

“The Feel of the Guitar in Popular Music Performance”

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This file includes the abstract, extensive keyword list, and selected bibliography for the video essay “The Feel of the Guitar in Popular Music Performance” by Nicholas J. Shea, *SMT-V* 8.3 (2022). This video-essay may be found at: <https://vimeo.com/societymusictheory/smtv083shea>.

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**Abstract for
“The Feel of the Guitar in Popular Music Performance”**

by Nicholas J. Shea, *SMT-V 8.3*

Popular-music guitarists frequently reference the physicality of the fretboard when discussing songwriting and performance. Brittany Howard, for example, advocates that the feel of her guitar and physical gestures — chord shapes, licks, and riffs — are more critical to her craft than theoretical knowledge regarding pitch and harmony. However, in-depth gestural perspectives on musical organization are underrepresented in popular-music scholarship. This video article responds by investigating the relationship between fretboard gestures and popular music’s features in two contexts. First is a close analysis of “Short and Sweet” that focuses on how Howard coordinates chord voicings and larger left-hand shifts with important rhetorical moments reflected in the song’s lyrics. A following motion-capture study then surveys how similar gestural trends might generalize to performances by other guitarists. Data from performances by 14 local practicing guitarists demonstrate that the musicians typically prefer to articulate moments of formal transition with the largest physical gestures. Such findings suggest a degree of gestural intentionality and strategy amongst guitarists and clarify the contexts in which a guitarist might choose to maintain or abandon fretboard affordances.

Short Keyword List

Britney Howard, guitar, popular music, performance analysis, motion-capture

Extensive Keyword List

Brittany Howard, St. Vincent, Tom Morello, Steve Vai, Nancy Wilson, popular music, rock, pop, guitar, fretboard, frets, strings, gesture, chord shapes, licks, riffs, performance analysis, form, verse, chorus, musical training, Cartesian formula, motion-capture, action camera, Squire, affordances, local musician

About the Author

Nicholas Shea is an assistant professor of music theory in the School of Music, Dance and Theatre at Arizona State University. He received his doctorate at Ohio State University. He primarily studies how popular-music artists execute the various components of musical structure through performance, using techniques such as motion capture, corpus studies and theoretical analysis. As Co-PI of the ASU Music Cognition Lab, he is also currently conducting a series of perceptual experiments that assess how a musician's training and primary performance style influences their understanding of popular-music harmony through meter.

Performances

Brittany Howard, 2019. "Short and Sweet," music by Brittany Howard, words by Brittany Howard; Comedy Central, *The Daily Show With Trevor Noah*,
<https://brittanyhoward.com/brittany-on-the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah/>

St. Vincent, 2009. "The Strangers (Acoustic)" music by Annie Clark, words by Annie Clark; Lake Fever Productions, Tugboat Productions,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yx8wWusn87c>

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