

This article was published in *Music and the Moving Image*, volume 14, issue 3 in 2021 and can be found at this link (full citation below):

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/musimoviimag.14.3.0046>

Dosser, Max. "POP! Goes My Heart: The Sound of Specific and General Love in Romantic Comedies and Dramas." *Music and the Moving Image* 14, no. 3 (2021), 46-60.

POP! Goes My Heart: The Sound of Specific and General Love in Romantic Comedies and
Dramas

“If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your
story.”¹ – Orson Welles

On a day like any other, as unremarkable as the one before, something out of the ordinary happens: You meet someone. Maybe you met this person in the past; maybe you have seen them on television, in movies, on the back of a book; or maybe this is the first time you have ever laid eyes upon them. Regardless, you meet in an unexpected fashion. The meeting... does not go well. At least, not as well as you may have hoped. Even so, there is a spark, an attraction the likes of which you have never experienced. Not even with your spouse, fiancé(e), or significant other if you have one. Eventually, you realize you love this person, but there is something that keeps you apart. This may be somebody else, a secret one of you has kept, or something indefinable yet difficult to overcome. But you do! Only, not immediately. Things end. Then there is a reconciliatory moment where you meet again and there is a proclamation of love so grand it would make even the most callous cynic shed a tear. From there, your love is solidified, and you live happily ever after. Presumably. Depending on the genre.

What I just described is the prototypical plot of a romantic comedy. *A Star is Born*'s Jackson Maine (Bradley Cooper) believes that “music is essentially twelve notes between any octave. Twelve notes and the octave repeats. It’s the same story. Told over and over. Forever. All any artist can offer the world is how they see those twelve notes.” Genre films largely fall into this description as well. Billy Mernit spells out the seven basic story beats of

romantic comedies: the Setup, the Cute Meet, a Sexy Complication, the Midpoint, Swivel, the Dark Moment, and Resolution.² While most romantic comedies follow these story beats, the films are far from identical. Like all genres, romantic comedies grow as they “repeat some elements, but vary others; individual [films] will even introduce new elements which will in turn become conventionalised.”³ With music, the twelve notes are a toolkit; for film, the seven story beats are more limited, formulaic, points that have to be hit for there to be a story. It is the ingredients of character, setting, and theme that permit romantic comedies the ability to create new stories out of the same beats, like music can with its twelve notes.

While scholarship on film music is extensive, there is important work to be done on original pop songs in films and films’ compilation scores, in which the musical selections are largely pre-existing songs.⁴ Anahid Kassabian, in discussing romantic comedy music, argues that pop scores and compilation scores can open up multiple interpretations for viewers as the songs pre-exist the films. As such, “perceivers can bring their own relationships to the song, the artist, or the genre into their engagement with the filmic text.”⁵ As increased attention is placed on romantic comedies and dramas and the way they engage in the discourse of love—through dialogue, narrative themes, and music—one cannot ignore the films where the music and stories are intimately connected,⁶ particularly when the protagonists of the films are musicians and the songs are supposedly composed by the characters within the film’s narrative.

Romancing Movie Musicians

Music and Lyrics (henceforth *M&L*) and *A Star is Born* (henceforth *ASIB*) are a romantic comedy and romantic drama, respectively. The two films have little in common regarding factors such as audience reception, critical acclaim, and awards prestige.⁷ The differing receptions,

however, may be an indication of the bias against romantic comedies, as both films feature a washed-up male musician who falls in love with an ingenue who helps him write songs. In both films, the characters perform original music. These songs reflect a distinctive positioning of love within their respective genres and illustrate how the use of film music can influence how love is mass-marketed through cinema.

Erica Todd contends that there are two types of cinematic love: passionate love and companionate love. The former predominates in romantic dramas while the latter is central to romantic comedies. While passionate love is “short-term, arising from idealistic conventions like ‘love at first sight,’” companionate love is “more long-term and durable” and “has an inevitable link with the institution of marriage.”⁸ While I agree with Todd that the two genres depict love differently, I find issues with Todd’s dichotomy. Romantic comedies typically conclude without marriage and their central relationships often spark with a “love at first sight moment” just as those in romantic dramas (and even Todd acknowledges that both types of romance can enter into the other genre in key moments⁹). As such, I propose a different dichotomy of love: whether the love featured in the film is idiosyncratic and specific to the film characters’ blossoming relationship or if it is more generally applicable to relationships and primarily rooted in the feelings provoked in the audience. To do so, I turn to the original compositions created for these romantic films.

This article expands the understanding of cinematic depictions of love through the use of genre theory and the network model of signification. Through these, I trouble the discourse surrounding romantic film genre distinctions by examining how the original songs convey the concept of love and ask if the specificity of love showcased in *M&L* is a key component in the sustaining the genre border between it and a romantic drama like *ASIB*.

Placing romantic comedies and romantic dramas into conversation, as opposed to looking at just one genre is important for a number of reasons. First, the two appeal to different, yet overlapping audiences, so the romantic themes will differ, despite having many intersecting generic dimensions. Second, much like film critics, scholars have largely segregated the two genres. If a work discusses romantic comedies, drama is just one element of the films; if a work is about romance, then romantic comedies are scuttled into a single section, so as to remain a work about “art films” rather than “popcorn movies.”¹⁰ Third, while much has been written about pop music in film and how music adds to romance through the “love theme,” scholarship seldom focuses on the original pop songs composed for films within these genres.¹¹ The genres of romantic comedies and dramas have much in common. The central differences, at least in the case of these films, are their depictions of love and when in the narrative the credits roll.

The Genre of Romance

Despite critical apathy, romantic comedies were one of the most popular and commercially successful genres of the 20th century, as were romantic dramas. Between 1997 and 2009, the historical romantic drama *Titanic* (1997) was the highest grossing film of all time, and adjusted for inflation, a different historical romantic drama currently holds the spot—*Gone with the Wind* (1939). Romance is so integral to American media that most media include a romantic subplot, even in varied genres, such as fantasy, survival, and western.¹²

There is, however, a stronger historical link between the genres of romance and musicals. Before 1932, films featuring music in a significant way were romantic comedies that highlighted musical performances.¹³ Robynn Stilwell argues that due to the connection between romantic comedies and musicals between the 1920s and 1940s, the closest approximation to a wider

musical style in romantic comedies “would be that of the Tin Pan Alley or mainstream pop song.”¹⁴ Songs in musicals can communicate the drama of the narrative and represent the themes of the production,¹⁵ which can be seen in how the original compositions of *M&L* and *ASIB* convey narrative information about the protagonists’ relationship and provide an insight into the films’ depictions of love. Song-and-dance numbers can reveal “moments that cannot be uttered at the diegetic level” and give “voice to untold stories in the mise-en-scene.”¹⁶ More recently, film musicals like *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and *Chicago* (2002) understood that postmodern musicals need to incorporate music more realistically than Broadway productions, yet still function as narrative, dialogue, and show-within-the-show production numbers.¹⁷ While neither *M&L* nor *ASIB* feature song-and-dance numbers, their original music has similar functions.

The mention of *Moulin Rouge!* and *Chicago* is worth dwelling on, as I have so far connected musicals with romantic comedies—even the Golden Globes’ categories imply a film can be a Drama *or* a Comedy/Musical. While the categorizations at one award show might seem insignificant, one would be hard pressed to call *Moulin Rouge!* or *Chicago* comedies, unless they stopped watching halfway through. The same is true of *La La Land* (2016), which won a record-breaking number of Golden Globes in the Comedy/Musical category in 2017. Recently, however, films that traditionally would have been classified as comedies/musicals have eschewed that label to call themselves dramas. This includes *ASIB* and the jukebox musical *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018). While their preferred categorization does not influence whether academic genre analyses can approach them as musicals, I choose to analyze *M&L* and *ASIB* as romantic comedies and dramas that *feature* music, as opposed to musical romantic comedies and dramas. This distinction could be seen as nitpicking, but it is for both theoretical and practical reasons.¹⁸ Now, it is important to ask what defines a romantic comedy and a romantic drama?

This question is vital to consider as the border between genres is often fuzzy and porous. Jacques Derrida writes that “every text participates in one or several genres.”¹⁹ Similarly, Janet Staiger argues that every film contains elements of a variety of genres.²⁰ Rick Altman greatly strengthened film genre analysis with his semantic-syntactic approach, in which he proposed that the broad building blocks, the vocabularies, and the specific meaning-bearing structures of genres need to be considered when discussing film genre.²¹ Yet even Altman’s approach raises questions about the genre borders. Despite this, examining romantic comedies and dramas’ “established conventions can offer a context for interpreting the depiction of [various] types of love.”²² The rest of this section details established characteristics of romantic comedies to illustrate the differences and similarities between romantic comedies and dramas. Thomas Schatz posits that film genres “express the social and aesthetic sensibilities not only of Hollywood filmmakers but of the mass audience as well,”²³ so it is vital to consider the syntactic expectations and semantic fields audiences may relate to romantic comedies and dramas, both in the kind of love stories told and the loves they depict.

The simplistic definition of a romantic comedy—“boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl”²⁴—fails to consider the expanding diversity of romantic comedy characters’ race, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability in recent years.²⁵ Interestingly, this same expansion is not seen in romantic dramas, where “homosexuality is generally not represented,” making films like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) outliers.²⁶ Celestino Deleyto better describes the genre as the intersection of three elements: “a narrative that articulates historically and culturally specific views of love, desire, sexuality and gender relationships;” “a space of transformation and fantasy;” and “humour.”²⁷ Romantic dramas feature less humor but are not entirely devoid of it. While major differences exist between the genres, largely stemming from their thematic

messages and endings—as epitomized by Todd’s playful definition of romantic dramas: “boy meets girl, boy gets together with girl, boy loses girl”²⁸—I would like to complicate the distinction between the two genres.

One conception of romantic comedies is that “the world of Hollywood romantic comedy is brightly lit and accompanied by upbeat music in major keys.”²⁹ Of the eleven songs in *M&L*, six are in major keys and five are in minor. In *ASIB*, ten of the eighteen songs are in major keys. While both films have incidental score that may complicate the amount of major versus minor with a variety of musical cues, the musical atmosphere created by the soundtracks for both films is primarily major. That, however, does not always mean upbeat. The final song in *ASIB* is in the key of G major, but many (this author included) find it heartbreaking. This disconnect is likely due to the fact that “songs have access to language, specifically lyrics, which can be a very explicit means of transmitting meaning” as opposed to instrumental cues that are imbued with emotion through visual association or repeated usage.³⁰

Perhaps the largest difference between the two genres is highlighted by Tamar Jeffers McDonald’s definition of romantic comedy: “a romantic comedy is a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion.”³¹ The disparity then comes from the ending. As said by Orson Welles in this article’s epigraph, happy endings are always possible, they just depend on where you choose to conclude your stories. Romantic comedies almost always end before the wedding, while romantic dramas can go far beyond.³² In romantic dramas, after we see a couple fall in love, they are typically torn apart. Romantic dramas end with tears of despair, while romantic comedies end with tears of joy. In this article, the films’ final songs and the co-written

duets are given special attention, as they encapsulate two separate philosophies of love. In order to best discuss these songs, I must first detail the network model of signification.

Network Model of Signification in Film Music

Kathryn Kalinak argues that regardless if film music is instrumental or accompanied by lyrics, it accomplishes the same functions: “providing unity, creating mood, heightening atmosphere, aiding characterization, establishing geographic space and time period, and connecting an audience emotionally to a film.”³³ Music scholars have increasingly turned to compilation scores and pop scores, which feature original music composed specifically for the film but marketed separately. According to Jeff Smith, pop and compilation scores began emerging in the 1950s and 1960s, largely for economic and commercial reasons of increasing revenue through selling records.³⁴ Despite this monetary goal, Smith maintains that pop and compilation scores still support the dramatic requirements of films, which is evident in how these scores have grown in popularity among auteur directors such as Quentin Tarantino and Edgar Wright.³⁵ As Claudia Gorbman argues, “Music-loving directors treat music not as something to farm out to the composer or even to the music supervisor, but rather as a key thematic element and a marker of authorial style.”³⁶ Kassabian contends that instrumental, pop, and compilation scores provide differing identification functions for audiences, and, as such, each deserves scholarly attention.³⁷ The import of pop scores only increases when films such as *M&L* and *ASIB* seamlessly weave original music into established musical worlds.

Compilation and pop scores “have dramatically changed the landscape of film scoring.”³⁸ One significant change is the downplaying of the themes, particularly the leitmotif. Musical themes in the score can “index different situations, emotions, and events,”³⁹ but with the

introduction of compilation and pop scores, themes shifted from repeated motifs to introductory songs and/or songs played at particular moments to convey emotions, create atmosphere, and mark narrative moments. There are examples of pop songs repeating and creating a pseudo-leitmotif, such as “Moon River” in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), but, generally, songs seldom repeat as an instrumental theme would.⁴⁰ It is worth noting that *M&L* and *ASIB* straddle the line between compilation score and pop scores, because many songs were newly composed for the films while others were pre-existing.⁴¹

While music semiotics is how many academics write about music as a language, the majority of that scholarship focuses on instrumental music. Philip Tagg and Ron Rodman, however, have repurposed semiotics to make it more applicable to popular music. In Rodman’s network model of signification, music is not analyzed in isolation, but rather in how “all sensory channels (image, sound, music, language) combine to create meaning.”⁴² Tagg notes that music semiotics adapts Peircian semiotics, in particular *thirdness*, where the sign is the sound of the music, the object is “the idea of movement and touch perceived as representable in sound [and music],” and the interpretant is the interpretation of the meaning of the music.⁴³ With Rodman’s network model of signification, the music is anchored to the other sensory channels on the screen. This model is particularly useful for popular music in film where the auditory sensory channels play over the visuals.⁴⁴

In the remainder of this article, I analyze the differing philosophies of love in *M&L* and *ASIB* through utilizing the network model of signification. First, I focus on the plots of each film, highlighting their similarities and how each fits into its respective genre. Then, through an analysis of the films’ original music, I demonstrate how the depiction of love in *M&L* is based in specificity, while *ASIB* provides a more general take on love rooted in the emotion of the

relationship. Finally, I turn to the films' central romantic duets to demonstrate how the ethos of love is complicated by when, in the narrative, the credits roll.

Washed-Up Musician Meets Ingenue

With genre tenets in mind, I turn to Mernit's romantic comedy structure to examine the story beats of each film. In *M&L*, the "Setup" of the film begins with a 1980s music video of Alex Fletcher (Hugh Grant) and his band POP! performing their hit song "POP! Goes My Heart." When the video ends, we learn that Alex's bandmate, Colin (Scott Porter), left POP! to start a successful solo career. Meanwhile, Alex is being considered as a contestant for the show, "Battle of the '80s Has-Beens," establishing Alex as a musician who relies on his old fame to keep up his lifestyle.⁴⁵ His manager (Brad Garrett) then wins him an opportunity to write a song titled "Way Back into Love" for the pop music sensation, Cora (Hayley Bennett).

In the "Cute Meet," Sophie (Drew Barrymore), a woman paid to water Alex's plants, absentmindedly sings original lyrics as Alex works on the song. He then asks her to write with him, but she refuses. The "Sexy Complication" is when, after seeing Alex perform, Sophie relents, agreeing to work with him. The two begin to develop feelings for one another as Sophie's writing style intrudes on the way Alex normally works. At the "Midpoint," Alex and Sophie deliver the song to Cora, who absolutely loves it. Having succeeded, Sophie and Alex go out to celebrate and end the night consummating their feelings for one another.

The "Swivel" occurs when Cora debuts her version of their song to Alex and Sophie—a sensual orchestration she can dance to, not the love ballad Alex and Sophie wrote. Cora requests they add a final verse. Sophie tells Alex that she hates Cora's version. Alex responds that it's *just* music, and as long as Cora sings it, it doesn't matter what it sounds like because they'll get paid

and his name will be important again. This conversation leads directly to the “Dark Moment,” where Sophie, sick of making negotiations, leaves, ending their relationship. Later, when she rebuffs his apology, their future together is uncertain. The “Resolution” comes when Sophie and her sister (Kristen Johnston) attend Cora’s concert and hear Alex sing a song he wrote himself—a song in which he apologizes to Sophie. Then, after Sophie and Alex share a reconciliatory kiss, Cora and Alex debut “Way Back into Love,” with the original orchestration, to the world, affirming the love Alex and Sophie share.

ASIB begins much in the same way as *M&L*, where the “Setup” features Jackson Maine performing one of the songs that made him famous, “Black Eyes.” Unlike in *M&L*, Jackson’s popularity decline is not noticeable, as Jackson performs in a packed arena concert venue. The opening does, however, showcase Jackson’s drug and alcohol addiction. This is important to note as *M&L* also mentions that Alex once had a drug and alcohol problem, though it is a passing comment and has no impact on the story. For *ASIB*, Jackson’s addiction is responsible for nearly every issue that arises. In *M&L*, when Sophie asks how Alex dealt with Colin leaving POP!, he responds, “Oh, with drugs and alcohol, and, uh, ultimately, my own solo album.” Drugs and alcohol are never mentioned again. As both male protagonists are famous musician characters, addiction is something audiences might expect to be addressed, yet the focus or lack thereof reveals another difference between these genres. Romantic comedies deal with people improving through love, while romantic dramas illustrate how the characters’ flaws either need to be overcome or they will ultimately doom the relationship.⁴⁶ While addiction is likely too heavy of an issue to be handled in most romantic comedies, it isn’t in a film without the genre expectation to leave the audience smiling. Steve Neale describes this as the “verisimilitude” of the genres: addiction in a romantic drama about musicians is “probable, plausible, [and] likely,” even

appropriate, but not in a romantic comedy, despite their similarities.⁴⁷ Both films feature romance, laughter, and drama, yet the conclusion of *ASIB* is far from the happy ending in *M&L*.

Furthermore, while *M&L* is based on an original screenplay, *ASIB* is the fourth iteration of its story.⁴⁸ Dan Wang argues that remakes “are documents of the changes that a particular story [absorbs] as it [moves] through the American twentieth century.”⁴⁹ In discussing the various remakes of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Krin Gabbard contends that “each new *Jazz Singer* was radically refashioned as its ‘narrators’ formulated new stories to accommodate the profound changes in American culture.”⁵⁰ This is manifest through how the endings of *The Jazz Singer* and *ASIB* changed as each were remade, and how elements such as blackface, drugs, and alcohol, were either removed or inserted, reflecting the cultural acceptance or rejection of certain tropes. As a story told four times between 1937 and 2018, *ASIB* provides a unique look into how America’s conception of love and romance has changed in the twenty-first century, while *M&L* provides insight into a particular point in time.

Returning to the romantic comedy beats, *ASIB*’s “Cute Meet” is the moment when Jackson sees the musical talent and potential of Ally (Lady Gaga) as she sings “La Vie en Rose” at a bar and he invites her to get a drink. The “Sexy Complication” and the “Hook” occur in quick succession. At the bar, Ally becomes so angry that people are disrespecting Jackson’s privacy, she punches a pushy fan. Afterwards, Jackson takes her to a grocery store to get frozen peas for her swollen hand, and in the parking lot, they discuss music, their dreams, and begin to fall for one another. Ally then sings the beginnings of the song “Shallow” to Jackson, and the two sleep together. The “Swivel” is the next morning when Jackson invites Ally to his next concert. She declines, saying she has to work. The two separate and it is unclear if they will ever see each other again. In the “Dark Moment,” Jackson laments that Ally is not at the pre-concert

sound check, as she is all he can think about and it interferes with his playing. Upon the urging of her friend (Anthony Ramos), Ally eventually relents and goes to the concert. When she arrives, Jackson tells her he wrote an arrangement of “Shallow” and invites her to come on stage with him. Again, she declines and watches as he starts to sing the song without her. In the “Resolution,” Ally goes out on stage, and just like in *M&L*, they debut the song they co-wrote, the song that cements their love, to the world.

From Mernit’s story beat description, the two movies appear largely identical, even down to the musical cues. The complicating factor, of course, is that the version of *ASIB* I just described is only forty-two minutes long. The actual movie runs for another ninety-two minutes, only ten minutes shorter than the entirety of *M&L*. The recementing of love after a rift is where romantic comedies end; weddings are almost never a part of the story. In *ASIB*, Jackson and Ally get married with a full hour remaining. The movie tracks the entirety of their relationship: from their first meeting to Ally performing a memorial concert after Jackson has died (something else that would never happen in a romantic comedy, unless the lead came back as a ghost). With the additional time, *ASIB* takes us past the point of laughing. David Shumway posits that, in romantic comedies, “when the right man or woman is found and returns one’s love, the subject will be satisfied, will lack no more.”⁵¹ *M&L* plays into this idea—that while there will be struggles, finding your one person is enough. *ASIB*, however, in going past the declaration of love, demonstrates that love needs many layers of cement, and that even if love is found, the subject may never be satisfied.

Through looking at the story structure of the films, similarities reveal themselves, though the differences are stark enough to justify the different genre categorizations. I now turn to the original music in the films, particularly the songs the male leads write after they have put their

relationships in jeopardy and the co-written duets. From these songs, the philosophies of love advanced by each film become clear.

Washed-Up Musician Tries to Fix His Mistakes

ASIB has two ending songs, one for the romantic comedy ending and one for the romantic drama. *M&L* ends with two back-to-back songs, which coincide with the two endings of *ASIB*. One is the duet the leads write together; the other is a song the male lead writes in an attempt to reconcile with the female lead. Through using the network model of signification, I illustrate a distinctive positioning reflected in the two films—namely how the romantic comedy relies on a love rooted in a specific relationship, while the romantic drama crafts a more generalized depiction of love.

I should note, however, that there are moments of specificity in the love depicted in *ASIB* just as there are more generic moments of love in *M&L*. My purpose with this dichotomy is not to say that the love in *M&L* is completely specific, but rather that the love conveyed in *M&L* is more rooted in the audience desire to have *that* relationship—to be romanced by Alex or to sweep Sophie off of her feet and grow old working with your best friend and lover. In opposition, one likely would *not* want Ally and Jackson’s specific relationship, particularly as Jackson dies only two years after meeting Ally. Rather than the relationship, *ASIB* presents the emotions of the relationship as the appealing component for audiences, while *M&L*, like many romantic comedies, roots the desire in the specificity of the characters, portraying the couple as the singular “right man or woman” for the other. This difference is clearly displayed through the specificity and generality of the music the couples compose, most notably in the lyrics.

Starting with the songs that Alex and Jackson write to reconcile with Sophie and Ally, it should be noted that while this is the penultimate song in *M&L*, it is the final song in *ASIB*.⁵² This is due to the structure of the films, where in romantic comedies, there is almost always a grand romantic gesture in the “Resolution” phase, which reunites the pair so their love can be solidified. As Sophie has left Alex, he needs to convince her of his commitment before the climactic duet. In *ASIB*, Ally never leaves Jackson. In fact, she decides she will take a hiatus from touring to be with Jackson. After his addiction leads to him publicly humiliating her, however, Jackson fears he will lose her. While in rehab, Jackson tells Ally he wrote her a song, but the audience does not hear it until the final scene of the film.

In *M&L*, prior to debuting “Way Back into Love” with Cora, Alex performs “Don’t Write Me Off.” The lyrics all directly reference Alex and Sophie’s relationship. Examples include: “It’s never been easy for me to find words to go along with a melody,” a self-effacing reference to the fact that Alex cannot write lyrics; and “Since I met you, my whole life has changed. It’s not just my furniture you’ve rearranged,” an allusion to when Sophie, against Alex’s wishes, shuffled around his entire workspace as it was better for her writing process. The song is Alex’s plea, with the chorus being, “Though I know I’ve already blown more chances than anyone should ever get; all I’m asking you is don’t write me off just yet.” This reveals Alex as a character who is made alive by Sophie’s pen. He, much like Jackson, is revived by his love’s fresh writerly energies.

One could argue that the lyrics are general in a familiar sense, where Alex sings about how Sophie micromanages his living arrangements, how he (the man) messes up a lot and needs her (the woman’s) forgiveness. In that way, it almost reads like a stand-up comedy bit about traditional romantic roles—riffing on established tropes but setting them in a context. A context

that makes the general feel specific—a necessary move in the romantic comedy genre, as the films appeal to their audiences by presenting a relationship they could experience.⁵³ Each line of lyrics references their relationship. The allusions to their relationship make the song specific. It is about Alex and Sophie, not another couple.

Utilizing the network model of signification, I consider the interplay between the visuals, spoken word, sound effects, and music. The visuals throughout the scene are one of three kinds: close-ups of Sophie and Alex, a long shot of Alex singing on stage, or medium shots of Sophie and Alex’s smiling friends. In terms of sound, all the audience hears is the music and Sophie gasping or laughing. This is striking as Alex performs at a concert—a concert for a pop sensation—but the audience sits silently listening to him. His song has subdued the audience, winning over not only Cora’s fans but also Sophie’s sister, who moments before the song began was furious with him over how he treated Sophie. A further notable aspect of the sound mix is that while Alex plays in an arena venue, far away from Sophie, the mix sounds as though his voice and Sophie’s reactions are the same volume, as if they are right next to each other. The mix creates a sonic intimacy between them. The interaction of the music, lack of ambient sound, and visuals culminate with Sophie crying tears of joy when Alex sings the chorus. His song worked, by being a song that would not work for anyone else. The love song was for Alex and Sophie. Everyone else was just an observer, there to ensure the romantic gesture had a grand audience.

In contrast, the song Jackson wrote for Ally while in rehab (“I’ll Never Love Again”)—a song Ally, instead of Jackson, debuts to the audience, as Jackson killed himself only two scenes prior—does not reference anything that is specific to their relationship. Rather, it is something anyone who has ever loved and lost might feel. One example is “When we first met, I never thought that I would fall, I never thought I’d find myself lyin’ in your arms,” which does not

apply to their relationship, as Jackson introduced himself to Ally with the intention of asking her on a date—the attraction was immediate and strong. Instead, this is a common sentiment of people not looking for love and finding it in unlikely places. While this certainly applies to Jackson and Ally, it is not unique to their relationship. The chorus is “Don’t wanna feel another touch. Don’t wanna start another fire. Don’t wanna know another kiss, no other name fallin’ off my lips. Don’t wanna give my heart away to another stranger or let another day begin. Won’t even let the sunlight in. No, I’ll never love again.” The lyrics reflect a more general feeling of a person unable to fathom loving anyone other than the person they are with, nothing specific to Ally and Jackson.

The visuals, however, conjure that specificity for Jackson and Ally. Like “Don’t Write Me Off,” Ally sings “I’ll Never Love Again” in front of a silent concert audience, with the only sounds being her singing and orchestra. Again, the sound mix does not play like a live concert, but the intimacy is not created between Ally and Jackson, but between Ally and the viewer. This sonic combination makes it sound as if Ally is singing directly to the viewer. The effect is heightened by the way the camera pans across Ally’s face throughout the sequence. The movement has a pragmatic purpose of keeping the viewer visually interested as there is always movement even while the shot remains on a single subject. There is also emotional purpose behind the shot: conveying that Ally is trying to move, to continue living as Jackson’s brother, Bobby Maine (Sam Elliot), told her to, but she cannot. She loves Jackson, and with him gone, she can only sing a song he wrote for her. The only times the visuals leave Ally are three cuts to the past: The first, while she and Jackson are on stage and he hugs her; the second, when they lie in bed and she makes him laugh. In the third, on the upbeat before the final chorus, the film cuts from Ally to a flashback of Jackson singing the song to her for the first time. Not only do the

visuals cut, but the sounds switch to Jackson's voice with the only accompaniment being his piano. While Ally cries through her rendition and the orchestral strings add a melancholy feeling, the final cut to Jackson shows that this was his love song. When he sang the line, "I'll never love again," he meant that Ally was all he ever wanted, and he would love her for the rest of his life, not realizing he would end it only a few short weeks later.

The visuals create specificity, but the lyrical content is more general and rooted in emotion—both Ally's and that evoked in the viewer. The love Ally and Jackson share is a love that anyone watching the film could have and a love that anyone could lose. The depiction of love in *ASIB* is for everyone, not just for Ally and Jackson, and in order to be for everyone, actual details of their past need to be erased from the lyrics and displaced into the visuals.

Washed-Up Musician and Ingenue Duet. The End?

While the philosophies of love in the reconciliation songs differ between the films, the ending of *M&L* and the romantic comedy ending of *ASIB*—the unveiling of the duet written by the two leads—share a specificity. Because the plots of *M&L* and the romantic comedy section of *ASIB* are focused on the writing and performing of the duets, both songs are previewed prior to the official debuts.

The entirety of *M&L* builds to the public unveiling of "Way Back into Love," featuring three different versions with various plot-necessitated orchestrations. The first is the demo Alex and Sophie record for Cora. Recording the demo is the start of the "Midpoint," when all their efforts culminate with the two singing about finding a way back into love, to each other. The song becomes not only their reason for spending time together but also the representation of their love. The second version of the song is Cora's reorchestration, which she describes as "this

heavy Indian thing ... very rhythmic” with a beat that is “steamy and sticky.” Sophie views it as a perversion of their song, and the fact that Alex does not object to Cora’s changes indicates to Sophie (and to the audience) that he may not care as much about their love as Sophie does. The final version, with a similar orchestration as the demo, plays right before the credits roll, as Alex and Cora perform on stage. When Sophie asks, “What happened to steamy and sticky?” Alex responds, “Well, I explained to Cora that it violated the very core of the lyric and corrupted the purity of the song. And when that didn’t work, I told her it would help me to win you back.” The first half of his comment speaks directly to Sophie’s concern about Cora’s version tainting not only the song but the love that produced it, and the second half is Alex’s acknowledgement that Sophie’s love is more important to him than selling the song. Though, luckily for them, both work out. This is a gesture that, while less grandiose than performing an apology ballad on stage, is more impactful for their specific relationship.

As writing “Way Back into Love” is central to the plot of *M&L*, the majority of the lyrics are lines Sophie wrote alongside Alex throughout the film, but the final performance contains the final verse that Sophie wrote after ending their relationship: “There are moments when I don’t know if it’s real, or if anybody feels the way I feel. I need inspiration, not just another negotiation.” This verse references two specific moments in the film—one when Alex and Sophie were falling in love, the other as they were breaking up. While originally composing the song together, Alex says, “We’ll change [the line] ‘places in my mind’ if I can keep the chord sequence into the bridge.” Sophie lightheartedly responds, “This isn’t a negotiation,” as if they haven’t been negotiating on aspects of the song all along. The negotiations turn from fun to tense, however, after Cora reorchestrates their song. Alex is not bothered that they have to make the song that is the encapsulation of their relationship worse. To Alex, revitalizing his career is

more important than the integrity of this single composition. Under a new deadline and unhappy with the direction of the revised song, Sophie and Alex fight and, after leaving, she writes the final verse alone. “Way Back into Love” features lyrics written during their happiest moments and in their darkest moments, but all the lyrics are directly drawn from and tied to their relationship. While others may have experienced similar events as Sophie and Alex, the specificity in the lyrics makes the song solely about Alex and Sophie, which limits the generality of the love conveyed.

“Shallow,” the duet Ally and Jackson co-write, showcases the philosophy of specific love, but that is because its performance marks the end of the romantic comedy portion of *ASIB*, and thus fits the same mold as “Way Back into Love.” It is not until the film moves past romantic comedy and into romantic drama that their music shifts to be more general, appealing to nearly anyone who has experienced love. Even so, the lyrics to “Shallow” contain less specificity than those for “Way Back into Love.”

Like “Way Back into Love,” “Shallow” is previewed before the actual performance on stage—when Ally and Jackson are falling in love with each other. While in the grocery store parking lot, Jackson tells Ally about his father passing away and how his brother had to raise him, though he doesn’t really “know who was raising who.” She looks at him and sings, “Tell me something, boy, aren’t you tired tryin’ to fill that void? Or do you need more? Ain’t it hard keepin’ it so hardcore?” Jackson asks, “Is that me?” “That’s you,” Ally replies. Ally then tells Jackson that she “started writing this song the other day, and maybe [it] could work, like, as a chorus or something,” and she belts out what becomes the chorus of their duet. Ally’s statement that she wrote the chorus “the other day” means it is not about her and Jackson. Jackson made

her think of it, and their meeting completes the song, but the verse is the only part of the song about the two of them, already distancing it from the specificity of their budding relationship.

When Jackson and Ally perform “Shallow” in concert, Jackson adds a verse stemming from Ally’s desire to have a career in music but prioritizing her other work. He sings, “Tell me somethin’, girl, are you happy in this modern world? Or do you need more? Is there somethin’ else you’re searchin’ for?” While not referencing actual lines spoken by each other, “Shallow” does contain specificity, but there is also a generality in the lyrics. Additionally, even though “Shallow” is not a love song, it does cement their love for one another and start the transition from romantic comedy to romantic drama. After “Shallow,” the next song specifically about Ally and Jackson, “I’ll Always Remember Us This Way,” features only one reference to Jackson: “That Arizona Sky, burning in your eyes,” as Jackson grew up in Arizona. Afterwards, their music no longer has specific references to each other. They move to generalities about love.

All of the songs mentioned here are performed at concerts, meaning they are diegetic music performed as much for the fictional audiences in the film as they are for the audiences watching the films. Through the music, the philosophies of love become clearer. *M&L*, a romantic comedy in the vein of Richard Curtis,⁵⁴ uses music to demonstrate a love specific to two particular people, while *ASIB*, the fourth version of a romantic drama, uses music to demonstrate a more general love that is rooted in emotional appeals to the audience.

Conclusion

This article complicates the prevailing thinking regarding the generic divide between romantic comedies and dramas through examining the narratives of *M&L* and *ASIB*. I illustrate how the films utilize original songs to emphasize their two distinctive depictions of love. While

this reading of the films reveals how the musical representations of love interacts with their genres, my method of close readings is limited to a discussion of these specific films. Future scholars interested in how music inflects depictions of love should employ other methods, such as surveys of narrative tropes and soundtracks in a wide swath of romantic comedies and dramas, musical and otherwise. The music in these specific films, however, is particularly important, as not only are they original compositions, but they are compositions that are supposedly composed by the lead characters in the films, further anchoring the music to the romantic pairs. Stilwell argues that even “as our culture has grown less certain of the possibilities of romance” and newer romantic comedies play into that anxiety, music can “underscore emotions more directly.”⁵⁵ Moving forward, scholars and popular critics should take note that films may not slot neatly into the romantic drama and romantic comedy categories through narrative or tropes alone, as there is a great deal of overlap between the two. Rather, we should consider the films’ endings and their soundtracks, particularly when the soundtracks straddle the line between pop scores and compilation scores.

While the depictions of love in *M&L* and *ASIB* are distinctive, they are not necessarily unique. The idea of films using original compositions to strengthen or even transcend portrayals of love can also be seen in musical films such as *Begin Again* (2013), *Beyond the Lights* (2014), *The Greatest Showman* (2017), and *Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga* (2020)—all of which feature original compositions sung by the actors in the films. One can also consider the same effect in romantic comedies and dramas that are not necessarily musical, such as Leah Nobel’s music in *To All the Boys I Loved Before: Always and Forever* (2021), Sufjan Stevens’s songs in *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), or The Weeknd’s original compositions for *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015). These examples reveal the importance of considering the interplay between pre-

existing music and newly composed songs in film soundtracks. As Kalinak and Gorbman have shown, with the growing usage of compilation and pop scores, directors are becoming more involved and intentional with their musical selections. Music and film scholars should look to how pre-existing and newly composed music interact in films, as songs have the ability to not only create mood, aid characterization, and heighten atmosphere, they can also dramatically influence how audiences connect to a film and the specific (or general) depiction of love therein.

There is a growing tide of romantic films featuring soundtracks with original music produced in Hollywood and by Netflix in particular.⁵⁶ This trend will be important to track as the conception of love in Hollywood is no longer boy meets girl and they fall in love. Love is complex, and anxieties about “finding the one” or having a successful dating life are growing. Wang tracks how cinema has shifted representations of love from outward and visible to one of the inner with the “soul.” In doing so, he argues that “as romance’s referent moves inward, the film image must grapple with the loss of its ability to provide proofs of love while the soundtrack becomes freighted with a newfound pressure to express the lyricism of the self.”⁵⁷ Romance will continue to exist in cinema, regardless if it is with the intersection of comedy, drama, or other genres, and film music has become an ideal place to explore how love is conceived for audiences.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dan Wang, Michael C. Heller, Kevin Pabst, and his writing group for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. Additional thanks to the editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. Thanks are particularly owed to Brenna Wallace for her support throughout the process of writing and editing this piece.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jonathan Wells, “Orson Welles’ Six Best Quotes,” GQ, May 6, 2015, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/orson-welles-quotes-citizen-kane-100-birthday-anniversary>.
- ² Billy Mernit, *Writing the Romantic Comedy*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 109-117.
- ³ Kathrina Giltre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 11.
- ⁴ Kathryn Kalinak, *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5
- ⁵ Anahid Kassabian, “Songstruck: Rethinking Identifications in Romantic Comedies,” *Screening the Past*, July 27, 2005, <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2014/12/songstruck-rethinking-identifications-in-romantic-comedies/>.
- ⁶ For examples, see Betty Kaklamanidou, *Genre, Gender, and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium of Hollywood Rom Com*, (New York: Routledge, 2013); Dan Wang, “Scenes of Feeling: Music and the Imagination of the Literal Subject,” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017); Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).
- ⁷ *ASIB* was nominated for eight Academy Awards in addition to 257 other award nominations. Among the six total nominations *M&L* received, the most prestigious were “Best Feature Film Casting – Comedy” at the Casting Society of America and “Choice Movie: Chick Flick” from the Teen Choice Awards.
- ⁸ Erica Todd, *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema: Romance and Film Genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5-16.
- ⁹ Todd, *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema*, 15.

¹⁰ Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, (New York: Wallflower, 2007), 7.

¹¹ For more on pre-existing pop music in film as opposed to original compositions, see Ian Garwood, “Must You Remember This? Orchestrating the ‘Standard’ Pop Song in *Sleepless in Seattle*,” in *Movie Music: The Film Reader*, ed. Kay Dickinson (New York: Routledge, 2003), 109-118; Amanda Howell, *Popular Film Music and Masculinity in Action: A Different Tune*, (New York: Routledge, 2015); Steven Lannin and Matthew Caley, *Pop Fiction: The Song in Cinema*, (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005).

¹² Cynthia Whitcomb, *The Heart of the Film: Writing Love Stories in Screenplays*, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 5. For a further look into romance used as a sub-plot in American media, see Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹³ David Neumeyer, “Merging Genres in the 1940s: The Musical and the Dramatic Feature Film,” *American Music* 22, no. 1 (2004), 122.

¹⁴ Robynn Stilwell, “Music, Ritual and Genre in Edward Burns’ Indie Romantic Comedies,” in *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, eds. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 29.

¹⁵ James Spurrier, “The Integration of Music and Lyrics with the Book in the American Musical,” (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 1979), 148-54.

¹⁶ Priya Jha, “Lyrical Nationalism: Gender, Friendship and Excess in 1970s Hindi Cinema,” *Velvet Light Trap* 51 (2003), 48.

¹⁷ Ann van der Merwe, “Musical, the Musical, and Postmodernism in Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge*,” *Music and the Moving Image* 3, no. 3 (2010), 31-38.

¹⁸ For accounts of the musical film genre see Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). For more on how recent musicals intersect with other genres, see Barry Keith Grant, *The Hollywood Film Musical* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); K.J. Donnelly and Beth Carroll, eds., *Contemporary Musical Film*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 230.

²⁰ Janet Straiger, “Hybrid of Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History,” in *Film Genre Reader 3*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 185-195.

²¹ Rick Altman, “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 27-41.

²² Todd, *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema*, 10.

²³ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genre: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), 14.

²⁴ Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 4. Examples of diverse romantic comedies include *Love, Simon* (2018), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Let It Snow* (2019).

²⁵ Deborah Jermyn, “I Love NY: The Rom-Com’s Love Affair with New York City,” in *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, eds. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 21.

²⁶ Todd, *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema*, 19. For more on romantic dramas “depend[ing] on the ideology of heterosexuality,” see Kathleen Rowe, “Comedy, Melodrama and Gender:

Theorising the Genres of Laughter' in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunskova Karnick and Henry Jenkins, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 39-59.

²⁷ Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 45-46.

²⁸ Todd, *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema*, 23.

²⁹ Todd, *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema*, 23.

³⁰ Kalinak, *Film Music*, 87.

³¹ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 9.

³² David R. Shumway, "Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage," *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 4 (1991), 10.

³³ Kalinak, *Film Music*, 87.

³⁴ Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4.

³⁵ Michael Rennett, "Quentin Tarantino and the Director as DJ," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 2 (2012): 391-409.

³⁶ Claudia Gorbman, "Music Auteurs," in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 149.

³⁷ Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2-3.

³⁸ Kalinak, *Film Music*, 87.

³⁹ Wang, "Scenes of Feeling," 116-117.

⁴⁰ For more on popular songs as leitmotif, see Ronald Rodman, “The Popular Song as Leitmotif in 1990s Film,” in *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film*, eds. Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 119-136; Sarah Provost, “The Dance Hall, Nazi Germany, and Hell: Accruing Meaning through Filmic Uses of Benny Goodman’s ‘Sing Sing Sing’,” *Music and the Moving Image* 10, no. 2 (2017): 33-45.

⁴¹ To further this confusion, the soundtrack for *M&L* was released prior to the film and “Shallow” was released as a single before *ASIB* premiered, making the original music available to listen to prior to the films being unveiled. For more on compilation and pop scores, see Julie Hubbert “The Compilation Soundtrack from the 1960s to the Present,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, ed. David Neumeyer, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 290–318.

⁴² Ron Rodman, *Tuning In: American Narrative Television Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 43.

⁴³ Philip Tagg, *Music’s Meanings: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos* (Larchmont, NY: Mass Media Music Scholars’ Press, 2013), 160-161.

⁴⁴ For an example of this type of analysis, see Max Dosser, “Throw in the Tune: Musical Characterizations of Disability in Wrestling Films,” *The Journal of American Culture* 43, no. 4 (2020): 300–311.

⁴⁵ POP! is based on Wham!, with Colin as George Michael and Alex as Andrew Ridgely. Much of POP!’s music plays like parodies of Wham!, such as “Meaningless Kiss” being a take on “Careless Whisper.” For more, see Lisa Schwarzbaum, “Music and Lyrics,” *Entertainment Weekly*, February 14, 2007, <https://ew.com/article/2007/02/14/music-and-lyrics-2/>.

⁴⁶ Karen Bowdre, “Romantic Comedies and the Raced Body,” in *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, eds. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (New

York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 105-116, illustrates this idea of romantic comedies “bettering” their characters with yet another Hugh Grant romantic comedy, *Two Weeks Notice* (2002).

⁴⁷ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood: The Greatest Show on Earth* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 28.

⁴⁸ Adam Chitwood, “Screenwriter Will Fetters Talks Clint Eastwood’s A STAR IS BORN; Says Script Was Inspired by Kurt Cobain,” Collider, April 1, 2012, <https://collider.com/a-star-is-born-remake-kurt-cobain-will-fetters/156491/>.

⁴⁹ Wang, “Scenes of Feeling,” 116-117.

⁵⁰ Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 104.

⁵¹ Shumway, “Screwball Comedies,” 10.

⁵² Technically, each film has an additional song afterwards, but as they play entirely during the credits, they are not a part of the narrative.

⁵³ Cassidy Green, “The Effects of Romantic Comedies on Women and Female Adolescents,” *Proceedings of the National Conference on Undergraduate Research* (2013), 399.

⁵⁴ Guido Heldt, “... there’s no music playing, and it’s not snowing’ Songs and Self-reflexivity in Curtisland,” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 6, no.1 (2012), 73-91.

⁵⁵ Stilwell, “Music, Ritual and Genre in Edward Burns’ Indie Romantic Comedies,” 37.

⁵⁶ Michelle Darrisaw, “20 New Romantic Comedies to Have on Your Radar in 2019,” Oprah Magazine, September 16, 2019, <https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/tv-movies/g25804986/new-romantic-comedies-2019/>.

⁵⁷ Wang, “Scenes of Feeling,” 117.