

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

***SMT-V 8.3 (May 2022)***

***Society for Music Theory: Videocast Journal***

**Nicholas J. Shea**  
**(Arizona State University)**

Editor: Megan Long  
Associate Editor: Jonathan De Souza

**ISSN 2689-5471**    **DOI:** <http://doi.org/10.30535/smtv.8.3>

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>.

*SMT-V* is the open-access, peer-reviewed video journal of the Society for Music Theory. Founded in 2014, *SMT-V* publishes video essays that showcase the latest research in music theory in a dynamic, audiovisual format. The journal features a supportive and collaborative production process, and publishes five to six videos per year. The videos may be found at [www.smt-v.org](http://www.smt-v.org).

*SMT-V* is overseen by an Editor who organizes the vetting of the videos, along with an Associate Editor who aids with the technical details. Members of the editorial board help to vet submitted videos. Those wishing to publish a video on *SMT-V* should first submit a written proposal summarizing the proposed project. If the proposed project is deemed appropriate, the author will be invited to submit a draft of a storyboard or script. Upon acceptance of the script, the author will be invited to produce a full video in conjunction with guidance and assessment from selected members of the Editorial Board. Details regarding the submission process are found at <https://www.smt-v.org/submit/>.

**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>

### **Bibliography**

- Cusick, Suzanne G. "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem." *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (1994): 8–27.
- De Souza, Jonathan. *Music at Hand: Instruments, Bodies, and Cognition*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- . "Fretboard Transformations." *Journal of Music Theory* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 1–39.
- Doll, Christopher. *Hearing Harmony: Toward a Tonal Theory for the Rock Era*. University of Michigan Press, 2017.

- Hannaford, Marc. "Subjective (Re)positioning in Musical Improvisation: Analyzing the Work of Five Female Improvisers." *Music Theory Online* 23, no. 2 (2017).  
<http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.17.23.2/mto.17.23.2.hannaford.html>
- Koozin, Timothy. "Guitar Voicing in Pop-Rock Music: A Performance-Based Analytical Approach." *Music Theory Online* 17, no. 3 (2011).  
<http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.11.17.3/mto.11.17.3.koozin.html>
- Reyna, Fabi. "Brittany Howard on Collaboration, Gear, and Making Up Your Own Chord Shapes." *She Shreds Magazine*. 2017. <https://sheshredsmag.com/brittany-howard-11/>
- Rockwell, Joti. "Banjo Transformations and Bluegrass Rhythm." *Journal of Music Theory* 53, no. 1 (2010): 137–162.
- Shea, Nicholas. "Ecological Models of Musical Structure in Pop-rock, 1950–2019." PhD diss. Ohio State University, 2019.
- Temperley, David. "Communicative Pressure and the Evolution of Musical Styles." *Music Perception* 20, no. 3 (2004): 313–337.
- Wheeler, Tom. "GP Flashback: Heart's Nancy Wilson Discusses Her Playing Style, Influences and First Guitar in 1979." *Guitar Player Magazine*. 2020.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20200317212924/https://www.guitarplayer.com/players/gp-flashback-heart-nancy-wilson-discusses-her-playing-style-influences-and-first-guitar-in-1979-story>