of this; the electronic keyboard melody and melancholic synthesizer sounds provide the musical backdrop for lyrics that depict a figure ruminating on an apparently disintegrating relationship and floundering in the urban maze, afraid that the world is literally passing him by:

*Exit signs and subway trains  
Twenty-four hours, statues in the rain  
Walk in the headlights, walk in the daylight  
Automobile noise*

Similarly, in 'A Walk Across the Rooftops', we hear that '*the traffic lights are changing*', and that the song's subject will '*leave the quiet red stone / And walk across the rooftops*' before heading towards the '*black and white horizon*'. But the sense conveyed is that this *Billy Liar*<sup>2</sup> dreamer will never move far beyond his 'red stone' (Glaswegian sandstone tenement) window; his gaze may hop-scotch across the rooftops, but his feet never will. In this respect, the song is reminiscent of the flight-of-fancy escapism encountered in an acclaimed ballad by Motown group, The Temptations:

*Each day through my window I watch her as she passes by  
... Soon we'll be married and raise a family  
A cosy little home out in the country with two children, maybe three  
I tell you, I can visualize it all  
This couldn't be a dream for too real it all seems*

*But it was just my imagination, once again  
Running away with me*

'Just My Imagination (Running Away with Me)' lyrics: Barrett Strong; © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

The restlessness in The Blue Nile's music often translates into an explicit desire to be in a different environment: to be somewhere, anywhere, other than here. In 'Over the Hillside' the longing in Buchanan's delivery amplifies the wish expressed by the lyrics. But again, the emphasis is on *imagined* movement, and on a misguided belief that moving oneself from a terrain will free oneself from turmoil.

*The railroad and the fence  
Watch the train go roll around the bend  
Over the hillside  
Over the moment  
... Walk me into town  
The ferry will be there  
To carry us away into the air*

Part of the desire for flight expressed in 'Over the Hillside' appears to come from a feeling of being locked into the city: '*Workin' night and day / I try to get ahead / But I don't get ahead this way*'. A similar exasperation is evident in 'Headlights on The Parade': '*The city wins while you and I can't find a way*'.

Coupled to an air of anxiety in aspects of The Blue Nile's material is an awareness of others who are moving in different directions. A recurring theme is that the main protagonists in their songs seemingly have their clocks misaligned, coming home when others are leaving, and vice versa, as demonstrated in 'From a Late Night Train': '*From a late night train / The little towns go rolling by / People in the station / Going home*'. Connected to this temporal disjuncture is a palpable sense that the main character here does not possess the security of routine and domesticity he identifies others as having. This perceived comfort is one he appears to crave, yet recoils from. Such a dualistic tension is also outlined in 'Seven A.M.', in which the subject of the song, after a night apparently spent wandering the streets, considers returning home (his home?) at just the moment that most people are leaving theirs: '*Where is the love? / I'm coming home to you / Stop, go / Stop, go / Stop, go / I don't know*'. The air of indecision that imbues Buchanan's vocals as he sings these words is suggestive of Elizabeth Wilson's aforementioned 'endlessly circular journey', the circular journey here looping around from hesitancy to frustrated indecision.

'Seven A.M.', as demonstrated by its title, is also one of a number of Blue Nile songs in which an unusual emphasis is placed on a specific time, with others including 'Stay Close': '*The common hall at 3am / Said how'd it go? / Yeah, how'd it go today?*' and 'Regret': '*It's 3.30 and I'm thinking of you*'. The exceptionally quiet nature of 'Regret's' musical backing suggests that Paul Buchanan is referring to 3:30 am, rather than pm. Additionally, 'Regret' provides another example of a Blue Nile song in which the narrator appears rooted in time and place, whilst all around is motion – and, possibly, given the word play, emotion: '*Though I'm standing still / I'm in a moving place*'. This atmosphere of uncertainty, of being out of sync and metaphorically out of step with the rest of the city, of being discombobulated by what Lefebvre (2004, p. 16) called arrhythmia – dissonance between different rhythms – is one that is present throughout the group's early hours ruminations.

## Proximity and detachment, stasis and (slow)motion

'Easter Parade', like 'Regret', is a sparsely arranged piano-based ballad, and is one of The Blue Nile's signature songs. Again, it invites consideration of Walter Benjamin's city writing since it vividly highlights the group's attempts to 'investigate city environments as repositories of collective memories and experiences', as Frisby (1986, p. 221) said of Benjamin's work. In 'Easter Parade' the collective memories are imagined ones: New York, mid-century. It is a rarity in The Blue Nile's output in that, for once, the subject in the song overcomes their stasis. On this occasion it is the rest of the world that stops, and him that moves:

*The line of traffic comes to a standstill  
For the love came, out in the morning air  
I find a place I started from  
The wild is calling, this time I follow*

These lyrics provide a reminder of Rose and Wylie's (2006, p. 479) contention regarding landscape, namely that it:

enlaces us with its possible views and frames ... Often calling from a distance, stirring us not just to stand, look, measure, and read but to follow, landscape names the creative tensions of selves and worlds. This is the animating quality of landscape.

The main character in 'Easter Parade', one of the group's quietest, most contemplative compositions, is slightly removed from the parade. He may not be able to hear it properly but the listener assumes he is witness to the event, and to the excitement, noise and movement associated with it. Sensations floating up from the parade collide with falling, impermanent confetti; the noise and excitement from the street contrasts with the stillness and introspection experienced by the narrator, who apparently views the parade from inside an office building:

*In the bureau, typewriter's quiet  
Confetti falls from every window  
Throwing hats up in the air  
A city perfect in every detail*

*Easter parade  
I know you, birthday cards and silent music  
Paperbacks and Sunday clothes  
In hallways and railway stations  
Radio across the morning air*

This trampolining juxtaposition of descending confetti and rising hats is a reminder that movement, of course, is omnidirectional, extending vertically as well as horizontally – with the latter plane alluded to by the references to railways and the parade itself. Through such lyrics, Paul Buchanan, almost certainly unknowingly, is responding to Hägerstrand's (1982, p. 323) call to 'rise up from the flat map with its static patterns and think in terms of a world on the move, a world of incessant permutations.' But, as ever in Buchanan's world, stillness and movement connect – a song that begins: 'The line of traffic comes to a standstill', ends: 'A crowd of people everywhere / And then the people, all running forward / Easter parade.'

The mood of 'Easter Parade', and its emphasis on heightened senses, urban rhythms, civic essence, and re-living of moments, spaces and experiences, chimes with Hetherington's (2013) rhythmanalysis informed ideas on the role of noise, rhythm, and memory in archiving and understanding cities, and with Lefebvre's (2004, p. 36) original description of rhythmanalysis:

It requires equally attentive eyes and ears, a head and a memory and a heart. A memory? Yes ... to grasp this present otherwise than in an instantaneous moment, to restore it in its moments, in the movement of diverse rhythms. The recollection of other moments ... is indispensable ... in order not to isolate this present and in order to *live* it in all its diversity, made up of *subjects* and *objects*, subjective states and objective figures.

The funeral cortege tempo that carries the words and melody of 'Easter Parade' invites consideration of the speed at which urban existence is experienced and of how speed is represented and understood. Since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, a common assumption is that a 'speeding up' of time has taken place, particularly in cities, along with an accompanying annihilation of space by time (Harvey, 1990). But over the last 25 years such assumptions have begun to be interrogated and questioned. May and Thrift (2001, p. 1) suggested that time-space compression thinking created 'a familiar and unhelpful dualism moving around the foundational categories of Space and Time', whilst Hubbard and Lilley (2004, p. 273) stated that believing a speeding up has occurred 'tells only part of the story, as where there is speed there is also slowness ... geographers must be attentive to the uneven production of both space and time to grasp fully the ambivalence of modernity'. Crang (2001, p. 189), meanwhile, in work that highlighted the 'assemblage of different beats' generated by cities, recognised Lefebvre's key contribution to such discussions, noting how he

draws our attention to the overlain multiplicity of rhythms; dominant and quieter, cycles on daily, weekly, annual rhythms that continue to structure the everyday as much as 'linear time'.

Much of The Blue Nile's music encourages reflection on those same contrasting rhythms, especially differences between daily and nightly routines. Fulford-Jones (2008, p. 117) observes a key distinction between their first two albums: whilst first album, *A Walk Across the Rooftops*, 'photographs the city between sun-up and sundown; the warmer, lush *Hats* soundtracks the same streets after dark.' Quantick (1989, p. 40), in his review of *Hats*, similarly notes that 'a certain motif surfaces: i.e. three [of the seven] songs have got the words "night" in the title and the rest are set in the dark part of the day.' The emphasis in The Blue Nile's work on how rhythms and emotions are experienced differently in the city at different times supports May and Thrift's (2001, p. 20) belief that the 'imaginative realm is ... of considerable importance to our understandings of TimeSpace, and hence, in turn, to how we subsequently act in TimeSpace'. And the imaginative realm of music, which results of course from energy moving through time via a medium in space, provides an immanent platform to examine such matters, ones which should always warrant our attention given that 'time and space, as Kant reminded us, are the fundamental axes around which life revolves' (Cresswell, 2006, p. 4).



## Conclusion

Studies on specific sites of production and scenes of consumption have long dominated geographical research into music, as this article's review of literature highlighted. As important as such work continues to be – not least in addressing the discipline's recalcitrant visual leanings – a thematic extension of music geography is overdue. Hence, the alternative perspective adopted here: one that prioritizes the space of music over than the place of music.

By focusing on a case study act, The Blue Nile, the article sought to demonstrate, both to geographers and to others interested in popular culture and creative practice, how city writing can be (re-)constituted and enlivened through music. Rather than stressing how The Blue Nile's albums work as documents of Glasgow, their home city – an approach adopted by Brown (2010), Scott (2018), and others – the article emphasized more universal accounts of city living discernible in the group's output. Specifically, it considered how their work engaged with competing but complementary registers of urban existence: stillness and speed; mundanity and immensity; yearning and epiphanizing; silence and sound.

The Blue Nile were shown to be adept at relaying anxieties associated with navigating cities' multiple rhythms and at voicing pressures inherently linked to the increasing polyrhythmia of everyday life (Lefebvre, 2004). But in addition to depicting that unease, the group's music was also shown to provide a rare sonic environment in which keenly felt sensations triggered by a fracturing of ties between space and place and between time and movement could be worked through, by performer and listener alike.

The article sought a new vantage point for studying musical output enriched by motifs of mobility and immobility. It did so by seeking a fresh approach to the study of lyrics, pivoting away from the dominant social science focus on context and opting instead for a sustained engagement with the musical texts themselves. By doing so, the article explored how popular music can encourage new ways of conceptualising movement and stillness, connection and separation. It drew extensively on popular culture primary sources – most obviously the recordings of The Blue Nile – and on an array of secondary sources, with the article incorporating, and responding to, journalistic insights found in newspapers, magazines, music papers, websites, and popular music books – including contemporary accounts from when The Blue Nile were active as well as subsequent commentaries. It deployed fact and opinion from radio programmes, TV documentaries, novels, paintings, blogs, and podcasts, and sought to highlight the value of such sources for geographic enquiry.

The article contended that critical engagement with a specific area of popular culture – in this case, popular music – animates understanding of the urban experience and enriches analysis of real and imagined landscapes. It demonstrated that a deep reading – or close listening – of popular culture texts provides fresh insights into concerns central to social and cultural geography, including those of mobility and cultural memory and emotion and affect. Lyrics, in tandem with their performance and musical setting, were shown to construct space, but were also revealed to be a vivid means for investigating and representing how everyday life is shaped by the alternating pull of motion and inertia, and by an interlacing of time and space – both public and private, exterior and interior.

Throughout, this article challenged certain accepted thematic understandings. Lyrical themes of motion and mobility, particularly when male-authored, have frequently been synonymous with a flight from domesticity and responsibility and a search for new possibilities, especially sexual ones; these ideas have been examined with regard to popular music generally (Jarvis, 1985), and in relation to specific artists, such as Bruce Springsteen (Moss, 2011) and Frank Sinatra (Milburn, 2019). Supplementing this research has been writing that has foregrounded the romanticization of speed in popular music, for example, Greil Marcus's (1989) aforementioned analysis of Jonathan Richman's song, 'Roadrunner'. But this article has shown that this conventional nexus of popular music and speed does not apply to The Blue Nile, a group whose music was partly characterized by its 'slow-motion pace' (Dalton, 2008). In much of their material, movement, if present at all, was portrayed principally as a corollary to thought processes. The Blue Nile were not an act that eulogized wide vistas or speeding on empty roads across vast landscapes, instead they celebrated the quiet joys and secret sorrows associated with nocturnal meandering through city spaces. Theirs was a rare attempt to use music and lyrics to better understand emotions that contribute to, and result from, staying put – to conveying the experience of stillness when, all around, there is kinesis: *'Though I'm standing still / I'm in a moving place'*.

## Notes

1. *Musique concrète* was a movement centred on Paris in the late 1940s and 1950s led by the composers Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry. Its practitioners experimented with the electronic manipulation of sound, and with the incorporation into music of environmental 'found sounds'.
2. *Billy Liar* is a 1959 novel by Keith Waterhouse. The story is based around the title character who constantly dreams of escaping his stifling existence but who, when given the chance to leave, refuses to go.

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## The Blue Nile's Albums Discography

*A Walk Across the Rooftops* (1984)  
*Hats* (1989)  
*Peace at Last* (1996)  
*High* (2004)

All albums above: © and © Confetti Records trading as The Blue Nile; except for *A Walk Across the Rooftops*: © and © Epstein Records trading as The Blue Nile.

All Blue Nile lyrics cited in this article: Paul Gerard Buchanan; BMG Rights Management.

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