

# **“Bad Girls Do It Well”**

Musical Exoticism and Commodifying Difference in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Introduction

“Musical exoticism” is a term that I got familiar with during the bachelor programme Musicology at Utrecht University. We studied exoticism as a stylistic phenomenon which gained most of its popularity in eighteenth century opera. When I became interested in the subject, I noticed that the focus on exoticism as a stylistic label and as a phenomenon of the past seemed to be the standard for most of the available literature on the subject. The social relevance and problematic aspects of the portrayals of Others were not an important part of these studies.

Last year, I attended a lecture from the American scholar Jason King. He talked about the British-Sri-Lankan artist M.I.A. and described her as a postcolonial popstar, which he conceptualized as “a popstar from a non-western country, who creates music that supports a postcolonial worldview.”<sup>1</sup> While touching on some exotic stereotypes in her music, he labeled her as an artist who is aware of power inequalities and evaluated her as “doing good for the world.” The use of this new terminology for an artist I was so familiar with, triggered my interest in musical exoticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I wondered how these contemporary exotic works have been studied in musicology, and how these newer forms of exoticism relate to earlier portrayals of Others.

Both of the encounters with musical exoticism led to the realization of this thesis. The research question I aim to answer is: in what ways does musical exoticism work as a commodifying factor in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular music? I will investigate three categories of commodifying Others, which I think are the most relevant forms of musical exoticism in the current popular music industry: music relying on exotic signifiers, musical borrowings and collaborations. Doing this, I will explain how these categories serve as commodifying factors of Otherness for the Western audience.

## Method and approach

My approach derives from different fields of research. From the field of musicology, I will use concepts from traditional musicology and popular music studies. This is apparent by the focus on both musical stylistic features and the cultural meaning of musical exoticism. Musicological studies on newer forms of commodifying Others often use concepts deriving from postcolonial studies. The field of postcolonialism investigates the cultural legacy of colonialism. My thesis will not take a postcolonial approach, but will take steps into exploring how these concepts are relevant to the subject of musical exoticism.

The three categories I established, music relying on exotic signifiers, musical borrowings and collaborations, will be leading concepts in this thesis and structure my discussion of musical exoticism. Several case studies that fall under these categories will reveal the issues that are essential to consider in a study of musical exoticism.

In the first chapter, I will address the current state of musicological research on the subjects of exoticism and related concepts. A state of play on exoticism in musicology will be my starting point: how has the subject been treated in the last two decades? Two publications of the last ten years, *Musical Exoticism* (2009) from Ralph Locke and *Beyond Exoticism* (2007) from Timothy Taylor, will be discussed in-depth, since these are key publications in the most recent literature in this field. A separate section on the postcolonial approach follows the section on exoticism.

After explaining my theoretical framework, I will discuss the first category of musical exoticism: music containing exotic signifiers. In a case-study, I will investigate the sonic elements that are deployed to signify Otherness in M.I.A.’s song “Bad Girls.” Comparing these “exotic signs” to the signs that are deployed in classical music, I will argue that this song stands in line with the long history of portraying Others in classical music. Furthermore, I will show how the music video and these musical signifiers together create a new meaning: the long-lasting stereotype of the Arab world as savage and rebellious. The reception of “Bad Girls” reveals the problematic stance that Western critics have towards artists of color who use some kind of musical exoticism.

The two other categories of musical exoticism I will discuss, emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: collaboration and sampling. I will first address the most relevant musicological studies concerning these categories. Three songs from M.I.A. serve as examples of why these categories can be seen as exotic, and how these categories commodify Otherness. In the discussion, I will introduce the term autoexoticism, and explain why artists of color continue to exoticize themselves. Here, the broader social meaning of musical

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<sup>1</sup>Jason King, “Postcolonial Popstar” (Lecture, Utrecht University, December 2, 2016).

exoticism is revealed.

In the entire thesis, M.I.A.'s music will have the focus in my discussions. Her career serves as a great example of an artist of color who exoticizes herself, while stating to be politically affiliated. M.I.A.'s position as a refugee and her political affiliations add an extra layer of complexity to the different categories of musical exoticism. These complexities are central issues in current debates on musical exoticism, because they are products of globalization. To show that M.I.A. serves as an example of many "autoexoticizing artists," I will discuss several artists of color who do the same thing.

### **Relevancy**

With this thesis, I want to add to the musicological research on the subject of musical exoticism. Existing literature focuses mainly on classical music and its musical style, or has a focus on newer forms of commodifying Others and leave earlier research undiscussed. Because of this gap, the broader social relevance this subject has had for centuries is left out.

The subjects of musical exoticism and the commodification of Others have a broad social relevance, since they reveal power inequalities between different players in the popular music industry. With different players, I mean the Western popular music industry on the one hand, and non-Western musicians on the other. Non-Western musicians are used as a marketing handle, since their Otherness is appealing to the Western consumer. In the category of music containing exotic signifiers, the general notion of Otherness is evoked through music and video. These portrayals of Others keep long existing stereotypes of cultures alive.

In the last couple of years, public debate on racism and difference has increased in Western countries. In international politics, the popularity of xenophobes like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Geert Wilders shows an intensification of discussions about race and an increasing division of social groups. In the Netherlands, the so-called "Zwarte-Pietendiscussie" (black-Pete discussion), which is about the Dutch racist tradition of blackfacing during the yearly "Sinterklaas"-festivities, also intensified over the last decade. The international activist movement Black Lives Matter started in 2003 and campaigns against institutionalized racism. These recent developments show that the public debate on racism intensified. For musicology, it is essential to acknowledge that these tensions and inequalities also manifest themselves in the popular music industry. Investigating the commodification of Others and the sonic stereotypes of Otherness will help to acknowledge that music is not a universal art-form that is free of politics, but is in fact a product of society.

# 1. Musical Exoticism: Musicology and Postcolonial Studies

## 1.1 Exoticism as a Musical Borrowing

The majority of musicological literature on musical exoticism is relatively recent: before the 1990's, studies on the subject were almost nonexistent.<sup>2</sup> Most of the first publications on musical exoticism deal with the question of borrowing: how the music of a non-Western country that is portrayed, influenced the Western exotic work. This is what Ralph Locke calls the 'Exotic Style Only' paradigm, which I will elaborate on later. The article "Orientalism and Musical Style" (1998) by Derek Scott is a part of this paradigm.<sup>3</sup> In the introduction, Scott states that it is not important to know where the exotic work is set geographically. However, in the article, Scott investigates different several exotic styles linked directly to a specific country or people (*style hongrois*, *style turc*, Spain, the Far East). He tries to find out how the Western composers got familiar with a certain national style: for example, the use of whole tones in Ravels *Shéhérazade* could have come from Indonesian music he heard at the Paris World Exposition in 1889.<sup>4</sup> The list of features that are used as musical markers of cultural difference underlines his focus on musical elements.<sup>5</sup> Scott's approach may be limited, but the list is still serves a reference for investigating exotic signifiers in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular music.

Another book that belongs to the "Exotic-Style Only" Paradigm is the essay-volume *The Exotic in Western Music*, edited by Jonathan Bellman (1998). In the introduction, Bellman defines exoticism as "[...] the borrowing or use of musical materials that evoke distant locales or alien frames of reference. [...] characteristics and easily recognized musical gestures from the alien culture are assimilated into a more familiar style, giving it an exotic color and suggestiveness."<sup>6</sup> The terms "borrowing" and "use" show that Bellman takes a stance towards exoticism that is uncommon nowadays, because these words imply that exotic music is realistic and true to the portrayed region.

## 1.2 From "Exotic-Style Only" to "All the Music in Full Context"

A recent and comprehensive study is *Musical Exoticism* by Ralph Locke. Besides providing several case studies on different genres (but with a focus on Western classical music), he extensively discusses the concept of exoticism and untangles its implications and related concepts. Locke advocates for a broad understanding of exoticism, as evident from his definition of the concept, consisting of five aspects. The first aspect is the following:

"Musical exoticism is the process of evoking in or through music - whether that music is 'exotic-sounding' or not - a place, people or social milieu that is not entirely imaginary and that differs profoundly from the home country or culture in attitudes, customs and morals. [...] More precisely, it is the process of evoking a place that is *perceived* as different from home by the people who create the exoticist cultural product and by the people who receive it."<sup>7</sup>

This aspect of Locke's definition of exoticism is very different from the previous publications. By specifying that music can be " 'exotic-sounding' or not," Locke draws upon what he calls the "All the Music in Full Context" Paradigm, which I will describe later. "Evoking [...] a place, people or social milieu that is not entirely imaginary" is different from previous publications, because those consider exotic musical elements as borrowing of musical elements from a specific region. The other aspects of Locke's definition consider how exoticism has impact on the culture where it is produced and the tension between the portrayed region and the "home culture." For instance, the place that is being evoked is being perceived as different or similar to home by the listeners, which may be emotionally charged.<sup>8</sup> The differences are generally consciously conceived by the creators, but the resemblances are not. Through years of performing the work, the meaning

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Derek B. Scott, "Orientalism and Musical Style," *Musical Quarterly* 82.2 (1998): 309–335.

<sup>4</sup> Scott, "Orientalism and Musical Style," 314.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, "Orientalism and Musical Style," 317.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan, Bellman, "Introduction," in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), ix.

<sup>7</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

of differences and resemblances is likely to change as a different cultural situation may bring different values and expectations.<sup>9</sup>

Locke states that this definition still is incomplete, but emphasizes that exoticism does not solely rely on the presence of special exotic coded musical styles or elements.<sup>10</sup> By stating this, he criticizes the paradigm that was present in musicology, which he calls the “Exotic-Style Only” Paradigm.<sup>11</sup> Previous studies, like Bellman’s and Scott’s, only consider musical works that contain exotic stylistic features. These works are a part of what Locke calls “Overt exoticism.”<sup>12</sup> However, he states that works without these musical codes can also be exotic. For instance, in Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, the Japanese geisha Cio-Cio-San (*Madama Butterfly*) is not represented through the typical pentatonic writing, but still delicacy and smallness is evoked. In the course of the opera, the audience is provided with “information” about the Japanese, for instance in the libretto. Where her name “butterfly” is already “delicate,” Cio-Cio-San’s lyrics express her vulnerability towards men.

Locke states that the “Exotic Style Only” Paradigm is popular because of musicology’s general focus on “the music itself.”<sup>13</sup> The new paradigm Locke proposes is the “All the Music in Full Context” Paradigm, which does not exclude works that do not contain exotically stylistic features, and also focuses on historical, social and cultural circumstances in relation to the exotic work.

Locke stresses that the musicological work that has been done in the “Exotic-Style Only” Paradigm is very valuable and uses these studies to create a list of musical stylistic features that are often deployed to suggest an exotic location or culture.<sup>14</sup> He states that, these features often work together to create a meaning: they work in clusters.<sup>15</sup> Together with Scotts list of stylistic features, I will use this list to compare musical exoticism in classical music and popular music.

### 1.3 Timothy Taylor: Beyond Exoticism

The second book with a new approach towards musical exoticism is *Beyond Exoticism* (2007) by Timothy Taylor. Taylor advocates for new ways of analyzing exoticism (or as he writes “the representation of Others in music”), because power relations in the cultural world have changed drastically. Before industrialization, social élites with court composers had “the power of representation” of Others. With the rise of popular musics and mass culture in the twentieth century, this power shifted to corporations. Taylor states that because of this power shift, the way we analyze this representation of Others should also change. In most of his articles, this means that he focuses on the popular music industry and the marketing of non-Western musicians, and the impact this has on society. Taylor proposes to eliminate the word “exoticism” and replace it with “hybridity,” because this word is nowadays used as a marketing handle for the music of Others. Besides, Taylor states that hybridity is a better word to describe musicians who are not strictly Western but have a diasporic identity, and who still try to evoke an exotic locale or culture.<sup>16</sup> I will describe the concept of hybridity and my choice for the use of the word exoticism more in-depth in paragraph 1.6.

Taylor criticizes musicological writings until now and blames the authors of fetishizing form and style and thinks the focus should be more on social, cultural and historical processes.<sup>17</sup> Here, it seems like he is advocating for the same “All the Music in Full Context” Paradigm as Locke proposed. However, Locke stated that most of *Beyond Exoticism* book is framed within the “Exotic Style Only” Paradigm by focussing on musical signifiers of Otherness.<sup>18</sup> I strongly disagree with this argument, as Taylor relates all musical signifiers he mentions to broader cultural issues. For instance, he describes how the press of that time wrote about Rameau’s *Les Sauvages* from *Les Indes Galantes* (they strongly believed the music was authentic Indian music).<sup>19</sup> On his turn, Taylor also mentions Locke as one of the authors who “shows symptoms of the classical music ideology.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 214.

<sup>13</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy D. Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 141.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Where both Locke and Taylor seem to agree on the need of a new approach, their approaches are different. Locke pays a lot of attention to defining exoticism and relating concepts. The way he categorizes different kinds of popular music, “certain streams of cultural life that tend to make less ambitious aesthetic claims, such as popular song, Broadway Musical, and Film music,”<sup>21</sup> is in my opinion, far too narrow and denigrating towards all genres popular music has to offer. Taylor invests more in issues that are relevant to the present day music-industry than Locke, and therefore makes a more relevant contribution to the subject. His focus on artists who are not considered to be Western themselves and the way they are treated by the music industry shows a great interest in broader issues in the current globalized world. I will continue on discussing the 21<sup>st</sup> century and new forms of musical exoticism in paragraph 1.6.

#### 1.4 Music as a Signifier of Exoticism

Locke’s “musical signifiers of Otherness”<sup>22</sup> or “stylistic features that are deployed to suggest an exotic locale or culture,”<sup>23</sup> Bellman’s “musical gestures”<sup>24</sup> and Taylor’s “musical signs signifying non-western Others”<sup>25</sup> all imply that music is a communicational medium. But how does this work, and how does this relate to the perception of musical works as exotic?

Many semiotic concepts originate in linguistics. Music is often compared to language, but it is argued that music contains an extra layer of meaning that is connected to the unconscious of people, like movement patterns of the body.<sup>26</sup> According to Richard Middleton, existing models of semiotics concerning the sender, channel, message and the receiver of a code often do not consider the multiplicity of variables of every musical code.<sup>27</sup> Music has strictly musical codes like pitch, rhythm, and the use of certain instruments, but also extra-musical codes like theatrical elements (for instance in opera).

The model of the “sender, channel, message, receiver” provides a starting point for investigating if a work can be considered as exotic, and to whom. Some studies of musical exoticism focus mainly on the receiver of the work: the listener. Locke quotes the art historian Frederick Bohrer, who states that “[...] reception is not merely a useful methodology in the study of exoticism. Rather, exoticism in a fundamental sense, *is* reception.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, reception is a very important concept, because the reception of a work is formed by the listeners personal experiences and previous knowledge of everything surrounding the work in question. Locke states that exoticism arises in an interactive middle between what the listener knows of a certain place, and what the listener *thinks* to know of a certain place, which is not always correct.<sup>29</sup> But besides the relationship of the listener to the musical work or portrayed region, the relationship of the composer (or nowadays, artist) to the portrayed region is as important for defining a work as exotic. Sometimes the difference between exoticism and nationalism is a thin line: for instance, Chopin’s mazurkas could be considered as exotic, because he was mostly influenced by salon mazurkas rather than Polish folk culture.<sup>30</sup> The use of compositional stereotypes, or musical codes evoking exoticism, and the relation of the composer towards to portrayed region makes that a work can be considered as exotic, rather than nationalistic.

When a composer or artist uses stereotypical musical elements from his or her country to exoticize themselves, this is called autoexoticism. According to James Parakilas, musicians from countries that are considered as exotic by the Western consumers are forced to exoticize themselves in order to be successful in Western market.<sup>31</sup> He states that one of the first cases of autoexoticism were Spanish composers like Manuel de Falla, who helped to create an image of Spain as exotic and distant.<sup>32</sup> Autoexoticism will be an important concept in considering M.I.A.’s music and other musicians of color. In my discussion, I will argue that these musicians also autoexoticize to meet the expectations of the Western consumer.

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<sup>21</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> Bellman, “Introduction,” ix.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 172.

<sup>27</sup> Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 173.

<sup>28</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 69.

<sup>30</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> James Parakilas, “How Spain got a Soul.” In *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 139.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

### 1.5 Orientalism and Postcolonial Analysis

In musicology, the words “exoticism” and “Orientalism” have been used both to describe the same phenomenon.<sup>33</sup> There does not seem to be consensus about both the exact meaning and the difference between the concepts. Two explanations of the difference between Orientalism and exoticism are most common in musicological writings. The first is that Orientalism is only concerned with the West and its position against “the Orient,” and not with other ethnical groups. In early writings, “the West” did not include the United States, and the “Orient” only included the Middle-East and not South and East Asia.

Another explanation of this difference is that in Orientalism, there is more focus on a binary opposition and unequal power relationship between a superior “Self” and a less privileged “Other”. Following this, Ralph Locke states that Orientalism is a more sharply disapproving substitute for the word exoticism, and therefore is not fruitful in an analysis of music.<sup>34</sup> Both explanations can be traced back to Orientalism as conceptualized by Edward Said. His book *Orientalism* (1978) describes the academic study of “the East” by historians and literary writers in the 19th century.<sup>35</sup> They tried to understand the Orient and explain its cultures. The result is a binary opposition between the Western “Self” and Eastern “Other,” where the East is depicted as uncivilized, underdeveloped, irrational, mysterious, and primitive.<sup>36</sup> The identity of the Self is constituted in contrast to this irrational Other as civilized, enlightened, rational and democratic.<sup>37</sup> This comfortably places the Western Self always hierarchical above the Eastern Other.

Because the meaning of the word Orientalism has changed drastically over the years, I chose to use the word exoticism. Besides, I want to underline that the portrayals of Others in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are a continuation of earlier portrayals of Others.

Said’s *Orientalism* is generally seen as one of the founding texts of Postcolonial studies. This field of study focuses on the cultural legacy of colonization. The use of postcolonial theory for analyzing exotic portrayals in music has been criticized in musicology. For example, Jonathan Bellman criticizes the postcolonial approach towards music: he states it is useless when there is no unequal power relationship.<sup>38</sup> In my case studies, I will not directly apply postcolonial analysis. However, the notions of “Self” and “Other” will be important in my analysis, because musical exoticism also constitutes the identity of the rational Self against the irrational Other.

### 1.6 The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Authenticity, Hybridity, Global Bass

In this paragraph, I will consider concepts that are important for analyzing newer forms of musical exoticism. Part two of Taylor’s book *Beyond Exoticism*, called “Globalization,” is useful for my focus on the 21<sup>st</sup> century popular music and in particular music made by nonwestern musicians. Taylor treats a broad span of issues that are very relevant for the topic of musical exoticism, like the marketing of non-western musicians, albums that are the product of a collaboration with a Western and a non-Western artist, and authenticity. I will elaborate on these issues in my discussion of musical borrowings and collaborations in chapter 3.

The first musical genre that has been extensively studied in terms of marketing of non-Western musicians, is world music. At first, the term was used by ethnomusicologists to describe all the local music of a particular culture, society or country, that is not considered to be Western: as a genre, it separates the West from the rest.<sup>39</sup> During the 1970’s and 1980’s, record companies incorporated the term as a genre to describe all music that relies on some degree of non-Western instrumentation.<sup>40</sup> This includes the local, “ethnic” music from musicians from all over the world, but also collaborations between Western and non-Western musicians. In other words, the term world music reduces all non-Western music under one genre, for the sake of marketing.

Authenticity is an important concept in the discourse of world music. This concept has been explained in different ways in different discourses, but always with a shared assumption of something real,

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<sup>33</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penquin Group, 1978), 1-368.

<sup>36</sup> Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political economy of Passion*, (Boulder: Westview, 1995), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan D. Bellman, “Musical Voyages and Their Baggage: Orientalism in Music and Critical Musicology,” *Musical Quarterly* 94 (2011): 433.

<sup>39</sup> Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew J. Forss, “World music.” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2259436>.

original, and essential. In relation to world music, it is mostly explained as cultural or ethnographic accuracy.<sup>41</sup> Authenticity has been used as a marketing handle, because Western consumers are drawn to everything that is “real:” for instance, the consumer thinks a gangsta rapper should be black and poor, not white and middle-class.<sup>42</sup> Besides, Western consumers expect native musicians to make real, “ethnic” music, and not to be contaminated by Western music. This makes authenticity a problematic term: what is authentic to the Western consumer is based on their perception of non-Western music.<sup>43</sup> The appeal of authentic music to Western listeners is related to the appeal of exoticism, because both are drawn to a certain primitive realness of a cultural Other.

In the 1990’s, the concept of hybridity was used by scholars and critics in relation to music as an alternative for the concept of authenticity.<sup>44</sup> It was a way to describe music that could not be described in terms of authenticity, because of the mixing of different styles. Besides, the discourse of hybridity was a way to consider diasporic musicians and their position towards the popular music industry. Taylor states that hybridity has joined authenticity as a marketing handle, to describe all music with a certain mixing of styles.<sup>45</sup> In addition, he claims that authenticity is a less important concept in hybrid musical styles, because consumers do not question the authenticity of hybrid musicians. However, authenticity is still an important concept in relation to 21<sup>st</sup> century music, because hybrid musicians also sample or work with “authentic Others” and claim to produce an authentic sound. My case-studies will support this argument.

A musical genre that can be called a hybrid, is global bass. Most of the music I cite in my thesis, and in particular all of M.I.A.’s work is a part of this genre. The German musical software company *Native Instruments* organizes a series of events built around the concept of global bass, called “Tropical Frequencies.” In a lecture on “Tropical Frequencies,” DJ and producer Throwing Shade conceptualized global bass as the following: “Contemporary music that combines characteristics of traditional music styles, but with an electronic sound pallet.”<sup>46</sup> She underlines that global bass is a typical 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon, as its driving forces are the internet and musical software. It encompasses all cultural exchange, but has also now reached the mainstream. Here, she mentions M.I.A. as one of the main Western producers of global bass. Throwing Shade emphasized that global bass is a continuation of earlier forms of cultural exchange, the main difference being that the development of this music happened way faster.<sup>47</sup>

### 1.7 M.I.A.: a Hybrid Musician

M.I.A.’s exotic, politically loaded music in combination with her position as a refugee make her a striking case for my study. M.I.A. is the artist-name for Mathangi “Maya” Arulpragasam. She is a British-Sri-lankan artist who is currently living in the United States. Her music can be best described as politically-loaded electronic dance music, but most importantly, M.I.A. incorporates musical elements that are not considered to be Western in most of her songs. This is done by the use of instrumentation, rhythms, melodies and other musical elements that she derives from different parts of the world. Besides, she uses samples from several non-Western artists, and she works together with non-Western musicians. For her mostly Western audience, the combination of a familiar electronic beat (similar to contemporary hip-hop or trap artists) and these exotic signifiers make her music appealing. This combination also makes that her music can be described as global bass.

M.I.A.’s position as a refugee complicates discussions of Self and Other, because it can be debated whether M.I.A. can be seen as a Western artist. But because her music is produced in the Western popular music industry and her main audience is Western, I consider her as a Western artist.

During her career, M.I.A. was targeted by several critics writing for mainstream media, who accused her of cultural appropriation. I will show some of these comments in chapter 2. The general consensus seems to be that M.I.A. cannot use music from countries that she is not from, because she is from Sri-Lanka. At the same time, M.I.A. has a huge fan base and is praised for using Others music and speaking up for ethnic

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<sup>41</sup> Taylor, *Global Pop*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Simon Frith, “The Discourse of World Music.” In *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 308.

<sup>44</sup> Kariann Goldschmitt, “Hybridity.” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2256796>.

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 141.

<sup>46</sup> “Tropical Frequencies Introduction with Throwing Shade.” YouTube video, 22:14, posted by “Native Instruments”, January 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLkFqg7ZvTWb3CSXIyIXlepE51VtJZHY1z&v=ul81PouFCnQ>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

minorities. The general audience seems to think that M.I.A. should not be accused of cultural appropriation because of her work as a political artist. I will address this tension in the subsequent chapters.

## 2. “Bad Girls:” Exotic Signifiers or Sonic Stereotypes?

The first category I want to explore in my research of musical exoticism in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular music, is music that employs exotic signifiers. Such music tries to evoke a certain place or culture, using several exotic signifiers in both the music and the video. In this chapter, I will show why M.I.A.’s music is exotic. Her hit single “Bad Girls” (2010) will be the focus of my analysis, which will concern the main musical exotic signifiers. In this analysis I will rely on the lists of exotic signifiers from Locke and Scott as described in chapter 1.

Because the music video for “Bad Girls” has a big role in evoking Otherness, I will elaborate on how the music and the images work together. I argue that the music and the video work together to create an exoticizing image of Arabs and the Arab world: the image of the Arab as savage and rebellious.

### 2.1 Mathangi, Maya, M.I.A.

Because M.I.A.’s identity as a Sri-Lankan refugee had a major impact on her career, it is important to describe her background. M.I.A. is born in 1975 in Hounslow West-London as a daughter of Sri-Lankan parents. Because they moved to Sri-Lanka when she was only six months old, the first eleven years of her life were influenced by the civil war that was raging in the country. The Tamils, the biggest ethnic minority from Sri-Lanka, were fighting for independency against the Sinhalese government. The Arulpragasam family is part of the Tamil population. M.I.A.’s father Arul Pragasam became a political activist and was one of the founding members of the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students, an organization fighting for the rights of the Tamil population. Media often falsely claimed that he was a member of the military separatist group “The Tamil Tigers,” a rumor fed by M.I.A.’s love for tiger prints in clothing and visual presentations.<sup>48</sup> The link to this organization, which is now in most countries considered to be terrorist, had a major impact on representations of M.I.A. in the media. These representations are often rude and sometimes even xenophobic, which I will show in paragraph 2.4.

M.I.A.’s career as a musician started in 2005 when her debut-album *Arular* came out. Her fifth album *AIM* came out in 2016 and will be her last studio-album.<sup>49</sup> Over the years, M.I.A. has built a huge fanbase, mostly in the United States and Europe. All her albums have a different political activist cause. She started with raising awareness about the civil war in Sri-Lanka with her debut-album *Arular*. Afterwards, her focus widened to include a variety of political subjects like privacy in the digital era, racial inequality and feminism. These political affiliations underline the identity as a rebellious popstar M.I.A. takes on.

### 2.2 The Music

“Bad Girls” is a song from the album *Matangi* (2013) and is released as a single in 2012. Nowadays, the song can still be heard in dance-clubs. It has 58.390.181 plays on Spotify and 96.024.248 views on YouTube on 19 April 2017, which makes “Bad Girls” one of M.I.A.’s most popular singles. The most important phrase that is repeated twenty times in the song, is “Live fast, die young, bad girls do it well.”<sup>50</sup> Without the music video, the song seems to be a party-anthem that addresses girls who live a life full of parties, due to the lyrics and the beat that reminds of hip-hop and trap artists. M.I.A. said that this was her goal:

"Nobody wants to be dancing to political songs. [...] I wanted to see if I could write songs about something important and make it sound like nothing. And it kind of worked."<sup>51</sup>

Apart from the electronic dance beat, the song contains several musical signifiers that work together to evoke a feeling of exoticism to the Western ear. Together, these signifiers enhance the exotic appeal: they work in a cluster. This cluster of exotic signifiers underlines Locke’s statement about exotic signifiers working together to create meaning.<sup>52</sup>

The song starts with two acoustic-sounding instruments: a drum and a plucked instrument. The drum

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<sup>48</sup> Lisa Weems, “Refuting “Refugee Chic”: Transnational Girl(hoods) and the Guerilla Pedagogy of M.I.A.,” *Feminist Formations* 26. 1 (2014): 122.

<sup>49</sup> “M.I.A. says new album will be her last,” *The Guardian*, accessed May 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jul/15/mia-aim-last-album>.

<sup>50</sup> The full lyrics are provided in the Appendix 2.

<sup>51</sup> “Not so missing in action,” *Nirali Magazine*, accessed May 31, 2017, <https://niralimagazine.com/2004/10/not-so-missing-in-action/>.

<sup>52</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 50.

and the plucked instrument play a syncopated rhythm, and the plucked instrument repeats the same note. Both the syncopated rhythm and the absence of a tonal area makes this sequence unstable and unfamiliar for Western listeners. To clarify the music I provided a simplified transcription of the main themes of “Bad Girls.”<sup>53</sup> The syncopated rhythm and melody are shown in the two staves at the bottom.

### 1. Simplified and approximate transcription of the main themes of "Bad Girls."

After this sequence is repeated for eight times, M.I.A. comes in with her first phrase: “Live fast, die young, bad girls do it well.” The melody and rhythm of the vocals are simple, which provides stability in both the tonal area and the metric pulse. Together with the vocals, new electronic rhythms kick in, that are not syncopated and make the song sound similar to any other electronic dance song, with accents on 1 and 3.

When the phrase “live fast, die young” is repeated for the third time, a new melody is introduced. This melody is the hook of the rest of the song and is quite similar to the vocal melody, as shown in the transcription. The last line of the first verse “Don’t go screaming if I blow you with a bang” is followed by a short stop, after which a phrase with the text “Suki Suki” is accompanied by a full electronic dance beat. The acoustic sounding instruments are hard to hear after this. At this moment, the song sounds even more similar to other Western electronic dance tunes. The rest of the song is essentially a repetition of these elements.

In this song, M.I.A. employs several exotic signifiers that are classified by Locke and Scott. The first is the mode of the song. One of the exotic signifiers Locke mentions, is “Modes and harmonies that are considered non-normative in the era and place where the work was composed.”<sup>54</sup> He particularly mentions that a lowered second degree is often used. This interval is very important in “Bad Girls”: a minor second can be heard in the hook in #G - A, #F - F, and E - #D. Besides this insistent use of the lowered second degree, the song does not use the Western tonal system.

The second feature is mentioned by both Locke and Scott, which is the use of repeating rhythmic or melodic patterns. As apparent in my transcription, the whole song is build around two repeating melodic patterns. This repeating rhythmic sequence can be translated into the exotic signifier of a general focus on rhythm instead of melody. The use of foreign Western instruments or Western instruments in a non-Western way, which Locke mentions, is also an exotic signifier in this song. However, in “Bad Girls,” this signifier is present in a 21<sup>st</sup> century form: most probably, all the acoustic sounding instruments are electronically produced.

In Scott’s list of “Oriental devices,” two other elements are present in “Bad Girls.” The first is the

<sup>53</sup> For my transcription, I used the instrumental version: “M I A Bad Girls Instrumental,” YouTube video, 3:47, posted by Maya Jack, October 7, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDjxUopFt44>.

<sup>54</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 51.

extensive use of percussion and unpitched percussion in particular.<sup>55</sup> The second element is the use of trills and grace notes.<sup>56</sup> In the hook of the song, grace notes appear twice. All these exotic signifiers show that a lot of elements that are deployed in classical music to evoke exoticism are also present in popular music, and more specific in global bass.

### 2.3 The Video

After considering how musical signifiers evoke exoticism, I will show how the music video for “Bad Girls” underlines racial stereotypes about the Arab world. The music video is shot in Morocco. Its director is Romain Gavras, who also directed the video for M.I.A.’s single “Born Free” in 2010. The video is set in a desert. The specific country remains unnamed in the video, but several images are used to locate the video in an Arab country. In short, it shows M.I.A. hanging out with Arabs, and participating in a dangerous street-race. M.I.A. stated that she wanted to make this video because of her obsession with cars: “As an artist I have always had an obsession with cars. [...] It was nice [...] to put an image to the obsession”.<sup>57</sup>

The idea of putting a street-race into a video came from YouTube videos, as Gavras stated: “We stumbled upon these videos on YouTube, we were mesmerized. I must have watched all videos of Saudis drifting on two wheels.”<sup>58</sup> M.I.A. seconds Romain’s assessment: “[...] it was like the coolest shit I’ve ever seen.”<sup>59</sup>

The video starts with a shot of an empty, foggy desert, which is accompanied by the sound of wind blowing. Together, it suggests that the location is a very distant and exotic location. A bus full of men wearing Gulf-style clothing and women wearing head scarves makes that the video seems to be set somewhere in the Middle East. The unstable acoustic rhythm and melody underline that the portrayed country is far away from the Western world.

When the first sentence “Life fast, die young” kicks in, M.I.A. is standing in front of a car that is surrounded by women. They are all wearing headscarves with tiger-print and a lot of gold jewelry. M.I.A. talked about her inspiration for their appearance:

“That inspiration comes from one image of an Iranian chick driving a truck, and she was wearing this like crazy outfit, and loads of gold, and amazing nails, super feminine. But she was like all covered up and she was a trucker.”<sup>60</sup>

The tension between masculinity and femininity seems to be what M.I.A. particularly fascinated in this image. Driving a truck is considered as a masculine profession: the fact that it is driven by an Iranian women who on top of that underlines her femininity carries out rebelliousness, which is the main thing M.I.A. is striving for.



2. M.I.A. surrounded by "rebellious Arabs", still from the music video of "Bad Girls."

Beside their notable appearance, the women have an important role in the video, as they are drifting in the cars and dancing at M.I.A.’s side (or behind M.I.A.). Unlike the clothing of the women, all men are wearing *kanduras* and *keffiyehs* that are mostly white and look all the same.<sup>61</sup> They are less participating in the race and are always dancing at the side: most importantly, they never dance together with M.I.A. This can be seen in a still from the video in figure 2. In the video, the Arabs serve as a rebellious background, for a rebellious Western singer. The rest of the video shows M.I.A. in the middle of the street race. She dances among the girls, wearing colorful and “Western” clothing. She participates in the street race and sits on a drifting car while polishing her nails.

<sup>55</sup> Scott, “Orientalism and Musical Style,” 317.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> “M.I.A. - "Bad Girls" (Official Behind the Scenes): Noisy Specials #08,” YouTube video, 13:35, posted by “Noisy,” March 12, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6-sNTOhYnU>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Bad Girls or Bad Arab Stereotypes?: MIA's New Gulf-Cool Rap Video Offends,” Akbawaba, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.albawaba.com/editorchoice/bad-girls-or-bad-arab-stereotypes-mias-new-gulf-cool-rap-video-offends-411996#comment-form-title>.

The separation of men and women, the daring clothing worn by the women and women driving cars in this video prompted an interpretation that this video takes a political stance against the fact that women cannot drive in Saudi Arabia. However, according to Garas, no political message was intended with the video:

“We didn’t want to portray guys versus women. [...] This [car racing] is a unifying object, not something that divides men and women. Each time an Arab woman appears on screen, the audience expects a preach such as ‘Arab men beat their wives, that’s why they yearn to be free’. Whereas here, there is no already-seen [*sic*] social meaning.”<sup>62</sup>

M.I.A. and the director were very aware of the fact that they made use of stereotypical elements in the video: “The idea was to compile Arabic references, fantasized or not, into a pop video. Pop videos usually show American kids in their element. Here, you got Arab kids in an insane car rodeo element.”<sup>63</sup> The phrase “Arabic references, fantasized or not” shows that they were exoticizing the Middle-East and “Arab people” on purpose.

But what parts of the video can be seen as the racial stereotyping the Arabs? In the video of “Bad Girls,” M.I.A. consistently deploys the long-existing stereotype of Arabs being rebellious and wild. Besides deploying racing as a very rebellious and wild activity, the video shows women grabbing a gun at the phrase “don’t go screaming if I blow you with a bang.” This links the Arab states to violence. The image of Arabs as wild, rural and rebellious is most appealing to M.I.A., as a “rebellious” artist herself. Unlike M.I.A.’s statement that no political message was intended in this video, the constant division of men and women suggests otherwise. The glamorous clothing of the women against the traditional clothing of men, the women pulling up guns and their division during the car-race underlines this.

Besides portraying Arabs as rebellious, the whole video underlines the difference of this unnamed, uncivilized country to the Western world. But most importantly, all men and women serve as a background for an artist who presents herself as Western, and wants to hang around with the “rebellious Arabs.” M.I.A. states that she wants to make people familiar with Arab culture, but instead uses long-lasting stereotypes to underline her own rebelliousness.

## 2.4 The Reception of “Bad Girls”

M.I.A.’s use of exotic musical elements received several negative reviews. Especially her position as a Sri-Lankan refugee and her speaking up for ethnic minorities, makes that people find her a difficult case and are facing different questions. Is M.I.A. making a better world by bringing different musical aspects into mainstream, Western popular music? Does her identity and her political awareness make a difference on judging her of cultural appropriation? And even: should popular music have a role in debates about difference at all?

A general comment on the album *Kala* was made by Alexis Petridis, the head of pop and rock criticism from *The Guardian*:

“On the new album, however, MIA's attitude towards making music seems to have begun mirroring Angelina Jolie's attitude towards starting a family: you can just order in the constituent bits from various far-flung corners of the world.”<sup>64</sup>

Besides this quote being very unreflective, the fact that it comes from a review from *The Guardian* is the most bothering part of it. Another comment of M.I.A. not having a real connection to the music she makes, is made by Simon Reynolds:

“Don't let M.I.A.'s brown skin throw you off: she's got no more real connection with the favela funksters than Prince Harry.”<sup>65</sup>

These two written comments are directly made towards M.I.A. and her use of non-western music. The implication here is that she cannot use any music from any culture that is not Sri-Lankan. Both authors are

<sup>62</sup> “M.I.A. - “Bad Girls” (Official Behind the Scenes): Noisey Specials #08,” YouTube video, 13:35, posted by “Noisey,” March 12, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6-sNTOhYnU>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Alexis Petridis, “MIA, Kala,” accessed on January 21, 2017, [www.theguardian.com/music/2007/aug/17/urban.electronicmusic](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/aug/17/urban.electronicmusic).

<sup>65</sup> Simon Reynolds, “Piracy funds what?,” accessed on January 18, 2017, [www.villagevoice.com/music/piracy-funds-what-6428289](http://www.villagevoice.com/music/piracy-funds-what-6428289).

respected critics in several printed media, among which the most-known and established ones like *The Guardian*. Their stance towards M.I.A. as an artist of color leans towards racism.

These two comments are only the top of the iceberg of a vast amount of critique that M.I.A. received in different media. “Bad Girls” also got negative comments of writers, of which I will name two:

“Whatever one’s individual interpretation might be, the video clearly depicts hackneyed stereotypes of the Arab world, and perpetuating these can have a real impact on the way our society views others. [...] Despite her track record of weaving sharp social and political criticisms into her music, I can’t help but feel that one of the primary impacts of M.I.A.’s latest video is indeed to perpetuate already pervasive images of Arab exoticism to at least some degree.”<sup>66</sup>

This comment is made by Nada Zohdy from the online news-platform *Mic* and focuses on the impact the video can have on how the Western society views the Arab world. A comment from Thanu Yakupitiyage from *Hyphen Magazine* relates the video to Orientalism:

“But in ‘Bad Girls’ depictions of the Arab world, I see a false, hyped-up misrepresentation of the region we now know for the Arab Spring. I’m bothered by M.I.A.’s reproduction of Orientalist tropes -- “Orientalist” in Edward Said’s sense, of a distorted lens through which Arabs are viewed and “experienced” by the West. ‘Bad Girls’ is just a hipper, high-definition stereotype of Arabs as desert-dwelling, sword-wielding, horse-riding, and dangerous.[...] Just because M.I.A. is “brown” doesn’t mean she gets to objectify non-Western cultures.”<sup>67</sup>

These comments effectively underline my statement on behalf of the video of “Bad Girls.” Yakupitiyage’s link to Orientalism particularly fits my point: this image is a continuation of earlier portrayals of Others. Faisal Al Yafai from *The National* does not see the harm in this video and speaks of “encouraging cross-cultural pollination”:

“What the video does is reference an underground activity in the Middle East - and given that the Middle East is already seen as quite radical, the whole theme is doubly subversive. The rest of the details are fairly superfluous, born of a need to be shocking - ooh, guns! ooh, dark-eyed women! - and belabour the obvious tropes of the region. [...] It strikes me as more of a compliment to a complex region that the strands of its underground culture are used to bolster a mainstream video. Drifting is a cultural meme in Gulf Arab society, and has now been featured in a different cultural form. That seems like an encouraging cross-cultural pollination.”<sup>68</sup>

Al Yafai seems to praise M.I.A. and Gavras for not using the most obvious stereotypes but focusing on a underground culture. Still, it is ironic that M.I.A., who claims to be aware of power relations between the Western and the non-Western world creates a video with “Arabic references, fantasized or not.”

Whereas these comments are made to the problematic stereotypes in the video of “Bad Girls,” the comments of Petridis and Reynolds are made to the whole musical legacy of M.I.A.. A discussion about cultural exchange in music is valid, but the ethnicity of an artist should not be a reason to be attacked. Or, to state it differently: M.I.A.’s skin-color should not be an element in this discussion.

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<sup>66</sup> “What M.I.A.’s New Video Says About Arabs,” Nada Zohdy on Mic Network, accessed June 12, 2017, <https://mic.com/articles/4080/what-mia-s-new-bad-girls-video-says-about-arabs#.xqT6iqsW0>.

<sup>67</sup> “M I A AND THE REAL “BAD GIRLS” ,” Thanu Yakupitiyage on *Hyphen Magazine*, accessed June 12, 2017, <http://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2012/02/mia-and-real-bad-girls>.

<sup>68</sup> “Bad girls do it well: stereotypes and silent Arab voices,” Faisal Al Yafai on *The National*, accessed June 29, 2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/bad-girls-do-it-well-stereotypes-and-silent-arab-voices#page2>.

### 3. Commodifying Others: Musical Borrowings and Collaborations

In the previous chapter I showed that musical codes of Otherness that are frequently used in classical music are also present in M.I.A.'s "Bad Girls." Because of this, the song can be seen as a continuation of the long Western history of musical portrayals of Others. But in addition to this tradition of overt exoticism, new ways of representing Others emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These new representations are the subject of this chapter. Here, again, M.I.A.'s songs provide relevant case studies.

In this chapter I am concerned with two different kinds of commodifying difference: musical borrowings and collaborations. I use these terms in a particular sense. Musical borrowings refers to the sampling of non-Western music by an established musician, who then transforms it into their own music. This leads to issues concerning financial profit and musical ownership, especially in the case of an unequal power relationship between the "sampler" and the musician who is being sampled.

By collaborations, I mean the practice when established musicians work together with a musician or several musicians who is generally understood as "non-Western." This collaboration is legitimated by an aesthetic musical connection, but is in reality driven by an fascination with authentic Others. In both categories, I deliberately chose to use the term "established musician" instead of "Western musician," because this includes all musicians who are not strictly Western, but do have an established career in the Western popular music industry. I will argue that, where-as in my case studies the tension between a "powerful" Western musician and a less privileged "non-Western musician" is not always present, these collaborations and borrowings are driven by a fascination for exotic Others.

Musicologists have studied both categories. The first scholar who treated the phenomenon of such an "unequal collaboration" in-depth, is Louise Meintjes. In her article "Paul Simon's Graceland, South Africa, and the Mediation of Musical Meaning," she extensively investigates the notion of collaboration that is tied to this album. She argues that in *Graceland*, the notion of collaboration is present on different levels, which led it to be a sign for social collaboration.<sup>69</sup> It is present in the music itself, because different styles are mixed and some songs contain several languages. Besides, the album was presented and marketed as a collaboration. On another level, people evaluate this notion of social collaboration between a white American and black South-African musicians differently, since everyone comes with a set of sociopolitical and cultural experiences.<sup>70</sup> Meintjes argues that *Graceland* operates as a sign vehicle for collaboration and that the album communicates political implications through signs on different levels. She does not evaluate the album as either good or bad, but emphasizes that musical and political meanings are embedded in each other.<sup>71</sup>

Timothy Taylor also discusses *Graceland* and quotes Paul Simon's justification for this collaboration: "I was reacting musically. I liked a certain kind of music, I wanted to play with those musicians, I wanted to interact with those musicians and I treated them with my utmost musical respect."<sup>72</sup> Here, it is shown that Simon uses an aesthetic connection to legitimate his collaboration with South-African musicians. Taylor is more criticizing about the album and states that the notion of collaboration "smoothed over the often exploitative ways in which nonwestern musicians were used."<sup>73</sup>

The act of sampling is also often legitimized by an aesthetic connection, or by a connection to the same cultural heritage. Steven Feld describes in "The Poetics and Politics of Pygmy Pop" how jazz musicians of color sample Pygmy pop from ethnomusicological sources, but do not mention the musicians in the liner notes. For example, Herbie Hancock did this in his song "Watermelon Men." He legitimized this by stating: "It's a brother kind of thing, we are all making African music."<sup>74</sup> Feld states that while African Americans have a different position towards African music than Americans, the power differentials cannot be denied.<sup>75</sup> Feld describes the new meanings and relationships that result from the act of sampling as "schizoponic mimesis."<sup>76</sup> By placing the original sample in a new context, a new meaning is created. Feld

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<sup>69</sup> Louise Meintjes, "Paul Simon's Graceland, South Africa, and the Mediation of Musical Meaning," *Ethnomusicology* 34.1 (1990): 37.

<sup>70</sup> Meintjes, "Paul Simon's Graceland," 38.

<sup>71</sup> Meintjes, "Paul Simon's Graceland," 69.

<sup>72</sup> Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 127.

<sup>73</sup> Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 127.

<sup>74</sup> Steven Feld, "The Poetics and Politics of Pygmy Pop," in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, eds. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 258.

<sup>75</sup> Feld, "The Poetics," 270.

<sup>76</sup> Feld, "The Poetics," 263.

concludes that every relation between an original and a copy is “an icon of unequal power,” and that the escalation of sampling that happens leads it to be a part of more political issues.

Like Hancock, M.I.A. has a different position towards non-Western music. Both her position as a Sri-Lankan refugee and a political activist complicates her relation to different kinds of music and her legitimization of using this music. Because M.I.A. presents herself as a spokesman for all ethnic minorities, she uses the “brothers kind of thing” argument as well. With a study of three songs from M.I.A., I show how she applies musical borrowings and collaborations in her music, and why these cases are problematic.

### 3.1 “Jimmy”: Signifying a Global East

“Jimmy” (2007) is a song from M.I.A.’s second album *Kala*.<sup>77</sup> The song is a cover of “Jimmy Jimmy Aaja,” which appears in the Bollywood movie *Disco Dancer* (1982), therefore it is a musical borrowing.<sup>78</sup> Some elements of the original were altered to make the song more suitable for the Western market. M.I.A. wrote new lyrics in English, which are different in content from the original. *Disco Dancer* tells the story of a boy named Asin, who is renamed as Jimmy to pursue a professional career in disco dancing. In “Jimmy Jimmy Aaja,” a woman encourages Jimmy to come over and perform on stage: “Jimmy Aaja” is Hindi for “Jimmy, come over.”<sup>79</sup> M.I.A. transformed the content of the lyrics into an overt love-story: “You tell me that you're busy. Your loving makes me crazy. I know that you hear me, start acting like you want me!”<sup>80</sup> Besides changing the lyrics, she added a few choruses. Apart from the use of distortion on the vocals and the extension of some instrumental parts, the musical material is roughly the same as the original. There is no doubt that the song “Jimmy” is a cover of the original “Jimmy Jimmy Aaja”. However, the liner notes of *Kala* state that the song only incorporates elements of the original song:

JIMMY

Written by M.I.A. and Switch

(...)

Incorporates elements of “Jimmy Jimmy Aajaa Aaja” from the film “Disco Dancer”, written by Bappi Lahiri, published by Saregama.<sup>81</sup>

Feld, Steven. “The Poetics and Politics of Pygmy Pop.” In *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, eds. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, 254-279. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

This description of the song does not give enough credits to the original song, since all the musical material of the song derives from “Jimmy Jimmy Aaja.” M.I.A., an established musician, uses a non-Western original, claimed it to be her own and receives all the artistic and financial credits for it.

A comparison of the video-clips shows an interesting contradiction. The clip for “Jimmy Jimmy Aaja” can be considered as Western in style, but in the clip for “Jimmy,” several visual markers refer to a global Eastern locale. In “Jimmy Jimmy Aaja,” the actress and singer Parvati Khan is dressed like a Western disco popstar wearing a glitter top and tight red jeans. She is dancing on a stage and repeatedly asks a man, who we assume to be Jimmy, to come over to dance on the stage.

The most notable reference to an exotic Other locale in the video for “Jimmy” is the dance M.I.A. and her dancers perform, which is an imitation of the “Thousand Hand Guan Yin” dance from the Chinese choreographer Zhang Jigang.<sup>82</sup> The original dance is not mentioned in the liner notes of *Kala*, but the similar choreography and several similar detailed visual elements make that there is no doubt that this is an imitation. I provided a still from both the original “Thousand Hand Guan Yin” dance in figure 3, and from M.I.A.’s imitation in “Jimmy” in figure 4.

In the ‘Thousand Hand Guan Yin’ dance, the dancers line up in a perfect column and perform a

<sup>77</sup> “M.I.A. - Jimmy,” YouTube Video, 3:28, posted by MIAVEVO, accessed on May 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBECisSkAu4>.

<sup>78</sup> *Disco Dancer*, directed by Babbar Subhash: BabbarSubhash Movie Uni, 1982.

<sup>79</sup> Lyrics Translate, “Jimmy Come (Jimmy Aaja),” accessed on May 24, 2017, <http://lyricstranslate.com/nl/jimmy-aaja-jimmy-come.html>.

<sup>80</sup> AZ Lyrics, ‘M.I.A. lyrics’, accessed on May 24, 2017, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/mia/jimmy.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Liner notes of M.I.A.’s *Kala*, XL Recordings, CD, 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Tara Atluri, “‘Like PLO I Don’t Surrender’: Genealogies of Feminine ‘Terror’ and the Evils of Orientalist Desire,” in *Gender and the Representation of Evil*, eds. Lynne Fallwell and Keira V. Williams (New York: Routledge, 2017), 189.

strictly timed choreography with their hands and arms.<sup>83</sup> The dance is about the Buddhist goddess Guan Yin, the “thousand hands” in the dance represent her ability to render assistance to the people on earth.<sup>84</sup> Because the dancers portray a goddess, the dance is concentrated, stylized and graceful.

In the imitation of the Thousand Hand dance in “Jimmy,” the atmosphere and intent is almost opposite from the original. Where in the original, the dancer at the front of the column does not have a more significant role than the other dancers, in “Jimmy,” M.I.A. is at the centre of all the attention. She sings while doing the dance and her movements are loose and not stylized. At some points M.I.A. and the dancers stop the choreography and dance freely to the music.

The outfit that M.I.A. and her dancers wear has similarities with the original: their clothes are gold and yellow, they are wearing crowns on their head and they are covered in glittering jewelry. Besides, they all have golden pointed jewelry on their fingers and an image re of an eye on their hands, to express the thousand hands and Guan Yins ability to watch over all people on earth.

But apart from these similarities, M.I.A. and her dancers wear heavy make-up, tight leggings and their clothing shows more nudity. The combination of their appearance, the lyrics of the song and close-ups shots of M.I.A. looking sensually into the camera produces a much more sexually charged performance. The “Thousand Hand” dance cuts to show M.I.A. dancing by herself in skin-tight Western clothing and accompanied by flashing lights. Because of these fast cuts, flashing lights and sex-appeal, M.I.A.’s interpretation of the ‘Thousand Hand Guan Yin’ dance is in big contrast with the original. M.I.A. combined a Chinese dance to a Bollywood song and transformed the mixture into an exotic, sexually charged love-story.

By combining a Chinese traditional dance with an Indian Bollywood original, “Jimmy” portrays a global East, but with lyrics and a physical appearance that are tailored to Western preferences.

### 3.2 The Aboriginal voice on a record

A song that does not strictly fall under the categories of borrowing or collaboration but offers an interesting case, is “Mango Pickle Down River,” which also appeared on the album *Kala*. It is presented as a collaboration, but is actually a remix, almost similar to the original source. The liner notes provide the following information about this song:

MANGO PICKLE DOWN RIVER - with Wilcannia Mob

Written by M.I.A., Keith Dutton, Lendal King, Colin Roy Johnson, Walter Ebsworth, Buddy Blair, Morgan Lewis, Brendan Adams, Daniel Wright

Remixed from the original recording ‘Down River’ from the Wilcannia Mob.<sup>85</sup>

The Wilcannia Mob and the song ‘Down River’ are the result of a social outreach project in Australia.<sup>86</sup> The five boys of the Wilcannia Mob, indigenous Australian rappers in the age of eight until twelve, are mentioned as co-writers (their names are written after M.I.A.). Together with the phrase “with Wilcannia



3. Picture of the "Thousand Hand Guan Yin" dance



4. M.I.A.'s imitation of the "Thousand Hand Guan Yin" Dance, still from the music video for "Jimmy."

<sup>83</sup> ‘Thiên Thủ Quán Âm (Thousand Hand Guan Yin)’, YouTube Video, 5.54, posted by Wanderer0816, accessed on May 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vs-H7xLnrs>.

<sup>84</sup> Mandarin House, “Thousand Hand Guan Yin”, accessed on June 29, 2017, <http://www.mandarinhouse.com/thousand-hand-guan-yin>.

<sup>85</sup> Liner notes of M.I.A.’s *Kala*, XL Recordings, CD, 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Down River, “About Down River,” accessed June 29, 2017, <http://downriver.com.au/about-down-river/>.

Mob,” this suggests that “Mango Pickle Down River” is a co-production. However, a comparison of the original recording with M.I.A.’s version shows that they are almost completely the same. The vocals and accompaniment seem to be taken from the original recording, since no differences can be heard in those parts. The accompaniment of the overall rapped vocals in “Down River” consists of the constant sound of a didgeridoo and a repeating beatbox. M.I.A. expanded the song by two verses (the total amount of verses is seven), and added a bridge. This is done by simply copying the beat as made by The Wilcannia Mob, and adding her vocal parts. From the second chorus, we can hear M.I.A. rapping together with the Wilcannia Mob. The producer, Diplo, put some emphasis on the beat by adding an electronic pulse. Besides, he remixed the original beat at some points: at the bridge, he altered the rhythm of the beat, and in the last twenty seconds of the song he added a short sequence of rhythmic scratching. But besides of these adjustments, this “co-production” is an exact copy of “Down River.”

M.I.A. used this song because of her fascination with an ethnic, authentic Other: the indigenous Australians. Her statement about “Mango Pickle Down River” underlines this fascination with the authentic Other: “I just love it because you never, ever hear the aboriginal voice on a record.”<sup>87</sup>

An example that falls into the category of collaboration, is the song “Hussel.” This song is featured by the Nigerian-British MC Afrikan Boy. Like M.I.A., he is an immigrant, working in the Western popular music industry. Because of this, issues about differences in power are less relevant here. Instead, I argue that this collaboration happened because of M.I.A.’s fascination with ethnic, authentic Others. This fascination expresses itself in the following quote: “It seemed like he [Afrikan Boy] was really comfortable expressing himself as a real immigrant; he’s humorous and from a different place than just a grime MC.”<sup>88</sup> This “realness” of Afrikan Boy is expressed in the lyrics of his rap, in which he describes the struggle of being an immigrant in the United Kingdom. In the song, Afrikan Boy raps with a strong African accent. The instrumental part of the song consists mainly of an acoustic and African-sounding rhythm. The focus on rhythm rather than melody, the acoustic drum-sound underline the song being really “African” and is therefore another example of 21<sup>st</sup> century music using the same exotic signifiers as classical music.

By working with different ethnic minorities, M.I.A. wants to show an ability to discover authentic voices of Others. These collaborations are legitimated by “doing social good,” by feeling an aesthetic connection, or, like Herbie Hancock, as a “brothers kind of thing.” But M.I.A. continues to use sonic stereotypes in relation to these Others. Besides, working with someone just because of his or hers “authenticity” is offensive. She uses someone’s identity as a marketing handle.

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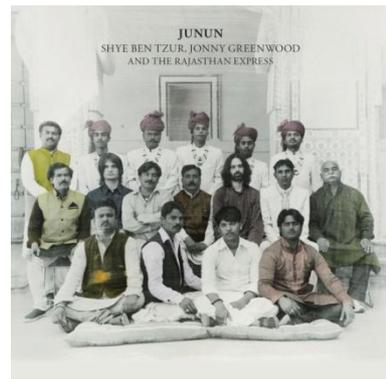
<sup>87</sup> Cam Lindsay, “MIA,” accessed on June 29, 2017, <http://exclaim.ca/music/article/mia> .

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

## 4. Discussion

After discussing how musical exoticism underlines racial stereotypes and reveals power inequalities in the popular music industry, it makes sense to question whether musical exoticism is always wrong. M.I.A. brings unfamiliar sounds to the Western consumer with her music. For example, people become familiar with the didgeridoo after listening to “Mango Pickle Down River.” This can be seen as a good thing.

Now that I have explained several problematic cases of musical exoticism, I also want to give an example of a positive cross-cultural collaboration. An collaboration based on equality in terms of both marketing and production, is the album and project *Junun*. This album is a collaboration between the Israeli composer Shye Ben Tzur, Jonny Greenwood, who is mostly known as Radiohead’s guitarist, and The Rajasthan Express, a collective of nineteen Indian musicians. When it comes to the composition and production of the album, the music is not changed to fit into a more “Western” style. Greenwood is an equal member of the group and does not seem to have any privileges concerning the composition process or artistic input. During the concerts I attended, Greenwood did not have a more central position on stage than the other musicians: he was standing at the back of the stage and did not get any special attention at all.<sup>89</sup> And, maybe most importantly: the album is not marketed as “Jonny Greenwood and authentic Other.”



5. The album cover for Junun.

However, a review of the concert on 3voor12, a platform for popular music from the Dutch channel VPRO, again shows how badly informed and rude critics are when it comes to non-Western music:

“Every festival deserves an Indian square party. [...] The aged men of The Rajasthan Express are of course everything but standard rockstars, with their grey moustaches and orange haircloths. One of them does a solo with two little rattle instruments in his hands. [...] It was just cool to see Jonny Greenwood with this odd couple.”<sup>90</sup>

Of course, the Indian musicians look different from what 3voor12 calls “standard rockstars.” But the description of their turbans as “haircloths” portrays the musicians as primitive.<sup>91</sup> Besides, describing the *manjira*, an Indian cymbal instrument one of the musicians was playing, as “little rattle instruments,” is denigrating. It shows that critics still do not know how to write about music from Others, and that they are used to describe non-Western cultures with a denigrating tone of voice.

### 4.1 Autoexoticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

As I showed with several examples, M.I.A. exoticizes herself in her whole career. This act can be called autoexoticism, and is anything but a rare phenomenon among musicians of color in the popular music industry. I will mention some examples of artists of color who use exotic signifiers or samples in their music to exoticize themselves, and thereby turn themselves into marketable Others.

In 2013, the American artist Jason Derulo had a massive hit with the song “Talk Dirty to Me.” The main theme of the song, an exotic melody on the saxophone, is sampled from a song from the American-Israeli band Balkan Beat Box.<sup>92</sup> In the video, several women of color who are dressed as different stereotypes (for example, an Indian princess and a Caribbean carnival dancer) dance in a sexual manner to express their sexual availability to Jason Derulo.<sup>93</sup> The music and stereotypical characters in the video place Derulo in an exotic, Other world.

<sup>89</sup> This was the case at both the concert at November 14, 2016, at Le Guess Who? Festival, and the concert at June 20, 2017 at Best Kept Secret Festival.

<sup>90</sup> Translation from original Dutch review: Norbert Pek, “Jonny Greenwood op z’n plek met Junun,” accessed June 29, 2017, <https://3voor12.vpro.nl/update~9a53bc6b-fe08-49f5-8a84-58c1a509b88b~bks17-jonny-greenwood-op-z-n-plek-met-junun~.html>.

<sup>91</sup> The original word in Dutch was “haardoeken.”

<sup>92</sup> Steven Snyder, “How Middle East Sounds Drive Jason Derulo’s Talk Dirty,” accessed June 29, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-05-07/how-middle-east-sounds-drive-jason-derulos-talk-dirty>.

<sup>93</sup> “Jason Derulo - “Talk Dirty” feat. 2 Chainz (Official HD Music Video),” YouTube Video, posted by Jason Derulo, accessed June 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbtPXFZIHg>.

In 2003, Beyoncé and Sean-Paul released the song “Baby Boy.”<sup>94</sup> In the song, Beyoncé commits the sexual fantasies she has every night, and she dances a sexually charged choreography in the music video. She is dressed in a glittering bikini with beads, which seems to be inspired by the stereotypical image of belly dancers.<sup>95</sup> Her exotic and sexual dance is accompanied by fast, complex rhythms on a varied percussion set, and exotic melodies on a flute and a guitar. In the choreography, Beyoncé rolls over the ground and throws sand towards the camera (or, to the audience of this video), by which she expresses her wild and sexual attitude. Before this dance sequence starts, Sean-Paul is shown sitting in a seat that looks like a throne, with an Asian looking woman on his lap. Just like in Jason Derulo’s video, the non-Western woman is portrayed as submissive and sexually available.

A remarkable similarity between “Baby Boy” and the song “Buttons” (2006) from the Pussycat Dolls and Snoop Dogg can be seen in how the music and the video work together to create the stereotype of an exotic, sexually available, and wild woman.<sup>96</sup> The Pussycat Dolls were an American girl band with six members. Filipin-Hawaiian singer Nicole Scherzinger was the frontwoman of the group from 2003 until the splitting of the group in 2010, and had a central role in their music. In “Buttons,” a rap verse by Snoop Dogg is followed by an exotic choreography from the Pussycat Dolls. Just like Beyoncé did in her choreography, the Pussycat Dolls express themselves as wild and exotic women by doing a dance that is sexually charged and takes mostly place on the floor.

These are, together with my previous case studies of M.I.A.’s music, just a few examples from the last decade of musicians of color who exoticize themselves through their music and music videos. These are all examples of autoexoticism. As I stated, this phenomenon is anything but rare under musicians of color. An important question follows: why is this the case? This situation stands in line with a long history of musicians from non-Western countries who had to exoticize themselves in order to be successful in the Western music industry. This can be a possible explanation for these newer cases of autoexoticism. The Western consumer is still appealed by the exotic Other and expects people of color to make exotic music. These self-exoticizing works from people of color meet with the expectations from the Western audience, which makes that the exotic image of all non-Western Others is kept alive.

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<sup>94</sup> “Beyoncé - Baby Boy ft. Sean Paul,” YouTube Video, 4.09, posted by beyonceVEVO, accessed June 29, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ucz\\_pm3LX8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ucz_pm3LX8).

<sup>95</sup> This part starts at 3:24.

<sup>96</sup> “The Pussycat Dolls - Buttons ft. Snoop Dogg,” YouTube Video, 3.57, posted by ThePussycatDollsVEVO, accessed June 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCLxJd1d84s>.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude my thesis, I would like to get back to my research question: in what ways does musical exoticism work as a commodifying factor in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular music? In different case studies, I described three forms of musical exoticism that commodify Otherness in the popular music industry. I showed how the sonic stereotyping of Others is the reducing of cultures, and is especially bad when it is accompanied by a music video full of stereotypes.

The categories of collaborations and musical borrowings evoke different issues, of which financial profit and musical ownership are the most significant. An extra layer of complexity arises in M.I.A.'s "Mango Pickle Down River," which is presented as a collaboration but is almost a complete copy of the original song. The crediting of samples should be major concern to the record companies, who make a massive amount of money from the music and talent of non-Western musicians. M.I.A.'s cases of collaboration out of an obsession with authentic Otherness are offensive. It is a continuation of the Western world being obsessed with the authentic Other.

In the discussion, I showed that M.I.A. exoticizes herself to show her "globalized identity" and rebelliousness. In the last decade, several artists of color exoticized themselves. A possible explanation for this can be that these artists of color have to exoticize themselves in order to be successful in the popular music industry. It is what the Western consumer expects them to do and it affirms the image that Western consumers have of non-Western Others. However by doing this, these artists keep the distorted view of other cultures alive among the Western audience.

With this thesis, I hope to have made a valuable contribution to existing literature on the subject of musical exoticism. Still, more scholarly attention to this field is needed. An inventarisation of representations of Others in the popular music industry would be valuable, like Jack Shaheen did for Hollywood film with his book *Reel Bad Arabs*.<sup>97</sup> Also, as became apparent in the three cases in my discussion, the relation of musical exoticism to gender and sexuality is important to consider in future research.

As a closing statement, I would like to focus on how to analyze exoticism in the popular music industry. To underline the fact that contemporary representations of Others can be seen as a continuation of earlier portrayals, I used lists of exotic signifiers that were made concerning classical music. Because music videos play an important role in the stereotyping of cultures, these should be investigated intensively. The investigation of musical exoticism using concepts of both traditional musicology and popular music studies provides a complete analysis. The ways that Others are commodified in the Western popular music industry gets more and more complicated. Most importantly, I argue that publications about exoticism and commodifying Others should always address power differences and tensions, and social issues these works carry out. Musical exoticism and the commodification of Others reflect differences in power in society today.

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<sup>97</sup> Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, New York: Olive Branche Press, 2001.

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3. The Thousand Hand Guan Yin dance. Original source: *China Daily*, accessed June 29, 2017. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/olympics/2008-08/12/content\\_6928481\\_3.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/olympics/2008-08/12/content_6928481_3.htm)
4. M.I.A.’s imitation of the Thousand Hand Guan Yin Dance. Still from the music video of “Jimmy.” Accessed June 29, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBECisSkAu4>.
5. The album cover for *Junun*. Original source: Pitchfork, accessed June 29, 2017. <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/21213-junun/>

## Appendices

### 1. Abstract

This thesis investigates how musical exoticism works as a commodifying factor in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular music. Drawing on research from the fields of traditional musicology, popular music studies and postcolonial studies, three categories of musical exoticism are studied in-depth: music containing exotic signifiers, musical borrowings and collaborations. Music from the artist M.I.A. provides relevant case-studies for all categories, since her identity as a Sri-Lankan immigrant and political activist complicates her position towards musical exoticism. The music and music video from her song “Bad Girls” create an exoticizing image of Arabs and the Arab world: the image of the Arab as savage and rebellious. Newer forms of musical exoticism, collaboration, musical borrowings, are more problematic regarding financial and artistic credit. The autoexoticizing of artists of color is a continuation of composers exoticizing themselves. A possible explanation for this, is that artists of color have to exoticize themselves in order to be successful in the Western popular music industry. Still, by doing this, these artists keep stereotypes and the Western distorted view of cultural Others alive.

## 2. Lyrics "Bad Girls" - M.I.A.

### Refrain:

Live fast, die young  
Bad girls do it well  
Live fast, die young  
Bad girls do it well [x2]

My chain hits my chest  
When I'm banging on the dashboard  
My chain hits my chest  
When I'm banging on the radio

Get back, get down  
Pull me closer if you think you can hang  
Hands up, hands tied  
Don't go screaming if I blow you with a bang

### Verse

Suki Suki  
I'm coming in the Cherokee gasoline  
There's steam on the window screen  
Take it, take it  
Wheels bouncing like a trampoline  
When I get to where I'm going, gonna have you trembling

### Refrain

Yeah back it, back it  
Yeah pull up to the bumper game  
Read the signal  
Cover me, cause I'm changing lanes  
Had a handle on it  
My life, I broke it  
When I get to where I'm going, gonna have you saying it

### Refrain

Get back, get down  
Pull me closer if you think you can hang  
Hands up, hands high  
Don't go screaming if I blow you with a bang

Going up to bitch I'll see it for a million  
Accelerating fast I could do this in a second  
Looking in the rear view swagger going swell  
Leaving boys behind cause it's legal just to kill  
Shift gear automatic damned if I do  
Who's gonna stop me when I'm coming through  
What we got left is just me and you  
But if I go to bed baby can I take you?

Get back, get down  
Pull me closer if you think you can hang  
Hands up, hands high  
Don't go screaming if I blow you with a bang

### Refrain (2X)