

Saadane Afif *Power Chords*

POWER CHORDS IN THE EXPLODED FIELD

a text by Jörg Heiser

*I had a dream that we were rock stars
And that flash bulbs popped the air
And girls fainted, every time we shook our hair.
We were songbirds, we were Greek gods
We were singled out by fate
We were quoted out of context –it was great.
Grander than castles, cathedrals or stars
Electric Guitars!*

Paddy McAloon (Prefab Sprout),
Electric Guitars

In a moving crowd of dancers at a noisy party in June 2005, a guy I had met a few times before turned to me, and with his hands raised like he was praising a higher being and his widened eyes staring at me like those of a religious fanatic, he solemnly shouted: "This track is a sculpture!"

He may have been a little drunk, but he was not joking, and his remark immediately struck me as succinct. The crowd was dancing to *Drop it like it's hot* by Snoop Dogg featuring Pharell Williams, an amazingly stripped down composition of minimalist beats and fractured particles of melody, with rap lyrics inserted in the considered, measured tones of an auctioneer. This piece of music is like a siren call in Morse code: it punctures the aural space with a few precise markers, leaving loads of funky pauses –"negative space"– for dancers and listeners to fill with silly wantonness and instant pleasure (a guilty pleasure to the extent you can't fail to notice the almost surrealistically crass sexism of the lyrics).

Listening to an instrumental version of *Drop it like it's hot* a few weeks later, I wondered whether Rosalind Krauss would have included it in her concept of "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," back in 1979, when she first published the groundbreaking eponymous essay¹. Probably not. I understand that in strict and formal terms this piece of music is not, and doesn't have

¹ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *October* No. 8 (Spring, 1979), p. 30-44.

to be, sculpture. Nevertheless, its syncopated rhythms suggesting body movements –patterns moving through time– and carefully chosen pitches suggesting the playful modulation of sound –tonal markers defined by their distance and “timing” towards one another– insistently pointed to a dimension that Krauss had not taken into consideration. She had brilliantly used Land Art as the stepping stone towards an understanding of how Postmodern sculpture is defined by sets of oppositions and mutual exclusions unfolding around its relation towards architecture and landscape. But she had completely forgotten (and maybe she had to, for the sake of her argument) that sculpture in the 20th century at least equally importantly was defined by its relation to moving entities, namely body performance on the one hand and sequential technologies (film, sound-recording etc.) on the other. In other words, in thinking about space –oddly falling back on Lessing’s famous 18th century distinction between visual arts as the “static” form and literature as the “sequential” form– she had ignored time.

Early versions of these thoughts were probably still in the back of my mind when a couple of months later I visited the former sugar factory on the bank of the Saône that was the main venue of the Lyon biennale. As I passed through rooms full of green fog or pink balloons, I also felt I was coming closer to a sound check taking place one floor up –my first perception of *Power Chords* (2005) by Saâdane Afif.

Slow, sustained, mildly distorted, lush rings of electric guitar linger down the staircase, and I could also oddly discern that they seem to be played live, rather than being pre-recorded and piped through a speaker system. Why do I feel I can hear a difference between a guitar being played live and a pre-recorded version? I walked up the stairs, to find a room with eleven identical black Marshall guitar combo amps

placed on the floor, with eleven identical white Fender Stratocaster guitars placed next to them on guitar stands.

The electro-acoustic effect of the amps erratically being distributed all across the floor of the space contributes to the distinct sound quality; it seems more pervasive and “irregular” than a standard two- or four-speaker sound system, and the Marshall sound with its warm, controlled distortion also adds to this. But it is also the way the guitars are played: the chords mostly seem “clean”, they have a tonal quality, but there are also a few “unclean” intervals ringing, and though all in all the sounds feel measured and “intentional”, there is also an element of seeming randomness in the timing of the strings being stroked, like several guitars being tested during a sound-check by a tranquilized New Wave band with a predilection for Minimal music. But there are no musicians in sight.

On closer inspection, it appears that the chords are played by mechanical devices attached to the guitars. A wooden clamp is positioned on the fretboard, with little pieces of wood holding the chords usually held by a player’s hand, while a revolving plexi disc with picks attached underneath is placed on the lower end of the strings, seemingly remote-controlled to strike the strings at a particular moment in a particular way (slower in arpeggio style or faster as a “straight” chord) according to what seems to be a computerized score distributing instructions among the instruments. A text piece on the wall –set in holographic lettering that shimmers like the skin of a rainbow trout– provides a playful semiotic complement to this set-up, as it represents the lyrics of a song entitled *Pop (Power Chords)*, attributed to Mick Peter and Saâdane Afif. It evokes rock concerts (“your clockwork crowd”, “barking and yelling”, “a bunch of nice boys and girls”), but also

minimalist sculpture (“Pretty transformation, this stack”); and it reminds one of conceptual Post-Punk lyrics with its repeated, “detached” enumeration of three colours in different order (“Blue, red, orange”, “Red, blue, orange”).

There are two hints that can be discerned in terms of unravelling the logic behind the orchestration of guitars, one being the term “Power Chords”, the other being the succession of colours. “Power Chord”, in the strict sense, is a term that came about amongst rock guitarists to describe the sonic effect achieved on an electric guitar played over distorted amplification by striking the two notes interval of a perfect fifth (or its inversion, a perfect fourth) while omitting the interval of a third note from major and minor chords (arrived at by just slightly touching and thus muting the respective strings of the guitar). While the interval of a third would result in dissonance and instability of the tone at high levels of distortion, power chords still maintain tonal clarity, and thus sonic “power”². In a wider sense, “power chords” also refers to the compositional vernacular of Rock’n’Roll, the conventions often used to create catchy riffs –namely with “money chords”, progressions of three, sometimes four chords that have a long tradition of being perceived as pleasant, popular, and thus *potentially* – I will return to that notion of potential –successful.

The succession of colours cited in the lyrics of *Pop (Power Chords)* alludes to the *Barres de bois rond* of André Cadere –“Round Bars of Wood” formed by “spools” painted in different colours to indicate a mathematically determined sequence of permutations. This connection is made explicit in Afif’s “cartel des bâtons”, an itemization paper that accompanies the installation: it provides the key to the permutational structure underlying the remote-controlled playing of the guitars –starting from the work’s entire musical score being

² This definition of “power chord” is based on the most useful one I found on the web: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power_chord (9 May 2006)

attributed to Cadere. It then goes on to painstakingly list no less than thirty alternate versions of different types of permutations that together form the musical score of the piece, all of which are dated 1978/2005 (1978 being the year of Cadere's death; 2005 being the year of Afif's *Power Chords*), and each being brought into connection with a specific *Barre* –listing its dimension and even providing a provenance of ownership (Yvon Lambert, Paris, for example, or Gilbert & George, London).

Cadere's *Barres* have played a prominent role in a number of earlier pieces by Afif –for example he previously translated Cadere's permutations into sequences of differently coloured spotlights (*Untitled*, 1971/2003-B 02301004 =30= =22 x 23=), or paid homage to the *Barres* and their deceased maker by doing "cover-versions" that are called *Black Spirit* (2004), using four different types of black paint, and *Ghost* (2005), using four different types of white paint. This makes it all the more necessary to take a closer look at the precise concept that underlies the *Barres*. According to Cadere's concept, the length of the wooden "spools" painted in different colours is equal to their diameter. Four variables distinguish each *Barre*: 1) the combination of coloured "spools" –Cadere used only black, white and the six basic rainbow colours (i.e. yellow, orange, red, violet, blue and green), with a minimum of three and a maximum of seven at a time; 2) the specific permutation (i.e. the mathematical system that determines which colour follows which colour, going through a set of possible combinations); 3) the error purposefully introduced into this permutation (with the notable exception of the possibility of two same colours following each other, to avoid an all too obvious visibility of that error); and 4) the length and diameter of the entire *Barre* resulting from all of this³.

³ See for a more detailed description: André Cadere, *Présentation d'un travail/ Utilisation d'un travail*, Hossmann Hamburg, MTL Brussels, 1975, and Bernard Marcelis, 'Wie eine runde Holzstange anzusehen ist', p. 46-49 in *André Cadere. Unordnung herstellen* (exhibition catalogue), Kunstverein München and Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum Graz, 1996.

To give an example, there is a *Barre* which measures 182 x 3.5 cm (in the collection of Massimo Minini): the first set of four painted "spools" are (in that succession) violet, red, yellow, and black. In the second set of four the first two are inverted, so that now it's red followed by violet; the third version is red, yellow, violet and black. According to this system of four colours permutating thirteen times (one of eight systems Cadere used), the tenth version should be black, followed by violet, red and yellow –but actually the violet comes first, then the black, i.e. they have been "falsely" inverted. This element of error occurs only once per *Barre* –it remains unique.

In Afif's *Cartel des bâtons*, however, each of the thirty versions –and this is crucial– is not described by the particular succession of colours but chords aligned to this very succession. In the case of the aforementioned 182 x 3.5 cm piece, black is an E, yellow is A, red is G, and violet is B7. Now we understand how the *Barre* can suddenly become a score: the colour-code system is "translated" into a chord-progression system, thus keeping the underlying structure but replacing the medium in which it is expressed. A computer is fed all this data, thirty different Cadere *Barres*, each of them with its distinct set of chords being articulated. Then each of the chords, in relatively slow and measured sequence, is played out over the respective guitar that is prepared to play it, turning a *Barre* of such and such a length into a succession of chords ringing at such and such a duration.

What kind of chords are actually attributed to the colour successions of Cadere? Here the work comes full circle: for these are the chords being used in the progressions that form the basis of what, in the western musical tradition, makes a popular song. This traditional system is to a certain extent more limited than Cadere's

–not all chord combinations sound intriguing or “pleasant.” But at the same time it’s more free –it’s not ruled by a strict order of permutations. For example, the succession of E, A, G, and B7 mentioned above is used in John Lennon’s *Yer Blues* (from The Beatles’ *White Album*), expanding and “violating” the traditional blues progression leading from A to B7 by dropping in a G in-between. The music critic Patrick Eudeline, in a long article in French magazine “Rock & Folk” entitled “Chanson mode d’emploi” (song manual) tells the pop history of the system of “possible” chord progressions as a constant play between conforming to and “violating” a system of rules.

“The famous three chords, Eudeline remarks, everyone twists them every which way, suggesting them, eluding them, inverting them, reinventing them, in order to create a surprise [...] E-A-B, that’s *Green Onions* and *Purple Haze* and *Bang a Gong*”, but also *You ain’t seen nothing Yet* and *I am the Walrus* and... the list is endless. C sharp minor-A-B-C sharp minor, that’s *Because the Night*, *Shake Your Booty* and *Wishin’ Well* by Free, as well as Clapton’s *Layla* and *I’m Eighteen*, but put an F sharp minor in place of the B, and you have *Friday On My Mind*. By reversing the three, you have... Yes, it never ends. Or nearly⁴.” The “nearly” points not only to the fact that you can only have so many versions of the same song, but also to the fact that not all chord progressions are experienced as “pleasing” –containing a snappy combination of tonal tension and *denouement*– and thus a potential to go down well with a large audience.

From Eudeline’s article, Afif extracted a list of twenty different “money chord” progressions consisting of two, three, or four chords. In order to let any of them form a potentially successful song, you paradoxically have to slightly alter the formula to actually make it stand out –which must have reminded Afif of the “errors” Cadere

⁴ Patrick Eudeline, “Chanson mode d’emploi”, p. 72-79 in *Rock & Folk* No. 451 (March 2005), this translation is extracted from *Expérience de la durée*, catalogue Biennale de Lyon (2005), p. 312.

introduced into his permutations, even though these are certainly not introduced to achieve popular recognition. Using Cadere's system to shuffle pop chord progressions pushes their logic beyond its inherent limits, towards the logic of Minimal music: Terry Riley's *In C* (1964) comes to mind, which uses only intervals based on C within a mathematical system of permutations that determines more the sequential *when* than the sonic *how* of an ensemble playing it; another reference would be Glenn Branca, who has used orchestras of electric guitars to create walls of sound. (It seems a remarkably apt incident that Tony Conrad, another important veteran of Minimal music, happened to exhibit near Afif in Lyon, and eventually helped him tune the guitars.) As with Riley's *In C*, Afif's piece is less about the play between conforming to or violating the rules of a genre (that of the pop song), but rather the play between strict rules and "free" coincidence. The title *Power Chords* in that sense ironically evokes the promise of "overwhelming" and convincing the art audience, while pushing its meaning towards a more critical understanding of "power" –in the spirit of Cadere who was very critical of the power structures in art's institutional set-up of museums and galleries (notably Afif doesn't use *Money Chords* as a title, presumably not least to allow that connotation). Cadere challenged the power system of art in part by "intruding" into its realm with his own "fetish of power", the *Barre*. Cadere used it as a "tool", carrying it around or resting it on the floor like a walking-stick, both outside and inside of art spaces, sometimes claiming presence in other artists' exhibitions he was not invited to participate in, simply by showing up during the opening with a *Barre*, maybe leaning it against the wall, possibly leaving it there. At other times –when actually invited– he placed it not in the "regular"

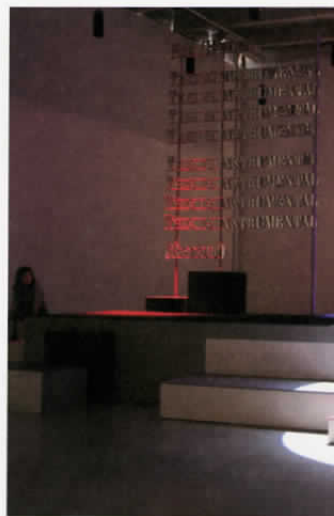
exhibition space, but for example on the office desk of a curator to accentuate his function (the curator in question being Jan Hoet, 1977 at the Museum Van Hedendaagse Kunst in Gent, Belgium). Cadere's work thus also consciously took on the character of intrusion, like a flag put up on a territory –and he risked being seen as a pushy guy who forces his way into representation (while in fact his work in many cases, by its nomadic nature, remained fleeting and ephemeral). As notorious as Cadere's tactics might have been perceived by many at the time, he nevertheless marked, almost literally with the *Barres*, the border between inclusion and exclusion that obviously had a relation to his status as a Polish-born Romanian citizen who lived most of his artists' life in Paris.

Afif's piece to some extent shares this character of intrusion –not in terms of a “personified” performative gesture, but simply by the nature of amplified sound. *Power Chords* has a “designated” location, but unless it is shown separately in a sound-proof space, you inevitably hear it before, during and after you see it. It could be called an installation, since you have several elements –the guitars and the amps, the wall text– that mark a territory at different spots, creating a spatial tableau or scenario. Though not a physically coherent entity with a front and a back as most sculptures –the piece sonically wobbles and moves; its elements are enwrapped by the sounds permeating throughout that space, which makes the ensemble to some extent a “relatively autonomous being” within that space– in that sense a sculpture.

Afif is not so much concerned –as many contemporary artists working in reference to classical Conceptual and Minimal art are– with feeding on the aura of earlier, preferably dead heroes such as Cadere. That would have obviously worn out after a number of pieces.

Rather, he's actually putting Cadere's work to "use". While Cadere with the *Barres* marked his position within the field of art, Afif uses them predominantly as a tool, key and filter to organise the cultural "artefacts" he appropriates (light shows, power chords, guitars etc.) into a coherent entity. Another striking example of that strategy is *Pirates Who's Who* (2000-2004): Afif takes designer Ron Arad's quirky bookshelf *Lovely Rita* (1995) – a meandering band of beige PVC fixed to the wall that creates an irregular up-and-down surface of waves of books rather than stacks or rows– as its point of departure. Afif's piece comes with green and blue glitter paint dripping down from behind the wall-mounted shelf as if the books about piracy to be placed on it were spilling algae-rich sea-water, or toy-blood. Crucially, the edition of six doesn't include the books, but a contract that asks the buyer to try and put together his or her own selection of new or second-hand books about pirates, thus co-creating an individual piece –in other words, Afif provides the tool, key and filter with his instruction to use the Arad exclusively for one genre of books. It makes you imagine the owners trying to outbid each other with an evermore sophisticated selection of vintage editions of, say *The Pirates Own Book: Authentic Narratives of the Most Celebrated Sea Robbers* by Charles Ellms (1837) or Sir Francis Drake's *The World Encompassed* (1628), until finally the shelf collapses under the weight of obsessive collecting –which in itself would form a sly comment on the logics of the market and the "piracy" of cultural artefacts, but also on the idea of sculpture as a thing created half-way between construction and collapse.

Afif's explicit employment of works by Cadere or Arad is not just derivatively reiterating others' artistic concepts and designs for the sake of a game of historical ping-pong, but "abuses" them as a means to organise and structure



Top: Lyrics Display, Palais de Tokyo, 2005.
Photographie Franck Audoux. Courtesy galerie Michel Rein

Above: *Pirates Who's Who*, 2000-2006. Photographie DR. Courtesy Saïdane Afif

Right: Lyrics Editions, 2005.
Courtesy Galerie de Multiples, Paris



the world, and to find untapped potentials in it. (Here “world” means mostly, but not necessarily exclusively, the way it is reflected in pop culture.) Conversely, pop culture becomes a tool, key and filter to reshuffle and reframe his own work, for example by inviting –for his exhibition entitled *Lyrics* at Palais de Tokyo in 2005– writers and musicians to create lyrics and music in response to individual works displayed in earlier exhibitions, thus creating an aural “transcription” in the form of music-tracks bearing the titles of these works, and issued on CDs which the audience can listen to. This twists and resists the convention of the representational survey of a solo exhibition, because of course the responses of the writers and musicians inevitably “paint over” Afif’s works with a new expression in a different medium. For example, the aforementioned lyrics of *Power Chords* by Mick Peter reappear with music by Julien Perez, revamped as ambient noise in a Throbbing Gristle vein with exalted Bryan Ferry-type crooning on top⁵. Ultimately, through this transcription, Afif wilfully obscures the representation of his earlier work, in order to provoke the listeners into making the effort themselves to actually find out what is being referred to in the songs.



However, Afif’s translations, combinations and inversions of material coming both from art and pop sources are not simply cases of “crossover” or “sound sculpture”. The chords of *Power Chords* are “only” its material or subject matter, not its central aesthetic and conceptual concern –just like Jasper Johns’ bronze casts of *Beer Cans* (1960) are not predominantly concerned with the material quality of bronze, or with the nature of beer cans, and would be slightly misunderstood if subsumed under “bronze sculpture”, or “art-drink-crossover”. *Power Chords* is both “sound” and “non-sound” in the way that –according to Rosalind Krauss’s definition–

⁵ For more information on the CDs, please refer to label that issued them, www.bottrop-boy.com

Land Art can be both "landscape" and "non-landscape", i.e. defined by its exploration of the schisms within a field of interrelating terms. In Krauss' concept, the term "sculpture" moves to the periphery, becomes one among several options in the exploration of spatial art-making, other options being the marking of sites, the construction of sites, or the creation of what she calls "axiomatic structures" (artistic intervention into, or mapping of architectural experience, including its possible negation, as in works of Bruce Nauman or Richard Serra).

Even with the artists Krauss took as examples for her spatial concept of the "expanded field", she ignored the presence of the performative body, as well as the technological, or conceptual sequencing of movement in their sculptural work: think of Bruce Nauman's video corridors, or Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* film (1970), which (as Michael Ned Holte has noted) is heavily inspired by Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) and reframes the famous land art piece as a time machine into the distant past (bulldozers as dinosaurs) and the near future (the salt-encrusted remnant of the "original" design)⁶. All that said, Krauss's concept of "sculpture" in the expanded field can itself be expanded. Her central interrelation between landscape/architecture on the one hand and their negation on the other (what she calls not-landscape/not-architecture) is combined with a second, equally central interrelation between performance/sequence and non-performance/non-sequence.

The reference to the sequential and process-based is not simply a return to the Modernist concern with the kinetic, from Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) to Tinguely's machines, etc. (while not necessarily excluding it). Rather it can be read as a more pronounced emphasis on the future via technology's (film, electronics, etc.) effect on perception: just as landscape and architecture

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the Jetty film, see Michael Ned Holte, Shooting the Archeozoic, in *Frieze* No. 88 (January/February 2005), p. 78-81.

are predominantly traces and markers of history (while not excluding the possibility of future alterations), the performative, sequential and process-based concerns open up the potential of new developments to emerge (while not excluding the reflection on history).

Like Robert Smithson's work which resided, in a way, in the slash between the terms site and non-site, Afif's *Power Chords* is performance and not-performance (the guitars being "performed", but marking a ghostly absence); sound and not-sound (in one way it's a sound piece, but it's also predominantly focussed on a conceptual permutation that doesn't "need" sound to exist). And just like a music-track such as *Drop it like it's hot* leaves numerous ways to fill its sparse rhythmic skeleton with adventurous dance movements and silly, emphatic exclamations –so does *Power Chords* employ tacky rock riffs to help explode the "expanded field".

Jörg Heiser, spring 2006

Songwriting directions for use

Patrick Eudeline

Without knowing it, rock accomplished the work of several centuries of classical music. But what about now? Does the art of composition still exist? To those who play music at home, Patrick Eudeline recalls some rules that are altogether personal and essential.

"How natural to them (the Beatles) is the use of an Eolian cadence at the end of "Not a Second Time" (the exact same progression that Gustav Mahler loves at the end of his Songs of the Earth)"

William Mann, The Times, December 27th 1963.

"To this day, I still do not have the slightest idea what this man meant. Eolian cadence? Eolian cadence? It conjures up birds. Yes, exotic birds. Apart from that..."

John Lennon, The Playboy Interview, November 1980.

Eventually, not a lot of things would have done so much for the legend of the Beatles than this flattering and impromptu comment of a very famous British musical critic, on Christmas Eve 1963. After this article, the Beatles were no simple rockers anymore... but the new composers of the century. The funny thing is that when you listen to the end of *Not a Second Time*, you hear nothing else than a G chord followed by an E minor. Even if, far away, we think we hear George Martin play rather a major E on his piano in lieu of the expected G. But, anyway nothing to make a fuss about for a Beatle. But Rock is like this. And our specialist could not understand its specificities. Indeed, a lot of passages have an E chord followed by a D chord... Even though the general tonality of the passage is a tonality of E. For a classical musician, it would be a quite daring modulation from the leading tone, on the 7th degree flat of the scale.

Whereas in reality, D and E, on a guitar, in barred chords... follow each other. And they are right under your fingers. Under the fingers of all those who however will never know what an Eolian cadence, an avoided cadence, a tierce de Picardie, a submediant, a Napolitan sixth, or an ostinato is, all these delightfully exotic terms invented for musical theory. The funny thing is that rock did use all these sophisticated processes... Like the Eolian cadence attributed to the Beatles by our delightful prig. Only, in using other processes, other than classical music theory. Because rock, like blues of course, is like this: a combination of naivety and self-taught licks. And above everything, a combination of praise for idiom, its own roots. A whole vocabulary that one should reinvent. Thus, from each Beatles' song, we can trace the origin, from Hambourg, and their first fifties' flurry. We can locate exactly, and some made no bones about it, which song, which was already played at

the Star Club, stammered out on the tape recorder of Paul's uncle during these famous 1960 sessions that were recently found, gave them the idea of such a chord scale. We can make out Mancini's *Moon River* sleeping behind *Yesterday, Night and Day* behind *The Fool on the Hill*, Del Shannon, Buddy Holly and Arthur Alexander or Gene Vincent a bit everywhere, but also the Olympics (*I wish I could shimmy...* The first cycle of fifths they have heard), Frank Ifield and *I remember you*, Little Eva or Ritchie Barrett, Eddie Fontaine or the Shadows... All this rock into being, the Beatles absorbed it like sponges, transcending each brainwave, each proposal. Rock built itself upon them. Up to Bowie's or Randy Newman's twisted harmonies. Until today. Today? Well...

The art of songwriting, since then... must have lost its way. Somewhere. We do not exactly know when. Since people got used to sampling?... Since we hear expressions such as *I found you a rhythmic or lay your voice upon my riff?* Since music is something one can download from the computer, and a riff... nothing else but a connection of barred chords on a saturated guitar or, even worse, a loop pinched from someone else. Pinched? Come on! It would be too good: the great ones pinch, certainly. They even steal, like the Beatles formerly, but it was to reinvent, transcend. As for the others... Sampling is blind copying. Nothing more.

Yes. Another culprit? The power chords of modern metal, or Nirvana. Or people who imitated this sound, followed it without understanding it. At first (and short) sight, Nirvana's songs are nothing but a random connection of barred chord scales, flouting, in any case, any harmony rule. And it became a sound. A common sound, unconsciously cribbed by any Clinging Brother of the metal, hardcore, any music. Indeed, Cobain, after the fashion of the Beatles, transcended rules. Rules he knew well enough to allow himself to break them. Which he showed at a later stage. At the time of the live *Unplugged*. Taking up Bowie or Leadbelly. Something he had proved from the beginning, even before Nirvana, when he played pieces of Creedence Clearwater Revival with his high school group.

But since him, countless are the guitar players who think they made a song because they connect barred chords... on the two big strings. As for Cobain, he tried to incur risks, the ultimate panting, in a world that already had heard too much. Reinventing the ancient law of harmony. And he is not the culprit. We will see that later on. It disappeared. Yes. The main responsible, then it was... rap, of course! Or techno. So?

The problem is, some masterpieces are made of one single chord, such as *Smokestack lightning*, *Spoonful* or *The Beat Goes On*. Or of two chords. And nothing else. Oh yes! Masterpieces! Such as *Shout* of the Isley Brothers, *Hey Gyp*... Their secret? We expected a third chord that never came. Any other musician would have satisfied the expectation, and concluded it. No, we stayed with the tension.

Later on, James Brown and funk set it as a principle. We stayed on the same twisted chord and hammered it in, in any possible way. But the Sex Machine stayed where it was, ploughed the ground. An orgasm? The key to the riddle? Never. It was genuine and endless sex. Without any break, nor rest. Since then, it does not surprise anyone to listen to a piece without this famous third chord, as James Brown, and others before him (starting with

Bo Diddley, hey!) did popularize the sound. This is what enabled to rap to exist... We know it, practicing loops forbids modulating, going to another chord, resolving. We lay the loop, we repeat it... And that's it! It should be nothing at all: Brown's past genius made it acceptable. We think it was done on purpose, to keep the tension. But it is not an aesthetic choice, an intentional desire... Nothing but a handicap. Rap dreams of songs, in substance, since it dreams of Soul and R&B, but it is condemned to struggle in the same tiny pool. And to row round in circles. Unless it gave up loops.

A bit like these people that make electronic music thanks to jack-of-all-trades software, digital composition support, etc., because they would indeed be incapable of doing anything else! And certainly not of pursuing the work of John Cage, Varese, or Jean-Jacques Perrey. It is easier to copy one after the other fifty times the same three-second loop cribbed from Earth, Wind or Fire, whatever, instead of creating a new song.

In the end, we have three minutes indeed of something that looks like a song..., the three first seconds of *Sex Machine* or *Mother Popcorn* or *Trouble* of Marvin Gaye that have been stammered, repeated indefinitely. A scratched disk?

A scratched disk? Well now you mention it, let's talk about scratching, then? And DJ who... No, let's be lenient, it is not because the nineties are over and one now just needs to utter the words Massive Attack or Moby that...

Anyway, one thing is certain, since we talk about the death of the song format: since the end of the eighties, at the very least, the rhythmic got ahead of anything else. With the exception of Oasis, Paul Weller and two or three britpopers... It was hard to find in the charts a song as adventurous, on a harmony point of view, as any hit in the end of the sixties. Anything from Abba to the Seekers, to *Imperial Bedroom* of Costello, or *Airport* of the Motors. Anything until the beginning of the eighties, in a nutshell.

Playing with a click, recording everything in a Cubase-type sequencer, using loops: all these easy tricks had indeed a price to pay. Like giving up a meter that is not a genuine 4/4: too bloody annoying to program. And too bad for those who would have the idea to compose a song in the way of *Don't let me down* or *I want you (She's so heavy)* to stay with the Beatles. These failing feet, these uneven meters, the Pro Tools grid hates them, since it does not bear the subtle acceleration that is so specific of great drummers. We rigidify, we correct on the screen. And too bad for the swing.

The absurdity reached such a level that Dr Dre or Neptunes' minimalism was to be found new, and to praise the Beatles or 1965 Brian Wilson for nothing else but electronic gimmicks and studio art. Because the time understands that and can do it: putting plugs everywhere and piling up tracks to hide their mediocrity. Overproducing. On the other hand, trying to analyse how in *Think for Yourself* or *Penny Lane*, the Beatles succeeded in making stand together such a succession of minor and major tonalities and borrowed harmonies... deciphering *Move's Blackberry Way*... It is a different kettle of fish.

What is the Beatles' secret, like the secret of anyone of their generation? We would be inclined to believe that growing up in a world where music is scarce and the worst that could happen to it would be being schmaltzy... It is not the same than facing

the debased flood that makes up the collective unconscious of today's young people. Being twenty years old in the nineties is having heard, endured or liked, whatever, both Papa Roach and Bach, Simple Minds and grindcore, funk and synthpop. Everything and anything in a way. A world of music where the ear gets lost. We learn in musicology that introducing a traditional, Balinese gamelan or raga musician, whoever, to civilisation... means losing him. Flooded with a far too degenerated music, he quickly forgets his gist and principles. The Balinese gamelan player, even unconsciously, starts to play as quickly as Yngwie Malmsteen... the great flamenco guitar player renders like a sponge these bits and crumbs of melody with debased harmonies wafted from a lit television while he was sleeping, and thus loses his precious identity.

The Beatles, the B Boys, Hollies or whoever, were lucky enough to grow between Bach and Eddie Cochran. The worst was BBC's songs. A world where all music proposals, via classical music and jazz, had been done. Waiting for the pop to reinvent them. Where there was nothing else to do but to stir them up, to rebuild everything. It is their miracle.

In short, here we are. The art of songwriting is lost. Such is my humble opinion in any case. Oh! The Y2K decade brings us something like a divine surprise. Something like the return of the rock. And a teenager-like fascination for it. I never thought I could see again twenty years old make mincemeat of each other on blogs to know if the Beatles are above the Stones... And I want to forgive everything in anticipation to the Brats, the Naast, all these seventeen year old kids who quote Count Five or the live at Harlem Apollo, to the iPod full of history and the NME subscribers. What they do on the stage... at seventeen years old, I did not give as much. And this article, in the end, was written for them.

May they draw one or two ideas from this article. A trigger, a flash... Such as on the day when, on the first concert of the Dolls... Zox, first bass guitarist of the Dogs, said that *Route 66*, on a slow, is a blues in eight bars. And that we could thus play *It hurts me too* on it. Or the one when Vincent Palmer made me notice that 1977 groups did not play *Louie Louie* properly, the hymn of that year... Because one should play G-C-D minor- C. and not G-C-D-C (with a simple D, the piece is in G. Played like this, with a D minor, it becomes a C piece. the whole balance is changed.)

Yes. A flash. Because their stumbling block will be there: writing songs.

Because, people with the sound, the energy, the faith... We find everything today. And even convincing haircuts. But songs. Not really...

How shall I put it? Jack White has a hell of a sound and touch, and when he goes solo: no problem. But people stand up, feel something when he plays *Jolene* or *Saint James Infirmary*. For me Bloc Party or Franz Ferdinand do not sound like *deliciously eighties*. It sounds like badly composed. Like these old punks who discovered imperfect machines of that time and did what they could with it.

Sorry for those who never touched a guitar or tried to understand the mechanism that governed their emotion. I am not sure this article will fascinate them. Stephen Hawking said that

sales were to drop for each equation he had to include in his book *A Brief History of Time*. I have a bit of the same problem with this article. But it is hard here to choose to overlook the great principles that govern tonality, harmony and music theory. In a word, it is hard not to quote chord scales. Talking about music without getting to the nitty-gritty.

What is the last great song I heard? Really? I am not talking about a twist on a sample, I am not talking about an improvisation on a riff that turns round in loops. No, a song! With the bridge that modulates the coda like the last Parthian shot. The chorus flying up. Something with the same three or four chords as usual, but that rekindles magic one again.

Like the Beatles, hey! Yes, the Beatles, for ever. *Yer Blues* could have been a blues like any other. But here, this blues in E, if Lennon had played it like everybody else, he would have concluded each blues turn by a B. If he had turned it in a more jazzy way, we could have expected F#m7 and B7... But this would have been your usual predictable blues. In the way of Stevie Ray Vaughan, the Fabulous Thunderbirds or whoever.

No, at the critical moment, Lennon plays a G. A G chord that plunges into the expected B. The one that ends the cadence. And this is what changes everything. The G chord generally is external to the E scale... It should not have sounded right. But in the context, it is like some panting, a suspension... We plunge into it: and this is what Lennon wanted: the conclusion of his blues... Lyrics are like an abyss. This unexpected chord pushes us off, seals the tension. It is the door to hell. Nothing less.

Yes, a song, I said... No, but, recently? Nick Cave? The Strokes, at a pinch? Weller maybe? Oasis? Suede, Pulp, Blur? Tom Waits, yeah! The Libertines? Let me think...

No... The question can thus be asked. Since we talk about a great song! The type of songs, which originality staggers you and which melody asserts itself. A song that would do something else than keeping turning over the minimum wage of the sixties. The Libertines, after all, is nothing more than four chords, and the most predictable ones.

Of course, during its first year, Clash did not achieve more. But still, as of today, I am still searching.

Three chords! And money chords! Let's start from the roots. The source. The obvious. Everything is about three chords, in the end. The same old three chords. Always the same, whatever the tonality. No, there isn't such thing as the three chords of the blues. Or rock. These three chords, E-A-B... or A-D-E, or C-F-G, or G-C-D, those we call the money chords since they suffice to make a hit... are universal. They have been here for ever. Well, since the Middle Ages. And troubadours. Since songs exist. And since Bach, the old sanctimonious, unified the tonalities with the Well-tempered Clavier. Since then... The Clash, Annie Cordy, Throbbing Gristle or Britney Spears, your favourite Celtic ballad, funk, Marilyn Manson, or the best of Eurovision that you listen to now... Everything complies with the same logic! Even by default. The one, therefore, of the three chords. This is, as Lennon would say again, the first chair, these three chords. Based on the three main degrees of the scale.

To begin with, there is the *tonic center*, where everything begins and comes back to, the stable state. In C, it would hence be C... In E, it would be E. Everything starts from there to *tell about something*. Because every music is a journey, an unbalance; the resolution of a tension. All human feelings, all emotions may be told, only by playing with these three chords. Start with C, so. The tonic center. The first degree of the scale. And then the subdominant and fourth degree, the first step of the journey, the F. And then the third chord, the dominant, the G, Vth degree... Which concludes the whole and enables to go back to C, our tonic center. The perfect state of stability.

Indeed, all these visions, hopes, everything music carries is based on this logic, these three pivot chords. Twisted in every way. May they be avoided, suggested, charred. Everything. Only with Ist degree, IVth degree, Vth degree.

Scale, degrees? C D E F G A B: let's count on our fingers. C is the first degree (the tonic center), F is the fourth (subdominant, first step, etc.), G, the fifth, the conclusion. I, IV and V, hence.

And I recall having seen Charlie McCoy conducting the great orchestra of Nashville... with only one hand. A finger raised... they needed to stay in C. Four fingers, they ought to change to F. The whole hand? It was G.

At first therefore, we have seen it, there were three chords.

I, IV, V. Played in any direction. And then, starting from strict blues to arrive to songs... A VIth minor was added (C#minor for E, or A minor for C...) for what we called rhythm changes: doo-woop, twist, etc. Song then as opposed to rock. C-F-G for blues rock and folk, C-A minor-F-G for the song... And then that's it! The rock of the fifties can be summed up like this. Or close. Twelve or eight bars, sixteen when it was a song rather than a blues, the *three chord trick*, three chords presented in a riff, such as in *Louie Louie* or *La Bamba*... With sometimes, a bridge that went to F, went back to C, concluded on G before going back to the verse...

And the die is cast. More or less. When Buddy Holly (*Peggy Sue*) or Carl Perkins (*Honey Don't*) dare the next square (G#) before going back to G, it is the end of the world. Oh, well! Sometimes, there are some adventurous substitutes, some ninth or seventh chords (after all, on a guitar, you can do that with one single finger), some licks coming from jazz. It is allowed, after a C, to replace the A minor with an A 7, or by an E7, the F by a D minor... But the basis of rock –of everything actually– is four chords.

Ah and then... the Spanish fade out! Like in *Hit the Road Jack*. This scale (A minor-G- F-E. OK? Going up and down) haunted all the rock. To be continued. From *Walk don't run to Don't let me be misunderstood*, *Sunny*, up to *Stray Cat Strut to All along the watchtower* (except for a few modulations)... to *Sultans of swing*. Up to the worst, actually.

The worst? No! There is worse: did you know why this famous sequence is the one of nearly all trip-hop and similar pieces? Because you can stick anything on it. Any loop. Without worrying about tonality. Harmony rules are such that it will always appear in tune. At the very least it could sound a bit discordant... Well, discordant in the fashion of George Martin. As if we did it on purpose. A win-win situation, in short.

So three chords, a fade out, the rhythm change...The Beatles in Hamburg knew nothing else.

Building upon this legacy from the fifties, they –our Beatles– in three or four seasons, reinvented the whole Western music, regained the ear and the instinct. Nothing less. And going back to the path going from Bach to Varesa, in short.

One must indeed see music history like a progressive conquest of dissonance. Up to the breakpoint. The famous three chords, each one will twist them in any way, suggest them, elude them, inverse them, reinvent them, in order to create a stir. Each generation pushes off limits. What was daring, but acceptable to the ear of the contemporary of Liszt seemed off key for those of Mozart...

Until Wagner and Debussy, the very limit of Western music. They used parallel scales, guessed the furthest harmonies, dismantled the very concept of melody. Beyond that, there is noise. We cannot go further: human ear responds to specific laws. Laws a deaf learned saviour rediscovered, who, touching a knotted string, had guessed harmonics. Up to the intangible, the sharp or flat eleventh or thirteenth (as usual count eleven starting from C... the sharp eleventh is thus F#... got it?). Beyond that, we feel no connection with the original note. After them, it is thus a dead end... Like music cannot evolve. We called it classical music. Because like for rock and jazz later on... everything is said, the form is stilted. It cannot surpass itself.

Wagner and Debussy invented everything. Like these ambiguous increased or decreased chords, (Tristan chord, that we find in *Purple Haze*, the Em7⁵ flat, which seems to belong to several tonalities, and which can thus be used as a pivot, to fuel suspense. Yes! A diminished B chord is the B, D, F notes. So we can hear them as the fifth of E, but also the third of G, the sixth minor of D... with this principle, we can modulate, conceive infinite fade ins, break the cycle of the fifths (ah have I forgotten this notion? Play *Hey Joe*... C 7 to E yes C-G-D-A-E. This is a cycle of fifths, backwards, i.e. E-A-D-G-C, it is *I will survive*). Modulate? Infinite fade ins, I said? It's *Tannhäuser*... Like Tamla Motown. Or the Beatles.

It is *Jumpin' Jack Flash* like *Because* (that Lennon borrows from the Moonlight Sonata, but played backwards), *Tin Soldier* like *Wonderwall* or *Sunny*. It is also *Temptation* in an Everly Brothers version, *Eloise*. Mastering modulation and fade in is mastering emergency...

So, surrounded with these inventions; these concepts rooted in classical music, the rock of the sixties adopted them. Paul McCartney did not know that one could inverse a chord and from a C play a G on the bass (the fifth of the chord, hence...) rather than a simple C? But his idol Tamla James Jamerson did it, so he pinched the lick. It is crystallization, a common and general emulation, each one copying immediately on the genius neighbour. Three hundred years of classical music and harmonic wonders are here at disposal, ready to be plagiarized. In this way, classical critics acclaimed the genius of the Beatles, the famous chord of *A hard day's night*: this famous D7sus4...Or was it a Fadd9, a GbassF? No! An Fadd9 bass D! We don't really know... They could not understand: the secret, if I may, was in the tuning of George's twelve string, indeed... But also in the note Paul plays, and in the *Polychord* created by the combination of both...

Rock created its own logic. A combination of naivety, necessity and quotations, once again. Elsewhere (*I'll get you*), the Beatles conclude a 1st degree, a 1st (D in this case) by a Vth minor instead of a Vth... The minor 7th, after D. This goes back to the seventeenth century, to Monteverdi. But McCartney did not know that... He pinched the lick from Joan Baez (*All my trials*)! As simple as that. Lennon transcended it in *Strawberry fields forever*, and then it became a psychedelic cliché. A quasi synonym for a "high" atmosphere. A great part of the 1967 sound.

This is how modern pop was born, the others only needed to follow the way.

And then the Beatles invented modern metal, grindcore and Metallica. Yes. Nothing less. We usually claim the Kinks, the Who invented hard rock. According to the legend, in making Eddie Cochran and his riffs the ruling principles, in playing three chord rock in the fashion of *Louie Louie* more heavily...they gave birth to the whole scale, from *Born to be wild* and *Purple Haze* to Metallica (burp) and Slayer or Slipknot.

It is a fallacy. They rather widespread electricity and distortion. But chord scales, melodies, the very principle of modern hard music... No, once again, the Beatles deserve all the credit for it. They used at a very early stage the third chord of the scale, adding a flat to it, and they associated it with the not less daring VIth flat. Yes, it is this, the chord scales E-G-A-D,... or E-D-G-A like in *Back in the USSR*. Modern rock, since Hendrix, Cream is based on it... And the Beatles introduced it... Oh, since *Please please Me* and *It won't be long!* In 1963, hence. Before, *I can't explain, You really got me, All day and all of the night* and the others who used in one way or another... *Gimme some lovin'!* *Sympathy for the devil*, *Dear Mr Fantasy!* *Proud Mary!* The Beatles lifted the lick from the Everly Brothers, from *Bye bye Love?* But for the magic brothers, it was only an introduction. The Beatles systematized this process. Then, the Move's *Helter Skelter* or *Brontosaurus*, the lick little by little became nearly a synonym for metal or hard rock... until *Paranoid*, to the Pistols and *Nevermind*... Up to when Metallica and Co got into the habit of playing without the notion of tonality really existing. As if everything was allowed since from E, nothing forbade to glide to a G, which is however not in the scale, and to go to D. The effect, namely this dissonance, lost strength, since it was not in the right context, these hairless impromptu chords did not even bother to resolve them. So it was compensated with the volume, tuning the guitars as low as possible, compressing the sound as much as possible. We arrive here to Korn, Manson. To prevent the dissonance from shocking, they only play anyway in power chords, i.e. on the two big strings, forgetting the third one and the others...which give the third and defines the chord and requires worrying about harmony! Whereas, for example, on our *Yer Blues* that we find here, this chord is the famous fall into hell mentioned above...from *I ain't dead already*... Nothing is meaningless: the feeling to express calls for the chord.

It is likely that we won't go further than *Ghost Town* of the Specials of Abba, well! Not further than the last stylists of the beginning of the eighties who took over the Beatles' lesson and pushed it to its limit. The Beatles who, with the *Abbey Road* scale,

most probably pushed the principles of pop or rock composition up to their absolute limit. The best of today, apparently, can only keep turning over their lost treasure? But it is likely that the Beatles and their genius followers, from Jimmy Webb to Roy Wood or Bowie gave us enough for the Y2K decade to be entitled also to their own songs. One should maybe forget machines and neglect easy tricks, and in any way go back to the roots... I don't know. After all already, in its time, punk rock, without mentioning grunge, had to reinvent everything... starting from already used formulas, a die already cast, drawing from its legacy. Pete Doherty and co reached the phase of Clash before *London Calling*. We have to trust them: according to the last news, our crack smoker listened to Jimmy Webb and Gram Parsons... The thing is, well! If we stay in E, without bothering about the original tonality, to simplify, E-G-A, it's *Green onions* like *Purple Haze* or *Bang A Gong*, but also *You ain't seen nothin' yet* or *I am the walrus* or... We never grow tired of it. C#minor- A-B-C#minor, it is *Because of the night*, *Shake your booty* or Free's *Wishing well*, like Clapton's *Layla* or *I am eighteen*. But with an A minor instead of A, it is *Friday on my mind*. Inversing the scale, we have... Yes, it is never ending. Or quite so.

And The Libertines chords of *Can't stand me now* (E-A-B-C#minor) are the same as the doo-woop rhythm change of the fifties, like the four basis chords that started everything. However, they make it sound recent enough for young people to climb on the stage to kiss Carl Barat. The Libertines act as if they had forgotten everything. The pedal on the guitars, like machines. As if it were proper to go back from scratch: the song. The attitude. Period. It agreed with punk. Let's never underestimate the power of rock. As long as the art of songwriting does not die.