

ON SKIP DIVING AND HOT DOGS

Craig Hamilton

1, 2, 3...

Four people standing, talking. [Music plays]

Close up. A glance sideways.

Long shot: A question.

Two depart for the dancefloor, two others remain.

Dancing

Standing

Dancing

Standing

The camera pans, people dancing.

A riot of colour and movement; too fast to fade – it's all a blur.

Memory – Fragment – Return

The American Graffiti soundtrack helps to construct a fantasy world. A world created from fragments of memory – real, imagined, inherited – that together render Modesto, California, as the 1950s roll into the 1960s, viewed through the lens of the final hours of an endless summer.

The songs on the soundtrack album are narrative cues; fragments that through some combination of their sound, lyrics, or performance somehow evoke a memory. They appear on the soundtrack album in the exact order they appear in the film, with some small exceptions – “Gee” by The Crows and Flash Cadillac and The Continental Kids’ version of “Louie Louie” are heard in the film but are not on the Soundtrack album.

The movie is 1 hour and 22 minutes long, and if you play the soundtrack album from start to finish it is not a great deal longer than that. Wolfman Jack introduces some of the songs. It is the movie experience rendered in four sides of vinyl and designed to take you back to Modesto, California as the 1950s roll into the 1960s; a ticket to ride to a place and a time in which you never lived, and which never really existed.

How does it do that? How does it work as a flow of fragments? How does it evoke the narrative, the sights, and the memories?

*The keyboard player grimaces, the singer sweats, the beat goes on.
 The sound becomes muffled, the action moves backstage.
 Fraternal advice. Smoke. A mirror is raised and a future fades into view, briefly.
 ..then cuts away swiftly, the audience recoils at the vision.
 Different times
 but the beat outside, inside, goes on.
 4/4. Relentless. Formulaic. Familiar.
 Always different, always the same.
 Until the slow dance.
 The old dance. The oldest dance.
 A tearjerker*

Skip Diving

I found my vinyl copy of the American Graffiti soundtrack album in a skip outside a house on the street next to mine, and it was reasonably clear what had happened in order for it to end up there: the widowed partner of an elderly couple had died, and his/her children had ransacked the house in order to get the property on to the market at great speed.

The skip had appeared suddenly one day alongside a For Sale sign and was filled almost immediately. Alongside a pile of around 200 records it contained all sorts of other things from inside the house: videotapes; magazines; obsolete electrical goods; rugs and mugs. Everything was dumped. And along I came, with a comparable lack of shame to that displayed by the grasping offspring, to delve greedily into that skip to rescue around 50 of those LPs. There were a couple of Beatles LPs and a rare Buddy Holly mono pressing that together were worth a hundred pounds alone. It was a good haul!

Thirty-odd years after the release of American Graffiti, the soundtrack that sold like hotcakes had become an artefact that held absolutely no value for the children who had inherited the home it had grown old within. The thread of memories was snapped; the connection between youth, ageing, and memory was lost. It did not get passed down.

But the songs on the record remain, they are timeless, and – perhaps in part due to their use in American Graffiti – they are individual fragments redolent with memory that – either in whole or part – can evoke a time, a place, and a youth that never existed in anywhere other than the imagination. I did not live in Modesto, California as the 1950s rolled into the 1960s, and neither did the previous owners of the soundtrack. Here's the thing, though: Richard Dreyfuss' Carl did not live there either. And neither did Toad, John or Steve. They are archetypal apparitions in a place and time that is wholly unreal; Dreyfuss is a visitor in a memory/fantasy of his own imagined past, tripping on a magic carpet ride.

He's the baby boomer on a 1970s trip back to his youth; he's the baby boomer with the disposable income to buy cinema tickets and soundtrack albums; he's the baby boomer who will – when the 1970s roll into the 1980s – buy a property in which to raise his own kids; he's the baby boomer who is now dead, or somewhere very close to it.

The thread of memories will snap; the connection between youth, ageing and memory will be lost. His house will get passed down and his records will go in the skip.

It is now as if Carl and his ilk were never here, just like he was never there, because *there never was a there* – only fragments of sound and memory that evoke a 'there' to which nobody can ever return. This was Lucas' construction: a world every bit as fantastical as the one inhabited by Luke Skywalker. Unlike the Death Star, however, there are no fundamental design flaws in time. No exhaust pipe to lob a missile down. Time marches on more imperiously than even Darth Vader and the lads.

(An accident of editing, or so the story goes....but take that with a pinch of salty tears: you need to remember that this is the movie business)

...it all hangs for a moment, they are up close in close up.

A pivotal scene. A pivotal moment.

Then, all of sudden, we're back to the slapstick; the shiny young foils.

Punches and cars and wisecracks

1-2-3-4. [snare]

Mike Love Shops at Lidl

American Graffiti opens and closes with two pop songs. Billy Haley and The Comets' "Rock Around The Clock" plays over the opening credits, "All Summer Long" by The Beach Boys closes the film.

A song released in 1954 eventually gives way to another, released ten years later, in a film that distils the archetypal teenage experience of mid 20th century America into one night, narrated over 113 minutes, and told through the story of four main characters and a supporting cast. Everything so far points us toward the suggestion of a neat chronology and of a time-bound narrative, with hard borders having a clear purpose.

But the real action takes place elsewhere.

The real action takes place in the mind of the viewer, in the mind of the listener.

The film's soundtrack album, released on MCA records in 1973, opens and closes with the same songs that bookend the film. Bar a handful missing due to licensing issues, it presents 41 songs in the exact order they appear in the film. The gatefold sleeve holds two records that form a different kind of boundary and create a record of a record. This pop culture artefact enables the experiences of the characters in another – the film – to break through the boundary of 113 minutes on screen

and the narrative of a single night in Modesto, California, and into your home, onto your turntable. In so doing the soundtrack worms its way into *your* story and begins to narrate the experiences you have; told over a lifetime, where these pop songs and others like them act as punctuation, as bookmarks, as momentous mementos, creating a soundtrack compilation of verse/chorus/verse/chorus moments.

This is why, when ordering a hot-dog in a 50s-themed restaurant in Kings Heath, Birmingham, the onions taste just that little bit more authentically American if Bill Haley or The Beach Boys are playing on the jukebox.

But then you look around the room and see there is no jukebox, just a cheap speaker bracketed to the ceiling, probably connected to a concealed iPod. Then you wonder why your brain just conjured up a jukebox (although you know why) and at that moment you'll notice how the frankfurter tastes exactly the same as the ones you get at Lidl. And then you picture Mike Love in Lidl, struggling with a wonky trolley. This is a pleasant image, and your brain runs with it. You hope Mike Love drops his hotdogs in the car park, and then squashes them under a wheel of his wonky trolley.

You're doing a lot of the work here.

Bill Haley did his work a long time ago. Somewhere between The Beach Boys and now, George Lucas did his work, adding a new level of meaning to theirs. Each worked within the boundaries of media industry conventions: the three-minute pop song; the four-character movie.

But this, here, right now, is where it's at. You and your hot-dog. Bill Haley on the jukebox-not-jukebox. The imaginary Mike Love shaking his fist at the sky. A million miles away from Modesto, California you may well be, but you and your hot-dog are where the action is now.

And you've been having fun all grey, wet Tuesday long.

Craig Hamilton was a Research Fellow in the School of Media at Birmingham City University until late 2021. His research explored the role of digital, data and Internet technologies on the business and cultural environments of music consumption. He focussed on a practical engagement with systems of data collection, analysis and visualisation through the ongoing development of skills in R, R Shiny, R Markdown and other softwares related to data science and the Digital Humanities. Since leaving academia, Craig has been working in the Ed Tech industry and more recently began working as a Data Careers Development Specialist at the UK communications regulator, Ofcom. He continues to research popular music in his spare time.

