

Review Essay: *Echoes of the Twentieth Century*

Peter Doyle. *Echo & Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900-1960.* Music/Culture Series. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005; 293 pp. ISBN 0-8195-6784-9 (paperback).

Most popular music researchers agree that the emergence of rock and roll in the mid 1950s was the single most important historical development in twentieth-century popular music in the United States and, indeed, the entire world. There is less of a consensus on how best to narrate this history. The sanctimonious “great composer, great works” approach, endlessly critiqued by musicologists (nonetheless more often than not deemed pedagogically appropriate by college music departments, especially for Western art music “appreciation” classes), seems woefully inadequate even at the most basic levels of instruction. Certainly an art form often characterized as an insurgent force for cultural democracy seems hardly compatible with a pious exercise in restrictive canon formation (one that too often possesses the intellectual rigor and authority of a fan’s top-ten list). Moreover, contemporary scholars have realized (somewhat belatedly) that the history of twentieth-century popular music is ultimately the history of *records* and thus, even though common-sense understandings of music and musicality *still* often revolve around live performance and the playing of standard musical instruments, no popular music history of the last century could possibly be complete without a substantive consideration of the most important musical device of that century by far, the recording studio, and its role in fashioning the recorded music commodity-form.¹ Since the commodification of music is always the result of a contingent social process and is never *a priori*,² such an account must also include a consideration of the specific strategies, including aesthetic ones, by which the market value of recorded music was increased such that it eventually overtook sheet music and other competing music commodity-forms and became the basis of the gargantuan global industry that exists to this day. Often these strategies are employed by little-known studio engineers, record producers, and other non-performers who have frequently played pivotal, if undervalued, roles in the history of modern popular music.

Echo & Reverb, Peter Doyle’s delightfully innovative cultural history of recording techniques used to define aural spaces, particularly artificial

¹ *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures*, ed. Paul D. Greene and Thomas Porcello (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005).

² Timothy Taylor, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music,’” in *Ethnomusicology* 51, no. 2 (2007): pp. 281-305.

reverberation and sonic reflection (delay/echo), reminds us that the interpretation of recorded popular song always requires a triangular approach, one that takes into account music, song text, and the purposeful, artful manipulation of sound. More important, Doyle's investigation also provides a useful model of popular music historiography and uncovers an important shift in the utilization of studio-based reverberation and echo effects which corresponds directly to the seismic epistemic shift occasioned by the rise of rock and roll.

Doyle's primary approach to constructing his historical narrative is to analyze exemplary recordings (75 in all, according to the discography) from the eras he discusses. This armchair methodology is old-fashioned, to be sure – arguably it is the same method Wilfrid Mellers employed in his monumental but deeply flawed *Music in a New Found Land* (1964)³ – but Doyle's study is also informed by contemporary cultural theory inspired by the likes of Attali, Deleuze, and Said as well as the exhaustive research of many of the popular music historians who preceded him, including Peter Guralnick, Greil Marcus, Robert Palmer, and Nick Tosches. Doyle's analyses may rely on outmoded psychoanalytic approaches too much at times and he succumbs more than once to the temptation of over-interpretation, but the book nevertheless constitutes solid evidence that useful and original interpretations of music recordings can be arrived at through even the most old-school of research methods. (A novelist and non-fiction writer affiliated with Macquarie University in Australia, Doyle possesses perhaps the distance, both geographical and disciplinary, necessary to have attempted a work of this audacity and scope.)

Echo & Reverb investigates the constructed spatial dimensions (in other words, the electrosonic rhetoric of spatiality) of celebrated and influential recordings by Robert Johnson, Les Paul and Mary Ford, Hank Williams, and Elvis Presley and the like as well as more obscure artists such as “hillbilly” musician Frank Hutchison, Foy Willing and the Riders of the Purple Sage, and urban bluesman Joe Hill Louis. Doyle argues that these diverse electrosonic rhetorics of spatiality, from the “virtual proscenium arch” of early recordings to the advent of the “echo chamber” in the Fifties, reflected and responded to a rapidly changing American society, helping pave the way for our current popular music era, one dominated by the “fabrication of space” through multitrack recording techniques and studio sound processors.

The book is divided into ten chapters and proceeds in roughly chronological order. With chapter titles like “Sobbing Guitars, Distant Horizons

³ Wilfrid Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land: Themes and Developments in the History of American Music* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1964).

and the Acoustics of Otherness” and “Off the Wall’: Blues Recording at Sun and Chess Studios, 1947-1954,” Doyle explores mainstream and niche-market recordings and their intersections with American discourses of race, gender, class, region, social deviance, and psychopathology. The study is impressively well-written throughout and theoretically sophisticated without being pretentious or distracting. Typical in its eloquence and insightfulness is the following passage comparing two mainstream popular music genres of the 1930s and 40s:

Pop western was about masculine trials and travails, about striving and *becoming* a man, in the acceptable, self-willed, individualistic western capitalist mode. Pop Hawaiian seductively offered a chance of undoing, unwinding, letting go, ebbing.... The drifting glissandos of the steel guitars, the lightly voiced male and female harmonies, the soft rhythmic strumming of the ukulele and *tiple*, the swaying of hula dancers – all suggested the antithesis of the rigors, demarcations, and repressions of day-to-day life in industrial society, a watery dissolution of the quotidian. In the imaginary Polynesia, boundaries dissolve and bodies are freed of encumbrance (131).

Doyle demonstrates how most producers of mainstream popular music recordings from the first half of the twentieth century – from glossy, professional Tin Pan Alley pop to languid “Hawaiian” instrumentals to heroic “cowboy” songs – enlisted reverberation and delay effects in a fairly straightforward representational regime wherein the semantic content of the lyrics became the basis for a fabricated “picturesque” spatiality – whether of a theatrical performance space, tropical island, or rugged, majestic canyon. Employing inventive, often quite low-tech methods inspired by both the experimental studio wizardry of mainstream pop of the time and the less straightforwardly representational spatialities of certain jazz, blues, and country records, rock and roll producers of the 1950s began to fashion a contrasting aesthetic. In an effort to sound modern and cutting-edge, entrepreneurs like Sam Phillips and Leonard Chess developed a distinctly non-pictorial logic of representation, such that reverb and echo effects instead evoked (and provoked, in the listener) subtle, complex psychological states *suggested* by the text. Furthermore, Doyle asserts that rather than maintain a professional distance between performer and listener (the “virtual proscenium arch,” as he terms it) studio effects were used in rock and roll records seemingly to collapse the space between performer and listener in compelling ways. The result was, instead of a clearly defined separation between audience and performer, “[n]ow all were participants within the zone” (231). This dissolution of boundaries could create

for the listener an experience of transgressive intimacy with an unseen, not-wholly-present other.

Doyle is of course hardly the first to argue that rock and roll's emergence was revolutionary, nor the only researcher to stress the importance of developing sound manipulation technologies to popular music history. The originality of his argument lies largely in his recognition of the cinematic origins of the impressionistic, artistic use of electrosonic reflection by mid-century record producers. In contemporaneous horror movies, he writes, "[r]everb indicates a kind of pregnant off-center space, neither fully occupied nor truly empty. It typically suggests the imminent appearance of the threatening presence" (169). It is this "uncanny" use of reverberation that Doyle argues crucially influences the sound of 1940s blues and early rock and roll records. "By assuming the sonic-spatial attributes of the (approaching) reverberant other, *and* the anchored self, [Elvis] Presley's recordings finally and decisively broke with the pictorialism of prior spatial practice, while still retaining its affective, expressionist powers.... On the representational plane something akin to a revolutionary usurpation of power had occurred" (232). Creatively linking deliberately-added reverberation on records, cinematic sound effect conventions, and actual social marginality (Elvis himself was after all just a poor, humble Southern boy) perhaps constitutes the book's most valuable contribution.

Doyle ends his historical exploration just a few years after the mainstream emergence of rock and roll. This is all for the good, as there is no shortage of capable popular music scholars who can, and should, pick up this history from where he leaves off. An obvious bookend to Doyle's study is the arrival of stereophonic recording, which brought a new sort of fabricated spatiality to the music recording encounter. To this I would add that Doyle's account concludes prior to the emergence of full-blown, self-conscious artistic aspirations (some would say pretensions) among rock and roll musicians. Thus Doyle's research points to a phenomenon familiar to cultural historians: innovative techniques usually precede self-conscious attempts to formalize or systematize them.

Now I would like to offer a few words on my experiences using *Echo & Reverb* in the classroom. For the past four years I have assigned the book in graduate seminars on the history of popular music in America and it has worked quite well as a supplementary text – students tend to find it both engaging and readable and its focus on the first sixty years of the twentieth century helps them learn about an era of music history with which most are relatively unfamiliar. Students have also praised the book's ingenuity in drawing persuasive and lucid connections between recorded songs and everything from classical mythology to the history of American capitalism to the social theory of

Erving Goffman. I would recommend using Doyle's text in advanced undergraduate seminars as well, particularly in conjunction with guided in-class listening to recordings analyzed in the text. But the book provides more than a coherent approach to an incredibly rich data set – it also supplies a useful model for writing about recorded music. Fabricated spatiality constitutes one aspect of the recorded music encounter that even students who lack musical training and vocabulary can describe and analyze with some degree of confidence, and since I always require my students, regardless of their musical background, to write an in-depth analysis of a commercially released recording, this is quite valuable.

In the early 21st century, the amount of artificially added reverberation and echo used on recordings depends largely on genre and audience considerations. For example, the level of synthetic reverb on a banjo can identify a recording as bluegrass, “newgrass,” or new age; on a string orchestra playing Mozart it can distinguish between classical music recorded especially for infants and an album by an acclaimed symphony performing in a European concert hall, where artificial reverberation to “sweeten” the sound is used sparingly. Peter Doyle's book is laudable in that it focuses our attention on this vitally important sonic artistic tool and the ways in which its meanings and uses developed over a long and convoluted history – a history that cannot be separated from the contradictions, injustices, and opportunities of twentieth-century American society.

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