

Textes et contextes

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université Bourgogne Europe

19-1 | 2024

**L'entre-deux, une recomposition des représentations. Regards
transdisciplinaires et transfrontaliers**

The Fiery Furnaces: Memory-Based Rock Music as Literature

The Fiery Furnaces : le rock autobiographique comme objet littéraire

Article publié le 15 juillet 2024.

Thomas Britt

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4813>

Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d'être soumis à des autorisations d'usage spécifiques.

Thomas Britt, « The Fiery Furnaces: Memory-Based Rock Music as Literature », *Textes et contextes* [], 19-1 | 2024, publié le 15 juillet 2024 et consulté le 27 mai 2026. Droits d'auteur : Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d'être soumis à des autorisations d'usage spécifiques.. URL : <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4813>

La revue *Textes et contextes* autorise et encourage le dépôt de ce pdf dans des archives ouvertes.

PREO

PREO est une plateforme de diffusion [voie diamant](#).

The Fiery Furnaces: Memory-Based Rock Music as Literature

The Fiery Furnaces : le rock autobiographique comme objet littéraire

Textes et contextes

Article publié le 15 juillet 2024.

19-1 | 2024

L'entre-deux, une recomposition des représentations. Regards transdisciplinaires et transfrontaliers

Thomas Britt

🔗 <http://preo.ube.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=4813>

Le texte seul, hors citations, est utilisable sous [Licence CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Les autres éléments (illustrations, fichiers annexes importés) sont susceptibles d'être soumis à des autorisations d'usage spécifiques.

Introduction

1. Indie Rock and Literary Fiction
 2. Concepts and Sources
 3. Temporality/order and character
 4. Aural and textual interaction
- Conclusion

Introduction

- 1 References to units of time are standard in spoken and written communication and across literary types. “Last day in May, the afternoon.” “On the 13th day of the 5th lunar month.” In isolation, such phrases use different temporal markers to establish in the listener or reader's mind some distinction related to the indicated month, day, or time of day. The first of the above phrases could appear in a diary. The second sounds vaguely Scriptural. The visual image they conjure for some might be a calendar or a season of the natural world. Both quotations, however, are song lyrics characterized as recollections

and appearing in the discography of The Fiery Furnaces, an American musical group that explores sound- (or song-) based recollection so thoroughly that it serves as one of the band's defining features.

- 2 Initially active from 2000 to 2011 and from 2020 to the present, The Fiery Furnaces includes two permanent members: brother and sister Matthew Friedberger and Eleanor Friedberger. Both are musicians and performers, but Matthew writes most of the music and lyrics, and Eleanor is responsible for most of the singing. The duo was unusually prolific in their original run, releasing nine full-length albums (eight studio; one live) in roughly six years. Each sibling has enjoyed a solo career, with Matthew releasing at least a dozen solo albums and Eleanor releasing four.
- 3 A close reading of a discography of such a size could fill multiple volumes, and the excellence of their songwriting and performances would deserve such a treatment. While this article analyzes selections from most of the Fiery Furnaces albums and, to a lesser extent, the siblings' solo works, the particular, narrow focus is on how the songs' literary (and occasionally filmic) qualities contribute to a unique meeting point of music and memory. This article engages with the memory-based experimental music of The Fiery Furnaces as a type of complex storytelling more common in other narrative forms. Rather than exploring an instance of music and memory in literature, this reading of The Fiery Furnaces examines memory-based music as a type of literature.
- 4 Tiina Männistö-Funk argues that “music can concretize and organize biographical memories and make us sensitive towards the different temporalities of remembering” (Männistö-Funk 2016: 235-236). The autobiographical thrust of The Fiery Furnaces' music and promotion includes references to literary, musical, and religious sources that have been adapted to the particular purposes of each project. To the extent that intertextuality informs the Fiery Furnaces project, each instance reflects the artists' particular memory of that text. Though not all of the song lyrics examined in this article are explicitly about memory, nearly all of them depend on the influence of remembered texts and objects, which are adapted into new forms in song.
- 5 In the first section, I explore the relationship between “indie rock,” the generic grouping within which the Fiery Furnaces' music is said

to exist, and “literary fiction,” that category of publishing signifying quality fiction that breaks with conventions of genre and popular commercial forms. I point out how the Fiery Furnaces' output, ostensibly an example of indie rock, hews closer to the substance and reputation of literary fiction and the aura of literariness. Though the band's music has sometimes enjoyed critical acclaim, the inherent literariness of the material has been divisive among critics and consumers. Section two examines specific concepts and sources such as the Bible and Broadway musicals that serve as familiar contexts or sources of allusion embedded within cultural memory, which take on new meanings when delivered via the melodies and especially the lyrics of The Fiery Furnaces.

- 6 The third section involves two key components of literature and film narratives, temporality/order and character, especially as those relate to memory and recollection in the Friedbergers' music, including how the characters that populate the songs are perspectives that become the site of memories within the music. Finally, the fourth section engages with the interaction of aural and textual elements within the design and promotion of The Fiery Furnaces' albums, which combine the various layers of memory and recall, including that of the listeners, to unify the disparate styles that constitute the Friedberger siblings' discography.

1. Indie Rock and Literary Fiction

- 7 The albums of The Fiery Furnaces and the solo releases of the Friedbergers have all reached listeners through independent labels, distinguished from major labels primarily through a lack of corporate wealth and promotional reach. As a result of the lower financial stakes, independent labels also enjoy the freedom to focus on musical niches and often allow more artistic experimentation, a facet of the business model that has benefited The Fiery Furnaces. Rough Trade Records released the band's debut album, *Gallowsbird's Bark* (2003), *Blueberry Boat* (2004), *EP* (2005), and *Rehearsing My Choir* (2005). Both Rough Trade and Fat Possum released *Bitter Tea* (2006), and then Thrill Jockey released the remainder of the group's full-length albums to date: *Widow City* (2007), *Remember* (2008), *I'm Going Away* (2009), and *Take Me Round Again* (2009).

- 8 Within popular culture, it is common to hear bands like The Fiery Furnaces referred to as exemplars of “indie rock,” which, by the most straightforward definition, means they are not signed to a major label. In a 2005 article, “What is Indie Rock?” Ryan Hibbett contextualizes the musical grouping relative to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital and compares indie rock’s relationship to its corporate contrast with “high art in its relation to popular culture,” stating:

Indie rock is part of a dichotomous power structure in which two fields—one (A) having a large audience and producing an abundance of economic capital, the other (B) having a much smaller audience and producing little economic capital—operate in a contentious but symbiotic relationship: while resisting the conventions of A, B acquires value through its being recognized as “not A.” (Hibbett 2005: 57)

- 9 Hibbett’s point about indie rock acquiring value because of its opposition to, and perceived distinction from, major-label rock is itself a process that depends on a cultivated memory. That is, a music listener or follower of popular culture must first develop an awareness of the structure and products of corporate-funded major label rock music and keep those impressions in mind to appreciate the differences expressed in products of independent labels. Without the memory of the norm (major label releases), the departure from the norm (independent label releases) is less defined and would not seem exceptional.
- 10 *Rehearsing My Choir*, the Fiery Furnaces’ memory-saturated fourth studio album, is a biographical work about the Friedberger siblings’ octogenarian grandmother, Olga Sarantos. Though written by Matthew, the lead vocals on the album are delivered by Sarantos herself, speaking/singing the story of her life. Though these aspects of the album do not suggest the potential for commercial success, an independent label such as Rough Trade gains cachet and asserts its indie rock bona fides by being willing and able to release the grandmother album to a more limited audience.
- 11 There is a precedent for this type of divide within book publishing. In a recent article for *The Nation*, Dan Sinykin explains that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, “the category of ‘literary fiction’ emerged from

a culture of crisis to mark an old distinction [including that of entertainment versus art] as newly salient. It announced aesthetic ambition: Literary fiction was not commercial, not popular, and not *genre fiction* (emphasis in the original)” (Sinykin 2023). This effort to define literary fiction by what it is not clearly parallels and slightly foretells the position and promotion of indie rock relative to more conventional major-label rock music. As literary fiction existed as an exception to lesser distinguished but more overtly commercial categories of fiction in publishing, such as books by “brand-name authors” (Sinykin 2023), the ideal of indie rock champions eccentric, enigmatic characters rather than celebrities and often resists mass commercial exploitation through more artistic or less easily consumable music.

- 12 Although the work of The Fiery Furnaces exists in the musical sphere and not the literary publishing sphere, their music is relevant to a discussion of memory in literature beyond the literary fiction/indie rock parallel. The *literariness* of the band’s lyrics and music is found in both the “automatization and deautomatization of language” (Benthien, Lau, and Marxsen 2018: 18) that occurs in Matthew Friedberger’s lyrics, as well as in other literary components of the musical work. Miall and Kuiken’s “three-component model of literariness involving foregrounded stylistic or narrative features...defamiliarizing responses to them, and the consequent modification of personal meanings” (1999: 121) also align with the form and function of The Fiery Furnaces’ music, often involving the characters’ memories within the music and listeners’ memories of the music.

2. Concepts and Sources

- 13 The narrative of The Fiery Furnaces blends the siblings’ fancifully reworked biographical details with the blues, religion and Scripture, and the memory of other personal and cultural sources. Yet their career breakthrough arrived via a more conventional cycle of rock music production and promotion that occurred at the turn of the millennium. Originating from Chicago but forming their band in New York in 2000, Matthew and Eleanor’s emergence as an indie rock act coincided with a broader reclassification of rock bands within a music industry searching for the next marketable shift. Beginning in the late 1990s, a perceived revival of garage rock or post-punk music,

typified by groups such as The Strokes (from New York City), The White Stripes (from Detroit), and the Hives (from Fagersta), had provided such a trend, called “The New Rock Revolution” by some tastemaking outlets such as British music publication *New Musical Express*.

- 14 Any rush to find, promote, and capitalize on the next wave of popular music implicitly comes with the awareness that another wave is in the offing, especially in the post-millennium reality of an accelerating spread of digital information and shortening attention spans. Indeed, in retrospect, the rock revolution that captured what seemed like the entire attention of the music press in the first years of the 2000s, and which did further blur the line between independent and major label releases, only lasted a few years. In 2010, Marc Spitz wrote a retrospective article for *SPIN* magazine, “The ‘New Rock Revolution’ Fizzles,” eulogizing a period of creativity and products/promotion thereof that Spitz had been enthusiastic about but whose expiration date had arrived by spring 2005. The pull quote from Spitz’s article summarized the impermanence of the revolution: “A wave of back-to-basics bands take over, but all too briefly” (Spitz 2010: 95).
- 15 The “back-to-basics” condition Spitz refers to could refer to the stripped-down instrumentation, production styles, and song structures of these revivalist rock bands. For The Fiery Furnaces, though, the blues was the basic musical touchpoint used to promote (and discussed in the reception of) their first album, *Gallowsbird’s Bark*. As a musical and narrative form, the blues predates rock-and-roll by nearly a century. The blues’ influence on rock and roll is apparent in both the musical and lyrical conventions of rock and the selection of songs that existed at the nexus of the transition from blues to rock. This history includes white artists on major labels covering songs by black artists on independent labels (Garofalo 2002: 124), which is a different sort of defamiliarization/modification process that also relates to contemporaries of The Fiery Furnaces, such as The White Stripes.
- 16 While plenty of critics found the influence of the blues within *Gallowsbird’s Bark*, the Friedbergers themselves also leaned into the comparison, with *New York* magazine printing an uncharacteristically pithy quotation from the duo in September 2003, just before the re-

lease of the album: “We’re spastically bluesy” (“New Rock City” 2003). What was less emphasized at the time but particularly relevant to the present article is how the overall Fiery Furnaces project resonates with the blues narrative. Kimberly R. Connor observes:

What the blues depicts is not factual information as such but rather the life of human feeling, and therein the connection to a religious impulse also resides. For all the lure of the real there is also the blur of the real that shapes a narrative to mythic proportions – as in the case of Robert Johnson at the crossroads – in order to make it meaningful and useful. (Connor 2012: 144-5).

- 17 The link between the Fiery Furnaces and the (memory of the) blues comes into clearer focus when one considers that their personae involve a biography that blends fact and myth and lyrics that regularly refer to religion, even if their musical style has moved far away from the blues proper.
- 18 A press release issued by the band to promote live shows blurs the line between the real and the mythic, in the manner Connor describes the blues, establishing the idea of feuding, underperforming siblings who did not share the same taste or formative experiences in music, who traveled outside of the United States but eventually found their way back to each other, and whose musical relationship seems to be fruitful only as long as it tempers the simmering enmity (including physical violence) that exists between the two contrasting figures.
- 19 The religious strand of the blues also exists in the band’s name, which alludes to Nebuchadnezzar’s treatment of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the Book of Daniel, as well as in several song lyrics that use the memory of Scripture and the setting of the church as crucial components of the musical narratives in the Fiery Furnaces discography. For example, the church is a primary setting of *Rehearsing My Choir*, pulling from Sarantos’ experiences in directing and singing in a church choir (which was also the site of early musical activity for the Friedberger siblings). An iTunes exclusive release of *Widow City* features a bonus song called “Barnabus and Paul,” referencing two characters from Scripture whose documented personal dispute and sep-

aration might have resonated with siblings in an uneasy creative/familial relationship.

- 20 Another *Widow City* song, “Pricked in the Heart,” quotes and defamiliarizes the New Testament narrative of John the Baptist, with the lyrics “John baptized with water; now, with wine,” substituting the source text’s references to fire and the Holy Spirit with wine, thus connecting the language to the listener/reader’s memory of Jesus’s first miracle (turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana). Matthew’s 2009 solo album *Winter Women* (2009) also includes several references to religion, spirituality, and Scripture, often focusing on characters within the songs. There is a nominal nod to Biblical characters Rachel and Ruth in the song “Ruth vs. Rachel” and a curious pair of similes (“Poor as Job / Meek as Moses”) in the song “Don’t You Remember,” which, with its explicit invocation of memory, itself bridges EP track “Here Comes the Summer,” in which Eleanor punctuates nearly every phrase of the verse with the question, “Remember?” and the Fiery Furnaces’ live double-album *Remember*.
- 21 Musical theater is another concept or source that the Friedbergers mine for material from and about recollection, which serves their musical project devoted to the same. The most conspicuous example of such a musical source is the *Blueberry Boat* song “Spaniolated,” whose runtime of just a few minutes makes it one of the epic album’s more individually digestible numbers. In “Spaniolated,” Eleanor sings from the perspective of a teenage character captured by an old man and stuck on a boat. After a reference to being forced to ingest “three pills a day to keep me from getting taller” (Friedberger 2004), which might allude to the fluctuating size of the title character in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the captive character of “Spaniolated” sings the following: “I wish I wish I was back in Chicago / Up the river to Seville I was rowing and strumming / On my portable guitar my fair lady a humming / The pain, the pain, in Spain falls mainly on me / The pain, the pain, in Spain falls mainly on me” (Friedberger 2004).
- 22 This selection of lyrics from “Spaniolated” involves multiple levels of recollection, including that of the singer, the character, and the audience. Those familiar with the Friedbergers’ Chicago origins, which the promotion of the group made no secret of, and which other *Blue-*

berry Boat songs, such as “1917,” involve in their premises, will recall this biographical information about the musician and link Eleanor’s origin to the longing (indeed, the prayer) of the character in the song to return home. For the character in the song, who has just in the previous line been taught to pray the rosary, she is repeating learned information and then humming a tune from Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner’s 1956 musical *My Fair Lady*, the words of which become altered in this Seville-set section of *Blueberry Boat*’s travelogue. The Fiery Furnaces change the well-known lyrics from the musical’s song (involving a mnemonic device), “The Rain in Spain.” Here, “rain” becomes “pain,” and the destination of the “pain” is no longer “mainly in the plain” but rather “mainly on me.” However, the adjustment and the citation of the musical’s title within the lyrics ensure that the listening audience will recall the source and be aware of the alteration to fit the scenario in the adapting song.

- 23 Two additional elements of *My Fair Lady* as a source are worth noting. First are the parallels between the musical’s characters, with the instructors Higgins and Pickering being a forerunner to the known taskmaster Matthew Friedberger and Eliza Doolittle (the student) being the figure that Eleanor corresponds to within the Fiery Furnaces personae of which her brother is the domineering partner instructing his sister how to say and sing what he wants her to say and sing. The second noteworthy aspect is the apparent influence of “The Rain in Spain’s” use of alliteration (“In Hartford, Hereford, and Hampshire? Hurricanes hardly happen”) on several Fiery Furnaces songs, such as EP’s “Sullivan’s Social Club” and *Blueberry Boat*’s “Birdie Brain,” a stylistic feature which has the effect of making the complex lyrics more memorable to a listener.

3. Temporality/order and character

- 24 *Rehearsing My Choir* is the Fiery Furnaces album that most overtly involves biographical memories and temporality as a subject and foregrounded stylistic feature. As the album’s premise is Matthew’s creative fictionalization of his grandmother’s memories, there is a constant interplay between the decades of her life and the events and emotions she (and her grandchildren) associate with those events and

emotions. Because the album engages in such a direct way with the subjects considered here, it is one of the only Fiery Furnaces albums previously analyzed in scholarly publications, specifically for its “memory theme” (Little 2007) and instrumental adaptation of forgotten language from lost correspondence (Britt 2020). In order not to cover the same territory as those other publications, it is useful to look elsewhere in the Fiery Furnaces’ discography for attention to temporality, narrative order, and the characters who experience those passages and arrangements of time.

- 25 *Bitter Tea* is an album recorded at the same time as *Rehearsing My Choir*, originally intended to accompany it in a double-album package. One way of understanding the contrast between the two halves of the would-be double album is as the grandmother versus the granddaughter, or at least an older woman versus a younger one, with the content on *Rehearsing My Choir* being the recollected stories of a woman near the end of her life and the content on *Bitter Tea* being “the depressed love songs of a lyrical, 12-year-old girl, alone in her room, banging on a piano...’It’s a clever young person’s fantasy of being satisfied with life” (Coyle 2006).
- 26 One irony of discussing both albums through the lens of memory is that the older woman’s memory, by her own admission, cannot be fully trusted and that the preteen girl has not yet lived the events that exist only in her fantasies. Thus, neither character can properly remember. The *Bitter Tea* song “Nevers” deals with elusive events of the past and future by concretizing no time at all. In “Nevers,” Matthew executes the theme of negation and erasure of time (and space) by using reverse vocals, or backmasking, and phonetic reversal. Therefore, in addition to imagining *as real* a place that does not exist, the recording and production techniques also present his and Eleanor’s voices telling the story while caught in a blend of forward and reverse temporality. “Nevers” begins with the following lines:

There’s a town I know called Nevers / No nevers / Never wasn’t was
what it weren’t /
When it wasn’t once. Knew Nevers / Knew Nevers / Nothing never
I’ll ever learnt /
There’s a village I visit, that’s Vaguely / Sorta vaguely... /Vaguely!: yes
I seem to recall /

Though it's unclear, clearly: Vaguely / Very vaguely / Can't say it's been there once and for all. (Friedberger 2006)

- 27 While this opening section of “Nevers” makes the lyrics almost unintelligible for the listener, a reprise of the song, unlisted in the packaging but appearing at the album’s end, strips away these recording techniques and Matthew’s voice. Within the metanarrative of *Bitter Tea*, Matthew erases himself, and only then are the lyrics intelligible when delivered strictly by Eleanor. Though Matthew has a reputation as a maximalist, this arc of subtracting or isolating musical information that begins with the “Nevers” reprise continues to some extent into his solo career.
- 28 The next Fiery Furnaces album, *Widow City*, resumes a similar process of turning no time in the past or no time in the future into a musical reality, though this time, the album is promoted with a fanciful and detailed description of “this strenuous work of the imagination, or Imaginary Work” involving “the strict subjugation of an imaginary bible to an imaginary board game” (*Widow City* 2007). One standout song from *Widow City* is “My Egyptian Grammar,” in which the character sung by Eleanor recalls specific memories of passing out on the day of her daughter’s wedding as well as other more fantastic and cryptic scenarios. After each recollection, though, she begins the chorus with the words, “Now that clearly didn’t happen” (Friedberger 2007) before narrating her consultation of a book of Egyptian grammar and the contents thereof. The hieroglyphs she finds in the book are, by definition, visual objects that represent words, so her use of mere words to describe them is as insufficient as the precisely detailed memories are ultimately unreliable. However, each subsequent section of the narrative includes the object associated with the hieroglyph she has previously found, so the song’s structure suggests a type of determinism in which the grammar book guides her in the same way the imaginary board game would.
- 29 By joining themes of false memories with the shortcomings of translation and the blurred line between fantasy and reality, the narrative of “My Egyptian Grammar” aligns with the “Imaginary Work” at the core of the Fiery Furnaces project. Having finally named this process/product in promoting *Widow City*, the band’s sixth album, the Friedbergers seem to privilege the quality of subjective experience to

any objective standard of verifiable recollection or sensible order. Indeed, negative reactions to the Fiery Furnaces' output often involve a perplexed assertion that the lyrics and music are too complicated or esoteric. Eleanor has speculated that "Maybe because people don't know some of the references they tune out or something ... and the fact that the instrumentation is so varied and a melody only lasts for a few bars or something like that. I don't know. To me it doesn't sound that way, and it doesn't sound complicated" (Britt 2012). Even when turning a critical eye towards her own musical project and trying to understand the more negative reception of her music, Eleanor is identifying the allusory nature of the lyrics and the ephemeral quality of melodies. One could argue that a listener encountering and overcoming these aspects of the music, which set it apart from much of mainstream rock music, corresponds to that final dimension of *literariness*: the "consequent modification of personal meanings" (Miall and Kuiken 1999: 121).

- 30 Additionally, while Matthew's melodies are short, they are also unusually repetitive, and he varies them by performing them on several instruments in an individual song. Hence, the enjoyment of Fiery Furnaces' songs depends on another facet of memory research: repeated patterns are increasingly pleasing to an individual because of prior exposure. In other words, memory and not preexisting "aesthetic sensibilities" (Lampinen and Beike 2015: 15) contribute to a positive response to certain patterns, including particularly repetitive melodies. In keeping with references to their Greek heritage that appears in the Friedbergers' music, there is an interplay of Chronos (quantitative) time and kairos (qualitative) time underlying the temporal activity of the songs' narratives. Over time, the various moments, which seem disparate and scattered, form a coherent arrangement because of the melodies that unite them.

4. Aural and textual interaction

- 31 If there were any doubt about Matthew Friedberger's interest in subjective experience related to memory and the representation thereof, Matthew includes text in the lyric sheet for 2006 solo album *Holy Ghost Language School*, which reads "MORAL: BUT IN THE END NOW WHO'S TO SAY WHAT WHAT YOU SAID OR WHAT WHAT YOU

DIDN'T? BUT IN THE END NOW WHO'S TO SAY WHAT'S IN YOUR HEART OR WHAT ISN'T IN IT" (Friedberger 2006). These words set apart within the lyric book by being stylized in all capital letters and detached from any song title are, in fact, the lyrics to the album's final track, called "Moral and Epilogue." While the entire history of The Fiery Furnaces includes enigmatic textual accompaniment, such as the press releases and promotional materials cited earlier in this article, this direct articulation of the moral to the story, as it were, is rare within the Friedbergers' output. With this text, which concludes the lyric booklet for *Holy Ghost Language School* and reprises the theme of the songs' lyrics (especially that of "Topeka and San Antonio"), Matthew seems to be claiming that memory is always fluid and never fixed, insofar as no one knows another person's heart.

32 There is a strong possibility that this moral is also tongue-in-cheek, but just as the Friedbergers' biography contains just enough facts to serve as tent poles for the draped fiction, it is often the accompanying text and not the music that provides the truest indicators of Matthew's motivations and logic as a songwriter. One significant effect of calling memory into question while simultaneously creating music that depends on the listener's recall of literary and cultural sources and ability to integrate the musicians' modification of those sources into memorable music is that Matthew and Eleanor treat their catalog as endlessly modular. Three separate releases emphasize the usefulness of the written word to link or reorder individual songs so that the various moments represented by those songs achieve a playful coherence. The irony of this approach is that the music and accompanying text often warn the listener against treating memory as fact. Additionally, because the written text alone is free from melody, the aural elements that might become increasingly pleasing thanks to repeated exposure are missing from the fool's errand of trusting in a more codified version of the songs' various strands.

33 In *Bitter Tea*, this playful approach to arranging the songs narratively includes only a few added words that link the song titles into a continuous paragraph. For example, the songs "Bitter Tea," "Teach Me Sweetheart," and "Waiting to Know You," which play consecutively when listening, become the phrase, "With a cup of bitter tea, go ahead and teach me, sweetheart--I'm waiting to know you" on the rear cover art of physical copies of the album (Friedberger 2006).

Matthew employs a different version of this technique on the double-album release *Winter Women/Holy Ghost Language School*, textually uniting the titles of all 29 songs in the collection but including the titles for the second-billed album (*Holy Ghost Language School*) first and the first-billed album (*Winter Woman*) second. This variation of the technique does not depend on additional language to attach the distinct titles to one another, but the songs are all written as a single block of text, which highlights existing connections between them, such as the *Winter Women* sequence consisting of “Don’t You Remember?” and “Becha Don’t.”

- 34 Live double album *Remember* is a dizzying mix of songs and song fragments, mostly sonically overhauled for live performance and spliced together from several different concerts into more than two hours of music that might be the peak of the Fiery Furnaces’ attention to memory, defamiliarization, and subjectivity. As the performances on this collection are live recordings rather than studio recordings, a paragraph of text appearing in the album packaging unites song lyrics from across the group’s discography, this time highlighting lines that include the word live (lighv) or its sound within other words: “And now we live by muskles...in a cash and carry next to Mt. Olivet” (Friedberger 2008). This emphasis on live (lighv) rather than live (liiv) defamiliarizes our expected associations with the live (liiv) album format.
- 35 Although more than fifty songs appear in the collection, the official track listing only includes six suite names, which quote and allude to song lyrics, leaving the musical contents of the album a mystery. The textual features of physical releases of the album make the mystery even more explicit, as a small piece of paper appears in the packaging, announcing the “Remember Treasure Hunt” and asking the listener/reader, “Why not guess what’s on this album?” invoking their memory of the studio recordings to predict what the suites might contain. The text continues, “You might do so before and after listening. Please write down your answers,” a request that invites the listener/reader to join the activity that playfully rearranges the titles and words of the songs just as the artists themselves have been doing for their past few albums.

Conclusion

36 In this article, I have examined the music of The Fiery Furnaces as an instance of indie rock that validates the aim of that art category to be set apart from the interfering influences of major-label rock music. A comparison of indie rock to literary fiction helps to highlight the parallel between musical and literary publishing, and definitions and understandings of what makes a work (written or otherwise) *literary* provide a useful context for considering the Fiery Furnaces' stylistic approach. Exploring a selection of particular sources for the group's music, including Scripture and stage musicals that coincide with their creative approach to autobiography, highlights how a preexisting memory of historical and cultural objects is a prerequisite for engaging with the Friedbergers' playfully allusive style. Across their discography, the Fiery Furnaces address temporality and memory from various angles, including making real that which has never happened or will never happen and reinforcing the instability of memory and its resistance to being verified, possessed, or shared. Finally, the literary qualities of the group become most evident when one examines the text that accompanies their musical releases, text which newly defamiliarizes the melodies and lyrics that might have been memorized but which are always subjected to future adaptation against the impossibility of replicable memory.

Primary sources

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew (2006). *Winter Women/Holy Ghost Language School*, Kenoza Lake: 859 Recordings.

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger (2006). *Bitter Tea*, Oxford: Fat Possum.

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger (2004). *Blueberry Boat*, London: Rough Trade.

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger (2005). *EP*, London: Rough Trade.

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger (2003). *Gallowsbird's Bark*, London: Rough Trade.

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger (2009). *I'm Going Away*, Chicago: Thrill Jockey.

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger (2005). *Rehearsing My Choir*, London: Rough Trade.

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger (2008). *Remember*, Chicago: Thrill Jockey.

FRIEDBERGER, Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger (2007). *Widow City*, Chicago: Thrill Jockey.

Widow City (2007), in: Bandcamp. <https://thefieryfurnaces.bandcamp.com/album/widow-city>

Secondary sources

BENTHIEN

, C., Lau, J., & Marxsen, M.M. (2018). *The Literariness of Media Art*, New York: Routledge.

BRITT, Thomas (2012). "Copying People I Like: A Conversation with Eleanor Friedberger," in *PopMatters*. <https://www.popmatters.com/151624-copying-people-i-like-a-conversation-with-eleanor-friedberger-2495914777.html>

BRITT, Thomas (2020). "Experimental Music as a New Frontier of Adaptation Studies," in: Betty Kaklamanidou, Ed., *New Approaches to Contemporary Adaptation*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

CONNOR, K. R. (2012). "Worrying the line: Blues as story, song, and prayer," in A. Fairweather and J. Steinberg, Eds., *Blues- Philosophy for Everyone*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

COYLE, Jake (2006). "Fiery Furnaces pours on experimentation with 'Bitter Tea,'" in: *Midland Reporter-Telegram*. <https://www.mrt.com/news/article/Fiery-Furnaces-pours-on-experimentation-with-7657267.php>

GAROFALO, Reebee (2002). "Crossing Over: From Black Rhythm & Blues to White Rock 'n' Roll," in: N. Kelley, Ed., *Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music*, New York: Akashic Books.

HIBBETT, Ryan (2005). "What Is Indie Rock?" in: *Popular Music and Society*, 28:1, 55-77.

LAMPINEN, James Michael and Denise R. Beike (2015). *Memory 101* (=The Psych 101 Series), New York: Springer Publishing Company.

LITTLE, David T. (2007). "Memories Are Better Off Sung," in *New Music USA*. <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/memories-are-better-off-sung/>

LOEWE, Frederick and Alan Jay Lerner (1956). *My Fair Lady*, New York: Columbia Records.

MÄNNISTÖ-FUNK, Tiina (2016). "Pieces of Music as Memory Capsules," in: M. Cobussen, V. Meelberg, and B. Truax, Eds., *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art*, New York: Routledge.

MIALL, D. S., & Kuiken, D. (1999). "What is literariness? Three components of literary reading," in: *Discourse Processes*, 28:2, 121-138.

"New Rock City" (2003), in: *New York Magazine*. <https://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/music/features/music2003/n9254/>

SINYKIN, Dan (2023). "What Was Literary Fiction?" in *The Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/what-was-literary-fiction/>

SPITZ, Marc (2010). "The 'New Rock Revolution' fizzles," in: *Spin*, 26:4, 95.

English

This article addresses the topic of “sound-based recollection” through the work of Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger, musicians best known as brother-sister rock duo The Fiery Furnaces. Though the Friedbergers work primarily within music and not literature or film, I argue that their music is literature, especially in the way Matthew's lyrics and Eleanor's performances of those lyrics engage with their personal memories, including their creative recollection of objects and traditions they refer to in their songs. After exploring how the music industry's indie rock category parallels the book publishing industry's literary fiction category, I illustrate how the Fiery Furnaces' allusions to history and popular culture connect the listener's memory of cultural objects to the songs' newly adapted versions. Narrative components like temporality, order, and character, customarily associated with literature or film, are central to the Fiery Furnaces' musical reminiscence. The article concludes by tracing the evolution of those elements in the songs to the endpoint (indeed the “moral”) of the Friedbergers' attention to memory, biography, and fiction: that neither music nor text is sufficient to replicate the past, but that a literary approach to music and memory can playfully embrace that reality.

Français

Cet article se penche sur la question de la « mémoire auditive » à travers l'œuvre de Matthew et Eleanor Friedberger, le frère et la sœur qui composent le duo rock The Fiery Furnaces. Bien que les Friedberger travaillent principalement dans le domaine de la musique et non de la littérature ou du cinéma, j'avance que leur musique est bien de la littérature, surtout au regard de la façon dont les paroles écrites par Matthew et leur interprétation par Eleanor puisent dans leurs souvenirs personnels, notamment à travers la remémoration créative des objets et des traditions dont ils parlent dans leurs chansons. Après avoir étudié les parallèles entre la catégorie « indie rock » dans le domaine musical et la catégorie « literary fiction » dans le domaine de l'édition, j'illustre la façon dont les allusions que font les Fiery Furnaces à l'histoire et à la culture populaire associent chez l'auditeur le souvenir d'objets culturels aux nouvelles versions qu'en proposent leurs chansons. On retrouve des éléments narratifs comme la temporalité, l'ordre et le personnage, plus souvent associés à la littérature ou au cinéma, au cœur des réminiscences musicales des Fiery Furnaces. L'article conclut que ces éléments découlent de l'intérêt des Friedberger pour la mémoire, la biographie et la fiction : dans leur œuvre, ni la musique ni le texte ne suffisent à restituer le passé, mais une approche littéraire de la musique et de la mémoire aboutit à une acceptation ludique de cette réalité.

Mots-clés

indie rock, « literary fiction », Fiery Furnaces (The), adaptation, biographie

Keywords

indie rock, literary fiction, Fiery Furnaces (The), adaptation, biography

Thomas Britt

Professor, Film and Video Studies, George Mason University, Fairfax County,
Virginia