

Fits of Disjointed Clarity

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This project can also be accessed (with all referenced music) [here](#).

Whether done on purpose or by accident, our lives are often lent a cohesion that allows us to find comfort in a world that is oftentimes chaotic. We see patterns in everyday events and we find meaning in coincidences, yet this is often an attempt to ignore, or cover up, the chaotic and disjointed lives that we lead. Many times things occur in our lives that are random and interrupt the so-called cohesion, the order, of our lives. Perhaps it is an event as serious as a fatal car accident or as something as insignificant as a bird relieving itself on your head. There is no meaning in these events; they are not connected to the events in one's own life but cut into the cohesive whole of our lives and cut right back out with the same rapidity. Art, as something that is inspired by our own lives, also can try to ignore this disjointed aspect of life, however in doing so it merely perpetuates the half-truth that our lives are cohesive wholes and not subject to happenstance. It is in the midst of the conflict between the cohesive and disjoint in art that I place White Denim's *Fits*. An album composed of multiple genres, moods, sounds, and dynamics, the Austin-based band creates a controlled chaos within each song, and within the album itself, that mocks any concept of cohesion in an album. [1] What the listener is left with instead is a series of unique musical ideas that, while seemingly lacking any connections, are in fact connected through their disjointed nature. This approach to the album, whether done with purpose or not, imagines the album as a series of short stories and the music itself as a thread that creates an adventure. The band is well aware that there may not be an end goal in this adventure, for it is the journey, not the goal, which matters here. Cohesion is dismantled in favor of a free form dialogue with the listener that prompts genuine thought and emotion and in which both listener and musician creates meaning for the music. It is with this in mind that I assert the importance of the use of the disjoint in art (specifically music), as it can allow for a more personal and fulfilling experience than an album that merely handholds the listener throughout, squandering any interpretation outside that intended by the artist. This is of course not to say that the cohesive approach to music has no merit, for clearly hundreds of years of musical history would speak to the contrary. However, I set forth the idea that this disjointed approach used by White Denim can release the listener from the constraints present in the cohesive approach and endow the listener with true creative freedom, as they formulate their own meanings and narratives for the music.

However, despite the clear benefit that such an approach can have for music, the debate surrounding the issue of cohesion in music seems merely to skirt the disjoint in favor of the more common and safe idea of cohesion. *Fits*, as a more modern piece of music, has yet to be fully examined in the context of scholarly writing. However, I believe the critical analyses that do exist of this album, found in the pages of popular music magazines like the UK-based NME and Chicago-based Pitchfork, offer interesting insight on this issue. Based on opinion, these sources nonetheless touch on the ideas of the disjoint and free-form dialogue that is derived therefrom, yet merely circle these ideas without properly engaging them as viable ideas. In Ben Patashnik's review of the album in NME, he does manage to articulate how White Denim's album sparks a dialogue with the listener, mentioning that it "never signposts its intentions,

instead giving the listener enough credit to be able to identify them themselves” (Patashnik, “Album Review: White Denim *Fits*”). I agree wholeheartedly with this statement, for the album does indeed prompt the listener to “identify” the meanings, emotions, and intentions behind the work by engaging in a dialogue with the work. There is no handholding, for the band does not set out a cohesive narrative or theme that would relay the meaning to the audience. However, the point at which Patashnik departs from my own view is at the junction between the disjoint and cohesive. Patashnik argues that the band has “shoehorned [various sounds]...into a coherent whole” (Patashnik, “Album Review: White Denim *Fits*”), a statement I would argue merely attempts to ignore the disjointed nature of the album in favor of a more commonly held musical idea. It is not “a coherent whole” that provides room for a free form conversation, for if the album were united in its sound, themes, or structure there would be little room left for the input of the audience. Led down defined, musical paths, the audience would be forced into an interpretation, or certain meaning, that has been set out through some cohesive narrative, theme, or sound. It is the fact that *Fits* is incoherent within its overall structure and the structure of its songs that provides the crucial spark for the dialogue and emotional journey of the listener. Where will it go? What will they do next? Where will I go next? The listeners are unsure of the intentions of the album, thus they begin to form their own stories, views and ideas about it.

On the other hand, Eric Harvey’s review of the album on Pitchfork Media focuses solely on the disjoint nature of the album, but misses the potential for this kind of musical approach. Harvey, commenting on “the way [White Denim] switches sounds so abruptly” (Harvey, “White Denim: *Fits*”), points out an inconsistency in the album: “For all the moments *Fits* locks in and finds a groove strong enough to hang a hook on, it more often slides right past, on some sort of relentless vision quest” (Harvey, “White Denim: *Fits*”). Here Harvey engages with the disjointed nature, the abruptness, of the album, without acknowledging, like Patashnik, the effect that this can have. Although tastes clearly differ here, the album’s abrupt shifts in sound are not in any way an attempt to search for something more. There is no “relentless vision quest,” but rather a slow meandering through time and space. It is the lack of a definite, cohesive location, image, or narrative on *Fits* that forces the listener to engage and think for themselves. The album is an unexpected journey from locale to locale, not in the hopes of accomplishing a definite goal or completing a “quest,” but with the brunt of the interpretative responsibility put on the listener. It is a free form conversation that can go any number of ways not the standard narrative of an album.

It is with these two approaches, both of which touch upon the disjointed nature of the album and its ability to inspire a dialogue with the audience (respectively) and both of which fail to fully grasp these same ideas, that I set forth my own approach. Clearly music can be a cohesive art form, that presents a narrative, theme, or sound connected through various pieces or songs, however I do not believe music can only be effective by staying within this method. White Denim’s experimentation with the disjoint is a clear indication that music that lacks a cohesive whole can engage in a more personal way with the audience by creating a free form conversation out of that lack of cohesion.

In addition to these critical sources, between which I have placed my argument, I will engage with Matthew Gelbart’s “A Cohesive Shambles: The Clash’s *London Calling* and the Normalization of Punk.” Gelbart’s unique analysis of this classic album paints a picture of an

album that thrives off of the clash between a cohesive narrative and theme and disjointed sonic ideas. In analyzing the Clash's monumental album, Gelbart uses music theory and music criticism to look more closely at this conflict: how the album is both a cohesive "non-punk" work and a disjointed punk work. I think that this source is invaluable for my own work, and my analysis of the individual songs on *Fits* and the album itself will attempt to approach the music in a similar way. Thus, I will reference Gelbart throughout the paper and will also use a bit of music theory to illustrate the disjointed nature of *Fits*. With these sources and approaches in mind, I will now set forth into the chaotic space that White Denim has created, as I analyze several songs off of *Fits* and several aspects of the album as a whole.

A clear practice in disjointed cacophonous celebration, "Say What You Want," the third track on *Fits*, embodies the deconstruction of cohesion. Composed of three unique parts all fit within a length of a little under three minutes, this song shifts ideas, moods, and sound quickly yet in a natural way. Starting off with a chunky, distorted guitar and the echoes of guitar feedback, a recurring blue-rock riff is played over a bizarrely intricate rhythmic pattern, immediately sending the listener to a crowded, dimly lit barroom concert. Loud and raucous, especially towards the end of this section at which point cymbal crashes, organ, and guitar become one resonant wave of sound, this section of the song falls apart after about a minute. As the drums taper off and the guitar spirals down into a slower, more restrained melody, the second section begins with echoing guitars and pounding drums. This is quickly followed by the third section which interjects itself upon the latter with a guitar line straight out of an Indian raga, continuing in a similar vein until the end of the track. Barroom rock show, psychedelic folk meanderings, and Indian raga all clash in a measly three-minute song that takes the listener on a journey across the globe. Any cohesive idea that may have been present at the beginning of the song is forgotten a minute in, as both the band and the listener become lost in a musical dialogue. While the growling guitar of the first section settles the listener in with a sound that is somewhat familiar, the Eastern-influenced guitar in the third section instantly transports the listener somewhere they had never anticipated going. Thus, the disjointed sections of this song act as a loose tour guide for the listener, never holding their hand but encouraging them to explore this musical landscape just as the band is doing. It is with this approach that White Denim straddles the fine line between complete chaos and the disjointed approach seen here, as familiar sounds (such as the sitar-like guitar) give the listener a reference point to begin their journey, yet the familiarity of these sounds are disrupted by being placed in a disjointed order. Thus, the listener must construct their own narrative or meaning from these familiar yet disjointed elements. It is in this way that White Denim is able to utilize the disjointed approach so well, for throughout the album they stand on the brink of being totally incoherent but pull back from that precipice through careful use of the familiar and disjoint together. This is an effect that is created not just in the songs but across the entirety of the album, as the disjointed nature of the songs ironically acts as a connective thread, forcing the listener to create connections themselves.

As the feedback of "Say What You Want" lingers in the listener's ears, White Denim quickly transitions into a loud and raucous series of chords and snare drum hits that nod to the rambunctious and simple elements of punk rock while also hinting at the nuanced and bounce-laden beats of some jazz drummers. Right away, this track, titled "El Hard Attack," creates a bizarre juxtaposition between two seemingly opposite styles, leading the listener in various sonic directions that enables them to create their own ideas about the music. Then after about twenty

seconds, suddenly, with very little transition time, the band breaks into a hard rock riff with cymbal hits bashing in the background like mortars being fired onto a battlefield. This is then followed by another quick transition into a Latin-tinged beat over which the lead singer sings in Spanish. This section is never again referenced in the song and no Spanish is ever used in any other place on the album, making this a disjointed oddity not only in the context of the song but also the album. This two minute long track is the random car accident of this album, as it the listener is given no warning or hint that the band has even the slightest idea of going below the border, into the jazz clubs of New Orleans or into the sweaty, teenager-filled bars of a 1970's London. Once again, like in the previous track, the band shifts from idea to idea, place to place, sound to sound, with very few transitions or stops in between, forcing the listener to think about and feel the music. Gelbart's statement that an album's cohesive nature creates "conditions an 'interpretive community' to read the whole as a narrative or at least a unified and interconnected statement" (Gelbart 248) holds true here, as the listener is without a cohesive whole. Thus, there is an emphasis put on creating one's own "interpretive community," in which the ideas and emotions taken from the album are solely that of the individual and have been gained through a deeply personal and free-form dialogue with the work. This track, composed of many disjointed sections, is emblematic of this idea. A listener could be tapping his foot to the pounding drums of the first section only to be thrown for a loop by the sudden Latin beats he is hearing. This shifting of the sands under listener's feet results in the aforementioned dialogue, for the emphasis is now put firmly on the listener to interpret this shift. The band is certainly not offering an explanation. And that is where the disjoint thrives and sparks this conversation; the artist's voice is present yet not overbearing, allowing this dialogue to occur.

Just between these two songs, the disjointed nature of the album is evident. However, where Gelbart's analysis of *London Calling's* "stylistic eclecticism" leads him to see "a common factor among the styles here that could work to tie the album back [together]" (Gelbart 263). No such "common factor" exists here. Where the Clash's album was tied together with "cross-references between personae, lyrics, studio effects, musical themes...vocalization, chords and keys" (Gelbart 248), these elements are never quite the same on *Fits*. A wide variety of guitar effects, like the sitar-like effect and chunky distortion on "Say What You Want", and sounds, like the Latin percussion on "El Hard Attack," are never used or "referenced" again. Instead, unlike the Clash's *London Calling*, disparate elements are used not to create a broad narrative with varying characters and sonic elements but rather a series of disjointed narratives connected through the listener's own set of created meanings.

However, the disjointed nature of the album does not end with merely the sounds of the tracks, as the band also departs from any standard transitions in musical keys (the chords used in songs that usually work together to create something harmonious). Oftentimes albums are put together so that songs transition easily into one another through these keys, for certain notes, chords, and keys just sound right when placed next to one another. This creates a flow and cohesion to an album, like on *London Calling*, where the first four tracks are in the keys of E minor, E minor, A major, and C major, all of which, when placed alongside one another, create a natural transition from track to track (Gelbart 250). Quite contrary to this, White Denim does not seek to create transitions, either through musical keys, chords, or dynamic shifts. Instead there are moments of complete disjointedness between, and within, tracks, like in the lack of transitions between the sections of "Say What You Want." However, an even better example of this occurs in between

the tracks "Sex Prayer" and "Mirrored and Reverse," during which the electronic, synth-laden jam of the former drones on for a couple of seconds only to be abruptly interrupted by the psych-rock bass line and jazz-infused drums of the latter. This sudden shift is not held together through a similar chord progression or key but is quite sudden and, like the entire album, is the disjoint breaking into the listener's point of view. Whereas the tracks on the Clash's album may create a sense of cohesion, thus creating a narrative and effectively illustrating a theme, there is no such move made here. Instead, cohesion is thrown out in favor of the disjointed abandon of free-flowing ideas and imagery. The audience, thrown by the shift in key, tempo, and instrumentation, is made into an interpretive artist themselves. The dialogue between artist and audience is one composed of creative output on both sides. The flow of the album, thus, is not achieved through a unified and ordered narrative but rather through a unique, personal interpretation created by the listener.

In essence, what White Denim has achieved through creating a disjointed musical work is demonstrate that the cohesive, ordered approach to music that many hold to be the "truth" is only a half-truth. *Fits* is proof that the cohesion of music merely creates an "interpretive community" that forces the audience into forming a certain set of meanings for a particular piece of music. This confinement is something that has been largely adopted by the music community, consciously and unconsciously, as the role of the disjoint has been left by the wayside. The two analyses of Patashnik and Harvey, along with the duality-based analysis of Gelbart, prove that the disjoint is present in the current musical zeitgeist and indeed does have a role in music. In complete opposition to this norm, White Denim utilizes the disjoint in order to create a free-form dialogue that allows the audience to create their own narrative and meaning for the music. Their music straddles that fine line between an incoherent mess and this disjointed approach through clever uses of familiar sounds in unfamiliar contexts, and, in doing so, allows the listener to at least have reference points when forming their own meaning of the music. Thus, the disjoint equates the audience and artist by putting both in the role of the creator, expanding beyond the constricting, yet still valuable, model of cohesion. It is, ultimately, only through White Denim's fits of the disjoint that the clarity of both the artist's and audience's roles can realized.

Works Cited

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1. In this case, I wish to point out that cohesion in terms of music, is the elements of an album, or individual song, that keep the piece in question together and allows it to flow towards a certain endpoint.