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Riffs

Experimental writing on popular music



BIRMINGHAM CITY
School of Media

Riffs

Experimental writing on popular music

*“Here are mutes, liquids, aspirates - vowels, semivowels
and consonants. Now we see that words have not only a definition
and possibly a connotation, but also the felt quality of their
own kind of sound.”*

Mary Oliver (1994)

Riffs

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Editorial

Nick Gebhardt

Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, Birmingham City University

Don't get me started... It began as an experiment. How to find the words to say what we wanted say about music? Asking ourselves over and over: what are we trying to say? And why? There are a few rules: four to be exact. Total commitment. Always writing. No more than 2000 words (and less, if possible!). No criticism of each other. It's a space for disjointed dreamers, verbal acrobats, and irresponsible grammarians. Or perhaps it's an asylum for linguistic mishaps and malcontents who want to practice etymological misrule among forbidden verbs, wily nouns and prickly pronouns. And anyway, in the end, it's really about finding your voice; a process of discovering who you are and where you're from in what you write. But hang on, first things first! "How's it going to work?" they asked, sitting around a table, one lunchtime in early October. "Well," I said, "something like this." And then it wasn't at all like that. The start was, by any measure, a conventional one, boring even in retrospect. "Read an essay and respond in not more than..." was the instruction. "Still too much like school," I thought, when the initial pieces came in, struggling to pull away from the usual habits of exegesis. "As X noted in her study of Y." So I started reading everything I could get my hands on about writing: how to write more, better, faster, plainer, clearer, with greater fluidity, poetically, technically, philosophically; how to find passion in syntax, structure and form; and how to use symbols, metaphors and metonyms to create new ways and worlds of words. Particular tasks turned into existential journeys; someone's view of the park became a fable of belief. Henry James, Kathleen Stewart, E. B. White, Kazuo Ishiguro, Mary Oliver, William Zinsser, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many others became our guides. And so we wrote about making music together, we looked for the rhythms in dialogue, described a single moment in time, imitated our favorite author, imagined the perfect music lesson, found words that put us back into place, confessed to each other the metaphors we live by, cut out the clutter we all knew was there, responded to songs with soliloquy, and captured with a glance what the gaze so often obscures. "We live amid surfaces," Emerson once said, "and the true art of life is to skate well upon them." The essays that fill the pages below are testimony to some fine skating. We invite you to join with these lyrical skaters as they figure what their words and images and sounds can do and just how far they can take us with them.

Riffs emerged from a writing group at Birmingham City University, established in 2015 by Nick Gebhardt and supported by the Birmingham School of Media. As popular music scholars, many of the original 'Write Clubbers' straddled disciplines: music; sociology; media studies; anthropology; dance. Some felt adrift, on thin ice.

'Write Club' offered an opportunity of 2,000 words and the space of a table and eight chairs to explore what it meant to research popular music, to write about it, to construct an argument, a description, a song, a line. Once nerves were finally quashed and it became comfortable to watch another read your work, the writing became better and better until it seemed a crime to keep them under wraps, hidden away from curious eyes on a private blog.

In this, our first issue of Riffs, we offer up some of our thoughts and writing in the hope that we will be able to read yours, and that each of us will in some small way change the ways in which we think and write about popular music. Consider this your official invitation to Write Club.

- Sarah Raine, Editor.

In Defiance of Any Sense Of Normalcy: A Portrait of 21st Century Northern Soul

Dan Briston

1960s Industrial America: A songwriter pours emotion into their lyrics and a band provides a catchy beat. A record is produced on a limited timescale and budget and is released. It doesn't reach the top 100: multiple copies remain stored in a warehouse somewhere, destined for destruction.

Years later, an Englishman finds a box of these records. He takes them home on a budget flight to Britain's Industrial heartlands and plays them to his friends at a youth club. He practices dance moves in his bedroom, then his friends do the same. Soon, people from across the country meet every weekend to hear more, to dance and buy copies of these obsolete sounds at giant halls. A movement begins; British cultural history, out of records that were discarded years ago across the Atlantic. Thousands of emotions, thousands of lyrics, thousands of records enjoyed by people for four decades and counting. This phenomenon can be boiled down to two words: Northern Soul.

For those who have devoted the last 40 years of their lives to this movement, the amount of meaning packed into those two words is indescribable. Northern Soul is the light at the end of the tunnel, an escape from the drudgery of the working week. Northern Soul is their life. For those who are young and discovering the scene, Northern Soul also provides an escape; from plastic pop and regurgitated club tunes. They become as devoted as their forefathers did in the '70's.







Dan Briston is a photographer based in Norfolk. His long-term documentary project 'In Defiance of Any Sense of Normalcy: A Portrait of 21st Century Northern Soul' collates over a year of photographs from around the UK and was published as a paperback book in May 2016. He looks to publish Volume 2 in Autumn 2017.

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The Mastering Engineer: Manipulator of Feeling and Time

Alexander Hinksman

Other contributors have responded to Mary Oliver's prompt with valuable considerations of the roles phonetics and their so-called 'felt qualities' play in the construction and performance of popular songs. These phonetics can have *pitch*, they can be delivered at a particular *loudness* and they can also contribute to a sense of *rhythm*, *meter* or *tempo* as the songs in which they reside play out over time. Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin (2008: 71; 111) defines these five parameters, along with *harmony* and *melody*, as the factors that structure sound into music. He argues that when the parameters are in a state of obvious and controlled flux, a listener's expectations are challenged and so a listener responds to the music on an emotional level (also see Ball 2010: 281-282; Clynes 1982: 27-29). With this concept in mind, it is therefore important to consider how, in the context of *recorded* popular music, all of this is reconfigured and finalised by 'mastering engineers'. In this sense, they shape the listener's emotional response to every major recorded music release heard at home, on the Internet, or through the airwaves.

This contribution will draw on my own experiences in music production and research, citing relevant technical literature where appropriate. It will first describe how, at the 'micro' level, the mastering engineer can affect the felt qualities of a vocal performance in a recording. "The vocal is the central element", explains *Stonebridge Mastering* owner Gebre Waddell (2013: 107). "Mastering is best performed with this in mind. The vocal quality almost never should be sacrificed." Secondly, this contribution will position the mastering engineer as an agent for controlling a vocal's "temporal oranigzation" [sic] - that which, at the 'macro' level, Negus (2012: 483) would argue is "fundamental to [music's] creation and reception".

Understanding Mastering

Anderton, Dubber and James (2012: 23-44) outline the recorded music assembly line that formed in the latter half of the 20th century; pre-production, tracking, mixing, mastering, through to manufacture at the tip of the funnel (also see Waddell 2013: 1). Taking these authors' outline one step further and envisaging the assembly line as a 'funnel' helps make sense of the impact mastering has on recorded music. Often, as is the case with many of the acts that reap major portions of recorded music industry revenue, the aforementioned processes are carried out in separate locations and by separate engineers, who identify as specialists in any of these fields. Audio mastering is typically understood by music listeners, industry professionals and mastering engineers themselves as the process of a single practitioner sonically fine-tuning, polishing and fixing a selection of recordings deemed 'ready' for release. The mastering engineer also prepares their metadata, their sequence on an album and also their relative volume, prior to distribution in a variety of formats (see

Anderton, Dubber and James 2012: 67; 73; Hepworth-Sawyer & Golding 2011: 241-244; Katz 2002: 11-12; Owsinski 2008: 5-8; Waddell 2013: 1-5; Wyner 2013: 1-8).

To offer a brief historical context, the specialist knowledge required to ‘cut’ master lacquer and transfer audio from tape gave rise to dedicated mastering engineers or vinyl ‘disc cutters’ in the mid 20th century (see Horning 2013: 71; 85; 111-114; Owsinski 2008: 4; Waddell 2013: 143; 194-197). Mastering then evolved from this ‘electric age’ practice, as Dubber (2012: 18-30) may term it, to a contemporary ‘digital age’ practice, owing to the introduction of compact disc in the 1980s and the later proliferation of portable digital formats. Yet, a recent resurgence in vinyl record sales has not left (and will not leave) the practice of ‘cutting’ a record redundant.

It is useful to consider the contemporary mastering engineer as a conduit and critic figure; the process of mastering a ‘bridge’ (Katz 2002: 11) or ‘gateway’ (Nardi 2014) between production and consumption. Esteemed mastering engineer Bob Katz (2002: 11, my emphasis) defines mastering as “the last *creative* step in the audio production process [...] your last chance to enhance sound or repair problems in an acoustically-designed room”. To outline mastering in this way is to suggest that a mastering engineer’s work should, in the interests of artistic integrity, *enhance* the felt qualities of recordings and vocal performances within these recordings.

Mastering can make an extreme, subtle or surgical difference to a recording. Furthermore, as Bregitzer (2009: 184) aptly explains, “there are no hard-and-fast rules” for mastering; “there is no standardized [sic] method of mastering”, to also quote Gebre Waddell (2013: 3). Nevertheless, contemporary practice will encompass any of the analogue or digital signal processing phases in the simple list below (also see Katz 2002: 25-26; Owsinski 2008: 13-14; Waddell 2013: 8; Wyner 2013: 35-36).

- Harmonic simulation (tube or tape emulation)
- Equalisation
- Compression
- Stereo-field enhancement
- Digital limiting
- Dither
- Noise shaping
- Editing

(see Bregitzer 2009: 184)

Before considering the effect each processing phase can have on a vocal performance, it is crucial to stress that each phase should be considered optional rather than essential. My research findings would suggest that numerous engineers could take issue with the above and most certainly the suggested flow of signal, prior to ‘digital limiting’. Nonetheless, my research has proven that contemporary signal flow will fundamentally comprise the above.

Anderton, Dubber and James (2012: 65) note how, according to Leyshon (2009), the music production industry has also disintegrated vertically. A mastering engineer can still operate

in a dedicated or ‘specialist’ studio equipped with analogue hardware to carry out the above.

They may also operate in a project studio, a home, a bedroom or wherever laptop and user can work together. In part, this owes to recent advances in home computing and recording, algorithmic digital signal processing design, and Internet connection speeds. The signal processing phases are often carried out within software ‘digital audio workstation’ environments (see Bregitzer 2009: 186-209; Hawkins 2002; Wyner 2013: 9-13).³

This all demonstrates how, at the tip of the production funnel and for better or for worse, both specialist and amateur have agency to veneer recorded music industry output with their own distinctive sonic watermark. To quote Gebre Waddell (2013: 25):

Selecting and understanding the equipment [...] is part of what makes studios unique. [...] Some studios seek a balance between color [sic] processors and clean processors. [...] It is important to remember that while equipment is important, the greatest influence on the sound comes from monitoring, acoustics, technique and skill.

Through this and also my own extensive research findings, I argue that sonic and acoustic temperaments of both equipment used for mastering and rooms in which mastering takes place all together impress upon the felt qualities of recordings heard by music listeners (see also 26-72; Katz 2002: 75-82; Owsinski 2008: 13-32; Wyner 2013: 9-24). The engineer’s capacity to interpret sound has just as much potential to impact on a recording, and this figure may today be a conceived specialist, a home recording enthusiast, musician or laptop owner. The concept of ‘colour’ will be explained later in the prose.

When understood in this way, it is extraordinary to consider that mastering, as Nardi (2014: 8) rightfully notes, has lacked substantial consideration from scholars. The existing stock of technical literature on mastering is comparatively sparse when compared to the abundance addressing ‘music production’ in a more general sense. Bregitzer (2009: 183) acknowledges that the so-called ‘dark-art’ of mastering “is most often shrouded in mystery” and also argues that “[m]any inexperienced clients may not even know that mastering a recording is required”. Hepworth-Sawyer and Golding (2011: 241) state that mastering engineers “enjoy a ‘dark art’ status”; that “the guarded secret of mastering is kept behind closed doors in a cloak of mystery.”

If music stirs our emotions and a vocal within a recording has so-called ‘felt qualities’ to aid with this, it is crucial that the process and the potential impact of mastering is understood. This contribution will now explain, in the simplest terms, how the lesser-known but critical process can resculpt a vocal delivery in a recorded popular song.

³ Stating that contemporary recorded music production has only now, for the first time in history, become an accessible or non-corporate convention would be problematic. Horning (2013) informs us that the early home ‘recordist’ would operate on an amateur level using their own equipment prior to the post-WWII boom of independent recording studios that would later embrace multitrack-recording. By 1932, home recording rose to a level of popularity that made “Radio-Craft [publishing] Home Recording and All About It” justifiable.

Manipulating Feeling

Observe the air-like qualities of the aspirated 'h' in 'hair'. 'Harmonic simulation' (implying that this is carried out in the digital domain) will emulate the tonal qualities, often termed 'the colours', that hardware devices such as tape machines can impress on an audio signal. This owes to their unique circuitry and design. Tube and tape emulation, or 'actual' tubes and tape, can be used to saturate and distort a recording to offer the scientifically destructive albeit artistically favorable effect (when appropriate) of generating harmonic content from the source (see Owsinski 2008: 15-16; 27; Waddell 2013: 26; Wyner 2013: 22-24). This may lessen the distinguished difference between existing high frequency aspirates and higher-frequency harmonics that subtly arise out of lower frequency vowel sounds, liquids and mutes. Emulations of these hardware devices also emulate their tendency to 'roll-off' high frequency 'air' - that which could be lost from 'hair'. They may also reduce the dynamic range of an audio signal's amplitude, as would a compressor (see Bregitzer 2009: 199-200; Waddell 2013: 45; 92-94; Wyner 2013: 19; 30; 81).

More typically, mastering engineers use 'equalisers' to alter the tonal balance of an audio signal within the range of human hearing. This is considered to be between 20Hz and 20kHz.

Any frequency up to ~25Hz may be considered 'subsonic';

'bass' ranges from ~25Hz to ~120Hz;

'lower midrange' from ~120Hz to ~350Hz;

'midrange' from ~350Hz to ~2kHz;

'upper midrange' from ~2kHz to ~8kHz;

'high frequency' content from ~8kHz to ~12kHz;

'air' from ~12kHz upwards

(see Waddell 2013: 84-86)

Consider the low and percussive quality of 'b' in bring or 'p' in picture. In my own experience, using an equaliser to attenuate a curve of frequencies centered around ~275Hz will help alleviate perceptually 'muddy' characteristics from a recording. Plosive sounds that characterise mutes or 'stop consonants' are often present in this range and can be accentuated when vocalists use microphones in close proximity (see Eargle 2005: 64; Howard & Angus 2001: 332). In excess, this action can weaken any sense of rhythm, meter and timbre deriving from plosives in this frequency region.

Observe the piercing 'sss' that accompanies 'st' in 'stop' or 'sp' in 'spat'. Also notice how these sounds are more prevalent when whispering. Any sibilances that characterise certain aspirates are present in the 3-10kHz range. To attenuate or boost around this range will either reduce or accentuate whatever felt qualities these aspirate sibilants offer (see Bartlett & Bartlett 2009: 297; Bregitzer 2009: 169).

Psychobiologist Manfred Clynes (1982: 143-144) acknowledges a study undertaken by Kotlyar and Morosov (1976). The study proved how performer emotions are particularly exposed

through natural differentiations in amplitude. The communication of living emotion through music may be referred to as 'essentic form' (see Clynes 1982: 51-2; 64-65; Ball 2010: 267-269).

It is therefore remarkable that a 'dynamic range compressor' condenses the dynamic range of an audio signal's amplitude and enables the engineer to sculpt or shape dynamic content. On a vocal, the difference in amplitude between various aspirates, liquids and mutes can therefore be lessened or shaped by such processing; their emotional impact can be adjusted. A specific type of compressor, known as a 'de-esser', allows the mastering engineer to suppress a particular band of frequencies. Unlike equalisation, suppression happens only as frequencies surpass a particular threshold of amplitude. These tools target sibilant sounds at the higher end of the frequency spectrum, which often penetrate through a recording to the point of distortion, distraction and discomfort. The de-esser will directly impact on the listener's perception of sibilant and aspirate sounds. Excessive use of a de-esser will however introduce artificial lisping effects (see Waddell 2013: 44; 98).

Stereo-field enhancement involves the use of tools such as 'elliptical eq' to alter how particular frequency bands are distributed in the stereo spectrum. Before the introduction of digital formats, mastering engineers would 'mono' any sub-bass or lower bass frequencies to ensure cutter heads and playback styluses would not skip when working with cutting lathes or when playing from vinyl (see Owsinski 2008: 88; 257; Waddell 2013: 143; 194-197). This also resulted in recordings having a perceptually 'tighter', conceivably more pleasant low end and so, to a degree, the process persisted out of preference rather than necessity. The vocalist may be concerned with how this process can enhance the perceived 'punch' of lower frequency notes and plosives. Today's engineers can also widen the stereo image in the higher frequency spectrum to increase spatial depth in a recording. "Low frequencies are usually localized [sic] by the listener from every direction", explains Bregitzer (2009: 200). "The higher the frequency, the more we can perceive directionality", and so widening the stereo image has greater impact on the listener's spatial perceptions at this end of the spectrum (also see Moylan 2008: 64; Waddell 2013: 90-92). In doing this, harmonic resonances and formants that derive from liquids or mutes, and also the fundamental spectral elements of any aspirates, are all together perceived differently, owing to their exaggerated distribution in the stereo field.

The last creative mode of signal processing is typically carried out using a 'limiter'. A limiter may be used to increase the amplitude of the signal, whilst preventing any peaks from exceeding the maximum output volume and distorting. This can raise apparent loudness and yet reduce dynamic range across the entire frequency spectrum. As with compression, the difference in amplitude between various aspirates, liquids and mutes can be lessened through such processing; their rhythmic impact adjusted once again.

'Dither' and 'noise shaping' should always proceed the aforementioned processing. They are, for the sake of argument, non-creative and imperceptible processes applied in the interests of good housekeeping for a world of digital audio (see Waddell 2013: 94-95). Bregitzer mentions 'editing' to indicate the process of track ordering, leveling and applying fades; a creative activity though not a process of manipulating the sonic or emotional content of entire tracks.

Manipulating Time

Reflecting on Alperson (1980: 408), Negus (2012: 483-484) considers music and each musical constituent as a function of time; “temporal organization [sic] is fundamental to [music’s] creation and reception”, he argues. I consider ‘temporality’ an appropriate term to describe how music or vocal performance can radiate an obvious sense of rhythm and metre against the clock. Reflecting on the writings of Storr (1997), Sacks (2007: 244-246) suggests rhythm is a means of bringing a group of people together, synchronising their movement and minds. He also explains how memorising a series, the alphabet for instance, is made easier through meter and rhythm (237). EDM scene veteran Rick Snoman would later emphasise the significance of rhythm and temporality to the genre of electronic dance music (see also Fassbender 2008: 15).

Dance2Trance and their first track labelled “We came in Peace” is considered by many to be the first ever ‘club’ trance music. [...] [I]t laid the basic foundations for the genre [trance] with the sole purpose of putting clubbers into a trance-like state. The ideas behind this were nothing new; tribal shamans had been doing the same thing for many years, using natural hallucinogenic herbs and rhythms pounded on log drums to induce the tribe’s people into trance-like states.

(Snoman 2009: 251-252)

I suggest the terminologies ‘flow’ and ‘trance’ may be used synonymously to describe how, in Negus’ (2012: 483) terms, music induces an “acute feeling of time passing; of giving oneself up to the moment; of existing within memories; of losing all sense of measured clock time” (see Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Pursuit of Happiness 2015). If an obvious sense of rhythm and meter can stimulate lasting states of ‘flow’ or ‘trance’ in listeners, who will then become more attuned to those occupying the same space, then it is important to consider how the mastering engineer and the processing techniques they employ can impact on rhythmic and metric qualities in recordings and vocal performances.

It is through the brain’s ability to interpret diverse sound intensity in rhythmic patterns that it detects meter, be them in an entire recording or just a vocal performance (see Ball 2010: 209-210; Levitin 2008: 172). In detriment to this, sounds of a similar intensity are grouped together by our auditory system (see Ball 2010: 142-144; Clynes 1982: 119; Levitin 2008: 81). Aggressive application of compression and limiting can considerably narrow the dynamic range of a vocal take in the mastering stages of record production. This will decrease its clear essence of pulse, punch, rhythm, metre and thus temporality at the macro level. The capacity of a performance or recording to induce states of flow and trance in the listener will consequently diminish. Strikingly, Katz (2002: 86-132; 185-196), Milner (2010: 237- 292), Rowan (2002) and Vickers (2010) all observe how such processing has been exploited at an increasingly profound level, following the introduction of digital formats. This has given rise to a so-called ‘loudness war’, whereby recorded music industry personnel ensure new music releases are competitive in terms of apparent loudness.

To conclude

The goal of both producer and mastering engineer is often to deliver recordings through which audio engineering ‘work’ to bring a vocal performance to the listener is concealed, unless *exposé* is deemed creatively appropriate. This is not to say an engineer’s hallmark sound, aesthetic choices or their ability to creatively manipulate audio should not prevail. It is evidence of, quite literally, ‘work’ undertaken to construct their signatures and showcases that is suppressed. The engineer will work to disguise evidence that the vocalist ever stood in front of a microphone or that a dynamic range compressor was used. If mastering is done correctly then it should, for the most part, go undetected. Nevertheless, it is important that music listeners, songwriters and singers to recognise the lesser-known figure at the tip of the production funnel. This figure may now be a professional or an amateur. As this contribution has explored, both have agency to distinctively shape the listener’s emotional response to and temporal perception of ‘felt qualities’ in a vocal performance across an entire recording.

Alexander is currently a PhD candidate at *Birmingham City University*. His doctoral research offers a wider investigation into the technical operations of professional mastering engineers. The research in-progress has been presented at the *Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research* and Alexander has conducted a stockpile of lengthy interviews with a broad succession of internationally renowned engineers. They themselves and also their associated projects have collectively earned extensive arrays of *GRAMMY*, *BRIT*, *MPG*, *TEC*, *Mercury Prize* and *MOBO* awards or nominations. The research has also involved invitation to US *Grammy* Award-winning mastering engineer Vlado Meller’s mastering workshop in Charleston, South Carolina.

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The Savage Twisting of Vowels

Megan Sormus

'Here are mutes, liquids, aspirates - vowels, semivowels and consonants. Now we see that words have not only a definition and possibly a connotation, but also the felt quality of their own kind of sound'
Oliver (1994: 22).

'The savage twisting of vowels which resonate with the disarticulation of the body'
(Whiteley, 2000: 110)

This piece examines the combination of words and music and the visceral effect and tangible quality of language itself. In order to bring the felt attributes of words that Mary Oliver describes to the forefront, it is based on my own research on riot grrrl. It focuses on the way in which the somewhat textual traditions of riot grrrl - their music and lyrics, body writing and zine making, brought the feelings of young women to life. It was the marginal language of their experiences that, in part, activated an alternative and distinctive sound. This echoed the anger and alienation felt by riot grrrls, goaded by a consumer culture they felt existed to silence them and indeed, 'write them out'. A principal objective of the riot grrrl community was to create an autonomous female identity that stood outside the inscribed confines of domestic, patriarchal and consumer institutions. This piece is therefore centred on two contrasting scenes, one denoting the private space of a girl's bedroom, and the other revealing a contrastingly public but similarly girl-orientated space of a riot grrrl gig. With this, it brings to light the two contrasting narratives of riot grrrl - the fight against the domestic confinement of young women, and the creation of subversive spaces that housed alternative forms of female self-expression, constructed by the motivating effects of words and sound. To build on female expression within these new spaces, riot grrrls borrowed from the do-it-yourself (DIY) tradition of punk. At the forefront of this piece is an interpretation of 'D. I. Y' and the way that its construction substantiates the growth of an independent grrrl identity and the connotation it carries is one of autonomy. Riot grrrl also encouraged young women to use this DIY objective to regain control of their bodies. This is duly noted in the twisting of the word 'grrrl', as it is distorted from its original meaning and brings an aggressive quality that worked to separate the young women from the idealised narratives of girlhood. Body writing is another example of way that riot grrrl encouraged a crude corporeal reaction to language, transforming the body into a textual space for creation and expression. The piece plays on this bodily response to sound, its permissions and its limitations, interpreting Oliver's quote through a first person narrative. This is in order to reveal how the words and sound of riot grrrl, housed in a do-it-yourself attitude, create songs of the self.

At the piercing intonation of a drill, I jolt upright in my bed. The rhythmic reverberations unfurl my curled up body from its question mark curve into a reluctant exclamation mark, as my legs remain stretched out before me, unwilling to depart from their prostrate position. The sound of the drill stutters on - a shameless solo artist and me its reluctant listener.

My aching feet appear to feel the mechanised music and bob back in a sluggish harmony. This spontaneous kinaesthesia sparks memories of the way my feet had stomped, kicked and jumped in response to the sound of the Bikini Kill gig the night before. The caterwauling, the soft-spoken seductive tones and the guttural aggression of Kathleen Hanna's eclectic vocals summoned my body. This was to be my first experience of the way riot grrrl bands put music to the words of my own feelings. Hanna's concoction of ugly verse and harsh music flooded out into a sonic sea that seemed to solidify underneath my feet. It became as tangible as the Dr. Martens in which I stood and carried me in a hard-hitting wave of grrrls that surged me forward to the front of the stage.

I think back to the way Hanna switched from jumping up and down to striking vogue like poses, twisting seductively to the contrastingly savage twang of the opening lines of 'Rebel Girl'. Her white t-shirt depicted *The Jam*, the combination of words echoed what I felt as I was also jammed in an odorous pick 'n' mix of grrrls in the small pit, who were all mimicking Hanna's punk pogoing. Jumping straight up in the air in unison and crashing back down to the floor with a dot and a dash, the grrrl audience aggressively punctuated each of the verses Hanna sang out with their movement: a violent exclamation mark, an assertive full stop or a pause-for-breath comma, all of which both encouraged and halted the flow of linear verse. The whiteness of Hanna's ripped t-shirt mixed with crimson lips and raven hair transformed her into a subversive Snow White. Rewriting the romanticised fairy tales fed to young girls, this punk princess dripped her own poisonous words and built her own forest of prickly obscenities and bountiful truths to protect us all and keep out the so-called Knights who carried patriarchal ideologies like their shining armour.

The savage sound and aggressive syllables arranged themselves into narratives around me to tell the story of my life as a young woman that I could embody and believe in. The amalgamation of grrrls created a stormy ocean of contorting faces as they spat, and sang and silently mimed along to Bikini Kill, their words animating Hanna's thrashing limbs and hypnotically swinging hair. With the streaks of red hair on black emblazing under the hot lights she became ever more the phoenix rising from phonetic flames created by the all-girl mosh audience. I remember the way a grrrl had shouted to me in one ear, elevating her syllables in order to reach me over the noise. The spray of her enlivened words created a vehement mist, condensing until it dropped to the ground into the ever-growing puddle of things never to be heard at a loud concert that was forming around us. In the other ear, I heard Hanna bawl from the stage **'WE'RE BIKINI KILL AND WE WANT REVOLUTION GRRRL STYLE NOW'**. At this prompt my mouth opens automatically and a ceremonious roar escapes. As if it was waiting for this opportunity all night, the roar builds in intensity as confidence grows. Grrrls slot between each other both awkwardly and amorously, a weird waltz that ricochets young women in-between two worlds, a carnivalesque scene where grrrls

lead in heavy boots and ripped floral dresses as opposed to being led in gowns and glass slippers. Words have carved out this subversive space. It is a textual terrain that spells out pure female expression through the transformation of words into song. It carries the limbs of grrrls to an alternative beat. It is the definition of resistance.

Putting the music of my memories of the night on repeat in the recesses of my mind, my eyes begin to shoot darts across my bedroom. The reverberations of my father's dodgy Sunday D.I.Y still bumbled around me, the sound conjuring apparitions of wonky shelves, bent nails and family photographs hanging skew-whiff, all out-of sync with the chorus of the tools that had brought them to life. I watch and the vibrations of the sound enliven my messy bedroom, the punk inspired collages I have stuck all around notebooks, my scrapbooks, and my guitar leaning against the wall all beat at the bloodied scream of the drill. The music of D.I.Y animates them with a sense of themselves as tools of resistance. For a grrrl, these tools work against the preened and proper girly images of consumer culture. These narratives speak *for* young women in reams of idealisation and leave them mute. This provokes an angry and aggressive response to the oppression felt by the crushing language of girl culture. Each object around me is a tool to twist the language of this culture out of shape, to inject resistance and disrupt it, to disarticulate my body before it becomes erased by the regulatory fictions of idealised girlhood.

Suddenly, the language of the drill provokes an irritation that swells inside me as the noise continues to tug at the tendrils of my inertia, like a child tugging at the skirts of its mother with sticky hands demanding her attention.

Shhh.

I clamp my hands over my ears and close my eyes and force the air between my lips. Its shrill quality brushes the enamel on the back my teeth as it falls in sharp drops out of my mouth. A fully formed swarm of sound buzzes in the air carrying with it the connotation of silence. The realisation of the imposing and imprisoning quality of the call for silence pricks my eyes and ears back open. I begin to feel that it is no coincidence that the call for silence also constructs the sound of 'she'.

Shhhe

The definition of the word becomes fully realised. There is a sudden feeling of imprisonment as the social construction of my gender sounds out around me, carrying with it the rules that formulate a girl prison: *Shhe* can't play guitar, *shhe* can't write songs, *shhe* can't be anything other than what she is told to be. My *shhh* mingles with the drill that still refuses to give up its subversive sound. With this, I sound out D. I. Y. Strange. A dissonant blend of letters that bookend a rebellious sounding vowel, which spurts strong in the centre despite having no business wedged between two consonants. I think about how the sound of this blatant contradiction blends better than the make-up I am instructed to wear by consumer culture that whisper step-by-step instructions of how to become the perfect girl. It is clear. d.I.y brings power through juxtaposition.

I glance at a zine I've marked open and remember how it felt as if the words it housed had crawled onto my skin, glowing like the felt tip I had used to illuminate a particular quote.

At its command I became a tool of contradiction, a collage of resistance:

'We're tired of being written out – out of history, out of the 'scene', out of our bodies... for this is the reason we have created our zine and our scene... be proud of being a grrrl'
(Harris, 2008:6).

I look down at my arms still harbouring the smudges of riot grrrl resistance embedded in the body writing I had done the night before. Body writing is proud armour for a riot grrrl. I remember the way I blew onto my arm to dry the liquid letters, breathing life into the sound of the words that I had sketched on there - ugly words that are so lightly thrown at young women yet stick to them like a heavy slime - 'Slut'. 'Bitch'. 'Whore'. However, when they glow on the skin like a shield made of Sharpie silver they sound out another meaning. The body becomes a textual site of self-expression, of identity, of creation and enjoyment. It becomes the centralised 'I' in D.I.Y.

I stand up at the final rallying cry of the drill. I desire to carry the same aggression, the same perseverance of the D.I.Y tool to wake up the whole street and embody the repetitive aggression at the heart of the word *grrrl*. I scratch out the letters 'd. I. y' onto a blank page, a skeletal frame to begin with but nevertheless emphasising the 'I' I wish to find by changing these words into song. Singular letters stand waiting for the spin of sound to give them a faint pulse that will inevitably strengthen into a fully formed composition.

I pluck at the strings lying inert on the fret board of the guitar, creating a resuscitative jolt that animates them. E A D G B E: I feel through the secret language of this private alphabet and make it public with cacophonous tones. The metal fuses with the new beginnings of a language that is still waiting for a perceptible definition. The lettered strings reverberate and talk back to each other, my fingers travel from the low hum of E to the lofty heights of B. Backwards and forwards they whisper their secrets to me and make my hand twitch as I scratch fresh words onto the white paper at their command. Their sound spills out to form letters that form words that then form lyrics and verse. At the beating heart of resonant sound I blow hot air from my pursed lips onto my sore fingers, I sense the language of the sharp strings as it indents itself into my skin like brail. I scratch and scribble, feeling the vibrations of the life chords of my guitar filling out the undernourished frame of the song of the self. With this, I grasp a glimpse of my self among the feeling of sound, within the contradictory construction of d. I. y.

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Bob Dylan: Nobility, Lyrics and Ghosts

David Kane

Introduction

The news that Bob Dylan had been awarded the 2016 Nobel Prize for literature prompted a healthy response. Comments ranged from the congratulatory to the critical, the latter, while acknowledging Dylan's talent, argued that his work could not be considered as literature. The former stoutly defended the Nobel committee's decision, often citing the importance of Dylan in personal biographies and championing his right to be acknowledged as a poet.

The award and subsequent debate have resonance with a number of topics that deserve further consideration. In the following, I examine Dylan's unique status in the history of rock that often focuses on his songwriting, particularly his lyrics, and the manner in which he influenced other musicians. I also consider how responses to Dylan's Nobel can be construed as illustrating the gap that continues to exist between the supposed high cultural value of literature and the low value of rock music. Further, I explore how continued acknowledgement of Dylan's work can be viewed as affirming a rock 'golden age' that peaked in the 1960s and which, for some commentators, results in contemporary replication of the past that acts to hold back innovation. This is most noticeable in the concept of hauntology, which, in this context, promotes a desire to resurrect a time in which music really mattered.

These musings are interspersed with my personal experience of Dylan's music that while rendering me unqualified to hold an objective view, enable an understanding of the polar positions often taken in any discussion of Dylan and his work and his ability to delight, dismay, enthrall and frustrate in equal measure.

Don't ask me nothin' about nothin' I just might tell you the truth
(Dylan, 1965)

The recent bestowing of the Nobel award for literature to Bob Dylan has generated a significant amount of comment relating to the suitability of the recipient to receive such an honour (see, for example: North, 2016; O' Hagan, 2016; Sheffield, 2016; Stanley, 2016). Dylan, after all, is a musician: during the mid 1960s, he categorized himself as a 'song and dance man'¹ and his works reach the public via the practices of the music rather than the publishing industry. The Nobel committee's explanation that the award had been given 'for

¹This response was given in answer to the question 'Do you think of yourself primarily as a singer or a poet' at a press conference in San Francisco, December, 1965. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-cPoZZVm3Dk>

having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition' (Nobel Prize, 2016) served to further muddy the waters, as did the committee's insistence that Dylan was a poet and, therefore, a worthy and deserving winner.

Commentary on the award, congratulatory and critical, coalesced around two themes: whether Dylan could be considered a poet and the notion that song lyrics can be considered as literature. While some literary luminaries applauded the choice of the Nobel committee, others were less enthusiastic. Salman Rushdie, for example, welcomed Dylan's award by noting that 'The frontiers of literature keep widening, and it's exciting that the Nobel Prize recognises that' (Rushdie, 2016). Irving Welsh, however, on hearing the news described it as '...an ill-conceived nostalgia award wrenched from the rancid prostates of senile, gibbering hippies' (Welsh, 2016).

The main reason advanced by those critical of the Nobel Committee's choice was that Dylan's work does not constitute literature (see Furedi, 2016; North, 2016). This resonates with the notion of a divide between the high cultural value of literature and the contrasting low value of rock music. This position is interesting as Dylan has been considered as bridging the perceived divide between vapid music and music as an artistic medium (see Snellgrove, 2013). Dylan's detractors argue that his work cannot be considered as literature as removal of music from his lyrics renders them less powerful. Danny Karlin, a leading expert on Robert Browning, observed that if Dylan's lyrics had been published as poems rather than songs, 'nobody would have taken a blind bit of notice' (Morris, 2011).

It should be noted that Dylan has, throughout his career, divided opinion. There are those, for example, who are instantly turned off by the very sound of his voice. There are others who simply cannot see what the fuss is about. In 1969, Nik Cohn dismissed Dylan as '...a minor talent with a major gift for self-hype' (Cohn, 1969; 2004). His recent Nobel, however, is not without precedent: he has been the recipient of a number of awards throughout his career including two honorary doctorates from the universities of Princeton and St Andrews, a Pulitzer Prize under the 'Special Awards and Citations' category, the Presidential Medal of Freedom and a number of Grammy awards. Dylan was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988. His output has also been the subject of academic study and, on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 2011, the University of Mainz, the University of Vienna, and the University of Bristol organized symposia on his work.

The advice of Nobel Committee permanent secretary Sarah Danius to those unfamiliar with Dylan's work to begin with his 1966 album *Blonde on Blonde* however, could go some way to explaining Welsh's remarks (Ellis-Peterson and Flood, 2016). Was the choice of Dylan for this award simply an exercise in re-affirming both his status and the era of arguably his best known and acclaimed work as a rock 'golden age'?

The justification prepared by the committee points to some unease as to how their choice would be received. The same justification however is interesting in that it foregrounds one aspect of Dylan's work – his lyrics. I will use the remainder of this piece to rehearse some thoughts about popular music lyrics, the impact of Dylan and the notion that popular

music is unable to escape the influence of the 'classic era' and is currently locked into a cycle of reproducing the past.

Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now
(Dylan, 1964).

My own introduction to pop and rock was via my brother's collection of singles and albums from the 1960s. I quickly became acquainted with offerings from the Searchers and the Hollies, but my favourites were the Beatles. This was probably helped along by their feature films, which at the time were shown regularly on British Christmas television. *The Monkees* TV show was also a staple of UK children's television at the time and I was delighted to discover some Monkees singles among the collection.² Then came Dylan.

My brother, by this time, had musically moved on. I don't recall the exact circumstances, but I was aware that he was listening to something that sounded very different to the British beat groups that constituted my musical diet. I decided to investigate: the first Dylan album that I listened to was *Bringing It All Back Home* (Dylan, 1965). This in itself was confusing: one side of the album bore some resemblance to the music I was used to listening to. There were drums and guitars – they sounded different, but they were definitely there. On the other side, however, the instrumentation was very different; it was sparse and spiky, punctuated with blasts of harmonica. In addition, side two comprised only four quite lengthy songs. It took some time for me to realize that something else was fundamentally different: the words (or lyrics as I would learn later was the preferred terminology) – they were unlike anything I had previously encountered. While my favourite British beat groups sang about love, heartache and holding hands, Dylan danced 'beneath a diamond sky with one hand waving free' (Dylan, 1965a). While not possessing the critical faculties to fully understand how different his approach was, it appealed to my own literary ambition and conceit; I became a Dylan bore.

I began to do some digging and found that there were several books written about Dylan; also that he had written one himself (this turned out to be quite disappointing, however; see Dylan, 1973). The books about him filled some gaps in my knowledge. I learned of his transformation from earnest folkie to electric rocker and the apparent consternation this had caused (this in itself is one of the most mythologized events in rock music history). I learned about a mysterious motorcycle accident that occurred at the peak of his fame in the mid-sixties and yet another transformation on his re-emergence two years later. I learned about his evasiveness; I learned that much of this evasiveness was caused by questions concerning his songs – particularly questions asking about meanings in his songs.

² 56 episodes of *The Monkees* were originally broadcast on BBC1 between December 1966 and June 1968. The shows were repeated often throughout the 1970s.

Because something is happening here but you don't know what it is do you, Mr. Jones?

(Dylan, 1965b)

Songs mean something? This was something that hadn't previously occurred to me – I re-visited the albums armed with my newly acquired knowledge. I became more confused: early Dylan albums were easier to access in terms of meaning, the finger pointing songs (for example: *Only a Pawn in Their Game*; *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*; *Masters of War*) as Dylan would later refer to them, (Heylin, 2009), that formed the bulk of his output as he rode the wave of the protest movement of the early 1960s, were more direct, more obvious. His turn to rock signaled a lyrical departure, captured most vividly in the three albums recorded in the period 1965-66: *Bringing it all Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*. I had no idea if he was a poet, but he certainly had a way with words!

It was many years later that I learned of Dylan's voracious consumption of both musical and literary genres: his re-workings of the great American Songbook combined with techniques borrowed or stolen from Robert Johnson and Woody Guthrie informed his early protest songs (see Moore, 2006). We can speculate that knowledge of the French symbolist and American Beat poets contributed to his lyric writing when he became disillusioned with folk and turned to rock.³ From conversations with my brother, I learned that Dylan was considered 'important' although, this held little meaning at the time. Over the years, as I trod my own musical path, his name would often crop up: as an influence or as an example of music someone loved or, indeed, hated. I lost touch with his output however. Like many I suspect, experiencing his mid-60s work first meant that anything subsequent was heard with more than a little disappointment. The power of what Mick Brown called 'the amphetamine poetry of *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*' (Brown, 2011) made a lasting impression on me and I wanted to hear more. I hoped that each new album release would signal a return to 'that thin, that wild mercury sound...metallic and bright gold' that characterized his albums from 1965-66.⁴ It was not to be: Dylan had moved on, perhaps I had not.

Nonetheless, it was clear he had influenced my own approach to music: I paid as much attention to the words as I did to the music and was often drawn to artists who clearly, in my opinion, thought that lyrics were as important to the song as the tune (particular favourites include, for example, Elvis Costello, Howard Devoto and Andy Partridge). I was aware that Dylan was continuing to release music and touring almost endlessly. I attended a number of his concerts; the experience ranged from awe to disappointment. He has seemingly always been a contrarian and age has not mellowed this aspect of his personality: he rarely acknowledges an audience and re-arranges, sometimes beyond recognition, tunes that many

⁴ Dylan described this as the sound he heard in his head and wanted to achieve on his records during an interview with Ron Rosenbaum in 1978.

⁵ This is a continuing practice. At a review of the first Desert Trip festival, Stephen Deusner noted that '[Dylan] and his band play a low-key set that reshuffles tunes from nearly every stage of his catalogue, as though he's still trying to figure out what they mean.' Uncut, December 2016.

hold so dear.⁵ It is as if, as Stephen Deusner observes, Dylan does not play for the crowd, he plays for himself (Deusner, 2016).

...Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, fighting in the captain's tower while calypso singers laugh at them and fishermen hold flowers

(Dylan, 1965c)

As I noted earlier, it had been impressed upon me that Dylan was 'important'; the Nobel award lends credence to this view. It transpired that his importance was rooted in the way that his lyrics had opened up possibilities for the popular song. As Carys Wyn Jones observed in her work on rock canons, Dylan's 1965 album, *Highway 61 Revisited* '...is associated with visionary revolution, a straightforwardly canonical marker of value' (2008: 53). Jones draws upon a description of the same album in Rolling Stone magazine in its '500 Greatest Albums of All Time' to reinforce the point:

...one of those albums that, quite simply, changed everything. "Like a Rolling Stone"...forever altered the landscape of popular music – its "vomitifc" lyrics (in Dylan's memorable term, literary ambition and sheer length (6:13) shattered limitations of every kind.⁷

There are difficulties, of course, with this interpretation of Dylan's contribution. As Andy Bennett, drawing on Allen and Lincoln (2004) and Schmutz (2005), observes, the concept of 'retrospective cultural consecration' where consecrating institutions confer acclaim, historical importance and cultural value on particular texts needs to be taken into account. Bennett draws on Schmutz's assertion that this heritage rock discourse has its genesis in Rolling Stones 500 Greatest Albums, which acted as 'a critical driver of the retrospective cultural consecration and production of the rock canon' (2009: 479). This activity, which has been supplemented through the emergence of "prestige-granting" bodies and institutions including the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Bennett argues, 'is very much part of the ageing rock audience's reassessment of rock, not merely as something particular to their youth, but rather as a key element in their collective cultural awareness and a major contributor to their generational identity' (Bennett, 2009: 478).

There is a danger that this activity, along with increased access to music from the past via online services, could work to affirm the golden age of rock as the apex of popular music, as a period of revolutionary change that is unlikely to be repeated. This process is assisted by the baby boomers who grew up in the 'golden age' and who now occupy positions that allow them to influence how the history of rock is portrayed. It could be argued that Dylan's Nobel is an example of this process in practice.

⁵ Dylan covers his listening and reading habits in detail in his autobiography *Chronicles Volume One* (2004). The Beat poet Allen Ginsberg can be seen in the background of Dylan's promotional film for the song 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' (1965c)

⁷ Various Contributors, 'The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time', Rolling Stone, 11 December 2003, 83-178. In: Jones, C. W. (2008).

So, caution must be exercised. It is interesting however, that Nik Cohn, who admits to being no fan of Dylan, noted that his songs:

...changed the whole concept of what could or couldn't be attempted in a hit song. Suddenly, pop writers could go beyond three-chord love songs, they didn't have to act mindless any more. Mostly, they could say what they meant (1969, 2004: 181).

This, in a sense, returns to the high/low culture argument: did Dylan facilitate a movement in popular music that enabled it to be considered as something other than throwaway? As art even? Perhaps the innovative elements of Dylan's work, which could transfer to other forms including literature, influenced the Noel committee's decision. Much has been made, after all, of Dylan's influence on other writers and bands, notably the Beatles. Rock mythology holds that Dylan gifted the Beatles two important things, drugs and the idea that their status and songs could be used to tackle the issues that concerned both them and their audience. In short, Dylan is credited with freeing Lennon and McCartney from their Tin Pan Alley approach to songwriting ('songs for the meat market' as Lennon would later call them),⁸ arguably setting in motion the divide between pop and rock that began in the mid-to late 1960s.

The final words on Dylan's influence should perhaps again belong to Nik Cohn who observed '...his effect on pop remains enormous: almost everyone has been pushed by him...and almost everything new that happens now goes back to his source. Simply, he has grown pop up, he has given it brains' (1969, 2004: 185).

The ghost of 'lectricity howls in the bones of her face
(Dylan, 1966).

As the above illustrates, there is little doubt that Dylan is one of rock's most important and interesting figures. His refusal to stand still or rest on his laurels and his longevity mark him as something special; there is also little doubt that his work challenged the formulaic notion of pop and expanded the range of options open to his peers and those that followed. Even his look 'that classic mid-Sixties Dylan look – bird's-nest hair, dark shades, pipe-cleaner legs, Chelsea boots, razor-sharp cheekbones – is the coolest look ever' (Gill and Shepherd, 2016). Then there are the lyrics.

Dylan c. 1965/66 – 'the coolest look ever?'
Image credit: Hulton Archive/Getty Images



⁸ Lennon described his early song writing this way in an interview with Jan Wenner for Rolling Stone in 1971).

His status however, along with that of many of his contemporaries from the 'classic' age of rock is problematic. I have already commented on the notion of retrospective cultural consecration above but for some, the problem runs deeper. For these commentators, advances in technology along with political and economic strategies have combined to curtail creativity in pop resulting in an aural landscape that comprises regurgitations of sounds and styles from the past. These concerns often follow a central theme: that pop is obsessed with or, alternatively, haunted by, the spectres of its past. Jean Hogarty (2017) contends that a culture of retro and nostalgia has characterized the popular music of recent years. Borrowing from Mark Fisher (2014), Hogarty asserts that 'there is no now' in popular music terms and that we have entered 'the age of retro culture that is occupied by the ghosts of popular music's past' (Hogarty, 2017: 2)

This view has its roots in Derrida's notion of hauntology, which was originally posited to illustrate how Marxism would continue to haunt Western society and which is generally described as a paradoxical harking back to a lost future (Derrida, 1994). Hogarty argues that younger music fans demonstrate hauntological feelings in their desire to resurrect a time in which music really mattered and belief that 'contemporary music lacks originality and its own unique zeitgeist...' (Hogarty, 2017: 80). To achieve this, they 'immerse themselves in what they deign to be a more 'real' musical past' (ibid). This is echoed, to a degree, by the public outpourings of grief that have followed the deaths of several rock luminaries in 2016, the most notable being David Bowie. These reinforce the argument that musicians from the classic age are held in esteem not only by audiences that grew up with them, but also by generations following. Reasons for this could include the pervasive nature of the canon of rock greats, parental influence and encouragement and the ability to access the back catalogue of artists from the past.

The conferment of Dylan's Nobel laureate adds credence to these arguments, acting to reinforce the notion that the 'classic' era of rock was the time that mattered most, when all the battle lines were drawn and when music was revolutionary. This could be construed, as noted by Bennett above, as the continued influence of the baby boomer generation, hence Irving Welsh's acerbic response to the news of Dylan's award. Of additional concern, as Joseph Kotarba notes, is the presentation of rock nostalgia, which can be viewed as a '...simulacrum (cf. Baudrillard 1983). It never existed in its original state as it is now presented to consumers' (Kotarba, 2013 :46).

It balances on your head just like a mattress balances on a bottle of wine
(Dylan, 1966a).

'He deserved it [the Nobel] for that line alone'
(Hamilton, 2016).

As is probably obvious, I do not have the benefit of an objective position when discussing Bob Dylan and his work. He was a looming presence in my formative musical years and influenced the way I listen to music: in many ways, he is to blame for the often-obsessive attention I pay to lyrics: I forgive him.

This is not to say that I am entirely comfortable with his latest honour: while I am a little skeptical about the claims that there is ‘no now’ in popular music terms, it does appear that the spirits and, in many cases, the performers of the ‘classic’ age of rock refuse to give way (Dylan is a case in point). As noted by advocates of the hauntological notion of pop, technology has facilitated this situation, providing almost unlimited access to music of the past. This can be viewed as either a blessing or a curse: providing rich seams for today’s artists to mine, or conversely, stifling creativity and reducing output to pale imitation or parody of what has gone before.

As Alan Moore observes, histories of popular music often tell the stories of musicians and their entourages, which ‘serves the cult of celebrity, a most pervasive characteristic of the age’ (Moore, 2006: 338). Although the latest feting of Bob Dylan ostensibly foregrounds his work, particularly his lyrics, there lurks the suspicion that it also reinforces the cult of the ‘classic’ era of rock, in itself as pervasive as Dylan’s place in my own biography.

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Locational Aesthetics: Squashing

Andy Ingamells

[Read the following text aloud after strenuous physical exercise, preferably squash.]

As a composer I think it's er, yeah I think it's really important to, to play squash. It's a very musical game. When the ball's bouncin', the echo, the resonance, the indeterminate rhythm of the game; everything, it comes together in this big cacophonous sound y'know. I think it's, it's really such a fantastic musical experience to play.

I come to the squash court and I play and I start to think about music and then I start to talk about music.

'It is said that "talking about music is like dancing about architecture". This means that talking about music is pointless.'

The sounds of the voice when you're out of breath; I think it really changes it and it really gives it a different character. And it, it's that character that sounds like music.

'But talking may sometimes sound like music. In fact, some languages such as Chinese or Swedish are intoned, where different sounds convey different meanings, just like music.'

I listen to a lot of music where the voice has been distorted in some way, maybe using electronics. But really a voice distorts in everyday life. It distorts on the squash court when you're out of breath, when you're running for a ball, when you can't concentrate on what you're saying. And that's also music.

'The sounds of our speaking voices may in fact be music, rather than about music.'

'And our activities also interact with architecture, in a very direct way.'

'So if talking can be considered music, then this game of squash can be considered dance.'

'In this case we are talking about music whilst dancing about architecture.'

Andy Ingamells is an experimental musician developing unorthodox and extraordinary methods of composition that blur the distinction between composer and performer. Examples of his work include a 24-hour performance disseminating brief instructions via the internet to be interpreted in over 30 countries worldwide, expanding the idea of musical indeterminacy to read aspects of everyday life as notation, inventing the game of violin cricket, and a five-day performance-journey across Europe inspired by organ music.

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Read aloud at 4am

Ed Mckeon

Rising from the dead of night

Half-human, staring back from the mirror, amphibian-eyed, a splice in the rhythm of day following night following day following night. Muttering a dream-language: a remnant of the half-human's other half. The witching hour is past; this is the bewitching hour, four o'clock, when no-one in their right mind is fully conscious.

Times have their own logic, a chrono-logy. Radio or newspaper over breakfast, the second coffee switches on synapses for Spinoza perhaps. Or perhaps not. (Heidegger at high noon, and Nietzsche at night....) Do we read *Riffs* with a mid-morning roll or over a third coffee? Email over lunch, reports and writing in the afternoon; novels in the evening and poetry before sleep? Who Tweets (about former beauty queens) at 4am...?

Reasonings are in time and of time and – at best – out of time. Ancient customs of chants and scriptural readings attest to these rhythms, including the unsleeping vigilance of the Early Church's all-night *nocturns*, part of the canonical hours. Is there a gloaming significance in the chanting and singing of this breviary, the traditions of Jewish scriptural recitation, the muezzin's calls and the night-time *isha* prayer, or the Orthodox *Horologion*? The emerging day and its ratiocination is coaxed through the voice; thoughts becoming song.

The moment of waking comes as a surprise, a jolt. The morning finds Gregor Samsa transformed into an insect in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, just as Kovalyov discovers before breakfast his alarming facial castration in Gogol's *The Nose*. The miraculous accident of the self must be repeated each day, pieced together and performed anew from memory. Perhaps this is why most suicides occur between midnight and six, a supposition underlying Robert Ashley's *That Morning Thing* (1967-8) after three women friends independently took their own lives.¹ Interviewed before its West Coast premiere at Mills College in 1969, Ashley draws out his idea:

“.... The image of the title is that time of the day, er, I think metaphysically, when you're supposed to go through a great crisis, just before dawn. ... You tend to die, like, at that time of day, four o'clock in the morning.... The idea is that one sort of rebuilds himself every morning, right, you become yourself again, and this involves not only rebuilding in a physical sense, getting up and going through all the physical changes, but also, like, rebuilding your personality. For me, I assume, I don't know about other

¹ These dark hours of the night have recently been confirmed as the most likely hours for suicides by researchers. See <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/study-pinpoints-when-people-are-most-likely-to-commit-suicide/>, accessed 14 Dec 2016.

people, it involves talking to myself a lot.... The 'Morning Thing' is that ritual you go through, trying to decide whether you're going to live or die that day, right.... Taking the metaphor a little bit further, er, the 'Morning Thing' is that body you have to cope with in the morning. You know, you have to shave the hair off its face, brush its teeth...."²

It speaks – Robert Ashley's That Morning Thing

The performance opens with 'Frogs', one of four scenes which, with a final 'episode', comprise the piece. As the theatre darkens to black-out, a rhythmical chorus of frog sounds drifts out, recordings we will learn are taken from the 1957 Smithsonian Folkways release, *Sounds of North American Frogs*. Their calls produce a soundscape, a neutral drone, with a high and a low pitch band, punctuated by grunts and cries, supported by the comforting charm of herpetologist Charles M. Bogert's expert narration.³ We will be told that Ashley used this collection in his first listed composition;⁴ its subtitle – 'The Biological Significance of Voice in Frogs' – points towards mating calls and 'warning' or aggressive vocal displays. The voice can be a deterrent, just as it can be a lure.

As the nocturnal swamp blue-green lights fade in, a ritual dance takes shape.⁵ Eight women in white shift dresses and round black glasses step forward and take up positions in pairs marking out a symmetrical grid, their hands open-palmed. At the back of the stage, five men are seated; a spotlight frames the middle – the 'Speaker' – who stands, suited (in contrast to the others), and begins his half-hour 'illustrated tract', its many-claused cadences in a-metrical polyphony to Bogert and the frogs:

"I intended to convey one simple idea; namely, that language, at least the American language, and in particular, the spoken and written language – joining these two, perhaps separable, kinds of language together – could, it seems, become obsolete, could be replaced in the mechanics of our daily life by other forms of communication, not more primitive, or more essential, but, in fact, more complex – communicating matters and ideas that are derived *from* language, and that in some, if not all, instances are not only derived from but concern themselves *with*, the decay of the spoken language"...

² Interview by Charles Amarkhanian with Robert Ashley. See http://ia600804.us.archive.org/3/items/TA_1969_12_06/TA_1969_12_06_ed.mp3, c.6'45" – 11'28".

³ See <http://www.folkways.si.edu/sounds-of-north-american-frogs/science-nature/album/smithsonian> for details, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYp6NhwIkjU> for an online recording, both accessed 14 Dec 2016.

⁴ Ashley used it for George Manupelli's film *The Image in Time*, one of the very first 'tape music' soundtracks in film history – see James, Richard S. 'ONCE: Microcosm of the 1960s Musical and Multimedia Avant-Garde' in *American Music* 5/4 (Winter 1987), pp.359-390.

⁵ My description comes from the video documentation of the 'opera' re-produced in November 2011 by Performing Artservices Inc at The Kitchen, New York, for Performa 11, the biennial of 'visual arts performance'. The production was curated by Mark Beasley, and directed by Fast Forward. See <https://vimeo.com/39447038>, accessed 20 December 2016. Further details of the production are available on the blog, <http://thatmorningthing.blogspot.co.uk> accessed 20 December 2016.

At this point, the other four males stand and begin calling numbers from one to five – their amplified voices filtered to a drawn out and blurted frog-like “w-^-n” – which act as instructions choreographing the females’ movements for much of the remaining speech. The melodious reading of the Speaker continues uninterrupted:

“...much as, in the popularization of a basically clinical notion, the person who stutters or falters in his speech not only reveals his anxieties about himself, but, in fact, creates conditions in which new anxieties are brought into existence, projecting them upon his environment; in effect, forces which cause that environment to take forms that seem to exclude the speaker, forms that cannot but substantiate the speaker’s preconceptions; and that these newer modes of communication will be, paradoxically, more brutal and more dangerous precisely *because* they will have derived from situations in which the instinctive resort to the language of rationalization has been thwarted.”⁶

As the women meet en face in pairs, and as their palms touch, they turn their heads toward us, ‘blinking’: their glasses lighting up and flashing.



‘Image credit: Mimi Johnson 2011’.

⁶ The full text of *The Speaker* was published for the first time in Ashley, Robert, *Outside of Time: Ideas about Music*, Köln: Musiktexte, 2009, pp.440-51. It’s tempting to see in this ‘argument with frogs’ an echo of Aristophanes’ famous play on Dionysus’ comic journey to the Underworld in search of a deceased Athenian tragedian worthy of the tribulations at hand: whilst making the crossing, ferried by Charon, the frogs chorus provokes Dionysus to argument.

This tract – this voiced argument – concerns the vocal tract, the filtering of language by the body into meaningful sound, drawn out into a kind of song, a variety of tract.⁷ The exposition presents us not (only) with the *idea* of the sense-of-the-voice, but with the sense of the voice itself. It is to be understood in being read aloud.

The Speaker develops his thesis on the decaying of language – and its mortal dangers – by elaborating two situations, which ‘for the sake of memorability’ he calls respectively ‘The Dime Store Misunderstanding’ and ‘The Keypuncher’s Error’.⁸ The first concerns the misleading use of language to gain an advantage over an interlocutor, as in what Ashley perceived as the growing habit of salespeople to short-change their customers whilst appearing to perform them a service. The decline of the ‘dime store’, as of everyday verbal transactions, follows the abuse of that property of spoken language that acts as an appeal to the Other, its quality as a lure. The logic of the transaction, especially the profit motive, supersedes the logic of the exchange and the inter-relation. The power of the voice to deceive is normalised, or as the Speaker says:

“I have presumed that, as in higher and more dreadful forms of cruelty, ‘The Dime Store Misunderstanding’ is a fact perpetuated by men for whom language has become obsolete, and that their residual speech, their very words, are a threat to us.”⁹

As the rational quality of speech is polluted, perhaps in the making of the American language ‘great again’, we face a growing threat from knee-jerk reactions, meaningless acts borne of frustration as the truth of words is rendered redundant. This is ‘The Keypuncher’s Error’, whose mis-holed ‘punchcard’ would make early computers malfunction. The ‘nonverbal fact’ makes speech inoperable.

“[It] seems to lack a time dimension; it has no duration. I believe that it originates in a predisposition to do physical injury to someone in the immediate area, someone almost within arm’s reach, that it is not profoundly psychological; on the contrary.... It is as though one’s arm were angry.... It communicates a passing state of being so brief and violent as to be wordless. It is, in essence, a ‘fit’....a spike of madness. It corresponds, perhaps, to the muscular movement of the frog.”¹⁰

Ah yes, the frogs, whose crepuscular ‘dance’ and chant has continued to delight and chorus us throughout the Speaker’s disquisition, in plain hearing. The image of the frogs, we are directed, comes from George Orwell, and from Ashley’s association of them with the fragility of the lifecycle, and also with “our irrevocable, necessary commitment to the use of nuclear energy”. The frogs’ precarity speaks of our own vulnerability to man’s hubris, amid the ongoing wintering of language.

⁷ In Roman Catholicism, a tract (from the Medieval Latin, tractus cantus, drawn-out song) is an anthem of Spiritual verses formerly replacing the alleluia in certain penitential and requiem Masses. The simultaneous use of the different meanings of tract in ‘Frogs’ appears deliberate.

⁸ It is typical of Ashley to endow everyday propositions with philosophical anti-gravity, lifted surreally from their ground, just as the ‘bank robbery’ in *Perfect Lives* is intended as a metaphysical conceit.

⁹ Ashley, *Outside of Time*, p.448.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.450.

Orwell's essay – on the common toad, rather than frogs specifically – reflects on their spring-time emergence. 'At this period, after his long fast, the toad has a very spiritual look...his body is shrunken, and by contrast his eyes look abnormally large. This allows one to notice, what one might not at another time, that a toad has about the most beautiful eye of any living creature. It is like gold, or more exactly it is like the golden-coloured semi-precious stone which one sometimes sees in signet rings, and which I think is called a chrysoberyl.' ¹⁰ Beyond the lifecycle or the botanist's regard, Orwell's concern is for the sense of wonder, if not awe, that even the 'common' toad can inspire, at no cost to its beholder. The 'miracle' of spring transfigures the abode of his 'decaying slum', and seems more urgent or pressing, more real than the graven images of everyday political life and more incredible than the latest technology.

'I think that by retaining one's childhood love of such things as trees, fishes, butterflies and ... toads, one makes a peaceful and decent future a little more probable, and that by preaching the doctrine that nothing is to be admired except steel and concrete, one merely makes it a little surer that human beings will have no outlet for their surplus energy except in hatred and leader worship.' ¹¹

It sings my song – the hetero-hetero-affection of the voice

That Morning Thing invites us to marvel at the frogs, to remove the frog in our throats, and to hear ourselves sing before we croak. Against the rational oration of the Speaker, figuring out his anxiety at the withering of language, the over-reliance on a faith in verbal precision and its efficiency of communication, Ashley sets the humble amphibian vocalising and its capacity to surprise us, to disarm us and arouse our curiosity.

Reading aloud, or hearing the sing-song of our voice, might usher us anew into a dawning realisation that our self-difference – our inability to secure ourselves as self-same – need not be disturbing or alienating. On the threshold of waking, feeling half-human, there is a breath-taking moment of corporal virtuosity as that morning thing, staring back at us, touches us through the living marvel of its vocal tract. ¹² A survivor of night's mystery, we might begin to appreciate – in song – this miracle of the self: a singer neither conjuring us from within nor affecting us from without; rather, a singing without precedent, a self as frog,

¹⁰ First published in *Tribune*, 12 April 1946; reproduced online at <https://www.theorwellprize.co.uk/the-orwell-prize/orwell/essays-and-other-works/some-thoughts-on-the-common-toad/>, accessed 20 December 2016.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² This echoes Brandon LaBelle's proposition: "Might the voice be thought to more as a tension – a tensed link, a flexed respiration, and equally, a struggle to constitute the body, rather than a disembodied sound? Not so much an object, but rather a primary production of a body? A body trying to be a subject?" See Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, p.5.

perhaps, without need of a princess's blessing.¹³

We might also think of the frogs' song as a tract in the manner of Ashley's second piece (after the soundtrack for Manupelli's film): *Tract* (1958-9), for voice and orchestra.¹⁴ A curiosity amongst his work, he borrowed from the progressive jazz of the time the idea that a pitch can have a harmonic aura or logic of its own independent of its relation to linear progression, the harmonic field that it might imply. Presaging electronic techniques by focusing on the sound's colour, its unique timbre, and – with wind instruments especially – their capacity to be transformed by embouchure, the shape of the mouth, lips, and musculature of the larynx, its four-line polyphony toys with the possibilities *within* as well as *between* harmonies and their call for resolution. The logic of the line, its coherent progression in 'sentences', contains another logic: of the phoneme and the utterance through the vocal passage, the becoming-voice.

After further realisations of problems inherent to language, to rational understanding and its 'opposite' in nonverbal acts – with 'Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon' (and its infamous distanced account of *fellatio*) and the inquisition of the Director of the show by the eight women in 'Four Ways' – *That Morning Thing* ends with 'She Was A Visitor'.¹⁵ Now, the house lights come up whilst the women performers position themselves on the staired isles within the audience. As the Speaker intones the words of the episode's title, bringing out its drone-like qualities through insistent repetition, they whisper in turn its phonetic components, inviting the audience to join in, enjoying the taste of the sound in its emanation through its passage from lungs to tongue: sh-ee oo-a-z a v-i-z-i-t-er.¹⁶ In a kind of inversion of the opening, we the audience have become a frog chorus, bringing enchantment to language through vocalisation.

¹³ In her auscultation of the experience of Wonder as the primary affect of Joy in Spinoza, and readings of his and Descartes' philosophy by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio alongside Derrida and Deleuze, Catherine Malabou traces a similar path of self-relation from one of auto-affection – the self represented to itself, in particular through the 'inner' voice – to hetero-affection – the self as Other to itself, being touched as if from 'outside' – to a hetero-hetero-affection, as in the feeling of the voiced body, an astonishing event of the self. See Part I of Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

¹⁴ The piece was re-worked in 1992 for Tom Buckner, who recorded it with pre-recorded electronic orchestra: New World Records, 1995

¹⁵ Both 'Purposeful Lady' and 'She Was A Visitor' were recorded independently of the opera; both were key works in establishing Ashley's reputation from the early '70s before his seminal TV operas from *Perfect Lives* onwards.

¹⁶ For the production at The Kitchen, the audience were given a sheet with the phonemes spelt out within the programme. This and other materials are available to download via <http://www.robertashley.org/productions/2011-thatmorningthing.htm>, accessed 20 December 2016.

Epilogue: Pre-dawn chorus

Can we be amazed by the production and sounds of our own voices? As dawn breaks, perhaps the sense of our voices can call us into being, resisting any ‘spike of madness’ from the failure of language to fulfil its promise. Returning from the underworld (or under-duvet) of sleep, we might learn from the Orpheus legend that – as John Hamilton has suggested – ‘a confrontation with death [is] the condition of the possibility of song.’¹⁷ More than this, perhaps: we can add that the voice may be the vessel that can transform an experience of death and transport us into wonder.

Given Ashley’s reputation as one of *the* artists of the spoken and sung voice, *Tract* has one further notable peculiarity: the singer’s part is wordless. Yet just as the use of frog sounds in his first work was inspired by Orwell’s writing, so *Tract* also has a hidden text. Ashley had considered using poetry by Wallace Stevens, the great American Modernist, but decided against it. All his subsequent works would be made from his own lyrics. As dawn breaks, let us borrow from Stevens and feel the force of these words forming through our first breaths of day:

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above the snow...
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep’s faded papier-mâché...
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny-cry – it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.¹⁸

¹⁷ Tracing the coupling of torture and music through Greek and Roman texts, Hamilton suggests that the idea of music may have emerged to civilise the encounter with pain, that it arises from an experience of ‘coming into contact with lifelessness’. See John T. Hamilton, ‘Torture as an Instrument of Music’, in *Thresholds of Listening: Sound, Technics, Space*, edited by Sander van Maas, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015; p.150.

¹⁸ From Wallace Stevens, ‘Not Ideas About The Thing / But The Thing Itself’ in *The Collected poems*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1971, p.534.

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How I finally learnt to love.....Grindcore! and in doing so reclaimed a very close friend

Matt Grimes

(For Stevie G – my punk soul brother)

Section I: Memories

I still remember it to this day, the sheer feeling of shock and surprise when my then best mate Stevie G played me the opening refrain of “You Suffer” - the first vinyl release from Napalm Death. Just as I heard the first few seconds of aural assault coming from the speakers on Stevie’s record player it was over, as if it didn’t happen, as if it was an acoustic hallucination – all 1.3 seconds of it. A momentary blast of noise that seemed to be made up of pure unadulterated, visceral anger, and despair. In an instant, it seemed as if anarcho-punk was destined to morph into another more extreme sub-genre that was beyond my comprehension of what symbolized music, well anarcho-punk music at least. Stevie had this massive smile on his face as if to say, “This is as good as it is ever going to get Matt,” – this was the future, past and present of extreme music, right there in the squat we shared.

I had heard of Napalm Death before hearing this particular tune; their name had been brought to my attention through an advert in a fanzine I had picked up at a gig somewhere. It was for a demo tape they had made called “Punk is a Rotting Corpse” and available by mail order from the fanzine distro. Perhaps the title of the demo tape was a portent to what was to follow in the ensuing years that, for me, marked the demise of anarcho-punk as it fragmented into a number of more extreme sub-genres of music that seemed to push the envelope of sonic experimentation and assault.

Stevie and I were really close mates and had been since secondary school. We had made each other’s acquaintance through the tried and tested ceremony of the school playground fight. Stevie was the only outwardly visible punk at my new school and when he spotted me on my first day of school, also doing my best to look as punk as I dared, he decided that in a school of 1,500 kids there was not enough room for two punks, so one of us had to go.

As is common with school fights, no one ever wins because the teachers come and break them up before it gets that far. We were both dragged off to the headmaster’s office and given five of the best with a Dunlop Green Flash plimsoll (the headmaster loved tennis and I was convinced he didn’t like even numbers either, hence only getting five rather than six of the best). From that day on Stevie and I decided that the fight wasn’t between us, but between us and the “system” – that school, our parents, the police- in fact everyone who was not a punk.

And that’s how Stevie and I forged a relationship that lasted for a number of years. We did just about everything together. Hitched penniless around the country to go to punk gigs,

experimented with drugs and alcohol, got into fights with skinheads and mods, bunked off school and listened to punk music whenever we could, and argued with our teachers and parents about the injustices of authority. In the summer of 1981 when it was time to leave school and the parental home, it only seemed natural that we would get a squat together because that was what we had been talking about for years. So along with a number of other miscreants we had “collected” on the way, we set off into town to liberate a building and join the ranks of the *real punks*. Time moved on, and whilst some things changed others remained the same. We still carried on squatting together, spending a lot of time with the anarcho-punks in London, often staying at squats there for weeks at a time. We went hunt sabbing, took part in political rallies and demos with Class War and the Anarchist Federation, even hippy free festivals such as Stonehenge, where I made my first contact with a ‘tribe’ of people that would later form the next chapter of my life. Anarcho-punk was in “full flight” and Stevie and I were living the dream (of sorts): no money, and no jobs but, most importantly, no responsibilities and feeling part of a community of likeminded free people.

I’m not sure when it happened exactly, but at some point the mood of anarcho-punk shifted and got darker, as did the politics and the people around it. Margaret Thatcher’s decimation of the mining communities, the Peace Convoy, and an escalating nuclear muscle flexing exercise with Russia only added to the bleakness, as society seemed to become more fragmented. The music also started to get more sombre and gloom-ridden, with bands such as Discharge, Amebix, Icons of Filth, Antisect, and Extreme Noise Terror playing breakneck speed thrash punk with lyrics focussing on nuclear death and destruction, and total state control of a near future oppressed dystopian society. Squatting became more problematic and with it came a new breed of crusty squatter, dosed up on Special Brew, Tuinal and even louder and more aggressive extreme music that seemed shambolically reflective of its listeners.

Stevie had been up in Birmingham for a while, staying with some mates and came back excited about a new band he had seen a couple of times at a venue called *The Mermaid*, which already had a reputation for the punk scene that had developed around it. That band was Napalm Death and Stevie described the experience as likened to being hit in the face with a sonic sledgehammer – he had (he said) found what was missing from his life: something that unleashed and expressed that anger he had carried with him; something cathartic.

So this sort of brings me back to the beginning and me hearing Napalm Death for the first time. I just didn’t get it, and Stevie trying to convince me by playing it over and over again, that this was the future of music. We didn’t see eye-to-eye over this, it just didn’t work for me and that’s when the problems started. Stevie was always a 100%, all or nothing bloke and he had latched onto this sound and that would be his focus from that point on. With Stevie’s forays into this extreme music, and my lack of interest in it, he started hanging out with a more “committed” group of people, who ended up at the squat and with them came this additional pervading darkness: heroin.

It was only a matter of time before Stevie got tempted into it, part of his all or nothing character, and from then on heroin became a regular feature of a large number of the squats residents. We would argue more, the music in the squat became more extreme and aggressive,

personal stuff would start going “missing” and after one of Stevie’s so called “committed” new mates threatened me with an axe, after a four day amphetamine binge: our friendship imploded. I decided after some contemplation and another summer at free festivals to get away from the toxic atmosphere in the squat and join the Travellers on the road. As a parting gesture of goodwill and hope, I offered the hand of friendship to Stevie and tried to persuade him to come on the road with me, away from the heroin and the darkness, but he was too wrapped up in his own pitiful ego by then. I left Brighton, not returning for a number of years, and sadly heard on the grapevine a year after leaving that Stevie had died of a heroin overdose. I couldn’t bring myself to attend the funeral – a regretful decision that has always troubled me. Looking back it was almost inevitable that Stevie would not quit this mortal coil easily or peacefully - he always was a person of extremes, energetic, volatile, unpredictably violent, but beautifully funny and my best mate.

Section II: An Afterword

I’m not suggesting that Grindcore (as this type of extreme music later became to be known by) was responsible for our friendship falling apart, I am sure it was as much the heroin and the company Stevie chose to keep. For a number of years I could not entertain the thought of listening to Grindcore because of the memories associated with it and my musical tastes had, by then, encompassed the E- generation as I travelled from one free techno party to another, with my new “tribe.”

Certainly the highly political song titles and lyrical content of Napalm Death had always struck a chord with me, even if the music initially didn’t. Finally, after hearing Napalm Death again on the John Peel radio show one night in 1992, I decided to revisit the band’s stuff. I was intrigued by the production values of the band and the paradox they seemed to create. The sound of their music takes punk’s lack of concern for formal structure and standard musical convention to another level. They offer a version of punk at its most blunt and brutal. Atonal in their approach their songs are brief, often limited to one or two minutes, and tended to avoid formal lyrical structure in favour of short, sharp statements, revealing a pre-occupation with state control, corporate power and a dystopian society built on economic and physical slavery.

From the titles of the songs their lyrical content is seemingly important, but paradoxically is mostly indecipherable due to the mode of delivery. Deena Weinstein (1991; 2009) suggests that in mainstream Heavy Metal lyrical matter may not be of concern to the listener. However I would suggest that the importance of the lyrical matter to the artists in this case is vital: the content informs the form completely.

It would be fair to say that “You Suffer” and a number of Napalm Death’s repertoire are not songs in the context of the model adopted by Western culture and the western music canon in recent centuries, but it could certainly be regarded as a song within the context of the musical structures of other cultures. While Napalm Death’s songs do not contain a narrative as would be common in traditional folk ballad structure, it may be possible to view a large proportion

of their work as existing within an extended tradition of Folk Music which includes music characterised by “protest,” a continuum in which I would include Crass and a number of other anarcho-punk bands whose political dissent pervades their repertoire. The political impact of extreme metal music comes into question particularly when looking at arguments such as those of Keith Kahn-Harris. Kahn-Harris (2004: 6) argues that the very nature of extreme metal is “reflexively-anti-reflexively constructed as a depoliticizing category.” He identifies the ways in which black metal, for example, constantly toys with the ideas of violent racism and fascism, however will never embrace it outright. Napalm Death on the other hand, I would suggest completely embrace the lyrics they sing, and have been involved in campaigns against apartheid, animal exploitation, global corporate, and state power among others, and express their disgust of fascism, racism and the establishment. Napalm Death, I would argue, are not accommodated by Kahn-Harris’ analysis of extreme metal at all because of the nature of their songs and their behaviour. This is also reflective of the political stance of a large number of anarcho-punk bands and the anarcho-punk scene from which Napalm Death emerged.

The recording techniques and seeming lack of acoustic treatment and mastering perhaps reflect the very raw subject matter implicit in their lyrics. Where it is traditionally perceived that the meaning of the song is carried in the lyrical content, Frith (1986) argues that the meaning is also carried in the performance of the song. It could be suggested that the “differentiation” which occurs in the sound of Napalm Death is related to the way in which the group focus on the delivery of sound and also on the way in which that sound is utilised as a carrier of meaning, both of which are key elements that seem to underpin the Grindcore genre. The actual structure of the text of the song is broken down, by the vocal delivery, into monosyllabic content. Listening to the vocal output, this low pitch guttural sound seems to come from another place outside of the human vocal range. It seems the voice travels from the diaphragm, from the lower points of the body, inside the resonant sound chamber of the torso, which allows the low pitch to be sustained without damage to the throat or lack of breath to sustain the sound. This acoustic approach is not dissimilar to early Buddhist temple chanting, where monks would employ tonal variations in their meditative and ceremonial chanting, in a quest to connect with divinity. This style of delivery and associated production values seems to contribute to a sense of sonic rapture, of speech being drawn to a halt and fractured, with the suggestion that the end result of this process will be atomisation, an attack upon the fabric of the text itself. A form of sonic rupture where, if only for a moment, a new sphere of possibility may be opened, in the space created by this rupture.

So perhaps that’s what Stevie saw in this music all those years ago, that rupture and the possibilities that might have opened up, indeed not only for not him but for all those around him. Perhaps if I had also seen that, then things may have turned out differently for both of us. I like Grindcore and have done for a number of years. I enjoy listening to it, albeit mostly in a slightly nostalgic way. The good thing now is that I can listen to it and remember the better, happier times with Stevie before it all went tragically wrong. Perhaps I should have just listened to Napalm Death a bit more then.

Matt has had a varied and colourful life as a punk, Traveller, activist, performer, art technician, landscape gardener, DJ, parent and educator. He is a Senior Lecture in Music Industries and radio at Birmingham City University and a member of the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research where he is currently studying for a doctorate on anarcho-punk, memory, ageing, and legacy. Matt is a steering group member of the Punk Scholars Network and has written on anarcho-punk, punk 'zines and radio as a tool for inclusion and social change.

Passionate about equal access to media, Matt has worked with a number of marginalised groups such as Gypsies and Travellers and isolated teenagers in rural communities; using radio production techniques as a way of giving a 'voice' to the 'voiceless' and enabling them to create media and counter-media.

Born into a West Ham United supporter's family, Matt swapped allegiance to their archrivals Millwall at the age of 12; coincidentally at the same time he discovered punk rock. His dad and grandad never forgave him. He has remained committed to Millwall ever since: probably because no one likes them and he don't care.

He spends a lot of time cycling, rock climbing and gardening, trying to live as ethically as possible –though at times failing miserably.

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Discography

"You Suffer" Track 12 from "Scum" (LP) 1987 Earache Records

Noise: The Felt Quality of Sound

Photographer **Bethany Kane**

Curator **Sarah Raine**



1

Silence is so freaking loud- Sarah Dessen



2

Music is the poetry of the air- Richter

Filling the lens with noise,
Invading the watchful eye.
For a moment, we are there.



3

Concentrating on the lives people lead, **Bethany Kane** aims to reveal their narrative through photography by highlighting details within the personal and public environments central to their processes of identity construction. Her practice builds upon the knowledge and understanding she gains through her own personal experience, using retrospective photographic processes to produce a unique insight into these rarely documented subjects. Past exhibitions include her work on the Northern Soul scene, Punk, Skinhead and Oi subcultures.

Bethany is also an MA student at Birmingham City University and the Editorial and Design Student Partner for *Riffs: Experimental Research on Popular Music*, a postgraduate journal at BCU.

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Sarah Raine is a PhD candidate at Birmingham City University's School of Media, researching the younger generation of the current Northern Soul scene in the UK and Spain, in particular the narratives that participants construct in their engagement with the people, places and practices of the scene. Sarah is currently a Research, Editorial and Exhibitions Assistant and Project Coordinator for the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, and the Network Coordinator for the AHRC research network *Jazz and Everyday Aesthetics*. She is also the Review Editor for the IASPM Journal and the Managing Editor for *Riffs: Experimental Research on Popular Music*.

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1. Giuda. Hipsville Festival, Surrey. 16.05.2015
 2. Giuda. The Lexington, London. 05.12.2015
 3. Band Unknown. Libertejas Weekend, Hotel Vegas, Austin, Texas. 23.05.2016

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Riffs

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Experimental writing on popular music

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