

Murder to Marriage: Love and the Evolution of The Killers

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Abstract: The Killers' music crosses genres and seems to alternate between upholding or challenging the conventions of rock music. This is particularly evident in their depiction of romantic desire. Through their recording career, their work has undergone a dramatic shift in its engagement with love. Early songs often dealt with spurned male lovers who react violently to rejection, culminating in what is known as the band's Murder Trilogy. However, their more recent work has departed from rock's critically cited fixation with freedom and sexualized love to concern the struggles of prolonged relationships in which partners face the pressures of romantic disillusionment. Their evolution has conspicuous ties to frontman Brandon Flowers' own marital and religious commitments. This article traces such thematic changes to investigate relationships between love, masculinities, and spirituality in rock music. Through close readings of The Killers' music, with particular care for the influence of their frontman, the article uncovers the cohesive evolution of the theme of romance in their discography.

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The Killers occupy a contentious place in contemporary music. Their emergence onto the popular music scene in 2004 was characterized by a fusion of rock, "lo-fi fuzz" (Prevatt, qtd. in Keene 36), synth-pop, and new wave revival. The band's early visual aesthetic, mostly embodied through the stage persona of frontman Brandon Flowers, gave conspicuous nods to glam rock and the "British pop dandy" (see Hawkins), but shared elements with the concurrently rising emo genre with its similar penchant for men in tailored suits and

eyeliner. Both their visual and musical styles underwent a notable transformation for their second album, striving to evoke a Springsteen-esque Americana. They have continued to dabble in various genres, notably arena rock in recent years, thus preventing their music from settling into a secure niche (Plutzik, paras. 7-10) and defying the “hallowed distinctions between ‘pop’ and ‘rock’” problematized by musicologist Allan F. Moore (“Authenticity” 210). While early hits “Mr. Brightside” and “Somebody Told Me” still receive radio and club play, their more recent work has received less commercial success and critical acclaim.[1] Following the release of their fourth studio album in 2012, Chris Bosman of *TIME* and *Consequence of Sound* described the band as “both grand and forgettable” and “embarrassingly satisfying” (para. 1), while Craig McLean of the *Independent* hailed them as “America’s greatest rock band” (n.p.). While Flowers himself appears to espouse this attitude in some public statements, in others he seems to apologize for work by the band that he finds subpar. They are, in short, a musical entity in a state of constant fluctuation, contradiction, and evolution.

One such evolution comes in their treatment of love and romance. Rhodes identifies love as “rock’s great theme” which the genre addresses “in all its positive, negative, and ambivalent connotations” (25). The Killers’ engagement with the theme alone is certainly not unique. What is noteworthy, however, is the nature of their evolution, which has been marked by conspicuous thematic and stylistic transformations, changes in reception, and, perhaps most significantly, their frontman’s return to his Mormon faith and much-publicized church-influenced commitment to his wife. In chronological terms (outlined below), their early work largely abstained from positive depictions of romantic relationships, centering instead on breakups, unreciprocated desire, and seemingly doomed pick-up lines (“Somebody told me/That you had a boyfriend/That looked like a girlfriend/That I had in February of last year”). By the release of their fourth album, their subject matter had evolved to focus heavily on love, with a particularly notable concern for love in long-term relationships. From the first track off their first album to the first single off their fourth, The Killers made a dramatic shift from murdering the object of their narrative focalizer’s affection to marrying her.

Surveying popular music, Madanikia and Bartholomew define love as a musical theme as “expressions of romantic love or caring for a potential, current, or past romantic partner, as well as any content that involved a romantic relationship” which may also, but not always, “involve expressions of sexual desire” (3). For the purposes of this article, I will consider songs as being *about* love/romance when their lyrics explicitly describe such a relationship (or the loss of one) or clear romantic and/or sexual desire. The band’s early studio albums posit bad endings to such desires, ranging from jilted emasculation to murder. The rejection theme continues in the release of 2007’s *Sawdust*, a compilation album of early singles, B-sides, and rare tracks. The album contains a number of songs that address romantic relationships, including The Killers’ first promotional single and exception to their early focus on the consequences of rejection, “Glamorous Indie Rock and Roll.” Most other songs, however, pertain to smugly single-sided desire or the loss of a relationship. In keeping with the angrier approach suggested on *Hot Fuss*, “All the Pretty Faces” is a frenetic rock song in which the focalizer seems torn between love and violence, desire and rejection. “Leave the Bourbon on the Shelf” here functions as a breakup song, although it is in fact a prequel to The Killers’ take on a rock murder ballad in *Hot Fuss*’s “Jenny Was A Friend of Mine.” (The Murder Trilogy will be discussed in detail below.) Other romance-centric tracks here include “Under

the Gun,” “Who Let You Go,” and a cover of Kenny Rogers’ “Ruby, Don’t Take Your Love to Town.” Before closing with a remix of “Mr. Brightside,” the album features one of the band’s most popular covers, Dire Straits’ “Romeo and Juliet.” This album thus seems to collect several love-centric songs that were not selected for the early studio albums.

However, the next studio album, *Day & Age* (2008), withdraws from explicit love, its loss, and romance. No love-centric songs (per this article’s definition) appear on the album save for one: “Tidal Wave,” which was exclusive to the iTunes edition. Yet with their fourth LP, *Battle Born* (2012), The Killers focused conspicuously on romance, a turning point away from their previous work. The album explores romantic relationships with a maturity that is both unusual for often youth-centered rock and a departure from the images of the bewildered and rejected young boys on *Hot Fuss*. Not coincidentally, “Miss Atomic Bomb” acts as a sequel to “Mr. Brightside” both musically and lyrically, featuring its antecedent’s signature guitar motif and the apparent decision of the Mr. Brightside character to move on from the woman he cannot have. Several other tracks on the album concern romance, heartache, and even the hardships of marriage: “Runaways,” “The Way It Was,” “Here With Me,” and “Heart of a Girl,” and, on the deluxe edition of the album, “Prize Fighter.” A failed romantic relationship is lamented on “Just Another Girl,” a previously unreleased bonus track that closes their greatest hits collection, *Direct Hits* (2013). Finally, their fifth studio album *Wonderful Wonderful* (2017) focuses more personally on marital relationships, specifically that of Flowers and his wife Tana.

It is clear from this survey that The Killers’ studio work has evolved toward romance rather than away from it, to such a point that their recent work is *dominated* by songs about love, to the dismay of some fans.[2] Several concurrent factors have precipitated this shift, including aging band members and fans, Flowers’ stated distaste for much contemporary rock music, and the peculiar place of Flowers as a devout Mormon rock star with ambitions of becoming an even greater one. More generally, the shift also participates in the critically well-established ability of rock music to explore and challenge masculinity via songs about love and desire. This article traces the band’s thematic evolution as an investigation into rock’s varying modes of masculinity, gender politics, and the star persona of the frontman figure. While Moore cautions against some humanities approaches to music studies (“Introduction” 7), my analysis of the music itself will primarily concern lyrics, which, Griffiths notes, are often de-emphasized in music studies despite their influence on the music itself (40-43). My focus on Flowers as the driving force of the band’s thematic evolution also requires a lyrical focus, as he is the band’s primary lyricist and spokesperson, and lyrical analysis is particularly efficient in revealing the “complex interplay between myth and music(ian)” (McCarthy 28). Furthermore, as this article will demonstrate, changes in the band’s treatment of romantic relationships are correlated with events in Flowers’ personal life. Through song lyrics, Astor and Negus argue, musicians “inevitably negotiate the meaning of their own biographies” (200). The band’s evolution is, therefore, most conspicuous through analysis of lyricism and the gradual identification of Flowers himself as his own focalizer.

Rock Masculinities

The trajectory of The Killers' evolution from murder to marriage can first be contextualized through an understanding of the relationship between masculinity and rock music. Much of the scholarship on this relationship concerns more popular, more aggressive, or conspicuously harder rock acts. Discourses of masculinity in the respective works of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, both all-male bands that have straddled similar rock/pop lines to The Killers, have received a respectable amount of academic and non-academic study. Rock has traditionally been addressed as a male-dominated genre, and even when women do find prominence in the genre, Crider argues, rock "has always conformed to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity" (259). Male focalizers are also standard and can be reasonably assumed in many, if not most, songs performed by men in the rock and pop genres, further supporting a link from masculinity and maleness to such music.[3] Focalization, an essential element for this analysis, occurs in "the relationship between the 'vision' of the agent that sees, and that which is seen" (Bal, *Narratology* 104). The reader/listener is presented with the perspective not only of the narrating voice but also the implied perspective of the agent witnessing or participating in the events of the text, ultimately allowing up to three or four levels of focalization (Bal, *Narratologie* 32). With regards to masculinity, personal focalizers are especially embedded within lyrical music, which implicitly creates the masculine figure through a gendered human voice.

R.W. Connell's theoretical model of "hegemonic masculinity" provides a starting point for several contemporary studies of masculinity and music. In her model, hegemonic masculinity is understood as a socially prescribed set of images and practices which men are expected to exhibit publicly. Frith and McRobbie's seminal work on "cock rock" in 1978 provided a detailed analysis of hyper-aggressive masculinity in rock music that allowed only for anger and jealousy as male emotional expressions. This category was juxtaposed with what the authors termed "teenybop," whose focalizer was an "incompetent male adolescent" who sang of his own "self-pity, vulnerability, and need" for the "unreliable, fickle, and more selfish" woman (375). However, Frith's 1985 "Afterthoughts" admits this work oversimplified much of rock's gender relations. Nonetheless, their study of women's sexual objectification and men's anger and sexual prowess is echoed in much rock criticism and is even now not without merit. In 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt revisited Connell's original theoretical framework to adjust for more nuanced understandings of masculinity and to establish a "renovated analysis" of prescribed male qualities (854). This revised study rejected the former premise of an automatic subordination of women but maintained that gender hierarchies are still powerfully in place (846-7). Men's abilities to navigate appropriate contexts for hegemonic practice are also acknowledged. Hegemonic masculinity, then, "is not static or essential" and may or may not include all the qualities previously ascribed to it (Houston 159).

Musical masculinities have indeed evolved to include performances that defy traditional criticism or that fluidly fuse characteristics of traditional understandings of gendered expression. Leonard posits Kurt Cobain, with his emotional neediness contrasted against aurally aggressive grunge rock, as a challenge to binaries such as Frith and McRobbie's (25). Biddle, meanwhile, recognizes the "new male singer/songwriter," who is characterized by "openness to vulnerability, a commitment to social and sexual intimacy, and

a tendency to want to avoid the overt spectacularisation of masculinity” (125). The Killers are far from the more aggressive musical forms of rock with which many critics of music and gender have been concerned, nor do they display the soft sensitivity of Biddle’s characterization, which is exemplified by more musically and vocally subdued singers Sufjan Stevens and José González. What can be found in their work, however, is a negotiation of these spheres of musical masculinity that alternately upholds and challenges rigid critical classifications, beginning at one extreme (murder) and ending at what here serves as its thematic opposite, husband-and-fatherhood. These negotiations manifest particularly through a series of masculine focalizers who have gradually forsaken narrative distance to become identifiable as the band’s frontman himself.

“I’m Not Satisfied Until I Hold You”: Murder and Rejection (2003-2004)

Heartbreak is a common subject in The Killer’s music, as in rock at large, but is highlighted in their work by certain early tracks in which it leads to murder. Their Murder Trilogy comprises, in narrative order, “Leave the Bourbon on the Shelf,” “Midnight Show,” and “Jenny Was A Friend of Mine.”[4] In the first song, the focalizer is rejected by his girlfriend, Jennifer, in favor of another man. In the second (which is actually the tenth and penultimate track on *Hot Fuss*), he murders her, and in “Jenny” (which opens the album), he is interrogated by the police, ultimately confessing to the crime. The lyrics of “Leave the Bourbon” themselves do not indicate that he will kill her for this perceived transgression, but a threat is implied:

Give me one more chance tonight
And I swear I’ll make it right
But you ain’t got time for this
And that wreckin’ bell is ringin’
And I’m not satisfied until I hold you

The final chorus modifies the last line to say “I’m not satisfied until I hold you tight.” The last word takes on new significance when paired with “Midnight Show.” Here, the focalizer confronts Jenny and strangles her: “I took my baby’s breath beneath the chandelier/Of stars and atmosphere/And watched her disappear.” We may now interpret the addition in the previous song as foreshadowing the manner in which Jenny will die. The embrace/strangulation motif is repeated in the chronologically final song, in which the focalizer proclaims, “She couldn’t scream when I held her close/I swore I’d never let her go.”[5]

The Murder Trilogy blends rock aggression with less masculine-coded emotional sensitivity to depict the most extreme reaction to rejection. The act of strangulation is particularly aggressive and dominating, requiring applied physical force over a prolonged period in order to ensure death. Through this act, the focalizer expresses the traditional stereotype of hegemonic male aggression while retaining a petulance that still echoes Frith and McRobbie’s limited analysis. Perhaps the most vocally emphatic tracks of *Hot Fuss* are

the two pertaining to Jenny's murder. In these, Flowers' voice moves from a disaffected, narcissistic bluntness ("I know my rights/I've been here all day and it's time/For me to go so let me know/If it's all right") to loud, growling protest ("I just can't take this!/I swear I told you the truth!") in "Jenny" and a repetition of "no" over climactic driving guitars and a sustained wail in "Midnight Show"). In both songs, it is only when the focalizer becomes angry or is threatened with the revelation of his crime that Flowers emotes. His desperate pleas for Jenny to reconsider before he murders her compromise the smug dominance that he otherwise displays. Regarding the sex murderer, an iconic figure in murder ballads, Reynolds and Press write that "Murder is the final expression of his passion, the proof and testament of his love. It's a form of absolute possession, a terrible sanguinary intimacy" (28). In these songs, Flowers perhaps inadvertently aligns himself with Nick Cave, whom Reynolds and Press label "the most powerful exploration" of that expression in rock (the alliance is all the more significant in that Cave has experienced a similar musical evolution, the lyricism of which owes much to his personal spirituality). In this way, the focalizer-murderer becomes a morbid, romantically rejected embodiment of Connell and Messerschmidt's revised, plural hegemonic masculinities, which may involve conflicting emotional ambivalences (852), but still invite physical violence even if they are no longer predicated upon it (840).

On *Hot Fuss*, "Jenny" is followed by The Killers' first single, "Mr. Brightside." This marks the first blatantly love-centric song in their musical corpus, but it is far from a celebration of love. The song instead reveals the inner paranoia and envy of a male focalizer observing the woman he desires with another man. His protestation that he has "been doing just fine" at the beginning of each verse is contradicted by a sense of emasculation as he imagines the couple preparing for sex:

Now they're going to bed
And my stomach is sick
And it's all in my head

[...]

I just can't look
It's killing me
And taking control

The self-identified Mr. Brightside does not resort to murder when he perceives himself rejected, and his song thus removes him from the aggressive masculine/emasculated dichotomy found in the Murder Trilogy. The music video further establishes this removal, as Flowers appears as a nervous but smugly flamboyant dandy in contrast to the older, more emotionally collected Eric Roberts in their battle for the girl. Here, the embodied focalizer is at his least hegemonically masculine and most like a music dandy, who, "mocking his own self-loathing [...] exhibits an outward expression of superiority" (Hawkins 5). This dandy, Reynolds and Press argue, is himself a "revolt against the proper model of masculinity" (17). Flowers' dandy, however, lacks a rock dandy's typical politically transgressive nature due to his inability to participate in the "supposed sexual freedom" of the aesthetic identity (Hesmondhalgh 57).

While “Mr. Brightside” refrains from violence, it is worth noting that its 2012 sequel, “Miss Atomic Bomb,” evokes destructive imagery. With a decade between them, the two songs are positioned at polar opposite eras in The Killers’ thematic trajectory: “Mr. Brightside” occurs at the new wave/post punk-revival beginning and “Miss Atomic Bomb” is the centerpiece of the Springsteen-influenced arena rock of *Battle Born*. Here we return to Mr. Brightside’s focalization as he at last relinquishes his desire for the girl. There is a conspicuous maturity to the song, not only due to the years between albums and a more developed tone in Flowers’ voice but also within the lyrics, which denote a passage of time: “I was new in town, a boy with the eager eyes,” “When I *look back* on those neon nights,” “We were innocent and young,” “Sometimes in dreams of impact I *still* hear” (all emphases mine). The paranoid boy of the first track has grown into the man who has granted himself the power to leave the scene of his rejection. Accordingly, the frenetic, club-friendly dance-rock of its predecessor is replaced by a smoothly building rock ballad. The identification of the girl as “Miss Atomic Bomb” creates a sense of her as a sudden, all-destroying force, yet the focalizer, previously unmanned by his romantic desire, now emerges whole (“The dust cloud has settled/And my eyes are clear”).

Yet, in keeping with the masculine destructiveness of *Hot Fuss*, the song closes with doublespeak suggesting a bad and bitter end for one of the pair. While the focalizer’s declaration that “this love that I’ve cradled/Is wearing thin” does not result in Miss Atomic Bomb’s murder, the subsequent lyrics “But I’m standing here/And you’re too late/Your shock-wave whisper has sealed your fate” imply that *something* undesirable awaits her. This fate, however, is clouded in ambiguity as the narrative adopts another layer in the song’s finale. The “you,” previously addressing Miss Atomic Bomb through the focalization of Mr. Brightside, now shifts to Mr. Brightside himself, addressed by the song’s external narrator, who may possibly be the mature Mr. Brightside as a distinctly separate entity speaking to his younger self. As the song fades out, a final verse describes Mr. Brightside with images that imply assault:

It feels just like a dagger buried deep in your back
You run for cover but you can’t escape the second attack
Your soul was innocent, she kissed him and she painted it black
You should have seen your little face, burning for love
Holding on for your life

Then backing vocals (also primarily provided by Flowers) juxtapose this narrator’s voice with Mr. Brightside’s as the latter repeats the pre-chorus:

But you can’t survive (All that I wanted was a little touch)
When you want it all (A little tenderness and truth, I didn’t ask for much)
There’s another side (Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time)

What is particularly notable here is that the first shift is not signalled; the listener only realizes that “you” is now Mr. Brightside when the focalized “she” enters. The fluid shift leaves it open to question if the final promise of death (“you can’t survive”), whether literal or figurative, is addressed to the man or the woman of the ill-fated pair. As (currently) the final piece in the band’s exploration of romantic destruction, “Miss Atomic Bomb” removes

the male focalizer from the jealous paranoia of his first appearance and the homicidal actions of Jenny's murderer, but, as if an homage, it still ends with a sense that the emasculation of rejection will have negative, if ambiguous, consequences.

"I Don't Really Like You": Ambivalent Desire (2006-2008)

The Murder Trilogy now stands as an anomaly in the band's musical corpus; despite their name (which was inspired by a New Order video), they did not build their recording career on killing. While some subsequent songs have addressed failed relationships, none have ended in death or emotional raving. Ambiguity and ambivalence, however, persist, and the post-*Hot Fuss* era can be romantically characterized by focalizers at war with their own emotions. The 2006 sophomore album, *Sam's Town*, featured only one song that can be considered love-centric. "Bones" is one of the band's few erotically suggestive songs; as will be discussed in the final section of this article, the band typically avoids references to sex. The song juxtaposes a playfully inviting chorus ("Don't you wanna come with me/Don't you wanna feel my bones/On your bones/It's only natural") with verses that suggest inexperience and even disdain on the part of the focalizer. The line "And in the ocean we'll hold hands" is immediately followed by a *Hot Fuss*-esque tonal bluntness in "But I don't really like you." An image of the focalizer weeping is similarly immediately followed by a sonically joyful first chorus. The second chorus yields to an unemotional spoken admission that provides insight into the focalizer's ambivalence: "I never had a lover/I never had soul/And I never had a good time/I never got cold." His romantic and sexual inexperience has prevented him from feeling the opposing pleasure and pain of a relationship.

Male ambivalence comes to the forefront of "All the Pretty Faces," recorded during the *Sam's Town* era and released on *Sawdust*. Here the focalizer asks the focalized subject to "help [him] out" immediately before proclaiming "I don't feel like loving you no more." The line that follows ("I don't feel like touching her no more") shifts the focalized from second-person "you" to a feminine third person. The chorus echoes *Hot Fuss*'s violence as well as its ominous aural tone as drummer Ronnie Vannucci Jr. hits the cymbals on every eighth note with Mark Stoermer's bass also picking up during the lines "You're not going anywhere without me/These trials don't prepare the air of love/You're not telling anyone about me/And you shake and you bleed while I sing my song." Other tracks on *Sawdust* are similarly steeped in romantic ambivalence. Despite its title, "Under the Gun" is not a song about murder but rather about a focalized man who is "tied to a dream" of the deceptive woman he loves. The chorus is entirely a repetition of his request to the narrator: "Kill me now, kill me now, kill me now." According to the narrator, however, the man's release can come only from the woman herself, whom the man still characterizes as an "angel." His desire to be destroyed rather than continue suffering at her hands boasts shades of "Mr. Brightside" but lacks Brightside's paranoid, 80s pop-influenced charisma and thus makes him seem the more emasculated of the two.

These songs, as well as those referencing romantic relationships on *Sawdust*, withdraw from the violent passions of *Hot Fuss* but do not replace them with other forms of romantic or sexual desire. Indeed, some songs suggest a cynicism about love. "Where the White Boys Dance" sets a break-up, focalized by a woman, against the comedic cultural motif

of unsophisticated young men who “might have a chance” only because she is upset. Flowers’ disaffected tone as he voices the focalizer of “Who Let You Go?” sounds bored with desire when he sings “I find it so romantic/When *you* look into *my* beautiful eyes/And lose control” (emphasis mine). *Day & Age* returns to the avoidance of explicitly love-centric songs. Confident masculine lust is nowhere to be found in the band’s 2006-2008 studio work, nor is the unabashed romanticism of the rock ballad. Up to this point, The Killers have complicated their treatment of love by infusing it with either ambivalent naiveté at best, or a petulant and selfish desire at worst.

“If I Go On With You By My Side...”: Marriage Rock (2012-Present)

The release of *Battle Born* in 2012 saw the greatest thematic shift in The Killers’ music by conspicuously focusing on romantic relationships. The love-centric songs on the album do not repeat the motifs of spurned suitors or ambivalence; instead, many of them relate the perspectives of focalizers who navigate established and prolonged relationships. The first single (and second track on the album), “Runaways,” is an up-tempo arena rock song, powered by militaristic ghost notes on the drums and resplendent with energetic keyboards, that traces a pair of lovers from their courtship to pregnancy to engagement and ultimately to marriage. While dissimilar in tone, tempo, instrumentation, and vocal clarity, the track shares a trajectory with Springsteen’s “The River” (1980), depicting the idealism of young love (“a teenage rush”) as it rises to confront adult responsibilities (“We got engaged on a Friday night/I swore on the head of our unborn child/That I could take care of the three of us”). The couple soon wish to escape from their new roles. The focalizer sings, “But I got the tendency to slip when the nights get wild/It’s in my blood,” while his wife “says she might just run away/Somewhere else, someplace good.” The bridge and final verse see the focalizer, like Springsteen’s, comparing the relationship’s better days to its current tension:

We used to look at the stars and confess our dreams
Hold each other til the morning light
We used to laugh, now we only fight
But baby, are you lonesome now?

At night I come home after they go to sleep
Like a stumbling ghost I haunt these halls
There’s a picture of us on our wedding day
I recognize the girl but I can’t settle in these walls

The repetition of “I knew that when I met you/I’m not gonna let you run away/I knew that when I held you I wasn’t lettin’ go” in each chorus moves from evoking romantic attachment to marital imprisonment. Unlike the similar language of the Murder Trilogy that describes Jenny’s murder, here inextricable embraces are used to signify the upholding of matrimonial bonds.

A melodically catchy song about marriage is, to a degree, an unusual choice to mark any band’s return after four years, especially when their sales have declined with each

album. Yet it does participate within a critically undefined group of songs in which a romantically committed man rediscovers freedom not through leaving (or murdering) his partner but through roaming away from the family home. It is perhaps no coincidence that this motif appears in the music of some of the band's influences, who are also known for being in committed relationships, as well as being conspicuously religious. The "tendency to slip when the nights get wild" in "Runaways" echoes Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line," which "pledges masculine fidelity while suggesting its opposite" (Edwards 84). For country and rockabilly performers like Cash, roaming allows focalizers to regain "some sense of lost working-class freedom and individualism" (88). The road similarly functions in Springsteen's work "as source of male power" (John Connell 211). The Killers' focalizer here finds comfort in driving, as related in the final pre-chorus's triumphant contrast to the "stumbling ghost" he is at home: "I turn the engine over and my body just comes alive," he sings, sustaining the final syllable triumphantly as the drums, rhythm, and bass uniformly punctuate the musical phrase. Although driving does not bring the focalizer of "The River" the same ecstatic release as that of "Runaways," the convergence of the two songs is here amplified.

The next song on the album, "The Way It Was," continues the driving motif, beginning with a man driving through a desert. Its music is much more subdued, resembling a power ballad, which "court[s] intimacy" as the "singer imparts what comes across as deeply felt emotions and draws in listeners through delicate candour" (Metzer 438-9). Here, the focalizer reminisces about the early days of a romance but finds the relationship has soured. The chorus subsequently questions whether or not the couple will be able to salvage their love. The interplay between singer and musicians inserts a pause between short phrases as represented here, signalling an increasingly emotive uncertainty: "If I go on/With you (by my side)/Can it be/The way/It was." [6] If this song only resembles a power ballad, the subsequent track, "Here With Me," actually is one. The song begins slowly and mournfully as the focalizer, accompanied by a piano, laments a past failed relationship (the opening line, "Wheels are turning," continues the evocation of driving). Like the previous two tracks, this one juxtaposes carefree images of young romance with a more mature man's sense of loss. The focalizer is almost painfully vulnerable in his nostalgic desire, with Flowers crying out the chorus and eventually vocalizing in falsetto. Unlike Jenny's murderer, this focalizer cannot confront the object of his desire when he encounters her but rather flees from her, deciding to passively "wait" for her to return to him. As the song closes, he can only repeat his desperate request, "I want you here with me."

With "Miss Atomic Bomb" belonging more to the narrative begun in *Hot Fuss*, the remaining love-centric song on the album is another ballad (but not a *power* ballad). "Heart of a Girl" relates the first meeting of two young lovers who now struggle to "hear that ancient refrain," but the suggested marital strife does *not* end in late night roaming or separation, as the focalizer realizes his partner has chosen to stay with him: "Staring down the mouth of a hundred thousand guns/And you're still here/You're still here." This realization is followed by the emphatic proclamation "I believe that we never have to be alone." The track closes with an informal renewal of marital vows: "Standing on stone, you stand beside me/And honor the plans that were made." The alienation experienced by focalizers of other love-centric Killers songs is here put to rout in favor of the assurance of a long, weathered but stable partnership. Its placement after the trio of romantic disillusionment songs and "Miss Atomic Bomb" leaves the listener with the image of a devoted couple working toward the

continuance of their relationship. A final crash and a sustained chord on the synthesizer emphasize a sense of narrative finality.

“Heart of a Girl” pairs with “Prize Fighter,” a bonus track on the deluxe edition of *Battle Born*, to create a very personal exploration of frontman Flowers’ actual marriage (the story of “Heart” is indeed how he and Tana met). That exploration continues in The Killers’ fifth album, *Wonderful Wonderful*. Although the album’s lead single, “The Man,” is a parody of machismo, as if to mock previous cocksure focalizers, much of its promotion has concerned its three songs that specifically concern Tana and address her struggle with complex PTSD, which Flowers revealed in multiple promotional interviews in late summer of 2017. The third track on the album, “Rut,” addresses Tana’s suicidal depression directly and apparently from her perspective (Beaumont para. 16). “Rut” is followed by “Life to Come,” a quasi-spiritual rock song in which the focalizer promises “to be the one” who will “be there in the life to come.” In “Some Kind of Love,” which prominently samples Brian Eno’s “An Ending,” the focalizer, here identifiably Flowers himself, softly praises his wife’s strength and discourages her from self-harm, leading up to a plea sung by Flowers and his and Tana’s three sons. In the title track, which is more musically experimental than much of the band’s catalog, the focalizer sings to a “motherless child” who seeks “rescue” and will find it by “follow[ing] [his] voice.” Using the archaic “thee” pronouns to address her and claiming omnipresence, the focalizer doubles as a divine being who promises “great cause to rejoice” and a “home” for her. He recedes from this grandiosity in the final verse by admitting that he may be “dirty” and “unworthy,” but repeats his promises. This song in particular, Flowers relates to *NME*, served as a bonding experience for him and his wife, as it brought him to a better understanding of her long-untreated condition (Reilly para. 8). Just as the most prominent focalizer of the band’s love-centric songs has moved from the smarmy young murderer to the tempted but devoted husband, he now appears to simply be Flowers. In this way, Flowers becomes more conspicuous as the driving force behind The Killers’ thematic evolution. Thus, it is through his frontman persona that we may conclude an examination of the band’s trajectory from murder to marriage.

“This burning belief in salvation and love”

Building on analyses by music scholars Frith and Auslander, Sutton explicates three “layers of performance” (209). The first is the musician himself: here, Brandon Flowers outside the public eye, the man, husband and father, composer, and primary lyricist for The Killers. The second is the star: here, the Brandon Flowers who appears onstage and in paratextual materials. The third is the narrator and/or focalizer that has been this article’s focus hitherto, who need not bear any resemblance to the prior layers, and it is this third that has steadily emerged as an audible and visible presence within the band’s music.

As a practicing Mormon who now abstains from alcohol and drugs, Flowers is an unlikely rock star.[7] In an interview with *The Daily Beast*, Flowers describes his decision to devote himself to his faith in terms that we can see reflected in his de-eroticized, drug-free music: “[...] being committed to my wife and family, I can’t see any downside to it. There are people who’ve done the sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll thing and made it happen for them, but I knew even when I was young that that wasn’t going to work out for me” (Stern para. 14).

However, his current devotion to his faith did not occur until after *Sam's Town* (para. 13), thus aligning the sneering, desperate murderers and rejected lovers of the band's early work with each other, during which time Flowers has stated that he experienced "a rebellious streak" (para. 21). Writing for The Mormon Women Project, Tana Flowers has similarly emphasized her husband's temporary departure from his faith in this period (para. 1). He has since committed himself to his wife and children and prioritized them over music; their inclusion as focalized subjects and performers on *Wonderful Wonderful* provides musical evidence of an increasing thematic prioritization.

The Mormon emphasis on marriage is evident in "Heart of a Girl," and thus it is all the more appropriate that the band's 2012 album places it as the final love-centric song. As an influence on Flowers even prior to his re-commitment to the church, it likely also accounts for the continued lack of sexuality in the band's work. The most explicitly sexually-charged lyrics in their corpus occur prior to Jenny's murder in "Midnight Show" ("You got a real short skirt/I wanna look up") and the chorus of "Bones," but even these songs do not venture into the raw sexuality that is often associated with rock. While by no means universal, the genre's frequent "separat[ion]" of sexuality from "fidelity and trust" and "the demands of conventionality, including marriage" poses a challenge for the rock musician who adheres to their faith more than simply nominally (Hesmondhalgh 56). As Hesmondhalgh argues, rock often deploys sexuality as a means of "opposition to structure and [...] central institutions of order and continuity" (63). While Hesmondhalgh points out that alternative rock allows for a "hyper-masculine but desexualized rock style, derived from the frenetic energy of punk," The Killers' sound has evolved further away from that energy; the one track that could be described as having "the frenetic energy of punk" on *Wonderful Wonderful*, "Run for Cover," was in fact composed between the *Sam's Town* and *Day & Age* eras. The remembrances of youthful sexuality in *Battle Born's* love-centric content are relatively tame: "Did you forget all about those golden nights?" and, respectively, "Your body was tan and your hair was long/You showed me a smile and my cares were gone." The latter continues to echo the nostalgia in Springsteen's "The River," in which the focalizer describes "Her body tan and went down at the reservoir." Springsteen's musical influence on The Killers is made all the more relevant through his own own admitted religious ties and struggle to reconcile his experience of the world with his faith (Marsh 97). Although Springsteen has dealt with sexuality more frankly than Flowers, his focalized women (whom are frequently named Mary) are undoubtedly colored by Catholicism (Moss 343-4). In the Mormon context, so, too, is Flowers' lyrical evolution from murder to marriage.

Complications superficially arise in Flowers' solo work. To date, Flowers has released two solo albums, *Flamingo* (2010) and *The Desired Effect* (2015). The first boasts a more explicit spirituality than The Killers' work, with "Crossfire" fusing images of lovers with a cosmic battle between heaven and hell. "Playing with Fire" features a more direct statement that appears to reference Flowers' own precarious place as a rocker who is equally religious and ambitious, aged by marriage and fatherhood, but determined to keep his faith:

Ten thousand demons hammer down with every footstep
Ten thousand angels rush the wind against my back
This church of mine may not be recognized by steeples
But that doesn't mean that I will walk without a God

Rolling river of truth, can you spare me a sip?
The holy fountain of youth has been reduced to a drip
But I've got this burning belief in salvation and love
This notion may be naive, but when push comes to shove
I will till this ground

Yet *The Desired Effect* sees a brief return to early form. The album makes heavy use of synthesizers in stark contrast to *Battle Born's* arena rock, a sonic homage to 80s pop and new wave, and its lyrics feature darker treatments of love and desire. The chorus of the first single, "Can't Deny My Love", ends with the lines "And you can run to the hillside/And you can close your eyes/[...] But you're not gonna deny my love." [8] Likewise, the upbeat, brass-backed "Lonely Town" relates the perspective of a stalker who, while lacking the energy of the Murder Trilogy's focalizers, references having a knife.

However, these songs are not permitted to carry the narrative theme of the album. Two songs after "Can't Deny My Love" is "Still Want You," a campy pop song accompanied by doo-wop style feminine backing vocals in which the focalizer proclaims continued love for his partner in spite of all the troubles of the world. Then, two songs after "Lonely Town," Flowers settles back into the theme of simultaneous spiritual and romantic longing. In "Never Get You Right," the focalizer addresses a troubled woman whom he romantically describes as "born lost and dirt blonde." Another Springsteenian veneration of the focalized woman is suggested as he ends each chorus with an affirmation of her power: "The people passing by/Should tremble at your sight." This veneration now serves as a lyrical prelude to Flowers' songs for Tana in The Killers' *Wonderful Wonderful*, as does the image of the focalized woman as a lost child. The focalizer of "Untangled Love," the last love-centric song on *Desired Effect*, seeks the kind of romance that may lead to marriage and fatherhood and ultimately appears to find it: "It took a lot of faith, it took a lot of lies/But I finally came to realize/Untangled love/I can see it in your eyes." Therefore, like *Battle Born*, the album closes its exploration of love with images of stable monogamy, and leads to the autobiographical depictions of marriage on *Wonderful Wonderful*. Finally, with no distance remaining between Flowers and the narrative focalizer of his work, he sings lines such as "You got the grace of a storm in the desert/You got some kind of love" directly to the focalized woman, who also lacks narrative distance. As Flowers has admitted in multiple promotional interviews for the album, the focalized woman is *literally* his wife. The Killers' most recent work, then, brings their evolution far from the beach where Jenny died and directly into the Flowers home.

Conclusion

Music critics still contextualize the band through their early interest in murder. A September 2017 interview with *NME's* Marc Beaumont begins with the band being shown Jeffrey Dahmer's glasses. Flowers voices mild personal identification by reminding Beaumont that one of Dahmer's escaped victims shared Flowers' surname. Beaumont describes Flowers as "slightly embarrassed" by the venue, a club across from Dahmer's former apartment (para 3). According to Beaumont, Flowers disavowed any role in selecting

the venue, suggesting a distaste for the continued association of his and the band's work with violence and death. It is clear from the band's thematic shifts that they have largely moved on from the sneering young man who murdered his ex-girlfriend and who opened their first album. "Jenny Was A Friend of Mine" has been an intermittent staple of the band's live shows, and while it has recently reappeared in their 2017 tour, it was only rarely played in the weeks leading up to *Wonderful Wonderful's* release. While Flowers has explicitly identified only three of the ten songs on *Wonderful Wonderful* as pertaining to his wife, the album's exploration of his marital relationship has dominated the pre-release press, with Flowers giving nearly identical statements to publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *NME*, and *Q* regarding the album's intimacy to him. The departures of bassist Mark Stoermer and lead guitarist Dave Keuning from the tour, although it has been stated that this was for personal reasons, highlights the role that Flowers has played in directing the band's shift.

Though The Killers have been neglected by popular music scholarship and even seem to suffer from some neglect from music critics, their discography provides insight into rock's shifting concerns about love and sexuality, particularly through the lens of masculinity. The video for the aptly-titled "The Man," *Wonderful Wonderful's* first single, depicts Flowers as a parody of masculinity who repeatedly affirms "I'm the man." The video's contextualization of the self-proclaimed man through visual references to deserts, Las Vegas, and celebrity ambitions further encourages a reading of the song as a self-aware critique of *specifically* Flowers' early focalizers. Such a reading, then, enables realization of the thematic shift in Flowers' more personally authentic odes to his wife on the album. As part of his stated commitment to his family and church, he appears to be extricating himself from his early image and thematic interests.

Other themes persist in The Killers' work, such as the American dream, fate, and overcoming self-doubt and regret. However, it is through their journey from murder to marriage that we may find a particular negotiation of the expectations of masculinity within rock – and where it intersects with themes that have been more artistically and critically neglected in the genre, such as marriage, fatherhood, and a more explicitly conservative spirituality. The band's seemingly precarious future at the time of this writing calls into question whether or not these subjects are sustainable when made so explicit, especially when they have increasingly become linked to a frontman's personal beliefs and family life. Regardless of sustainability, however, the band's discography reveals a fascinating gender-coded trajectory from some of rock's most famous masculine themes (aggression, sexual liberation) to the affirmation of marital and religious faithfulness.

[1] Indeed, *Noisey* reports that "Mr. Brightside" has remained in the UK charts every year between 2004 and 2017.

[2] Observation of various Killers fan spaces online reveals a noticeable (but by no means universal) disdain for the band's overtly romantic work, especially songs that seem to reference Flowers' relationship with his wife.

[3] Challenges to the association of the male rock/pop singer with a male focalizer seem infrequent. A notable example occurred with Matchbox 20's "Push" (1997). Despite being criticized for seeming misogynistic, its chorus ("I wanna push you around / [...] I wanna push you down / [...] I wanna take you for granted"), is complicated by each verse's opening with "She said...."

[4] The Murder Trilogy is not the band's only negotiation of a woman's murder. In 2005, their setlist commonly included "Where Is She?", a song written about the 2003 death of Scottish teen Jodi Jones. The song shares some similarities with the trilogy; like the fictional Jenny, Jodi was murdered by her boyfriend. However, in response to public backlash, the band did not release any official recordings of the song. It cannot, therefore, be counted amongst their standard catalog or the Murder Trilogy. Moreover, Flowers has stated that the song's focalizer is Jodi's mother, not her killer. While it does point toward the band's early fascination with murder, it is not part of the same negotiation of rock masculinity as the trilogy.

[5] The motif is more explicit in alternate live versions of the song, in which Flowers sometimes sings "She couldn't scream while I held her throat" or even "She kicked and screamed while I held her throat" ("The Killers' Top Ten Most Played Concert Tracks" para. 11).

[6] "By my side" is only sung by backup vocals. Thus, Flowers' lead vocal track makes this phrase even shorter.

[7] Certainly, Flowers is not the only Mormon to find mainstream success in music. However, he currently lacks the wholesome family appeal and light pop of, for instance, the Osmonds. His continued adherence to Mormonism, which he has affirmed to *Rolling Stone* in September 2017 (Greene paras. 7-8), also distinguishes him from rock/pop musicians like Tyler Glenn, the frontman of Neon Trees (with whom The Killers have toured). After coming out as gay in 2014, Glenn has spoken openly of his ostracization from the church and a sense of separation from God.

[8] What is omitted here is the repetition of "not gonna deny" before the line's fulfillment at the end of the chorus. The song may also be interpreted as a religious song in which the focalizer of the chorus takes on the qualities of the God of the Book of Job and the New Testament's Jonah as He promises his own inescapability. This possibility is emphasized in the music video, which (in contrast to the 80s pop sound of the song) casts Flowers as Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown.

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