

# EDITORIAL

Ash Watson

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A few years ago, I was visiting the UK from Australia and I ended up in a pub between Birmingham City University campus and the train station, after either an experimental writing workshop or a Paul Weller symposium – I can't remember which – where someone asked me what kind of music I listen to. I replied that I don't really listen to music. That was such a lie! I lied. I was surrounded by music scholars and completely intimidated, so, in a more youthful impulse I'm working to shake off, I tried to avoid the question for fear of giving the wrong answer. Sitting at a wooden table in a back room facing my half-finished beer and a choir of curious faces, I think I actually made the excuse that I grew up in a house of readers (true) who didn't listen to music (false). To answer the question now: I love pop music and Australian indie. It shapes my memories and adds texture to all the places I find myself in. In fact, when my novel was published I made a playlist to celebrate, of 100 songs I listened to over the years I wrote the book and which capture the scenes and feeling of the story. If you're curious, it's on Spotify: "Into the Sea (novel playlist)". I can speak about reading fiction until I run out of air, but the music I treasure and what I experience when I listen to it is still not something I have much practise talking about.

The seven stories in this fiction edition of *Riffs* start with this same conversation and run with it in a number of directions. From treasured bands and sounds, they move toward questions of value, questions of creation, questions of authenticity and technology and the intimate publics of music. They chase the affective breadth of our listening experiences. The opening piece, "Dancing with Death: A Speculative Ethnography" by Ben Assiter, spits us out into a pandemic future of underground raves with high highs and skin-tingling risks. In Ian Inglis' "Kite in the Sky", we follow one person's unbelievable find in a record store. Hussein Boon's story, "The Condition of My Existence", unfolds a reel of breaking news about technology in the music business and all the costs and questions of freedom that follow. Elodie Roy's "Tapes of Sandy" is a story told through fleeting fragments, about how people are and become assemblages of memories and material things like coats, coffee cups, and stolen records. In "The (N)early man: Arriving too soon, thriving too late by Farley Ruskin", Kevin Quinn flexes the method of the magazine exposé and offers a deep dive into the life and work of a renegade 'industro-punkwave' pioneer. Emily Mackay's "Tin Can Alley" takes us behind the algorithmic operation of an AI music production company into the life of an overworked playlist maker and her relationship with a single song. Finally, Paul Raven's "Rust (City) Never Sleeps" plays with the relationship between fiction and narrative, offering a chapter from a PhD thesis submitted in the year 2050 on sites of the rock revival in Sheffield.

Each of these stories offer more than narrative-based depiction. They experiment at the junctures of writing and music, aesthetically manifesting and marrying storytelling with sonic genre. While you read them, consider what they illuminate about the things fiction and music share: an attention to form and lyricism. This is a generative intersection that can challenge how we write and how we listen across both forms.

**Ash Watson** is a sociologist of technology and fiction. She works at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, UNSW Sydney. Her research explores the emergence and social impact of “disruptive” technologies, from AI to counter-archives to zines, using qualitative and arts-based methods. Her debut novel *Into the Sea* (2020) was published in Brill’s award-winning Social Fictions Series. Following a group of young adults through a year of the mundane and extraordinary, the story considers what it means to live “the Australian way of life.” Ash is the inaugural Fiction Editor of *The Sociological Review*, heading the journal’s short story series. She is also the creator and editor of *So Fi Zine*, a digital and DIY print publication for sociological fiction, poetry and visual art.

