

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Give Me Something to Sing About': intertextuality in Once More With Feeling

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5st9c8c4>

Author

Bauer, AM

Publication Date

2023-12-10

Peer reviewed

Chapter 12

“Give Me Something to Sing About”:
Intertextuality and the Audience in
“Once More, with Feeling”

Amy Bauer

“I love all musicals.”

(Joss Whedon, audio commentary to
“Once More, with Feeling.”)

Critics hailed “Once More, with Feeling” (6.7) as a brilliant example of the television musical. Its musical numbers flow from the narrative, yet prove integral to the seven-year arc of the series, and its eclectic but unified score was written expressly for the talents of a cast (mostly) new to the genre. Notably, its book, score, and concept all sprang from one mind, that of the Buffyverse’s primary architect, Joss Whedon.

Although untrained in musical composition, Whedon’s affection for and knowledge of the American musical are everywhere evident, even if we did not have John Kenneth Muir’s admission that he is a “virtual encyclopedia of musical film history.”¹ Analogous to the combined cinematic genres—from horror to religious epic—that mark *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, “Once More, with Feeling” alludes to Sondheim and Loesser alongside the sardonic charm of 1940s music, 1950s swing jazz, 1970s arena rock, 1980s power ballads, and 1990s soft-rock confessionals, all within a lean, swift-moving structure that performs the dramatic functions of the classic American musical.

Much has already been written regarding the novelty, influence, and intertextual richness of the *Buffy* musical.² My contribution to that literature analyzes the musical structure of the songs themselves and places it in a dialogic relationship to the sources they summon. Such intertextual richness acknowledges fans’ devotion to and knowledge of both the show’s history and cultural references to the

¹ John Kenneth Muir, *Singing a New Tune: The Rebirth of the Modern Film Musical, from Evita to De-Lovely and Beyond* (New York, 2005), p. 10.

² See, for example, essays in the bibliography by Richard S. Albright, Jamie Clarke, and Jeffrey R. Middents, as well as conference papers by William Donaruma, Cynthia Masson, and Todd Williams. It is also discussed by Rhonda Wilcox in *Why Buffy Matters: the Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (London, 2005), pp. 191–205, and the other chapters in Part III of this volume.

American musical. The harmonic and rhythmic structure of songs, in conjunction with dance, book, and stage direction, self-reflexively evokes distinct musical eras, held up as paradigms for the situation of characters in the fictional world of Sunnydale. Whedon's own commentaries suggest that "Once More, with Feeling" functions as a critique of the genre and its history on both small and large screen. In this it reflects the fears and desires of "genre fans" everywhere, as it conflates the utopian fantasy of the musical with the dystopian fantasy of the Buffyverse.³ Whedon acknowledges and incorporates those fears within the narrative as ironic asides, juxtapositions, and musical jokes that ease our entry into the episode. The conflation of two fantasy worlds—the musical and the fantasy/sci-fi show—generates a greater truth, to the surprise of both the characters "on stage" and those of us in the audience.

To this end, I analyze the songs and their contexts in a (rough) parallel to the history of the American stage and screen musical. Numbers are grouped by style and intratextual reference, followed by summary remarks on the musical as a whole and how it functions within the history of the series.

Swing Time

I believe all film in the history of cinema aspires to be Fred Astaire. I think he is the single greatest phenomenon in the history of film. The airiness, the transcendence, the delight, the absolute authority ... He was built to dance.⁴

I'll Never Tell

The most self-consciously historical number of "Once More, with Feeling" is Anya and Xander's self-described "retro pastiche" dance number in the key of C, "I'll Never Tell," in the style of a classic Astaire-partnered comedy dance (a staple of his films with Ginger Rogers in the 1930s). The jazzy chords that slide down chromatically in the bass signal the typical vamp intro to a tune straight out of the Great American Songbook. But by actually beginning the tune with the indecisive vamp in B \flat (arriving in the middle of a cadence that never achieves closure) Whedon heightens the ambivalence of Anya and Xander's emotions toward their approaching wedding.

³ On the musical as utopian fantasy, see Paul Filmer, Val Rimmer, and Dave Walsh, "'Oklahoma!': Ideology and Politics in the Vernacular Tradition of the American Musical," *Popular Music*, 18/3 (1999), pp. 381–95. A discussion of the history of the term "genre" as it connotes current sci-fi and fantasy texts in general is found in Matthew SurrIDGE, "Comics and Codes: Biography as Genre (a Reply to 'Based on a True Story')," *The Comics Journal*, September (1999), accessed 1 May 2008 at http://www.tcj.com/3_online/b_surrIDGE_092299.html.

⁴ Joss Whedon quoted in Muir, *Singing a New Tune*, p. 27.

"I'll Never Tell" is composed as a standard: as opposed to the rock-influenced numbers that precede it, its harmony remains in a jazz-influenced traditional style. Anya and Xander trade unstable verses that never reach the tonic (the home chord), hitting the chord a half-step above the dominant chord instead, to force a traditional if witty modulation to the key of G. In this way, A \flat (as \flat VI) becomes the tritone substitute for the secondary dominant as they enter the chorus, as shown in Figure 12.1.⁵ As Anya and Xander consistently "miss" the tonic, despite their best intentions, so they have missed one another's true fears, and their engagement will never find closure in marriage.

Figure 12.1 Tritone substitution in "I'll Never Tell"

The musical score for "I'll Never Tell" is presented in 4/4 time. It features three staves: Anya's vocal line, Xander's vocal line, and piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), indicating the key of G major. The tempo is marked "a tempo".

Chord Progression: C (I) — F (IV) — A \flat ¹³/G \flat (\flat VI² add6, tritone sub) — G (I).

Lyrics:
 ANYA: 'Cos there's noth - ing to tell.
 XANDER: No. I'll nev - er tell. 'Cos there's noth - ing to tell.

Harmonic Analysis:
 C: I
 IV
 G: \flat VI² add6
 I
 ("V" (tritone sub))

The overtones of a later era of Broadway surface as the leads trade bars, and the battling chorus moves into a quickstep swing rhythm in 4/4. The *No, No, Nanette* (1925) styling of the music includes the strong two-beat feel and the Charleston rhythm that closes every four bars, while the accompanying lyrical ripostes recall the clever banter by Dorothy Field or Ira Gershwin that characterized the Astaire-Rogers duets in the films *Swing Time* (1936) and *Shall We Dance* (1937).

⁵ I use both Roman numeral and pop chord analytic symbols, with major and minor triads differentiated by upper- and lower-case letters respectively. All musical examples are based on the published sheet music in Joss Whedon and Paul Ruditis, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 'Once More, With Feeling': The Script Book*, ed. Micol Ostow (New York, 2002). Lyrics refer to those published in Whedon and Ruditis, as well as the CD notes to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: "Once More, with Feeling"* (Rounder Records, 2002).

Both music and lyrics betray an ironic distance: the closed high-hat and stomp rhythm of the chorus—slowed and stylized to allow the leads to interact—evokes an earlier era than that of the “hip” lyrics. Yet the frank dialogue is not out of place in the pre-Hays Code 1920s atmosphere evoked by the music (“His penis got diseases from a Chumash tribe” is an intratextual reference to an event in the episode “Pangs” [4.8]). The specific reference is to the genteel comedic banter enjoyed by the post-code Fred and Ginger: where Fred sang “You like vanilla and I like vanilla,”⁶ Xander sings “She eats these skeezy cheeses that I can’t describe”; where Ginger complained that Fred was “no insults and all morals,” Anya complains that “When things get rough he just hides behind his Buffy.”

The double-time wordless dance bridge that follows serves the same function that dance did in those classic 1930s musicals: where words fail, feet take over, and Anya and Xander are re-united in movement. The irony continues unabated, however, as they swing dance to a late-1960s mocking funk vamp, a coded sign of the “swinging sixties” that segues into their warm reunion. Here both language and music reflect an earlier era, while a dark hint of what will come later in the sixth season enters in the chorus (“I read this tale, there’s wedding then betrayal”). The climax of the number, with Anya and Xander singing in unison “We could really raise the beam in making marriage a hell” perfectly unites *Buffy*’s supernatural premise with the legacy of the partner dance and the very ordinary fears of the mortal fan contemplating a defining stage of adulthood, a staple of the show from the beginning.

The final verse plays with the rhythm as both lyrics and music (with a temporary resolution of the continually evaded cadence) resolve the song’s internal tensions. Yet those tensions resurface and come to a peak in the coda, to delay the climactic dominant (D⁷) with a sly reference to A_b in “thank God, I’ll never tell” as the pair strike one more evocative pose and topple back into the sofa “laughing, in classic post-musical number style.” Here Anya and Xander reference a very specific scene in *Shall We Dance*, where Fred and Ginger strike one last “balletic” pose before toppling into the grass at the close of “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off.” As Anya and Xander were uncomfortable mounting a classic partner dance—complete with overhead angled shot—so Astaire and Rogers were uncharacteristically awkward on roller skates, with their clumsiness operating as an ironic backdrop to the sophisticated rhymes of Ira Gershwin’s lyrics.

As the only stable couple in “Once More, with Feeling,”⁷ Xander and Anya’s extended battle serves the same purpose as do the partner dances of Astaire and Rogers, which “choreograph their sexual relation in terms of comparability and

⁶ Ira Gershwin, lyrics, “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” (1937).

⁷ An online analysis by Rowan gives an astute analysis of the three couples in “Let’s Face the Music and Dance: Couples in ‘OMwF,’” *Tabula Rasa—Love. Redemption. Spike*. (2001), accessed 2 May 2008 at <http://www.btvS-tabularasa.net/essays/FaceTheMusic.html>.

partnership without losing its romance and erotic charge.”⁸ The viewer experiences a rich portrait of the couple in a relatively brief time: Anya was a man-hating demon reformed by Xander’s love, while Xander is a “regular guy” both smitten with and somewhat troubled by his mate.

The props that serve as reflections of their “ordinary life” reflect the magical role of props in famous scenes such as “Make ’em Laugh” from *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), in which Donald O’Connor dodges a sound stage full of everyday hazards. By overcoming them and taming his surroundings, he opens up the physical and virtual space of the musical number (a metaphor highlighted when O’Connor confuses the canvas wall of the set with an actual wall at the dance’s climax). The Sunnydale Press newspaper advertising the musical mayhem, the refrigerator, and the kitchen table are all players in “I’ll Never Tell,” and through them the viewer realizes the extent of the town’s transformation. As Sutton described the meaning of props in the musical,

This transmutation of objects, of the quotidian, is achieved by sheer force of imagination in the protagonists. Objects and settings from the everyday world of the surrounding plot (the “real” world) are given a new meaning by their use within the number (the idealized world).⁹

At the end of Anya and Xander’s dance we smash cut to them walking with Giles through Sunnydale. At this point, our protagonists have not given all that much thought to their impulsive need to sing and dance away their innermost fears and hopes. Anya, ever the cultural critic, worries aloud over why her and Xander’s number was a “retro pastiche,” while Xander, the most anxious of the Scoobies, proclaims it “a nightmare, a plague ... it’s like a nightmare about a plague.” Giles confirms their fears by noting that, indeed, a musical immolation occurred, although in his self-effacing fashion he dryly notes “I just saw the one—I managed to examine the body while the police were taking witness arias.” Their self-analysis cuts deeper as all three are, in fact, still very much within the “retro pastiche,” as street cleaners synchronously dance and a young woman (played by co-executive producer Marti Noxon) pleads her case with a traffic cop.

What You Feel

We caught a glimpse of the musical demon Sweet—played by Broadway star Hinton Battle—at the close of Act I, at the point where the musical spell that has infected Sunnydale took a turn toward the dark side. Upon the spontaneous combustion of a man who literally danced himself to death, Sweet intones “That’s

⁸ Steven Cohan, “Feminizing the Song and Dance Man,” in Steven Cohan (ed.), *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader* (New York, 2002), p. 93.

⁹ Martin Sutton, “Patterns of Meaning in the Musical,” in Rick Altman (ed.), *Genre: The Musical* (London, 1981), p. 190.

entertainment!”. This directly references *The Band Wagon* (1953) as well as a 1974 collection of favorite musical clips that defined and classified the American film musical for later generations. The numbers in *That’s Entertainment!* allow the stars of the American film musical to live forever; but the dance to death is Sweet’s distillation of the musical “plague,” the finale for which he sits patiently through love songs, dancing dry-cleaner patrons and witness arias. As we prepare for his official entrance, the hapless Dawn is kidnapped just as she breaks into song, only to awaken splayed out on a pool table in the Bronze. Dawn’s number is thus transformed into an elegant, Cyd Charisse-like dance number as she negotiates the space of the Bronze with Sweet’s puppet-masked henchmen.¹⁰

Darkly coded, minor-key orchestral background music leads up to Sweet’s entrance during Dawn’s ballet.¹¹ As Dawn feints with the puppet minions, strings sigh over *pizzicato* cellos, an ominous oboe melody, and a diminished run in harp and bell chimes, orchestration that alludes to the cinematic reveal of a villain’s dark plans in fantastic films from the 1980s onward (for example, in Danny Elfman’s scores for Tim Burton such as the entrance of Catwoman in *Batman Returns*, 1992, or the “Evil Eye” scene in *Sleepy Hollow*, 1999). Yet at Sweet’s entrance the music is pared down to a jazz trio with a distinctly laid-back shuffle rhythm. Whedon notes that Dawn’s confrontation with Sweet “brings her to a sexualized place.”¹² Likewise the fantasy scoring gives way to jazz and blues with its cinematic connotations of seduction. Whedon also mentions that he had stairs added to the Bronze set so that Sweet could descend onto the stage gradually in a scene that recalls Astaire’s use of steps on the shipboard set of “Slap That Bass,” also from *Shall We Dance*,¹³ the lyrics of which also echo the sentiments of Sweet’s song.

As we might expect from Sweet’s modified zoot suit and his soft-shoe entrance, “What You Feel” is a jazz swing tune with blues inflections. The “cool” vibe of the demon is coded by his dress and the particulars of his tune: its cyclic structure, blues appropriations, and the gently rocking, double plagal cadence that marks the last four bars of the refrain: g minor–C–g minor–F–g minor (i–IV–i–,VII–i). Figure 12.2 gives an overview of the structure: upper-case letters are assigned to each repetition of the refrain: all *A* sections begin on the tonic, while *B* sections

¹⁰ Dawn’s ballet with the masked henchman reminds Jamie Clarke of the rape scene in Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), “that similarly demonised the musical by being accompanied by a rendition of ‘Singin’ in the Rain’.” Jamie Clarke, “Affective Entertainment In ‘Once More, with Feeling’: A Manifesto for Fandom,” *Refractory*, 2 (2003), accessed 1 May 2008 at <http://blogs.arts.unimelb.edu.au/refractory/2003/03/18/affective-entertainment-in-once-more-with-feeling-a-manifesto-for-fandom-jamie-clarke/>.

¹¹ Whedon reveals that he asked Beck for “something like Peter and the Wolf.” Joss Whedon, “Once More, with Feeling” audio commentary, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season Six DVD Collection* (2003).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

begin on the supertonic.¹⁴ Although the audience never hears his name ("I got a hundred" he later tells Buffy), we will call him "Sweet".¹⁵ Whether intentional irony or not, "sweet" was the term for the saccharine, pre-composed vocal and orchestrally enhanced jazz pioneered by Paul Whiteman and marketed to a predominately white audience through the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁶

Figure 12.2 Phrase structure of "What you Feel"

A: a a' b a"

Why'd you run away? ...

A: a a' b a"

I'm the heart of swing ...

A': a"" a"" a a'

'Cause I know what you feel, girl ...

B: b a" b' b"

All those hearts lay open, that must sting ...

A'': a"" a"" b b (harmonic syncopation)

'Cause I know what you feel, girl ...

Tag: b"" a"

I bought Nero his very first fiddle ... That's what it's all about!

Sweet approaches Dawn, and reveals to her and the audience why he has arrived in Sunnydale in the first (A) chorus. The second chorus details the nature of the particular musical curse he inflicts, leading Dawn to the (spoken) interjection "So, you're, like, a good demon? Bringin' the fun in?" Once again, props define the diegetic space and delineate characters in lieu of verbal exposition. Dawn and the minions journey off the pool table and around the Bronze to define Sweet's lair and the space that will later serve as a showdown between Buffy and the demon. Sweet towers over Dawn, who slides across the floor submissively as he enters in a low-angle shot. Yet his descent mirrors the ambiguity voiced in the first two refrains: an angel might descend, metaphorically, from some moral height, but

¹⁴ Lower-case letters indicate four-bar phrases and are assigned by harmonic function (a phrases begin on the tonic, while b phrases begin on a pre-dominant), to reveal each phrase as a microcosm of the whole. The lyrics quoted indicate only the beginning of the relevant verse, not the complete lyric associated with that phrase.

¹⁵ Whedon and Ruditis, *The Script Book*, p. 16.

¹⁶ Lewis A. Erenberg, *Singin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago, 1998), p. 11.

we expect a “bad” demon to ascend from hell. Later Sweet ascends the stairs, as did Jack Buchanan playing the tyrannical but cowed director Jeffrey Cordova in the backstage version of *Faust* that illuminated the larger romantic drama of *The Band Wagon*.

The third chorus suggests the dark side of Sweet’s reign, while the second (*B*) chorus confirms it: by causing people to sing and dance their most intimate and intense emotions, “that energy/Starts to come on way too strong.” The result is pain and the occasional self-immolation, the Faustian bargain or “penalty/When life is but a song.” We leave the stability of the tonic in favor of the unstable Neapolitan (♭II) harmony when Sweet sings “You brought me down and doomed this town.” Yet, despite his power, Sweet never professes factual, empirical knowledge of the world. His repeated claims that “I know what you feel, girl” sum up his character. Sweet is an empathic demon who unleashes his emotional knowledge in that popular dramatic form that enshrines heightened emotion as its *raison d’être*: the musical. He has existed for centuries; his brief visit to Sunnydale comes not coincidentally at a point in Buffy’s journey in which everyone in her orbit bears difficult and painful passions that need release. Whedon explains why Sweet is later allowed a mysterious exit: “He is the musical, incarnate, and he’s all around us, and that’s where we put him.”¹⁷

That Sweet is a “professional” music demon is marked, as Jeffrey Middents notes, by Hinton Battle’s superior singing and dancing skills.¹⁸ Middents feels that the singular nature of Battle’s performance dangerously recalls those Golden Era musicals that confined African-American performers to one walk-on performance per film. Casting Sweet as African-American may be an ironic reference to earlier codes, but there is no doubt that Battle’s skills, in conjunction with the jazz idiom, slick dress, and casual speech mark him as profoundly hip. The fascination of white culture with the masculine attributes of the African-American musician entails harmful ethical assumptions. Yet, as Ingrid Monson notes, the notion of “hipness” relies as much on discipline, dignity, and social consciousness as it does on transgressive or socially marginal behavior.¹⁹ Sweet is not only the sole professional entertainer in Sunnydale; he is the only character comfortable with who and what he is, with nothing to hide from the world. Hence his comfort with one key and one style: Sweet has the only number with a clearly defined, unambiguous cadential closure. As Middents notes, he has the upper hand throughout the episode, and leaves of his own accord. When “What You Feel” is reprised, Sweet delivers the episode’s title as an ironic aside, as “All those secrets you’ve been concealing” succeeded in bringing hell on earth.

¹⁷ Whedon, “Once More, with Feeling” audio commentary.

¹⁸ Jeffrey R. Middents, “A Sweet Vamp: Critiquing the Treatment of Race in *Buffy* and the American Musical Once More (with Feeling),” *Slayage* 17 (2005): 19.

¹⁹ Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 48/3 (1995), p. 422.

That’s Entertainment

Vincente Minnelli is the beginning and the end of musical directors. I think that’s exemplified in the number in *Brigadoon*’s “Waiting for My Dearie,” which I could watch four hundred times. He could do more with a very little bit of movement in a very small room, than [other] people could do with a stadium.²⁰

Under Your Spell

The central love song of “Once More, with Feeling” was shot in an “old-fashioned” long take,²¹ as Tara professes not only her love to Willow but her belief that Willow’s love has renewed her. Tara’s lyrics reflect the larger-than-life fantasy projection that the “show of love,” as Dennis Giles puts it, will abolish difference and result in a larger unity.²² The diegetic staging of “Under Your Spell” literalizes the magic implied by the show of love in all musicals as the two witches transform their surroundings, moving from the idealized nature of a beautiful park to the intimate space of their bedroom, accompanied by dancing girls and pixie dust as metaphors for infatuation, and using levitation as a transparent metaphor for sexual union.

The structure of this scene and its carefully choreographed spaces recall Vincente Minnelli’s staging of *Brigadoon* (1954), where magic was manifest in the shift from one place to another. In both musicals the experience of enchantment momentarily expands from a select group to admit outsiders: inhabitants of *Brigadoon* encounter visiting hunters, and Xander’s invocation subsumes the whole of Sunnydale under its spell. Because “Under Your Spell” interrupts the Scooby gang’s search for the musical menace behind this curse, it appears to halt the plot at this point; it thus hearkens back to the tension in classic MGM musicals of “a shifting and volatile dialectic between integrative and nonintegrative elements,” or story versus spectacle.²³

Yet, as did many of the romantic numbers in MGM musicals from *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944) to *Gigi* (1958), “Under Your Spell” has several functions that are crucial to the story. On the surface, innocent, trusting Tara is positioned at one end of a continuum, and her later break with the duplicitous Willow maintains a classic parallelism characteristic to musicals as a genre. As Tara and Willow delight in the joy of expressing their deepest emotions in song and dance—only to later become disillusioned and shocked by the result—so will the larger narrative unfold, as ever greater secrets emerge in song, and ever more desperate events unfold on Sunnydale’s stage. In an even larger sense, this scene, like many others, hints at

²⁰ Whedon in Muir, *Singing a New Tune*, p. 51.

²¹ Whedon, “Once More, with Feeling,” audio commentary.

²² Dennis Giles, “Show-making,” in Altman (ed.), *Genre: The Musical*, p. 86.

²³ Martin Rubin, *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle* (New York, 1993), p. 12.

events to come in the Buffyverse, when a large chunk of California will be under the spell of Dark Willow.

Tara's ballad answers the need for an unabashed love song; its purity of tone and intent highlights the pain of betrayal and loss when later reprised. Written in D major, the opening tonic-dominant chords promise a simple upbeat pop song, yet come to rest with a deceptive cadence on a subdominant ninth chord to reveal dark undercurrents as Tara details her earlier, unhappy life.

The first verse ends on an extended half cadence, while the chorus begins deceptively on the submediant (b minor). Tara's declaration combines "rock" Mixolydian with major: moving between parallel modes allows her to express her intensely amorous feelings with not one but two dominants, as subsequent phrases move through the A major dominant chord to cadence on C (♭VII).²⁴ She remains essentially on the dominant of B major during the bridge, before returning to D and another half cadence on A, the open musical structure expressive of her desire (see Figure 12.3).

Figure 12.3 Analytical reduction of verse, chorus, and bridge of "Under your Spell"

The figure displays the analytical reduction of the verse, chorus, and bridge of the song "Under your Spell" in D major. The notation is presented in a grand staff format, with chord symbols indicated below the bass line.

Verse: D: I V IV⁹ V IV⁷ V

Chorus: vi V ii B:[♭]VI[♯] II[♭] VI[♯] I

Bridge: V ii vi i V ii IV ii[♯] I IV⁷ V

²⁴ The majority of contemporary rock songs have a modal basis in Mixolydian or Aeolian; both these and other so-called church modes serve as genre markers which became more important after the 1960s as pop genres fragmented into numerous subgenres. See especially Robert Walser's *Running With the Devil: Power, Genre, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middleton, CT, 1993), and Allan Moore's two articles, "Patterns of Harmony," *Popular Music*, 11/1 (1992), pp. 73–106, and "The So-called 'Flatted Seventh' in Rock," *Popular Music*, 14/2 (1995), pp. 185–201.

The verse never returns. Instead, a final chorus incorporates the bridge, its telescoped form signaling Willow and Tara's consummation. The filmic convention of an abrupt cut—so that the number never closes—signals the pleasurable excess of Tara and Willow's love, the "show of love" their number represents, and the capacity of the musical to contain this excess.

Rest in Peace

The second love song of "Once More, with Feeling" belongs to Spike, the vampire torn between his violent nature and his affection for Buffy and her sister. In a shot that rhymes with the opening to "Under Your Spell," the camera enters Spike's crypt with a generous pan, modeled on the first widescreen movies.²⁵ Given his inner battle, Spike gets a suitably conflicted ballad that forms a mirrored pair with "Under Your Spell." Tara expresses contentment while outside in the sun and open air; as her passion grows more intense, the pair retires to a bedroom and a mutual expression of love. Spike, hurt and angry, repudiates Buffy's scorn in his underground crypt. As his irritation finds release the two move to an outdoor cemetery but end the number with an accidental embrace in an open grave that repulses Buffy and leads her to flee.

Both intimate in the verse and brash in the chorus, "Rest in Peace," juxtaposes expressions of self-pity with fierce protest. It is constructed differently from either "Under Your Spell" or the retro numbers of Anya, Xander, and Sweet. Rather than four-bar phrases with closure, both verse and chorus of Spike's ballad are based on a circular chord progression composed of one- and two-bar harmonic modules. Its harmonic language remains resolutely modal (E Mixolydian) and elliptical, allowing the harmony to follow Spike's mercurial mood without taking the listener out of the tonal and emotional context. "Rest in Peace" frustrates cadential release by remaining Mixolydian, moving habitually to D and A (♭VII and IV) in a plagal motion repeated in the key of G (♭III).

The forward thrust of the song relies on rhythm, meter, and tempo: a harmonic rhythm of one chord per bar is associated with stability, two chords with motion, and four chords with closure. Spike does not find harmonic release until the climactic bridge, where an abrupt pivot through b minor takes him to the key of C# major (VI, enharmonically written as D♭ in the sheet music). Only in this guitar-unfriendly key will Spike reach a "real" dominant in the form of G#, before a deceptive cadence returns him to the E Mixolydian of the chorus (the transition from C# back to E is shown in an analytical reduction in Figure 12.4).

²⁵ Whedon cites *Brigadoon*, *West Side Story*, *Les Girls* and *It's Always Fair Weather* in his audio commentary to the episode.

Figure 12.4 Transition from C# to E in “Rest in Peace”

“hurts me more”

C#: V bVII I V bVII I E: $\frac{i}{vi}$ $\frac{\#V}{III}$ I

Chris McDonald calls such a progression modal subversion, identifying it with the practices of guitar-oriented alternative rock musicians of the 1990s.²⁶ Thus the shift to C# in the bridge reveals Spike’s true feelings, as well as his true Otherness, as neither monster nor man, neither sentimental crooner nor hardcore punk. The progression that ends both verse and chorus signals closure primarily as a descending bass line, one that slides down anticlimactically to the tonic (G–F#–E). This “anti-cadence” projects Spike’s world-weary outlook and implies that he must wait to find true closure.

The mainstream rock style evoked in the chorus strikes a balance between Spike’s association with both punk rock/cultural rebellion and sentimental fare (such as his peculiar attachment to daytime soap opera and the mundane conviviality of pub crawling). Loyal viewers will recognize allusions to Spike’s long history of romantic suffering in the lyrics, which feature anaphora (“Let me rest ... Let me get ... Let me take ...”), ironic metaphor (“since I’m only dead to you”) and relentless rhyming in the climactic bridge (“... possessed ... breast ... guessed ... chest ... unimpressed”), all nods to his human past as a failed Victorian poet.

While Spike’s persona is of recent vintage, the role of an unrequited lover with a highly ambivalent relationship to the object of his affection has been a staple of the classic musical since Laurey’s dream in *Oklahoma!* (1943). Spike will leave behind the person he was, as Fred Astaire’s cinematic hooper left behind his former self to forge a new professional and personal union with Cyd Charisse at the close of *The Band Wagon*. The show of love enacted by Tara and Willow mirrors the show of love between the reluctant but passionate lovers Buffy and Spike, who will close the musical in a new relationship not only with one another but with their world.

²⁶ Chris McDonald, “Exploring Modal Subversions in Alternative Music,” *Popular Music*, 19/3 (2000), pp. 360–63.

Comedy Tonight

[My influences] were the old guys: Bock and Harnick, Frank Loesser; these were really big with me... Sondheim is, of course, the God of all things.²⁷

I've Got a Theory/Bunnies/We're Together

The first ensemble piece, and the one that introduces the central conflict that drives the plot, is "I've Got a Theory/Bunnies/We're Together," sung by the Scooby gang as they gather in *The Magic Box*. Although "Theory" lies firmly in the musical comedy tradition,²⁸ its opening changes (A–G–f# minor–E) occur over a repeating "lament" descent in the bass (A–G–F#–E), whose cyclic structure—and long-standing association with dread and romantic longing—suggest the complications to follow.

Each phrase expresses a theory on the surface (regarding the narrative's central conflict), as well as a theory regarding the characters and their relationship, coded through word choice, vocal contour, and rhythmic cadence. Giles states the truth (as a demon *does* cause all the mayhem), yet, in his typical, self-effacing manner, withdraws this insight. Willow reveals her characteristic optimism and prodigious memory in reaching back to season one ("Nightmares" [1.10]) for a possible solution ("some kid is dreamin'"). Reflecting the static situation, each phrase of the bassline returns to the beginning without resolution, structuring the verse as a question and answer. Characteristically, Xander interrupts the return to the beginning, subverting the formula with a Gilbert and Sullivan-like line of patter ("Which is ridiculous 'cause/witches they were persecuted Wicca good and love the earth and women power, and/I'll be over here.")

Xander's stoptime sets up Anya's break with the tune altogether: despite Tara's attempts to continue, she begins her own number, a heavy-metal diatribe against her sworn nemeses. "Bunnies" signals heavy-metal in timbre, dynamics, and mode, shifting to open guitar voicings on E (chord V of A),²⁹ and reversing the bassline with an ascent that emphasizes the didactic dominant-tonic cadence (Anya is quite sure that bunnies are evil). "Bunnies" is staged as a laser light show with appropriate histrionics as Anya screams "bunnies!" before an amusing *volte-face* pivot on G major for "Or maybe midgets."

As in the classic integrated musical, Anya's anthem serves as more than comic relief; it reveals Emma Caulfield as capable of great wit and emotional range. Anya has served as a bellwether of the Scoobies's emotional state since her reversion from vengeance demon to human. Thus, as the gang witness her outburst, their

²⁷ Whedon, "Once More, with Feeling," audio commentary.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ We actually hear power chords that suggest D Dorian, the prototypical heavy metal mode. See Walser's discussion in *Running With the Devil*, pp. 46–51.

fears lock them into a repeating harmonic-emotional cycle of “what if?” that always ends on the dominant.

After “Bunnies” the two-beat feel of “Theory” returns, but the bassline continues to rise rather than fall, and a modulation from A to B major cues Buffy’s disconsolate entrance. “We’re Together” upsets the periodic four-bar motion from the tonic with a modulation to e minor prepared by the earlier shift to B major (chord V of E). The musical arrangement also shifts from orchestral scoring to 1970s soft-rock instrumentation, an appropriate accompaniment to hackneyed sentiments praising community (“What can’t we face if we’re together?”) that mask our heroine’s apathy and despair. Buffy’s phrases don’t follow the Baroque logic of “Theory” or the modal progression of “Bunnies,” but begin and end with (chromatic) third relations: e minor–C and G–e minor. Just as her progression never cadences, so her question is never answered, requiring Anya’s mini-reprise “except for bunnies” to close the number on an ironic note.

Unhappily Ever After

When Buffy peeks outside to see if all of Sunnydale really is “alive with music,” she witnesses a classic production number, with a satirical twist: co-executive producer David Fury leads a dancing chorus of dry cleaning clients in “They Got the Mustard Out!” This nod to the musical past opens up the narrative present, as the insular and self-involved gang is thrust into something much larger than itself. As character revelations cause serious personal complications, so the community expression of joy in consumption will enact a price.

A musical like “Once More, with Feeling” would have been unthinkable before the split between the commercial Broadway musical and the art musical that occurred after Sondheim and Bernstein’s *West Side Story* (1957). Like Whedon’s musical, Sondheim’s works combine modernist elements with “a thorough absorption and self-conscious utilization of the past.”³⁰ Sondheim is famous for maintaining a high level of craftsmanship while deconstructing “happily ever after,”³¹ a central theme in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* as series. In a typical Sondheim musical, vernacular song enters the drama as “diegetic song,” which—in contrast to the integrated book musical—creates a greater unity between verbal and musical elements. In Stephen Banfield’s words, “the recognition of musical and lyric style [in diegetic song] actually becomes an issue in the plot ... [and] it takes on a heavily symbolic role.”³²

³⁰ Geoffrey Block, “The Broadway Canon from Show Boat to West Side Story and the European Operatic Ideal,” *Journal of Musicology*, 11 (1993), pp. 541–2.

³¹ David Walsh and Len Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture* (Westport, CT, 2003), p. 134.

³² Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor, 1993), pp. 184–6.

This is certainly the case with the wry asides peppered throughout "Once More, with Feeling"; Anya's self-conscious designation of her duet with Xander as retro pastiche, and her inquiry as to whether Spike's song was a "breakaway pop hit, or more of a book number," suggest that she perceives a larger form to the whole. Janet Halfyard problematizes this question, constructing a category of songs that are non-diegetic "whilst they are being sung" but which are perceived retrospectively as diegetic.³³ I agree with Richard S. Albright, who unequivocally states "there is no secondary diegesis, no separate world of the performance."³⁴ Not only is there no "backstage musical," but all that once was non-diegetic—emotional cues, background scoring and orchestral hits—is absorbed into the fabric of Sunnydale life, as revealed early in Act I when Giles quips "that would explain the huge backing orchestra I couldn't see and the synchronized dancing from the room service chaps."

Those caught up in the show are too busy disgorging their innermost feelings in song and dance to analyze the experience *in media res*. But Halfyard divines that "Once More, with Feeling" is not about the show—the threat of this week's villain—*itself*. As in painfully self-reflexive works such as Sondheim's *Company* (1970), in which characters comment upon their songs, and *Into the Woods* (1987), in which characters deconstruct the fables in which they're trapped, "Once More, with Feeling" is about the Scooby gang's reflection on their fate. And it is this self-reflexivity, rather than musical style, that links Whedon to Sondheim.

As Walsh and Platt note, Sondheim's musicals remain ethical to the core and are concerned throughout with establishing significant values through compromise. There is thus a political element to the Sondheim musical but not, they decide, a Brechtian one, as Sondheim always places character before politics.³⁵ Similarly, Whedon has refused every urge to reduce his work to a simple political message.³⁶ The complexity of "Once More, with Feeling" and what ultimately makes it such a satisfying "show" is the unpretentious yet profound nature of each character's reflexivity. Our heroes' concern reflects *Buffy's* long history, in which no good thing or favorable event comes without cost. Although it is "all kind of romantic" to Dawn, most characters recognize the arrival of an all-singing, all-dancing musical spectacular as a sign that their repressed emotions, secrets, and fears have exceeded the bounds of drama as genre. They react with verbal and musical wit to their quandary, historicizing their predicament overtly (citing past events) and covertly (through the substance of each number). "Once More, with Feeling" thus

³³ Janet K. Halfyard, "Singing Their Hearts Out: The Problem of Performance in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*," *Slavage* 17 (2005), 37.

³⁴ Richard S. Albright, "[B]reakaway pop hit or ... book number?: 'Once More, with Feeling' and Genre," *Slavage* 17 (2005), 10.

³⁵ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture*, p. 145.

³⁶ Rhonda Wilcox discusses this in "'There Will Never Be a 'Very Special' *Buffy*': Buffy and the Monsters of Teen Life," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 27/2 (1999), pp. 16–23.

references the history of the book musical, up to the point that it became self-aware and “conceptual” (from *West Side Story* to *Company*).

Part of Your World

I think the greatest musicals—with the exception of *South Park*—that have come out of the American cinema in the last ten or twenty years have all been Disney musicals.³⁷

Going Through the Motions

In interviews and commentary, Whedon has reiterated how Buffy’s first number was inspired by the heroine’s “I want” scenes that open recent Disney musicals like *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991).³⁸ This homage includes a strong female lead expressing pent-up emotion, simple but effective symbolism (Buffy staking a vampire while singing the word “heart”), and the climax.³⁹

The “I want” number has a long history, from (*No, No*) Nanette’s “I Want to Be Happy” to Golden Age female protagonists such as Annie Oakley (*Annie Get Your Gun*), Nellie Forbush (*South Pacific*) and the Marias of *The Sound of Music* and *West Side Story*. In the context of the American musical, a vampire Slayer cutting a wide swath through a hoard of undead is a novel take on both the “I want” number and the feminist heroine. Yet the central irony of “Going Through the Motions” rests on the revelation that Buffy has lost the fierce emotions that defined her power (“What’s My Line, Part 2” [2.10]). The Greek chorus of demons has a Freudian bent, referencing Buffy’s characteristic witty banter with her prey while dissecting her mental state. Although we are not formally introduced to the latest crisis in Sunnydale until “I’ve Got a Theory,” Buffy drolly telegraphs the plot through her trademark puns (emphasis mine): “Every single night, the same *arrangement*. ... I’ve been making *shows* of trading blows. ... I’ve been *going through the motions*. *Walking through the part*...”

The orchestral overture opens on an F major six-four chord, an unstable dominant that should resolve to C, but moves down to an E \flat ^{7sus} chord instead, implying a resolution to A \flat . The opening chords serve as chromatic embellishments of E Mixolydian (a foretaste of Spike’s ballad), as the nostalgic Technicolor titles give way to a prosaic scene of the housemates’ morning rituals. But Buffy’s concerns rise above the everyday, as signaled by her ascent back to F via a third progression (E–A \flat), and a dominant (C^{7sus}), that decisively announces her solo.

³⁷ Whedon in Muir, *Singing a New Tune*, p. 76.

³⁸ Whedon, “Once More, with Feeling” audio commentary. Whedon discusses this number specifically in relation to Ariel’s “Part of Your World” in *The Little Mermaid* in Whedon and Ruditis, *The Script Book*, p. 76.

³⁹ Whedon in Muir, *Singing a New Tune*, p. 281.

The gist of the opening progression (shared by the Jam’s “Absolute Beginners” among other upbeat 1980s songs) moves through $\flat VII$ to the minor dominant, but the bass $F-E\flat-D-C$ is the same “lament” progression that underpins “I’ve Got a Theory.”⁴⁰ As in Spike’s plaint, Buffy’s Mixolydian mode exploits the emotional contrast between major tonic and minor dominant. She hits the wrong dominant—G major—on “nothing here is right,” followed by a her failed attempt to tonicize d (the relative minor) that enters the chorus with a deceptive cadence to symbolizes her loss of drive (as shown in an analytical reduction of the first verse and chorus in Figure 12.5).

Figure 12.5 Analytical reduction of first verse and chorus of “Going Through the Motions”

Verse

5 “Ev’ry single night” 7 “Still, I always feel” 9 “I’ve been making shows”

F: I vi v⁷ (minor dominant) I C: $\flat III$ $\flat VI$ (“wrong” dominant) V d: vi i V

Chorus

11 “going through the motions” 13 “Nothing seems to penetrate”

VI F: III $\flat VI$ V VI I $\flat VII^7$ (“plagal” dominant)

deceptive cadence in d (return to F)

⁴⁰ A truncated form of this descending line appears in the solo lament of Spike, and in his duet with Buffy (“Walk Through the Fire”); it returns as Buffy reveals her deepest secret in the denouement of “Something to Sing About.”

When the bridge finally reaches d minor, it rocks back and forth between d minor and G major, mired in plagal relations (I–IV) as Buffy cries “Will I stay this way forever? Sleepwalk through my life’s endeavor.” She rebuffs a buff a grateful victim only to rest on a crucial E_b major chord—the ‘plagal’ dominant (♭VII) in F and the Neapolitan (♭II). As our hero dusts a vampire and kills a goat demon by turns, E_b blossoms into a major seventh chord on “heart” and “owww.” As a transient key center between F Mixolydian and d minor, E_b represents the freedom of slaying, a freedom that no longer grounds the Slayer. In her final climactic phrase, Buffy returns to the tonic F, as her minor dominant on “be” (c minor) slowly mutates into major over a pedal F; reaching toward cadential closure but not achieving it as the dust swirls around her in the coda.

Something to Sing About

“Something to Sing About” is the fourth act companion piece to Buffy’s opening number. It announces C Mixolydian, the missing “dominant” from “Going Through the Motions,” and the key of hope in the final number, “Where Do We Go From Here?” Here Buffy faces Sweet’s challenge and bluntly demands he give her “something to sing about.” She drops her red coat (in what Whedon terms “a low-budget TV version of Cyd Charisse’s classic *Bandwagon*” scene) to reveal no less than the “meaning of this show.”⁴¹ Buffy’s emotional climax comes not when she is saved from a fiery death, but immediately afterward when, emotionally and physically exhausted, she reveals her darkest secret to the friends who raised her from the dead. With its major tonic and minor dominant, the key of this number parallels “Rest in Peace” as well, although here Buffy finds release at the end of each phrase on a full half cadence.

Irregular seven-bar phrases in the verse support the deeply ironic tone of “It’s all right if some things come out wrong / We’ll sing a happy song and you can sing along,” before moving to a double-time feel (two chords per bar) in the chorus, the *B* section of a modified Rondo form: *ABABCBC*. During the *B* section, the implied 2/4 meter shifts to an implied 7/16 (7/8) then 3/8 (6/8) (as seen in Figure 12.6), as Buffy’s lyrics grow ever more reflexive and sardonic (“Wishes can come true . . .”) and the harmony gets more tense (adding a ninth to the minor dominant). Buffy’s frantic dance, accompanied by asymmetrical phrasing and a cyclical C–g minor vamp (I–v) leave us unsure of how or when her number might end.

But the double-time section also provides a sharp contrast when the verse returns to a broader 4/4 feel and a direct modulation up to D Mixolydian. In terms of genre, Buffy’s call to “give me something to sing about” here becomes not only anthemic but hymn-like, with a slowed harmonic rhythm and choral backing, before a double-time turnaround vamp on e minor–b minor as the verse repeats.


⁴¹ Whedon, “Once More, with Feeling” audio commentary.

Figure 12.6 Meter shifts in "Something to Sing About"

B section

Double-time feel


Written meter **4/4** C Gm⁹ C Gm⁹

Perceived meter **2/4**  **7/16**

Where there's life there's hope Ev-'ry day's a gift

I v⁹


7/8 C Gm⁹ C Gm⁹

7/16  **6/16**

Wish - es can come true. Whis - tle while you work

a tempo

6/8 Gm⁹(#5) Gm^{6/9} **4/4** B^b Dm

6/16  **4/4**

so hard all day. To be like oth-er - girls, -

^bVII ii

Buffy's emotional turmoil is reflected in the constant change of genre (rock ballad to punk polka to hymn) as well as meter; dance rhythms give way to a flexible 12/8 in the C section in b minor, with another repeated plagal motion. The diminished chord that merely embellished Buffy's "hymn" (C-C^{dim}-A under a chorus of "Ah") here appears on the tonic B, to render more acerbic her momentous revelation: she was pulled out of heaven, and now she feels as though she's in a living hell. At this point Spike alone steps up to save Buffy from self-immolation, taking over her despondent plaint (in a return of the C section), during which he repeats the b minor-B^{dim} slide three times on "living." Spike's reply energizes "Something to Sing About"; he transforms Buffy's B from failed tonic to leading-tone into C major, the key of hope, and the chord of emotional and tonal closure to Buffy's original F major.

What a Feeling

The musical montage has become such a staple of film and TV that scripts must be thirty pages long by now: “He walks down the street. Cue oldie.” Whether it’s modern pop or a bunch of standards ... it’s just a really boring video. If they would just dance to pass the time while they’re walking sadly down the street, they would do us all a favor.⁴²

Standing

At the conclusion of Sweet and Dawn’s number in the Bronze we immediately cut to the third and “saddest”⁴³ solo ballad in “Once More, with Feeling,” given to Anthony Stewart Head, the one cast member with prior experience in stage musicals (most notably a West End performance of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*). Giles’s isolation and yearning is heightened by his separation from Buffy in this scene; she moves at a slower pace in a “training montage,” as she self-reflexively predicts, “from an eighties movie.” “Well, if we hear any inspiration power chords we’ll just lie down until they go away” he counters. But rather than *Rocky*-style, over-produced rock bombast, Giles breaks into a number whose stark intimacy—a quiet beginning on acoustic guitar—contrasts starkly with the dancing and singing spectacular of “What You Feel.”

Giles’s brief but powerful ballad is modeled on a singer/songwriter lament with contrasting stanzas, in an *AABAB* form. “Standing” begins in the key of F, quickly subverted as an F^{#dim} chord on “ready” (and “pretending”) tonicizes G. This clever harmonic feint relates forward and back: the F–g minor (♭VII–i) that embellished Sweet’s number becomes the foundation of “Standing” (see Figure 12.7), while the disorienting shift from Buffy’s tonic F to Sweet’s G expresses Giles’ anguish over his decision to leave Sunnydale.

The key of G represents “the world outside”; as soon as Giles mentions Buffy again he is back in F major. Giles attempt to reach G falls time and again back to F as he describes Buffy’s emotional stasis. He reaches the major dominant when he declares “I know I said that I’d be standing by your side,” yet words fail him (the phrase ends with “but I ...”). The *A* section repeats before the climax brings a confusion of key centers; C major (“take you by the hand”) followed by F Mixolydian. The song closes with the *B* section, leaving the form open, with a melancholy close on c minor–G (“standing in the way”) that mirrors Buffy’s cry of “be alive” from “Going Through the Motions.”

“Standing” is immediately brought into conjunction with the reprise of “Under Your Spell,” as Tara realizes she has been manipulated and literally put under a spell by her lover. As Tara comes to the heartbreaking realization that she must leave Willow, Giles joins her in the key of B major with “believe,” on its

⁴² Whedon in Muir, *Singing a New Tune*, p. 276.

⁴³ Whedon, “Once More, with Feeling” audio commentary.

Figure 12.7 Ending of "What You Feel" compared to the opening of "Standing"

"What You Feel," tag

Gm C Gm F Gm

"Now we're partying, that's what it's all about."

G: i IV i ^bVII i F: ↑ Buffy's key

"Standing," opening

F F[#]dim G D/A C/A

"You're not ready, for the world outside."

I G: vii⁻⁷ I V⁴ v

↑ "The world outside"

bright dominant, F[#], and the duo shift from minor to major to express their grief in unison. Yet the modal shift to major cannot by itself contain their emotion, and the reprise moves to the dominant key. Tara and Giles sing their laments in counterpoint, coming together on "wish I could stay" over c[#] minor (the minor dominant). The open-ended progressions in the first incarnations of "Under Your Spell" and "Standing" come to a close here with the plagal progression A–E, with E major transformed into a signifier of loss and shattered hopes.

Walk Through the Fire

The ironic juxtaposition of genre and function continues with Buffy's training scene. Just as "Standing" is an understated lament rather than an angry rock screed, so Buffy's workout is a melancholy dance rather than a training montage from a 1980s movie. Although not without self-reflexive humor (Giles's throwing knives at Buffy while simultaneously singing about protecting her is an "ironic turnaround" that is "a staple of the Buffy universe"),⁴⁴ this scene parodies neither the underdog machismo of "Footloose" (*Footloose*, 1984), nor the female

⁴⁴ Ibid.

empowerment enacted by “Flashdance ... What a Feeling” (*Flashdance*, 1983). Buffy’s buff detachment represents a Pyrrhic victory over the grave, revealing her emotionally more dead than alive. Her alienation from Watcher, friends, and family prefigures her further isolation as she marches off to save Dawn alone in “Walk Through the Fire.”

Co-executive producer David Fury lists “Walk Through the Fire” as his favorite number: “I think that was one of the most sophisticated numbers, musically and lyrically. Having all of the characters sing in it—obviously it was patterned after a sort of ‘Tonight’ number from *West Side Story*.”⁴⁵ “Walk” marks the return of a full verse-chorus form, as well as the union of every character (save Dawn) as they converge on the Bronze for the showdown with Sweet. Its soft introduction, in which first piano, harp, and then strings emerge from silence, reaches back to the minor bridge of “Going Through the Motion,” over a somber pedal D that recalls both the end of that number (where “alive” rang out over a four-bar pedal F) and the inarticulate sigh that ended Giles’s stanzas (an open D–A fifth with added E). “Walk Through the Fire” marries soft rock to the function of a dirge, as its opening verse alludes to the lament bass heard earlier (D–C–B_♭). The verse references both Phrygian and Dorian modes, the shifting chord qualities matching the antithesis expressed by the lyrics (see Figure 12.8).

Figure 12.8 Phrygian and Dorian modes in “Walk Through the Fire”

The musical score for "Walk Through the Fire" is presented in two systems. The first system, labeled "Verse 1", shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "I touch the fire and it free-zes me. I look in-to it and it's black." The piano accompaniment features a bass line with a "lament" bass (implied) and chords: Dm, F^{A7}/C, C, B^b/D, E^b, C. A bracket above the piano part labels this section as "D Phrygian". The second system, starting at measure 5, shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "Why can't I feel? My skin should crack and peel... I want the fi-re back..." The piano accompaniment features chords: Dm, F, Bm⁷(b⁵), Dm, C, B^b. A bracket above the piano part labels this section as "D Dorian".

⁴⁵ Quoted in Whedon and Ruditis, *The Script Book*, p. 79.

The verse moves from E_b (♭II) to C (♭VII) through a B⁰⁷ that forecasts the stinging revelation on B^{dim} yet to come in "Something to Sing About." In the third verse Spike joins Buffy, a burst of anger accompanying his own B⁰⁷ ("I'm free if that bitch dies"), with a droll reversal that reflects the return to d₂ minor ("I'd better help her out"). Yet when the chorus enters in an anthemic F major, "Walk Through the Fire" is revealed as a mirror image of "Going Through the Motions." In the opening number Buffy came out fighting in F, but admitted her ennui and exhaustion in the d minor bridge, while in "Fire" she begins by confessing her emotional frigidity in d minor, only to resolve "Walk through the fire" with a defiant I–V–IV progression in F.⁴⁶

Giles, Xander, and Anya join on the bridge, which prolongs B_b (the subdominant), freezing the progression while the Scoobies voice their apprehension by turns. The vocal counterpoint in the fourth verse reflects the emotional counterpoint of the scene. Though separate and isolated, each line follows the same chord progression, just as all of the characters travel to the same destination. In the final verse, three contrapuntal lines accommodate five juxtaposed expressive modes: Buffy's indifference, Sweet's glee, Tara's despair, Spike's schizophrenia ("No I'll save her; then I'll kill her!"), Giles's anxiety, and Willow's ironic aside ("I think this line's mostly filler"). The final chorus moves to a deceptive cadence on D_b (♭VI), as the note A that accompanied "walk," "fire" and "where else" slips to A_b for three repetitions of "burn" that melt into F as the vocals fade and an ominous d minor returns as Buffy arrives at the Bronze.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Numbers such as "Walk Through the Fire" and "Something to Sing About" owe their choreography and editing to contemporary film and video, but their musical style is indebted to those recent, pop-influenced Broadway and West End productions of the 1980s and 1990s termed the megamusical. Platt and Walsh identify the soft-rock style of the megamusical with the glorification of spectacle over substance (for instance, the arrival of the helicopter in *Miss Saigon*), and an attendant simplification of music and narrative to meet the demands of international syndication.⁴⁷ At the opposite pole stand pop-rock musicals such as the Who's *Tommy* (1993) and Jonathan Larsen's *Rent* (1996),⁴⁸ whose specific focus and original music set them in a class apart. *Rent* proves an especially constructive comparison as it celebrates community in the context of social otherness, a

⁴⁶ Although a common rock progression, its treatment here recalls "Seasons of Love" from the musical *Rent*, discussed below.

⁴⁷ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture*, pp. 157–64.

⁴⁸ Whedon lists *Rent* as one of his influences. See Whedon and Ruditis, *The Script Book*, p. 63.

bohemian life that “represents both individuality *and* community in a social world where difference ... stands at the centre.”⁴⁹

The characters in *Rent* find meaning through aestheticizing life; as they try to bridge their downtown sensibility with an uptown market without selling out, they find that paying the rent metaphorically takes their souls. In a similar sense Buffy and her friends are marginalized by practicing magic and hunting demons; their attempts to save the world certainly run the risk of death, but— as in the world of *Rent*— losing one’s soul seems a far greater price to pay. In both its formal model (Puccini’s *La Bohème*) and emotional scope, *Rent* is operatic, creating a world in which pop, jazz, and country styles speak equally to the characters’ plights.⁵⁰ The cast’s final assertion that there’s “No day like today” leaves them in a quandary not unlike that of the Scooby gang. Yet “Once More, with Feeling” lacks *Rent*’s celebratory atmosphere and romanticizing of everyday life. Having just saved the world—or at least, Sunnydale—yet again, Buffy and her friends find the resolution of their personal dilemmas a far more daunting task, a theme celebrated in outstanding episodes from “Becoming, Part II” (2.22) to “The Body” (5.16).

The final number picks up right where “Something to Sing About” left off, but opens as a moderate shuffle in a bright C major. “Where Do We Go From Here?” may be the final chorus or “big group sing,” as Spike puts it, but it marks a strikingly ambivalent end to an intense and cathartic journey. A relaxed, archetypically tonal progression begins the song (I–ii–vi–I–V–vi^{sus}), and each eight-bar phrase closes with a deceptive cadence on a minor, to project the open-ended sentiment of the title in the first chorus of 32 bars (a double period structured as *aa’ba’aa’ba’*, where each letter represents a four-bar segment).

The second chorus modulates up to D major, paralleling “Something to Sing About.” But unlike the earlier number, “Where Do We Go From Here?” remains in D, growing brighter and more tonally defined with a steady alternation of tonic D and dominant A, as the chorus sings “When does ‘The End’ appear?/When do the trumpets cheer?” This question is never answered directly, although I would argue that it is indirectly, by the music. As the group slides up in the final cadence (closing unexpectedly in B major), their communal strength redeems the piquant diminished chord that earlier expressed Buffy’s anguish: B diminished finally becomes B major, and “Once More, with Feeling” closes 180 degrees from where it began, on the opposite side of the Scoobies’s tonal and emotional universe, a full tritone away from the F of the introduction.

The musical structure of “Once More, with Feeling” thus ends on an ironic reversal that, in its abstract beauty, serves as a synecdoche for the network of ironies throughout the show. Indeed, its complex discursive context offers a model

⁴⁹ Walsh and Platt, *Musical Theater and American Culture*, p. 152.

⁵⁰ Eric Salzman, “From Stage to Page: Music-Theater in Print,” *Theater*, 32/1 (2002), pp. 65–6.

for the relational, inclusive, and differential nature of irony,⁵¹ for it lampoons those stylistic genres that span the musical's history even as it revels in their power to express what lies beyond mere language.

It seems disingenuous to bring up irony and the American musical without mentioning this episode's allusion to camp as a cultural signifying practice associated especially with MGM musicals.⁵² For instance Anya, the castrating man-eater turned domestic goddess, becomes a diva in "Bunnies," while her fiancé exhibits a typical American heterosexual male's anxiety about dancing and revealing emotion (a correlation that forms the crux of the plot). Yet whatever camp sensibility operates in *Buffy* is subtle and double-edged, inextricably bound up with its self-reflexive ability to mock its own conventions as well as those of the genres to which it alludes.⁵³ Thus the ease with which the series adapted to a musical format, one that included singing scofflaws, dancing dry-cleaning patrons and a "Six hundred pound Chorago demon making like Yma Sumac." As Whedon admits, "Buffy is so sophomoric, romantic, colorful, tense, sexual ... I think half the episodes feel like they're about to burst into song anyway ... So to say a demon has come in who causes musicals makes perfect sense in that world."⁵⁴

Music has always held a central role in the Buffyverse,⁵⁵ taking as its premise the long-standing tradition of Hollywood and nineteenth-century opera that music does not lie.⁵⁶ "Once More, with Feeling" not only acknowledges the ethical nature of music but also asserts that candor as its *raison d'être*; indeed, the multiple plot lines of season six cannot move forward without the liberating if ugly truth of its performance. In staking its claim to candor, the musical honors its fans, who already associate musical performance on *Buffy* with questions of authenticity and sincerity.⁵⁷ Whedon treats his audience as equals, celebrating his nostalgic love for the idealistic charms of the musical while admitting, with sardonic asides, that his discursive community is far too knowing to accept

⁵¹ See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York/London, 1994), pp. 58, 64.

⁵² See Steven Cohen's detailed study *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC, 2005).

⁵³ Roz Kaveney calls the show's reflexivity "almost obsessive!" in "She Saves the World. A Lot," in Roz Kaveney (ed.), *Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel* (London, 2001), p. 11.

⁵⁴ Muir, *Singing a New Tune*, p. 282.

⁵⁵ S. Renee Dechert writes: "Indeed, [music] functions as a form of rhetorical discourse every bit as important as the lines characters speak." "My Boyfriend's in the Band!": Buffy and the Rhetoric of Music," in Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery (eds) *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Lanham, MD, 2002), p. 219.

⁵⁶ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1991), p. 156.

⁵⁷ Halfyard explores this at some length in "Singing Their Hearts Out."

such “entertainment” at face value. So to say a demon has arrived who causes musicals makes perfect sense to the *Buffy* fan, who knows that there may be closure without victory, and a kiss without a happy ending, but—in the end—there is always “something to sing about.”