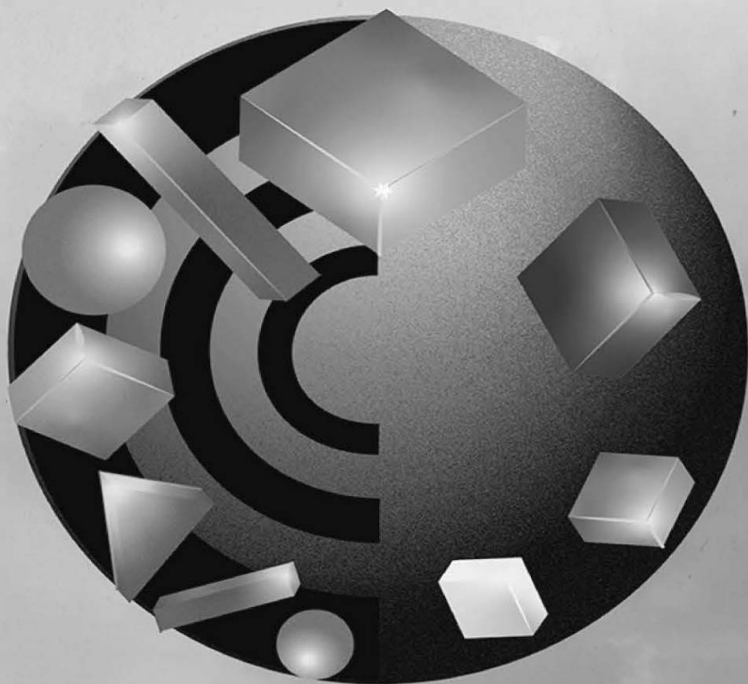




-expressionless



LISTENING

LISTENING

Expressionless Edition I (eo.22)
A collection of responses

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INTRODUCTION

The LISTENING project began with a series of encounters and dialogues at Expressionless HQ about friendship, experience, hospitality, politics and art. Points of discussion included police violence, home delivery services, cocktail making, Deadhead culture, local Chicago politics and the writings of Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, Shoshana Felman and others. One of the most resonant and decisive of these conversations revolved around a short piece of writing by Italian composer Luigi Nono, “L’errore come necessità” (1983).

A bit of background: Nono was a contemporary of Stockhausen and Schoenberg, working initially in a serialist mode before moving toward electronic textures and tape effects, and eventually explorations of spatial music and live electronics. He was controversial in European art circles for his intense commitment to Communist politics and anti-colonial emancipatory struggles, themes that concern much of his work. His writings from this period attest to the extent that the Marxist-Leninist project directly influenced the formal and stylistic development of his com-

positional output. Still, contemporary to the retreat of the organized European left, later works signal a considerable sonic and thematic shift. Beginning with works like *...sofferte onde serene...* (1976) and especially *Frammente-Stille: An Diotima* (1980), his work began to incorporate extended silences, increasingly sparse scores, chance elements, and extremely subtle uses of dynamics. Libretti, previously featuring polemical quotations from the likes of Lenin and Guevara, shifted toward eclectic and ambiguous integrations of texts from Benjamin, Rilke, Aeschylus and others, often as organized by Nono's close colleague Massimo Cacciari, an ex-Communist leftist politician and philosopher with Heideggerian leanings. Late works feature titles like *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura* (very roughly, *the nostalgic utopian far-future distance*) or *No hay caminos, hay que caminar* (*there are no paths, you must walk*, dedicated to Andrej Tarkovsky and inspired by a graffito encountered on a Spanish monastery wall), indicating a yearning for a kind of utopian politics that might eschew teleology or systematic ideology. Nono's writings from this time also took a turn, shifting toward themes like error, interiority, chance and contingency, and toward an increasingly radical inquiry into the very act or process of *listening*. "L'errore come necessità" is an interesting example of this. The entire piece is interesting (and quite poetic), but here is an excerpt that especially caught our attention (our rough English translation is as follows):

Silence.

It is very difficult to hear.

It is very difficult to listen to others in silence.

Other thoughts, other noises, other sonorities, other ideas.

In listening, you often try to find yourself in others.

You want to find your own mechanisms, your own system, your own rationalism, in the other.

This is an absolutely conservative violence.

Instead of listening to silence, listening to others, one hopes to listen to oneself once again.

This repetition is academic, conservative, reactionary.

It is a wall erected against thoughts, against what is still not possible to explain today. It is the sign of a systematic mentality, based on prejudices: internal or external, social or aesthetic.

They like comfort, repetition, myths; always like to hear the same thing, with small variations that allow you to demonstrate your intelligence.

Listening to music.

It is very difficult.

I believe it is a rare phenomenon today.

Calling for a "great diversity" of artistic approaches and possibilities, Nono concludes:

... Perhaps one can change the rituals; perhaps it is possible to try to wake up the ear.

To wake up the ear, the eyes, human thinking, intelligence, the utmost inwardness, exteriorized.

This is now what is essential.

We believe that the piece speaks for itself.

Expressionless aims to produce constellations of disparate responses (writing, visual art, video, music and sound art, etc.) to a shifting array of motifs and fragments. We felt that the Nono fragment resonated with our intentions, and that, especially in a year that has taught us all a thing or two about ineradicable contingency, **radical listening** was as a good a motif as any around which to dis-organize our first print release.

Thus LISTENING the project was born.

As per our mission statement, Expressionless, in however small a way, hopes to develop “a little place where the emergence of a transient and unavowable community of producers, common in their difference, becomes possible.”

As we wanted the project to be radically open to a diversity of responses, commissions for the project were left extremely open-ended, with near-complete editorial freedom provided to those commissioned. In our submission call, we stated that:

Beyond some consideration of listening ... the form and content of your contribution is open to any topic, obsession, sense, medium, interest, perversion, pleasure, discontent, annoyance, crisis and/or commitment that may incite your production.

As such, the pieces provided make an unsystematic mix of conversations, freeform text responses, sound pieces, images, criticism, research-oriented writing and poetry.

Contributions are as follows:

Windy Weber of veteran Michigan drone musicians and record store owners Windy & Carl composed a series of email letters to Expressionless over the course of several months in 2020, in which she discusses community, nature, resistance, encroaching industry, the pandemic, friendship, and the duo's recent music.

Musician and sound artist **Brock Stuessi** provided a critical reflection on his 2018 radio project *Incidental Music*, examining the implications of what he diagnoses as its failure to truly reject the curatorial aspects of musical composition. Instead, Stuessi proposes the possibility of a truly contingent listening, unaccountable to the notion of music altogether.

Writer and critic **Jack Miller** provided an exploration of gesture and group dynamics in the films of Howard Hawks, identifying collaborative formal relationships

between his depictions of ecstatic, ruptural moments of listening and the emergence of the friendships and social collectivities so quintessential to his films.

Filmmaker and multi-media artist **Deborah Stratman** had a long conversation with Expressionless' D. Taylor about her work, the documentary form, the project of radical listening, and her Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago exhibit, *Feeling Tone*, inspired by the legacy of Studs Terkel.

Argentinian writer and musician **Nicolas Ferreiro** composed a Spanish language reflection on plant communication, the novels of Haruki Murakami, and dignity. This edition also features B. Shear and F. Gumucio's English language translation of the piece.

Artist **Carrie Kirby** provided a digitally-designed image, *listen*.

Music critic **Raphael Helfand** provided an account of their listening through the late Scott Walker's entire discography in one evening.

Former California gubernatorial candidate and beloved *The Circle* contestant **Shubham Goel** provided a brief commentary on his time on the show, listening, socialization and social media use. A brief interview conducted by Expressionless' B. Shear follows.

Guitarist **Eli Winter** provided a warm and loving tribute to, and analysis of, the music and life of his friend **Cameron Knowler**, bluegrass-influenced guitarist.

Writer **Anna Laffrey** provided a research-oriented piece, derived from a prior thesis project, exploring the ways by which folk musicians resisted copyright laws in the 1970s. Laffrey's editorial interjections throughout have been preserved, making for an affable commentary on prior academic writing.

Artist and poet **Stefania Gomez** provided the text of her poem *The Bees are Flying* to accompany a sound piece centered on its recitation.

Other interstitial photographs throughout are provided by artist **Delaney McCoy**.

Indiana-based graphic designer and musician **Jack Andrews** designed this edition's jacket art.

This edition was edited, organized and co-designed with love by **Dylan Taylor**, with co-editor and Expressionless communications chief **Ben Shear**, and with the indispensable expert assistance of **Hammad Khalid**, book designer extraordinaire. This volume could have never entered existence without the knowledge and support of co-editor **Yumi Mannarelli**.

We tried to leave plenty of space between texts and images, in case readers wish to contribute additional writings, drawings, etc. to the pages in front of them.

This edition also includes four sound pieces made to the call:

Brock Stuessi provided a collage of recordings from his *Incidental Music* project to accompany his text piece.

Composer and musician **Ari Korotkin** contributed a piece entitled *like ones also stir*.

Stefania Gomez contributed a piece of sound art, featuring a recitation of her poem *The Bees are Flying* as published in this edition.

Guitarist **Daniel Bachman** contributed a drone piece entitled *Blues for Zoltan Bottykos*. Bachman writes: “For the last year I have been helping a man named Jim restore an old homestead site backing up to Shenandoah National Park. The modest home sits on the hillside overlooking Old Rag mountain, a gentle granite peak that has been watching over the valley below for over one billion years. Jim has become my friend and overtime I learned the history of the place we were fixing up. Zoltan Bottykos was the previous owner. He was a Hungarian Jewish man who was a prisoner held in the Russian Gulag for years until he escaped and eventually found his way to the USA. He began working as an accountant and for years lived in the Washington DC area. Bottykos retired to Madison County Virginia, purchasing the little place in the hollow.”

A few final notes:

Contributions are presented with minimal editorial interference, leaving any dissonances (conceptual and otherwise) intact.

We hesitate to rationalize or narrativize these pieces into some kind of statement or theory.

These pieces are traces of acts of listening, and are not necessarily directly *about* "listening."

Some of these pieces pose listening as a question of the experience of sound, whereas some do not.

Expressionless as a project has something to do with friendship and community. We hope that this collection of responses testifies to these things, as well as to the acts of radical listening that are perhaps essential to them.

XOXO,

The editors

The world is a messed up place and there are so many ways forward

The world is a messed up place and there are so many ways forward

*Letters to Expressionless from
Windy Weber of Windy & Carl*

In a series of free-flowing emails with Expressionless, Windy Weber of Windy & Carl reflects on creative practice, community, Pure Michigan, small business, the encroaching of industry on natural beauty, and the duo's latest music. The letters, coming February through June of 2020, likewise trace the difficulties and anxieties of the Coronavirus pandemic as it unfolded.

(...spurred on by anger, empathy and a need to help someone we cared about...)

Well, nine years ago we moved from a very blue collar working class area to a quiet middle class area. The first five years were lovely—quiet, great neighbors, lots of writing and creativity—and then a massive shift happened. You see, we knew when we moved into this house that Ford Motor Company owned all the land across from us, but nothing had changed in so long. Outside our front living room window I could actually see the building where my father used to test ceramic engines for Ford. He was part of the research and development department, which was on the campus across from the house we had moved into. So many things about this house reminded me of my parents, and we moved here and found the first five years to be very blissful and productive. We made *We Will Always Be* and Carl's solo LP during that time and several 45s. But then in late 2016 this MASSIVE construction project started across from us, literally across the street. The construction happened for several hours every day. They would start at 4:30 a.m. and end after 10:00 p.m., which was over the hours allowed, and if I would complain the construction crews would find ways to take it out on us. I had to file police reports for their abuses. It was over three years of constant noise, house-shaking and house damages but the city would not help us because Ford runs Dearborn, Michigan.

So in the quiet times, we would create as much music as we could, because it consoled us, it helped us deal with all the atrocities that were happening—they clear cut over ten acres of forest and drained two wetlands and all the animals in that area died or were displaced. There was a fence erected right in front of our house. It was terrible. So

many days of anxiety and remorse. So we used our quiet time to create and to be positive when we could. Blues for a UFO resulted exactly from this issue. You see, we had already been dealing with two years of Ford construction and destruction when Dion's [Fischer's] UFO Factory¹ was damaged on purpose by the Ford developer who wanted his land. It was an immediate impact on us. Dion was being treated like dirt just like us. Big corporations do not care about little people or little biz, they only care about dollars. And when Dion's bar was attacked, we felt that personally and we wanted to help him, because when we were in the same position no one helped us. In fact, the city around us essentially told us to get lost, because Ford runs Dearborn and no one can say a bad word about them. But we could stand up for Dion and we made that record for him in about eight days, spurred on by anger, empathy and a need to help someone we cared about. Dion is one of the folks who has helped Detroit move forward. He has run clubs for years to help provide places for bands to play who had nowhere else to go, whether local or international. He has put his heart and soul into the scene here and when he was attacked, we all felt the impact. So Carl and I made these songs and we donated half of all the income to Dion to pay his bills. His biz was closed for months, but he still had tax bills, utilities and invoices to pay off. We understood, we have our own biz, you cannot escape those bills and we did what we could to help him. It also made us feel a little better about how we could help someone else when there was no help for us. There's no way to win against Ford Motor Company because they rule supreme and we are just ants unable to bend that rubber tree plant.

1 Dion Fischer's Detroit pub and venue.

(...trees and birds and flowers and calm places to be,
just be)

The *Pure Michigan* track² was fun! I love birds and Carl is a great guitar player. The song came about easily and we felt it was a great addition to the comp of local artists who really wanted to promote the beauty of Michigan. It was well-received, but unfortunately, the program has been cancelled. Our new governor has decided that Pure Michigan is a waste of funds. Not enough people have stood up to say otherwise and now the campaign is over. We still love our song and are thrilled to be able to shine a light on the legacy of state parks and their importance. Nature is SUCH a big deal to us—trees and birds and flowers and calm places to be, just be. It was in our blood to celebrate the glory of state parks!

Now we have a new album coming out in March³, the first in eight years on Kranky⁴. It took us over six years to create but we feel the time was well spent. Six of the songs are shorter and tell a story. It is a narrative about modern times—who do you trust, how do you take care of yourself, and how do you know what side to be on? The world is a messed up place and there are so many ways forward, but how do you stay true to your own beliefs and yourself? We are grateful to be working with Kranky again and hope the ideas on this album resonate with people who listen.

2 Windy & Carl produced a piece, “Forest Trails,” for the *Pure Michigan* tourism campaign’s soundtrack album *Pure Sounds of Michigan* (2019).

3 *Allegiance and Conviction* (released March 27, 2020)

4 Veteran Chicago-based record label, specializing in a gamut of dreamy, droney, shimmery musics.

(...it is oddly quiet in the shop now)

We have had our record store⁵ closed for three months now (maybe longer?), since March 22nd, and as I am writing this, it is June 21st, so yeah three months. We go in and work for four hours a day doing mail orders, listing things on eBay and cleaning. It is truly amazing how much crap can be collected in a 20 year time span. Even though we move the store a lot, the crap has continued to accrue all this time. I have been pulling out boxes of things we have not seen in years and had forgotten about like old magazines, bizarro noise tapes, autographs and rare posters, lots of cards and notes from friends, and lots of old bills and trash. I've thrown away almost half of what I've dealt with so far; I don't need check stubs from the year 2002, you know?

We are using this time when we have no customers to clean and pare down because we want to close the shop next year. We have spent 21 years promoting music for others and although we have released our own records, we now want to concentrate on our own music and art full-time. We also want to leave the city life—there's too much noise and irritation living in the city. We want to have a few acres in the country and a good home studio and a lot of quiet. So we are working toward that as our goal.⁶

5 Windy & Carl own a record shop, Stormy Records, located in Dearborn, MI.

6 As of November 2020, Stormy Records' website reads: "Due to Covid-19 issues, and the number of cases in the USA still growing out of control, our shop is currently closed to the public. We are offering curbside pickup and worldwide mail order. Please contact us at Stormyrecords@earthlink.net or at 313-581-9322 to get more information. We list items for sale on our Facebook page every week!! We also have realized that life is short. We have spent

Of course, 21 years of seeing the same people and having thousands of conversations about music, concerts, records and raves means it is oddly quiet in the shop now. It's just the two of us working on separate projects and talking very little. We are together now 24 hours a day. We share the car ride to and from the shop. We go to the post office together and grocery shop together and everything. It is a good test for living out in the country around no one, but also a strange change. We have always been somewhat hermit-like, and we really are. It's okay with us.

Our state has said retail can reopen but we see what is happening in other places and we're not comfortable opening back up to the public. So many people think the pandemic is a joke and refuse to wear masks or be kind to each other. We have thought of maybe offering shopping by appointment only after July 4th but we're not sure, there is a lot up in the air in our world.

21 years supporting and promoting the music of all kinds of artists we enjoy, and we now want to move into a new phase of our lives. As musicians ourselves, we feel it is time to concentrate on our own art and music. We will be closing the shop in mid 2021 and moving out to the countryside to live near family and work on our creations full time. We have loved our place in the Detroit arts community all these years, and are grateful for the love that has been returned to us. If you wish to support the shop, and us, btwn now and the summer of 2021, please place an order through mailorder or curbside pickup. Thank you for all of your years of friendship and support!"

(...tying up loose ends)

It has been very odd to release a new album during this time and to have actually put out two projects⁷ in a three month timespan. We have had some good press on the Kranky record. It has somehow been very appropriate for the time—heavy and brooding and lyrically weird. It is resonating with people in ways we are thankful for. It took so long to make and there were so many other things in the way of it being a straight shot but we are proud of how it turned out so we can't complain. We simply want to be able to work on things in a more linear fashion, hence the idea of giving up the shop. Also, the three CD set of early home recordings took years to do because Carl listened to hours and hours of old tapes and picked out the pieces he thought would work best, and then I started doing the art. It took over 2 years to be fully realized. Six hand painted panels, hand assembled and numbered . . . yikes. I swear over and over that I will not do projects like this again and then I agree to them and they take forever.

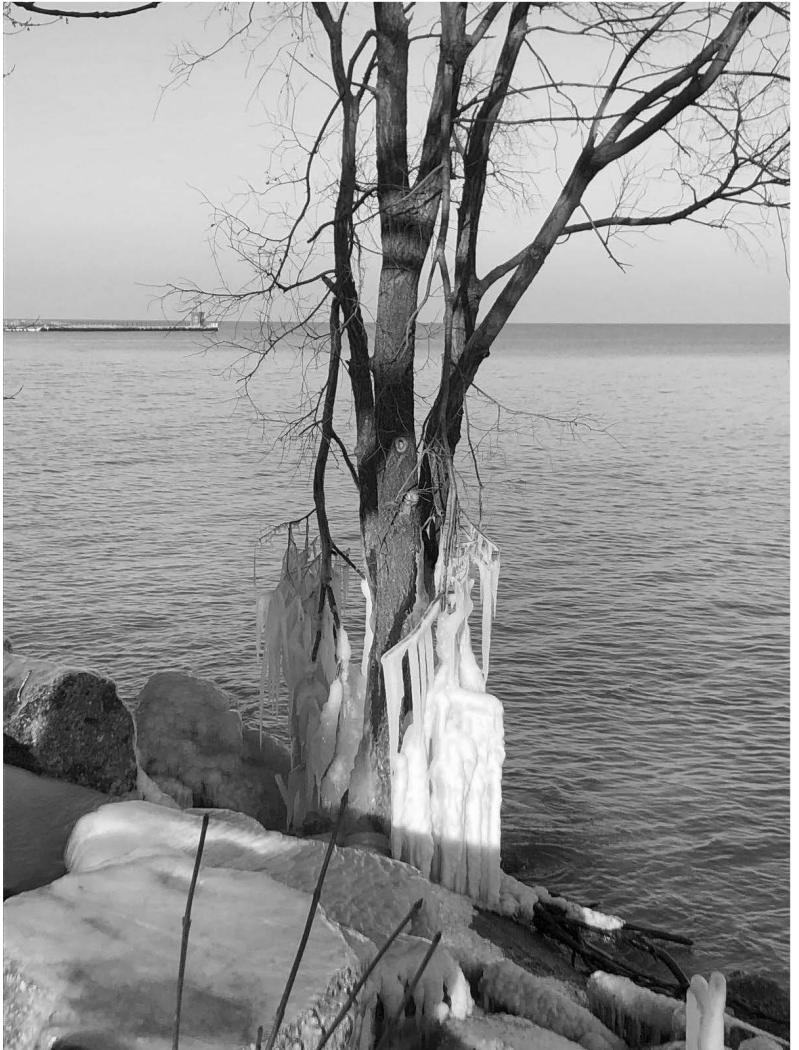
When we started 2020, Carl and I had six full length projects to finish, now two of them are done and out. We can begin working on the next four which include a jazz album and a really dark and heavy guitar album. We'll see if those can be finished before another six years goes by . . .

⁷ Weber is referring to the aforementioned album and the three CD set *Unreleased Home Recordings 1992-1995* (released June 5, 2020).

For now that is where we are at, tying up loose ends and looking to the future for a brighter spot in the world, at least in our world, a place that our art can be more fully realized. Hopefully the world agrees and things calm down with the pandemic sooner than later. I hope everyone reading this is healthy and hanging in there.

Windy





Listening Against Music: Critical Reflections on WNUR's *Incidental Music*

Brock Stuessi

In fall of 2018, I hosted a radio show on [Northwestern University's] WNUR-FM called *Incidental Music*.¹ The show was my attempt to pull together various streams of sonic, ecological and philosophical thought that had been in my orbit during my post-college time in Chicago. I was primarily interested in the incidental experience of music in everyday, city life – reggaeton emanating from the passing car, an apartment window left open, the radio at the laundromat – and how these experiences relate to a sonic landscape experienced writ-large. In practice, I composed the show out of field recordings made on a weekly basis. For an hour each week, I would weave and warp these recordings together using a variety of real-time digital processes in Ableton and MaxMSP to varying degrees and effects. More often than not, these improvisational processes enacted their own kind of “musification” on the field recordings – turning the sound of a busy intersection into a time-stretched, reverberant space, giving tonality to the transient pulses of the train passing by, slicing the sounds of a dryer into metered segments.

1 Listen to the original show here: <https://www.mixcloud.com/brock-stuessi/>

Listening back to them now, I wonder if, through performance and mutation, I obscured what I had so intended to show. I wonder if what I had intended to show had any efficacy to begin with. I wonder how I would do the show differently now. This essay is a reflection on *Incidental Music* as a practice of environmental listening. By re-engaging with this material from a place removed, I hope to reflect on the kinds of listening I did and was trying to promote with the radio program. In addition to this writing, I have again interacted with the sonic material as a means of creative analysis. In my own shifting approach to the material from then to now, I hope to expose buried concepts of listening, recording and being with regards to the surrounding world. Thanks to [the Expressionless editors] for the support and opportunity.

- *“Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.”*

- Pauline Oliveros, “Native” from *Sonic Meditations* (1971)

“I had taken a DAT recorder to Hyde Park and near Bay-swater Road I recorded a period of whatever sound was there: cars going by, dogs, people. I thought nothing much of it and I was sitting at home listening to it on my player. Suddenly I had this idea. What about if I take a section of this – a 3½ minute section, the length of a single – and I tried to learn it? ... I tried to learn it as one would learn a piece of music: oh yeah, that car, accelerates the engine, the revs in the engine goes up and then that dog barks, and then you hear that pigeon off to the side there.”

- Brian Eno in David Toop, *Ocean of Sound*

I begin with Pauline Oliveros and Brian Eno not only because these two thinkers and musicians have had a profound impact on my own conception of music, but also because the division between the sentiments of these two composers situates my intentions behind *Incidental Music*. We can however begin with their similarities: Both Oliveros and Eno are advocating for what I would identify as an expansive view of music which includes not only human-created sound activity, but the non-human sound world. The two are, of course, not alone in espousing this kind of broad musical aesthetic; however, I think both present an accessible inroad to thinking about potential relationships between the non-human environment and music. The two composers' bodies of work also markedly contain extramusical, philosophical and spiritual endeavors. I am thinking here of Eno's involvement with the Long Now Foundation dedicated to promoting “slower/better”

thinking and Oliveros's Deep Listening Institute. I bring this up because the two foundations evidence the ways that the composers think about their musical activity as having practical and even ethical applicability beyond the scope of the repeated musical commodity of the 20th century. This view of music is a Platonic one that artists today continue to yearn for as a point of anchor – a reaction to the actual material circumstances of their artistic practices.

However, beyond these two similarities, Oliveros and Eno's statements begin to diverge. Firstly, the two arise from entirely different contexts. When Oliveros writes, "Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears," she is composing, she is creating a score for musical performance. While perhaps unconventional by some evaluations, "Native" is a piece of music presented as such within the larger work of music: *Sonic Meditations*. As all compositions, "Native" is a call to action, in this case an action which requires no prior specialization or experience with an instrument. The instrument in the case of "Native," if we are to extend a traditional metaphor, is the body itself with a heightened and displaced listening awareness.

On a structural level, Oliveros's composition contrasts with Eno's exercise of recording and learning a sound fragment from Hyde Park "as one would learn a piece of music." For Eno, this learning has to do with habituation and a certain mapping of musical concepts such as pitch and rhythm, however non-tonal or aperiodic they may be, on to the field recording. Whereas Oliveros presents a mode of listening as an embodied piece of music, Eno's musicifying of the Hyde Park recording is a practice which broadens and enhances his musical awareness and con-

cept more than it actually produces music. By limiting his sound segment to 3½ minutes, Eno also makes a gesture toward the pop song, implicitly referring to a certain kind of music as “music.” Where Oliveros invokes the body, Eno uses the microphone as a tool of transmission between his ears and the sound experience of the park, which has been removed both spatially and temporally from the moment of recording to the studio. Eno is listening to a recording, though he implicitly makes an ontological leap to equate this recording with the sound of the park itself. Thus, Eno repeatedly experiences the sound of the park, and the repeatability of this experience is integral to his practice. This repeatability, to invoke Jacques Attali’s theories on the political economy of music in the 21st century, is a marker of the musical commodity imbued with its own particular fetishes and values.² In contrast, Oliveros’s composition is an unrecordable composition constructed for momentary and persistent experience. In this way, it resists commodification and collecting, at least on a sonic level.

I am not here to claim *Incidental Music* even begins to approach the kind of artistic statement of an Eno or Oliveros. Rather, I have briefly outlined these two musical modes of thought because they help to frame both my influences in creating the radio program and the unresolved contradictions in the outcomes of the show. In addition, Eno and Oliveros’s approaches to environmental integration, though spanning far beyond any individual piece or sentence, provide a surprisingly apt description of the

2 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minnesota Press, 1985.

divide between those working in representational modes and experiential modes of environmental music.³

Of the two approaches, *Incidental Music* mostly readily relates to the technological, microphone-centric approach of Eno's exercise. My weekly process of creating field recordings was an attempt to capture similarly non-exceptional sounds as Eno's recording of Hyde Park. This commitment to "mediocrity" was important to me – I didn't walk out the door with the intention of recording anything in particular. I walked out the door with the recorder on to capture what it would. In this act, I aimed to imbue the process with a certain amount of indeterminacy and to capture a representation of what it is like to be listening in the world. Of course, this intention did not always translate to actual practice. There were certainly times I walked off the sidewalk in order to capture the transient rich crunches of the snow, times I filtered through radio stations while recording in my car when I otherwise would not have, times I felt strange about replying to my friend on the street. Looking back now, I realize how nearly all of my recordings, while I so desired them to be "incidental," were mostly intentional. More than anything, I realize how difficult it is to truly forget about the microphone in your hand or backpack. It is the particular state of listening one enters when holding a microphone, akin to the way I look at the world when a camera is dangling from my neck. It is the feeling of being under the auratic spell of an object, an affect particular to these machines of capture.

3 This broader division in the history of environmental music in general is beyond the scope of this essay, for a primer I suggest *Sound American's* issue seven on Deep Listening and David Dunn's "Acoustic Ecology and The Experimental Music Tradition" published in *New Music USA*. - BS

When I say machines of capture, I mostly refer to the way the microphone, the camcorder, the camera, capture time, or at least the summation of ideologies which allow us to think of time as being capturable. Beyond the obvious use of the microphone to capture and reproduce, *Incidental Music* made clear to me the psychological effects of field recording. This effect is a state of heightened awareness that thrusts the holder into a position of aesthetic arbiter, deciding when to record, what to record, for how long and why. In holding the microphone, an object so charged with musical significance, I wonder if these aesthetic questions suddenly become musical ones? If this is true, does one even need to go through Eno's repeated listening to construct a musical piece? Thinking about the recording process as its own form of listening, the differences between Eno and Oliveros become more easily traversed – the microphone merely becomes an extension of the body equally capable of listening, or invoking a certain psychological state of listening, as the feet. This is the latent concept within the entire body of field-recording-as-music, from Richard English to David Dunn, and explains the obsession of many of these artists with sound quality, microphone bias and soundscape.

Listening back to the body of recordings I made for *Incidental Music*, I am struck by the amount of “poor” recordings I captured. By “poor” I refer to the jarringly loud gusts of wind, the captured conversations, the jiggling in the car cup holder. The inclusion of these sounds was intentional insofar as I consciously chose to make my recordings without the aid of headphones and often carried my microphone with an effort toward forgetting it was there at all. Some of the most interesting recordings, then and now, are those in which I truly forgot the microphone was on. One particular recording begins with capturing the

sound of rain out my apartment window, what follows is an unintentionally recorded conversation and half of Stars of the Lid's *And Their Refinement of The Decline*. Another captures the sounds of the kitchen for fifteen minutes after I left it. In listening to the first of these two recordings, I am reminded of Graham Lambkin, whose Amateur Doubles recordings open up a third stream of philosophically approaching a synthesis of field recordings, music and the environment. But what is so interesting about these products of forgetting? Are these the moments in which the vision of *Incidental Music* is actually realized? Part of why these recordings are interesting certainly has to do with their truly incidental nature. The other part has to do with the field recording as that capturer of time and memory. For me, the recordist, these incidental recordings do not act as reference points to other multi-sensational memories and experiences. Only the microphone heard what I did not. They are a blank slate of sorts that I can listen to without hearing my own intentionality. Listening to them is not so much different than listening, period.

Moving from the recordings to their assemblage as a transmission on WNUR, I think of the improvisation implied throughout Oliveros's music – the wandering around in the dark of "Native." The sonic artifacts of *Incidental Music* represent my real-time responses to the field recordings of the week. In this exchange, much like the power the microphone exerted on my choices of space and object, the radio medium, my tools of manipulation and my own musical mind played determining factors in the sound that would emit from the transmitter. For the most part, these improvisations produced the kinds of textures one might expect from a digital looper, reverb, delay and resonance algorithms. I think of these processes now as a kind of specific "musicification." The rhythmic looping

and ambient textures represent my own efforts to make something I deemed in the moment interesting enough to play on the radio. I understand this move, theoretically, as somewhere between Eno and Oliveros. It is a studio process constructed from recordings like Eno's experiment. However, and this is where I draw parallels to Oliveros, the encounter with the recordings is a first-time one, and the result of this encounter is a meandering, freely-improvised reaction. This reaction is one built on a listening, or perhaps a re-listening, if one allows the same representational relationship as Eno, that mutates the original act. Beyond these two actions of mine, there is of course a third and possibly forth and fifth listening taking place at the time of live transmission and the subsequent digital archiving on Mixcloud.

Thus, *Incidental Music* is a multivalenced orbit of listening both on the subjective level, in my experiences making field recordings for the show and the in-the-moment listening and reacting to these recordings live and on-air, and the objective level, in the transmission and subsequent displaced and disjunct listenings to the show. Thinking about the latter, I wonder whether the show amounted to anything beyond what it is on the surface: a collection of field recordings and modulations that sound kind of like ambient music. Listened to in the context of radio, during a programming block one expects to hear music, on a station known to play generally weird music, I doubt many listeners made a distinction between *Incidental Music* and the proceeding show. Considering that I conceived of the show with a particular, extramusical call to action and with the intention of inspiring a new kind of listening, I cannot claim the show accomplished its mission. While many of the soundscapes of the show are fairly pleasant to listen to, the manipulations now sound crude to my ears

and I hear more my effort to cull some kind of sonority from these disjunct recordings than anything else. However, there are interesting moments, like the ones I have described above. Created situations like the dry sound of driving in my car transmitting out to many other listeners in cars on a cold Chicago night, like the recording of my roommate and I talking over Stars of the Lid in my living room.

These moments produce what I now identify as an “incidental listening.” In my assessment, these portions, defined by a heightened and irregular experience, are the best of the show and act out the intentions I so haphazardly obscured. In a final analysis, what I find so potentially dull about the show now is not the experience I had making my weekly recordings or the moment of reappraisal in doing the show, but my misplaced desire to create music from the recordings – not the Incidental, but the Music. At the time I believed the only way to make people listen to the world around them was to organize sound into an aesthetic form, and in doing so I reified the exact hierarchy I was trying to disrupt with the show. I was trying to deconstruct, liberate and draw all sounds under the classification of music, but in doing so I could never actually take the last and so critical step of destroying music altogether. Moving beyond this trap of the progressive and liberal musical concept, I instead see the value in a more simple conceit: *there are sounds other than music worth listening to.*

As a sonic artifact of this inquiry, I am presenting a more straight-ahead assemblage of the recordings I made for *Incidental Music*, one for each show that aired. I have remixed these recordings with fewer digital manipulations in hopes that you can begin to disassociate your

experience with them from a musical context. In total, I believe presenting the recordings, as banal as they may be, will hopefully reflect better my original intentions of creating *Incidental Music*. And perhaps the banality is the point. May these recordings be so dull and meaningless to you that they become obsolete, that they allow a space to take off your headphones, to take a walk without music, and hear the world around you.

“Whiskey, Leave Me Alone”: Social Listening in the Ragged Hawksian Cinema

Jack Miller



Those of us who admire the American filmmaker Howard Hawks (1896-1977) tend to admire him deeply, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the process of getting acquainted with his work may be a rather bewildering one. Many of us discover Hawks early on, in a state of innocence: we notice that many certified classics of Hollywood cinema (*Scarface*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Big Sleep*) were all directed by the same guy, and that he seems a rather versatile figure in his ability to excel in a wide variety of genres. Later, we become aware of Hawks' shameless tendency to revel in self-repetition and intertextuality, or the notion that, on some level, it seems like he's making the same movie over and over again, with slight modulations applied to the material each time. (The scenarios of *Only Angels Have Wings*, *To Have and Have Not*, and *Rio Bravo* bear striking similarities with one another, and *El Dorado* might be regarded as an overt remake of the last of these.) We come to recognize his use of speed as a kind of formal element, both in terms of his strangely dissonant direction of actors as well as in the breakneck pace at which bits of business are hurled forward within the diegesis. Above all, the erudite Hawksian student begins to develop an unsettling feeling that the filmic universe of Hawks' cinema is weirdly imbalanced and unstable, peculiarly ragged and deeply secular.

Many Hawks cultists have tried to reconcile his two major tendencies, that of a kind of ragged, volatile instability, in which narrative incidents and physical actions only make sense or gain meaning *in relation to* other features of the material, and that of his enduring interest in social behavior, in a kind of celebratory collectivism which itself has ties to notions of the utopian and to undercurrents of male homoeroticism. Often, Hawks displays a kind of refusal or inability in his films to separate the volatile

world from the social one, and this may be observed in his gleefully amoral depictions of violence. Near the beginning of Hawks' 1952 epic western *The Big Sky* (among the most sublime and mysterious of his masterpieces), the friendship between Kirk Douglas's character (an individualistic hero) and Dewey Martin's (an ornery, quintessentially Hawksian team player) is consecrated by the former punching the latter during a misunderstanding between the two men. For Hawks, violence is a unifying force between men, a means of constructing relationships (and, by extension, utopias) rather than destructing or deconstructing them, as most filmmakers would choose to render such actions. In this regard, it might be said that Hawks effectively liberates certain forms of gesture from the affect(s) that we typically associate with such behaviors. The Hawksian vision of community arising out of male violence may be cross-referenced with another forceful act that frequently appears in his movies, that of musical performance. Hawks seems to be fond of complicating or disrupting straight performance scenes through reactions, collaborations and interruptions put forth by the other group members, thereby implicating all of the characters (and, by extension, the viewer) into a kind of ramshackle, communal ritual.



Although fictive meaning in a Hawks film is always somewhat dictated and created by the performative energy of his actors, he never specialized in that most pictorial and mobile of classical genres, the musical – and yet, this didn’t stop him from including musical performance scenes in nearly all of his great films. These scenes are among the most graceful, erotic, and joyous in his filmography, marked by an eloquence of gesture which moves his art toward a kind of formal apotheosis. In Hawks’ 1959 western *Rio Bravo* (perhaps his greatest film), the memorable Dean Martin country number “My Rifle, My Pony and Me” is rendered as a delightfully relaxed, unhurried hang-out session, rather than as a showy display of theatricality. Hawks constructs it as a set-piece built around a serious and deeply codified notion of listening, which is shown to us through various reaction shots, actions of mutual camaraderie, and ultimately a kind of unforced collaborative effort. The first time I saw the film, I was overcome with emotion during this scene (as I still am today when I have the pleasure of looking at it again), but it wasn’t initially clear to me why I experienced this reaction – the

song itself, though wonderful, probably wouldn't illicit this kind of response when taken on its own terms, and Hawks certainly doesn't film it in a lofty or exalted way.

Rather, I now think that the mysterious power of this passage in Hawks, for me one of the key passages in all of cinema, is two-fold. On the one hand, a great deal of its resonance arises out of its social context within the narrative proceedings, wherein this ragtag bunch begins to finally 'get its groove back' – Martin's character begins to overcome his struggles with alcoholism, the team starts to work together as a coherent unit, or more precisely as a spontaneous work-in-progress – at the exact moment that the encroaching void of danger lurking off-screen (embodied by a band of criminals working under a corrupt rancher) nears closer toward their fictional abstraction of a Texas town, to beckon the Hawksian heroes toward duty and toward action. As always in Hawks, mutual camaraderie becomes a means of holding back the darkness. But this passage also functions beautifully on a more filmic, directorial level, for more unpretentious and natural reasons than we are perhaps accustomed to seeing today. Hawks' camera lingers, up close, on John T. Chance (John Wayne) looking at and listening to his friends' music – Hawks documents his joy at regarding the act of artistic creation as a mellow and vibrant offspring of community. We then see Colorado (Ricky Nelson) belatedly joining in, and clumsily trying to find his melodic footing during the second verse. Hawks' cinema never possessed the plastic beauty, the poetic feeling for natural landscapes of a John Ford or an Anthony Mann; Hawk's cinema is largely a cinema of faces. Rather, it's this deep understanding of and respect for human behavior, and for the mysterious philosophical codes which sustain interpersonal relationships, that gives this sequence its robust rhythmic and emotional energy.



These moments, in which Hawks modulates or tempers the individualistic force of performance through the decentralizing presence of more “socially-oriented” compositions, seem to function in two key ways in his films. Sometimes, they serve to establish or construct the flavor and spatial laws of a particular environment or setting, and this seems especially true of those Hawks films that are, for the most part, built around a singular set, as in

Only Angels Have Wings (1939) and *To Have and Have Not* (1944). These films, like *Rio Bravo*, display an interest in the shifting group dynamics that occur while the characters themselves are involved in a kind of waiting game. Because the physical properties of the set have a more consequential relationship with meaning in Hawks than they seem to for most directors – he likes to use setting and its various props as formal playgrounds of sorts – these ragged performance scenes become crucial in that they comment on and clarify our understanding of social order in these abstract environments. This notion of behavioral commentary becomes fascinatingly literalized in *To Have and Have Not* through the figure of Cricket (Hoagy Carmichael), the house pianist at a vaguely *Casablanca*-flavored hotel bar in Hawks' French Martinique – a musical-narrator role that Carmichael essentially reprises two years later in Jacques Tourneur's *Canyon Passage* (1946)!

The second function of these Hawksian 'group performances' appears to be the consecration of bonds, usually between men, which should be seen as related to the formation of the group and its underlying ethos. The drinking tune "Whiskey, Leave Me Alone" is heard in two different Hawks films, made a decade apart, and used in this way on both occasions: we first hear it in *The Big Sky*, after Douglas' and Martin's characters have linked up with the latter's Uncle Zeb (Arthur Hunnicutt – one of the unsung heroes of American character acting) and a good many Frenchmen. Before the party departs on a mysterious riverboat saga up the Missouri which will sustain the action for most of this genial adventure film, they solidify the terms of this network of relationships with a drunken performance – a pleasurable intermingling of singing, brawling and drinking permeates the group dynamics here. Hawks reprises the song ten years later in *Hatari!*

(1962), and here it’s primarily used as a means for a team of big-game hunters to unwind and have fun with one another after another day spent catching African animals for American zoos. In this later iteration, the song is also brought forth to ‘patch up’ or restore order in a gendered context – the group has experienced a bit of integral trouble dealing with the arrival of a woman photojournalist (Elsa Martinelli) onto the scene. To cite a counterexample, the songs that Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe) and Dorothy (Jane Russell) co-perform in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), including “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” and “We’re Just Two Little Girls From Little Rock”, seem to assault the film’s built-in male spectators with a conspiratory force of femininity – significantly, this is the only Hawks film in which the central relationship is shared between women.



Hawks' status as one of the quintessential auteur figures in film history is richly deserved, especially if one considers the extent to which all of his material feels definitely related in intertextual and deeply personal ways, but this conventional narrative around his work also becomes complicated by the extent to which he allows actors and performers to play crucial roles in the creation of rhythmic and fictional energy. In this regard, it might be observed that, for Hawks, the group is always more complex and interesting than the individual – and this is true both in his approach to filmmaking as a collaborative process as well as in his fictional scenarios constructed around the group as an organic entity. If the musical episodes in his work rank among the more memorable and beautifully economic passages in the classical American sound cinema, this may be because they act as small, gestural embodiments of his most fundamental authorial concerns.







“Viva La Gap”

A CONVERSATION
WITH DEBORAH STRATMAN

In a freewheeling email exchange on the eve of her Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago exhibition *Chicago Works: Deborah Stratman* (March 17 - December 6, 2020), filmmaker and interdisciplinary artist **Deborah Stratman** converses with Expressionless’ D. Taylor on her cinematic and non-cinematic work, radical listening, relationships between sounds and spaces, forming time, the documentary form, technique, *feeling-tone*, hole-ontology, Studs Terkel, the supernatural, among other things.

I

E: The sonic dimension of your work suggests a rigorous modeling of the relationships between recording-event and the representation of place, experience, concept. Examples range from the matter-of-fact, 'indexical' presentation of the sounds of the shooting location in *The Illinois Parables* (2016), to the use of something like continuity sound in the barroom scene in *Optimism* (2018), to sounds that are almost in direct confrontation with the content of the images, as in *On the Various Nature of Things* (1995). Some of your films, like *Hacked Circuit* (2014), even directly comment on the construction and manipulation of "real" sound *through* highly manipulated sound. In *Order to Not Be Here* (2002) integrates Kevin Drumm's electronic pulsations into the sound mix, to harrowing and immersive effect. How would you describe your approach to recording

and representing place and experience through sound? Is it specific to each film, or are you doing something more programmatic? Does this approach have political, ethical or personal implications (insofar as these can be considered separate)?

DS: Sound makes space. Is space. Is nothing without space. Sound is expressed through and changed by space. I love making space with sound which is just making forms with time. It's the ultimate temporal sculpture medium. When you ask about approach, that's how I'd describe my primary relationship.

But there's lots of other relationships that define the ways I like to work with sound that have to do with, say, memory - the way rhythm makes things indelible - tone, humor, augury/foreboding, transposition, rupture, setting background or defining a protagonist -

to me melody can be a formidable protagonist. Though in terms of inclination, I'm more a ground than a figure person.

Political-ethical-personal, absolutely the aural has repercussions here. But so does the image. So does everything really. I don't think I approach ethics more pointedly or successfully in one or the other.

E: Loving this equation of *making sound-space* (sound=space) and *making time-form* as a way to think cinema-making. It feels axiomatic. The relationship of memory to this is interesting as well - thinking cinematic devices as translating *feeling-tone* and rhythmic nuances of memory (maybe we could provisionally define memory as *the palpable absence of a particular listening?*) into time-forms.

Of course, some have made analogies between

elements of your work and that of Straub and Huillet, but the incongruities are maybe more interesting here than the comradeship. In any given film of theirs, it seems that sound-space is always doing a kind of double duty: acting as index of the immediate conditions of its recording in a given place at a given time (no dubbing or continuity) and as index of some essentially inaccessible social-historical past (which is always a function of the former duty: locations chosen, conflicts between images, sounds, etc.). Of course they pushed this very far: you can find Straub moralizing against the use of cinematic imagination and "formless form," shots essentially become blocks of documentary-time, absolute fidelity is emphasized.

Your work also seems to be mobilized against historical amnesia, and totally conscious of place and time of recording, but far more willing to play

with interpretation, manipulation, recreation, *feeling* of memory. Are your time-forms built in fidelity to some primary act of listening (or remembering), or are they building something else entirely?

DS: That parenthetical definition of memory makes me think of Merleau-Ponty's description of a ghost as a perception made by only one sense. Apropos when we're talking alongside the great phantom, cinema.

I'm on board to think about memory as the absence of a particular listening. Or maybe *any* listening? The radical thing about listening, like Salomé Voegelin says, is that it *must* share time and space with the object or event under consideration. It's a philosophical project that demands involved participation. There's no detachment. It's not the 'over there' that vision gives us, but an in-the-midst. Which is what

makes listening such a good locus for the socio-political. On the other hand, sound is an intriguingly obstinate and malleable arena through which to take on history, because if we're listening to something, it's unfurling. It's never a static artefact.

Straub-Huillet are very important for me, but I'm happy you mention the incongruities. What idiom and dialect convey is immeasurable; a sub-surface mix of cadence, inheritance, geography, epoch I think there's a connection here to what I aim towards in constructing time-forms. An idiomatic erratic product of the dance I perform with my material. Most of the time, the only things my time-forms are built in fidelity to is themselves. Sometimes not even that. Though if they're well-made, there's an allegiance to the unfurling present *and* to the remembered/recorded past. Or to forecast. History and augury are equally productive companions to the moment.

Often my work grows out of a primary act of noticing. Might be a passage of music, an illustration, a story told But I'm not interested in fidelity to the thing as I came across it, or as I thought it. Like our buddy Walt Benjamin says, nothing's poorer than a truth expressed as it was thought. It's best if my ideas get snagged or interrupted by the world. I'm happy when subjects get in my way and become interlocutors. That's why I'm drawn to modes like documentary, where chance has a seat at the table.

E: I'd like to zoom in for a moment on the triple relationship of what you call augury/forecast, history/past and the moment/present in your time-forms, and specifically this figure of augury as opposed to history. History - and correct me if I am misinterpreting! - seems to be analogized with past time, which may or may not be "remembered" via the perpetual "moment" of the screen, the recording,

etc. There also seems to be a necessary relationship here between contingency and the representation of history, or even a parallel between chance and the realm of history generally. But what exactly is this third element, *forecast* or *augury*, in your time-forms? What are its implications? By augury, do you mean eschatology, soothsaying, editorializing, utopian projection, a gesture 'off-screen'? To bring this closer to Voeglin's discourse as you mention it, is augury a kind of *listening for*?

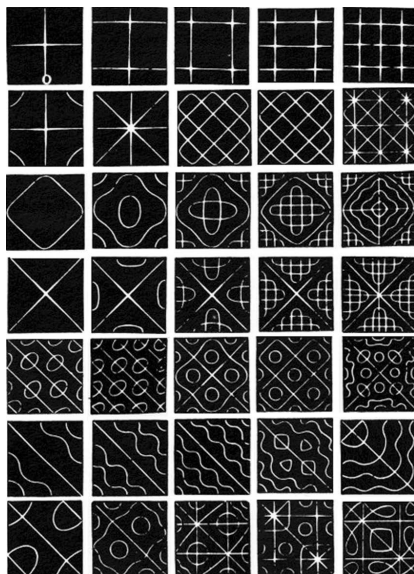
DS: It's all those things and more. Forecasting is sort of like remembering, except you're walking backwards into it, and there aren't any leavings available to sift through. When I use the word augury, I'm talking about projecting. It's anticipatory and conjectural. It could be tied to signs of narrative or melodic convention. It could be speculation based on cadence, or a product of pressures built

though editing, setting, gesture, framing, what's beyond the frame, etc. Without augury there's no suspense, or surprise, or rhythm. There's a channelizing of attention, or yes - a listening for. I believe in listening. Radical listening. Attentiveness is powerful. Observation, in its potential to cede space and agency, is powerful. We should question the habitual. Question bricks. Question the height of the curb. Which station our radio gets left tuned to. The route we favor. Notice who speaks. Who gets the last word. Be curious why certain renditions of events are given more credence than others. Be answerable for what we learn how to see.¹



TOP: from *Kings of the Sky*
 MIDDLE: from *THE BLVD*
 BOTTOM: from *Ray's Birds*
 NEXT PAGE: array of Chladni forms

1 These last few sentences are adapted from *Yes, Virginia, reality is worth caring about*, my contribution to "Qu'est-ce que le réel? Des cinéastes prennent position" (ed. by Andréa Picard, 2018), which is, in turn, deeply indebted to the thoughts of Georges Perec and Donna Haraway - DS



E: I would also like to explore your interest in what you're calling the documentary mode a bit further. One is tempted to suggest that a time-form of yours like *The BLVD* (1999) was produced in something like a documentary mode, or maybe *with* a documentary mode, as it documents a very particular social configuration in a particular place, is beholden to the contingencies of subjects' actions, enunciations, etc. Or, with completely different subject matter (and sub-

ject species!), a time-form like *Ray's Birds* (2010). But to avoid being too hasty, how do you conceptualize this notion of *documentary*? Are some of your films more documentary than others?

DS: *Kings of the Sky* (2004) lands here as well. With each of those films, it so happens I'm focusing on a person or group that performs. The racers perform drag races, the kept birds perform their raptor-ness, the Uighur troupe perform acrobatics. Seems I favor an observational mode with theater at its jelly center. *Hacked Circuit* is considerably more staged, but there's a similar nesting at work.

Documentary sits at the edges of where reality is collectively decided upon. As an operating mode, I think of shooting conversationally, improvisationally, in-response-to vs. hewing to a script or choreography. As a mode it looks more to

the indexical (say, a Chladni form) than the conventional (e.g. an alphabet), and towards recording something found rather than something invented. Some of my films stage and invent more than others. But does that make them less documentary? Vertov leans yes. Flaherty no. Kluge says reality is a paper tiger and should be possible to represent as the historical fiction it is. In any case, I'm happy when my designed forms are open to accident, and my observational forms acknowledge their artifice.

E: Maybe this could bring us to the ways you work through questions of framing and of visual space. Your work is heterogeneous, but much of it seems to carry something of a 'look,' certain aesthetic consistencies (even in your non-cinematic work). Much of this surely has to do with your approach to editing and juxtaposition, and in this *feeling-tone* tying everything together. But whether in video or 16mm,

there seems to be a tendency toward decisions like static shots, unconventional partial framings of bodies, painterly compositions, long Straubian pans. There seem to be spatial and aesthetic analogies even among the most seemingly distant pieces (in terms of subject matter), like between the way you shoot a bird's legs in *Ray's Birds* and the way you shoot a vacuum cleaner in a music video for James McMurtry (1995), or between the way you shoot a living room in *The Illinois Parables* and the way you shoot the empty *Magician's House* (2007). How do you work through questions of framing and composition in your time-forms? Your notions of "designed forms open to accident" and "observational forms acknowledging their artifice" seem highly relevant here, but specifically, do you feel like you tend toward a certain way of thinking about framing and visual aesthetic that is perhaps in excess of the contingencies of a given

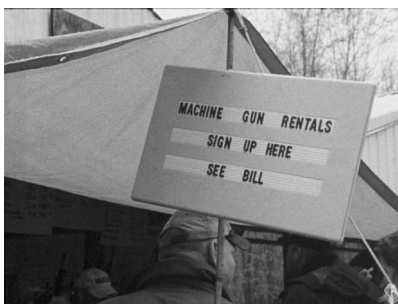
encounter with a shooting subject?

DS: Framing typically isn't something I think through. It's intuitive—a combination of balancing forms and pressures. Mostly, I just know the frame when I see it. You know how resonant frequencies ring in a form? A place might sound dead, but when you tap the right frequency, everything starts to vibrate. With framing, you might say I scan for a container with visual resonance.

E: Are there also instances in which you plan, diagram or otherwise anticipate shots in advance?

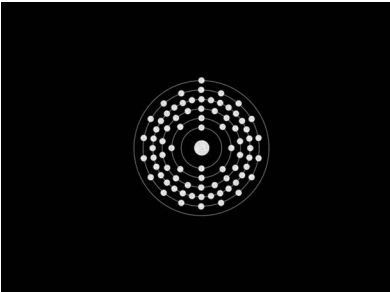
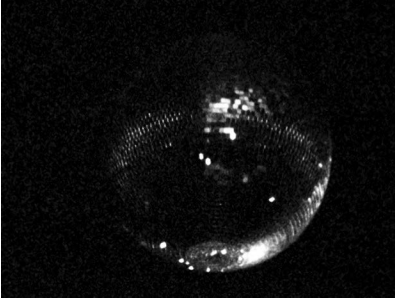
DS: Yes, as opposed to those resonant sorts of framings just described, I absolutely diagram out or plan for some shots. Sometimes quite methodically, as with the single tracking shots of *Hacked Circuit*, or *Immortal Suspended* (2013). On occasion, I've drawn out framing ideas (e.g. Wanet McNeill in *The Illinois Parables*). I of-

ten do mental run-throughs for sequences (e.g. aerially tracking the running man of *In Order Not To Be Here*, paddling into the drainage tunnel in *The Name is not the Thing named* (2012), shooting from the hot air balloon at the end of the *Parables*). And I often pilgrimage to places I want to capture. Take *O'er the Land* (2009)—nearly every sequence in that film involved a sortie: Niagara Falls, the US/Mexican border, the high school football game, RV sales lots, Morton Thiokol plant, the French/Indian war re-enactors, the bird research center, the machine gun festival. I'm often very clear on what setting I want, if not the framing per se.



from *O'er the Land*

II



ABOVE: from *Optimism*

DS: When you say 'bar-room' scene in *Optimism*, are you talking about the casino with the cancan dancers? Because that ping pong shark-porpoise-nerpa audio is also from a bar. A different bar.

E: Ah, a casino! *Optimism* is a good case to focus on for a moment. Not only is there a lot of sonic play, bits of music, etc., but there are these gloriously unsettling CGI and VFX sections with expanding gold atoms, digital noise disco balls, etc. alongside these almost pastoral documents of people and landscape. All of these interactions seem to reflect social dissonances surrounding the town's gold mining history (especially given the First Nations man's meditation on land use at the end), and certainly plenty of other mysterious things as well. Can you discuss some of

the thinking and listening that went into this film?

DS: *Optimism* was shot while my partner Steve Badgett and I were working on a public sculpture commission in Dawson City, YT called *Augural Pair* (2011-2016). I had no project in mind while I was shooting. It was just free form note-taking and filming for pleasure. I thought I might use it in a film someday, but I wasn't aiming for anything. Steve and I had many conversations around the history of that place - what value is, how value gets tied to desire, to extractive industries, to land, to ownership, to myth. All of those conversations came to bear on our process and the sculptures we eventually made. They seeped into the film too, but more indirectly. The film might actually have digested the ideas better because I sat on the footage five years before I edited.

I might never have made the film if I hadn't come back across the conversation with ex-Mayor John Steins that you hear at the beginning. I love that blender sound revving up as John's buddy Eldo mixes his drink. The fact that they're talking about this dream of installing a heliostat up on the hill to shine down a puddle of sun mid-winter when it's always dark in the valley is a perfect accidental rhyme with the mirrored disc that you see later in the film. That disc had nothing to do with the heliostat. It's just serendipity that the sculptural object Steve and I made so fluently stands in for John & Eldo's dream. Same goes for the sound of the ping pong game which can't help but invoke *white ball*. Again, a coincidental tie-in with the hillside disc / punch hole / fallen sun.

Once the circular refrain emerged, I leaned in, ergo the disco ball and the electron shell (or occult mandala, depending on viewer

predisposition). The structure of the film is a kind of looping, forward-moving circle – like a stretched slinky. I use a lot of transplanted sync, where we hear something well before or after we see it.

E: All fascinating. In terms of method, do you often shoot and then edit footage years later?

DS: Sometimes I work very quick. Like sketching. But at least half of the time I shoot and either don't return to material until years later, or am working on it sort of continuously, but over a very long time.

E: What's the utility of this?

DS: Alienation. The footage feels less mine if it ages. The shots get detached from the experience that generated the desire to shoot them in the first place. Some things sit because I never

had plans for them. I just shoot what moves me then add it to the shelf – something I can tap later when the right idea comes along. Other times I'm clear on what I should do, but the thing I'm trying to make is obstinate. And then other times, I aim for as little thinking as possible—hold the camera like the net.

E: I'd also love to hear more about *Augural Pair*, which also seems a good segue into thinking about the relationship (in this case direct relationship) between your filmic work and your work in other media, which is just as fascinating.

DS: *Augural Pair* were two sculptural interventions that considered how value and desire are connected to landscape and acts of removal. A giant mirrored disc attended by carved wooden ravens was installed on a cliff across the river from town, while in the town bank window, electronic signage displayed

the live price of gold per ounce. Both of these interventions had an associated viewing scope to bring them closer. Mineral extraction has been the key arbiter of population in Dawson since the Klondike Gold Rush. And while we were there, a mini gold rush just happened to be in effect. The price had sky-rocketed and the landscape was busy with surveyors and speculators.

The mirrored disc could be a hole through the cliff, a fallen star, a giant satellite dish, a gleaming eye or the shit of the sun, depending on the disposition of who was looking and when. You couldn't see the ravens unless you looked at it with the scope. We carved the birds after looking into Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in origin stories and thinking about the ways that flights of ravens have served augural purposes. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in ancestral home is around the confluence of the Klondike & Yukon rivers, where Dawson City later got built.

As for making non-films, some ideas just need alternate delivery modes. And it's nice to work publicly, where an encounter with art is less likely to be planned. Radical listening has been central to a lot of these projects.



III

This fight will not end in terrorism and violence, it will not end in a nuclear holocaust, it begins as a celebration in the rights of Alchemy, the transformation of shit into gold, the illumination of dark chaotic night, into light... This is Isabel from Phoenix Regatta Radio, signing off until tomorrow. (Bon in Flames, 1983)

Au – the chemical element gold
Augere – to increase
Auger – helical screw blade; a tool with a helical bit for boring holes
Augur – to divine; portend a good or bad outcome; foresee or predict
Augury – a sign of what will happen in the future; an omen; observation of the sky and birds; divination from the flight of crows; sorcery
Aus – to shine
Auspex – one who observes the flights of birds for the purpose of reading omens.
Auspice – a divine or prophetic token
Ausus – dawn
Aurora – a natural electrical phenomenon characterized by the appearance of streamers of colored light in the sky, usually near the northern or southern magnetic pole, Roman goddess of dawn
Aura – the distinctive atmosphere or quality that seems to surround and be generated by a person, thing or place
Aural – relating to the ear or the sense of hearing
Aureole – a circle of light or brightness surrounding something, especially as depicted in art around the head or body of a person represented as holy
Auric – relating to the aura supposedly surrounding a living creature; of gold with a valence of three **Aureate** – denoting, made of, or having the color of gold.
Auriferous – containing gold
Aurum – gold

In Aztec and Mayan tradition, gold was known as the excrement of the sun.

Crow Steals the Sun.

The world was all dark, all the time.

A chief kept the moon, the stars and the sun all to himself. The chief's daughter went to the river to drink. So Crow turned himself into a pine needle, which she accidentally swallowed down. Nine months later she bore a child. The chief doted on his grandchild, who cried and begged to play with the sun. The man relented and gave his grandchild sun to play with. He rolls it around. He plays with it, laughs, had lots of fun. Then he rolls it to the door and out it goes.
 "Oh!" he cries. He just pretends. He pretend cries because that sun is lost.

...

Then Crow disappears. Has the sun with him in a box. He walks around. Comes to river. Lots of animals are there - fox, wolf, wolverine, mink, rabbit. Everybody's fishing. That time animals all talk like people talk now. The world is dark.

"Give me fish", Crow says. No one pay any attention.

"Give me fish or I bring daylight." They laugh at him.

He's holding the box - starts to open it and lets one ray out. Then they pay attention. He opens box a bit more. They're scared. Finally he broke that daylight box and throws it out. Those animals scatter, hide in bush and turn into animals like now, and the sun come out.

"Go to the skies," Crow says. "Now no one man owns the light. It will be for everyone."

(transcribed Northwest Indigenous American myth)

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Augural Pair*
 in the wild
 ABOVE: conceptual notes for
Augural Pair

E: Comment on this notion of *feeling tone*. Is this a kind of philosophical method of listening, or to understanding and representing worlds, that you identify with or draw from?

DS: The feeling tone is an intelligence beyond words. I'm not sure this is what it was for Studs exactly. But I know the concept meant a lot to him. I think he first came across the phrase in an interview he gave.

In his book *Division Street: America*, one of his interviewees, Nancy Dickerson, says, "Let's face it. What counts is knowledge. And feeling. You see, there is such a thing as feeling tone. One is friendly and one is hostile. And if you don't have this, baby, you've had it. You're dead." So I guess it's also about the meaning of gesture, of our actions. It's philosophical, but it's also base.

E: Definitely pragmatic, but also a pretty profound way of looking at and listening to things. And communicating things--it seems cinema is the obvious medium for this, as word and language isn't even half of the matter. A more enigmatic film like *Xenoi* (2016) - *strangers* - where you get something like a sense of the contemporary haunting Western history without a word spoken--totally feeling-tone. Is feeling-tone a factor in the editing room as much as while you're shooting, or while you're thinking about your projects?

like stacking. The film was a collaboration with composer Michael Pisaro. We'd been invited as mentors to the Syros Sound Meetings and the theme that year was "khôra". Michael introduced me to the spiral of fifths (Pythagorean Comma) which influenced both of our recordings. To me, *Xenoi* is math meets sociology. I wish I'd been able to film a heap of discarded life vests. But Syros is generally bypassed as migrant landing site. Still, the thin financial climate permeated the country. Seems to be a hallmark of our times.

DS: Yes - definitely a factor in the editing room. The editing room is the heart of my cinema so I couldn't survive in there without feeling-tone.

Xenoi's locations are like a deck of cards, each with a particular historical or economic anchor. So in this case, editing was a bit more



from *Xenoi*

IV

DS: Are you guys really into deadpan?

Or what do you mean by expressionless objects?

E: We're into deadpan too, but we pulled the word expressionless from Walter Benjamin. He initially used it to describe a favorite artwork--Grunewald's Isenheim altarpiece--but it comes up in other early essays, like the one on *Elective Affinities*, to describe a moment in the aesthetic/critical experience of a work that cannot be systematized, and shatters any possibility of totality in the work. Benjamin suggests that the expressionless moment is what makes an artwork an artwork, and not just continuous with nature.

DS: So feeling-tone is actually an expressionless object, in that it can't be systematized? And if I have it

straight, the expressionless moment is a fault in perception around something that's felt to be art. For the art to be art, it needs the gap. This is a lead. It makes me think about the ontology of holes and the usefulness of absence. Michel de Certeau says the gap might be a failure of reason, a blind spot that makes reason accede to another dimension -- the dimension of thinking. And to think, the indeterminate is necessary.

At any rate, we filmmakers think a lot about gaps. Cinema's riddled with them and is aerated by them. Viva la gap.

E: In light of all this, it is interesting that *Xenoi* followed from the theme of *khôra*, this sort of interval between forms or places... As you say, art needs the gap to be art, and film needs to be aerated with gaps, and thinking begins, as it were, at the gap; but your art specifically and directly seems

fixated on the gap as subject matter as well. Whether the gap between locations, between waking life and sleep in *Waking* (1994), or even between people, lovers, relationships in *Untied* (2001)--these are just a few examples. At the same time, your work so often seems to be about connections: collectivity, culture, community, worlds. Even *Xenoi*, the film about *khôra*, there are intimations of a community of the displaced. Moving from the register of form to that of subject matter (insofar as they can be separated), can you comment on what has drawn you to gaps, thresholds so consistently throughout your work? Is there a relationship between *gap* and *connection*, or *community*, in your work?

DS: I'm not sure it's possible to have connection without a gap. Between me and someone else, there's always the thing we have to traverse that makes it a relationship in the first place.

Absence is the marrow of seduction. It's what I'm missing that seduces me. Plus, it seems good to take advantage of what is not: doors in a house, memorial silences, general strikes, the space between our eyes, between hearing and seeing, between things and their names. Gaps are what produce dimension. And here's an even deeper void that motivates me - the one at our core that we sense but can't say. If I knew it, if the lights got turned on in there, or in any other murk for that matter, then I wouldn't need to make work anymore.

$Hxy = x$ is a hole in (or through) y
 $Hx = \exists y Hxy$

WE WRITE "Hx" FOR "x is a hole"
 SINCE EVERY HOLE IS ONTOLOGICALLY DEPENDENT ON ITS HOST,
 BEING A HOLE IS DEFINED AS BEING A HOLE IN (OR THROUGH) SOMETHING.

THE HOST OF A HOLE IS NOT A HOLE
 $Hxy \rightarrow \neg Hy$

A HOLE CANNOT HOST ITS OWN HOST
 $Hxy \rightarrow \neg Hyx$

A HOLE CANNOT HOST ITSELF
 $\neg Hxx$

HOLES DO NOT HAVE HOLES: THEY CANNOT HOST ONE ANOTHER
 $Hx \rightarrow \neg \exists y Hxy$

HOLES CANNOT BE THE ONLY THINGS AROUND
 $\exists x Hx \rightarrow \exists x \neg Hx$

(per R. Casati and A. Varzi)

Casati & Varzi's ontological
 proof of holes

V

[DS sends an image of Pythagoras]

E: Very happy about the Pythagoras connection here. For one, there is always this dancing between a kind of *mathema* and (especially in this connection) *akousmata*. Your work seems to do this very explicitly. In a kind of Pythagorean vein, your time-forms often seem to twist together the magical, supernatural, even the occult with something like rationality, science, mathematics. There are Aleister Crowley references, a through-going fascination with alchemy, a palpable interest in ghosts and hauntings and the paranormal, alongside, say, space travel, surveillance tech and homages to Michael Faraday. Can you expand on this?

DS: I'm starting to suspect I've got overly binary tendencies, but for me magic and logic are sides of a

coin. They're both messengers of sorts. Ways to reach towards what we don't understand, poke at it a bit. Where does faith reside in the information age? What's the conceptual pillar of the human spirit? For a film to succeed, it needs a somatic something that transcends intellect. This supernatural / rational configuration comes up in *The Illinois Parables* too. I'm thinking of three characters: the preteen telekinetic firestarter Wanet McNeill, critical mass equation formulator Enrico Fermi, and Fred Hampton, the "black messiah" Cointelpro sought to prevent the rise of. I think it's the first time these tendencies have been personified in my work.

E: Let's talk about *The Illinois Parables*. It feels like a culmination. For one, it plays with just about every documentary cinema-adjacent strategy one could imagine. It also seems you're presenting something like a theory of history, ideology, contingency. We could

spend an eternity working through philosophical resonances--obviously Hampton, Tocqueville, Emerson, Fermi, but maybe even Althusser, Dilthey, Ricouer, Brecht, Anaxagoras and so on. You get political struggle, magic, chance, erasure, time, reenactment, a thousand years of nonlinear history, all in Illinois. It's relentlessly empirical and feels like an occult ritual. Can you discuss the process - some of the listenings, conversations and aerations that informed and shaped this piece and the "thin places" explored in it?

DS: The process was slow. Ten years. I didn't know where I was going for the first seven. An initial spark came from *O'er the Land* which at one point was going to include religious freedom as one of the freedoms it considered. That got too unwieldy (I mean, 'freedom' is already heroically unwieldy), so I put it aside and eventually those musings mutated into the *Parables*.

I think the first sequence I staged for the film was the preteen firestarter. I knew early on that I wanted a rejoinder to the critical mass equation and that paradigm shift that came with the nuclear advent. I had the Nauvoo and the Cahokia mound material very early too. But those shots weren't staged. At least not by me. I was just out on sorties. The story that Elder Everest tells about the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith was something he likely recited a lot as part of his role-playing in the Browning home at the restored Mormon settlement. And Ravenwolf just happened to walk into the frame. It was only years later when the fact that a black shaman had walked off the mound and into my shot cracked the film open for me. I was always amazed that it happened. But when I was filming, I didn't know I'd be making what I ended up making. I just knew the project needed to start way before white colonists showed up. He astonished me again by showing up at one of the very first screenings I had in Columbia, MO at True/

False festival. As best I knew, he lived in East St. Louis. But turns out he used to busk in Columbia and someone who saw the film recognized him and knew how to get in touch.

The last thing I shot was the hot air balloon footage which starts and ends the film. I knew I wanted footage of Michael Heizer's *Effigy Tumuli*. And I knew that the lifting off, that wobbling floating moment where your body's weight is left behind was going to be psychologically necessary. The heaviness of the histories becomes too much otherwise. But I didn't know that aerial material would also *begin* the film. It ended up working really well because it allows you to drop to the earth and cycle through the three sorts of mounds that appear in the film - those of indigenous mound builders, military arsenal storage mounds, and Heizer's mound (itself a reenactment of native mounds), before we commence with Ravenwolf.

A thin place as I first encountered it is a Jesuit idea. A place where the boundary



ABOVE: from *The Illinois Parables*

between this world and some other is very thin. A place of energy. A place we don't perceive with all five senses, where experience goes beyond those limits. That concept, perhaps in a more secular or political sense than intended by the Jesuits, was a guiding principle for me throughout for deciding on what locations and stories to use.

At any rate, many folks have had more interesting things to say about the film than me. I speak best with the film. It says things I could never articulate, and don't want to articulate.

E: Your MCA exhibition *Chicago Works* is also based on this film, with an additional exploration into the world of Studs Terkel. Can you talk about this exhibit, and how the content and concerns premised in the time-forms of the film have been translated to installation and gallery space?

DS: The *Chicago Works* show is two parts. *The Illinois Parables* plays in one gallery, and directly adjacent is *Feeling Tone*—a set depicting one of the WFMT radio studios Studs operated out of. It could be considered a missing parable, but it doesn't require the film. At one point I'd considered including an episode on Studs in the *Parables*, but for various reasons left it out. Mostly because his tapes were still at the National Archives being digitized, so inaccessible while I was editing. Also, I didn't want the film to get too Chicago-heavy. And I didn't want twelve parables. Too clock-y and Catholic. I wanted something less stable, and I like eleven as a prime number. Indivisible imbalance implies a politic.

I'd thought about reenacting the studio for a few years but didn't have a context. When curator Jack Schneider and I started talking, we realized the MCA would be a good fit. And while *Feeling Tone* doesn't need the film, I think it might need Chicago.

In any case, Studs' legacy seemed better to take on through something more tactile than cinema. He wrote extensively, so of course we have his books to hold. But if we're talking about his sonic life's work, those five decades of voices beg a physical anchor. A film seems insufficient to relay the mas-

sive arc of 5000+ taped conversations. Maybe any form is insufficient. The installation at least nods to it.

The radio booth functions as a kind of spaceship. Dorothy's transplanted house. But the sound it plays is always now. History is what's *happening*.

² Mounted on the exterior of the structure are four institutional speakers, one per side. The whole thing might just be an elaborate speaker cabinet. The idea was to have one new conversation looping per day throughout the run of the show, which was originally to be 120 days. The conversations range from 1953 to 1996. If the show gets to exist as intended, the guards are the only ones who'll hear the whole piece, and Studs as he ages.³

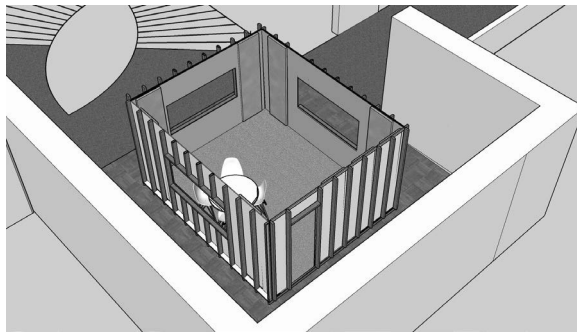
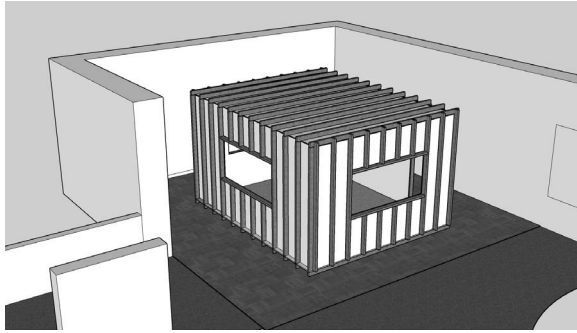
E: Do you have any closing thoughts?

DS: I've been thinking a lot about rocks. Send recommendations

2 Nod to Pablo de Ocampo for this great phrase – the title of his 2013 Flaherty Film Seminar. - DS

3 The COVID-delayed exhibition is now open until December 6, 2020. As the days the museum can be physically open to visitors will be limited and subject to change, we've decided to play one interview per day until the show closes via the MCA website. There will be 143 conversations in all, rolled out in chronological order. Now anyone can have the guard experience! Tune in for five rousing Studly decades. - DS

"Viva La Gap" A CONVERSATION WITH DEBORAH STRATMAN



TOP & MIDDLE: plans for *Feeling Tone*
BOTTOM: booth from *Feeling Tone*





La vida de las plantas, Murakami y la dignidad

Nicolas Ferreiro

Ayer di, en la casualidad casi infinita de internet, con una nota de Página 12 a Ivi Lee, quien fuera en su momento líder de Nairobi. Como nunca fui fanático ni de la banda, ni del estilo, la realidad es que no habría ingresado a la nota si el título no hubiera tenido una carnada. Y, creo, uno no pica por una carnada luego de haber procesado la “oferta” o “proposición” de manera racional, sino que, al igual que un pez hambriento, es el instinto o, mejor dicho, el camino más corto de un lugar al otro de nuestro cerebro que va de X a Y por una recompensa. Más sencillo: las notas del diario se abren por lujuria, indignación, reafirmación. Pónganle la palabra que quieran. En definitiva, abrí y pensé: “¿Qué carajos es esto”. Y me reí. Y creí que a los pibes de la banda les iba a parecer gracioso así que les pregunté qué opinaban y copié algunas de las declaraciones: “Es como free jazz pero con plantas”. O: “Luego de ver la manera en que las plantas reaccionaban en términos emocionales, interactué con ellas musicalmente”. Por último: “La experiencia de ver las decisiones artísticas que toma una planta es espectacular”.

Después de algunos intercambios, yo dije que dudaba de todo el proceso. Aunque, como suele pasarme, hablé antes de pensar y descubrí que, de hecho, había un producto que se conectaba a las plantas, medía su electricidad y transformaba eso en música. De qué manera lo hacía, por qué elegía ciertos sonidos y cómo lograba que fuera armónico no lo sabía.

La conversación en el chat se desvió a otro lado, pero yo seguí investigando. Encontré fotos de un recital con tres personas y una planta “tocando”. Vi un video de John Cage haciendo música con un cactus, pero no era la misma lógica. Él tocaba el cactus, no el cactus la música. Después leí sobre estudios en plantas, su respuesta a estímulos externos, vibraciones y entrevistas a bio-músicos. Y pensé que, en definitiva, había algo de verdad en eso que dice la gente de que hay que hablarles a las plantas y que yo era un prejuiciado y que no podía aceptar lo nuevo, lo bello, el amor, las plantas, las vibraciones.

Cuando le comenté a Vani me dijo que sí, que ya lo había visto, que Calu Rivero¹ lo hacía hace un montón. Y, en efecto, encontré videos en YouTube que recopilaban a Calu meditando con su planta, acariciándola, elongando al lado de ella, cantándole.

Se los pasé a los pibes y Pablo dijo: “esa mina sabe algo que nosotros no”.

“No sé por qué”, le dije a Vani, “pero la situación me da mucha bronca”.

1 Actriz argentina. In luencer. Modelo. Vegan Warrior. Illumination Nation. Desde hace un tiempo se llama así misma: Dignity.

Ella me dijo: “Obvio”.

Y aunque no seguí hablándole, porque no creo que ni a ella ni a nadie le interesara la movida indie de plantas musicales en NY y sus implicaciones, me dio la sensación de que había ahí un mundo al que no pertenezco y que *Dignity* tenía algunas de las respuestas. Me imaginé un mundo ideal de cierta clase privilegiada, hedonista y ociosa (no el 1% pero sí ABC1) que entiende el mundo como una meseta eterna (o una enredadera o una red de frecuencias, si se quiere) donde todos somos iguales, las plantas, los animales, los humanos, y nuestro objetivo como sociedad es vivir en una especie de páramo total e infinito, en armonía cósmica, que se logrará, en última instancia, con una buena meditación, alta costura y amor.

Pobre, nunca tan vilipendiado el amor. ¿Qué clase de trampa es esta? Yo no quiero seguir hablando de marxismo y de clase, pero, ¿cómo hablar mal de alguien que se escuda en el amor? Yo no quiero ese amor. Yo quiero estar enojado y decir que es una mierda que las clases privilegiadas tengan acceso a una información que yo desconozco, que mezclen hechos científicos con *new age* y que le pongan encima un pret a porter, Jimmy Choo y no sé qué otra cosa. Habría que pensar por qué el yoga y la meditación, que sirvieron, de algún modo, como *soma* para una sociedad basada en un sistema de castas, se aplica a nuestra sociedad occidental. No digo que no sirva. Cuando no puedo dormir o estoy nervioso, lo intento y funciona bastante bien. Pero, ¿es eso todo lo que necesitamos?

Pensé en el programa de Bojack Horseman creado por J.D. Salinger de preguntas y respuestas: *Hollywood Stars and*

Celebrities: What Do They Know? Do They Know Things?? Let's Find Out! Eso es algo que me gustaría poder hacer.

A la tarde estuve leyendo *Después del terremoto*, un libro de cuentos del año 2000 de Haruki Murakami. Cinco años antes, en 1995, un terremoto asoló la ciudad de Kobe y acabó con más de cinco mil personas. El libro surgió como una recomendación de Leandro para pensar en historias que están cruzadas por evento masivo. Es obvio por qué, ¿no?

Bueno, en uno de los cuentos, “Rana salva a Tokio”, un muchacho de una existencia gris es abordado por una rana gigante pidiéndole ayuda para derrotar a un tal Gusano que, de no evitarlo, provocará otro enorme terremoto. Lo más hermoso de ese pelea ese que será secreta, nadie más sabrá que Rana y ese muchacho salvaron a Tokio. Les dejo el extracto:

—No lo sé —dijo Rana—. Lo que Gusano piensa dentro de su negro cabezón, eso no puede saberlo nadie. También son contados los que lo han visto. Por lo general está sumido en un largo sueño. Arropado por la oscuridad y la tibieza de las entrañas de la tierra, duerme profundamente durante años, durante décadas. Como es lógico, sus ojos se han atrofiado. Sus sesos se han ido deshaciendo en su largo sueño, transformándose en una materia distinta, gelatinosa. Yo imagino que, en realidad, no piensa nada. Se limita a captar con su cuerpo ecos y vibraciones que vienen de lejos, los va succionando, uno tras otro, los acumula. Luego, debido a alguna reacción química, la mayor parte de ellos se convierte en odio. No sé por qué sucede esto. Yo no le encuentro ninguna explicación. —Rana enmudeció y se quedó mirando fijamente a Katagiri. Esperó a que sus pal-

abras penetraran en su mente y se asentaran en ella. Luego, prosiguió su relato—. No quiero que me malinterprete. No es que sienta odio o enemistad hacia Gusano. Tampoco creo que sea la encarnación del mal. Jamás se me ha pasado por la cabeza la idea de ser amigo suyo, ni nada por el estilo, pero creo que, en cierto sentido, al mundo no le importa que existan seres como él. El mundo es un abrigo enorme y tiene que tener bolsillos de diferentes formas. Pero Gusano, ahora, se ha convertido en un ser peligroso al que hay que controlar. Su cuerpo ha absorbido y acumulado cantidades tan ingentes de odio que ha alcanzado un tamaño descomunal, mayor que el que había alcanzado jamás.

La descripción que hace Rana de Gusano me hizo pensar de nuevo en las plantas. Yo no sé nada sobre vibraciones y frecuencias, y menos de constelaciones y relaciones cósmicas o materiales o vitales. Pero sí puedo diferenciar dos usos.

En el extracto de Murakami hay dos cosas que me gustan.

Primero, que Gusano, el enemigo no es intrínsecamente malo, sencillamente estuvo mucho tiempo expuesto a lo negativo y por eso, para salvar a más gente, hay que luchar contra él. Segundo, que el uso de las vibraciones se da en un contexto ficcional para implicar o derivar una reflexión sobre la realidad. Es el mismo lenguaje que opera en dos sentidos.

Respecto a las plantas, en cambio, la transformación de esas vibraciones en música no sucede en un plano ficcional. De hecho, es la planta quien “toca”. Se supone que

las vibraciones reales son traducidas en otro tipo de vibración. Y eso es lo que me interesa, la traducción. Digamos, ¿es el sonido de la música lo que las plantas dicen? O, mejor dicho, ¿es la música la manera en que se hace hablar a las plantas para darle sentido a esa misma lógica *new age* de confluencia cósmica? Al fin y al cabo, el traductor y la música que produce es un producto.

A la noche, no me podía dormir. No por las plantas, sino porque había comido mucho helado y me dolía la panza y dando vueltas en la cama, volví a buscar algo de información sobre cómo funcionaba el aparato este que transformaba las señales eléctricas en música.

Di con un artículo, entre muchos bastante elogiosos del aparato, que tenía una breve historia de esta relación entre la tecnología y la vida vegetal.

En principio, hay un libro de los setenta, *The Secret Life Of Plants*, que fue un best-seller y que, entre otras cosas, enseñaba a un cactus a contar, conectaba a una planta de interior a un detector de mentiras cuya aguja volaba al hervir a un camarón en su presencia o si entraba una persona en la que no confiaban al mismo cuarto. Digamos que la validez científica de tales experimentos nunca se comprobó pero abrió dos caminos: el de la experimentación formal y el del disparador de mucha información a nivel del público.

Eso no importa y pueden googlearlo si están más interesados.

La pregunta es: ¿cómo mierda le sacan el sonido a las plantas?

Bueno, según este artículo, lo que se “lee” de la planta es un proceso natural que ocurre cuando ésta absorbe burbujas de aire que recorren su cuerpo. En especial, sucede cuando el agua escasea.

Según la Dra. Monica Gagliano, en teoría una estudiosa científica de las plantas, dice: “Sencillamente, las máquinas que traducen el “biofeedback” de las plantas en música no tiene ninguna relación con el sonido de las plantas. El aparato usado muchas veces es un simple multímetro que mide la impedancia eléctrica de la planta. El multímetro transforma esas señales eléctricas en notas usando un chip, como una placa de sonido en una computadora”.

Parece que, de nuevo, el problema es uno de traducción. Las plantas emiten sonidos, eso seguro. Pero, ¿son esos sonidos la música que nos h

Me gusta la reflexión final de la misma doctora que señala que las plantas tienen sus propios sonidos y no necesitan humanos que le den sonidos falsos y digan que esa es su voz. “Yo”, dice ella, “podría conectarte a uno de esos multímetros. ¿Y qué si te dijera que el sonido que se obtiene de esa traducción es tu voz?”

Y lo más difícil de todo es que se hace en nombre del amor: por las plantas, por la vida. Y volviendo a la dignidad de Calu, la iluminación y la ropa de alta costura pienso que su “way of life” es sincero y no mercantilista. A

ver, digamos que la chica hace de sí misma un producto pero, me parece que es sincera en lo que vende. Digamos, una capitalista con honor. Pero también creo que hace un especie de daño, al igual que Gusano. Promueve una rebeldía silenciosa, de cáscara vacía, superflua que, de alguna manera, acalla voces y, al mismo tiempo, las traduce.

Yo no sé qué necesita cada persona del mundo, pero puedo hablar de mi. Entiendo que está mal comer demasiada carne, no reciclar y no ser un hijo de puta cada vez que salís a la calle. Lo entiendo y lo hago. Con mi pareja intentamos, conscientemente, elegir verduras en vez de carne varios días a la semana. Tenemos un tacho en el que separamos reciclables. Pagamos impuestos. Lo cual, dentro de todo, nos haría un buen par de ciudadanos.

¿Hace falta que alguien me esté recordando que necesito comer menos, amar más, iluminarme, hablar, meditar, descargarme, ser feliz? ¿Por qué necesito comprar zapatillas recicladas de doscientos dólares? ¿Por qué alguien querría contar todos sus secretos? ¿Y cómo puede ser eso beneficioso? ¿Qué significa no tener una vida privada? ¿No es esa una forma de la dignidad? ¿Será que es el último objetivo de una sociedad completamente controlada? Todos meditados y sin secretos, al aire, conectados por una red igual que las plantas cuyo lenguaje oculto, a partir de ahora, todos también podemos oír.

- Do Plants Make Music?, Jesslyn Shields
- Lo nuevo de Ivi Lee: “Es como free jazz pero con plantas”, entrevista por Yumber Vera Rojas.

LISTENING

- Plant Wave
- *Después del terremoto*, Haruki Murakami. Tusquets: Barcelona, 2000.

Plants' Lives, Murakami & Dignity

Nicolas Ferreiro (trans. F. Gumucio & B. Shear)

Yesterday, in the infinite happenstance of the internet, I stumbled upon a *Page 12*¹ link to Ivi Lee, who, at the time was the frontman of Nairobi. Since I've never been a fan of the band, nor the style of music, the truth is that I would've never clicked the link if not for the bait hanging off the title, "It's like Free Jazz but with Plants."² And, I think, one doesn't take the bait after having processed the "offer" or "proposition" in a rational way, instead, like a hungry fish, it's instinct, or actually, the shortest path from one part of our brain to another that goes from X to Y looking for a reward. Even simpler: the links on the newspaper are opened by lust, displeasure, reaffirmation. Use whichever word you'd like. Ultimately, I opened it and thought: "What the fuck is this?" And I laughed. And I thought the guys from the band would find it funny so I asked them what they thought and I copied a few of the statements: "It's like free jazz but with plants," "After seeing how the plants reacted in emotional terms, I interacted

1 *Página/12* is a popular newspaper in Argentina. - the editors

2 Can be accessed at: <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/254273-lo-nuevo-de-ivi-lee-es-como-free-jazz-pero-con-plantas> - the editors

with them musically,” and, “The experience of seeing the artistic decisions a plant makes is spectacular.”

After a few exchanges, I said that I doubted the whole process. But, and this happens often, I spoke before thinking, and I discovered that, in fact, there did exist a product that would connect to plants, measure their electricity and transform that to music. How it did it, why it chose certain sounds, and how it managed to make it harmonic I didn’t know.

The conversation in the group chat veered in a different direction, but I kept investigating. I found photographs of a concert with three people and a plant “playing.” I saw a video of John Cage making music with a cactus, but it wasn’t applying the same logic. He played the cactus, the cactus wasn’t playing the music. I later read about plant studies, their response to external stimuli, vibrations, and interviews with bio-musicians. And I thought that, without a doubt, there was some truth in what people say about talking to plants and that I was biased and that I couldn’t accept the new, the beautiful, love, plants, and vibrations.

When I mentioned this to Vani she told me that yes, she’d seen it, that Calu Rivero³ does it a ton. And true enough, I found videos on YouTube that compiled instances of Calu meditating with her plant, petting it, elongated beside it, singing to it.

I sent it to the fellas and Pablo said: “that chick knows something we don’t”.

3 Argentinian actress. Influencer. Model. Vegan Warrior. Illumination Nation. For a while she has called herself Dignity.

"I don't know why," I told Vani, "but the situation pisses me off".

She replied: "Obviously."

And even though I stopped talking to her about it, because I don't think neither she nor anyone else would be interested in discussing the indie musical plant scene in NY and its implications, I got the sensation that there was a world to which I don't belong and that Dignity had some of the answers. I imagined an ideal world for a certain privileged class, hedonistic and idle (not quite the 1% but ABC1) that everyone understands as an endless plateau (or creeper vine or a network of frequencies, if you will) where we are all equal, plants, animals, humans, and our objective as a society is to live in a sort of tundra, infinite and total, in cosmic harmony, that will be achieved, ultimately, with strong meditation, haute couture and love.

Pity, I've never seen love so vilified. What kind of trap is this? I don't want to keep talking about Marxism and class, but how can you speak ill of someone who hides behind love? I don't want that love. I want to be angry and complain about how shitty it is that the privileged classes have access to information unknown to me, that they mix scientific facts with *new age* and to make matters worse they throw on Prêt-à-Porter, Jimmy Choo, and I don't know what else. One has to wonder why yoga and meditation, originally intended, in some way, as a *soma* for a society based on a caste system, is applied to our western society. I'm not saying it doesn't work. When I can't sleep or I'm nervous, I try it and it works pretty well. But, is this all we need?

I thought about the episode of *Bojack Horseman* with the show created by J.D. Salinger based on questions and answers: *Hollywood Stars and Celebrities: What Do They Know? Do They Know Things?? Let's Find Out!* That's something I would like to be able to do.

In the afternoon I was reading *After the Quake*, a book of short stories by Haruki Murakami from 2000. Five years earlier, in 1995, an earthquake leveled the city of Kobe and killed more than five thousand people. The book came up thanks to Leandro's recommendation to think about stories interlaced with massive events.

Well, in one of the stories "Frog Saves Tokyo", a boy of bleak existence is boarded by a giant frog who asks for his help in defeating some Worm that, if not stopped, will cause another massive earthquake. The most beautiful thing about this fight is that it will be secret, no one else will know that Frog and that boy saved Tokyo. I leave you the extract:

"I have no idea," Frog said. "Nobody knows what Worm is thinking inside that murky head of his. Few have ever seen him. He is usually asleep. That's what he really likes to do: take long, long naps. He goes on sleeping for years—decades—in the warmth and darkness underground. His eyes, as you might imagine, have atrophied, his brain has turned to jelly as he sleeps. If you ask me, I'd guess he probably isn't thinking anything at all, just lying there and feeling every little rumble and reverberation that comes his way, absorbing them into his body and storing them up. And then, through some kind of chemical process, he replaces most of them with rage. Why this happens I have no idea. I could never explain it."

Frog fell silent watching Katagiri and waiting until his words had sunk in. Then he went on: "Please don't misunderstand me, though. I feel no personal animosity toward Worm. I don't see him as the embodiment of evil. Not that I would want to be his friend, either: I just think that as far as the world is concerned, it is, in a sense, all right for a being like him to exist. The world is like a great big overcoat, and it needs pockets of various shapes and sizes. But right at the moment, Worm has reached the point where he is too dangerous to ignore. With all the different kinds of hatred he has absorbed and stored inside himself over the years, his heart and body have swollen to gargantuan proportions—bigger than ever before.

Frog's description of Worm made me think about plants again. I don't know anything about vibrations and frequencies, and even less about constellations and cosmic, or material, or vital relations. But I can differentiate two uses.

There are two things I like in the Murakami excerpt.

First is that Worm, the enemy, isn't intrinsically evil, he's simply been exposed to the negatives of life for too long and because of that, to save more people, he must be battled. Second, the use of vibrations is given in a fictional context to imply or derive a reflection about reality. It's the same language that works both ways.

Regarding plants, on the other hand, the transformation of those vibrations into music doesn't happen on a fictional plane. In fact, it's the plant that "plays". Apparently the real vibrations are translated to a different type of vibra-

tion. And that's what interests me, translation. Let's ask ourselves, is the sound of music what plants are saying? Or better yet, is music the way we speak to plants in order to make sense of that *new age* logic of cosmic confluence. At the end of the day the translator and the music they produce is a product.

At night, I couldn't sleep. Not because of the plants, but because I had eaten too much ice cream and my stomach was hurting and I was turning in bed. I went back to look for information on how this device that transformed electric signals to music worked.

I landed on one article, among many praising the device, that included a brief history of this relationship between technology and vegetable life.

As a starting point, there's a book from the seventies, *The Secret Life Of Plants*, that was a best seller and that, among other things, taught a cactus how to count, connected an interior plant to a lie detector that's needle would fly if you boiled a shrimp on its presence or if an untrustworthy character walked in the room. Let's say the scientific validity of these experiments was never confirmed but it opened two paths: the one for formal exploration and the one for the spread of much of this information on a public level.

That doesn't matter and you can google it if you're interested.

The question is: how the fuck do they get sounds out of plants?

Well, according to this article, what is "read" in the plant is a natural process that occurs when it absorbs air bubbles that run around its body. Especially, when water is scarce.

According to Dr. Monica Gagliano, in theory, a scientific study of the plants says, "Sencilamente, the machines that translate "biofeedback" from the plants into music do not have any relationship with the sound of the plants. The commonly used apparatus is a simple multimeter that measures the electrical impedance of the plant. The multimeter transforms these electric signes into notes using a chip, like the sonic driver in a computer.

It seems that, once again, the problem is one of translation. The plants emit sounds, this is true. But, are they the sounds we hear?

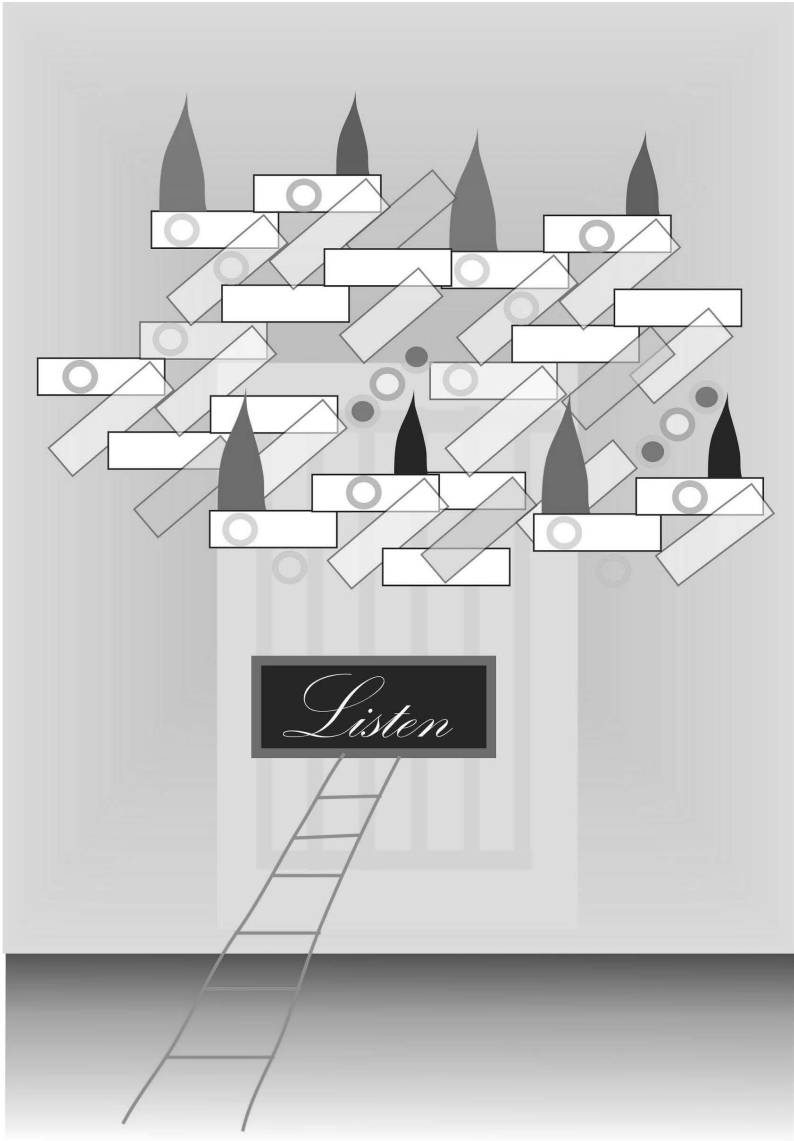
I like the doctor's final reflection that shows that plants have their own sounds, and they do not need humans that give them false sounds and claim that is their voice. "I," she says, "would be able to connect you to one of these multimetros. And what if it told you the sound that it obtains through this translation is your voice."

And the most difficult thing of all is what is done in the name of love: for plants, for life. And returning to the dignity of Calu, the illumination and the couture clothing, I think that her "way of life" is sincere, and is not mercantil-

ist. Look, we say that the woman makes herself a product, but, it seems she is sincere in what she sells. One might say, an honorable capitalist. But also, I think that it is a species of harm, equal to Gusano. It promotes a silent, hollow, superfluous rebellion, that somehow silences voices, and at the same time, translates them.

I don't know what each person in the world needs, but I can talk about myself. I know that it is bad to eat too much meat, to not recycle, and to be a son of a bitch each time that I go outside. I know and act accordingly. My partner and I consciously elect to eat vegetables instead of meat multiple times a week. We have a bin where we separate recyclables. We pay taxes. Which, on the whole, makes us good citizens..

Is it necessary for somebody to remind me that I need to eat less, love more, illuminate myself, talk, meditate, unwind, and be happy? Why do I need to buy recycled shoes that cost \$200? Why would anybody want to share all their secrets? And how could this be beneficial? What does it mean to not have a private life? Isn't that a form of dignity? Could it be the final objective of a completely controlled society? Everybody meditating and without secrets, the air, connected by the same network as plants whose hidden language, up until this point, we had all been able to hear?



I have added to this illustration over the years. I learned Adobe Illustrator when the kids were little.
- Carrie Kirby

Considering Scott Walker

Raphael Helfand

There are few listening experiences stranger and more harrowing than trying to take on Scott Walker's discography in a day. I embark on this adventure on Tuesday, the 12th of May, in the year of our lord 2020, for the pleasure and edification of the *Expressionless* reader. I will not be successful. I listen in my dining room office, in my parents' house, in a rural town outside Hartford, CT, where I've been camped out for eight weeks, fleeing New York and the virus that has overrun it. The audio tour takes me through a bizarre timeline, from a Middle-Of-the-Road early career, to the budding of an original style, to the destruction of said style, to a final act spent on the precipice of the avant-garde.

Scott Walker made music for more than 60 years, but the Scott who sang "SDSS1416+13B (Zercon, A Flagpole Sitter)" in 2012 was a different life form than the one who sang "The Livin' End" in 1956. Back then, he was Noel Scott Engel, a 13-year-old kid living in Hamilton, Ohio. He was an aspiring teen idol, trying to do a Buddy Holly impression with a voice that hadn't broken yet. There was no indication of the quavering baritone croon that would de-

velop less than a decade later, much less the pained howl he'd adopt much further down the road.

He moved to L.A. with his mother near the end of the '50s, and by '64, he was heading to London with his newly formed band, The Walker Brothers. The trio, none of them related or surnamed Walker, was essentially a singing duo, fronted by "bassist" Scott and "guitarist" John Maus. Drummer Gary Leeds never touched a kit in the studio and usually mimed onstage while someone else played his part behind the curtain. Their albums were largely the work of session musicians, coordinated by Philips Records' house producer Johnny Franz. The band was a branded image, three beautiful American heartthrobs, one of whom happened to have one of the great voices of the 20th century, and the most haunting of the 21st. Their songs were white-washed Motown tracks, catchy and heartsick, packaged for mass consumption by their rabid fandom, which mostly comprised British girls below the legal drinking age.

Exhibit A: "The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore," The Walker Brothers' biggest hit. Originally written for Frankie Valley, it flopped in the US but was the perfect Phil Spector facsimile for British ears. It starts out with a schmaltzy horn melody, a strummed acoustic guitar and a tambourine. Then the bass, drums and strings enter dramatically, Temptations style, escorting Scott onto the track. His voice is breathtaking as it enters, starting things off moodily—"Loneliness is the cloak you wear"—but it quickly devolves into sap: "The sun ain't gonna shine anymore / The moon ain't gonna rise in the sky / The tears are always clouding your eyes / When you're without love."

When Scott struck out on his own after the group disbanded in 1967, his label gave him little creative freedom. *Scott*, his solo debut, is a confusing listen. Six cheesy covers sit alongside three steamy chansons by Walker's hero, Belgian composer/singer Jacques Brel, and three Scott originals. One of these, "Montague Terrace (In Blue)," is the first glimmer of genius, an impressionist image of a couple in a seedy apartment building, dreaming of better surroundings. But as his early albums hit the charts—*Scott 2*, even with the abstract six-minute epic "Plastic Palace People," reached number one—Philips started letting him do his thing. *Scott 3* is all originals and Brel songs. It opens with "It's Raining Today," pairing Scott's narration of a broken memory with a high-pitched string drone behind its more traditional orchestration. As you listen through these early albums, Scott's voice grows richer and darker.

Scott earned extra label clout with his fourth solo album, *Scott: Scott Sings Songs From His TV Series*, a throw-away cash grab featuring covers of big band ballads and movie songs. It was all in service of *Scott 4*, which would be his most ambitious project yet.

I've listened to *Scott 4* well upwards of 100 times in the past few months to prepare for a book I want to write about it. Somehow I'm still not sick of it. It rewards constant listening, not because it's an inscrutable opus like Scott's later records, but because it coalesces better, tastes purer, every time. The strings are smoother, the horns punchier, the bass and guitar more deftly plucked, with each listen. Even the more ridiculous elements, like the flamenco guitar that ushers the album in, or the Russian men's chorus that underscores its climactic moments, start

to fall into place until they feel entirely uncontrived, part of the surreal scenery surrounding Scott's voice.

All ten tracks are originals. There are only two love songs, and one of those is addressed to a duchess. The opening track is a dramatic retelling of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. Side B begins with the story of a quadriplegic war veteran, which leads into a song about Leonid Brezhnev's neostalinist regime and its invasion of a liberalizing Czechoslovakia after the Prague Spring. This song, "The Old Man's Back Again," would later become Scott's most well-known track outside The Walker Brothers' canon. It mixes poetic imagery—crowds that "queue all day like dragons of disgust" and a shadow that crushes the hand of a vision "to the ground, just like a beast"—with one of the best basslines ever recorded. Scott's voice towers over the mix, surer and clearer than ever.

But in 1969, *Scott 4* was utterly rejected. It failed to chart, and Philips pulled it off record store shelves, embarrassed. Its delicious melodrama was too baroque to connect with teens en masse. It's arrangements were too strange for a pop audience, but not psychedelic enough for fans of the Dead or King Crimson, whose beloved debut came out a month earlier.

Scott 4's abject failure set off a decade-long dive into mediocrity. 1970's *'Til the Band Comes In* is a last gasp at originality, with an A-side of originals that loosely tell the story of the various inhabitants of an apartment building. There are moments of brilliance, like the piano bar Tom Waitsian "Joe" (three years before Waits released his pianocentric first record, *Closing Time*), and the following song, "Thanks for Chicago Mr. James," a theatrical track

about a young man saying goodbye to his sugar daddy. But this album did just as poorly as its predecessor, and Philips pulled the plug on Scott's individuality.

'Til the Band Comes In was the last solo album Scott Walker would make under his own volition until 1984. For the next five years Franz, his producer and friend, coaxed him into releasing a series of saccharine records that robbed him of his artistic integrity and still failed to chart. Worst of these is 1972's *The Moviegoer*, which features only songs from films. You can almost feel Scott's shame as he wades through "Speak Softly Love (Theme from *The Godfather*)" and a nauseating pedal steel rendition of socialist anthem "Joe Hill." After three more label-created disasters, Philips dropped him. The early 20s idol cum mid-20s auteur was now a struggling 30-something with a bad drinking problem and a worse Valium addiction. Later, Scott would call these years his "lost period." Besides *'Til the Band Comes In*, he never allowed any of their resulting albums to be reissued.

In 1975, The Walker Brothers reformed. It was a Hail Mary, a final effort to capitalize on the success they'd had ten years prior. They made one successful single, but their first two reunion records, *No Regrets* and *Lines*, both sold poorly. All the songs are covers, and though they aren't quite as soulless as Scott's last few records, they don't exactly break new ground.

But then, in 1978, they released *Nite Flights*. The first four tracks on the album are all written and sung by Scott, and they feel less like a return to form than the creation of an entirely new one. Almost a decade after *Scott 4* parted ways with the pop sensibility, Scott was back with a

different sound, his pretty voice distorted dissonantly, backed by Berlin Bowie basslines, prog synth swells and hellacious sax squalls. “The Electrician,” his final contribution to the album, is a career standout, complimenting his extraterrestrial double-tracked moan with a full string section, a harp, and an ominous bass drone that pulls the air out of whatever room you’re listening in.

By this time, I’ve been with Scott for over 11 hours straight and need a short dinner break. I know the rest of the listening will be much more intense and involved, and I’m a little afraid. There are nine projects to go—four solo studio LPs, one dance suite, one collab, and three film soundtracks. My mom makes tandoori lamb. It’s spicy and filling, just what I need to continue.

I return to *Climate of Hunter*, the first full album of original music Scott made since *Scott 4*. He’d signed a ridiculous and restrictive 10-album deal with Virgin, especially absurd considering he would only put out three more albums over the next thirty years.

Climate of Hunter came at the end of a six-year hiatus, but it only took about a year to get from genesis to execution. Scott wrote the songs in the late summer of 1983, in a workman’s cottage in the country, near Tunbridge Wells. Opening track “Rawhide” begins with the ominous line “This is how you disappear,” introducing us to Scott’s reinvented, enigmatic songwriting style. The album is a mashup of extremely abstract language and extremely ‘80s production, headed by Peter Welsh, who had just helped make Simple Minds’ breakout album, *New Gold Dream (81–82–83–84)*. It’s the last Scott Walker album to sound at home in its era instrumentally.

There are shimmering moments, like the way the strings on “Sleepwalkers Woman” blanket Scott’s voice, accenting the doomy resonance of his larynx, or the way Evan Parker’s free-improvised sax builds to a buzzing crescendo on “Track Six.” But the album also has its fair share of duds. Critical darling “Track Three” starts off like Springsteens “Born in the USA,” and would sound like any other ‘80s arena rock song without Scott’s vocals, double-tracked *Nite Flights*-style. It ends with a misguided cock rock guitar solo from Ray Russell, the album’s low point. Closer “Blanket Roll Blues” feels sanctimonious, a self-important celebration of Scott’s last few years in solitude. It ends the album on a sour note.

Of course, *Climate of Hunter* barely hit the charts, and Scott lost another record deal. It was for the best. Never again would he make anything that so much as resembled a pop song. And discarding the trappings of the mainstream zeitgeist led him to some of the best albums ever made.

11 years later, the faint tinkling of bells that opens *Tilt* rings in his late career. They dissolve into “Farmer in the City,” a raincloud of a song, set on an auction block, vaguely related to the murder of Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was run over by his own car on a beach in Ostia in 1975. The haunting refrain, “Do I hear 21, 21, 21? / I’ll give you 21, 21, 21,” molts and grows into new skin throughout the song, gathering and discarding signifiers until it’s more a series of noises than a lyric.

“The Cockfighter,” with its slow creaking open that explodes into industrial clangor, is even more opaque. An abstruse reference to Adolph Eichmann late in the song is

the only reference to latch onto. It's probably the best track on the album, or at least the most intense.

"Bouncer See Bouncer" has a verse-chorus structure, though it would be easy to miss. The song has nothing to do with bouncers, as far as I can tell. There's religious imagery in the verses—"halo of locust," "trumpet of Gabriel," "powder on a Magdalene Mary." The chorus seems to be a vision of parental intercourse seen through the eyes of a child. The instrumentation is sparse, comprising a low drone, a slowly pounded bass drum, and what sounds like the rustling of a bottle tree.

Echoing guitar flourishes soar above a church organ on "Manhattan" and appear again over a heartbeat drum on "Face On Breast." A hypnotic rhythm guitar is the main accompaniment on "Bolivia '95," which alludes to the death of another controversial figure, Che Guevara. "Patriot (A Single)" is the inner monologue of a torture victim in the first Iraq War. Instrumentally, it could be several songs, with a Badalamenti bassline giving way to screaming strings, a military drum and a whistle at different points. It certainly isn't a single. The title track is the closest thing to a conventional song that appears on the album. The lyrics tell a story set somewhere in the old west, perhaps before it was invaded by Europeans. They clash with instrumentation that sounds like late Radiohead (big Scott fans), punctuated by a metal drumline. Closing track "Rosary" is by far the album's shortest, running under three minutes, but it's also the most enigmatic. Scott sings over a guitar that alternates between two plucked notes and a single-chord strum. The lyrics leave no entry points, save the occasional reference to facial maladies—"we'll never stop it pimpling," "a little pattern to a styne"—and the re-

peated "I kiss holes for the bullets / And I gotta quit / And I gotta quit."

Tilt is in some ways Scott's quitting album. He's quitting the industry that misunderstood him, the pop structures that held him prisoner. His voice, once so lush and croony, sounds strained now, ready to break. But mostly, it's a new beginning, the start of the sound that would characterize the last 20 years of Scott's life.

On the way to his career-defining album, *The Drift*, Scott produced the soundtrack to *Pola X*, a French film directed by Leos Carax, based on Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*. It opens with a very short Scott track, sonically in keeping with *Tilt* and all that would come after it. Much of the rest of the score is moody string music, arranged by Scott, but there are some surprise guest appearances, such as Bill Callahan and Sonic Youth. There's also some hellish harsh noise thrown in every now and then. It's an odd, disjointed backdrop to an even odder movie about a torrid affair between a writer and his estranged sister.

At this point, I need sleep. The lamb is heavy in my stomach and the two glasses of red wine I drank with it have made my mind soggy and slow. My fingers are flailing, making egregious typos. It's dark in the house, and I'm too scared to listen to *The Drift*, which is perhaps the darkest album of all time, black metal be damned. I've failed in my initial task, but tomorrow is another day. I wake up early to take on Scott's most difficult, most essential record.

The Drift is the pinnacle of the aesthetic Scott spent decades developing—apocalyptic, pompous, hyper-referential and, at turns, darkly hilarious. It took Scott another 11 years to finish it, but as with *Tilt* and *Climate of Hunter* before it, most of those years were spent waiting for inspiration and funding. At this point in his life, no longer concerned with the industry's assembly line production, he felt he could take the time for the music to come to him. And even when he was ready to write and record, labels were rarely interested. "I'm the Orson Welles of the record industry," he said. "People take me to lunch, but nobody wants to finance the picture." *Tilt* was made possible by the adventurous folks at Fontana/Drag City, but it wasn't until 2004 that he found a permanent home at 4AD, a label that would let him experiment until his last days.

Still, there were financial restrictions. He needed a 36-piece orchestra, but had only one day—two three-hour sessions, per Musicians Union guidelines—to record them, lest they be paid overtime. Scott was up to the task, trained by his MOR days with Johnny Franz, who demanded three tracks per four-hour session, with no re-recording permitted. That day consumed a third of the record's budget. Among the album's other expenses were a donkey, a room-sized wooden box, and a bruised side of beef.

It's easy to get lost in the album's lore and its many unorthodox foley props, as most of its press coverage did, and forget how good the actual songs are. They are desolate but full of sonic stimulation, packed with signifiers but impossible to interpret in sum.

“Cossacks Are” begins with a maddening guitar lick, two dissected minor chords that repeat for four-and-a-half minutes, along with a pulsing ostinato drumbeat. Scott enters, his voice more forceful than it was on his last album and further up in the mix. His lyrics are snippets and synecdoches, “Arm across the torso / Face on the pale monkey nails.” Some are plagiarized from the news, from a review of a book on Polish erotica, from *The Guardian’s* obituary for Pope John Paul II, from a tossed-off comment by George W. Bush, from a speech by Slobodan Milosovich’s prosecutor. There is one joke—“You could easily picture this in the current top 10.” Is the song a commentary on fame? On historic cruelty? On the incompetence of music critics? Like the record it prefaces, it confounds interpretation.

Even though it falls second on the tracklist, “Clara” is the album’s centerpiece. It’s an almost 13-minute series of poetic musings on the execution of Benito Mussolini and his lover Claretta Pittacci by firing squad, and the subsequent desecration of their corpses in Milan’s Piazzale Loreto. The instrumentation is spectral and horrific—unspooling tape to represent birdsong, a thudding bass drum alternating with the famous punching of beef, a string section instructed to sound like B2 bombers approaching. Over it all, Scott compares the demise of the dictator and his mistress to American lynchings, creating pathos for the innocent Clara, whose short part is sung sweetly by Vanessa Contenay-Quinones (“Sometimes I feel like a swallow / A swallow which by some mistake / Has gotten into an attic / And knocks its head against the walls in terror.”), while percussionist Alasdair Malloy begins to shout with the exertion of his meat punches. Scott describes the couple’s dismemberment in abstract but excruciatingly descriptive

terms, compelling the listener to enter the grotesque scene and contemplate the complicated nature of evil.

“Jesse” is a song about Elvis Presley’s stillborn twin, and somehow also about 9/11. Scott sings from the point of view of the King, witnessing the bombing of the twin towers in a dream. The guitar line that drifts through the song is a black lodge version of the chords to “Jailhouse Rock.” The strings are again asked to mimic a plane, this time a Boeing 767 hurtling into the World Trade Center. The song ends with Scott’s Elvis imagining himself as a giant crawling across a prairie, ear to the ground, moaning, “I’m the only one left alive.”

I want to write a short essay about every song on *The Drift*, but I’m already starting to lose my mind, and it’s only 10 a.m. Here are some highlights:

- On “Jolson and Jones,” the braying of a real-life donkey, paired with the later lines, “I’ll punch a donkey in the streets of Galway (Me!) / I’ll punch a donkey in the streets of Galway (Brogue!).”
- “Cues” meditation on autoimmunity: “Immunity / Won’t feed on the bodies / Bones closing soon at the tips / Won’t feed on the bodies.” And later, “BAM BAM BAM BAM,” accompanied by a dull thudding on the aforementioned giant wooden box, supposedly to represent the banging of a pint glass on a bartop.

- The self-obsessed, pseudomesianic narrator on “Hand Me Ups,” plagued by his children, “The pee pee soaked trousers / The torn muddied dress.”
- From “Buzzers:” “Faces of the grass go lengthening / The lengthening of faces through the ice and sun / Faces lengthening go lengthening faces / Into lengthening faces from the branch to the grass / With buried heads they stand in full view / Eyes sliding of the faces up and up / Slide up the faces and up the sun / And up the faces go lengthening faces / Eyes are sliding above the tall and peaceful grass.” Apparently it’s about the evolution of horses.
- The scraping of a large object across the box, miked from within, on “Psoriatic,” to simulate the feeling of a pea being trapped under a table while a thimble rolls on top of it.
- The terrifying Donald Duck impersonation on “The Escape,” perpetrated by Peter Walsh, still Scott’s go-to producer 22 years later.
- The “pssts” that punctuate the otherwise subdued acoustic guitar singalong (not really) of “A Lover Loves.”

I go for a run. I’ve listened to *The Drift* twice back to back, and I need to clear my head. I go around the field at the end of my street a few times. It’s nice outside, high 50s, light breeze. The field is the property of the nursing home that abuts my block, and I begin to think about its inhab-

itants, slowly succumbing to disease and death. I think about how Scott wanted *The Drift* to have a green and red cover, even though (and probably because) he was color blind. I'm in a fragile state of mind. The only thing for it is to go back inside and listen to more Scott Walker.

Mercifully, Scott's next project, *And Who Shall Go to the Ball? And What Shall Go to the Ball?*, leaves little to write about, at least for someone who knows nothing about contemporary classical dance music. It was commissioned by CandoCo, a disabled and non-disabled dance company, and released just a year after *The Drift* came out. According to Scott, it's about "how we cut up the world around us as a consequence of the shape of our bodies." There are lots of long silences and eerie, dissonant strings, bowed legato notes juxtaposed with jittery plucked ones. There are at least two horn passages, the liveliest sections of the piece, one of which recalls mid-career Mingus or *Sketches of Spain* Miles. It sounds very hard to dance to.

I have neither the knowledge nor the mental fortitude to give *Bish Bosch*, Scott's final solo release, the treatment it deserves, and I'm assuming my readers are reaching the end of their ropes as well. So I'll try to be brief.

Bish Bosch is the final chapter of the "trilogy" that began with *Tilt* and *The Drift*. As Scott notes repeatedly on opener "'See You Don't Bump His Head,'" it's a swan song. Scott has explained the title as relating to a giant, Boschi-an female deity he imagined. The album goes further into left field than anything Scott made before it. Musically, it feels like he's throwing sounds in a blender to see what mix they'll render. His beloved string drones are present as usual, but he also uses automated sounds extensively

for the first time, and some of them sound genuinely alien. Add to that stoner metal guitar, samba rhythms, west coast jazz and an extended interlude of farting. Lyrical-ly, he's pushing language to its breaking point, combining his unbelievable lexicon with his ingrained encyclopedia of obscure and disgusting references to create new word forms, a la—dare I say it—DavidFosterWallace. *Bish Bosch* isn't as coherent or powerful as either of Scott's previous two records, but it may be the most impressive of them all; it's certainly the most deranged. Listening to it closely is like examining a Francis Bacon painting with a magnifying glass, or turning a room full of radio dials to simultaneous broadcasts of all history's genocides.

Like *The Drift*, *Bish Bosch* hinges on a central track, and this time it's much clearer what that is. "SDSS1416+13B (Zercon, A Flagpole Sitter)" is almost 22 minutes long and tells the story of a man climbing a flagpole so high he becomes a brown dwarf, a mass larger than the heaviest planet but not quite a star and unable to emit or reflect light (hence invisible). It begins with Scott singing a discomfiting acapella aria from the point of view of Zercon, Atilla the Hun's deformed, diminutive jester, hurling insults at his master. "If shit were music / La da da, la da da / You'd be a brass band." Then a doomsday guitar note sounds and repeats, and Scott begins to spout a mix of classical mythology and bathroom wall jokes, including phone numbers read in Roman numerals. Soon after, there's a botched circumcision, a "wormy anus," severed "reeking gonads," "proof that Greeks fucked bears," etc. Zercon tells a joke about Saint Simeon, who climbed up a pillar and stayed there for 30 years. Out of nowhere, over a chaotic industrial scrum, Scott's distorted voice screams: "DID YOU EVER THROW YOUR OWN MOTHER'S FOOD BACK AT HER? DID YOU EVER TELL HER, TAKE

THIS JUNK AWAY? WHAT KIND OF AN UNNATURAL SON WOULD DO THAT TO HIS OWN MOTHER?" The song has climaxed, and there are still fourteen minutes left. Riffing on the Saint Simeon joke, Zercon begins to climb a flagpole for Atilla's pleasure, and the rest of the story is told from the dwarf's rising perspective. He gives us some musings on Wagner's Ring cycle. He hurls more insults—"Does your face hurt, 'cause it's killing me?" He describes Ronald Regan sodomizing Mikhail Gorbachev, who "grostulates" beneath him. Finally, he sits atop the pole. "It's so cold! Infrared!" he moans. "What if I freeze and drop into the darkness?"

By this point I've obviously broken my promise to be brief. But no discussion of *Bish Bosch* is complete without mentioning the next track, "Epizootics." It's a glorious achievement of sonic mayhem, joining beatnik hipsterisms, allusions to colonialism in Hawaii and, of course, vivid descriptions of internal organs. Plunderphonic passages alternate with groaning horns, most notably a tubax. It absolutely rules.

I'll end *Bish Bosch* there and switch to *Soused*, Scott's epic 2014 collaboration with drone metal gods Sunn O)). It's become a trope for music critics to call Scott's voice operatic, which is misleading. If anything, his vocal style on his late albums is more in the manner of a recitative than an aria. But on the opening lines of "Brando," he really does sound like he's belting at the Met. That is, until Sunn O)) rushes in with a churning wall of guitar, and a guy nicknamed Peter the Whipper starts cracking a bullwhip. "A beating would do me a world of good," Scott monotones, though in his festering vibrato, nothing is ever really a monotone. "Herod 2014" finds Scot consulting the

bible for another instance of mass slaughter, this time the infanticide perpetrated by the eponymous King of Judea. “She’s hidden her babies away,” Scott wails menacingly over the morass of groaning guitars. There’s “Bull,” the most rock ‘n’ roll song on the album, about the crusades, and then “Fetish,” a return to Scott’s more free-verse, Bish Boschian stylings. Closer “Lullaby” is a reprise of a song Scott wrote for German singer Ute Lemper’s 2000 album *Punishing Kiss*. It’s an entirely new spin on the original—even without Sunn O))), her version is pretty excellent.

It’s already close to midnight, but to finish my journey, I’ll need to watch two feature films. The prospect is exciting, like staying up too late on a school night, except that I have no class or job to structure the following day.

The last two projects Scott ever worked on were film scores, both for young director Brady Corbet. *Childhood of a Leader*, his debut film, is based on a Sartre story of the same name, about a nine-year-old future dictator who throws a series of tantrums, each more sinister than the last. Scott’s soundtrack makes the movie. From the intense strings of the “overture,” to the Ligetian phasing over an absolutely monstrous bass drone in an early dream sequence, to a no-holds-barred finale complete with Scott’s signature improvised industrial percussion, the music sets an intense tone for an otherwise spartan slow burner. Apparently Corbet pushed for the score to be five percent higher in the mix than usual to show his respect for the master.

Vox Lux is essentially the opposite movie, and Scott’s score follows suit. It would be easy to write off *Vox Lux* as a very small footnote in his oeuvre. But there’s also an almost perfect serendipity to it. Scott began his career as a

pop idol, then abandoned it all to make some of the darkest music there ever was. But his final contribution to the world is a quiet, unobtrusive score to a movie about pop stardom gone wrong. The film, which features one of the most devastating opening scenes I've ever witnessed, is altogether a mixed bag. The orchestral and choral music in it is all Scott's, but all the original *songs* in the movie were written by Sia. On the OST, each artist gets ten tracks. It's essentially a split album. Scottwatchers who thought the Sunn O)) collab came out of nowhere would have been floored by this one.

Scott Walker died three months after *Vox Lux*'s wide release, and so ends his extended discography. It's 3:21 a.m., and I've just spent two full days and nights listening and rere-listening to his music. As a straight shot, it would have been about 20 hours of material, movie runtimes included. With my double and triple listens, I'll call it a clean 24.

Now that I'm finished bragging, I can reflect on my mission, which ultimately failed. It's a trek that started out on a bland MOR beach and ended in a dense jungle of sound, or a frozen tundra of soul-crushing solitude, depending on the fluctuations of my mood. It took me down some fun rabbit holes, but it certainly isn't the best way—or even the tenth best way—to consume Scott's music. His career is far too big to be absorbed in a few long sittings.

I close my laptop and head upstairs to my childhood bedroom. I lie in my old twin bed, looking up at a ceiling covered in luminescent plastic stars. I'm excited by the ridiculous tome I've just completed, but I also feel empty, as if I've evacuated a small, Scott-shaped homunculus from my body cavity. I feel less informed on his music after dip-

ping my toe in its murky depths, and more frightened of the insidious forces that lurk in the world outside my window. But as Scott once crooned, over a soft adult contemporary backing track, there's no regrets.





On *THE CIRCLE*¹

Shubham Goel

The Circle is such an interesting experiment because it really delves into the idea of connection through listening and responding. In the game, I had no access to electronics or the Internet so in a way it is the first time, especially in our social media-based world, that I had such a distinct focus when talking to someone through the Circle. Those distractions being axed let me focus one hundo on the other people, and I could form in a couple days a stronger bond than with someone I might have known for my whole life. Listening is definitely a pillar of triumph in *The Circle* because I could listen to the other people and genuinely take in what they were saying and find the points where we could connect authentically. When the listening was fire, the connection became hella fire. That's

1 *The Circle* is a Netflix reality show. In explicit comment on the influence of social media on human relationships, show contestants move into an apartment building together, and are expected to develop social relationships with the other contestants without any physical contact, via a televisual intercom system called the Circle. Some contestants act as "catfish," disguising some aspect of their identity (often by false avatar) to maximize social potential. Those who win are the most well-liked by other contestants, regardless of the semblance of the winning identity to the "real" identity of the contestant. Goel was an iconic contestant in the inaugural season (January 2020) of the show, finishing as runner-up. - the editors

why this game is so reflective of the world we live in because you have eight people from eight different walks of life connecting through a social media platform in order to connect AKA Earth LOL.

Seems like we are all in *The Circle* Round 2 with the Qtine LOL (Joke) (Bad Joke) (haha).

The Circle was the Circumference of my best experience in my Circle of life haha.

Goel briefly discusses the COVID-19 quarantine, social media (which he refers to throughout as “social medusa”), and his California gubernatorial campaign with Expressionless’ B. Shear.

E: Did *The Circle* prepare you for Quarantine? What’s similar? Different?

SG: Yea, it definitely did. *The Circle* kind of felt like Spring Training for the Quarantine! It is definitely similar in the sense that we can’t go outside and our relationships with everyone else are largely through a social media platform. The difference though is *The Circle* felt much more exhilarating and amplifying because of the stakes, game, and unknown. Also there is much more focus in *The Circle* because we only had to focus on the game and bonds whereas in the outside world we have work, TV, the internet and loads of other stimuli.

E: Were you surprised at any of the connections you made via *The Circle*? I could see an experience like *The Circle* putting you into conversation with people you would otherwise not really interact with, by choice or not.

SG: Yes! I think that is the true beauty of the game. Putting a group of strangers from different walks of life in an experiment to create bonds is so cool! Joey and me are so different but we ended up being best friends in *The Circle* and I think there is a poignant lesson to take from that which is it is good to meet new people outside of your Circle (pun intended) because it is much more lightning and electrifying to bounce off of someone's differences and learn from them. The 14 of us in the cast are across the world and come from different walks of life but the cast works because of all the differences.

E: You claim to hate social media in the show, but you are clearly very good at it. DISCUSS! Social media AKA Social Medusa!

SG: After having time to reflect on social media post-*Circle*, I have come to see the positives of social media such as friendships, community, voice amplification, and connections. I do still see the mental health deterioration and addiction issues from social media as well as the anxiety that comes from the comparison contest on social media. Haha. I find it funny when people call me a social media Picasso. I'm really not LMAO.

E: How do you square your bid for virality via Governor race with your stated aversion to online hype/clout?

SG: Yea the interesting thing is I used social media in my governor's race to spread my platforms and candidacy including my social medusa platform, to ban social media usage for K-12 students during school hours so they can balance life in this social media world and develop without the addiction.

I definitely see that the best way for change is from the inside.

Lessons that are Bound to Stick: On Cameron Knowler

Eli Winter

The last time Cameron Knowler and I saw each other, we got together to play guitar a few days after New Year's. A year before, we had gone on tour; now we had hopes to record some of the music we'd played on the road. At some point, Cameron let slip his lone serious New Year's resolution, which was "to stop talking." He's the only guy I know who could keep it.

I've known Cameron for a little over two years. I don't remember how we met. We play music together, but we come from different backgrounds. He's tan, limber and tall, with thin lips, a sharp nose and acne scars dotting his cheeks. He often dwarfs his instruments—arms angled, neck bent, tapping his toe when he plays. His voice is a narrow tenor, quiet yet incisive. Bantering in between songs, he can be difficult to hear, yet one senses that he's saying something important. He talks carefully, deliberately, with focused restraint. And he speaks in para-

graphs—pausing, digressing, backing up, turning to face a thought.

Nearing home after a summer tour, I tell him he feels like a kindred spirit. He feels the same.

On tour, I saw his attention to detail firsthand. Each morning, whether he's slept in a bed or on the floor, he rolls the cuff of his jeans up an inch or two past his ankles when he gets dressed. He wears his hair long, swooping diagonally over his forehead down to his brow. There's usually a trucker hat; sometimes, themed socks. You get the sense that he's self-sufficient, and that, in many things, he's taught himself much of what he knows.

Cameron plays guitar in a number of styles: bluegrass, oldtime, rock, jazz. He started when he was three. His dad, who was fascinated by the guitar, gave him a Guns N' Roses cassette tape. Cameron remembers his reaction: "I became obsessed... Holy shit." Soon, he was playing every day. His hand, he says, formed in the shape of the guitar's neck.

Don't get me wrong: the guitar has a steep learning curve. To strum, you turn your right forearm in towards the guitar, clipping a pick between your thumb and forefinger, like one might hold a pen. Your picking has to be precise to play notes in quick succession, moving between and across the strings. Meanwhile, your left hand curls around the guitar's neck, fingers bending into stiff, complex chord shapes, fingertips pressing the strings hard against the fretboard and in towards your palm, forming calluses or even drawing blood. The motions are unfamil-

iar, challenging, often painful. You could hardly blame a first-time guitarist for quitting once this mess of coordination challenges confronts them.

This might explain why, when Cameron started seriously learning to flatpick a few years ago, he spent a considerable amount of each practice session holding his guitar in his lap and looking at it. When you hold a guitar in your lap, its curves fit the shape of your thigh. Play it long enough and it feels like it's part of you; the Indian slide guitarist Debashish Bhattacharya says the fretboard of his lap guitar feels like part of his spine. But there's a scientific basis for it, too. A few minutes is all you need to use a tool, such as a guitar pick, and think of it as part of your body. Cameron's pick isn't separate from him, but an extension of him. The guitar, too, feels connected, part of a musical symbiosis. And so, when you hear Cameron's music, you feel like you've shaken his hand.

Cameron's main inspiration is Norman Blake, the iconoclast bluegrass guitarist. When I ask him where to start with Blake, Cameron gives me a list of nine records to listen to. Blake's music is at turns rollicking and stately, dignified yet unpretentious. He recorded with Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson, and Joan Baez, toured with Johnny Cash, but since the early 1970s, he's been playing bluegrass, which he first heard growing up in rural Georgia, through a radio hooked up to a car battery.

Cameron plays many of the same instruments as Blake: guitar, lap guitar, mandolin, banjo, fiddle. He appreciates Blake's "honoring of the fiddle tradition through his guitar playing." It does sometimes feel as if Blake is adapting qualities of other instruments to his own: trying to con-

jure the melodic sensibilities of a fiddler with a guitar, or the tone of a fiddle with his voice. I can imagine Cameron entranced by the possibilities Blake's music uncovers. He mentions Blake's simple, earthen melodies and muscular guitar playing as models for his own music. But, Cameron says, "what attracted me originally to his work is the fact that his music captures his childhood."

Cameron grew up in Yuma, Arizona, in the foothills of the Gila Mountains, where there weren't people his age. A lot of people winter in Yuma, but winter is short. School would have helped, but Cameron didn't attend. He wrote poetry with his dad and kicked around flea markets with his mom, who sold vintage glass beads. With his older brother, he dug holes in the backyard, and he rode dirt bikes, alone, in the Sonoran Desert.

The Sonoran stretches from Arizona to California, spilling across the border into Mexico. Yuma lies near the border, at the center of the Lower Colorado River Valley, the hottest part of the Sonoran, where the Colorado and Gila Rivers meet. The Sonoran is a place of extremes. *Gila* comes from the Yuma word for "salty water," but Yuma is among the driest places in the world. There are few aerosols in the air to scatter light, so the sky is a deep, clear blue. Summer highs can reach 120 degrees, at which point it hurts to breathe. It's so quiet that the silence feels like sound.

Rufinus, writing from Egypt in the fourth century, calls the desert quiet a "huge silence." He was visiting Christian monks who had moved there to pray, focus and reach a state of grace. Entire communities moved to join them. One monk, dying, said that a monk "should be all eye."

Another held a stone in his mouth for three years. They were surrounded by silence.

The late experimental musician Pauline Oliveros writes, “listen to everything all the time, and remind yourself when you are not listening.” Like the monks, she made listening her life’s focus. “I have faith in listening,” she writes. “Listening brings me to faith.” Playing accordi-on, she performed in duo. The second performer was the space.

For Cameron, the desert plays a similar role. There, he says, “smaller things had greater weight.” Dove calls captivated him: they travel the farthest, he says, with four distinct notes. Cities obscure their nuances, but the open space of the desert brings them out.

Listening to silence, then, is really just focused listening. To hear things you otherwise wouldn’t, and to recognize the significance of what you hear. “I think that the space in between things,” Cameron says, “can create more effect than any compositional device...it allows the listener to make connections in his or her brain that wouldn’t have been there before if we just laid it out for them.”

He had this in mind working on his first record, *New & Old*, though he’s developed it further with his second, *Honey off a Rock*. Cameron says he wanted to, “without accompaniment, create a record where you’re just as aware of the silence as you are to the sound of the instrument. And, to me, that’s kind of how my childhood felt, being in a desert environment.”

New & Old and *Honey off a Rock* are slim, sparse records, each around half an hour long, mixing traditional and composed songs for guitar and banjo. No note feels extraneous, and there are few flourishes. His guitar sounds crisp, its tone clear, and his banjo is spry, resonant and rich. A touch of reverb gives it a stately quality fitting for Cameron's originals, yet quite unlike the traditional songs' ramshackle nature.

Traditional American folk music is generally passed down orally. Each rendition of a song has its own unique spin. Now, musicians often use early recordings of solo fiddlers, called source recordings, as a reference. Players call the songs fiddle tunes, which both explains their origin and suggests their casualness. The music is simple, down-to-earth, visceral, its progressions intuitive.

But, Cameron says, players are measured by "how cleanly they can execute. It's become an avenue for virtuosity." He's concerned by the tendency among many contemporary flatpickers to emphasize speed and precision when they play. These guitarists, Cameron says, don't learn traditional songs from the fiddle, on which they were originally played, but from other guitarists. It makes sense: in oldtime music, fiddle or banjo players carry a melody that other players support, making it easy for passersby to pick up and play. Meanwhile, bluegrass increases the tempo, and as players trade solos, groups distinguish themselves from a listening audience. It's from this music that flashy flatpickers emerge, perhaps attempting to adapt bowed melodies and techniques for a plucked instrument. At best they reach a poor simulation of the originals. "In effect, this ignorance leads us to negate hundreds of years of tradition. Though these tunes are referred to as 'fiddle

tunes,' most guitar players have never listened to a source fiddler. They have no clue that, for each tune title, there are hundreds of interpretations that can be recognized by regional archetypes."

These archetypes, which can resemble technical imperfections, give these songs their character. Musicians often play around a core melody, decorating it with their own variations, often scratching, bending, slurring the notes; this is especially true of the aging rural fiddlers whose performances are preserved on source recordings. The struggle is part of the song. Push on a note long enough and it pushes back. That's part of the thrill of playing music: its capacity to create tension.

"If done right," Cameron says, "the fiddle can command the entire spectrum of human feeling and then some." Cameron can evoke that depth of emotion through his guitar. The first time I heard his version of "Cumberland Gap," I cried. It starts in the middle of the melody, immersing you in the song. His guitar is piercing and warm, like he's playing in your ear. But his rendition derives from that of the guitarist Kenny Smith, not the extensive collection of the song's source recordings. Part of me wonders if he's breaking his own rule.

But I also wonder if Cameron's less concerned with appearing inauthentic than he is with maintaining the simplicity of the originals. Eric Hoffer writes that "simplicity marks the end of a process of refining," and that "the creative effort consists largely in the elimination of that which complicates and confuses a pattern." Cameron's rendition of "Cumberland Gap" is deceptively simple, with fewer notes than many versions, whether Smith's or

those of source recordings. I get the sense that this is part of the heart of Cameron's work—playing only what notes are necessary to move a listener. Maybe the variations he stamps on traditional songs are his way of searching for what makes them special, adapting them to new contexts while retaining their power and form. I picture Cameron translating across musical languages, his guitar a conduit between the present and past.

Cameron thinks about traditional music in terms of respect. When he explains a musical choice—his approach to a song, his choice of guitar—he often uses the word “honor”: honoring tradition, heroes, instruments, a song's pulse. He treats flatpicked guitar with a seriousness normally reserved for classical music. “It's hard to look at a guitar with the same seriousness as a violin or grand piano, yet it invites deep, thoughtful study.” And it does. Yet flatpicked guitar rarely gets the treatment it deserves, he says, limited to liner notes and “stupid fucking instructional manuals.”

To remedy this, he's working on a book to both explain and theorize flatpicked guitar, which he's started calling “flatpique” guitar. The term is a political statement aimed at old time and bluegrass gatekeepers: historically, one tradition relegates guitarists to rote chordal accompaniments; the other gives them a starring role, emphasizing melody. The book is an attempt to unpack these unwritten restrictions while encouraging players to then reconcile the traditions and give rhythm and melody equal weight in their playing. “To flatpique,” he says, “is to continue the conversation of American traditional music, and respect its distinct qualities of rhythm and accent,” which he traces to the fiddle.

I sense his desire to represent these qualities in his arrangements of traditional songs. For his first record, Cameron relearned them to play them imperfectly. “Throughout my musical journey,” he says, “I’ve put the most emphasis on cleanliness of execution and cohesiveness of arrangement. I wanted to betray this tendency—or, rather, affliction—and see just how raw I could play.” In other words, any technical imperfection is the result of deliberate effort. Each flick of his pick against the pickguard, each scrape it makes against the strings, each thunk of his right hand against the guitar feels like an invocation of this muse. The muse tells him to let his notes breathe, to bang his pick into the strings, and he listens. Cameron pays attention to the textural nuances of the notes he plays as well as their sequence. The album art for the record is apt. It shows Cameron looking off to the side.

Throughout his music, I imagine him weighing the consequences of a particular note—its pitch, rhythm, inflection, timbre—as he plays it, distilling its particulars into a focused whole, adapting the next note to the one previous. On “Mint and Milk,” notes reverberate in the space and fade into silence. On the next track, “Mountain Dew & Blackberry Blossom,” Cameron plays so forcefully that, when he plays one string, adjacent strings often seem to sound, their notes clattering together. His banjo playing, particularly on *Honey*, prioritizes measured single-note runs, injecting such space between each note that the silence seems audible. That record features a more cathartic, controlled dynamic range. Sometimes, notes hide within their chords or arpeggios; others burst from his instruments with a sense of premeditation. These approaches are wholly distinct, yet each works towards music that isn’t cluttered with notes, that reflects the varieties of hu-

man experience in its nuances, that treats silence as an equal to sound.

Even when Cameron plays fast riffs, his playing maintains space between notes. When he learns traditional songs, he learns them on three instruments: first mandolin, then banjo, then guitar. I wonder how these instruments inform each other, if there's something about this aspect of his practice that lets him preserve space in the music. It suggests a more formalized music education, which Cameron has, in part: he studies jazz guitar at the University of Houston, and regularly takes lessons with accomplished banjo players. But when it comes to flatpicking, he's largely self-taught, like he was as a child.

For most of his time in Yuma, Cameron's learning was self-directed: he could pick up or drop subjects at any time, and anything he wanted to do, he could. It was an uneasy compromise. His dad wasn't college-educated and idolized academia; his mom was college-educated, but "despised the academic system."

They shaped his education in their own ways. Cameron's mom taught him to read, and he says that, "even to this day, I don't think I've met anyone with a more expansive vocabulary than her." He learned less through bookwork than by example: building things from scrap wood or designing skate ramps for his dad, a carpenter by trade. This helped him "realize the importance of taking your time with things."

But the tension of their disagreement weighed on him. As a teenager, he picked up a smoking habit from his par-

ents, stealing cigarettes from his mom. "Being unschooled, as it were, involved a lot of me making my own decisions where I really didn't even trust my own ability to do so....I remember enjoying my freedom but also getting frustrated by the lack of discipline in me, or the lack of discipline that was expected of me.

"I always wanted that intellectual element. I always felt that spending my time not studying, digging holes, or just riding my bike around or just looking at nature, I felt this want, this desire, to intellectualize the complex emotions I was feeling....I felt like a lot of my experience and knowledge was formless and, I guess, essentially meaningless and not empirical."

When Cameron was ten, his dad placed him in a youth group with his brother, where they made their first friends. The next year, Cameron started the sixth grade, his introduction to traditional schooling: "Ninety pounds, medium height, jean jacket, black top hat like Slash, jeans and skate shoes. Even in the summer, I would get teased for the way I looked."

Despite the inauspicious start, Cameron found school refreshing. "I was just kind of like, 'Oh! An environment where I'm actually told to do something.' And it was exciting to me to have those parameters, to have someone say, 'Here. Complete this assignment.' I had never had that, and it's still exciting to me. Still, when I go to school and someone assigns something, I'm like, 'Holy shit! I have a task.'"

And, he says, “it helped to give order to a lot of my aspirations....Being able to entertain myself creates a lot of inspiration, but I feel like it can remain kind of formless and hard to actualize unless you have the skills that public school, or just a curriculum in general, can afford you.”

At the end of the year, he made the honor roll. When he told his parents, Cameron says, “my dad teared up out of amazement. I assured him it was not a big deal.”

The last day of sixth grade marked a sudden change. He knew something was wrong when he saw his mom’s car waiting near the bus stop—it was only a couple blocks from home, and he normally walked back. Instead, his mom took him to the courthouse, where she’d file a restraining order against his dad. All she’d tell Cameron is that his dad had been looking at “bad stuff on the internet.” After eight hours of waiting, they drove home. There, they “found the entire house flipped upside down. Every paper removed, all computers removed.” On the way back from the courthouse, Cameron saw his dad sitting in the back of a police car. It was the last time they made eye contact.

I don’t know much about Cameron’s parents. I don’t ask. I’m not sure what to say, or how.

Cameron and I toured the East Coast and Midwest two summers ago, after his first record came out. The night before we left Houston, Cameron was reheating leftover quesadillas on the stove when his brother called him. Their dad was in a coma. “I haven’t talked to him in five years,” Cameron said.

It's an uncommon admission. Cameron's easy to talk to, but he's private. Sometimes, he leaves space between his ideas—explaining a complex thought about music—and I can't always tell how they connect. Sometimes he rattles off two seemingly opposed phrases—"it wasn't difficult, it was very challenging"—with the sense that they don't contradict each other. He tends to reveal personal details sparingly, often talking around them or leaving things unsaid, as if he's speaking in code. When I ask him to clarify, he might rephrase, but with a twinge of discomfort, and I back off.

But when he plays, I feel as if I understand exactly what he means. Of course, I understand little. There is no dictionary between English and musical notes, and if there were, not even Cameron could explain the thoughts that informed a musical choice. But I wonder if he, too, feels like music is his first language.

I ask him about moving to Texas the summer after sixth grade. He calls it the "Great Move," then digresses to an anecdote about skateboarding. He devotes a few sentences to his time in Clear Lake City, a southeast Houston suburb next to NASA headquarters. He alludes to "uncomfortable moments" in school there, but stops himself: "thankfully, that was cut short." In the same sentence, he enrolls in seventh grade and Hurricane Ike destroys his family's new house. To the few months afterward, during which his family moved from Clear Lake to Austin to Katy, a west suburb of Houston, he gives one sentence.

It's not until he talks about living in Katy that he mentions his mom's health. "There was nothing diagnosed. She thought that she was just highly depressed because

of the divorce, and so she slept a lot....I could barely even talk to her.”

Cameron stopped going to school after the seventh grade. For the next few years, until he was about sixteen, he would skateboard for roughly eight hours a day. Apart from skateboarding, he played video games and smoked cigarettes, his leisure following a rigid pattern.

The focus Cameron would later exhibit in his guitar playing reveals itself here. Describing a typical day, he says, “I would be sitting in front of my house, practicing the same trick for hours.” When I press him for details about his daily routine, Cameron says, “I’d hang out a lot.”

This continued for a few years—until he went to a bluegrass concert and bought an acoustic guitar. He was seventeen. “I created a very strict schedule and regimen, and all that time I spent skateboarding, I started playing guitar.” Cameron estimates that, for five years, he practiced anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours a day. In between practice sessions, he took classes at a community college, which his grandparents encouraged him to start a few months before. At home, he says, “I wasn’t learning a lot of songs. I just wanted to learn things perfectly.

“I didn’t want to play anything until I knew exactly what it sounded like. I would play a lick, or a musical idea, and I would look at the guitar without playing it, and then try to imagine what the lick sounded like before I played it again, and then I would play it, and then if it sounded different from what I had in my mind, I would play it again and isolate the area that I didn’t hear in my

head correctly. I had this idea that I wanted to be able to improvise in a way where I would hear every idea before I played it....I just wanted to be so comfortable holding it and understand where each note was.”

What strikes me most about his practice regimen isn't the duration of his practice sessions or the rigor of his practice, but the attention he gave it. People often think of practice as a repetitious activity concerned with muscle memory, in which the most important thing is to play the notes in the right sequence without thinking about how to play them. Cameron's approach was different. He says that, “at that time, I had so much to learn that I felt like it was comfortable to do it for that long.”

At roughly the same age as Cameron, I started to seriously pursue fingerstyle guitar. Instead of using a plectrum, I wear picks on my fingers—thumb, index, middle—to pull the strings. It offers a different kind of complexity than flatpicking, one more concerned with rhythm than tone. I am also self-taught. I have thrown picks at the wall, slammed guitars into their cases, even refused to practice for days, angry at the instrument that dares to challenge me. But Cameron saw the challenge going in. Welcomed it.

Cameron teaches people to play guitar, too. As part of our summer tour, we spent four days and four nights at the Appalachian String Band Festival, commonly known as Clifftop, after the town in West Virginia. It rained most of the time: hard, stinking, sopping rain, soaking tents and clothes and instruments. The rain damaged one of Cameron's prized guitars, an ancient Martin, and he had to send it home. Even under that stress, his students would text or

call him asking for pointers outside of lessons, and he'd respond with care.

I wonder how hard it is to teach. What it takes out of you. And how rewarding: what it gives back. Cameron plays music, he says, "so that I can have conversations about it. The conversations facilitate teaching." I wonder if he hopes his practice—teaching, playing, thinking about flatpicked guitar—will help make an impact on how people perceive flatpicked guitar. That, by careful study, stones thrown gently on the water, the waves will ripple out, slowly but surely, reaching one person at a time.

The tunes he plays are easy to learn. The music follows simple chord progressions, often in two eight-bar phrases, repeating until the musician who called the song signals to end it. The musicians improvise slight variations to the melody with each repetition. The confines of traditional song form inspire Cameron. "It's really the art that you create within those limitations."

I think of the limitations Cameron works within, those that the guitar imposes on us. Though you can retune a guitar's strings to change their relationships to each other, the notes you can play are bound to their place on the fretboard. As a player, you're bound to the size of your hands, the make of your guitar: its resonance, size, wood. Cameron limits himself by using one pick: a "single striking force." No matter how well you understand these limits, you can only move so far before they pull you back. There are the limits of your body, your focus, the moment in which you play.

I'm not surprised, then, that Cameron started a workout regimen when he started teaching himself guitar. "It is a curious feeling," he says, "moving back to a dreadnought after playing small-bodied guitars for a while, and the inevitable reconciliation of not having lumberjack forearms that follows." The gym lets him try to surpass his physical limitations and play in a way that better satisfies him. But I wonder to what extent limitations are the sign of a person's particular creative imprint.

In person, Cameron's presence is quiet and piquant. And he's skilled at modulating himself for different audiences. On tour, I saw him shift easily between convoluted, philosophical inside jokes, technical talk about building guitars or banjos, extended monologues on West African ethnomusicology, and the exclamation, "PissISS outOUT myMY assASS."

On the third night of that tour, we're sitting on a balcony in Asheville after midnight, passing around stories about our time in school. I have little to say. School has been good to me. So I try to understand the different perspectives of my tourmates and how they might inform my own. Cameron leans over and tells me, "I basically didn't know how to read until I was fifteen." I ask him again, and he reaffirms. He sounds like he means it.

I choke down my disbelief. Later, I'll have similar doubts about his practice regimen. Twelve to sixteen hours a day for five years? He must be exaggerating. There's not enough time in the day.

But then I get the sense that he's not trying to convey a literal truth, but a subtler one—not what it was, but what it felt like. I think about the space he leaves between musical phrases, the connections a listener might make. I think about how Cameron might teach a student, the lessons direct and latent. And I think back to that New Year's resolution, one that would put him with those monks in the desert, with the desert itself. "Music," Cameron says, "has provided everything for me." To commit oneself to pursuits of silence, teaching, serious musical study, seems a leap of faith, a gesture of thanks.

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Jam Law: How Folk Musicians Confronted Copyright Changes in the 1970s

Anna Laffrey

Derived from March 2020 thesis project.
Condensed for clarity, October 2020.

[images sourced from the *Sing Out!* reprints included in
footnotes]¹

1 Cover image: Gary Clement, "One Day in the Public Domain," *The New York Times*, (April 25, 1998).

Abstract

Studies of folk music have demonstrated how the artistic community adjusted to commercial contexts following popular revival in the 1950s and 60s, and legal scholars have analyzed the changes brought by the 1976 Copyright Act. No one, however, has examined print media from the 1970s to determine how folk musicians' legal consciousness manifested around the passage and implementation of this new, broadened Copyright Act. This piece studies archival materials from the American Folklife Center and the folk music magazine Sing Out! to determine how traditional musicians expressed their understanding of the 1976 Copyright Act and measured its impacts on their creative works. I argue that cooperation arose to combat confusion and apathy about the law; legally savvy musicians educated their peers and tested strategies to avoid being exploited through copyright. While the community resisted copyright's dominion over their music and sought to reform the ill-fitting legal framework, I find that their efforts were futile². This study analyzes the formation and communication of legal consciousness among a set of legal "outsiders" during a time of change, and exhibits how a galvanized grassroots community might organize to influence the laws that govern it.

Introduction

Folk music crept west from the ancient traditions of French troubadours and English ballad singers to America, where

² In my original thesis I used the word "fraught" here by mistake - makes no sense

its words belonged first to the working class.³ From our country's founding, the music's traditional knowledge has forged properties principal to our culture.⁴ Folk music long remained autonomous: a creative, self-reliant form separate from commercial authority.⁵ In this way, the communities that pollinated folk music detailed a unique American experience in their rich oral traditions -- one recounted from the political Left. Songs sprouted from diverse wells; more than almost any American art form,⁶ folk music is rooted deeply in the experiences of Black people and women.⁷

Soon enough, though, the popular music industry began mining folk traditions. What became the "folk music revival" in the 1950s and 1960s spiked popular interest in American vernacular music. The bulk of the craze came not from the "folklorists or ballad enthusiasts" that already cherished this music, but commercial tycoons who, almost by accident, found out that folk music could be

3 John M. Facciola, "Dylan and the Last Love Song of the American Left," *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 38, no. 5 (October 2011): 1280.

4 Daniella Fischetti, "Lost in Transcription: The Impact of Copyright Legislation on Female Folk Musicians of the Twentieth Century," *Women's Rights Law Reporter* 33, no. 285 (Winter/Spring 2012): 289.

5 Giovanna Carugno, "How to Protect Traditional Folk Music? Some Reflections upon Traditional Knowledge and Copyright Law," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 31, no. 2 (June 2018): 262.

6 Bernice Reagon wrote of American music's great reliance on Black artists: "I now believe that Black music exists in every place where Black people run... and we need it all... doing what it has always done. We need Black music that functions in relation to the people and community who provide the nurturing compost that makes its creation and continuation possible." (Bernice Reagon, "In Our Hands': thoughts on Black music," *Sing Out!*, January/February 1976.)

7 Fischetti, "Lost in Transcription," 290.

wildly profitable.⁸ Minority communities from which folk music originated were often neglected “in the inexorable search for the broadest possible market and the sponsor’s almighty dollar...”⁹ With popular audiences came deep cultural exploitation. The “folk revival” wasn’t all bad news, though; the broadening of folk music “liberated a generation” from the normative assumptions of popular music, so that young could tell stories “about their own consciousness... popularity and record sales be damned.”¹⁰

As these songs were mastered for the masses, the commercial industry and its intellectual property practices clashed with the spirit of folk. Music industry leaders sought to profit from songs woven by centuries of oral transmission, and record producers pinned simplistic copyright claims on folk songs with complex cultural roots. What’s more, the better part of the 20th century was governed by an outdated copyright statute that was enacted in 1909¹¹ when “motion pictures, phonograph records, radio, television, photographic duplicating, and tape re-cordings were either in their infancy or not even

8 Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008).

9 WLAC-AM in Nashville, for instance, broadcasted Southern blues and gospel music to a largely Black rural audience in 20 states for over 30 years. In April of 1975, the station switched to a rock format, blanketing the South with the sound of groups like The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. “Radio is a medium of the young, and sponsors know that,” WLAC general manager Jim Ward said when explaining the switch away from Black artists. (Bob Norman, “What’s Happening?” *Sing Out!*, 1975, Northwestern University Special Collections, Evanston, Illinois (hereafter NUSC)).

10 Facciola, “Dylan,” 1280

11 Robert A. Gorman, “An Overview of the Copyright Act of 1976,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 126, no. 4 (April 1978).

discovered.”¹² While folk took a new, popular stage, Congress was deep in a “painstaking” twenty-year effort to reform this national copyright law. And when the new act was passed in 1976, it threatened to reshape the way that folk musicians, already turned around by the frenzy of revival, protected their original music and interacted with others’ creative works. The rather indiscriminate change in federal law would facilitate the exploitation of folk musicians by commercial leaders and, in turn, galvanize the legal consciousness of a specific creative community.

My “Redacted for Irrelevance” Literature Review craves an articulation of the (mis)understandings of America forged by the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, then the anti-Vietnam protests that stretched well into the 1970s, and the delusions upheld by white-led American mass media in the wake of both. While briefly re-encountering my thesis, I had just read my roommate’s copy of *Sister Outsider* (a nod to each and every of my college syllabi that omitted Audre Lorde!) Including this excerpt in no way corrects for great underrepresentation of Black artists in folk music theory generally, and my own lack of focus on Black exploitation under new Copyright statutes, but best addresses the void established by me and my irrelevant literature review.



“The raw energy of Black determination released in the 60s powered changes in Black awareness and self-concepts and expectations. This energy is still being felt in movements for change among women, other people of Color, gays, the handicapped — among all the disenfranchised peoples of this society. That is a legacy of the 60s to ourselves and to others. But we must recognize that many of our high expectations of rapid revolutionary change did not in fact occur. And many of the gains that did are even now being dismantled. This is not a reason for despair, nor for rejection of the importance of those years. But we must face with clarity and insight the lesson to be learned from the oversimplification of any struggle for self-awareness and liberation, or we will not rally the force we need to face the multidimensional threats to our survival in the 80s.”

(Audre Lorde, “Lessons from the 1960s,” *Sister Outsider*, 138) (Address delivered on Malcolm X weekend at Harvard University in 1982)

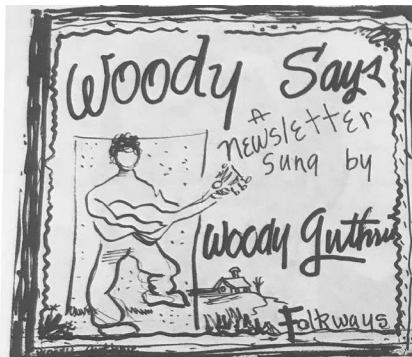
12 Jack C. Landau, “Copyright Bill Widens Protection From Pirating.” *The Washington Post*. July 22, 1964.

Methodology

All that changed with the 1976 Act can be explained by those who wrote throughout the late 1970s with a specific interest in the law's implications for folk music. I studied news clippings, legal correspondences and other primary accounts from the 1970s to understand how people involved in folk music expressed their impressions of the copyright shift approved by Congress in 1976. I drew from both *Sing Out!*, a folk music quarterly founded in 1950, and the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center, a federally-operated trove of traditional relics including a "Copyright" file full of news clippings and legal *correspondences*. Still, I could not access every issue of *Sing Out!* from the 1970s, and the American Folklife Center's collection is limited by the decisions made by its late-20th century librarians. My study, then, was bent by the political influences that weighed on *Sing Out!* and the American Folklife Center. These biases probably paralleled the sentiments expressed by folk musicians.

Literature review [redacted]

It mentioned Woody Guthrie three times :0



Record cover sketch by Woody Guthrie

"Stepstone" is one of the many fine duets that Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston recorded for Folkways. It was Moe Asch who motivated them to record together and he recalls:

"They were real folk musicians, peoples' musicians. They were travelers, they were not settlers and they were looking for a way of life; and at the same time they understood that you don't live in America in one spot. And they expressed that kind of life in their music."

"Stepstone" can be heard on *Poor Boy* (Folkways 31010, 43 W. 61st St, NYC 10023). Another good version is on Jane Voss' *An Album of Songs* (from Bay, 1516 Oak St., Alameda, CA 94501).

Analysis

1. Early 1970s: Folk artists ride out the revival and anticipate a new Copyright Act

As their music boomed beyond the revival years, folk artists grappled with newfound platforms for fame and modern modes of music distribution.

[Described height of 1960s folk music revival via David Crosby.]

[Virtuosic East Kentucky fiddle player Rich Kirby explained new exploitation in the “modern era of recording folk records.”¹³] He says these practices were seen as early as the 1920s, when Ralph Peer recorded “Fiddling John” Carson singing near Atlanta and advertised his session as a “race record,” or an early phonograph marketed to Black Americans largely between 1920 and 1940.¹⁴ Fiddling John’s tracks, though roughly produced by Peer at first, spiked to national sales of 500,000.¹⁵

While they understood the crooked nature of commercial involvement, folk artists were incentivized to work with large record companies sourcing “traditional” folk music for their records. Singer Beverly Grant, a social activist and labor singer-songwriter radicalized by the Viet-

13 Kirby, “Our Own Music,” 1973.

14 Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 80.

15 Kirby, “Our Own Music,” 1973.

nam War,¹⁶ told a *Sing Out!* writer that she was willing to market her music for popular audiences in order to secure an honest living and raise awareness for labor causes by way of a popularized audience. Grant told *Sing Out!* in the spring of 1973: "I want to do something commercially now with the songs, because the mass media is the only way right now for getting things around to the working people who buy records and go to concerts."¹⁷ Grant saw opportunity in commercial folk developments, and decided to cash in on potential profits. Still, Grant acknowledged problems inherent in "selling out" commercially: she denounced the "'star' trip"¹⁸ experienced by many people whose music got popular, and called their commercial greed "really disgusting."¹⁹

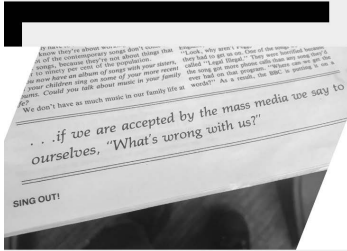
16 Barbara Dane, "Dare To Struggle! Dare To Sing!: Beverly Grant Sings About the Human Condition," *Sing Out!*, March/April 1973, 32, NUSC.

17 Dane, "Dare To Struggle! Dare To Sing!" 1973.

18 "Guthrie... had contempt for making money; he did not bother to copyright a single one of his hundreds of songs, although those royalties could have helped his family." (Facciola, "Dylan," 1280)

19 Dane, "Dare To Struggle! Dare To Sing!" 1973.

In 1973, Beverly Grant signaled a comfort with the popular entertainment industry's subsuming the spirit of folk music, and her role as a profiteer or pioneer within new commercialization. In 2014, she remembers herself radicalized, and imagines herself in solidarity with the working class people she centers her songs on. Wouldn't a white woman of her purported purpose refuse to promote exploitative practice by refusing to participate in them? Wouldn't her "deciding to do something commercially now with the songs" remove her entirely from the "real people, each struggling for a better life" that she claims allegiance to?



More Smithsonian Folkways told by Rhiannon Giddens to come.

INSPIRATIONS: WITH THE
SOUNDS OF THE

Written by Beverly Grant for *Smithsonian Folkways in 2014*:

Like many young people in those days, I became radicalized by the Vietnam War, the anti-imperialist movement, and the civil rights and black power movements, as well as the women's liberation movement. I immersed myself in activism and study. When I discovered the women's liberation movement in 1967, I started to feel that I could take ownership of myself. I had left my husband and a subsequent musician lover, whose come-on line to me was "I'll make a woman out of you." I picked up a guitar and started singing again. Songwriting became my way to work out thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, and to connect with others.

I continue to write songs that focus on poor and working women. I write about modern sweatshops outside of the United States that mirror the unsafe and low-wage conditions of the sweatshops here in the early 1900s... I look for the common threads that bind us through the personal stories of real people, each struggling for a better life.

(Per Smithsonian) *Bev Grant* is a veteran social activist, feminist, and labor singer-songwriter. She founded and directs the *Brooklyn Women's Chorus* and presents a multimedia performance about women's labor history called *"We Were There!"* She recorded two albums with her former band, the *Human Condition*, and currently performs with *Ina May Wool* in a duo called *WOOL&GRANT*.

(*Bev Grant, "Bev Grant: My Story," Smithsonian Folkways Magazine, Summer/Fall 2014.*)

Nevertheless having been commercially commodified, folk music garnered Federal attention for its traditional cultural significance in the wake of revival.²⁰ In 1972, the Music Division of the Smithsonian and the National Folk Festival were commissioned to participate in mid-1970s Bicentennial festivities as artistic representatives of America's liberal spirit.²¹ *Sing Out!*'s Bob Norman wrote in a November/December 1972 "What's Happening" column that folk music's involvement in Bicentennial festivities might help the Republican party "mask the deep problems that beset America, to glorify their years in office, and to set the stage for the 1976 election. Folk music is the perfect

20 By 1973, one enthused lawmaker had even recorded his own folk album; Sen. Sam Ervin of the Senate Watergate Committee recorded "recitations with harmonica accompaniment, including such folk favorites as 'Bride Over Troubled Waters,'" (Bob Norman, "What's Happening," *Sing Out!*, September/October 1973, 37, NUSC.)

21 Bob Norman, "What's Happening," *Sing Out!*, November/December 1972, 37, NUSC.

expression of the nation's revolutionary heritage that produced the extraordinary idea that *governments exist to serve the people.*"²² Norman suggested that, despite the revival's dilution of folk's authentic form, the government wanted to co-opt its political salience. This Federal interest in folk came at a peculiar moment, as the Vietnam War battered on under President Richard Nixon.²³ [Senators advocated for the establishment of an American Folklife Center as it exists under the Library of Congress today.]²⁴

So folk musicians grappled with their political convictions as commercialization took hold. In 1975, Leon Rosselson argued that the fragmentation of the American political Left and a general disillusionment with politics had led to a decline of folk music as a means for radical, change-affecting political expression.²⁵ He wrote of two political strategies remaining in folk post-revival: "one which uses folksong for a weekly wallow in nostalgia, suppressing its relevance for the present, leaving our perception of society we live in unchanged; and one which sees folk song as a useful everyday tool which can shape and change and allow

22 Norman, "What's Happening," 1972.

23 A folk group in 1980 performed a song of frustrated political sentiment following Nixon's resignation: "Once we rode in horse cars, we lived in shacks / But our souls were our own / Now we've got coops and cadillacs / Banker, can you spare a loan? / Once in helmet hats we cheered Uncle Sam, Belted the kids who hated to kill, Half a trillion bucks was dropped on Vietnam, I'm the Joe paying the bill. Once we had a Roosevelt, praise the Lord, Life had meaning and hope. Now we've had our Nixon, Agner, Ford / Brother, can you spare a rope?" (Yip Harburg, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" *CooP - Fast Folk Musical Magazine*, 1982, AFC at LOC.)

24 Norman, "What's Happening," 1973.

25 Leon Rosselson, "Stand Up, Stand Up for--?" *Sing Out!*, November/December 1975, NUSC.

us to express our perception of this society.”²⁶ Folkniks weren’t just concerned with the politics of folk music in the mid-1970s, but with their very fate as artists under potential revisions to national copyright.

This is where I conducted a bulk of my research, and met some lovely people driving progress in ethnomusicology. It's the spot to catch contemporary folk musicians who might pass through D.C...

Riley Calcagno & friends playing from the archives on my first visit to the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in January of 2018 ;)

LEGAL AFFAIRS
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Per the Oberlin College & Conservatory website:

*Originally from Seattle, WA, Riley Calcagno has been playing both classical and roots music on the violin from an early age. Now at home as well on banjo, guitar, mandolin, and vocals, he performs with The Onlies (winners of the 2017 Appalachian Stringband Festival), and in a duo with Vivian Leiva, whose 2018 album *Time Is Everything* featuring Riley Calcagno has garnered wide critical praise. Riley has performed and worked closely with Elvis Costello, the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, **Rhannon Giddens**, and Bruce Mosley.

I hope my and Calcagno's generation improves on folks like Bev Grant...

ETHNOMUSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

...means a measure of song which is made to measure singing, neither scholars have long acknowledged its value to be able to save it out suffering too much & sitting is performed via

2. Folkniks process changes brought by the Copyright Act of 1976

- A revision to the 1909 Act resulting from a twenty-year Congressional reform effort.²⁷
- Built upon the foundations of national copyright legislation introduced in 1790,²⁸

26 Rosselson, “Stand Up, Stand Up for--?”, 1975.

27 Gorman, “Copyright Act of 1976,” 860.

28 Jack C Landau, “Copyright Bill Widens Protection From Pirating,” *The Washington Post*, July 22, 1964, Copyright file, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., USA (hereafter AFC at LOC).

- Which were first applied to music ownership by an 1831 provision.²⁹

- The new act would be passed in 1976, then set into effect in 1978:
 - changes to the definition of what constitutes a “published” work (the first physical manifestation of a piece of art would become, in the constitutional sense, a “writing”³⁰ and would be covered by federal copyright).³¹

 - Artists then had to publish works with a notice of copyright to retain protection.³²

 - Works “created” on or after January 1, 1978 would be protected by federal copyright for a single term of fifty years after the death of the author
 - (or the last surviving author of a work).³³

 - The elusive, judicially developed doctrine of “fair use” was formalized in the 1976 Act. The act laid out an abstract “four-prong test” to be used while

29 Landau, “Copyright Bill Widens Protection.”

30 Gorman, “The Copyright Act of 1976,” 865.

31 Ibid.

32 Tom Beall, “The New Copyright Law,” *Sing Out!*, September/October 1977, NUSC.

33 Gorman, “An Overview of the Copyright Act of 1976,” 865.

judging the legality of alleged fair uses of any work: 1) the purpose and character of use, 2) the nature of the copyrighted work, 3) the amount and substantiality of the portion taken, and 4) the effect of the use upon the potential market.³⁴

3. *Galvanized by copyright change, artists call out pervasive commercial exploitation*

As artists' legal consciousnesses were stoked by a more forceful copyright act, the folk music community banded together to push back against the exploitative nature of the popular music industry...

In his autobiography, blues artist Willie Dixon explained how he prevented greedy executives at the Chess Record Company from claiming his songs as their own. To keep Chess from securing dominion over his royalties, he listed many other singers as co-authors on his tracks to box out exploitative claims for original songs that were solely his. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Dixon and his manager Scott Cameron had only "a vague grip on Copyright Law." So Cameron taught himself, making his first pilgrimage to the LOC in about 1973 in order to assist Dixon with legal claims to his music.³⁴ "I spent a lot of time at the Library of Congress," Cameron wrote. "At that time, everything they had was on 3x5 recipe cards." He came across a sneaky bit of the law called "employee for hire," generally used by music publishers

34 "Measuring Fair Use: The Four Factors," Stanford University Libraries, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/fair-use/four-factors/>.

35 Ibid.

to hire writers for film and theater scores. The provision cedes the copyright of these scores to the publishing company, not the writer. "I found that both Muddy [Waters] and Willie [Dixon], without having the wildest idea of comprehending what they were signing, signed those agreements," Cameron wrote.³⁶ As independent folk musicians lacked legal wherewithal to navigate the muddy waters of copyright, the manager of these seminal blues singers employed scrappy methods of self-sufficiency to navigate copyright complexities.

4. Combatting confusion, legally-savvy folkniks write to educate readers

In the 1970s, legally versed folkniks took to print media to educate their fellow singers and songwriters on the implications of copyright. One such author was Ray Korona, who abandoned his legal profession in favor of a folk music career that covered labor rights, environmental issues, social justice and even themes of love and friendship.³⁷

5. "Getting bitten": as copyright shifts, artists bear the brunt of legal bludgeons

As exploitation has plagued folk music since its conception in America; *Sing Out!* Staffers in the 1970s were eager to recall artists who had been ripped off... Willie Dixon remembers "getting bitten" by dishonest people that he trust-

36 Ibid.

37 "Ray Korona Band: Music that Mobilizes," Ray Korona & the Ray Korona Band, accessed March 1, 2020, <http://raykorona.com/activists%20band.htm>.

ed.³⁸ He said: “If they could keep you poor enough, you wouldn’t have nothing to fight with and that’s the truth.”³⁹

Abuses like these percolated through the folk community in the 1970s, and lawsuits followed up as artists sought recourse. In the summer of 1976, singer Louise King Mathews found that British superstar Eric Clapton had ripped off her original song “Give Me Strength” for his hit record *461 Ocean Boulevard*. While Mathews claimed she wrote the song in 1939, before Clapton was born, Clapton listed himself as the song’s sole author.⁴⁰ Mathews didn’t have the funds or legal wherewithal to take Clapton to court over her claim, so a verdict was never made on the legality of his lifting.⁴¹ Washington attorney Landon Dowdey said that disputes over the ownership of traditional music have a “David vs. Goliath” quality. *WXFM Chicago* quoted Dowdey in an article on the case: “‘There’s an attitude in this country,’ Dowdey says, ‘that you’re not really an artist unless you’ve made a fortune. If performers are poor, Black or unknown, or if they play ‘folk’ or ‘traditional’ music, then it’s open season on them. It happens all the time...’”⁴² In this case, Mathews couldn’t even pursue accreditation for her original work.

[Eric Clapton was mentioned here.]⁴³

38 Dixon, *I am the Blues*, 100

39 Ibid.

40 Larry Rother, “Copyrights: Blues on the Bottom Line or Hey, Is That Me up on the Jukebox?” *Triad WXFM Chicago*, 1977, AFC at LOC.

41 Rother, “Copyrights: Blues on the Bottom Line,” 1977.

42 Rother, “Copyrights: Blues on the Bottom Line,” 1977.

43 [Listen to: John Lee Hooker Boogie Chillen] [Don’t listen to: Rock band ZZ Top La Grange]

Proposing pathways for remediation

While riding the waves of the 1976 Act, the folk music community struggled to understand just how their music fit in the copyright framework set out in the U.S. The new act, like those that came before it, was fashioned as an umbrella to cover authorship rights in all creative industries.⁴⁴ While it was being developed by Congress in the 1960s, journalist Jack Landau noted: “the Copyright office has come up with something for everybody: authors, composers, sculptors, graphic artists, book publishers, choreographers...”⁴⁵

This focus on “everybody” was a crux in the issues of the folk music community, who saw their art and processes of transmission as independent from the commercial contexts that had subsumed them. Authors found that copyright frameworks didn’t account for the creative authorship strategies fundamental to folk music. Eric Clapton’s lifting of Louise King Mathews’ “Give Me Strength,” Larry Rother wrote in *Sing Out!*, exhibited that “Just where the assimilation of an artistic influence ends and the deliberate lifting of someone else’s creation begins is something that is often hard to determine — especially in a court, which is used to dealing with legal, not artistic, questions.”⁴⁶ Even if Clapton did plagiarize Mathews’ song, Rother argued, folk music need not be judged along the strict lines laid out by the federal copyright framework.

44 Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

45 Landau, “Copyright Bill Widens Protection,” 1964.

46 Rother, “Copyrights: Blues on the Bottom Line,” 1977.

Liberal musicians argued that a radical liberation of global folk culture could be achieved by harnessing the power of broadcasting. Pete Seeger in 1975 imagined a television channel operated by the United Nations that would offer underrepresented nations the opportunity to exhibit their folk cultures in a weekly broadcast.⁴⁷ He suggested that each of the United Nations prepare a half-hour segment about its Indigenous people each week, tracked in six languages so that it could run on air around the world. Seeger wrote: "On one side of each TV set should be printed, in the local language, 'We may like or not like what we see on this screen, but it is important for us to know that the rest of the world is thinking and doing. There are 4 billion people who breathe the same air as we do.'"⁴⁷ He advocated for a return to the roots of collectivism in folk culture, on a massive scale in a new and evolving medium.⁴⁸ Since he proposed this project in his late fifties, there's no proof that Seeger ever pushed ahead with any global tele-village.

46 Pete Seeger, "Johnny Appleseed, Jr.", *Sing Out!*, July/August 1975, NUSC.

47 Seeger, "Johnny Appleseed, Jr.", 1975.

48 He went on to warn that the television might be addictive: "On... the box I'd print one admonition: 'Don't let children look at it too close; bad for the eyes. Nor should anyone look at it too long. The purpose of life is to live, not watch other people live.'"

Conclusion

When the 1976 Copyright Act was passed in Congress, a community of musicians reckoned with provisions that increased federal supervision over the ownership of folk music, a form rich in history and culture that has long been dependent on complex processes of oral transmission. The new copyright act roused legal consciousness among folk musicians. With increased interest in copyright, they were privy to legal subordination in the music industry based on race, class, and gender. As the community struggled to understand just what the new law meant for their music in the wake of popular revival, artists banded together to facilitate education and prevent further exploitation by commercial agents. This coalition of artists found copyright regulation incongruent with the creative processes of traditional music and proposed alternative frameworks that might better govern the ownership of their folk arts.

Folk musicians' communications through print media in the 1970s exhibited how real groups of people might process the consequences of law and, in dissatisfaction, advocate for remediation. The authors preserved by *Sing Out!* records and in the American Folklife Center proved the fluidity of legal consciousness, as immediate issues commanded the attention of folks who wouldn't otherwise bother with federal statutes. Further study might probe specific lawsuits beyond the ones I mentioned here; court rulings, after all, confirm copyright's actual ability to defend folk musicians. Oral histories and even trends in music would complement these written accounts, too. Ultimately, though, folkniks' discontent would not affect change in policy. The commercial music industry would barrel on down the highway of copyright exploitation,

delivering a new era of “folk-rock” music to the popular sphere but leaving rudimentary folk singers in the ditches.

To today!?

-what-folk-music-means

Rhiannon Giddens, a Black woman and leader in contemporary commercial American roots and folk music, shared some of her experience with the *New Yorker* in May of 2019... (five years after *Sing Out!* ceased publication)

[/magazine/2019/05/20/rhiannon-giddens-](#)

(On playing in the Carolina Chocolate Drops)

"There wasn't a banjo player in the group at that time, and, although Giddens had initially hoped to learn the fiddle from Thompson, she volunteered to play banjo because he didn't really play without one. "That's what we ladies do—what needs to be done," she said.

(On leading a concert for the prisoners at Sing Sing)

Telling me about it, she broke down in tears—in part because of the fact that the prison concert was the first time she'd played to a majority-Black crowd. "It was so many beautiful brown faces all together, listening to my music, and responding to it in a cultural way I don't get to experience—talk-back, movement," she recalled. "They called me Rhi-Rhi."

(Now we've been through it with the Smithsonian Folkways)

"Half my family is white, you know?" she said. "But I would like to see more people from my other community at the shows and in the know." A few years ago, she tried to bring a tour to H.B.C.U.s (historically black colleges and universities), but interest seemed to be lacking. "It's hard," she said. "I don't feel Black enough, sometimes, to be bothered with. I know it's childhood stuff, but it's hard to shake." She recently helped to form the band Our Native Daughters, which comprises four female musicians of color, all of whom play the banjo in the group. When I asked if she had been excited for Black people to hear the band's music and experience it as their own, she responded, with characteristic bluntness, by jumping from hypothetical scenarios to material realities. The band's record, she said, had been released by Smithsonian Folkways. "It won't be covered by any black press," she said. "We took the platform that was offered." She told me recently that the Apollo Theatre, in Harlem, had turned down the Native Daughters' offer to play a show. The reasons were unclear, but, Giddens said, rejections like that make her wonder, "Am I truly that out of the black cultural Zeitgeist, or are the gatekeepers just that narrow-minded?"

The Bees are Flying

Stefania Gomez

When Plath wrote about her father's hives she wrote about their noise: loud and hot as an oven.

"Well, mostly they don't make any sound at all, sometimes they're so quiet, especially in the winter when they're so deep inside the hive you can't hear anything unless you open up the hive and start to take apart the different layers of the hive, and you get down deep and you open it up and there's this mass of organisms that are really humming, almost more like a hum than a buzz."

This year my mother's honey crop was slim. Was there ever a year so plentiful I wondered. The honey burst out of the combs the way something does though a woman has tried to stifle it, day after day, hour after hour, like a sound, though quieter in the winter, of something still living.

Like ambition the honey has ebbed and flowed.

"The queen herself has to be maintained at about 60-65 degrees. The way that happens is that all her helpers are beating their wings to create heat. They do that all winter long to keep her warm"

All winter long they buzz in their hive. All winter, the noise they make to survive.

"So they're feeding her and keeping her all winter long. So they are sacrificing themselves to her. So you get a die off of 40% of your hive and they're just spending all day long, until they drop, literally, flapping their wings to keep her warm."

Once, my mother's didn't make it. When a hive becomes inhospitable it's the queen that leaves first and the rest follow, to roves, to hollow trees, to the inside of walls, the hive leaves, all female. The male drones having mated with the queen and died.

"I just think that families now though are spread all over the place and It doesn't feel as natural. People should be within driving distance of each other. It's hard"

The spring my mother found her hive empty, she packed her things and left us. Behind her trailed a faint, but steady buzz.

"If you just look at them especially on a sunny day you can see the trajectory of all these busy bees just zooming zooming zooming in and out in and out just searching for the best pollen."

I used to dread the way she'd flit from place to place, leaving her colony at the smallest whiff of the unsavory. Now I know when she lands, around her layers and layers of combs bloom.

"The honey we got here was so sweet. It was unbelievable. It was surprisingly sweet. Probably some roses. We have no idea where they spent their day but they must have found some good flowers."





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- the editors