

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Affective Interruptions: Political Collectivity in Halftime

Craig Jennex

Department of English, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, ON, Canada

Email: craigjennex@torontomu.ca

Abstract

In this article, I analyze a rhythmic device in musical theater performance that is often used but rarely discussed: The sudden break into halftime. Breaking into halftime—a rhythmic shift that is performed and perceived as occurring at half the tempo (or speed) of the groove in preceding and subsequent sections—has the effect of abruptly stretching out and slowing down musical temporality. With a break into halftime, a song’s groove is suddenly broader, more open, and expansive. When accompanied by lyrics, the move suggests deliberateness, calls attention to the lyrical address, and invites a considered response from the listener. It is a musical device akin to drastically slowing down a spoken cadence to ensure that the listener is fully grasping the significance of one’s words. With or without lyrics, this temporal disruption has a powerful effect on listeners’ bodies as, suddenly, the established timing of one’s musical experience is disrupted and immediately set to half the speed of the previous pace. By analyzing the use of halftime in three filmed musicals—*Newsies*, *Rent*, and the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*—I show how the rhythmic device carries with it social coding of solidarity and collective power among queer, marginalized, and/or otherwise outcast individuals and ultimately alters the broader narrative of the shows. Ultimately, I articulate how halftime serves to queer time and forge collective action, allowing us to reimagine what sort of politics, formations, collectives, and futures are possible.

In this article, I analyze a rhythmic device in musical theater performance that is often used but rarely discussed: The sudden break into halftime. Breaking into halftime—a rhythmic shift that is performed and perceived as occurring at half the tempo of the groove in preceding and subsequent sections—has the effect of abruptly stretching out and slowing down musical temporality. With a break into halftime, a song’s groove is suddenly broader, more open, and more expansive. When accompanied by lyrics, the move suggests deliberateness, calls attention to the lyrical address, and invites a considered response from the listener. It is a musical gesture akin to drastically slowing down a spoken cadence to ensure that the listener is fully grasping the significance of one’s words. With or without lyrics, this temporal disruption has a powerful effect on listeners’ bodies as, suddenly, the established timing of one’s musical experience is disrupted and immediately set to half the speed of the previous pace.

One particularly engaging example of halftime can be heard—and seen—in the 2012 film *Pitch Perfect*. The Bellas’ final, championship-winning performance includes a break into halftime as the show-stopping moment, demonstrating that rhythmic cohesion and a sense of group solidarity is necessary for success as an ensemble. We see how the performers physically integrate the rhythmic shift: At the moment the Bellas break into halftime, all ten members congregate front and center on the stage and dip in unison to the beat, using their bodies to illustrate the change in time and feel caused by the newly introduced groove.¹ This particular example demonstrates how halftime works in filmic texts: Not only does it alter the viewer’s understanding of the aural narrative, but it also instigates a change

¹A video clip of the Barden Bellas’ performance is available on YouTube at “Pitch Perfect—Final Performance (Barden Bellas),” Dani Castro, March 8, 2013, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mn2qfC32SRo>. The Bellas break into halftime at 3:05 in this video.

in the physical performance in a way that requires the performers to adopt a new, socially collaborative arrangement.

But it is not only in musical theater performances that we hear this phenomenon. The rhythmic convention of breaking into a halftime groove is audible in a variety of post-1950s popular music genres. Readers may remember hearing it used in Aha's "Take on Me"² and Culture Club's "Karma Chameleon"³ (both from the early 1980s), or The Beatles' "Magical Mystery Tour,"⁴ released in 1967. More recently, we can hear this rhythmic device in some of the most widely consumed pop music in North America, including Taylor Swift's "I Wish You Would" (occurring at each chorus section) and "I Knew You Were Trouble" (occurring at the *end* of each chorus section as a tag, as she ruminates on the lyrics "trouble, trouble"); Justin Bieber's "Beauty and a Beat" (ft. Nicki Minaj); as well as Justin Timberlake's "Suit & Tie" (ft. Jay Z). In these last two examples, the break into halftime occurs simultaneously with the entrances of Minaj and Jay Z, the songs' featured hip-hop artists.⁵ MIKA's "Grace Kelly," which was released in 2007 and regained popularity in recent years, breaks into halftime at the song's bridge. In MIKA's song, the break into halftime corresponds with a lyrical address that emphasizes the song's critique of conformity—"Say what you want to satisfy yourself/But you only want what everybody else says you should want"—before the chorus and the song's regular timing return.

A break into halftime is jarring for listeners, working as a swift and obvious change in the regular flow of the musical performance. One aspect that makes the break into halftime particularly effective is the listener's lack of preparation—the effect is neither subtle nor gradual.

A useful comparison may be to the way slow-motion works in film. This is a better known effect through which the temporal progression of a cultural text is arrested and stretched. The effect of slowing down a filmed text is ubiquitous across genres. In action films, for example, it is used to increase the dramatic effect of a moment (often explosions, or the unexpected moment a character goes underwater, among others); in sports reporting it is incorporated to show a specific action or skill in greater detail; in broadcast news it is similarly used for dramatic effect. This comparison may gesture toward the work done by the rhythmic convention of halftime in music, but it does not fully explain it. Because music influences the way we perceive time far more effectively than visual texts do, the break into halftime is particularly dislocating in musical performance. It reminds us that the act of musical listening is always also the act of being open and vulnerable to someone else's time.

As the body regulates its motion according to the groove, the abrupt shift in musical feeling precipitates a physical correlation; as the musical time shifts, our bodies must quickly adapt. The incorporation of halftime is an emphatic device, as the halftime section of music holds rhythmic prominence in the song and is vital to how we interpret a larger piece of music. The temporal shift we register when we hear this rhythmic device is, in a sense, an illusion: The change is actually an alteration in rhythm, motion, emphasis, and pulse that merely gives the effect of the music progressing at half the tempo of the primary groove. A musical device like halftime permits the experience of a temporal flexibility that is otherwise not possible without an actual tempo change, positioning it as a site for temporally oriented political interventions through which we can imagine things otherwise.

In this article, I analyze the use of halftime in three film musicals: *Newsies*, *Rent*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In each of these musicals, a sudden break into halftime engenders a sense of solidarity and collective power among queer, marginalized, and/or otherwise outcast individuals, reorganizes the political sphere to make possible the ensemble's collective projects, and ultimately alters the broader narrative of the show. As I will demonstrate, the use of halftime in these performances also makes the ensemble's resistant politics compelling and enticing for listeners. Although halftime is employed in a variety of musical genres, the logic of musical theater allows us to more easily recognize

²Occurring in the eighth bar of each chorus, with the lyrics: "I'll be gone"; first heard at 1:02 in the recording.

³"Karma Chameleon" breaks into halftime at only one point in the song, around 3:10, just before the final chorus. In this example, the halftime chorus section is preceded and followed by regular-timed chorus sections.

⁴First heard at 0:32, occurring with the lyrics: "The Magical Mystery Tour/is waiting to take you away."

⁵"Suit and Tie" begins with an 8-bar introductory section in this halftime groove, switches into the song's more dominant groove at Timberlake's first verse, and continues in that time until Jay Z enters to perform the bridge.

the significance of this rhythmic device. Sung lyrics make the social function and meaning of the break into halftime more overt, and the broader narratives of these musicals offer clear contextualization to each rhythmic interruption. The larger plots of these musicals—all of which are transformed by the ensemble's break into halftime—make the device's function within the narrative clear. Particularly compelling is the way that the rhythmic device has been socially coded in these performances as a spark of collective political power among characters who are marginalized within the show's broader narrative.

My interest is in how the immediate break into halftime is used for queer political purposes in these hugely popular musical theater performances. Halftime requires temporal normativity for it to occur—it is in relation to this conventional timing that halftime does its work. Any music in duple meter can incorporate halftime passages. If a song's primary groove is complicated by unconventional rhythm, the abrupt break into halftime does not have the same jarring, arresting effect for which it is known. For halftime to function, it requires square, straight rhythms to play off and resist. My language here is meant to evoke the ways that this rhythmic convention serves a function similar to queerness: It challenges normative logic and works primarily by refusing convention; its queer function is precisely that it is *not* what is heard as normal or proper. The break into halftime carries with it social codes and affective knowledge even when it is divorced from a broader narrative and overtly political actions. The device still calls attention to our collective listening and the intimate connections made possible by temporal experiences that depart from established norms of a piece of music. While the rhythmic maneuver itself might not cause political change, it can create the affective environment for collective political action. In order to understand how this might function, we must first look at the way musical experience and queerness can intersect to enable alternative possibilities of time and temporality.

Feeling Music

We *feel* musical sound. That is to say, the experience of musical listening is not only an auditory process but also an embodied, physical experience. Several musicologists have emphasized this reality. Susan McClary, countering the discipline's historical tendency to treat music as an abstract amalgam of pitches, harmonies, and formal procedures, famously argued that the embodied experience of musical participation is precisely where the politics of the act resides: where musical sound “intersects with the body and destabilizes accepted norms of subjectivity, gender, and sexuality.”⁶ As McClary makes clear, feeling is a primary form of music cognition—a way we understand the sounds we hear—and an important locus of meaning.

Music's ability to animate our bodily movements has to do with the way we feel musical temporality and perceive the time of music as outside of regular, everyday timing. For Susan Fast, “it is not only the tactile nature of [musical] sound that surrounds us with its warmth but also the suspension of everyday time that is comforting and that allows us to reconnect with the physical in a mode *outside the everyday*.”⁷ Susanne Langer argues that music's “virtual,” “experiential time”—which she distinguishes from clock or ordinary time—is “the primary illusion of music.”⁸ Langer's use of “illusion” here is useful in order to think through the alternative experiences of time that music makes possible: Through music, we can construct, regulate, and experience the passage of time in ways that serve as alternatives to the ordinary, chronological time that structures our everyday lives. In other words, music allows us to experience the passage of time in ways that are unlikely or illogical elsewhere. Music can enable alternative or non-normative experiences of time and temporality which, as queer theorists have long argued, can generate new forms of relationality and new ways of existing in the world.

According to José Esteban Muñoz, there is a “linearity of straight time” that ushers all of us into normative modes of relations under heteronormativity and neoliberal capitalism.⁹ Elizabeth

⁶Susan McClary, “Same as it Ever Was: Youth Culture and Music,” in *Microphone Fiends*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 32.

⁷Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 132.

⁸Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (London: Pearson Publishing, 1977), 109.

⁹José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Utopia* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 25.

Freeman uses “chrononormativity” to describe the ways in which bodies are “bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation” and the ways that human bodies are organized, through temporal means, toward “maximum productivity” under neoliberalism.¹⁰ Through chrononormativity, Freeman argues, the oppressive logics of dominant ideologies come to be understood and implanted as embodied facts that seem natural, particularly to those whom this logic privileges. For an individual’s experience to be legible and to “make sense,” they need to fit within a broader, ideological timeline that structures the society in which they live. To put in other words, cultural belonging is a matter of timing. To be recognized as a proper subject requires being interpolated into normative timelines, including those of productivity under capitalism, nuclear family formation, generational inheritance, and others that mark an ostensibly “good life.” If queerness is partly about changing time and resisting the hegemonic power of heteronormative time,¹¹ and if non-normative experiences of time encourage us to recognize a non-normative sense of closeness, intimacy, and collective power, then music’s ability to challenge the normative logic of temporality suggests that music can also make interventions into the ways our bodies engage with time in a social and political sense.

While musical theater has long invited queer devotion, scholars have recently turned to the temporality of the genre as a locus of resistant queer politics. Sarah Taylor Ellis argues that it is precisely the way that musical temporality works in musical theater that expands the genre’s possibilities for queer readings and politics. “Within the genre of musical theater,” she argues, “the musical number’s show-stopping qualities frequently queer time; a song lyrically, musically, and choreographically expands upon an evanescent instant, temporarily displacing the narrative drive.”¹² Accordingly, for Ellis, the queer potential in musical theater comes from the way songs disrupt a broader, linear narrative and provide alternative experiences of time passing. Building on Ellis’s thinking around the queer temporality of musical theater, I argue that the sudden break into halftime is a primary way that we can hear collective queer potential in the genre.

“Seize the Day”

The break into halftime heard in “Seize the Day,” an ensemble song in the movie musical *Newsies*, demonstrates how this rhythmic shift is used to convey immediate cohesion among a group of individuals marginalized under capitalism.¹³ A 1992 Disney film music directed and choreographed by Kenny Ortega, *Newsies* follows the story of seventeen-year-old Jack Kelly (played by Christian Bale), the de-facto leader of a group of mostly homeless and orphaned children who sell newspapers to survive in New York City in the 1890s. Although it flopped in theaters, it has become something of a cult film—one I feel a particular affinity for because of the way that *Newsies* sparked and nurtured both my interest in music and my homosexuality.

I remember, decades ago, performing in my room to the film’s soundtrack, imagining myself singing and dancing with the beautiful boys in *Newsies* who were, at the time, only slightly older than I was. For me, the film is homoerotically charged from its outset. Minutes into the movie, viewers are shown the facade of a building marked “Newsboy Lodging House” as the camera enters and follows an older white man walking up creaky stairs. He enters a shared bedroom with multiple bunkbeds filled with sleeping young men in onesies, some of whom are two to a bed. A particularly handsome man sleeps with his feet hanging over the side of his bed, his onesie unbuttoned to his navel. Two young men share a bed, their limbs intertwined. In the background, between the two bedmates, a shirtless young man looks angelic, sleeping bathed in beams of light from the rising sun. The older man, who has been walking through the room waking the boys, stops at the upper bunk of a young man who refuses to get up. He shoves the boy who groans and turns around. Bale’s face—his flushed

¹⁰Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

¹¹See, for example, J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

¹²Sarah Taylor Ellis, “Doing the Time Warp: Queer Temporalities and Musical Theatre” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2013), 18.

¹³Newsies Cast, “Seize the Dance,” *Newsies Soundtrack*, 1992.

skin, his full lips—fills the screen. He trades playful jabs with the older man as they both smile and laugh.

When I first watched this film, I didn't have to work hard to interpret the homosocial kinship in this opening scene as homoerotic and sexually charged. In the following scenes, the boys sing and dance together as they move into the communal bathroom. Many are partially undressed; they touch and embrace. One calls his friends "bummers"—a nineteenth-century term referring to loafers or idle persons that is also used, contemporarily, by some older gay British and Australian men I know to refer campily to gay men who engage in anal sex. In the bathroom, the camera pans by shirtless, wet young men. One man climbs on a chair and towers over the others as he sings a long-held note: His onesie is unbuttoned showing off his defined pecs and abs. Some boys bathe each other as their roommates undress. They sing, in unison, about the "mighty fine life" they live with their peers.

The space of the lodging house is juxtaposed, through visuals, sound, and instrumental accompaniment, with the space of the newspaper printing press. The former is presented in the film as a place of communal care, homosociality, and leisure; the latter as an aggressive and fast-paced space meant to evoke the raucous factories that proliferated in the late nineteenth century. The direct juxtaposition of these spaces glorifies the homosocial space of the musical's lodging house to an almost comical degree—there is bliss and comfort, for these characters, in being packed in a room with other young men, singing, dancing, sleeping, and bathing together.¹⁴

Newsies is loosely based on the 1899 "newsies" strike in New York City—a youth-led campaign against two newspaper publishers: Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York World*, and William Randolph Hearst of the *New York Journal*. The film follows the budding friendship between Jack Kelly and David Jacobs (played by David Moscow), the latter of whom is regarded as smart and well-spoken. The masculine pairing is a conventional one: Jacobs is intelligent and savvy, but quite shy, while Kelly is suave and opportunistic—he often invents headlines to sell his papers, but lacks the analytic mind and foresight exhibited by Jacobs.

In the film, Pulitzer (played by Robert Duvall) and Hearst (who does not appear in the film) are presented as greedy capitalists locked in competition and eager to prey on the vulnerable workers who sell their papers. Pulitzer inflates the price of papers for the newsies to avoid making other cutbacks. The only other viable options, according to his accountant, are "salary cuts, particularly those at the very top," an idea Pulitzer dismisses at once. The film cuts to the circulation window at the headquarters of the *New York World* and, immediately, viewers can sense that something is wrong: Young boys are shouting and waving their arms in the air, crowded around the window and the nearby loading dock where they purchase their papers. Kelly leads the angry workers out of the *New York World's* courtyard and into the public square. It is here that, playing off Jacobs' intellectual arguments against growing class disparity, Kelly convinces the newsies that they must strike. Later in the film, after the newsies' unsuccessful attempts to recruit laborers in other boroughs, the main ensemble reassembles in the square. Jacobs, moving among the small groups of newsies, begins singing "Seize the Day."

"Seize the Day" is not the first ensemble number of the film, but it is the one that works to unite the group. The song begins with notably sparse instrumentation and a singular vocal line. An instrumental intro, performed by woodwinds and bass, progresses slowly at a tempo of 88 bpm. In these opening bars we hear the song's introductory meter, pulse, and primary tempo. Following this brief instrumental introduction, Jacobs sings the first verse, accompanied by woodwinds and bass. The arrival at the tonic cadence suggests the phrase is concluded; however, the cadence is repeated in the ninth bar, stretching the phrase beyond its conventional 8-bar limit. In this ultimate measure, the tempo fluctuates slightly when Jacobs takes liberty with the speed and rhythm of his lyrical delivery and, more overtly, at the end of the phrase where there is a very brief *ritardando* beginning with the penultimate

¹⁴In reality, newsboy lodging houses were common in New York City in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Built and administered by the Children's Aid Society of New York City, the spaces functioned as a living space for boys who had few other options. Many of the boys at these lodging houses were orphans or runaways who, for a relatively low price, could have access to lodging, food, and educational programs. Such spaces were populated by young men forced to work long hours for little pay in order to remain in the State's care.

beat of the phrase and a slight hold on the final beat. The addition of this ninth bar in this phrase, featuring a repeated tonic cadence, intensifies the anticipation we feel for the subsequent section.

The song's faster, regular tempo (126 bpm) begins here, driven by the drum kit, woodblock, and string instruments. This is the song's primary meter, pulse, tempo, and groove and the musical temporality from which the break into halftime forcefully departs. The main riff of this song is based on the syncopated *tresillo* rhythm (dotted quarter, dotted quarter, quarter). A four-bar instrumental phrase gives listeners and performers a clear sense of the song's regular musical time. Jacobs' vocals return, but this time they serve as a call and are met with a response from the ensemble: "Now is the time to seize the day/send out the call and join the fray/wrongs will be righted, if we're united/let us seize the day!" The second verse works almost identically—in terms of melodic and harmonic structure and with similar lyrical content—until the concluding instrumental bar, where beat three serves as an anacrusis (a pickup) into the subsequent halftime section. The new vocal phrase begins on beat three—earlier than we expect—and thus ushers us into the subsequent halftime section. The leading vocals, paired with the drummer's forcefully articulated tom drum fill, make the sudden break into a halftime groove all the more explicit and striking.

The entire ensemble sings this first halftime section and the lyrics reinforce the collective ethos of the section: "Neighbor to neighbor/father to son/one for all and all for/one." During these final lyrics, the ensemble breaks into four-part harmony. The instrumentation in this halftime section is the same as the previous verse, with the exception of one subtle alteration by the drummer, who moves their cymbal rhythm from the hi-hat to the ride cymbal, opening up their body and the sound they produce, accenting the new downbeat on the bell of the cymbal. With this break into halftime, several temporal elements of the piece shift, most notable of which is the meter. The meter—dependent on our perception of its rhythm and pulse—cuts in half to give the effect of the song progressing at precisely half the tempo of the preceding section. Indeed, the halftime section in "Seize the Day" is most clearly defined by placement of the backbeat on the third beat of each measure.¹⁵

Immediately following the six full bars of halftime, which, at the perceived tempo, feel like three slower bars, the instrumentalists return to the song's regular tempo of 126 bpm and play two bars as preparation for the following verse. But the halftime section we have just heard has transformed the ensemble, as we never again hear a solo voice. The halftime groove effectively unites the newsies into a collective body. From this moment forward the vocalists are united into groups; first into two camps to sing the call and response section of the following verse, and then as a united collective to sing the second and final halftime phrase that ends the song.

Following the ensemble's performance of "Seize the Day," the characters are imbued with a sense of collective power. Immediately after the song's final note, the gates leading to the headquarters of *News of the World* open, as nonstriking newsies ("scabs") form a line by the paper's distribution window to purchase newspapers. The ensemble stands together menacingly nearby. Seeing the ensemble, most of the nonstriking newsies leave the line and join the striking group. When one of the newsies refuses to join the strike, the striking newsies forcefully take the newspapers he purchased. A fistfight ensues and the striking newsies destroy all the papers in the distribution centre. The use of halftime in "Seize the Day" is integral to the broader narrative of the musical. It is the precise moment when the newsies come together as a collective—a de facto labour union—and have a successful first action, recognizing their collective power. The break into halftime serves as an affective impetus that motivates the political uniting of the newsies; the ensemble feels the change in the music—and we, as spectators, feel it too. This affective arrest of the song's forward motion, then, incites the newsies' political organizing and attunes viewers to their political struggle. Within the broader context of the musical, the homosocial bonds and political possibilities of uniting as a collective link the newsboys' class critique with a

¹⁵Unlike the other songs I analyze in this paper, the halftime sections in "Seize the Day" do not follow a conventional or normative "straight time" section in which the backbeat is clearly articulated on beats two and four. The normative timing of the preceding section of "Seize the Day" is based on the *tresillo* rhythm referenced above. While this rhythmic structure lacks a clear backbeat, it sets the tempo that allows the halftime break to be effective.

broader critique of norms of gender and sexual behaviors: In the lodging house showers or on the city's streets, these young men find comfort, care, and power when they come together.

“La Vie Bohème”

The break into halftime in “La Vie Bohème,” one of *Rent*'s primary ensemble numbers, provides another example of the maneuver binding together a collective—in this instance a group of marginalized individuals who live precarious lives touched by HIV/AIDS and the rapid gentrification of New York City.¹⁶ In this musical, the break into halftime serves a particularly queer function: Each halftime section elongates the music's temporality and thus serves to stretch time in a reality marked by what Jack Halberstam has articulated as the quickened pace of life under AIDS.¹⁷ This queer imperative of slowing down normative temporal progress and questioning temporal hegemony is why the use of halftime grooves work so effectively in this musical. The convention slows and stretches time so that individuals can experience a sense of plurality with others who similarly do not fit into the normative pacing of broader, majoritarian society.

We can hear this function of halftime in the ensemble's performance of “La Vie Bohème.” The ensemble gathers in a restaurant and, to the dismay of the server who tries to dissuade them from coming in, the group moves the furniture to make a long, family-style table. The camera pans to another part of the restaurant and we see Benjamin “Benny” Coffin III (played by Taye Diggs)—a man who was once a friend of the group but who now plays the role of the foil, the film's main agent of gentrification in Alphabet City, Manhattan—meeting with older white men wearing suits. The disparity between the two groups, both in terms of class and politics, is immediately obvious. Benny and his associates are unaware that the main ensemble has entered the restaurant until Maureen (played by Idina Menzel) addresses them directly. In this small establishment, two opposing visions for the surrounding area clash. The ensemble desires the bohemian lifestyle that has characterized the neighborhood, while Benny and the anonymous white men in suits represent the gentrifiers pushing the bohemians out of the area. Benny excuses himself from his business meeting and walks toward the ensemble.

After a tense conversation, low bass notes played on a piano signal the start of “La Vie Bohème.” Benny sings his next line, attempting to justify his capitalist desires. Mark (played by Anthony Rapp) turns to the long table of the ensemble and sarcastically offers a eulogy for the cultural ideals of bohemia. On the last syllable of Mark's introductory verse, the piano enters with a two-bar phrase that serves as the riff for the song's primary groove; with the entrance of the piano, we hear the beginning of the song's more rigidly defined progression. Mark holds his note as the chorus repeats the titular lyrics “la vie Bohème” at the end of each two-bar phrase. There is a clear acceleration as the piano riff and the ensemble's repeated lyrics quicken. For the first two phrases of this first verse the vocals are accompanied only by the piano riff. At the start of the third phrase—beginning with the lyrics “to riding your bike midday past the three-piece suits”—the drummer enters, articulating the backbeat of the groove on a closed hi-hat. (In the film, where the hi-hat backbeat is not nearly as perceptible as it is in the soundtrack version of the song, the backbeat is made audible by the ensemble's finger snaps.) The understated percussion accompaniment here is anticipatory, setting up the primary rhythm and the clear disruption of the rhythmic aberration that comes following this verse. After Mark sings the concluding lyrics of this verse—“to any passing fad”—the drummer pounds out two eighth notes on a low tom to end the phrase. The following bar breaks into a halftime groove and we hear and feel the effect of this musical device for the first time in the musical.

This break into halftime is dramatized by the drummer's entrance with full beat accompaniment for the first time in the song. As Steven Baur shows in “Ringo ‘round *Revolver*,” the vast majority of drum beats accompanying popular music since the 1950s include a ride pattern (typically played on hi-hats or a ride cymbal), the backbeat (typically played on the snare drum on beats two and four), and a bass drum pattern.¹⁸ Prior to this halftime section, the drummer is virtually silent, almost inaudibly tapping

¹⁶Rent Cast, “La Vie Bohème,” *Rent Soundtrack*, 1996.

¹⁷Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

¹⁸Steven Baur, “Ringo ‘round *Revolver*: Rhythm, Timbre, and Tempo in Rock Drumming,” in *Every Sound there Is: The Beatles' Revolver and the Transformation of Rock and Roll*, ed. Russell Reising (London: Ashgate, 2007), 173.

a backbeat on the hi-hat. Thus, the drummer's entrance with a full, heavy beat, alongside the halftime shift, marks this passage in the song as dramatic and momentous. At the same time, backing vocals hold an "ooohh" throughout the two halftime bars as Mark sings: "For being an us, for once/ Instead of a them!" These lyrics gesture toward the sense of collective power offered by this rhythmic device. At this moment, the group transforms from their status as an object—being the "them" others talk about disparagingly—to active subjects doing the speaking. This halftime section is delineated by the drummer, who moves from the closed hi-hat to the ride cymbal, giving the two bars a distinct sound of their own. The drummer plays a fill, followed by a two-beat pause during which the singers take an audible breath in unison, and then they are back into the regular rhythmic time of the piece.

We hear the break into halftime at two more moments in this piece. Each subsequent occurrence works similarly to what I describe above: The brief halftime sections occur at the end of the ultimate phrase of each verse, marking the beginning of the chorus.¹⁹ While the lyrics in the first halftime break were sung solo by Mark, with the ensemble holding an "Ooohh" during his delivery, the lyrics that occur in this second halftime moment are sung in unison by Mark (Rapp) and Mimi (played by Rosario Dawson). They sing: "Why Dorothy and Toto went over the rainbow/to blow off Auntie Em." The lyrics corresponding with the third and final break into halftime—"To Sodomy/it's between God & me/To S&M!"—are sung by the entire ensemble. It is the powerful collective mention of sodomy, accentuated by the break into halftime that disturbs Benny & the investors. Upon hearing these words, they quickly get up from their table and storm out of the restaurant. In "La Vie Bohème" each halftime groove invites more members of the ensemble to participate in subsequent sections of the song. Each break into halftime has the effect of uniting voices, incorporating others into the piece, and empowering the collective.

The uniting effect of the halftime groove is identifiable in the choreography of the cast in this filmed performance. The primary ensemble sits at a long communal table when the piece begins, closed off to the larger group in the restaurant. As the piece progresses, the performers move away from their table and direct their performance at others in the restaurant. The song serves as a musical call-to-arms for these spectators, many of whom move their bodies to the ensemble's performance. The break into halftime punctuates the performers' lyrical message, enlivening their cause; the scene serves as a debate between two opposing visions for the surrounding area, and the ensemble's emotional sincerity in each moment of halftime works to draw in the spectators around them. The collective power of the ensemble's performance engages others in the struggle to drive the gentrifiers from the restaurant. Thus, each halftime section serves as an emotional and potentially euphoric moment in which the performers and spectators (those within the film and as well as those of us watching at home) recognize a collective power through the temporal rupture of halftime and the constitution of political community it facilitates.

The use of halftime in "La Vie Bohème" takes on additional significance, as the singing ensemble is demarcated as a queer collective profoundly affected by the AIDS epidemic and the quickened pace of life that it brings. Because of the broader temporality of the production, halftime grooves and the sense of elongated temporality that they afford work to stretch time and slow down the rapid pace of life under AIDS. For Halberstam, the "constantly diminishing future" violently forced by the AIDS epidemic "creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment."²⁰ In the face of AIDS, Halberstam argues, queer longing to survive "squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand."²¹ While Halberstam turns to poetry to substantiate this theoretical claim, we can hear the urgency of the present moment more overtly in this musical performance: Each break into halftime interrupts the music's tasteful temporality, evincing the ensemble's desire to hold onto the collective present. Halberstam argues that "[q]ueer time, as it flashed into view in the heart of a crisis, exploits

¹⁹The second time we hear halftime, it ends the third phrase of the second verse; the third and final time we hear it, it ends the second phrase of the third verse. (The shortening of this third verse adds to the quick-paced forward-movement of the piece.)

²⁰Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

²¹Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

the potential of... ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent’.”²² The halftime passages in “La Vie Bohème” are necessarily fleeting. This ephemeral quality is what gives the musical phenomenon its power. Halftime serves as a brief moment that we know will come to an end when we return to the normative time and pacing of the song. We are constituted as a community through musical sound and, through the break into halftime, the experience of time is redefined just long enough for us to recognize how good it feels.

Its ostensibly progressive politics notwithstanding, *Rent* has faced a number of stinging critiques from queer thinkers I admire. Sarah Schulman, for example, has challenged the work for two primary reasons: First, that Jonathan Larson, who wrote *Rent*, plagiarizes her 1987 novel *People in Trouble* and, second, that Larson—an HIV-negative heterosexual man—profits from the distortion and commodification of AIDS and queer culture. David Román, in his book *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, argues that “AIDS is so ubiquitous in *Rent* that it is no longer even dramatic.”²³ For him, the epidemic is present, but woefully unexamined. In his article “Choices Made and Unmade,” David Savran contends that *Rent* (and much of the academic work on the musical) fails to account for economic, cultural, social and symbolic structures and their effects.²⁴ Finally, in her book *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*, Jill Dolan offers a scathing critique, writing that “underneath the celebration of queer and boho culture, the values of heterosexual America prevail” in the musical.²⁵

A focus on musical temporal meaning might encourage a more generative reading of the musical’s relationship with the AIDS epidemic. The *music* of musical theater, as I outline above, has long been identified by cultural theorists as holding unique potential for queer interpretation. “Musical numbers,” Ellis argues, “often engage in a narratively open present. Even in a sung-through musical such as *Rent*, anthems, reprises, and other repetitive frameworks ‘queer’ narrative time and capture a fragmentary sense of *communitas* that valuably blurs the lines among characters, performers, and audience members.”²⁶

Despite what we might perceive as the broader flaws of the musical, “La Vie Bohème” offers one model of collectivity for oppressed individuals. But it is more than this. The use of halftime in this performance potentiates collective political power through its arrest of musical time and disruption of normative progress more broadly. The ensemble directly challenges oppressive actors who represent both capitalism and the progression of modernity. By arresting progress, these actors quite literally find the time to build a powerful political collective. Halftime offers the ensemble a sense of collective agency to act in the present. This rhythmic gesture, with its powerful effect on the bodies of listeners, serves as a catalyst for solidarity and interpolates others into this collective body. This collectivizing effect, seen in the participation of bystanders in “La Vie Bohème” who are gradually incorporated into the performing body, is even more apparent through live audience participation in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

“Time Warp”

Perhaps the ultimate cult film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has a unique mode of audience participation that is strongly supported by the use of halftime. In this musical, a newly engaged couple—Brad Majors (played by Barry Bostwick) and Janet Weiss (played by Susan Sarandon), described by the film’s narrator as “two young, *ordinary*, healthy kids”—become stranded when their car breaks down. In search of a telephone, they approach a nearby castle marked by a sign reading: “Enter at your own risk!” Despite the ominous sign, Brad and Janet enter the castle, where they meet two oddball servants: Riff Raff (played by Richard O’Brien) and Magenta (played by Patricia Quinn) who, soon

²²Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2.

²³David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 273.

²⁴David Savran, “Choices Made and Unmade,” *Theater* 31, no. 2 (2001): 89–95.

²⁵Jill Dolan, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 110.

²⁶Ellis, “Doing the Time Warp,” 39.

after welcoming the two guests into the castle, break into the film's best known number, "Time Warp."²⁷

The song begins with a four-bar instrumental introduction. The instruments—guitar, bass, piano, drums—accent the down beat of the first bar, forcefully grabbing listeners' attention. Immediately following the downbeat, the piano, bass, and drums recede and the guitar takes primacy, offering a repetitive eighth-note pattern that alternates between two power chords. With its two-chord guitar riff and walking bass line, this section evokes early rock 'n' roll music of the 1950s and renders a form of temporal drag on the present—or "time warp"—immediately apparent. This piece is also a nod to the historical discourses that characterized rock 'n' roll music as a dangerous influence on good, "normal" young people. Riff Raff's vocals enter slightly before the bass guitar. Soon, the drummer enters the mix, mimicking the bass rhythm on the low tom and snare drum. Following this introductory section, we hear a piano glissando (adding forward motion) and the entrance of Riff Raff's sung vocals. Raymond Knapp argues that this opening section evokes "a kind of visceral strangeness in its opening progression, each time cycling safely back to the tonic through a series of plagal resolutions (descending harmonically by fourths)."²⁸ This strangeness is similarly evoked by the syncopated delivery of the spoken word line which also stretches out time: "It's assssssstounding..."

Immediately after this section the song breaks into halftime for the refrain "Let's do the time warp again." This is a transformative moment in the film's narrative: As soon as this new groove is heard, Riff Raff opens a double set of doors marked "Ballroom." A strange group—meeting for the Annual Transylvanian Convention, indicated by a banner that hangs overhead—looks up toward Riff Raff, Brad, Janet, and Magenta, who have entered the room onto a balcony overlooking the riotous scene. The guests below them sing, together: "Let's do the time warp again!" The lyrics punctuate the literal time warp that is occurring in the music through the break into halftime.

Each halftime section in this song is broken into eight bars: Two bars of the halftime groove—which sounds like one bar at 88 bpm—followed by two bars of the song's regular groove (two bars of a 4/4 groove at 176 bpm). This four bar phrase repeats, occurring twice in each halftime section. Halftime works so effectively in this song because the normal logic of the song unfolds over an emphatic quarter-note pulse, which dramatically shifts to a half-note pulse for the refrain. The halftime section serves as the song's hook. In this piece, it is not all the protagonists, but rather all the deviants, who are brought into the collective. The "normative" couple Brad and Janet are not really "in" the performance and subsequently face jeers from the chorus immediately following the song. However, the sense of collectivity this song evokes extends beyond the film's characters to those participating in the audience.

As viewers, we are brought into the collective of deviants while Brad and Janet remain outside of this community. In the time and space of this musical, it is the couple's normativity that both marks them outside the bizarre ensemble and makes them fearful throughout the narrative. Brad and Janet's presence allows the audience to determine what is normative and encourages spectators to identify with the oddballs and freaks in their performance of the song. Much like the bourgeoisie in *Newsies*, and Benny and other business people in *Rent*, these figures represent normative ideals that the queer collective resists.

Since its release in 1975, the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* is often used as the exemplar of the cult film genre and is known for its audience participation at screenings. Film scholars Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich identify "Time Warp" as a particularly moving moment of the screening ritual as "the audience breaks into song and dance. While cult members exhort nonparticipants to join the celebration, a film character directs the audience as a whole in the nuances of the song's associated dance steps."²⁹ This last point is important: Dance step instructions for participants are written into the lyrics of the song. This is particularly useful for those participating in the spectator experience for the first

²⁷The Rocky Horror Picture Show Cast, "Time Warp," *The Rocky Horror Picture Show Soundtrack*, 1973.

²⁸Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 250.

²⁹Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich, "Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading 'Rocky Horror,'" *The Sociological Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1992): 201.

time, interpolating them into the larger community. The use of halftime in “Time Warp” shows how the rhythmic force impacts an embodied audience: If you’ve been to a participatory screening of the film, you’ve likely recognized how the shift in rhythm encourages viewers to become involved in the on-screen and off-screen collective. Indeed, it is the break into halftime that invites the most vociferous and energetic audience participation.

According to Ellis, “Time Warp” offers “an extreme example of how musical performance can bend and even break normative narratives in musical theatre” and “implicates the spectator as a performer, actively involved in warping dominant ideologies by embodying a desire for difference.” In fact, she argues, the musical “maintains its identificatory power for a queer fan base because it persists in such a contradictory, frayed, and fragile present.”³⁰ “Time Warp” occurs in a way that “reroutes” the straightforward, heteronormative, linear marriage plot that the film sets up in its opening scenes³¹; the song shifts the narrative from a heteronormative one to one that is driven by a queer collective ethos. The break into halftime is key to interpolating audience members into this collective musical project. However, the effect of this rhythmic device is consistently overlooked: Ellis’s otherwise comprehensive analysis, for example, does not refer to the use of halftime despite the fact that audience members become part of the performing ensemble during the halftime groove.

Feeling Halftime

The use of halftime is a musical maneuver that is necessarily *felt*. The feeling of the break into halftime is experienced by the musicians, who collectively reinterpret the tempo, as well as by listeners. As the examples I unpack above suggest, this rhythmic convention functions as a temporal manifestation of solidarity and is regularly employed in musical narratives to spark collective power among marginalized or oppressed individuals. In “Seize the Day,” “La Vie Bohème,” and “Time Warp,” the slowing down of musical temporality affords a moment in which the singing ensemble can unite as a collective body. In each example this collectivizing rhythmic shift alters the narrative of the broader musical: It is a transformative musical maneuver. As we can see in these examples, the immediate break into halftime works in Western musical culture to bind together oppressed individuals, queers, and other “freaks”; it reifies the political potential of collectives even within a reality that privileges individualism and competition.³²

The immediate break into halftime also has the effect of sparking and emphasizing affective knowledge. In each of the examples I examine above, this spark is an important starting point for the formation of political collectivity and acts. Several affect theorists have worked to show that bodily knowledge precedes cognitive awareness. Lauren Berlant argues that “the present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back.”³³ The present, Berlant writes, “is not at first an object but a mediated affect.”³⁴ In his book *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Brian Massumi argues that “participation precedes recognition: *being precedes cognition*.”³⁵

Halftime, as a musical maneuver, is an arresting move that demands our attention and attunes us to the experience of being affected-in-common; a shared experience that binds us to other listeners. Listening is a process of reaching out to others for meaning. To listen is to be open to something outside of ourselves; to recognize the shared meaning of being-in-common. Halftime forcefully reminds us of this. It offers a bodily, affective pull that implicates us in a larger listening community. It forces us to recognize that we are part of a collective forged by our listening, by our being- and hearing-in-common. It is a temporal disruption that places us, collectively, in an alternative temporal

³⁰Ellis, “Doing the Time Warp,” 66.

³¹Ellis, “Doing the Time Warp,” 72.

³²Of course there is nothing to limit the compelling effects of rhythmic convention in their use towards benevolent or politically useful ends. Halftime is a convention that audibly suggests a sense of solidarity and political potential through the recognition of plurality and can just as often be used for nefarious ends.

³³Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

³⁴Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

³⁵Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 231.

frame. In each of the examples I analyze above, halftime serves to queer time and forge collective action—the former opens the possibility for the latter. Ultimately, queer temporality is about reimagining what sorts of politics, formations, collectives, and futures are possible.

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Craig Jennex is an assistant professor of English at Toronto Metropolitan University. He is the co-editor (with Susan Fast) of *Popular Music and the Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions* and the co-author (with Nisha Eswaran) of *Out North: An Archive of Queer Activism and Kinship in Canada*. His book *Liberation on the Dance Floor* will be published by Cambridge University Press in 2024.