

**The Creative Role of Session Musicians in Popular Music:
A Case Study of Michael McDonald's "I Keep Forgettin'"**

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Abstract

In this thesis, I provide an analysis of Michael McDonald's "I Keep Forgettin'" (1982) with the aim of gaining insight into the creative role and contributions of the session musicians playing on the track. In my analysis, I use an approach formulated by Zagorski-Thomas focusing on the activities that produced the music. I show how the session musicians contributed not only through the musical ideas they provided, but also by shaping the track's distinctive groove, and by adding many details that give the track its individual character. In doing so, they played a vital role in the creation of the track. With this thesis, I contribute to the growing body of research on the influential role of session musicians in popular music by providing a detailed example of how session musicians contribute to a track. My findings underscore the fluidity of creative roles and the complex nature of authorship in popular music. The demonstrated effectiveness of the approach I used provides a starting point for further studies of session musicians and other actors in the creative process of record production.

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Introduction

Session musicians have been referred to as “rock’s invisible elite,”¹ “pop stars anonymous,”² and “hidden hit-makers.”³ Such terms are suggestive of the inconspicuous yet influential role they play in popular music. Another definition is given by session keyboardist Greg Phillinganes, who describes a session musician as “a person who has evolved in the craft of making records.”⁴ Such an association with professionalism raises the question of whether their work is art or craft. On the one hand, session musicians make artistic contributions to the projects they work on by transforming abstract ideas from artists and producers into concrete, recordable sounds. On the other hand, they are associated with corporate interests, performing on commercial records and subordinating their creative impulses to the wishes of their employers.⁵ Consequently, session musicians are sometimes associated with a lack of authenticity.⁶ Together with the invisibility inherent in their work, this may be why their creative role in popular music is sometimes glossed over.⁷

Several authors have stressed the importance of studying the creative role and contributions of session musicians.⁸ Previous studies of session musicianship have used a variety of methodological approaches. Some were based on interviews,⁹ while others

¹ Daisann McLane, “Session Musicians: Rock’s Invisible Elite,” *Rolling Stone*, September 6, 1979, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/session-musicians-rocks-invisible-elite-116172/>.

² Graeme Thomson, “Pop Stars Anonymous,” *Observer*, June 14, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/jun/14/session-musicians-girls-aloud-paul-mccartney>.

³ Blake Madden, “Hidden Hit-Makers: History’s Most Iconic Session Musicians,” *SonicScoop*, November 13, 2014, <https://sonicscoop.com/hidden-by-the-glass-historys-most-iconic-session-musicians/>.

⁴ Greg Phillinganes, “Red Bull Music Academy Lectures S1 E10,” interview by Jeff Mao for Red Bull Music Academy Lectures in 2016, Red Bull TV video, 2017, 13:35, <https://www.redbull.com/us-en/episodes/greg-phillinganes-red-bull-music-academy-lectures-s01-e10>.

⁵ Alan Williams, “Navigating Proximities: The Creative Identity of the Hired Musician,” *Journal of the Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association* 10, no. 1 (2010): 59–62, <https://doi.org/10.25101/10.3>.

⁶ Williams, 60; Roy Shuker, *Popular Music: The Key Concepts*, 4th ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 26.

⁷ Jan-Peter Herbst and Tim Albrecht, “The Skillset of Professional Studio Musicians in the German Popular Music Recording Industry,” *Etnomuskologian vuosikirja* 30 (December 4, 2018): 121–23, <https://doi.org/10.23985/evk.69085>.

⁸ Paul Théberge, “Foreword,” in *Analyzing Recorded Music: Collected Perspectives on Popular Music Tracks*, ed. William Moylan, Lori Burns, and Mike Alleyne (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), xxvii; Brian F. Wright, “Reconstructing the History of Motown Session Musicians: The Carol Kaye/James Jamerson Controversy,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 13, no. 1 (February 2019): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196318000536>; Jan-Peter Herbst and Tim Albrecht, “The Work Realities of Professional Studio Musicians in the German Popular Music Recording Industry: Careers, Practices and Economic Situations,” *IASPM@Journal* 8, no. 2 (December 2018): 34, [https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871\(2018\)v8i2.3en](https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2018)v8i2.3en); Isabel Campelo, “‘That Extra Thing’ - The Role of Session Musicians in the Recording Industry,” *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, no. 10 (July 2015), <https://www.arpjournal.com/asarpwp/that-extra-thing-the-role-of-session-musicians-in-the-recording-industry/>.

⁹ Robert R. Faulkner, *Hollywood Studio Musicians: Their Work and Careers in the Recording Industry* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971); Williams, “Navigating Proximities”; Herbst and Albrecht, “Work Realities”; Herbst and Albrecht, “Skillset.”

employed archival,¹⁰ ethnographic,¹¹ or practice-led research.¹² Travis D. Stimeling used a multifaceted approach in his recent study of mid-twentieth century Nashville session musicians.¹³ A method that has not been thoroughly explored is close analysis of a track on which session musicians perform. This is what I will do in this thesis. I will select a single track as a case study and provide a close analysis of it with the aim of gaining insight into the creative role of the session musicians who played on it.

In choosing a case study for this analysis, I selected from the work of elite session musicians working in Los Angeles around 1980, who interested me because their names appear in the liner notes of countless successful records. This made me curious about what exactly their work consisted of. A track I have found to be representative of the typical way of working in Los Angeles during this time is Michael McDonald's "I Keep Forgettin' (Every Time You're Near)." It was released in 1982 on McDonald's album *If That's What It Takes*. "I Keep Forgettin'" was a moderate hit, reaching number four on the *Billboard* pop singles chart.¹⁴ Forty years after its release, however, it is still widely listened to, with more than seventy-six million streams on Spotify.¹⁵ The session musicians performing on it are drummer Jeff Porcaro, bassist Louis Johnson, guitarist Steve Lukather, and keyboardist Greg Phillinganes.

Most popular music is the product of an informal creative process that is barely documented. In the case of "I Keep Forgettin'," however, enough sources are available to provide a picture of what went on during the session. McDonald discussed the recording of the track on several occasions.¹⁶ Porcaro looked back on the session as well and discussed

¹⁰ Wright, "Motown Session Musicians."

¹¹ Eliot Bates, *Digital Tradition: Arrangement and Labor in Istanbul's Recording Studio Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹² Vincent Perry, "Unsung Heroes: Recreating the Ensemble Dynamic of Motown's Funk Brothers," in *Popular Music, Stars and Stardom*, ed. Stephen Loy, Julie Rickwood, and Samantha Bennett (Acton, ACT: Australian National University Press, 2018), 95–114.

¹³ Travis D. Stimeling, *Nashville Cats: Record Production in Music City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁴ Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits: Complete Chart Information about America's Most Popular Songs and Artists, 1955 - 2009*, 9th ed. (New York: Billboard Books, 2010), 428.

¹⁵ "Michael McDonald," Spotify, accessed June 13, 2023, <https://open.spotify.com/artist/24hJWbo98sH84tb0nkeaqy>.

¹⁶ Billy Amendola, "Michael McDonald," *Modern Drummer*, June 2001, 150–52; Robyn Flans, *It's About Time: Jeff Porcaro, the Man and His Music* (New York: Hudson Music, 2020), 114–15; Simon Collins, "Doobie Brothers Perth: Music Legends to Play Bluesfest Nikola Estate Alongside Counting Crows and John Butler," *West Australian*, March 12, 2023, <https://thewest.com.au/entertainment/doobie-brothers-perth-music-legends-to-play-bluesfest-nikola-estate-alongside-counting-crows-and-john-butler-c-9979249>.

creating his drum part.¹⁷ Lukather in a recent interview also reflected on the recording process for the track.¹⁸ In addition to these primary sources, a detailed picture of the track's rhythm and timing is provided by Räsänen et al., who used onset detection and time series analysis to examine the amplitude and inter-onset intervals of Porcaro's hi-hat pattern.¹⁹

Because only one musician is credited per instrument on "I Keep Forgettin'," and because all instruments are clearly audible in the mix, each musician's individual playing can be unambiguously distinguished. This makes the track well suited for my analysis. "I Keep Forgettin'" not only illustrates the typical way of working of the musicians involved, their working practices are also similar to those of earlier Los Angeles session players,²⁰ as well as those of session musicians in Nashville,²¹ at Motown,²² and in 1960s British pop.²³ As such, "I Keep Forgettin'" is a representative case study that can provide insights that contribute to a better understanding of session musicianship at large. The research question I have formulated for this thesis is: What insights can an analysis of "I Keep Forgettin'" provide into the creative role and contributions of the session musicians playing on the track?

My goal of investigating the creative role of session musicians led me to the method for analyzing the "activities that produced a piece of music" proposed by Simon Zagorski-Thomas.²⁴ While this method takes the track as its starting point, it also factors in all the activities before, during, and after the recording session that shaped the track.²⁵ Thus, it facilitates investigating what Zagorski-Thomas calls "the details of agency and influence,"²⁶

¹⁷ Jeff Porcaro, "Jeff Porcaro Throwback Thursday from the MI Vault," lecture at Musicians Institute recorded in 1986, YouTube video, January 29, 2015, 9:05, <https://youtu.be/dQ6tzBkKk>; Jeff Porcaro - Instructional Video," originally released in 1988, YouTube video, posted by Sara Quah, October 5, 2016, 7:55, <https://youtu.be/iMLGPD-nyT4>.

¹⁸ Steve Lukather, "The Steve Lukather Interview: Secrets behind the Songs," interview by Rick Beato, YouTube video, January 17, 2023, 23:28, <https://youtu.be/4nBbzajS29o>.

¹⁹ Esa Räsänen et al., "Fluctuations of Hi-Hat Timing and Dynamics in a Virtuoso Drum Track of a Popular Music Recording," *PLOS ONE* 10, no. 6 (June 3, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0127902>.

²⁰ I am referring to a group of musicians known as the Wrecking Crew, see Kent Hartman, *The Wrecking Crew: The Inside Story of Rock and Roll's Best-Kept Secret* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012). Hal Blaine describes the creative agency the musicians had during sessions. Hal Blaine, *Hal Blaine and the Wrecking Crew: The Story of the World's Most Recorded Musician*, with Mr. Bonzai, ed. David M. Schwartz, 3rd ed. (Alma, MI: Rebeats, 2010), 51.

²¹ Stimeling, *Nashville Cats*; Morris S. Levy, "Nashville Sound—Era Studio Musicians," in *Country Music Annual 2000* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 23.

²² Jon Fitzgerald, "Motown Crossover Hits 1963–1966 and the Creative Process," *Popular Music* 14, no. 1 (January 1995): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143000007601>.

²³ Gordon Thompson, *Please Please Me: Sixties British Pop, Inside Out* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 233–68.

²⁴ Simon Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product of Recorded Musical Activity," in *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis: Expanding Approaches*, ed. Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, and John Brackett (New York: Routledge, 2019), 117–32.

²⁵ Zagorski-Thomas, 118.

²⁶ Zagorski-Thomas, 123.

making it a good fit for my analysis. I will supplement Zagorski-Thomas's model with Timothy Warner's genetic model of creativity,²⁷ which aids in thinking about the creative process underlying record production.

In chapter one, I will elaborate on my approach by discussing how Zagorski-Thomas's analytical method can be used to investigate the role of session musicians. I will also discuss Warner's genetic model of creativity. In chapter two, I will provide an in-depth analysis of "I Keep Forgettin'," focusing on the role of the session musicians in the creative process. In chapter three, I will discuss my findings in the context of the existing literature on session musicianship.

²⁷ Timothy Warner, "Approaches to Analysing Recordings of Popular Music," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (2009; repr., Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 131–45.

Chapter 1

Investigating the Creative Role of Session Musicians through Analysis

The question of how to analyze popular music is a much-debated topic in musicology. A wide variety of analytical strategies have been suggested.¹ These different methods are not inherently good or bad. Rather, their effectiveness is relative to the analytical goal.² With my analysis, I aim to examine the creative role of the session musicians playing on “I Keep Forgettin’.” An important distinction here is that the object of my analysis is the track, not the song. A track is a concrete, fixed object defined by its sound. It is an amalgam of song, arrangement, performance, and production, characterized by a myriad of details that form its sonic fingerprint.³ It is often in these details—this “music between the notes,”⁴ in the words of Nicholas Cook—where the expressive power of popular music lies.⁵ Also, the work of session musicians often consists of developing abstract musical ideas into actual music. Therefore, these details are a vital place to look for the contributions of session musicians. My approach must provide ways to explore these less evident characteristics of a track.

Another challenge is that a track, the final product of the creative process, is often the result of the work of many individuals. It may bear the name of a single artist or group, but these often work with a range of contributors such as songwriters, producers, and session musicians. Moreover, the boundaries between these roles are less clear-cut than they may seem.⁶ My analytical approach must be equipped to untangle this web of creative roles. These considerations brought me to the method for “analysing the product of recorded musical activity” formulated by Simon Zagorski-Thomas.⁷

¹ For some recent examples of approaches to analyzing popular music, see Ciro Scotto, Kenneth Smith, and John Brackett, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music Analysis: Expanding Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

² Robert Walser, “Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances,” in *Analyzing Popular Music*, ed. Allan F. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24. As Walser suggests, “Analysis is a relational activity; its success is relative to its goals, which analysts should feel obliged to make clear.”

³ Zagorski-Thomas, “Analysing the Product,” 118; Albin J. Zak III, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 24; Warner, “Approaches to Analysing Recordings,” 144. Zak distinguishes song, arrangement, and track as the compositional layers that make up a recording. He points out that the sound of a track can vary slightly depending on the sound system it is played on. Warner emphasizes that although the sounds of a track are fixed, the subjective experience and interpretation of those sounds are not.

⁴ Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 58–63.

⁵ Zagorski-Thomas, “Analysing the Product,” 120–22.

⁶ Shuker, *Popular Music*, 233; Zak, *Poetics of Rock*, 163–64.

⁷ Zagorski-Thomas, “Analysing the Product.”

Zagorski-Thomas proposes an analytical method tailored to the specific characteristics of popular music, as he considers the notation-centered approach inherited from traditional musical analysis unsuitable for this purpose.⁸ Musical notation is reductive, which is an unavoidable property of any analytical tool.⁹ But the kinds of reduction it imposes, through the schematic interpretations inherent in notation and the terminology of music theory, are often inappropriate for popular music analysis.¹⁰ According to Zagorski-Thomas, the ideology of notation associated with conventional analysis can hinder understanding of the workings of popular music.¹¹ For instance, it can obscure the role of timbre. Traditionally, the timbral qualities of a particular instrument during a performance are considered a fleeting phenomenon separate from the actual work, whereas in popular music, timbre often plays a defining role.¹² Overlooking the role of timbre can obscure insight into the contributions of session musicians, as they usually bring their own instruments to the studio and shape the recorded timbre together with producers and engineers. Moreover, the manipulation of timbre through playing techniques is an essential expressive tool in popular music performance.¹³ Another consequence of the ideology of musical notation that Zagorski-Thomas mentions is thinking schematically about rhythm and timing.¹⁴ This ignores the nuances of timing that establish a track's groove.¹⁵ Because groove cannot be notated, a session musician's timing and feel will stem largely from their individual musical style, as their employers cannot easily prescribe these factors to them. Therefore, being mindful of such subtleties of timing is important in examining the work of session musicians.

A concept underlying Zagorski-Thomas's approach is the notion that musical meaning is rooted in our understanding of the actions producing the sounds.¹⁶ This focus on the relationship between physical movement and music is related to the ideas of Richard Middleton, whose three areas of analysis—gesture, connotation, and argument—Zagorski-

⁸ Zagorski-Thomas, 117. This idea is not new. Philip Tagg already discussed the inadequacy of traditional analytical approaches for popular music analysis in his seminal article Philip Tagg, "Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice," *Popular Music* 2 (January 1982): 37–67, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/852975>.

⁹ Walser, "Popular Music Analysis," 25. As Walser points out, "Analysis is inevitably reductive, which is precisely why it's useful."

¹⁰ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 119.

¹¹ Zagorski-Thomas, 117.

¹² Zagorski-Thomas, 117, 121. Timbre in popular music is discussed extensively in Robert Wallace Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark, eds., *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹³ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 121.

¹⁴ Zagorski-Thomas, 117, 121.

¹⁵ Groove is an elusive term, but for this thesis I will suffice with Tiger C. Roholt's rough definition that it is "the feel of a rhythm." Tiger C. Roholt, *Groove: A Phenomenology of Rhythmic Nuance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 1.

¹⁶ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 118–19.

Thomas also draws upon in his method.¹⁷ Middleton's notion of gesture is that we interpret musical sounds as analogies to physical movements.¹⁸ Connotation refers to how musical sounds evoke associations that influence how we understand those sounds.¹⁹ Argument refers to the intellectual argument of a work, such as its large-scale structures, relationships, and developments. While argument plays a major role in Western classical music, popular music depends primarily on gesture and connotation. For this reason, notation-based methods that are focused on analyzing argument can fall short for popular music analysis.²⁰

All this is not to say that I will eschew music theory when it is useful. Like Zagorski-Thomas in his example analysis, I will use the terminology and concepts of music theory when they are helpful. They are indispensable for communicating my observations and ideas. I will, however, remain aware of the blind spots that music theory can create in analyzing popular music.

Zagorski-Thomas suggests seven analytical categories to guide the analysis. These are *rhythm and timing, pitch, timbre, tonality and harmony, structure, interaction, and creativity, expression, and improvisation*. While some of these categories may appear traditional, Zagorski-Thomas's definitions of them are tailored to the analysis of popular music. For example, he emphasizes thinking about microtiming and non-static pitch. Also, these categories afford reflection on more abstract issues such as interplay, creativity, and improvisation. Thus, this method can provide a detailed picture of the activities that shaped a track.²¹ This allows for a thorough examination of the creative role and contributions of the session musicians performing on "I Keep Forgettin'."

Zagorski-Thomas discusses his model in the context of Jean-Jacques Nattiez's ideas about musical analysis. Nattiez identifies three areas of analysis: the creative or *poietic* processes, the immanent structures of the work, and the aesthetic processes.²² Immanent analysis, only considering the work's intrinsic aspects,²³ is too limited for my research goal. It does not provide tools for investigating Zagorski-Thomas's "details of agency and influence."²⁴ It is therefore necessary to also consider the poietic. I will combine what Nattiez

¹⁷ Zagorski-Thomas, 120; Richard Middleton, "Popular Music Analysis and Musicology: Bridging the Gap," *Popular Music* 12, no. 2 (May 1993): 177–90, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143000005547>.

¹⁸ Middleton, "Popular Music Analysis," 177.

¹⁹ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 120; Middleton, "Popular Music Analysis," 186–87.

²⁰ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 120, 129; Middleton, "Popular Music Analysis," 187–89.

²¹ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 121–22.

²² Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 10–16, 139–43; Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 117.

²³ Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 140.

²⁴ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 123.

calls inductive poietics, drawing conclusions about the creative process based on the track itself, with external poietics, using information about the poietic from outside sources.²⁵ I will do this by considering accounts of what occurred during the session from the musicians involved. I will also draw connections to other tracks the musicians performed on, as in his study of Nashville session musicians, Stimeling found that these players have “clear artistic identities that are anonymously visible across a wide spectrum of recordings.”²⁶ By placing the playing of the musicians performing on “I Keep Forgettin’” in the context of their other work, I will show how their playing on the track relates to their artistic identities. I will also include the aesthetic processes in my analysis to consider what makes the track work, what “affordances for interpretation” it provides,²⁷ and what role the musicians’ work plays in this. Because Zagorski-Thomas’s method addresses both the production process, the track itself, and the experience the track produces, it provides a way to unify Nattiez’s three areas of analysis.²⁸

By the term “recorded musical activity,” Zagorski-Thomas refers not only to a recorded performance, but to all the activities that shaped the final track.²⁹ To unpack these activities, he draws on actor-network theory (ANT).³⁰ In ANT, an actor is defined as any human or nonhuman entity that somehow influences the system or *network* it is part of.³¹ This emphasis on the role of nonhuman actors within a network is an essential part of ANT.³² As a result, ANT offers interesting perspectives on popular music, in which technology plays a major role. For instance, the studio as a place, including all the technology it contains, influences the activities that take place within it. Eliot Bates points out that studios create new forms of musicianship, and that studio musicianship cannot be understood as simply “unprefixed musicianship” in a studio environment.³³ Zagorski-Thomas has formulated a typology of the ways performance is influenced by the studio environment.³⁴ Bates even

²⁵ Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 139–43.

²⁶ Stimeling, *Nashville Cats*, 22.

²⁷ Zagorski-Thomas, “Analysing the Product,” 120.

²⁸ Zagorski-Thomas, 117–18.

²⁹ Zagorski-Thomas, 118.

³⁰ Zagorski-Thomas, 122–24.

³¹ T. Hugh Crawford, “Actor-Network Theory,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.965>.

³² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 70–74.

³³ Eliot Bates, “What Studios Do,” *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, no. 7 (November 2012), <https://www.arpjournal.com/asarpwp/what-studios-do/>.

³⁴ Simon Zagorski-Thomas, “Towards a Typology of Issues Affecting Performance in the Recording Studio,” in *Proceedings of the 2011 Art of Record Production Conference* (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 2012), <https://www.academia.edu/1601241>.

provides a list of things studios “do.” By this doing, studios influence the human actors they interact with.³⁵ For instance, Alan Williams points out that playing in front of microphones and under headphones is a mediated way of working that differs from playing in physical, sonic reality.³⁶ Musicians must be mindful of how this affects their performance.³⁷ The absence of a live audience and the musician’s knowledge that their playing is eternalized by a microphone—an “inhuman critic” representing “potentially countless future audiences”³⁸—will also impact how musicians play. For instance, Jeff Porcaro says he often heavily rushes the tempo during live performances, which he considers to be “a natural thing.” The audience does not notice this as such because of the excitement of the moment and because the groove is solid. He explains that in the studio he must be more conscious of tempo.³⁹ In addition to the studio environment, musicians’ instruments and related equipment are also nonhuman actors that both influence them and are influenced by them. Paying attention to this interaction is useful in understanding the dimension of timbre.

The roles of human actors in the studio are less straightforward than they may appear. On the surface, popular music revolves around recognizable celebrity artists whose names appear on album covers, and who are seen as the creators of the music.⁴⁰ For example, “I Keep Forgettin’” carries the name of Michael McDonald as its author. Behind the scenes, however, artists usually cooperate with a range of creative individuals in making records, including producers, songwriters, arrangers, engineers, and session musicians.⁴¹ This is pointed out by Albin Zak, who describes the collaborative creative process of record production as the work of a *composition team*. This team takes on the tasks of songwriting, arranging, performing, engineering, and producing.⁴² In the past, these contributors were credited in the liner notes of a physical album. Today, this information is often not provided with streaming music, making their contributions more difficult to trace.⁴³ This underscores

³⁵ Bates, “What Studios Do.”

³⁶ Alan Williams, “‘I’m Not Hearing What You’re Hearing’: The Conflict and Connection of Headphone Mixes and Multiple Audioscapes,” in *The Art of Record Production: An Introductory Reader for a New Academic Field*, ed. Simon Frith and Simon Zagorski-Thomas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 125.

³⁷ Paul Thompson, *Creativity in the Recording Studio: Alternative Takes* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 151–52.

³⁸ Donald Greig, “Performing for (and against) the Microphone,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 16.

³⁹ Jeff Porcaro, “Jeff Porcaro: MI Clinic,” clinic at Musicians Institute recorded ca. 1985, YouTube video, posted by Groove Master, November 12, 2013, 20:31, <https://youtu.be/NINqHZfpBZ8>.

⁴⁰ Williams, “Navigating Proximities,” 59–61.

⁴¹ Williams, 59–61; Shuker, *Popular Music*, 233; Susan Schmidt Horning, *Chasing Sound: Technology, Culture, and the Art of Studio Recording from Edison to the LP* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 136–37.

⁴² Zak, *Poetics of Rock*, 163–64.

⁴³ Théberge, “Foreword,” xxvii.

the importance of investigating their work. Zak points out that the synergy between the team members aids the creative process, and that the boundaries between their roles are permeable.⁴⁴ For instance, Jeff Porcaro says he gave input on song structures and arrangements during sessions.⁴⁵ Moreover, Steve Lukather suggests that the instructions given to session musicians were sometimes so minimal that the musicians were effectively ghostwriters.⁴⁶ Also, session musicians are expected to have knowledge of recording techniques and how these interact with their instrument, so that they can achieve the desired result for the track.⁴⁷ This enables them to make technical suggestions to the producers and engineers.⁴⁸ In these ways, session musicians can enter the domains of other members of the composition team. In studying the interactive creative process that led to a track, it is important to keep this fluidity of roles in mind.

Zagorski-Thomas proposes two additional strategies to support his method. The first is reenactment of the activities that led to the track, such as the musicians' playing.⁴⁹ Zagorski-Thomas suggests that reenactment can provide insight into the physical experience associated with an activity, as well as the metaphorical associations it evokes.⁵⁰ I will apply this by reenacting Lukather's guitar part, to see if the physical experience of playing it can give me insight into what he was doing and why. The second strategy Zagorski-Thomas suggests is Philip Tagg's idea of hypothetical substitution. This involves the imaginary substitution of one musical element with another. This replacement can shed light on the effect of the original element in the context of the work.⁵¹ Hypothetical substitution is valuable in studying the contributions of session musicians because it reveals the consequences of their creative choices. By considering what the effect of other choices would have been, seemingly unimportant decisions may prove vital to the track.

Because my analysis is aimed at examining the creative role of the musicians, I will supplement Zagorski-Thomas's method with the genetic model of creativity, proposed by

⁴⁴ Zak, *Poetics of Rock*, 163–64.

⁴⁵ Flans, *It's About Time*, 109.

⁴⁶ David Konow, "First Call: The Top Studio Guitarists of the '70's and '80's Look Back," SteveLukather.com, September 30, 2010, <http://www.stevelukather.com/news-articles/2010/10/first-call-top-studio-guitarist-lukather-looks-back.aspx>. Lukather says, "Somebody would give you like 85 bars of E written on a piece of paper, and [...] the guys in the band would rewrite this song for these people."

⁴⁷ Thompson, *Creativity in the Recording*, 151–52. For example, Jeff Porcaro explains how the use of gates can affect drum sounds and a song's groove. Porcaro, "Throwback Thursday," 20:15.

⁴⁸ For instance, Jeff Porcaro says a drummer could ask an engineer to use less gate and more overhead and room microphones for a more organic drum sound, which would enhance the groove. Porcaro, "MI Clinic," 25:25.

⁴⁹ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 123.

⁵⁰ Zagorski-Thomas, 123.

⁵¹ Zagorski-Thomas, 123; Tagg, "Analysing Popular Music."

Timothy Warner to support analytical methods such as Zagorski-Thomas's. The model provides a framework for investigating the musical creativity involved in the creation of a track. Warner distinguishes four activities that represent the physical and psychological processes involved in record production. The first is conception, which refers to the musical, logistical, and technical ideas that underlie the production process. This includes the pre-production that precedes a recording session. The second is realization, which refers to the physical processes involved in making the track. The third is perception, which involves the immediate experience of what is being realized. Based on perception, it is decided what ideas are promising ideas and will be further explored. The consequences of the realization phase are thus evaluated in the perception phase. The fourth is contextualization, in which the entire process is considered from a broader creative perspective. This includes comparing it to the stylistic conventions other tracks have created. Warner sees these activities that constitute the production process not as separate, consecutive phases, but as parts of an interactive whole in which they continually inform each other.⁵² Warner's model complements Zagorski-Thomas's approach, and together they provide the analytical tools for understanding the session musicians' role in the creation of "I Keep Forgettin'."

⁵² Warner, "Approaches to Analysing Recordings."

Chapter 2

Analysis of “I Keep Forgettin”

Upon its release in 1982, a reviewer described “I Keep Forgettin” as follows: “The lyrics [...] are simple enough—it’s the arrangement that makes it work. The funk and the syncopation provide a seductive hook that keeps the song bopping in one’s ears long after it’s over.”¹ It is hard to disagree with this assessment. But how did this effective arrangement come about? What created this funk and syncopation? What caused this “bopping”? And what was the role of the session musicians in all of this? These are some of the questions I will investigate in this analysis.

In the network that led to the track, the primary actors were Michael McDonald (songwriter, lead vocals, Fender Rhodes, synthesizers), Jeff Porcaro (drums), Louis Johnson (bass guitar), Steve Lukather (electric guitar), and Greg Phillinganes (Clavinet). Maureen McDonald sung background vocals. Ed Sanford co-wrote the song.² The producers were Lenny Waronker and Ted Templeman, and the engineer was Donn Landee.³

Understanding the production process of “I Keep Forgettin” and the role of session musicians in it requires some background information about the musical culture in which the track was produced. “I Keep Forgettin” was recorded in Los Angeles, a hub of popular music production, and consequently a center of session musician activity. Porcaro, Johnson, Lukather, and Phillinganes were part of the elite players who appeared on many records being made in the city.⁴ Their collective performance style, consisting of commonalities in playing style and a shared idiom,⁵ contributed to the sound of Los Angeles pop music of this era. Session musicians in Los Angeles were paid per three-hour session according to union scale wages. Around this time, the flat fee for a session was about \$130. In-demand musicians like those playing on “I Keep Forgettin” often received double or triple scale.⁶

¹ Ann Ryan, “Michael McDonald’s Solo Project a Success,” *New Mexico Daily Lobo*, September 24, 1982, sec. Arts, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1106&context=daily_lobo_1982.

² McDonald and Sanford were originally credited as the song’s writers. Because of a copyright issue, Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller were later credited as well. See Bob Leszczak, *Who Did It First? Great Rhythm and Blues Cover Songs and Their Original Artists* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 89–91.

³ Michael McDonald, *If That’s What It Takes*, Warner Bros. 23703-2, 1982, compact disc, liner notes.

⁴ The large amount and variety of work the musicians did make it difficult to compile comprehensive discographies of their output, but for thorough lists of each musician’s work, see Jan Lücker, “Sessionplayers,” *Sessiondays*, accessed June 13, 2023, <https://www.sessiondays.com/sessionplayers/>.

⁵ Zak, *Poetics of Rock*, 53.

⁶ Ricardo Forrest, “Recording Mecca Draws Session Elite,” *Billboard*, June 30, 1979, CR-14, Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1286435032>. In 1979, the flat fee was \$127.05.

The musicians typically performed on multiple sessions per day.⁷ A session like the one for “I Keep Forgettin’” was thus a routine job. Unless musicians were given a writing credit, which was uncommon, they generally did not receive royalty payments for the records they performed on. For “I Keep Forgettin’,” none of the musicians received a writing credit. This is worth remembering as I investigate their creative role.

The Los Angeles session scene was a small world,⁸ and the musicians worked together regularly. In addition to their session work, Porcaro and Lukather were in the band Toto together. McDonald also did session work as a background vocalist, already working with Porcaro for Steely Dan in the 1970s.⁹ For “I Keep Forgettin’,” the musicians were not hired anonymously through a contractor, but through personal contact, as often happens with session musicians.¹⁰ Lukather was called by Templeman and Waronker, who said McDonald wanted him to play on his record.¹¹ Unlike house bands who operated as a unit and worked exclusively for certain studios,¹² session musicians in Los Angeles during this time were hired individually based on their suitability for a project. Selecting a combination of session musicians is part of Warner’s conception phase. With their choices, McDonald and the producers put together a specific sound for “I Keep Forgettin’” based on their knowledge of the musicians’ styles.

The musicians only found out in the studio who else would be playing on the session. They were not given a demo, and there was no prior rehearsal.¹³ This was the usual way of working during sessions. Lukather describes the limited instructions the musicians normally received as follows: “I had to read some shit sometimes, but generally most people handed me a chart with some chords on [it] and said, ‘Play whatever you want.’”¹⁴ This is confirmed by Johnson, who says, “I’ve never been given parts to play in my whole life. [...] They tell

⁷ Lukather mentions doing about twenty sessions per week. Lukather, “Secrets behind the Songs,” 22:05. Porcaro was fully booked all day in 1979 according to Flans, *It’s About Time*, 108.

⁸ Robyn Flans, “When Sessions Reign Supreme: The Players, Studios from L.A.’s Golden Age,” SteveLukather.com, October 1, 2014, <http://www.stevelukather.com/news-articles/2014/10/when-sessions-reigned-supreme-the-players,-studios-from-la%E2%80%99s-golden-age.aspx>. Keyboardist and producer David Foster describes the session scene in Los Angeles at the time as a “club.”

⁹ Flans, *It’s About Time*, 113–14.

¹⁰ Keith Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 85.

¹¹ Lukather, “Secrets behind the Songs,” 24:14.

¹² See Bob Bowman, “Session Musician,” in *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, ed. John Shepherd et al. (London: Continuum, 2003), 105.

¹³ Lukather, “Secrets behind the Songs,” 24:01.

¹⁴ Neville Marten, “In My Life: Steve Lukather,” *Guitarist*, June 2021, 68, Gale General OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A659643041/ITOF.

me, ‘Here’s a track, play what you want.’”¹⁵ Porcaro in 1986 also said, “I can’t remember in the last ten years where I’ve ever gone to a session and somebody writes out a drum part.”¹⁶

For “I Keep Forgettin’,” the musicians received a chord chart,¹⁷ and McDonald presumably played the basic song for them.¹⁸ These were the raw materials from the initial conception phase of the track’s production that the musicians worked with. They played live in the same room, with live vocals by McDonald,¹⁹ although these were probably re-recorded later. They played two takes. During the first take, they arranged their parts.²⁰ This process in which the musicians collectively created an arrangement while playing and improvising, dubbed “communal arranging” by session musician Dean Parks,²¹ was the typical working method during such sessions. The second take, on which the musicians performed this arrangement and fleshed it out with improvised elements, became the track.²²

In discussing the session for “I Keep Forgettin’,” McDonald says the track “just had a natural groove.”²³ Groove is closely related to the body, movement, and more specifically, dance.²⁴ Porcaro draws a connection between his drumming and dancing, saying, “I dig dancing and shit. [...] If I’m hearing a tune man, and cats are playing it, my whole thing is just: number one, keep time, and make like I’m dancing and grooving.”²⁵ Indeed, it is hard to deny that “I Keep Forgettin’” has a funky groove that incites movement,²⁶ and its rhythmic gestures can thus be interpreted as analogous to the bodily movements of dance. I will attempt to unpack why the track has such an infectious groove. For this, the category of rhythm and timing is a logical starting point, as the musicians’ activities within this category will have determined the groove to a considerable extent.

¹⁵ Daniel Kreps, “Brothers Johnson’s Louis Johnson, Michael Jackson Bassist, Dead at 60,” *Rolling Stone*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/brothers-johnsons-louis-johnson-michael-jackson-bassist-dead-at-60-240936/>. Johnson says, “I’m the most rare bass player in the whole world. [...] No one ever gave me music paper to read.”

¹⁶ Porcaro, “Throwback Thursday,” 4:58. Porcaro says, “The only time you’ll see a figure, if it’s an ensemble thing or if they want you kicking a figure. And in today’s contemporary pop music there’s not a lot of ensemble-type figures, or [...] big band-type chop things.”

¹⁷ Lukather, “Secrets behind the Songs,” 23:33.

¹⁸ Lukather, 30:05. Lukather describes the usual way of working as follows: “You showed up, and the artist would sit behind the piano or an acoustic guitar, and maybe somebody had written out a chord sheet.”

¹⁹ Lukather, 25:28. Presumably Maureen McDonald’s background vocals were recorded later.

²⁰ Lukather, 24:59.

²¹ Dean Parks, “Dean Parks - Guitarist and Record Producer for The Sessions Artist Series,” interview by Dom Famularo for The Sessions Panel, YouTube video, June 1, 2018, 29:15, <https://youtu.be/z6uzl-CKrxc>.

²² Lukather, “Secrets behind the Songs,” 25:07; Porcaro, “Throwback Thursday,” 9:04.

²³ Collins, “Doobie Brothers Perth.”

²⁴ Roholt, *Groove*, 83.

²⁵ Porcaro, “MI Clinic,” 18:50.

²⁶ Guy Madison uses the experience of musical sounds inducing movement as an operational definition of groove in Guy Madison, “Experiencing Groove Induced by Music: Consistency and Phenomenology,” *Music Perception* 24, no. 2 (December 1, 2006): 201–8, <https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2006.24.2.201>.

The syncopated four-bar bass line in the chorus (see table 1) shared by the bass drum and bass guitar functions as the song’s main hook. It is combined with snare hits on two and four. What characterizes the drum part most is the sixteenth-note pattern on the hi-hat, which is interspersed with open hi-hat eighth notes. At the tempo of around 96 bpm, it would be comfortable to play the sixteenths with two hands, but according to Porcaro, this alternating-stroke method sounded “too stiff and staccato,” so he chose to play it with only his right hand.²⁷ He was inspired in this choice by drummers such as James Gadson, who also regularly played single-handed sixteenths.²⁸ This challenging playing technique—Porcaro says his “arms were about to fall off” during the session²⁹—creates a livelier feel than using the “alternating stroke method,” as he demonstrates in his 1988 instructional video.³⁰ This provides an opportunity for hypothetical substitution. Imagining double-handed sixteenths in the track demonstrates that his creative choice to use the single-handed method was critical in determining the track’s distinctive groove.

Table 1. Structure of “I Keep Forgettin”

Form	Section	Time	Bars
A	Instrumental intro	0:00	8
A'	Chorus 1	0:21	8
B	Verse 1	0:41	8
C	Pre-chorus 1	1:01	4
A'	Chorus 2	1:12	8
B	Verse 2	1:32	8
C	Pre-chorus 2	1:52	4
A'	Chorus 3	2:02	8
D	Bridge	2:22	3
C	Pre-chorus 3	2:28	4
A'	Chorus 4	2:39	8
A'	Chorus 5	2:59	8
A	Instrumental outro	3:19	8

The analysis of Porcaro’s hi-hat playing by Räsänen et al. provides clues that may explain this difference in feel. They show that the inter-onset intervals on the hi-hat exhibit a

²⁷ Porcaro, “Instructional Video,” 7:55.

²⁸ Porcaro, “Throwback Thursday,” 9:24. Gadson’s single-handed sixteenths can be heard, for example, on Bill Withers’s “Use Me” (1972). Porcaro also mentions Ed Greene. He also names Fred White, Earl Palmer, and Paul Humphrey as drummers who influenced him in his single-handed way of playing sixteenths in Robyn Flans, “Jeff Porcaro: The Feel of the Music,” *Modern Drummer*, November 1988, 23, 54.

²⁹ Porcaro, “Throwback Thursday,” 10:08.

³⁰ Porcaro, “Instructional Video,” 7:55.

pattern characterized by an alternation of long and short intervals.³¹ This is in line with Zagorski-Thomas's observation that popular music frequently contains consistent patterns of microtiming variation.³² Bill Bruford points out that such "playing out of time with precision" creates groove, citing Porcaro as an expert in this area.³³ Räsänen et al. also found that the amplitudes of hi-hat onsets within a bar exhibit a distinct pattern, which is more complex than straightforward accents on strong beats.³⁴ Art Thompson suggests that Porcaro's dynamic control in his hi-hat playing was an important part of his sound.³⁵ Porcaro explains that in his approach to hi-hat playing, he pays special attention to "the inner balance, the inner dynamic [...] within the bar," and that this dynamic "lope" helps create groove.³⁶ Together with the patterns in the inter-onset intervals, these dynamic fluctuations are key to the strong groove of "I Keep Forgettin'."³⁷ Both the inter-onset intervals and the dynamics of the hi-hat part show recurring two-bar patterns.³⁸ In his instructional video, Porcaro suggests playing sixteenth notes on the hi-hat and inventing two-bar phrases by varying the bass drum patterns as a practice method.³⁹ This suggests that he was indeed thinking in two-bar phrases when playing such sixteenth-note patterns.

During the final take, Porcaro broke a stick at the beginning of the third chorus. While recording may normally have stopped in such an incident, he continued playing, illustrating the efficiency session musicians work with. While playing eighth notes on the hi-hat with his foot, he discarded the broken stick and grabbed a new one. The swing the new stick comes down with creates a hi-hat accent at 2:03.⁴⁰

It is worth noting the absence of a common nonhuman actor in music production: the click track.⁴¹ With the exact onset times of Porcaro's hi-hat hits, Räsänen et al. were able to compare Porcaro's tempo over the course of the track with an "imaginary metronome," which represents the average tempo of the entire track. They show that Porcaro deviates from this

³¹ Räsänen et al., "Fluctuations," 8–11.

³² Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 121.

³³ Bill Bruford, *Uncharted: Creativity and the Expert Drummer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 101–2.

³⁴ Räsänen et al., "Fluctuations," 11–13.

³⁵ Art Thompson, "Dynamic Independence," *Modern Drummer*, August 2002, 88.

³⁶ Porcaro, "Instructional Video," 3:57.

³⁷ Among other things, Zagorski-Thomas suggests inter-onset intervals and dynamics as determinants of groove. Simon Zagorski-Thomas, "The Study of Groove," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 16, no. 2 (November 1, 2007): 329, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411910701554013>.

³⁸ Räsänen et al., "Fluctuations," 11–12.

³⁹ Porcaro, "Instructional Video," 8:30.

⁴⁰ Porcaro, "Throwback Thursday," 9:35.

⁴¹ Simon Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 183.

throughout the track, suggesting that a click track was not used.⁴² McDonald says of Porcaro that he “had a great knowledge for where [a] song should sit tempo-wise.”⁴³ This, combined with the absence of a click track, makes it likely that Porcaro set the tempo. With this decision, he will have partly shaped the track’s groove, as Ingrid Monson points out that choosing the right tempo plays a role in creating groove.⁴⁴

Throughout the track, subtle tempo changes take place corresponding to the different sections of the song. The choruses are slightly faster than the verses, which in turn are faster than the pre-choruses.⁴⁵ These tempo changes occur in a window of about 2 bpm,⁴⁶ making them small and not consciously perceptible to the average listener.⁴⁷ They do, however, impact the feel of each section. Jay Graydon, a producer who worked with Porcaro, suggests that this dynamic use of tempo was an important part of Porcaro’s musical style, saying that “his time float is what made him great.”⁴⁸ During the 1980s, using a click track became the norm to facilitate easy editing and synchronization with MIDI sequences.⁴⁹ Porcaro’s performance shows the effectiveness of a more organic use of tempo.

Porcaro intersperses the single-handed sixteenths with open hi-hat eighth notes. These variations contribute to the groove, which becomes clear if we hypothetically substitute the hi-hat part for a continuous stream of sixteenth notes, which would quickly become monotonous. In the choruses, Porcaro plays an open hi-hat eighth note at the end of most bars. Metaphorically, the opening and closing of the hi-hat can be understood as the physical gestures of inhaling and exhaling respectively, and these variations indeed provide musical breathing room by rhythmically and timbrally interrupting the constant stream of staccato sixteenths. In the verses, he uses the open hi-hat less consistently, which makes the variations less predictable, emphasizing the liveliness brought about by the shift to the relative major.

⁴² Räsänen et al., “Fluctuations,” 7–9.

⁴³ Amendola, “A Different View,” 152.

⁴⁴ Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 68–69.

⁴⁵ Räsänen et al., “Fluctuations,” 7–9. Räsänen et al. have visualized the drift in a graph. The third chorus starts a little slower than the others. This is probably because Porcaro broke a stick at this point, as he explains in Porcaro, “Throwback Thursday,” 9:35. The final choruses and outro are slightly slower, but still faster than the verses and pre-choruses.

⁴⁶ Räsänen et al. do not specify changes in bpm, but I verified this by manually determining the bpm at various points in the track.

⁴⁷ Räsänen et al., “Fluctuations,” 8.

⁴⁸ Jay Graydon, “Asked Jake (Archive),” Jay Graydon Official Web Site, accessed June 13, 2023, <https://www.jaygraydon.com/askedtxt.htm>; Räsänen et al., “Fluctuations,” 7.

⁴⁹ Simon Zagorski-Thomas, “Real and Unreal Performances: The Interaction of Recording Technology and Rock Drum Kit Performance,” in *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, ed. Anne Danielsen (London: Routledge, 2016), 199–200, 205–6.

Their metaphorical connotation changes into a more playful, dance-like gesture, especially when he plays two in quick succession.

Porcaro previously used the basic principle of the drum part—single-handed sixteenths on the hi-hat, a backbeat on the snare, and the bass drum synchronizing with the bass guitar—on Toto’s “Georgy Porgy” (1978). This track’s tempo of 97 bpm is comparable to that of “I Keep Forgettin’.” Porcaro also uses a similar pattern of single-handed sixteenths with regular open hi-hat eighth notes on Boz Scaggs’s “Gimme the Goods” (1977), Toto’s “99” (1979), and Randy Crawford’s “That’s How Heartaches Are Made” (1981). This beat has become associated with Porcaro, and writer Mark Griffith suggests that the unnamed “silky-smooth, 16th-note, deep-in-the-pocket groove” could be named after him.⁵⁰ The track’s striking drum part can therefore be considered a personal creative contribution by Porcaro. His substantial role during the session for “I Keep Forgettin’” is best summed up by McDonald, who says, “It was just one of those magic nights in the studio, where the recording took on a life of its own. Jeff was a very big part of that.”⁵¹

To match Porcaro’s hi-hat, Lukather’s part is centered around a simple two-note alternation, which he supplements with ghost notes to create a constant sixteenth-note pattern. A similar interaction between Lukather and Porcaro can be heard on the verses of Toto’s “Hydra” (1979), on which Porcaro also plays a single-handed sixteenth hi-hat pattern, which Lukather complements with a similar two-note alternation with ghost notes. On the verses of “I Keep Forgettin’,” Lukather plays what fellow session guitarist Tim Pierce describes as “reggae on one note” on the last two sixteenths of each beat,⁵² again supplemented with ghost notes providing a funky feel. In reenacting Lukather’s playing, I noticed that both his chorus and verse parts are based on the same comfortable sixteenth-note alternating picking pattern. When no notes are fretted, the strings are muted with the left hand. Varying the attack or omitting it altogether results in a funky lope similar to Porcaro’s sixteenths. The experience of this rhythmic picking motion resembles foot tapping, making it feel like a natural dance-like movement when locking in with the groove of the drums and bass. In my reenactment, I used the same sturdy, unusually small style of guitar pick that Lukather uses.⁵³ Because the pick is smaller than normal, the distance between the fingers and the string is minimal, which

⁵⁰ Mark Griffith, “Artists on Track: Jeff Porcaro,” *Modern Drummer*, July 1998, 133.

⁵¹ Amendola, “Michael McDonald,” 150.

⁵² Tim Pierce, “The Genius of Steve Lukather’s Amazing Rhythm Guitar,” YouTube video, July 31, 2021, 10:05, <https://youtu.be/ssZ25O1dNjo>.

⁵³ Steve Lukather and Arend Slagman, “Past Gear Steve Lukather,” *SteveLukather.com*, February 2013, <http://www.stevelukather.com/media/84498/pastgear.pdf>.

gives detailed control over the variations in attack. The limited flexibility of the pick also contributes to this. In this way, the pick affords Lukather's precise dynamic control, which adds to the track's sophisticated groove. Lukather used this funky picking pattern more often, such as on Quincy Jones's "Betcha' Wouldn't Hurt Me" (1981) and Toto's "Pamela" (1988). To close off the first two bars of the hook, Lukather interrupts the two-note alternation with a descending B-minor arpeggio, still in sixteenths. At the end of the four-bar hook, Lukather breaks the funky pattern with improvised blues licks. These more organic gestures add variety and expressiveness to the part.

The pentatonic bass lick Johnson plays at 0:11 and repeats four times throughout the track also mirrors Porcaro's hi-hat.⁵⁴ Thus, the sixteenth-note hi-hat part is the track's rhythmic foundation. Applying hypothetical substitution and imagining eighth notes on the hi-hat confirms this, as this would dramatically change the groove. However, in keeping with Zagorski-Thomas's ideas on rhythm and timing, the true rhythmic essence of the track lies not in the sixteenth notes on a theoretical grid.⁵⁵ Rather, it can be found in the subtle ways the musicians flesh out this basic rhythmic pattern to give the track its characteristic groove.

Zagorski-Thomas points out that the use of non-static pitch plays a major role in popular music.⁵⁶ On "I Keep Forgettin'," both Lukather and Phillinganes use a device to manipulate the pitch of their instrument. In the first pre-chorus, Lukather uses his guitar's whammy bar to apply a slight vibrato to the arpeggiated triads he plays.⁵⁷ This gives color to the static triads and provides a contrast to the rigidity of the syncopated muted parts in the other sections.

Phillinganes plays a Hohner Clavinet modified with a whammy bar,⁵⁸ also known as a Castle Bar. Using this metal bar protruding from the top of the Clavinet, the player can increase the tension on the strings and thus increase the pitch.⁵⁹ Throughout the track, Phillinganes plays improvised blues licks, using the whammy bar to bend notes. After the song's rhythmic and harmonic foundation has been established in the first few bars, Phillinganes plays his first blues lick at 0:09, an organic gesture that stands out against the tight beat. Two more licks follow at 0:15 and 0:19, contrasting the stubborn groove with

⁵⁴ Johnson repeats the lick at 2:12, 2:59, 3:09, and 3:19. The last three are varied slightly.

⁵⁵ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 117, 121.

⁵⁶ Zagorski-Thomas, 121.

⁵⁷ Lukather also seems to use the whammy bar lightly in the other two pre-choruses, but this is hard to hear with certainty in the mix.

⁵⁸ Lukather, "Secrets behind the Songs," 25:52.

⁵⁹ Huw Rees, "Ernst Zacharias & The Hohner Clavinet," *Sound On Sound*, June 2016, <https://www.soundonsound.com/people/ernst-zacharias-hohner-clavinet>.

more playful gestures. The next two licks Phillinganes plays in the first chorus form a call and response with McDonald's expressive vocal gestures. The connotations of plaintive blues songs evoked by these bends dovetail with McDonald's melancholic lyrics and vocal delivery. Although the two are similar in their gestural expressiveness, McDonald's warm voice contrasts with the Clavinet's somewhat shrill sound. In the second chorus, Phillinganes extends his funky chordal comping from the verse and pre-chorus, omitting the improvised licks. In the third chorus, the Clavinet almost disappears: the comping stops, and Phillinganes plays only a minimal single-line lick at 2:11 that merges with Lukather's guitar. In the fourth chorus, the bluesy improvisations return, with three licks beginning at 2:47. Phillinganes switches back to comping in the fifth chorus but ends it with an improvised lick. On the outro, he interrupts his comping again for a brief pitch bend. Finally, in the fade-out, he plays his most pronounced lick, but this is barely audible due to the declining audio level. Compared to the other musicians' parts on "I Keep Forgettin'," Phillinganes's playing is the most free-form. It resembles jazz comping, combining loose chordal accompaniment with melodic ornamentation. This, combined with the pitch bends, gives the track a less rigid, more organic character.

In the category of timbre, session musicians had agency by selecting and configuring the instruments and related equipment they used in consultation with producers and engineers. It is therefore worth examining the gear the musicians used and the resulting timbral characteristics of their sound. It is also valuable to consider how the musicians influenced the timbre of their instrument with playing techniques.

Lukather uses a clean guitar sound. He likely played a Valley Arts Strat-style guitar,⁶⁰ plugged into a modified "blackface" Fender Deluxe Reverb amplifier.⁶¹ The amplifier was set up in an isolated room so that he could sit with the other musicians without causing bleeding to the other tracks.⁶² The guitar part consists mostly of simple but distinctive figures played

⁶⁰ Lukather says, "Basically everything from 1980 to '83 was all the [Gibson Les Paul] 'burst. Well, that and the first Valley Arts guitar." Wolf Marshall, "Steve Lukather: Solid-Gold Guitar Slinger," *Vintage Guitar*, September 2008, <https://www.vintageguitar.com/3660/steve-lukather-2/>. The use of a whammy bar in the song rules out the possibility that it was the Les Paul because that guitar does not have one. See Lukather and Slagman, "Past Gear Steve Lukather."

⁶¹ Lukather says that in his session days, he "had an old blackface [Fender] Deluxe and some straight-ahead Marshalls." Marshall, "Steve Lukather." Since the tone does not resemble that of a Marshall, and considering a Fender amplifier would be a natural choice for a clean sound, it was likely the Fender. Lukather is presumably referring to the Deluxe Reverb which was modified for him by Paul Rivera, which he mentions in Willie G. Moseley, "Steve Lukather: A Full Plate for More than 20 Years," *Vintage Guitar*, November 2000, <https://www.vintageguitar.com/2861/steve-lukather/>.

⁶² Lukather, "Secrets behind the Songs," 25:28.

palm-muted. Lukather recalls that such parts were one of his specialties.⁶³ By slightly dampening the strings with the palm of the picking hand, the sustain of the notes is reduced, and the guitar's sound takes on a more percussive quality. On the descending B-minor arpeggios Lukather plays in the choruses, he reduces the amount of palm muting and allows the strings to ring out more.⁶⁴ This creates a timbral dynamic in the part. During the pre-choruses, Lukather does not use palm muting at all. Instead, he plays triads that he allows to sound fully, building tension released by the return of the percussive pattern in the chorus. In the bridge and subsequent final pre-chorus, the guitar sounds brighter, which Lukather accomplishes by increasing his attack and playing closer to the bridge of the guitar. By manipulating the timbre of the guitar, he provides increasing intensity as the song moves toward the final choruses. On the outro, he reduces the amount of palm muting and increases his attack, going along with the increased intensity in the other musicians' playing.

Porcaro's choice of drums and cymbals was an important part of his session work. His technician Paul Jamieson says Porcaro "was hired for his sound as well as his playing." It is not known what drums and cymbals Porcaro used on "I Keep Forgettin'," but a discussion of his gear by Jamieson suggests that his kit may have consisted of a 16" x 22" bass drum, 10", 12", and 13" rack toms, a 16" floor tom, and a 6½" x 14" snare, with 14" hi-hats for the foundational sixteenth notes.⁶⁵ The bass drum and toms have a deep sound and the snare sounds punchy, resulting in a clean drum sound that contributes to the track's crisp feel. The hi-hat is prominent in the mix and sounds minimally processed, preserving the natural sharpness of the cymbals. The other cymbals are less prominently mixed, so that their more chaotic timbre does not detract from the track's smooth sound. On the snare, Porcaro creates a dynamic buildup by playing cross stick in the introductory eight bars before the vocals come in, after which he switches to his usual rim-shots.⁶⁶

Phillinganes's Clavinet muddies the timbral waters. The Clavinet functions by striking strings with small hammers triggered by the keys, after which pickups capture the resulting vibrations.⁶⁷ The electric guitar works similarly, and the two instruments resemble

⁶³ Lukather, 47:40.

⁶⁴ Pierce, "Lukather's Amazing Rhythm Guitar," 8:40.

⁶⁵ This is mostly based on the kit Porcaro used for Michael Jackson's "Beat It" (1982). Except for the bass drum which may have been Ludwig, the drums were probably Gretsch, as Jamieson says "[Porcaro] used Gretsch in the studio after [...] 1978." Jamieson says the 1950 Gretsch 6½" x 14" snare was Porcaro's "go-to drum," although he did have several snares for different sounds. See Flans, *It's About Time*, 233–34.

⁶⁶ Porcaro says he always plays rimshots on backbeats. Robyn Flans, "L.A. Studio Round Table," *Modern Drummer*, November 1990, 94.

⁶⁷ Grove Music Online, s.v. "Clavinet," by Hugh Davies, accessed June 13, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.53394>.

each other in timbre. Along with Phillinganes's use of the whammy bar, the Clavinet evokes connotations of electric guitar playing, and could be mistaken for one. The sharp timbre of the Clavinet contrasts with the warm sounds of the other keyboard instrument, McDonald's Fender Rhodes, which uses steel tines linked to tone bars instead of strings,⁶⁸ making them complementary in timbre. Phillinganes's funky Clavinet comping resembles the style of Stevie Wonder. Phillinganes had previously been a member of Wonder's band, which explains this influence. The guitar-like pitch manipulations Phillinganes uses in the choruses are also reminiscent of Wonder's playing on Quincy Jones's "Betcha' Wouldn't Hurt Me" (1981), although Wonder uses a synthesizer rather than a Clavinet to achieve the guitar-like effect.

The range Johnson plays in (E1-E3) suggests that he is playing a four-string bass, as he usually did. The use of the four-string bass with its limited range keeps the track's low end uncluttered, which contributes to its crisp sound. The bass tone is deep and contains little treble. It does not clash with the other instruments in frequency range apart from the bass drum. Along with the sparse arrangement and transparent mix, this makes the bass stand out without drowning out the other instruments. At 3:12 and 3:31, Johnson uses popping, a technique that involves firmly pulling on the string, which changes the timbre of the bass and creates a distinct percussive accent. In doing so, Johnson adds a personal touch to the otherwise restrained bass part, as such more aggressive playing techniques were what he was most known for.⁶⁹

The harmonies of "I Keep Forgettin'," while perhaps a bit more sophisticated than those of the average pop song, do not stand out as a prominent feature of the track due to their mostly diatonic nature and the track's slick production. As Zagorski-Thomas suggests, this leaves room for complexity in other areas, since intricate harmonic progressions can divert attention from, for example, a track's complex rhythmic characteristics.⁷⁰ The elegant, inconspicuous chord changes provide space for the funky groove that is central to the track, and the bluesy variations the musicians add.

Apart from added synth parts by McDonald and vocal overdubs, the track was recorded in a single take.⁷¹ "I Keep Forgettin'" demonstrates the strength of the live approach

⁶⁸ Grove Music Online, s.v. "Rhodes, Harold," by Hugh Davies, accessed June 13, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.47652>.

⁶⁹ See E. E. Bradman, "Thumbs of Thunder: The Hard-Hitting Legacy of Louis Johnson," *Bass Player*, September 2015, Gale General OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A429410435/ITOF.

⁷⁰ Zagorski-Thomas, "Analysing the Product," 122.

⁷¹ For this session, there is no mention anywhere of the musicians "punching in" to fix mistakes, but Lukather says this was done occasionally, so it might have happened here. Lukather, "Secrets behind the Songs," 27:16.

as opposed to gradually building a track through overdubbing, especially in remote sessions as is common today.⁷² Playing live together in a room affords interaction between the musicians. A collective energy is noticeable in the track, especially in the outro, where the musicians push each other by exchanging improvised licks and playing with more intensity than earlier in the song. Also, as Monson points out, interpersonal interaction plays a role in groove, so this live approach will have benefited the track's groove.⁷³

The most dramatic and tense moment of the track occurs in the bridge, when the song's time signature, firmly established as 4/4 up to that point, becomes ambiguous. There are a total of 10 beats, which can be interpreted in two ways. McDonald's vocal lines starting on the fifth and eighth beats, the cymbal crash on the eighth beat, and the descending three-note bass line in the last three beats suggest a bar of 4/4 followed by two bars of 3/4. However, Porcaro maintains the duple feel of the backbeat, suggesting two bars of 4/4 followed by a bar of 2/4. The hesitating gestures of Lukather's offbeat stabs add to this confusion. This moment of uncertainty reflects the desperate repetition of "don't say that" by McDonald's protagonist. This tension is resolved by returning to the 4/4 of the familiar pre-chorus, and even more so when the chorus is reached.

As the track nears its end, the musicians' playing becomes more emphatic. Whereas Lukather's previous improvisations were unobtrusive, leading into the final chorus he plays a long phrase ending on the open low E string. During the instrumental outro, after McDonald's vocals finish, the musicians play improvised licks that fill the void left by the vocals and add character to the potentially uninteresting outro. Porcaro plays "32nd-note bass drum flourish[es],"⁷⁴ executed on a single bass drum using his typical sliding "toe-and-ball" pedal technique.⁷⁵ These coincide with a descending sixteenth-based phrase by Johnson, together creating a brief cascade of notes.

A large part of the musicians' creative input occurred before the final take during the communal arranging process. Lukather describes this as follows: "[McDonald] had this great tune, but like, what are you gonna play? So Jeff [Porcaro] starts playing his groove and Louis [Johnson] immediately falls into groove, and I just start playing [my part]. [...] We had that

⁷² Herbst and Albrecht, "Skillset," 149. Herbst and Albrecht pose the question of what the implications of such remote sessions are. The effectiveness of playing together live in a physical space demonstrated on "I Keep Forgettin'" suggests that something is lost in this modern way of working.

⁷³ Monson, *Saying Something*, 26–72.

⁷⁴ Ed Breckenfeld, "Jeff Porcaro: Style & Analysis," *Modern Drummer*, August 2002, 87.

⁷⁵ Porcaro, "Instructional Video," 9:07; Brad Schlueter, "18 Ways to Sound like Jeff Porcaro," *DRUM! Magazine*, December 2017, <https://drummagazine.com/18-ways-to-sound-like-jeff-porcaro-2/>.

sorted out by the time the first run-through had ended.”⁷⁶ It is interesting that the musicians managed to create parts that did not clash melodically, harmonically, or rhythmically, and did not interfere with the vocals. Lukather says, “My first instincts were usually good and I was known for coming up with hooky little parts. I could find a real musical part or a nice arpeggio hooky thing after a vocal phrase. [...] I have an arranger’s ear. I can hear melodies around melodies—stay out the way of the vocal and play something cool to lead it in or lead it out.”⁷⁷ Lukather’s chorus guitar part, for example, uses melodic material from McDonald’s vocals. The two-note alternation mirrors the beginning of the vocal part. And just as McDonald steps out of the minor pentatonic scale by singing a ninth, Lukather in his part, which can otherwise be seen as based on the pentatonic scale, uses a ninth to formulate the descending B-minor arpeggio.

Lukather’s chorus guitar part on “I Keep Forgettin’” resembles his part on the verses of Michael Jackson’s “Human Nature” (1982). The parts are similar in their basic melodic framework, picking pattern, and the position they are played in on the guitar. Lukather also deviates from the pentatonic scale by using the ninth in both parts.⁷⁸ This suggests that, as with Porcaro’s drum part, the musicians drew to some extent from a repertoire of recyclable ideas, which is not surprising given that such sessions were a routine job for the musicians. Lukather, for instance, mentions doing about twenty sessions per week,⁷⁹ and has appeared on hundreds of albums. He says his parts on tracks like “I Keep Forgettin’” were a matter of “one or two takes, boom, out, done,” saying, “I got hired to do all that stuff on the fly.” He describes the parts as “the first thing I grabbed for.”⁸⁰

The genetic model of creativity can help understand the interactive process of communal arranging. Based on the basic musical materials provided to the musicians at the beginning of the session, they conceived ideas (conception) and executed these on their instrument (realization). They evaluated these ideas in real time in the context of both McDonald’s basic song and the parts of the other musicians (perception) and considered whether the overall result was satisfactory from a broader creative perspective (contextualization). They revised their ideas as needed based on this immediate feedback, arriving at a complete arrangement in a matter of minutes, which they executed on the second

⁷⁶ Lukather, “Secrets behind the Songs,” 25:07.

⁷⁷ Marten, “Steve Lukather.”

⁷⁸ Pierce, “Lukather’s Amazing Rhythm Guitar,” 12:58. Pierce points out the stylistic similarities between Lukather’s guitar parts on the two songs.

⁷⁹ Lukather, “Secrets behind the Songs,” 22:05.

⁸⁰ Paul Hanson, “Steve Lukather: The Guitarist of Record,” BOSS, accessed June 13, 2023, https://www.boss.info/us/community/boss_users_group/1402/.

and final take. Lukather sums up this creative process as follows: “What we got paid to do, as studio musicians who made records, was fill in the blanks. We came up with all the hooky little parts and rearranged things in the blink of an eye.”⁸¹

While I have so far focused on what did happen musically, it is also worth considering what did not happen. As Pierce notes, Lukather is a virtuoso guitarist who has played many iconic guitar solos full of technical display, but his parts on this track, while effective, are minimalistic.⁸² An interesting opportunity for hypothetical substitution is available here. At a tribute concert after Porcaro’s death in 1992, McDonald performed “I Keep Forgettin’,” with Lukather playing a distorted guitar solo that contrasts with his original parts.⁸³ This illustrates the restraint he exercised in opting for the minimalist approach, and it shows how the different contexts of the recording studio and a live performance afford different ways of playing. Johnson was an equally skilled bassist but opts for only an elegant bass line that he ornaments sporadically with improvised touches. Writer Bill Leigh suggests that while Johnson was renowned for his funky “thumping” technique, he was also known for restrained groovy parts like the one he plays on “I Keep Forgettin’.” Leigh says that Johnson’s “sense of groove [...] kept the phone ringing on session dates.”⁸⁴ Porcaro and Phillinganes also could have done more but chose not to. This restraint could have made the track dull, but the musicians managed to give it flavor within the creative boundaries of the session. They imbued the track with a unique character by providing its recognizable groove and an abundance of distinctive musical details, without ever overpowering McDonald and his song. The way the musicians maintained this balance may be their most important contribution.

⁸¹ Steve Lukather, *The Gospel According to Luke*, with Paul Rees (New York: Post Hill Press, 2019), 4.

⁸² Pierce, “Lukather’s Amazing Rhythm Guitar,” 10:10.

⁸³ “I Keep Forgettin’,” with Michael McDonald and David Crosby, Spotify, track 6 on Toto, *Greatest Hits Live (Live: Universal Amphitheater, LA 14 Dec '92)*, CC Music, 1992. Guitar solo at 3:20.

⁸⁴ Bill Leigh, “More than Thunder Thumbs,” *Bass Player*, September 2015, Gale General OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A429410435/ITOF. Johnson’s playing on Michael Jackson’s “Get on the Floor” (1979) is an example of his “thumping,” and shows how restrained his playing on “I Keep Forgettin’” is in comparison.

Chapter 3

Creativity, Authenticity, and Authorship

A critic once described Jeff Porcaro and Steve Lukather as “brilliant soulless automatons” who “[make] the appropriate noises for the man paying the bill.”¹ Such associations with sterile professionalism, inauthenticity, and a lack of personality are recurring themes in critiques of the role of session musicians in popular music.² This skepticism results from the tension between the notions of music-as-expression and music-as-commodity described by Simon Frith, with session musicians being seen as representing the latter.³ Such criticism of their role overlooks the creative work they did on a daily basis, which I have provided a detailed example of in my analysis. The records these musicians performed on were highly commercial, but this is no reason to assume the people making the music were not creative individuals. As Keith Negus suggests, the music industry should be seen as a site of both commercial and creative activity, and it is reductive to assume that these are mutually exclusive.⁴

While the primary responsibility of session musicians is indeed to satisfy their employer, stereotypes of session musicians as detached professionals overlook the considerable creative input they provide in doing so. In most cases, their work does not consist of playing composed parts, but of transforming abstract musical ideas into concrete, recordable sounds. As Lukather puts it, “That’s what we got paid for—not for reading the dots and playing what was written on the page, but for filling in the blanks where there was nothing on the page.”⁵ My analysis shows that the musicians performing on “I Keep Forgettin’” played an integral role in shaping the track’s distinctive groove and character. Through a multitude of creative choices, they turned Michael McDonald’s basic song into a

¹ Max Bell, “Toto: Toto (CBS),” *New Musical Express*, March 17, 1979, Rock’s Backpages, <https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/toto-itotoi-cbs>.

² Williams, “Navigating Proximities,” 60; Shuker, *Popular Music*, 26; Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 133; Simon Frith, “Creativity as a Social Fact,” in *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance and Perception*, ed. David Hargreaves, Dorothy Miell, and Raymond MacDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65.

³ Simon Frith, “The Industrialization of Music,” in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 231. Frith also discussed the related notion of the “musician as worker” versus the “musician as creative artist” in Simon Frith, “Are Workers Musicians?,” *Popular Music* 36, no. 1 (January 2017): 111–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143016000714>.

⁴ Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 36–65.

⁵ Jude Gold, “Dreamcatcher: Steve Lukather,” *Guitar Player*, February 2018, 47, Gale General OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A526002569/ITOF.

full-fledged arrangement with both broad commercial appeal and interesting musical elements that keep the track engaging on repeated listening. Then they performed this arrangement, adding improvised elements that give the track an organic feel.

A key finding of my analysis is that the musicians did not just contribute by developing basic musical ideas or providing new ones. They also influenced the track through the multitude of details in microtiming, dynamics, and pitch they added. This suggests that even in situations where session musicians may appear to have less creative influence, they can still play a substantial role in the creative process. When they receive detailed demos and their work consists of “instrumental fine-tuning,”⁶ or when they play from elaborate sheet music, they must still make a range of interpretive creative choices. Thus, the analytical approach I used could also be applied to such situations where the role of session musicians appears to be smaller.

My analysis supports Isabel Campelo’s suggestion that the work of session musicians often consists of adding “something of their own” to a track in the form of creative contributions that stem from their personal musical style.⁷ Alan Williams also points out that session musicians make original and distinctive contributions to the projects they work on,⁸ and that this creative input is more important to the work of session musicians than their technical skill.⁹ With my analysis, I was able to provide a concrete example of what this creative work looks like in practice. My findings are also consistent with those of Jan-Peter Herbst and Tim Albrecht in their 2018 study of contemporary German session musicians. They also found that creative input was more important in the musician’s work than technical skill.¹⁰ This shows that the insights about the creative role of session musicians from my analysis are still relevant in a non-historical context.

The results of my analysis demand some nuance to the often-used metaphor of session musicians as chameleons.¹¹ It is true that they adapt to the style of the project they are working on, and that they should not stand out so much that they undermine the artist’s leading role. However, in many cases they are hired precisely for the individual creative contributions they can make. Williams points out that forming a creative identity in these

⁶ Virgil Moorefield, *The Producer as Composer: Shaping the Sounds of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 88.

⁷ Campelo, ““That Extra Thing.””

⁸ Williams, “Navigating Proximities,” 59.

⁹ Williams, “Navigating Proximities.”

¹⁰ Herbst and Albrecht, “Skillset,” 148–49.

¹¹ See, for example, Wright, “Motown Session Musicians,” 95; Bruford, *Uncharted*, 41; Betto Arcos and Josh Kun, “Studio Stories: Interviews with Session Musicians,” in *The Tide Was Always High: The Music of Latin America in Los Angeles*, ed. Josh Kun (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 163–64, 209.

circumstances could be difficult, especially because a session musician's contributions are often seen as corporate commodities that are secondary to the creativity of the artist they work for.¹² This could be a source of frustration for session musicians, but Phillinganes describes the artistic boundaries inherent in session work as inspiring because it was challenging to be creative within these limitations.¹³ "I Keep Forgettin'" illustrates how the musicians maintain this balance by making subtle but distinctive creative choices to give color to the track. Porcaro's drumming on "I Keep Forgettin'" is idiosyncratic and virtuosic, but it may go unnoticed by the casual listener because it does not draw excessive attention to itself. The lope of the single-handed sixteenths gives a unique flavor to the track that sets it apart from other records without sacrificing its commercial appeal or McDonald's principal role.

My findings about the creative role of the session musicians performing on "I Keep Forgettin'" are in line with Albin Zak's composition team theory, in which he emphasizes the collaborative nature of the production process, and the fluidity of creative roles.¹⁴ Guy Morrow suggests that the artist receiving the public's attention acts as a brand through which the creative work of session musicians and other members of the composition team reaches the audience.¹⁵ Many listeners who appreciated "I Keep Forgettin'" for its funky beat, characteristic bass line, and bluesy expressiveness will have attributed these things to McDonald, even though the session musicians were also responsible for these aspects to a considerable extent.

Lukather describes the fluidity of studio roles as follows: "Essentially, we were involved in the production and arrangement of each of the basic tracks we played on, whether the artists, managers or producers wanted to give us the credit for that or not. There was no law that said they had to and it was the same for all of us."¹⁶ He also says, "Sometimes you would come up with all the major parts of a song, or even rewrite it, and not end up with a writing credit or getting paid."¹⁷ This underscores the complex nature of authorship in popular music. While notions of authorship are usually centered around featured artists and songwriters, an analysis using an ANT-based approach reveals that a track is the result of a complex network in which all actors have influence. To rank these actors by importance may

¹² Williams, "Navigating Proximities," 61.

¹³ Phillinganes, "Red Bull Music Academy," 17:25.

¹⁴ Zak, *Poetics of Rock*, 163–64.

¹⁵ Guy Morrow, *Designing the Music Business: Design Culture, Music Video and Virtual Reality* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 113–14.

¹⁶ Lukather, *Gospel According to Luke*, 4.

¹⁷ Lukather, 106.

seem straightforward—the songwriter and artist are often seen as most important—but such a ranking is based on outdated notions of authorship. These notions overlook the complex creative process underlying popular music. As Zak suggests, the activities of all members of the composition team require artistry in their own way.¹⁸ Thus, they should not be overlooked in studying popular music.

¹⁸ Zak, *Poetics of Rock*, 163.

Conclusion

My goal in this thesis was to gain insight into the creative role and contributions of the session musicians playing on “I Keep Forgettin’” through an analysis of the track. By examining “I Keep Forgettin’” using Zagorski-Thomas’s analytical method, I showed how the session musicians played a key role in shaping the track. With this, I was able to substantiate existing studies discussing the influential role of session musicians in popular music with a detailed example of what this creative influence looks like in practice.

In my analysis, I discussed how the session musicians made a multitude of creative contributions during the production process. In the first take, the musicians communally arranged their parts by quickly transforming the musical raw material and rudimentary instructions they received into a full-fledged arrangement, a process I discussed from the perspective of Warner’s genetic model of creativity. They then performed this arrangement on the second take, which was used for the track. Through their creative use of rhythm, tempo, timing, and dynamics, they shaped the track’s defining groove. With expressive manipulations of pitch and timbre, they complemented this groove with colorful musical elements that gave “I Keep Forgettin’” a distinctive character.

Although the musicians did not write the song, they had a determining creative influence on the final track. This illustrates how session musicians transcend the role of simple performers of instructions. They can play an essential role in realizing the musical ideas from the conception phase preceding the session, by transforming these abstract ideas into concrete sounds that become the actual track. From the creative agency they have while doing this, they make artistic contributions, leaving their individual mark on the product of this complex creative process. This is in line with ideas about the permeability of creative roles and the complex nature of authorship in popular music. With my analysis, I was able to provide a concrete example to support these notions. This demonstrates the effectiveness of close analysis of popular music. Together with other methodologies, it can help provide a more complete picture of the creative practice underlying popular music production. I have focused my analysis on the contributions of session musicians, but Zagorski-Thomas’s method can also be used to examine the contributions of other actors in networks of record production, such as producers and engineers. This could also yield more insight into the interaction between human and nonhuman actors, such as recording technology.

By limiting myself to a single case study and analyzing it in depth, many details came to light that may have gone unnoticed in a more superficial analysis. While this was an effective approach, the fact that I only analyzed a single case study is also the main limitation of my study. I was limited in the conclusions I could draw from my findings about session musicianship in a broader sense. I dealt with this by selecting a case study that was both representative of the work of the session musicians involved and the working practices of other session musicians as described in the existing literature. By demonstrating the effectiveness of Zagorski-Thomas's method, I hope to have given future studies a methodological starting point to further explore the role of session musicians. Future research could apply the approach I used to other tracks on which session musicians play to see how the results compare. It would also be interesting to analyze a series of tracks on which the same musician plays to see what patterns of influence can be detected in them, or to analyze the work of several musicians to see how they differ in their approach to session work. Beyond analytical approaches, it is also important to continue historical research on session musicians, and to further examine the contemporary practice of session musicianship.

In this thesis, I have shown how session musicians contributed to a track within the creative constraints of a recording session. The professionalism with which they did this may suggest a lack of artistry, but my analysis has shown that the musicians' work was highly creative. This brings us back to the beginning of this thesis, where I raised the question of whether the work of session musicians is art or craft. This question is best answered by asking another: why not both?

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