

## The Poetics of Electrosonic Presence: Recorded Music and the Materiality of Sound

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The properties and possibilities of music recordings remain surprisingly undertheorized despite recorded music's ubiquity in contemporary musical life and the increasing attention technologically mediated musics have received from researchers in a variety of disciplines. In this essay, I propose that by taking recordings seriously as cultural objects and abandoning assumptions about their "inauthenticity", we can gain new insights into the multiple roles music plays in social life. Three basic questions structure what follows:

1. What is the nature of recorded music?
2. What does it do?
3. Why do people buy it?

The first question will be examined in the most detail, and will lead us to a consideration of musical sound itself as a semiotic/sensible phenomenon. Addressing the second question will occasion a discussion of how the recording and playback of musical sound transforms listening experiences and reconfigures social space, and answering the third question will involve a necessarily incomplete and exploratory investigation of the use values recorded music offers to consumers, accompanied by a rethinking of our current understandings of musical pleasure. I will argue throughout that the products of music recording technologies should not be evaluated according to their "truthfulness" as mimetic representations of live musical performances, but as specialized cultural objects in their own right. As will become clear, implementing this view entails devising new analytical tools and re-examining received wisdom on the possible meanings of musical commodities.

### 1. The Nature of the Electrosonic Object

Before its present incarnation organized around the question of sound, I had intended this project to be an exploration of a seemingly

innocuous question: should music recordings be analyzed as “texts” or as “performances”?<sup>1</sup> I had come to the following conclusion: music recordings are neither texts nor performances. Music recordings are *music*. This answer has some important implications. I maintain that recorded music is neither text nor performance because both those concepts tend to be formulated as properties of language<sup>2</sup>, and as such do not fully account for the unique ways musical sound produces meaningful effects. I say that recordings are music—nothing more, nothing less—to counteract the tendency to view them as pseudo-music, as pale substitutes for authentic musical experience obtainable only through live performance. What I am suggesting is a sort of *sonic materialism* which can provide an alternative to conventional and highly mentalist conceptions of music as a language-like, free-floating symbol system and to the enduring Romantic notion of music as a profound metaphysical communication possible only between live performers and live audiences.

If music recordings are said to be music, on what definition of music is this claim based? Conventional aesthetic treatises provide little guidance. “Indeed, long philosophical tradition has debated the status of music as a ‘language,’ an argument essentially idealist in character and neglecting the social and corporeal aspects of music-making” (Théberge, 1997, p. 161). Such approaches, wedded as they are to the printed musical score, also elide the *sonic* dimension of musical experience. Ethnomusicologists like John Blacking have attempted to provide less ethnocentric and text-centric conceptions of music by rooting them in social life and bodily experience (See Blacking, 1973, 1995). But ethnomusicologists have had serious problems defining their object of study (Nettl, 1983, pp. 15-25). James Cowdery, in an Editor’s Note, provides the following cautiously worded statement in a 1996 issue of the journal *Ethnomusicology*:

Most ethnomusicologists agree that every human culture appears to include some kind of music, although this idea relies on a broad definition of music, which does not prove applicable *within* every culture. Perhaps we might say more precisely that all cultures seem to embrace some way or ways of meaningful extraverbal sound production and listening, and that many ethnomusicologists are interested in the implications of considering such experiences as being musical (Cowdery, 1996/p. v, emphasis in the original).

Definitions of this sort reflect the ethnographic particularist bent of ethnomusicology, based on models of culture as Saussurean language-like systems of mental concepts, which, in this case, may or may not include “music”.<sup>3</sup> This ethnomusicological relativism privileges language through a model of culture that views linguistic signification as the primary determinant of cultural experience. Such a bias toward the linguistic and against other expressive modalities (musical, kinesthetic, visual) is, of course, nothing new in the academy, and it is precisely this bias that sonic materialism tries to correct.

Music shares certain formal elements with speech but seems to lack its special referential and reflexive capabilities; for this reason linguists, philosophers, semioticians, social scientists, and other commentators have regarded music as degraded, deficient, and semantically impoverished in comparison with language.<sup>4</sup> I prefer to view music as an *expanded* form of expression—one that makes full use of the properties of sound to move the human body in ways which speech cannot. Any definition or understanding of music, then—recorded music especially—should begin not with what it supposedly lacks (i.e., referential, semantic meaning), but with a consideration of the semiotic, formal, and experiential properties of *sound*.

### **Musical Sound as Sign and Substance**

Compared to visual stimuli, aural phenomena are in general more difficult to ignore or to perceive with complete detachment. According to psychoanalyst Martin Nass,

Sound is an enveloping experience and fills an entire presence...Thus, the quality of the auditory cognitive experience is of a different order [than visual cognition] in terms of its intensity and its ability to ‘hold’ its receiver. It narrows object distance and is more closely related developmentally to experiences of holding and experiences of touch (Nass, 1971, p. 303).

These sensory qualities have important implications for the ways in which sounds are meaningful to listeners. Using Peircean terminology, one could state that on the most basic level of semiosis, sound is an *indexical qualisign*. That is, as a succession of vibrations in air molecules emanating from a source, sound possesses the capacity to be used as an index of that source due to the ability, noted above, of sound waves to collapse physical distance between objects and create an experience of copresence. The

sounds of musical performance can index a performing musician, while the sound of loud music blaring out of a stereo system indicates the presence of loudspeakers. Yet the importance of sound in human culture, especially musical sound, is not limited to this simplistic level of signification.<sup>5</sup>

While music ultimately does index sound producers, I would suggest that the precise identity of the sounds' source does not need to be known in order for music to be effective. This is because sound, regardless of its source, possesses a material *presence* that can make its indexical properties of secondary importance. This leads us to the central argument of this essay: *Music recordings are cultural objects whose meaningful effects come about primarily through their ability to produce material sonic presences.* (While certainly much could be said about the metaphysics of presence at this point, I will only add here that commonsense notions of presence in the West emphasize visibility over the other senses—a point to which I will return.) Rock journalist Michael Lydon is one of the few writers on popular culture to grapple with the materiality of recorded sound. In an essay first published in 1974, he writes:

So the question really is, not can recorded sound be music, but can music be tactile, be stuff? Have records made music one of the plastic arts? (Lydon, 1980, p. 43).

In this passage Lydon provocatively conflates the materiality of the sound storage unit (the record) with the objective qualities of the sounds themselves, but whether or not we choose to view vinyl records (or compact disks) as musical “sculptures,” it is conceivable that, in the end, fields of inquiry dealing with signs and texts are less appropriate sources for understanding recorded music than is material culture studies.<sup>6</sup> As material culture, recorded music comes “bundled” (Rose, 1995) with a complex of images, texts, and characteristic associations. But recorded music also exists apart from these extrasonic framing discourses, as sonic material and as felt presence. Greg Downey, in a study of Brazilian *capoeira* performance, emphasizes the importance of attending to music's materiality, adding crucially that while the embodied, sensory effects of musical sound may be “pre-abstract”, they are *not* pre-cultural, and depend on socially learned practices of experiencing music (2002, p. 500). A major problem in contemporary ethnographic music research is that since texts, images, and other metacultural framing devices (see Urban, 2001) are easier to investigate than the actual sounds on the record, the sounds end up vanishing from

the analysis. This is despite the fact that the ways in which people listen and respond to recorded music are just as “cultural” as the ways they talk about it.<sup>7</sup>

### Unsound Judgments: The Case Against Recordings

But is it not the case that being moved by recorded, electronic, sequenced, and/or sampled musical sounds is somehow less authentic than being moved by sounds produced by a live, “unmediated” source? If so, which formal properties of the recorded medium are responsible for the alienation it supposedly produces?

Popular music scholar Richard Middleton articulates a prevailing view of the ontological status of the recorded music artifact:

We can certainly say that in an important sense a record is *finished*—finite, objectified—in a way that oral performance is not; indeed, in this sense it is, ironically, recordings rather than scores which represent an extreme form of reified abstraction (with the resulting potential alienation of producer and consumer). The immediacy of musical ‘speech’ is frozen into electric ‘print,’ producing an ‘acoustic publication’”(1990, p. 83, emphasis in original).

A danger of using music-language analogies of this sort is that one ends up equating apples and oranges. Unlike a musical score, recordings must be experienced in real time. Unlike speech and writing, live music and recorded music can be indistinguishable (is it live or is it Memorex?). And is there really such thing as a totally unmediated “oral performance”? Or is the “immediacy of musical ‘speech’” just a logocentric fantasy?

Further, recordings are not “reified abstractions” of musical performances. The majority of musical recordings are not representations of a single performance but are “musaics” (Negus, 1992, p. 31) of sound materials combined and manipulated in ways intended to achieve certain audio-sensory effects. Originary events in the production of a music recording can be fragmented and multiple (see Porcello, 1998), but they are intended to form part of a cohesive, musical whole. Thus, the logic of record production, to borrow a phrase from Lévi-Strauss (1966), is a “logic of the concrete”, of crafting a sonic object that will produce desired social and somatic effects for potential listeners.

Most commercially released recordings, then, are akin to films, and the distinction between recordings and live performances is comparable to

that between the cinema and theatrical performances. Films, of course, are rarely documents of a continuous performance for which they problematically substitute. Rather they, too, are recorded artifacts, contrived through techniques of editing, dubbing, “special effects”, and so on. There is no “original” to the film’s “copy”—this is of course a key insight contained in Benjamin’s famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1969). Yet oddly enough, the fixedness and iterability of the cinematic event is rarely criticized as inherently alienating, and its dramatic and sensory effects on audiences are widely assumed to be “real.” I would suggest that one reason for this difference is that cinema possesses a prominent visual dimension, while the fact that music recordings often lack a visual component entirely has long been a source of consternation and anxiety for cultural critics.

### **Sound and the Image**

Like the attempts to define music through unflattering comparisons with language, the few efforts made to understand the nature of music recordings emphasize what they lack—namely, a visual dimension. The continuing popularity of sound recordings in the video age at first seems anachronistic. Imagine if silent films (without the normal musical accompaniment) could still attract a mass audience. But those who in the 1980s predicted the eventual triumph of music video over sound recordings had a poor understanding of twentieth century history. Despite confident predictions by cultural commentators in various decades, television did not completely eclipse radio, videoscreen phones are still uncommon, and computer games have not thoroughly displaced albums as crucial building blocks for adolescent identities. It would appear that the autonomy that is unquestionably granted to visual media (when was the last time someone complained that a painting had no soundtrack?) could at least be provisionally granted to sonic forms. Still many writers have singled out the absence of visual information as a fundamental and often insidious attribute of music recordings.

John Corbett’s essay on the pleasures of recordings (1994) is one of the few serious attempts to grapple with their peculiar nature. Corbett’s discussion begins promisingly, with a call for examining the materiality of sound technology (1994, pp. 36-37), but his analysis of the pleasures of the music object hinges not on its material properties but on its failure to accompany sound with images. “For it is lack of the visual, endemic to recorded sound, that initiates desire in relation to the popular music object” (1994, p. 37).

Drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and Mulvey, Corbett coins the phrase “fetishistic audiophilia” to describe the “disavowal” of the visual dimension by consumers of music recordings. The lack created by the severing of the (supposedly natural) link between sound and image is responsible for the record’s status as a fetish object and therefore for the “erotic spark that drives the music industry motor” (1994, p. 40). One form this disavowal takes is the audiophiliac “fetishization of the autonomous sound” (1994, p. 43) through ideologies of high fidelity and noise reduction that seek to minimize sonic traces of the recording and playback media. This quest for pure musical experience “appeal[s] to a fantasy of absolutely independent music, where concerns of the image never enter the picture” (1994, p. 44).

As someone who is less invested in the metanarratives of desire provided by post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, I think Corbett’s account overlooks a far simpler explanation: recorded music lacks visuals because they are unnecessary. I would also suggest that what Corbett calls the fetishization of the autonomy of sound is actually the audiophile’s fetishism of *originary performance*. And by postulating a *necessary* link between the visual and sonic dimensions of musical experience, Corbett himself is guilty of fetishizing live performance as a state of pre-Symbolic musical plenitude, which is then violated in the act of recording.<sup>8</sup>

A slightly less negative take on the absence of the visual appears at the end of an article by Dave Laing on the early history of the recording industry. Laing suggests that the frustration of the “scopic drive” created by listening to phonographic recordings might play an important role in the complex phenomenon of listener identification with a recorded singer’s voice. He proposes that the ambiguity of address created by an invisible singing presence somehow enhances the intimacy of the relationship between recording artist and listener, posing the question, “Is there a connection between the voice without a face [on] the disc or radio broadcast and these complexities and ambiguities of desire and pleasure which the listening subject can map onto it?” (1991, p. 9).

This is a provocative and useful question, but I think it also somewhat misses the point. After all, recorded music’s function as background at social occasions, as sounds to which people dance, or as personal soundtrack while one goes about one’s daily routine does not require visuals at all. The western model of the concert, where what is taking place onstage is the subject of the audience’s undivided aural and visual attention, represents a relatively uncommon method of encountering music, and originates

in a bourgeois aesthetic that shudders at the thought that music should ever have a *function* (apart from its status as an autonomous aesthetic object to be admired and appreciated). It is a little surprising and dispiriting that both Laing and Corbett, both passionately committed to popular musics, should not only succumb to this traditional elitist understanding of musical reception but also reinscribe the western hegemony of the visual in a disciplinary field that should be doing all it can to resist it.

More ominous still are signs that the oculocentric regime of power/knowledge has invaded the process of music production itself. In an ethnographic study of digital sampling in the recording studio, Porcello writes

Because a sampled sound can be displayed visually on a computer screen, it is empirically knowable and analysable, and can be discussed without reference to aesthetic qualities. Reproduction thus becomes a matter of sound waves, equations and visual representation of envelopes and harmonics, a hyberbolic case of Weber's rationalised music production (Porcello, 1991, p. 73).

This is a disturbing passage; the technology it describes provides a more convincing example of "reified abstraction" than Middleton's disparagement of recorded sound. It corroborates my own experiences with digital music software users, who often reify musical sound in the form of a graphic image on a computer screen—a visual representation that can somehow display all of its essential sonic properties. Nevertheless, while techniques of recorded music *production* have become disembodied in some ways (Théberge, 1997), the purpose of these techniques is most often to *enhance* the bodily pleasures of sound at the moment of consumption. Thus the creation of sonic presence remains central to the structuring of the listening encounter.

Recordings are popular and provide pleasurable experiences not because of what they lack but because of what they offer—sounds which do not demand full attention, that fill and transform space, and free the eyes to attend to other more important things, like one's laundry or one's dance partner. This is what Peter Wicke means when he speaks of an "aesthetics of the everyday" (1990) characterized by music and listening strategies integrated into the normal flow of events, not set apart from it (see also Rösing, 1984).

But rather than criticize attempts to show the deficiencies of medi-



ated music, it might be productive to ask what, from a sonic materialist standpoint, can mediated musics do that live musics *cannot*? And what descriptive vocabulary can we use to engage them?

### Electrosonic Aesthetics: Sound's Affecting Presence

Roland Barthes' "grain of the voice" essay is perhaps excessively cited and insufficiently developed by music researchers (but see Middleton, 1990, pp. 261-293 and Downey 2002 for notable exceptions). Nonetheless, this work deserves some attention here. Throughout most of his essay, Barthes defines the "grain" of the voice as "the very precise space...of the encounter between a language and a [singing] voice" (1991, p. 181, emphasis deleted). Toward the end, however, he expands his definition to include other sorts of expressive behavior: "the 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (1991, p. 188). While Barthes is concerned with describing embodied presence in the performer's expressive gestures, his notion of "grain" can also be viewed as a *sonic* feature that contains the possibility of engaging the body of a listener as well (cf. Downey, 2002, p. 501). Sound, after all, not only emanates from vibrating bodies, but also has the power (regardless of its source) to vibrate other bodies with which it comes in contact. Barthes describes this relationship succinctly, asserting, "I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic..." (1991, p. 188).<sup>9</sup>

Corbett characterizes "grain" and other material manifestations of embodied presence in recorded music as traces of *visual* presence (1994, p. 41-44); this claim is based in part on a misreading of Barthes' essay. The erotic, somatic "image" evoked for Barthes by the grain of the singer's voice is not a visual body, as Corbett claims (1994, p. 43), but a palpable, sensual one. Rey Chow has argued that the audio-sensory properties of music can lead to a redefinition of embodiment: "While the image marks the body, in music one has to invent a different language of conceptualizing the body, that is, of perceiving its existence without marking and objectifying it as such" (1993, p. 392). It seems more plausible, then, to locate the grain of the voice in the realm of embodied aural and sensual experience.

The impact of musical sound is *audiotactile*; it literally moves the listener. Significantly, sounds do not have to originate from musical instruments, voices, or other live sources to have affective and aesthetic value. Porcello (1998, pp. 485-486) describes how even audible "print-through" on recorded tape (an unintentional phantom echo that precedes the onset of

a recorded sound, which professional sound engineers take pains to minimize) can be an important and pleasurable aspect of the listening encounter by providing a tantalizing foretaste of the music to come. Hip hop artists not only incorporate the sounds of prerecorded instruments into their compositions, but also add recordings of street sounds, electronically produced noise, even hissing and popping sounds taken from old vinyl records. As rap producer Cedric Singleton told one ethnomusicologist, "...the popping on the record...[is] the essence of the music...After a while, you listen to some old record, hear that popping; it takes you back. That's really the aesthetic value to it" (quoted in Keyes. 1996, p. 240). Corbett aptly refers to these sounds as "the grain of the record" (1994, p. 41).

The various sounds created by the imperfections of the recording and/or playback medium can indeed be said to constitute a form of sonic "grain": a "space of encounter" between music and "noise"—embodied and disembodied sounds—whereby the latter can become aestheticized as a valued component of the listening experience. Memories of pleasure derived from "the grain of the record" may be one reason why the sale of supposedly obsolete vinyl records actually increased in the U.S. in the late 1990s (although they were still a minuscule percentage of overall album sales); it certainly appears to be a more intuitively satisfying explanation than the usual dismissive comments made by critics about "vinyl fetishism." This seemingly atavistic sales trend brings to mind Simon Frith's complaint about CDs: "Compact disc players are now giving people a new idea of good sound, one without distraction, in which the ear is drawn to the surface of the track, the moment of musical production, with no reference to its context or surrounding noise" (1988b, p. 121). According to Frith, compact discs are "false" as a paradoxical result of their "fidelity," to the original recorded sounds. The music they provide is devoid of sonic traces of the playback medium itself—there is no "distraction", hence no grain. Instead, the pristine sound produced by digital audio floats in an empty, silent vacuum, which is experienced by Frith, a 45-rpm single enthusiast, as a musical deficit.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Body Electric**

Michael Lydon contends that recordings are just one aspect of a largescale historical process he calls the "electrification" of music in the twentieth century. He writes that in the production of phonographic recordings, "[t]he added 'something' that electrification undeniably brings to instruments may more vitally charge the scribing needle, itself an electric

instrument,” (1980, p. 45). Indeed, much of the impact of electrified popular musics (an almost redundant phrase) depends on the presence of electrosonic *excess*; distortion, compression, and other effects have in essence created a new expressive musical vocabulary that is now familiar to pop music audiences worldwide. What was once an unintentional by-product of electrical sound production and reproduction (which endeavored to transmit, amplify, and document pre-existent musical sound with as little interference as possible) has become central to pop music aesthetics. The origin of these sounds in the “imperfections” of the sound-carrying medium itself is irrelevant to listeners who have grown up with them. Is it any wonder then, that new digital technologies, which minimize electromechanically produced artifacts in sound recording, have received such a mixed response among music enthusiasts?

One example: new computer-based technologies of “smart” noise reduction, which digitally erase tape hiss, amplifier buzz, and other sonic anomalies in digitized sonic waveform data, tend to produce aesthetically undesirable results if applied too enthusiastically to popular music recordings. Electric guitars suddenly sound tinny, metallic, and lifeless; the bass guitar and kick drum lose their presence in the mix; and vocals can sound drained of their vitality. The acoustic ideology of originary performance that gave rise to these digital technologies does not account for the crucial importance that sounds generated by the “imperfections” and “limitations” of analog tape have historically played in the sound of popular music.

Similarly, while it has long been standard procedure for recording classical music and other non-electrified genres, very few pop music albums released in the last ten years have been digitally recorded, mixed, and mastered. Although digitally recorded rock and pop enjoyed some popularity in the 1980s when the process first became more affordable, almost every major popular music release these days is first recorded and mixed on analog equipment before it is subsequently digitally mastered onto disk or cassette. The reason is simple: the sonic icons of electrical excess so central to these musics have greater embodied presence when wedded to the artifactual “noise” of the analog recording apparatus.

## **2. Technocultural Practices of Production/Consumption: Recordings as Social “Agents”**

Barthes’ notion of grain is a potentially promising way to approach the complexities of recorded sound—a musical phenomenon that still lacks a well-developed analytical language. Though our theoretical understand-

ings of sound remain rudimentary, in the day-to-day workings of the music industry, record producers and musicians necessarily have a well-developed *practical* knowledge of electrosonic aesthetics. Contemporary popular music is, above all, about creating the right “sound” using the techniques of the recording studio (Jones, 1992; Zak, 2001). Garofalo asserts, “Recording equipment can no longer be viewed simply as the machinery that reproduces something called music, that already exists independently in some finished form” (1991, p. 254). The question is, how has music changed as a result of new technologies that can be used to produce, rather than reproduce, musically salient sounds?

So far the most comprehensive attempt to answer this question is Paul Th  berge’s *Any Sound You Can Imagine* (1997). In that work he makes the following observation:

The term “sound” has taken on a peculiar material character that cannot be separated either from the “music” or, more importantly, from the sound recording as the dominant medium of reproduction. With regards to the latter, the idea of a “sound” appears to be a particularly contemporary concept that could hardly have been maintained in an era that did not possess mechanical or electronic means of reproduction (1997, p.191).

This privileging of sonic materiality is manifested in the technocultural practices of the recording studio as well as the aesthetic judgments of music consumers (a category which includes music producers). We have already discussed the importance of sounds produced by the inherent properties of electrosonic media for generating valued musical experiences. A crucial development in the history of popular music is the extent to which these properties have come under conscious control by music producers and employed as compositional strategies. The resulting material sonic effects may even displace originary performance events as the most valued features of a given composition. Frith claims, “Most listeners, for example, no longer care that they have no idea what instrument (if any) makes their favorite sound” (1988b, p. 125). The empirical basis for this claim is unclear, but it is certainly a plausible statement given consumer trends in the contemporary musical marketplace. This state of affairs, which reflects the undisputed centrality of sound recording in contemporary musical experience, has the potential (among other things) to radically restructure live performance practice and the expectations of concert audiences.

Barry Shank (1994), discussing rock music production values in Austin, Texas, writes:

The traditional recording standard of ‘fidelity’ assumed an original performance to which the recording is faithful, but as recording becomes increasingly sophisticated *this relationship of fidelity has reversed*. More and more, the recording becomes the original work, all subsequent ‘live’ performances are attempts to emulate its sound (1994, p. 180; my emphasis).

A record producer in Jakarta told me that *dangdut* bands touring the Javanese countryside risked having rocks and even snakes hurled at them if they failed to produce live sounds that closely resembled those on *dangdut* cassettes. The live *dangdut* bands I observed in the city were remarkably adept at reproducing the familiar sounds heard on *dangdut* albums, which are generally recorded in sophisticated multitrack analog studios. (Many studios in Indonesia also possess digital recording facilities, but this technique is considered inappropriate for *dangdut* music, which is not supposed to sound too “clean”).

But even the most successful performers I saw could not attract as many people to the dance floor as the biggest cassette hits of the day, which were played by a DJ through the club’s sound system during the breaks between sets. Of course, this sort of phenomenon is hardly confined to Jakartan discotheques. Sarah Thornton reports that in many 1970s British clubs, “...live music effectively became the interval between record sets” during which the patrons could take a break from dancing (1996, p. 45). Certainly the impact of records on “live” music (a conceptual category that did not exist before the 1950s, according to Thornton [1996, p. 41]) cannot be overestimated. What interests me even more here is the impact recorded music has had on social settings other than concert venues—places where live music does not normally venture.

But before we examine recordings as sonic interventions in social space, it is necessary to make one final comment about the sonic materialist approach as it applies to the one topic more perennial in popular music studies than pop music’s pleasures: its politics.

### Sonic Warfare

Cultural studies researchers have generally focused their attention on resistant, counterhegemonic uses of popular culture, a concern that brings its own blind spots to questions of interpretation and possibility. In the quest for cultural resistance, a basic understanding of the processes by which electrosonic presences are experienced and evaluated is unfortunately often neglected. (Furthermore, many academic writers on rock music, wary of the music industry and seeking to defend the music's authenticity, choose to focus on the relatively "unmediated" contact between performer and audience afforded by the concert experience rather than the much more prevalent musical activity of listening to, evaluating, emulating, and partying to rock records.) Often overlooked is the way cultural struggles are played out in the realm of sound itself.

For instance, while easy listening music and mainstream pop emphasize midrange, with instrumental timbres such as strings and piano dominating, more aggressive, "oppositional" genres are often recognizable by the greater sonic emphasis they place on the extremes of the audible frequency spectrum. Rap has been celebrated for its powerful bass sounds (which are products of specific and sophisticated techniques employed in the recording studio); punk was once known for its trebly "low-fi" production values; and death metal guitarists have long favored a "scooped" distorted guitar sound, with the treble and bass frequencies boosted and the midrange frequencies attenuated. This EQ setting creates the biting, percussive, guitar "crunch" essential to the death metal genre—a sound that represents an apotheosis of electrification and electrosonic excess.

Cultural critics argue constantly about whether and in what ways musical styles like rap, hardcore, and metal are "oppositional" or "resistant". At the very least, we may claim that they invert the relationship between the psychoacoustic "center" of human hearing and its margins, so to speak, at the upper and lower thresholds of audibility.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this does not qualify as authentic resistance to some, but it is a fundamental strategy by which these musics assert their difference from the mainstream. It is also a strategy dependent on the electrification of musical sound, for it is only with the aid of electrical amplification that high and low frequencies can be dramatically enhanced. This emphasis on aural extremes is *iconic* of social opposition and affective extremity, and it is this iconicity, rooted in the material properties of musical sound itself, that makes it difficult to co-opt certain musical styles and transform them into voices of complacency and conformism. When this co-optation does occur, it is

*inevitably* accompanied by the introduction of studio production techniques which alter the distribution of sonic intensity in the music, creating a modified, more “polished” sound that places a relatively greater emphasis on midrange frequencies. Very few successful “crossover” albums recorded by metal, punk, or rap artists in the last fifteen years provide exceptions to this rule.

The politics of bass and treble are intimately tied in with recorded music’s strategic deployment in social space. Loud sounds in public places inevitably have political effects, and musics with screaming high notes and pounding bass rhythms are more likely to produce a strong response, whether it is utter revulsion, fear, or powerful identification with these transgressive sonic presences. It is to issues of music, social space, and public transgression that we now turn.

### **Music, Space, and Non-Place**

In addition to reconfiguring live musical experience, recorded music can open up new kinds of social space—even anti-social space. Sound’s ability to construct and expand beyond social boundaries and transform perceptions of place is crucially important in determining its deployment as a social agent, particularly by groups that are otherwise marginalized and *displaced*. Sarah Thornton writes:

One of the main ways in which youth carve out virtual, and claim actual, space is by *filling* it with *their* music. Walls of sound are used to block out the clatter of family and flatmates, to seclude the private space of the bedroom with records and radio and even to isolate ‘head space’ with personal stereos like the Walkman (1996, p. 19; emphases in original).

The introjection of musical sounds into private “head space” is a complementary tactic to the projection of sound into public space—while the latter asserts the power to transform one’s external social environment, the former allows the listening agent to insulate him/herself from that environment—a sonic declaration of autonomy.

In a fascinating article entitled “Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized: A Different Type of Question about Revolution”, Rey Chow discusses the role of Walkmans in 1990s China and Hong Kong. She writes, “With the invention of headphones...listening enters an era of interiorization whose effect of ‘privacy’ is made possible by the thoroughly

mechanized nature of its operation”(1993, p. 396). According to Chow, the social implications of a totally “portable” listening technology like the Walkman are clear, especially in a setting like mainland China:

The ‘miniaturizing’ that does not produce a visible body—however small—that corresponds with ‘reality’ leads to a certain freedom. This is the freedom to be deaf to the loudspeakers of history. We do not return to individualized or privatized emotions when we use the Walkman: rather the Walkman’s artificiality makes us aware of the impending presence of the collective, which summons us with the infallibility of a sleepwalker. What the Walkman provides is the possibility of a barrier, a blockage between ‘me’ and the world, so that, as in moments of undisturbed sleep, I can disappear as a listener playing music (1993, p. 398).<sup>12</sup>

Both the “interiorization” and the amplification (or greater “exteriorization”) made possible by recorded sound technologies have important implications for the construction of social spaces in contemporary society. Marc Augé’s monograph *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995) examines a new kind of anti-social space—the “non-place,” which he contrasts with “anthropological” places that offer stable and coherent sites for identity formation and social meaning, such as villages, homes, and natural landscapes (see Feld and Basso, 1996 for a consideration of these kinds of places). Non-places refer to one-dimensional, functional spaces such as malls, airports, highways, and supermarkets that have become ubiquitous in our contemporary, “supermodern” world. The impersonality and isolation from “anthropological” space which characterize non-places, according to Augé, is both alienating and comforting to their transitory inhabitants, who interact with these specialized environments in the roles of travelers, consumers, passengers, and the like. The strange, fragmented, and introverted experiences of self these spaces offer their users, according to Augé, are characteristic of our current existential and material condition of “supermodernity.”

Augé does not explicitly address music; it is nonetheless significant that our experiences in the non-places he describes almost always include recorded sounds. Sound is used in non-places to encourage appropriate user behaviors. Sterne (1997) discusses the many functions mediated musics serve in Minnesota’s Mall of America, as both “foreground” and “background” music. The presence of this music is intended to guide the



movements of shoppers and encourage high levels of consumption. Perhaps the most extreme example of recorded music as a tool for crowd control is the practice of piping Muzak into convenience store parking lots to discourage adolescent loitering (another kind of sonic warfare). But recorded music has other functions in these spaces besides social control and persuasion: music humanizes the user's experience of non-places. While Augé may exaggerate the isolating effects of the monotony of the open road, the airport waiting room, and the antiseptic environment of the supermarket, each surely would be even harder to endure without the material effects of recorded music, which provide meaningful contexts for experience in such impersonal spaces which otherwise lack forms of address that engage the individual user as a thinking, feeling person.

Like other forms of popular culture, mediated musical sound is both an agent of the sensory bombardment/overload that characterizes supermodernity and an escape from it—a retreat into self-constituted space. Music in its recorded form has become a portable locus for affective self-investment in a world increasingly dominated by non-places. Yet this assertion begs the question of why electronically reproduced musical sound is such an appealing site for this investment in the first place. What do we really know about the attractions of this peculiar commodity?

### 3. Why Do People Buy Records?

We know why record companies want us to consume their products; why we actually do so is more of a mystery. The appeal of recorded sound commodities (some much more than others) is not transparent. Dan Rose reminds us that "...consumer objects are social creatures equipped as agents of intervention to affect our bodies, our lives" (1995, p. 82). How are recordings equipped to affect the lives of those who purchase them?

The recorded music we buy is material, is "stuff," in two ways: as sound and as physical artifact. Records, cassettes, compact disks, even computer sound files, are enduring physical forms. Every consumer recording/playback format has its adherents and detractors<sup>13</sup>, and the graphics, texts, and images that form an important part of the overall package are vitally important in shaping the possible meanings of the commodity. Yet we cannot comprehend the appeal of recorded music if we confine ourselves to analyses of the container.

The physicality of these objects does create the possibility of *collecting* music. James Clifford has observed, "Some sort of 'gathering' around the self and the group—the assemblage of a material 'world', the marking of a subjective domain that is not other—is probably universal"

(1993: 52). In addition to the characteristic self-fashioning, narrative, and mnemonic functions performed by all collections (see Stewart, 1993), the accumulation of recordings contains the possibility of a new mode of articulation of the self toward music phenomena.

Rather than stemming from the pure fetishization of vinyl, plastic, cardboard, etc., (though this is sometimes a factor), one usually collects recordings for their use values, which stem not from their status as physical objects per se, or their inscribed surfaces, but from the listening experiences they offer. These experiences are possible by virtue of recorded music's ability to produce sonic presence when used in conjunction with a playback device. Sonic encounters are literally "stockpiled" (Attali, 1985) with the accumulation of music recordings, each one representing a temporal slice of musical experience waiting to be activated through the agency of a listener.

Recordings also contain *repeatable* musical experiences. Yet experiences involving recordings are not exactly the same from one time to the next. Variables such as volume, equalization, room acoustics, characteristics of the playback apparatus, position of the listener, and so on together make the possibility of a sonically identical listening experience fairly remote. And of course these variables do not encompass extrasonic factors like the listener's emotional and mental state and the variety of possible listening strategies she/he may employ. The repeatability of recorded sound is compelling because it creates musical experiences that are both similar and different from one another; the listener is enticed by the pleasures of recognition combined with the pleasures of novelty that depend on the unique contextual factors present at each listening encounter.

In short, recorded musical sounds create novel possibilities for musical pleasure, including the pleasures of repetition, of electrosonic "grain," and of agential intervention in social and individual space. As portable, material loci for affective and identificatory self-investment, recorded sounds also offer pleasures of self-fashioning. I would suggest that pleasures, such as these, which originate in the dual materiality of recorded sound objects, constitute the primary use values of music recordings as objects of consumption.

### **Mp3's: The Dematerialization of Music?**

But what of newer sound technologies that dispense with physical storage units in favor of intangible computer files? Combining DIY mixing and assemblage, the unauthorized duplication of copyrighted songs and entire albums, and compromised sound quality, mp3's and related digital

downloadable formats are the latest versions of blank cassettes. Even their method of distribution, a virtual global kula ring of reciprocal musical exchange, has obvious antecedents in bootleg tape-trading and other audio-cassette-related activities outside the formal music industry.

The difference, of course, is that music stored on mp3's (like music on the radio) seems to lack a fetishizable physical form. This raises the question, how essential is the "objectness" of recorded music artifacts? I believe it is far too early to attempt to answer this question, though I do not believe we are likely to experience the total "dematerialization" of musical consumption any time soon. Mp3's, with their muddy midrange, nonexistent bass, and crisp but lifeless treble frequencies, remain a convenient stand-in for higher quality compact discs (again, not unlike home-recorded audiocassettes) just as a computer is an expedient but ultimately unconvincing substitute for a stereo system. Only time will tell whether the global music consumer will come to accept that his or her most emotionally salient encounters with musical sound will lack the synesthetic pleasures of musical artifacts, or whether downloaded or streamed digital audio will function much like radio has functioned for decades, through exposure providing an incentive to purchase and own objectified, self-contained music products.

A final possibility is that we are witnessing an aesthetic shift analogous to the transition from live musical performance to recorded artifact, in which the compact disk (or vinyl) recording is ideologically positioned as the "originary" musical experience yet is increasingly marginalized and made redundant by advances in Internet-based storage media that provide the new formats with clear advantages for consumers, such as increased portability, an immense range of choices available instantaneously, or new interactive modes of listening.

### **Epilogue: The Defective Record**

Anthony Seeger's ethnographic study *Why Suyá Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People* (1987, pp. 97-100) contains a fascinating ethnographic anecdote involving a strange-sounding record. The story begins when Seeger comes across a 1960 Folkways recording of Suyá men singing that sounds a bit strange. "The pitch was lower than any song I had recorded, and the rattles had an unusual timbre: they sounded strangely slowed down. I could almost hear each pit in the rattle hit the others" (1987, p. 98). Later, using laboratory equipment to compare the record with other recordings done around the same time, Seeger confirms his

hypothesis that the original master tape of the record was, at some point in the production process, copied at the wrong speed. He is even able to approximate the actual pitch of the original performance, which was similar to that of his more recent men's unison song recordings. What happens next is surprising:

One night, when all the men were gathered in the center of the plaza and wanted to listen to some of their music, I played them the recording from the record. Attentively they listened to the entire song. When it ended, Kaikwati, the ritual specialist, and the only one of the four singers on the original recording still alive—leaned back a little and said: “It is beautiful, Tony. That is the way the Suyá really sang in the old days”(1987, p. 98).<sup>13</sup>

In Seeger's study, this incident provides important insights into the aesthetics of Suyá vocal performance. I want to suggest that it can also reveal something important about the nature of recorded music itself. In this case the accidental alteration of sonic material made possible by the recording medium confirms deep aesthetic and mytho-historical “truths” held by the Suyá at that time—namely that men were manlier in the good old days (1987, p. 99). Viewing this incident as resulting from a deceptive inaccuracy in the documentation of an actual performance is perhaps less interesting than regarding it as an example of the potential inherent in objectified sound. While the Suyá have learned from outsiders and their own experience that recordings “hear and remember accurately” (*ibid.*), in fact recordings that go beyond mimetic representation may be the most enjoyable and aesthetically powerful, so much so that their fidelity to an original performance (if there even is one) could be quite beside the point.

Perhaps this is the reason some popular music researchers are reluctant to treat records as just another industrial commodity, fabricated and false. For despite the countless layers of mediation in the production of commercial recordings (far more than the average Folkways release), there remains the subjective *immediacy* (un-mediated-ness) of the sonic experience, in which musical sounds emerge fully present. Here I am in full agreement with Porcello, who asserts: “...the ultimate significance of music resides not solely in musical texts per se, but rather in social and individual processes of musical encounter,” (1998, p. 486), and with Simon Frith: “For us, any general theory of mass culture must lie in the immediacy of our everyday pleasure in pop,” (Frith, 1988a, p. 7). It is in the moment of

encounter with musical sound in all its materiality that we will find the most compelling accounts of the significance of recordings in our musical lives.

This essay has made the modest suggestion that recorded music should be examined as a phenomenon apart from performance and that its fundamental nature is rooted in sonic (that is, audiotactile) experience. I will suggest in closing that a careful consideration of the potentialities of mediated musical experience can shed light on more general issues in cultural theory, particularly on the nature of social meaning. There has not yet been a high-profile attempt in ethnomusicology or popular music studies to construct a music-specific body of cultural theory that takes into account the material, embodied aspects of culture as well as the symbolic realm. Perhaps such a body of theory will be more successful than conventional language-centered approaches in assessing the limitations, pleasures, and possibilities of mass-produced and widely circulating cultural forms such as recordings. Clearly there is much work to be done.

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### Notes

1. See Greene (1999) for a different perspective on the textual and performative properties of recorded music.
2. The foundational texts of what has become known as the “performance approach” were written by folklorists and linguistic anthropologists interested in performed speech genres. See Bauman (1984) for a seminal contribution. Bauman & Briggs’ critical review of developments in the field (1990) concludes with a call to investigate how performed linguistic utterances become “entextualized”, and thus become resources for subsequent performances. Urban and Silverstein further elaborate upon this notion and what it means for our understanding of “texts” (1996). While the text/performance distinction has become far more nuanced in discussions of language use, it is still difficult to apply to the case of sound recordings, which collapse the temporal and conceptual distance between pre-existing form and singular utterance. From the point of view of sonic materialism, textual authority and performative force both inhere in the sound-object, but these properties do not determine its fundamental nature as a music product with a wide array of possible uses.
3. It is interesting to note that the abstract concept of “*language*” employed by linguistic researchers is *also* “a broad definition...which does not prove applicable *within* every culture.” And “culture” itself is even more vulnerable to this sort of criticism. Words like language, culture, music, religion, politics, etc. are used in social research because they are analytically useful, not because they are universally recognized categories.
4. Nattiez’s landmark study *Music and Discourse* (1990) persuasively applies semiological theories to musical phenomena, but does not challenge the limitations of these approaches to understanding how music functions. Far from requiring an absent object in order to produce mean-

ing (the standard definition of the *sign*), *musical sound is fully present, even if its producers are not*. It is not enough to argue (quite correctly) that music functions as a sign, since, as the semioticians continually remind us, *anything* can function in this fashion. While linguistic units function primarily as signs—as carriers of intelligible meaning (including both semantic and pragmatic variants)—there is no reason to assume that music’s primary purpose in social life is necessarily the same. Thus an adequate understanding of music must, I believe, go beyond theories of representation, perhaps even beyond semiosis (cf. Turino 1999, pp. 252-3). An interpretive approach to cultural meaning that appears more promising for the study of music recordings is Mark Gottdiener’s sociosemiotics. The main premise of this approach is that “...any cultural object is both an object of use in a social system with a generative history and social context and also a component in a system of signification which can be interpreted by users,” (1995, p. 100). Different sign systems converge on each cultural object, which is by nature polysemous. If one includes musical sound as a form of cultural object, sociosemiotics would appear to be a productive approach to the interpretation of recorded music commodities’ cultural meanings in concrete social settings.

5. W. Flagg Miller (2002) takes the idea of music’s indexicality one step further, arguing that cassettes are “meta-indexical” in that they invite reflection on the nature of various indexical relationships made possible by the uncanny properties of portable, recorded sound artifacts.
6. See Kingery (1996) for an overview of this newly revitalized interdisciplinary field, which combines approaches derived from (among other things) archaeology, cultural anthropology, political economy, and history. For a fascinating essay on the meaning of consumer objects in contemporary society (centered around a bottle of dandruff shampoo!), see Rose (1995).
7. Complaints about the neglect of “music” in popular music studies are nothing new. See Middleton (1990), Walser (1993), and Taylor (1997) for some important discussions of this problem. Most attempts to grapple with the “music itself” in popular music studies still take the form of conventional musicological analyses of a notated transcription. While this approach can be useful and illuminating, its dependence on visual representations usually prevents serious engagement with what I am

calling the materiality of the sounds themselves and their felt presences.

8. It is worth noting that the current valorization of performance by music researchers is itself a quite healthy reaction to an earlier view that regarded performance as an imperfect realization of “music” (represented on a printed score) rather than music itself. This point of view, still popular in some musicological circles, is severely limited as a starting point for research into musical practices that do not centrally involve notation. By the same token, however, approaches that focus on live performance are similarly inadequate for addressing musical practices involving the production and reception of recordings.
9. Of course, we should not completely lose sight of the fact that Barthes’ concept is meant as a category of aesthetic judgment: “some popular singers have a ‘grain’ while others, however famous, do not” (1991, p. 188). This foray into bourgeois criticism is best left ignored. Lata Mangeshkar, singer on literally thousands of Indian film soundtracks, has a voice that Barthes would undoubtedly say possesses no grain whatsoever. Yet, her embodied vocal presence is highly valued by millions of fans worldwide, from Kenya to Suriname to Malaysia.
10. See also Rothenbuhler and Peters (1997) for a particularly impassioned and erudite celebration of “phonography” (defined as recording techniques “that involve analog inscription on a mechanically rotating medium” [1997, p. 261 n.1]) coupled with a strident denunciation of digital sound reproduction technologies.
11. Systematic musicologist Helmut Rösing (1984, p. 129) writes:

We hear with our ears only sound-events of a particular frequency and intensity (16 Hz-20,000 Hz maximum; approx. 5-140 dB at 1,000 Hz). Speech and music as a rule avoid the extreme areas of the hearing range...Extreme high fundamentals and powerful high overtones sound harsh and shrill, while low tones sound close and even, at stronger intensities, threatening.
12. One particularly ardent Walkman enthusiast reflects:

Wearing a walkman turns real life into a film. It does this by oblit-



erating natural sound and replacing it with a dazzling stereo musical score. Suddenly, once-random events become choreographed to music. And, because there's no sound to your footfall, you feel invisible—not part of the picture; you're like a camera, aware of what it sees but not of itself. There was a moment during a Parisian downpour when I swore I was not getting wet! (Hardiman 1992: 71).

See Hokosawa (1984) for an intriguing but somewhat abstract meditation on the possibilities of Walkman listening as a kind of intervention in social space.

13. Arguments about the sound quality of vinyl records versus compact disks persist among music consumers despite the overwhelming market success of the latter. Thornton mentions that when CDs were first introduced into British dance clubs, DJs resisted the new format. To them, "the sound of vinyl was 'real', 'warm', 'imperfect' but full of integrity, while CDs were 'cold', 'clinical', 'inhuman', and 'unreal'" (1996, p. 64). Now, however, the compact disc format is more widely accepted and DJs have incorporated the "purer" sound of compact disc into their club mixes (*ibid.*).

Despite their considerable popularity, cassettes remain an unsung format in the West compared with vinyl records and CDs. See James et. al. (1992) for an eclectic collection of essays celebrating the properties and potentialities of the cassette medium. See Grandin (1989), Greene (1995), Manuel (1988, 1993), Muller (1999), Sutton (1985, 1996), Wallach (2002), and Wong (1989/1990) for examples of the importance of cassettes in the musical life of developing countries.

14. For much of ethnomusicology's history, the use of sound recording and playback devices by non-Western peoples was ignored. Recently, however, it has become common for established voices in the field to assert "[t]he global adoption of electronic sound technology from the West is unquestionably one of the most significant developments in music in the twentieth century" (Sutton 1996, p. 249). Programmatic statements published in recent years imploring ethnomusicologists to take technology seriously as an object of study (e.g., Lysloff, 1997) and new ethnographic studies (e.g., Fikentscher 2000, Greene 1995, 2001, n.d., Scales 2002, Taylor 2001) seem to indicate that the ethnomusicology of "sound engineering" (Greene 1999) is no longer in its infancy.

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