Timothy D. Taylor. *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology, and Culture.* New York: Routledge, 2001. x, 278 pp.

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Strange Sounds is among the growing literature concerned with the interface of technology and musical practice, reception, and use (referred to in this book, as in many others, as "production" and "consumption").[1] More specifically, the author is concerned with the ways "that digital technology shapes the three areas that have historically been so affected by technology: music production, storage/distribution, and consumption" (15), with a particular focus on the latter two. The ability to capture sound as digital information is, of course, an outgrowth of analog sound recording, and is thus only the latest chapter in a history of technological evolution that has both shaped and been shaped by the forces of musical culture. The field of potential inquiry for such a project is vast, and from the complex of relevant topics Taylor takes up a subset focusing on "agency" and "ideologies of technology" (9), with the aim of probing the social dimensions of the music/technology interface. What emerges is a somewhat idiosyncratic investigation that draws attention to several unlikely historical and aesthetic connections.

There are, for example, two chapters devoted to so-called "space-age pop" of the 1950s which, though a fascinating and in scholarly circles under-reported topic, would seem to have little connection to digital music technology. Or so it appears from the technological and the musical evidence. But the author is after something else here. The inclusion of space-age pop—one of the more unlikely pop music revivals of the 1990s—along with the relatively obscure techno artists Banco de Gaia and Muslimgauze, and the Goa/psychedelic trance music and dance scene in New York City bespeaks an interest in the margins of popular culture.[2] In addition to its influence on modes of music making and use, digital technology has facilitated the formation of a virtual internet community where like-minded listeners, perhaps few in number and widely dispersed, are drawn together through a digitized sharing of music and information. Through such things as MP3s, internet newsgroups, and web sites—which Taylor uses as sources—those at the margins may acquire a sense of community; as he puts it, digital connectivity helps "fans to find each other" (114). It's not digital technology per se, then, that is at issue here, but rather digital technology as a current representation of the human/machine interaction central to musical experience in the West for at least a century. In the author's reflec-

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tions on digital technology's influence on the way we hear, make, and share music, as well as how technology is, in turn, affected by the ways we use it, a view emerges of technology "as fundamentally and profoundly social" (206).

The book is in three parts, entitled "Theory," "Time," and "Space." The first of these introduces the topics to be explored, briefly summarizes some "theories of consumption," and takes on "the problem of agency in existing theories of technology and society" (15). Taylor argues that neither the top-down characterization of consumption, "mainly associated with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School" (22), nor its antipode, the bottom-up formulation associated with the so-called Birmingham School, accurately depicts the ways in which people behave as consumers. The former describes a scenario where "so-called culture industries promulgate their products on a public that accepts them unquestioningly," whereas the latter takes the view "that people make their meanings out of mass-produced and mass-mediated cultural forms" (22). In fact, says Taylor, either of these is liable to happen. They coexist as alternate possibilities in an overall dynamic that moves in both directions simultaneously.

The technological corollaries to these consumption theories are "technological determinism, in which technology is assumed to transform its users directly," and "voluntarism," which views "technology [as] a tool that people use, nothing more, and is thus essentially neutral" (26). Again, Taylor finds "both positions are overtotalized and falsely binarized" (37). Seeking a more realistic view of "technology as neither voluntaristic nor deterministic but as caught up in a complex, fluid, variable dynamic of each" (30), he posits something of a "practice theory" that emphasizes particularity of situation and circumstance. For "some sociotechnical systems are more deterministic than others" while "some provide for more voluntarism than others. . . . [I]ndividual subjects and subjects-as-agents are always important, though never central, just as structures [technology in this case] that act on them are always important but never central" (37). There is a wide range of experiences to be found in the ways that people interact with technology, "based on social class, age, geographical location, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnicity, cultural capital, and so on" (37). Taylor insists that to accurately reflect the complexity of the process, theoretical formulations must take into account such variability and acknowledge that "Any music technology . . . both acts on its users and is continually acted on by them . . . in a never-ending process" (38).

The second part of the book takes a look at the 1950s via French *musique concrète* and American space-age pop. "If in France," Taylor writes, "there was, by and large, optimism over technology in the postwar era, spending

some time examining American ambivalence and anxiety over technology in the same era provides a useful comparison" (72). If such a contrast seems curious, Taylor makes the unlikely connection through the resurgent popularity among some techno artists and fans (especially in France and England) of *musique concrète* composer Pierre Henry on the one hand and space-age pop—or, more generally, "exotica"—on the other.[3] Examples include *Métamorphose*, the 1997 remix album of Henry's *Messe pour le temps present* (1967) with contributions from several well-known techno producers, and the band Stereolab, whose main composer, Tim Gane, has often expressed an affinity for exotica.

There is also some discussion of the renewed interest in so-called "vintage gear," older-style sound generators and sound processing devices. Strangely, there is little here about sound per se, emphasizing instead the issue of control. Older, analog technology is preferred by some musicians, we are told, "in part because these older instruments have fewer automated features than today's instruments and thus allow musicians a greater degree of control" (97). And later: "The sophisticated digital hardware, and software that can replace some hardware, have caused some musicians to worry about what is happening to their control over their own sounds" (110). This assertion is supported with statements by Brian Eno and Robert Moog concerning not "sounds" but user interfaces. The resulting fallacy of the argument is a symptom of the book's priorities: though the topic is ostensibly sound and music, pride of place is given to cultural theory, which receives far more detailed and thoughtful discussion throughout the book.

What Taylor characterizes as Eno's "growing doubts" about musical technology are concerns voiced over the design of a new recording console. (Taylor tells us only that Eno is writing about "some extremely advanced studio technology.") Eno's specific complaint is not with its sound, but with what he calls the "endless options" it presents to the user. The problem, then, is not too little, but too much control; wielding it, sorting through all the choices it makes available, is burdensome (Eno 1999). When it comes to "sounds," Eno has been one of the great proponents and practitioners of digital sound programming on the Yamaha DX-7 precisely because of the control it allows. As he told an interviewer in 1985, "At the moment my favourite synthesizer is a Yamaha DX7 . . . I've become very interested in programming it because it allows you to create different harmonic series quite precisely" (Jensen 1985). Similarly, the main attraction of the Moog synthesizer—its sound—is not discussed. Instead, the comments attributed to Moog make the point that "the older equipment invites a physicality, and offers a tactility that are pleasurable and unavailable with most newer instruments having buttons instead of knobs" (110–11).

Indeed, user interface design has been a subject of much discussion. And the user interface may in fact affect sound in some way as it steers a user towards what is most easily or efficiently accomplished. This idea, however, is not explored. Conflating sound, sound manipulation, and user interface obscures both the nuances of the topic and the issue of agency that Taylor repeatedly claims as a primary focus.

Finally, in the book's third section the author probes some of the issues raised by the "increased availability and dissemination of digitized sounds" (12). This is a particularly interesting section in its probing of apparent paradoxes wrought by the increasing integration of technological and musical practices. On the one hand, for example, "digital technology . . . makes home music making possible as never before." This, in turn, allows musicians who so desire to "produce their music largely apart from more social and public realms." Yet in the form of Goa/psychedelic trance music and other types of dance scenes, the mechanized groove is the basis for "bringing people together in new communities" (13). Similarly, while digital technology has made it extremely easy to decontextualize musical sounds, to remove them from their original cultural place and moment, it also fosters the possibility that the sounds will attract greater attention and acquire a new cultural status. That is, as digital technology connects the globe, obscuring or erasing context in one big technological conflation, it may also amplify the local. As such, the small, the intimate, and the unusual may take on a disproportionate size and weight of presence on the global stage.

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When the stated project is to surf the margins of culture and report what one finds, it may seem pointless to criticize the shape of the wave. Still, I am left with reservations about conclusions reached through a lens as narrowly focused as Taylor's. While I have no quarrel with limiting the discussion of a larger phenomenon to a specific subset of issues, I do find it curious from a historical standpoint that the book is framed as it is, especially considering Taylor's stated concern for "history as it shapes peoples' real lives" (9). The music at the heart of his discussion is one genre or another of electronic dance music. And whatever else the various styles and "little cultures" associated with this music claim to be, they all belong in one way or another to the vast and complex culture of post–World War II pop music.[4] Yet the section of the book devoted to historical antecedents in the 1950s focuses on the "art music" (as Taylor terms it) practices of *musique concrète* and *elektronische Musik*, and the easy listening of space-age pop. No mention is made of the rock and roll records of the 1950s that

both fused technological and musical practices and deeply influenced the sound consciousness of a broad public. As I shall discuss later in more detail, the rock records of the 1950s laid aesthetic and practical foundations for music making, reception, and use that have influenced the development of both music and technology ever since. Taylor's "interest in the agency of everyday people and their use of everyday technologies" (15), and his interest in pop music, would seem to indicate at least an encounter with the most "everyday" of 1950s music.

In defending his "rather eclectic group of musics," Taylor admits "to being fascinated by many of these sounds on the fringes" (8). That's well and good, and promises a fun and illuminating ride. But then he goes on to say:

> I would argue that the strange, the relatively unheard, often affords greater insights into the largest issues I want to examine—agency, ideologies of technology, pro and con—than does other music. It is not that the mainstream offers no avenue to understanding people and their music in a particular place and time. But the odd—the marginal—can often tell us more, for the margins have much to say about the centers that those in the centers might not be aware of. (8-9)

Probing the lesser known aspects and figures of musical cultures is a project that happily is becoming widespread among musicologists. But asserting that the marginal can "tell us more" seems an overstatement of a personal preference. For one thing, the mainstream—represented, for the sake of argument, by the records on the *Billboard* charts—is not a faceless mass. It is composed of individual participants (musicians, listeners, record buyers, producers, dancers, A&R people, DJs, and so forth), a great many of whom are in themselves marginal. Furthermore, it's not as if these categories are autonomous; interactions between music representing the mainstream and music representing the margins make for a dialogue that affects both. When Junior Vasquez collaborates with John Mellencamp (*Mr. Happy Go Lucky*, 1996), the result is something that neither the artists nor their fans can predict. The process is volatile. Also, the marginal may enter the mainstream at any time—the unexpected rise of grunge from small clubs in Seattle comes to mind. Or the mainstream may recede to the margins—as with, say, hair-metal. The point is simply that there is an all-encompassing dynamic at work; the "margins" and the "mainstream" are not fixed categories and the fluidity of the situation, the porousness of the boundaries, requires a broad frame in order to make even a rough sketch of the cultural picture. It is the interaction of cultural activities at all levels

and of all sorts—Raymond Williams's "complex unity" (1977:139–40)—that provides the pulse for the cultural organism. Taylor himself argues for a more nuanced view with regard to technological determinism/voluntarism and also in his use of the term "glocalization," which "emphasize[s] the extent to which the local and the global are no longer distinct—indeed, never were—but are inextricably intertwined, with one infiltrating and implicating the other" (120). I am left feeling like I would have a better grasp of the "largest issues" the author wishes to engage if he took a similar, more realistic view of the workings of the pop mainstream/margins relationship.

Most of this criticism is aimed at the book's second section, "Time," which contains three chapters devoted to matters of historical precursors. It begins with a chapter called "Postwar Music and the Technoscientific Imaginary," which, after reminding us of the widespread 1950s hype about technological marvels ranging from atomic energy to "kitchen gadgets," outlines the history of the *elektronische Musik/musique concrète* debate in France. Taylor is particularly interested in the ways in which these musics manifested "anxieties about signification, and the place—and placement—of this new music in the histories of music past and future" (66). Placing some of Pierre Boulez's famous doctrinaire outbursts alongside statements by fellow French composer Pierre Schaeffer, Taylor paints a picture of an "aesthetic-discursive war" (55), "a deadly binary struggle" (58) between aesthetic stances that he summarizes with Claude Lévi-Strauss's formulation of bricolage (*musique concrète*) versus science (*elektronische Musik*): "The bricoleur works in signs, the scientist with concepts" (58). He boils the debate down to a difference in attitudes toward signification and compositional control, extending the binary to include contemporary formulations of oral/literate and primitive/modern. In something of a stretch, Taylor also likens the debate to the nineteenth-century aesthetic split between proponents of program music and absolute music:

> One last note on the historical underpinnings of this battle over the issue of signification. There is clearly a residue of older debates about musical meaning resonating in the rhetorical war between the *musique concrète* composers and the *elektronische Musik* composers. Their disagreement essentially recapitulated—or continued—a nineteenth-century battle between Richard Wagner and his proponents and composers whom they thought were not grounding their music in the real truths of poetry and drama. Wagner's side was the side of "program music," that is, instrumental music with an explicit story or meaning; the other side rallied around the idea of "absolute music," instrumental music thought

> to be without any such story or extramusical meaning. The main figure on this side was Johannes Brahms, championed by the most influential critic of the day, the Viennese Eduard Hanslick, who had written in *On the Beautiful in Music* that the only meaning in music is its form: "Forms moved in sounding are the sole and single content and object of music." Although he and Richard Wagner were often at odds, and though Wagner's stature still remains high, Hanslick's opinion is the one that has been dominant since, though it undergoes periodic attack, or what is seen as an attack, which is how composers in German [sic] viewed *musique concrète.* (54)[5]

This is a difficult piece of logic to follow, especially as it comes on the heels of quotes from Schaeffer about training listeners "to focus on timbral qualities of sound only, while attempting to ignore the origins of the sounds; the listener was expected to isolate and focus on an *objet sonore*, a 'sound object'" (54). Surely such a plea argues for a stripping away of "residual signification"(50), hopefully rendering the sound material as supposedly neutral in association as that created from scratch by *elektronische Musik* composers. The composer of *musique concrète* flirted with programmatic associations, but far from embracing them he hoped that listeners could be trained to ignore them. The fact that both sides were indulging themselves in wishful thinking need not distract us from the point, which is that both Schaeffer and Boulez had in common a modernist's distaste for audiences' interpretations of their music; ideally, composers would exert as much control over reception as over their materials. Further, Taylor misrepresents Hanslick by suggesting a vast oversimplification of what is in fact a carefully argued defense of the complexity of the musical experience. By invoking a complex history in such a cursory way, he leaves the reader to wonder what the point is of raising it in the first place.

A contrasting aesthetic is presented in the discussion of Pierre Henry, characterized as a composer "relegated to the margins of the canon of twentieth-century music, since . . . the hegemonic discourses and practices valorized organization and the abstract" (60). On the other hand, Henry's concern for "expressivity" and "communication" make him a more likely candidate than Schaeffer for arguing a link between *musique concrète* and techno. "Many techno musicians," Taylor writes,

> seek forbears as a way of grounding themselves in a legitimate tradition, and so the rise of "electronica" musics in the last few years has also prompted a renewed interest in Henry and some of the other early electronic composers . . .
>
> Contemporary musicians have cultivated interest in Henry's

> (and other older electronic) musics for a variety of reasons, reasons that would be difficult to theorize adequately under the rubric of some kind of postmodern nostalgia or a pure aesthetic appreciation. Instead, it seems as though today's DJs and remixers seek out these earlier musics as a way of attempting, in part, to discover a musical past for themselves, or to join a preexisting tradition, effectively resuscitating a residual tradition (in Raymond Williams's conceptualization) of which they can be the contemporary heirs. By actively linking themselves to a particular tradition or portion thereof and selecting heroes and forbears, contemporary popular musicians are able to construct an alternative history of popular music—not a history that begins with the blues and wends its way through R&B, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen, and others, but a tradition that has roots in studio experimentation, and perhaps even the romantic notion of the un(der)appreciated solitary genius.
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> This history, however, usually omits the African-American and gay musicians who are more demonstrably the real precursors of techno music, for it is mainly being championed by heterosexual suburban white men. For them, a lineage going back to the European avant-garde is more compelling than a more historically accurate one that traces their music to African Americans and gays. As such, these latter groups are almost wholly exscripted as techno is championed as an intellectual music to be listened to, not danced to. (66–67)

These assertions are supported with a few citations from techno websites making mention of Henry and a few French and British newspaper articles referring to him as a "grandfather" or "father" of techno musicians. But one has to wonder at the generality of the claims. If they are true of some of "today's DJs and remixers," they are clearly not true of a great many others. Who, then, are we talking about? If the answer is "heterosexual suburban white men" who invoke the name of Pierre Henry, then a follow-up question is surely in order: Why be so selective, or, perhaps better, why place the emphasis here? Exploring even a little of the question posed by the title of the book's first chapter—"Will the Revolution Be Digitized?"—must lead us further afield than this. And without going very far, we find ourselves among musicians and fans of multiple races, genders, and sexual orientations. Taylor acknowledges as much, which makes the argument somewhat baffling. If the point is that "many techno musicians seek forbears as a way of grounding themselves in a legitimate tradition"

(66), why limit the discussion to a "tradition" that is peripheral to most pop fans' (and artists are fans, too) experience? Is this a case of the marginal telling us more about the center than the center itself can convey? Or is it the distortion of a prism skewing the story in a desired direction? Yes, some techno artists count Pierre Henry as at least an ideological or spiritual forbear, an exotic "art music" uncle. (This may, of course, be as much a matter of image construction as musical affinity.) What these recordists have in common with Henry is the medium of sound recording and a similar attitude toward "communication." To this extent, the conceptual connection is clear; but the evidence of specific musical connections points just as clearly in another direction. For virtually all of the bewildering array of musics that fall under the "electronica" umbrella owe their groove to a pop lineage whose aesthetic foundations can also be traced to the 1950s.

Like the composers/technicians of *musique concrète*, the early recordists of rock and roll used technology to make musical works in unfamiliar ways. But unlike the abstraction of *musique concrète*, and perhaps more subversively, rock and roll embraced conventional music making even as it transformed it. Rock and roll distinguished itself from the musics it borrowed from—R&B, country, jazz, gospel, pop—in its acceptance of the recording medium as a central element not simply of distribution, but of artistic identity. Unlike their precursors, rock and roll records did not simply insinuate technology into musical composition and performance. Rather, in their often rude commingling of music and technology they proudly foregrounded their own artifice. If technological manipulation in music recording had previously been like the machinations of the wizard behind the curtain, here was a brash new music that flung the curtain open, challenging sonic conventions just as it did social ones. Furthermore, advances in recording technology offered musicians a strange, yet tempting new possibility for making music. The practice of overdubbing allowed a musician to self-accompany, to create a virtual ensemble from multiple passes of the same piece of tape. Though for many the whole idea ran counter to a cherished notion of authentic musical performance and was viewed as a gimmick or a sham, the practice caught on and came to be commonplace. The "one-man-band"—or small group—aspect of techno is a vestige of the work done by Les Paul early on (1951), followed by the likes of Paul McCartney (1970), Todd Rundgren (1972), Stevie Wonder (1972), and Prince (1980), each of whom has used technology to turn themselves into a "band."

Working with drum machines, synthesizers, sequencers, and samplers became a widespread practice in the 1980s. In the pop mainstream a new, machine-friendly genre known as synth-pop emerged in the U.K. bearing

the influences of disco, rap, and—though few at the time would admit it—progressive rock. In both their sounds and their grooves, synth-pop musicians in groups of two or three took increasing advantage of the revolution in digital technology as it became ever more feasible to have a "band" that consisted mostly of machines.[6] Two-person groups like Eurhythmics, Yaz, and Tears for Fears went to the top of the charts. And as Howard Jones proved in an impressive run of solo success, even just one person with a handful of synths could not only make hit records but provide a live stage show as well. Contemporaneously, at the margins, a music its creators called "techno" was developing a distinctive presence through recordings released by independent musicians working in and around Detroit. Again, the music was made by individuals and small groups working with machinery. Acknowledging its stylistic roots, one of techno's founders, Derrick May, characterized the music as "George Clinton and Kraftwerk stuck in an elevator" (Savage 1993). Electronica records in general, and certainly the ones that Taylor discusses, all partake of this pop music legacy. Of course, in attempting to carve out their own cultural place, artists may define themselves in terms that minimize the influences of immediate forbears. Appealing to an older, more "mythical" influence is a common rhetorical gambit among artists of all sorts. And that appeal is instructive as to the artists' aesthetic stances and the rhetoric of identity construction. But the "music itself"—and in the case of records, the sounds themselves—offers its own compelling evidence, which must be factored into any interpretation of artists' statements.

The following chapter, "Men, Machines, and Music in the Space-Age 1950s," briefly traces the rise of "commodity scientism" (76) in postwar America,[7] with an eye out for the "anxiety and ambivalence" (72) that attended the public's fascination with new technologies of all sorts. As the discussion moves to music, the technological marvels at issue are hi-fi stereo and the LP record. Space-age pop featured sophisticated musical arrangements, often for full orchestra, that were recorded, mixed, and marketed so as to highlight the sonic prowess of the home hi-fi system. The records that Taylor cites all make programmatic reference to modern technology in some way, as evinced in their album art, track titles, and liner notes. The music, however, is scripted composition that relies on a much older technology: musical notation. Indeed, Les Baxter, one of the prominent composer/arrangers of the genre, refers to himself as a composer of "concert music."[8] Bobby Christian's *Strings for a Space Age* (1959) features cover art that depicts a rocket blasting off, yet contains string arrangements of "Out of Nowhere," "How High the Moon," and "Autumn in New York." The occasional appearance of a Theremin or the overlay of some echo or reverb effect is an addition to the timbral palette, but the aim of

the sonic representation is high fidelity. Thus, space-age pop's claim to a technological aura—that is the infusion, rather than the overlay, of a technological ethos—is apparent not so much in the music but in the sophisticated recording and mixing techniques that sought to maximize the transparency of the listening experience available on the home hi-fi.

Here again, rock and roll records represent a far more radical sonic rhetoric with no pretense of aural transparency whatsoever. A great many of them, whether intentionally or because of limited resources or technical ineptness, are the epitome of lo-fi. And their primary medium of dissemination, AM radio, played its own part in a listening experience that completely distorted acoustic reality. As the sound gained widespread acceptance, its influence on listeners became evident in a gradual redefinition of standards of audio quality. A "good" sound came to be understood as one that was somehow distinctive in itself, rather than an accurate representation of some acoustic ideal. Think, for example, of the distorted guitar on the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" (1965), the phased and filtered vocals that open Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" (1975), or the crushing drums of Peter Gabriel's "The Intruder" (1980). Each of these takes a general timbral type and shapes it in a quite specific way. Making a pop record came to involve the crafting of a unique sonic world, an aim that remains fundamental—and especially so for electronica.

As a project in iconography, this chapter is quite interesting. Taylor presents evidence of "anxiety and ambivalence" toward the brave new world in the form of album cover art juxtaposing images of space-age technology and "beautiful women . . . always exotic, always threatening, and always tempting" (93). The gendered iconic rhetoric that equates men with technology and (often barely clad) women with space or the atom bomb is an instructive window into part of the social matrix of America in the 1950s. Likewise the identification of men with "complex hi-fi technology" (80). But the 1950s technology that would seem more germane to Taylor's study is the portable radio and the 45-rpm single. Neither of these were identified primarily with men or women. They were the province and the liberation of teenagers. If fidelity was low and the sound mono, the sense of empowerment was great for a generation of adolescents who had the money to pay for the music they liked and the technologies enabling musical mobility, which insulated their listening habits from adult control. With such devices as car radios and portable record players, young people shaped their own musical worlds in their rooms, their cars, their parties. Insofar as Taylor seeks to probe sources and causes of anxiety and ambivalence about technology, the social tumult associated with rock and roll—from racial integration of the pop airwaves to the growing generation gap—would seem to be a fruitful place to look.

In the last of the three chapters in this second section, entitled "Technostalgia," speculation turns to the reasons for exotica's resurgent popularity. Taylor finds fans' attraction to the genre voiced in terms of the "anthropological project" of collecting rare recordings, in terms of youth rebellion (since for today's young generation mainstream rock represents their parents' music), and in an appreciation of the music's sophisticated arrangements. But there's another dimension to the resurgence, I think, one that points to yet another vestige of the rock and roll legacy, namely, the aesthetic of the absurd. Rock and roll is infused with an absurdity—a reveling in the irrational and the meaningless—whose power to annoy the status quo is neatly exemplified in the famous Frank Sinatra diatribe in which he characterized rock and roll as

> . . . the most brutal, ugly, degenerate, vicious form of expression it has been my displeasure to hear . . . It fosters almost totally negative and destructive reactions in young people. It smells phony and false. It is sung, played and written for the most part by cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiterations of sly, lewd—in plain fact dirty—lyrics . . . it manages to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth.[9]

To try to imagine what sounds might have elicited Sinatra's vitriol we might think of the distorted racket of Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog" (1956); the hysterical melodrama of Screamin' Jay Hawkins's "I Put a Spell on You" (1956); the baby-talk vocal and the trashy guitar solo of Buddy Holly's "Peggy Sue" (1957), not to mention the comical, wait-for-it harmonic shift in the bridge; or the pitiable yet catchy tale of teenage heartbreak that is Leslie Gore's "It's My Party" (1963). Each of these more or less canonic tracks derives a certain portion of its charm and lasting importance as an exemplar of the pop aesthetic from its embrace of an absurdity encompassing music, words, and sounds. With rock and roll, the absurd moves out of the confines of the novelty song to effect a reordering of what constitutes rationality. The meaningless, the incongruous, and the just-plain-stupid burst forth with unprecedented force in the "mass infantilism and bad taste that was early Rock and roll" (Early 1995:25). It dismayed adults, but the sense of recklessness and bold abandon such behavior embodied became a touchstone for pop music thereafter. The rock critic Lester Bangs probably would have agreed with Sinatra, in a way, but for Bangs the music's supposed faults were in fact its strength. In an epiphany over the Count Five's *Psychotic Reaction* (1966), he once wrote that "grossness [is] the truest criterion for rock and roll, the cruder the clang and grind the more fun and longer listened-to" the record would be (Bangs 1987:10). Exotica was not

aimed at teenagers, but its rapid fade from a modest popularity was due in large part to what was viewed as a sort of B-movie bad taste. And this is precisely why it has once again found a following. It took some decades for a pop audience to work through various authenticity/identity scenarios and come finally to the point of such informational "plenitude" (McCracken 1997) that some would seek freshness wherever they might find it. But when they were ready, listeners for whom the musically absurd is merely another aspect of a multivalent aesthetic—that is, pop fans—found the cheesy charm of exotica waiting for them.

Exotica's revival is in some ways reminiscent of the growing fascination with the producer Joe Meek and the continuing influence of Phil Spector. Joe Meek was an English recording engineer and producer who made records in his apartment often using novel recording techniques and home-made sound processing devices. He, too, had a thing for space, and in 1962 he wrote and produced an instrumental track inspired by the launch of Telstar, the experimental AT&T communications satellite. Played by Meek's house band at the time, the Tornados, whose lineup was augmented by Meek's partner Geoff Goddard on clavioline, "Telstar" is a scrumptious piece of pop absurdity that became a worldwide hit. It reached #1 in both England and the U.S. The track begins and ends with electronically manipulated sounds meant to evoke the static of extraterrestrial communication. In between is a kitsch anthem with its own special beauty, a song of optimistic celebration uttered in the unearthly voice of the clavioline. For his part, Spector, in track after track that he called "little symphonies for the kids," developed a conception of recorded sound whose textural substance was wholly dependent on technological mediation. And though the arrangements are overstuffed and the lyrics repeatedly voice the vicissitudes of teenage romance (Darlene Love's "[Today I Met] The Boy I'm Gonna Marry" or the Crystals' "He Hit Me [It Felt like a Kiss]"), there is a slightly weird grandeur to the sound of the tracks that subsumes the corniness of it all in expressive gestures whose appeal has proven lasting.

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Among the ideas explored in the third, and strongest, section of *Strange Sounds* are global music trafficking, ownership, identity, ritual, and community as glimpsed in examples of music by Enigma (Michael Cretu), Banco de Gaia (Toby Marks), Muslimgauze (Bryn Jones), and the Goa/psychedelic trance scene in which the author did fieldwork. In "A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery" (chapter 6), Taylor recounts the fascinating tale of Michael Cretu's sampling of a song performed by an Ami (Taiwan) couple named

Kuo Ying-nan and Kuo Shin-chu. The song was called "Jubilant Drinking Song" and was included on a collection of recordings made at different times and places and released on CD by the Ministère de la Culture et de la Francophonie/Alliance Francaise as part of a collection called *Polyphonies vocales des aborigènes de Taïwan.* Some pieces in the collection were recorded during a European tour (in which the Kuos took part) co-sponsored by the French and Taiwanese governments for which the musicians were paid fifteen dollars per day; others were field recordings made by a Taiwanese ethnomusicologist. The resulting Enigma track, "Return to Innocence"—which uses the entire "Jubilant Drinking Song"—was a massive hit in both Europe and the U.S., leading ultimately to a lawsuit by the original musicians and a new recording by them incorporating—what else?—synthesizers and drum machines. After the Enigma track became a hit, the Kuos went into a Taipei studio and recorded an album's worth of material (including the by now proven hit "Jubilant Drinking Song"), and then sent the tracks to the Belgian producer Dan Lacksman for mixing and technofication. (Lacksman is best known as the producer for the techno duo of Eric Mouquet and Michel Sanchez, who go by the name Deep Forest.) The resulting album, *Circle of Life,* became a hit in both Taiwan and Japan.

Taylor mines the messiness of this tale to comment on issues of musical ownership, Western attitudes toward "the primitive," and the ways in which digital technology works not only to split "sonic signifiers from their signifieds and from their makers," but also to allow "the original makers of these musical signs [to find] ways of bringing them home" (135). One might also note the inadequacy of institutions and laws in the face of the global and instant music traffic that is now the norm. It appears that everything involved with the making of "Return to Innocence" was done legally as far as Cretu's part is concerned. His publishing company licensed the rights from the Maison des Cultures du Monde for 30,000 francs, half of which was paid to the Chinese Folk Arts Foundation. (In this case, these two bodies are in effect "the record company," and as is common among record companies, seeing the monies distributed equitably has apparently been something less than a priority.) Clearly, however, current laws, enforcing institutions, and even the ethics of cultural exchange are not equipped to deal with the competing interests of commerce, art, and ideology in a world where music in material form travels rapidly across the globe and turns up in places its original makers neither intended nor imagined.

The Kuos' story is a classic example of how the music business—capitalism, for that matter—has always worked. Those who manage to grasp power exercise it to their benefit until forced into more equitable deal-

ings. Assuming that there is no criminal activity involved, power is wielded according to the rules of a game set forth in laws, protocols, and habits. Digital connectivity adds more players—and sometimes in transnational dealings, contradictory rule-sets—to the game. In the midst of a complex and competitive cultural economy, there is little point in criticizing artists, as some have done, for exercising their imaginations through appropriation. The English "bands" Banco de Gaia and Muslimgauze also use samples of music taken from far afield. Regarding Banco de Gaia, Taylor speculates that "it might be possible to interpret [Toby Marks's] use of [sampled] Tibetan music as not unrelated to Chinese treatment of Tibet and Tibetans." But such an interpretation, which characterizes the work as an "imperial project" (153), would miss the point. Artists are society's court jesters, and they serve the function that jesters always have. At their best, they challenge everyone's cherished beliefs, icons, and attitudes. They expose formulations of authenticity and integrity as endlessly subjective, self-serving projects. They pierce assumptions; they undermine pretense; they call into question the very idea of taste and, as such, they have a place in a society's conscience. Attempts to limit the scope of their challenge are ongoing—they are a fundamental concern, for instance, of most totalitarian regimes; closer to home we had the Parents' Music Resource Center—but they are always a bad idea. The job of attending to fair distribution of monies earned or the integrity and preservation of a particular musical tradition is the job not of artists, but of administrators, lawyers, accountants, politicians, scholars, and institutions. Meanwhile, expect artists to behave as opportunists—sometimes naïve, sometimes cynical, often (thankfully) incorrect, inconvenient, or incoherent. If it seems slightly nutty and quite cynical, as it does to me, for middle-class English musicians to construct public images that incorporate, and in a sense trade on, far away political conflicts, well, so be it.

The association of the solo members of Banco de Gaia and Muslimgauze with Tibetan and Palestinian causes respectively—while at the same time obscuring their own actual identities—is but one aspect of the deep artifice of this music. Taylor points out that their use of samples not only splits signifier from signified, but may reconfigure the sense of a sound altogether. Removing samples from any affective context they may have had, treating them "as extremely aestheticized bits of sound (that is, snippets of sound for sound's sake)" (150), the artists use the sounds to create new affective contexts. Toby Marks, for instance, speaks of a technique whereby "you distort the sample to such an extent that it's not recognizable" (151). Yet stripped of their associative function, the samples participate in making new meanings. In a refreshingly ethnographic response to theories of postmodernism claiming the impossibility of "definitive hearing or inter-

pretation" due to the "fragmentary" and "depthless" nature of such ungrounded artistic expression, Taylor points to fans of the music: "For these fans, this music isn't necessarily postmodern in the Jamesonian sense of depthlessness, or mere pastiche; they don't often hear the samples as decontextualized or aestheticized, but as things that contribute to the meaning and coherence of the songs" (157–58). Indeed, in their new context the sounds take on a new rhetorical identity. Listeners, unaware of a prior source, assume that the sounds originate with the track at hand, for that is what their own experience tells them. Thus, in a process that may repeat again and again, samples undergo a transformation from copy to "original." As the sound is cut loose from its origins, it assumes a new "origin" and takes its place in a new rhetorical scheme.

In Taylor's chapter on the Goa/psychedelic trance "little culture" in New York (chapter 8), we move from the "postconcert and postsocial" (144) world of the solo studio composer to the communal "vibe" (174ff.) of the all-night dance party. Challenging theories of youth subcultures that "seem to have been written without reference to what people are actually doing" (180), Taylor frames the rave in terms of theories of religion and ritual borrowed from Émile Durkheim and Victor Turner. He notes that while his approach seems to run counter to views that commonly depict youth subcultures as clustering around expressions of resistance or opposition to a dominant culture, he is "not abandoning politics that have traditionally preoccupied youth subculture theorists" (181). Rather, he is attempting to expand the analytical perspective to account for what he observes in the Goa/psy trance experience: not resistance but communion, vibe. Indeed, the "little culture" formulation itself "helps move beyond the deeply essentialist assumptions of youth subculture theory" towards a view that "emphasizes the multiplicity and diversity" of cultural groups "that are relatively whole in and of themselves," not simply rebellious subsets (179).

Digital technology plays a central part in the Goa/psy trance little culture; its fans "have embraced technology" (191) even as they identify with age-old practices. In addition to connecting via the internet, they gather and move to the repetitive beat and melodic fragments supplied by synthesizers, samplers, and drum machines. Dancers—many seeking a heightened state of consciousness—join in a communal experience of exaltation termed "ecstasy" by Turner, or "collective effervescence" by Durkheim. Music composed of digitized sounds and inscribed in digital media is the enabler of the transcendent vibe that engulfs the dancers in a state that is somehow felt to be "natural." Thus technology—artifice—takes on an organic quality through the agency and beliefs of those embracing it. "Goa/psy trance people attempt to naturalize technology, turn it into something ancient and inevitable" (191). Consider the rhetoric quoted from the liner

notes from a trance CD:

> The all-night dance ritual is a memory that runs deep within us all, a memory that takes us back to a time when people had respect for our great Mother Earth and each other. A time when we came together to dance as one tribe united in spirit, We understood the cycles of nature and the power of the elements. We danced around great fires, we chanted and we drummed, invoking the great spirit to empower ourselves and our community. . . . They worked hard to eradicate the memory of the dance ritual but it remained as a seed deep within us all, to emerge one day in a new age, the age of Technology. (191)

Taylor is well on track in this chapter, I think. His report on the Goa/psy trance scene argues against the kind of ambivalence toward "technology and musicking" (173) expressed by writers such as Charles Keil and Christopher Small, which insists that live music is essential for social interaction. Keil sees "what happens in recording studios as a classicizing, perfecting, dream-world thing, and that takes it away from the dancers, which takes it away from the public space, the streets, clubs" (Keil and Feld 1994:158). Small, seemingly never very happy with recorded music, argues that

> the disc which can be held in the hand, is bought and sold like any other commodity and exists, at least potentially, permanently, is still, from the point of view of Afro-American musicians and their audience, including the vast contemporary audience for rock and pop music, only a way of disseminating the performance more widely; . . . for them it is disposable, to be thrown away when its usefulness is finished, to make room for new creations. (Small 1998:244)

For those who live with mechanized music, these comments have a hollow ring. Many hip-hop and techno musicians have vast record collections, which form a kind of repository of cultural history that encompasses style, aesthetics, politics, and memory—in short, tradition. It is in this sense that Public Enemy's Hank Shocklee refers to his brother Keith as "know[ing] records like an encyclopedia" (Moon 1991:70). The machine is what it has always been: an implement. As Taylor notes, it only gains whatever value it has through the use people make of it. There is a symbiotic flow between human and machine that is felt by musician, listener, and dancer—something like Taylor's rapprochement between technological determinism and

voluntarism. Whether or not it's part of an intermediate stage on the way to what a recent book calls our post-human future, I don't know (Fukuyama 2002). But as of now, the pleasure of the aesthetic experience, whether solitary or communal, is undiminished by the latest technology. Whether the pulse beats to a drum or a drum machine, the human energy generated by desire, memory, imagination, and social interaction subsumes the circumstantial particulars. "Technology, however awe inspiring and anxiety producing it may seem to be upon its introduction into the realm of human social life, quickly becomes part of social life, naturalized into quotidian normality as it helps people do things they have always done: communicate, create, labor, remember, experience pleasure, and, of course, make and listen to music" (206).

Many cultural theorists make an appearance in *Strange Sounds*, but it is the inclusion of fans' and musicians' perspectives that gives the book its sense of life. The recurring themes of process and agency bring into the picture a set of issues that mediate the theoretical by the actual, and often present a view more resonant with real world practices. One such case is Taylor's take on "cultural democracy" (161). He rightly points out that the idea of technology as an enabler of a sort of cultural equal opportunity is best engaged with specific cases before us. What we see is the marked change both in techniques of music making—many obviating traditional ideas of musical skill—and in access to those techniques held out by the proliferation of low-cost technology driving a do-it-yourself ethic among dance/electronica musicians. (The phenomenon, however, is certainly not limited to these genres.) The idea continues to grow that anyone, given the desire to, can make records. Fans, too, are invited to visit websites where they can remix artists' tracks from their own computers. And, of course, anyone with a playback device may choose the music for the moment, even rearrange the order of tracks on an album or make unique compilations of their favorites. Taylor points out that the situation personifies Jacques Attali's formulation of "'composition,' in which people make their own music for their own reasons and pleasure" (162). This is one of digital music's more intriguing prospects. Both recordists and listeners have a power over their personal musical experiences that is unprecedented to the point that the distinction between the two may become quite blurred. In a DIY world, we are forced to reexamine concepts of "artist" and "audience" that have held for at least five hundred years.[10] A similar idea was floated by Glenn Gould in a 1966 article for *High Fidelity* in an essay that resonates with many of the topics in *Strange Sounds*:

> At the center of the technological debate, then, is a new kind of listener—a listener more participant in the musical experience.

The emergence of this mid-twentieth-century phenomenon is the greatest achievement of the record industry. For this listener is no longer passively analytical; he is an associate whose tastes, preferences, and inclinations even now alter peripherally the experiences to which he gives his attention, and upon whose fuller participation the future of the art of music waits.

He is also, of course, a threat, a potential usurper of power, an uninvited guest at the banquet of the arts, one whose presence threatens the familiar hierarchical setting of the musical establishment. Is it not, then, inopportune to venture that this participant public could emerge untutored from that servile posture with which it paid homage to the status structures of the concert world and, overnight, assume decision-making capacities which were specialists' concerns heretofore?

The keyword here is "public." Those experiences through which the listener encounters music electronically transmitted are not within the public domain. One serviceable axiom applicable to every experience in which electronic transmission is involved can be expressed in that paradox wherein the ability to obtain in theory an audience of unprecedented numbers obtains in fact a limitless number of private auditions. Because of the circumstances this paradox defines, the listener is able to indulge preferences and, through the electronic modifications with which he endows the listening experience, impose his own personality upon the work. As he does so, he transforms that work, and his relation to it, from an artistic to an environmental experience. . . .

. . . It is my view that in the electronic age the art of music will become much more viably a part of our lives, much less an ornament to them, and that it will consequently change them much more profoundly.

If these changes are profound enough, we may eventually be compelled to redefine the terminology with which we express our thoughts about art. Indeed, it may become increasingly inappropriate to apply to a description of environmental situations the word "art" itself—a word that, however venerable and honored, is necessarily replete with imprecise, if not in fact obsolete, connotations.

In the best of all possible worlds, art would be unnecessary. Its offer of restorative, placative therapy would go begging a patient. The professional specialization involved in its making would be presumption. The generalities of its applicability would be an affront. The audience would be the artist and their life would be

art. (Gould 1984:347, 353)

These thoughts undoubtedly struck many at the time as strange. And perhaps they still do. But along the byways of the digital world explored in *Strange Sounds*, the wheels of Gould's vision are already in motion. Under headphones, in their own private worlds of musical sound, listeners control what they hear and when they hear it. On desktop computers around the world, music is created and distributed completely outside the influence or control of mainstream media outlets. A current MP3 player (the "MadPlayer" from Mad Waves) offers not only hours of music storage, but a built-in music construction set of beats and loops, as well as a microphone input for vocals; if no pre-recorded music quite suits the listener's mood, they have the means to create something themselves. Technology continues both to influence habits of musical use and to empower users to assert their musical individuality. In the process, aesthetic criteria and conceptual formulations of music's place in culture are being reconfigured. Stay tuned.

Notes

1. See, for example, Born (1995), Eisenberg (1987), Jones (1992), Kahn and Whitehead (1992), Théberge (1997), and Zak (2001).

2. Such stylistic designations as "techno" and "trance" refer to more or less distinct musical styles and scenes. There is, however, much overlap among them in musical and technological resources, in compositional techniques, and in modes of audience identification/participation. The general term "electronica" is often used to refer to the overall complex of electronic dance music. My terminology mirrors Taylor's usage.

3. In addition to space and technology, exotica—also known as "lounge music"—includes a range of kitschy evocations of far-off lands and cultures.

4. "Little culture" is a term borrowed from Grant McCracken, who makes several appearances in the course of *Strange Sounds*. It refers to "cultures that are relatively whole in and of themselves" (13).

5. Throughout this argument, the position of "German" composers is, for the most part, represented by Boulez.

6. The digital marvels of the early 1980s include the NED Synclavier, the Fairlight, and the Emulator samplers; the Lexicon 224 digital reverb simulator and the Lexicon PCM 42 digital delay; the Linn-Drum and Oberheim DMX drum machines; and the Yamaha DX-7 synthesizer, the affordable price of which made FM synthesis available on a mass-market scale.

7. Taylor borrows this term from Smith (1982).

8. For Baxter's repeated references to this, including comments on his *Music out of the Moon* album (which Taylor cites), see Baxter (1995).

9. This version of the quote was taken from http://www.sammydavis-jr.com/Pages/read/ode/ode3.htm [June 16, 2003].

10. "DIY" (do-it-yourself) is a rallying acronym for independent musicians working outside the major record label mainstream.

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