

Dolly's Laugh: A Meditation on Recorded Excess

Ruari Paterson-Achenbach and Sophie Marie Niang

Abstract

This creative response is an attempt to understand our long-standing obsession with moments that feel like they shouldn't be in song recordings but somehow remain. Written over the course of a few months, our dialogue responds to a desire to understand whether there is any meaning to these obsessions, whether they can teach us about sounds, the musicians that produce them, and the audience that receives them. We want to call attention to what is usually discarded—what happens before, after, in-between, or on top of—moments in excess of the track that break the performative bargain and reveal the multiple possibilities always contained within performance. This is accompanied by a sound piece combining the recorded moments mentioned in the piece, looping over and against each other.

Keywords: Excess, Recording, Performance, Mistakes, Freedom, Laughter

Dear Sophie,

I've been thinking about what you said the other day, about those moments before, in the middle of, and just after the performance where something more than the performance itself happens. You mentioned the recording with Dolly Parton and Chet Atkins singing "Do I Ever Cross Your Mind?" He's pretty old at this point, and he sings the wrong lyrics, and she just starts giggling before giving one of the best guitar solos of all time. When they finish, she laughs so beautifully and says "I love you." It's funny because this laugh, this performative demeanor is such a huge part of her as a beloved celebrity, but we never hear it in her songs, which are always so polished and pristine. The laughter breaks this, but it's still her performative personality, we're not entirely through yet. Philip Auslander talks about "Musical Personae," the construction (or imposition) of a sonic and visual identity that comes into being through the interaction of performer, audience, and context (2006). He wrote "when we hear a musician play, the source of the sound is a version of that person constructed for the specific purpose of playing music under particular circumstances", and that some performances fail "because there was no working consensus, no agreement as to what was supposed to happen and who was authorized to make crucial decisions." (2006, 102, 108). This agreement or consensus is what I want to call the "performative bargain," and maybe these failures or moments in excess of the agreement are what I desire, what I'm seeking. "Performance" is happening all the time and each stage has its own rules. We're discussing people who have constructed something that we also construct constantly in our relationships with them, their voices and sounds. I find myself craving more of these moments where something slips and we're let into the world beyond personae and the fabrication of it all

(although increasingly I'm not sure where to draw the boundary between these aspects and what the "real thing" even consists of). You know when you can tell someone has a crush on a person they're speaking to and they can't stop smiling or giggling or turning their eyes away because they can't look them in the eye for too long without being overwhelmed. I want to feel like that when I listen.

Anyway, send me what you have. I wonder if there's something in these moments that allows us to access these specific intimacies, which evade or exceed what is deemed possible. Enough for now.

Warmest,
Ruari

Dear Ruari,

I was struck by the line in your note about finding yourself craving more. I wonder if being drawn to these moments of excess, these slippages is motivated in part by a desire to see people fail, to catch them out, to get more from them than what they have consented to. We know that anything we are getting is part of this musical persona (thank you for sharing the concept), yet we believe we might be able to see beyond it, like the Connie Converse recording which starts with her asking the room not to record. I think here, too, of Simon and Garfunkel in Central Park stealing glances at each other, alternating, during the entire performance, until finally, their gazes meet, and one of them laughs. It's a tiny laugh, I think it's embarrassment? There is also that moment during *The Boxer* where Art begins singing way too early and then catches himself. As I was looking up the video again to write this, I stumbled upon an old forum (paul-simon.info), specifically a page entitled "garfunkel's mistake," from 2008, where people discuss exactly this moment. I thought I'd send you a screenshot because the discussions are quite similar to what we've been thinking about. I find it very interesting that the first post in the thread says that this somehow gives Paul Simon a positive point and Art Garfunkel a negative one because then all the subsequent posts seem to want to prove that Paul Simon makes mistakes too! And again, surfacing throughout is this idea that perceived loss of control on stage somehow brings us closer to artists' true selves and "makes them more human."

Headline

garfunkel's mistake

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Author

mikel
Feb-22-2006, 18:48 GMT
IP:
Spain


Comment

In the 81 central park concert, in the begining of "**The Boxer**", garfunkel did a mistake and startes singing very early. Paul watched him and started to laugh, didn't it?
I think that's and other negative point to AG and a positive one to PS!! ;)

[Login to reply](#) [Readers: 2008]

Kuno
Feb-22-2006, 20:16 GMT
IP:
Switzerland


Don't forget the mistake on BOTW, where Artie sings "ease your mind" on the second verse... I still don't know if this was a mistake or if he did it on purpose.

[Login to reply](#) [Readers: 2008]

Nikki
Feb-23-2006, 02:04 GMT
IP:
Canada


The false start on **The Boxer** is cute! And in the middle of the song, I think Art does something wrong again because Paul looks at him and looks and sounds like hes about to laugh...

[Login to reply](#) [Readers: 2008]

Klausl
Feb-23-2006, 06:54 GMT
IP:
Germany


Most of you know the 1975 Simon and Garfunkel Live-Version of **The Boxer** at SNL. Except Simon's guitar-playing not a masterpiece of harmony-singing.

Garfunkel missed the "...no it isn't strange..." -verse and then took his hand to his ear as sign of embarrassment.

Simon was smiling.

[Login to reply](#) [Readers: 2008]

Julie
Feb-23-2006, 09:20 GMT
IP:
United Kingdom


Simon makes mistakes too....
During the YTO tour at Liverpool....can't remember which song it was now....but it had to be restarted because ...if I remember rightly...one of the guitars was in the wrong tuning.

[Login to reply](#) [Readers: 2008]

Klausl
Feb-23-2006, 09:57 GMT
IP:
Germany


The song was "**Love**" and only shortly before integrated into the show.


In Frankfurt 2002 he sang one wrong line in "The Sound of Silence".

In CP 1991 he sang "looking (instead of thinking) back to the season before, looking back..." on **Hearts And Bones**.

With good stereo-equipment you can hear it was corrected in the studio. And on TV he was not on spot in that moment.

Also the first slow verse (Sunny sits by his window and... until "cages") on **The Obvious Child** was replaced. He was so nervous and sang shaky. You can also hear it. And see how nervous he was at the beginning.

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Emily
Feb-25-2006, 15:10 GMT
IP:
Denmark


I think that it's comforting when artists make mistakes on stage. and also when they have stagefright - it makes them more human.

[Login to reply](#) [Readers: 2008]

Mireille
Feb-25-2006, 16:50 GMT
IP:
France


I totally agree Emily. It gives something different of what we have on the CD (sometimes, to "cold", to flat).

[Login to reply](#) [Readers: 2008]

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Anyways, back to Central Park. By the time they did that gig, Simon and Garfunkel were not really on speaking terms. They'd broken up after *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, early in 1970.

Over the course of the decade, they reunited a few times, and by '78 they were closer again. So in 1980, when they were asked about a free reunion concert in Central Park, they said yes. They were never as good alone as they were together. And during the concert, I think you can

feel the proximity of two people who used to be one, and then weren't anymore. A resurfacing of intimacy, "the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this connection" (Jamieson 2011). It is this ineffable feeling that I catch in the excess of this specific performance, or rather what these glances enable me to think through.

I have a question for you: what do you think we learn about affect and performance in the slippages, especially I suppose in the recorded fuck ups (if I can call them that)?

Warmest,
Sophie

Dear Sophie,

It's hard to answer your question. Maybe it says something about us, the listeners, who are greedy for these perfect beings to do something wrong. We love them so much that when we see them show a flicker of humanity or fallibility whilst we venerate them, it reminds us of our shared, limited capacity. Humans make these things. Listeners and researchers are obsessive, and we become intertwined and fall in love with the things we study and consume. It's a different form of "authenticity" than we may desire from musical forms traditionally associated with working-class or minoritarian identities (what they say is "real" because they "really are"). Here it's a misbehaving authenticity, one which forms part of but also escapes the desired vision of the artist. The fallible person, part of the fabrication.

The one exception you mention is Connie, who never made it in her lifetime (she only did one public performance). We only have these recordings because her friend Gene Deitch recorded his house parties for posterity and sometimes she performed at them. She says something like, this one isn't ready yet I won't do it, and her friends say, it's alright we won't record it, and she says oh alright. This is a different kind of performative deal, performative bargain, one she was not party to. On the spectrum of authenticity and performativity, where does she stand? This is an ethical question; we really shouldn't be listening to her, but we're so glad we are. Isn't this so much of the research process? Unethically finding a way to engage with material we're not really supposed to, or at least that people couldn't imagine being engaged with in the way we do. Or as Stanyek and Piekut write, "being recorded means being enrolled in futures (and pasts) that one cannot wholly predict nor control" (2010). This desire is almost voyeuristic. In focusing on her moments of recorded excess, they become a pedagogical and diagnostic tool for other lines of inquiry. We realize what we are doing might be wrong, and we want it all the same.

One recording you showed me that I keep listening to is Joni Mitchell and James Taylor performing his song *You Can Close Your Eyes* live, somewhere in the UK and it's being broadcast live on the radio in London. She seems to have a penchant for laughing in songs,

maybe once intentionally (the end of *Big Yellow Taxi*) and a few times by accident. This is two years after she released her first album, the year before she released *Blue*, and two years after James released his first album and before he's made it really big. The concert is largely Joni songs, but this one sneaks in. She plays songs yet to be released, with *Carey*, *California*, and *You Can Close Your Eyes* being some kind of encore. I'm obsessed with encores, because it's like this strange extra space created within the gig that either necessitates tremendous anthemic joy or something more bare and naked. In a way, encores are a form of manufactured performative excess (at least when I go to gigs now). We're all in on the joke, we clap knowing they'll come back on for more with something pre-planned, but that gives the illusion of improvisation. A curated "something else" that we crave, which existed at some point in time. In the performance of *You Can Close Your Eyes* there's a spoken intro that goes something like this:

James & Joni [overlapping] - *so this is a ... / we're gonna finish now with a ...* [both end, audience laughs].

Joni - *this is a song that James wrote, a lullaby, it's really beautiful* [returning the guitar in the background, she starts singing *With A Little Help From My Friends*].

James - *it's such a comfort to have you up here*

Joni - *yeah I like having you up here too... why don't we form a duo?* [giggles]

James - *go to New York City* [also giggling]

Joni - *go to New York City, live in the Albert, struggle...*

[returning - the song starts - Joni still keeps laughing, I imagine them looking at each other, and he smiles in a way that makes her laugh].

It's as if they don't know what to do with themselves. They've already sort of made it, not big but they're fine. Yet to fully curate the characters we know them as, it's a rare moment where the vulnerability of the stage is brought attention to, and it forces them to joke but not really.

I'm losing my train of thought, so I should leave you by asking to hear more about fuck ups, intros, or outros, the moments which shouldn't be included by remain, accidentally or not.

Warmest, Ruari

Dear Ruari,

Something you didn't mention about the James and Joni performance is that before they start chatting, they're tuning their guitars, the room is laughing, and they're also trying to fill the space. And even when they begin to sing, she's still giggling, still struggling to take it entirely seriously. But when they start singing together then the atmosphere seems to change. Now, it is serious, now, it is moving. This is quite a melancholic tune, very earnest. I wonder if the meandering chats and giggling also arise from a certain timidity. In a sense, if the excess in the concert in Central Park played out between Simon and Garfunkel, if Connie's recorded excess is proof of the unethical, a record of her friend breaking the explicit agreement that was the precondition for the performance (you describe it as a different form of performative bargain, I think I'd go further and call it a betrayal), Joni and James's excess betrays an awareness of the public, one which the performative bargain seems to always erase or transform. Artists aren't supposed to be shy or embarrassed, are they? As a contrast, when Judee Sill speaks in her own live recordings in Boston, she's explaining the songs. She's speaking so quickly:

This song I just wrote a little while ago and hum.. Somebody told me they heard it on the radio today, it just came out two days ago. And hum... I wanted to write a song about this principle "the lower down you go to gain your momentum from, the higher up it will propel you," but I couldn't think of a way to say that poetically. And hum [swallows] I happened to stumble across this real obscure theological fact and that is that Jesus was a crossmaker. That really got me, when I heard that [speeds up] I knew I had to write a song about it. At the same time I was having a real unhappy romance with this guy who was a bandit and a heartbreaker and one day I woke up and I realized that "he's a bandit and a heartbreaker" rhymes with "but Jesus was a cross maker" and I knew that even that wretched bastard wasn't beyond redemption [the audience laughs, claps, she begins tugging at her guitar strings, softly] It's true, it's true, I swear... It saved me this song, it was this, writing this song or suicide you know [strums softly, twice]. It's called Jesus Was A Cross Maker and I, I hope you like it.

And of course this isn't a stolen moment, or a fuck up; she's just giving an explanatory preamble, one of these "song formulations" that are a fixture of singer-songwriter performances (Bealle 1993). Still, she's explaining at length, and at times it's like she's convincing the audience of something. She's not famous at this stage—although more successful than Connie, she never quite made it while she was alive. This is not a conquered audience; in fact, in many writings about her and in the documentary (Brown and Lindstrom 2022), it says that she wasn't very popular with audiences because she refused to play her part. She refused to be charming and lovely, she would fight with the audience, tell them to shut up, not cater to them. But I'm in awe of how earnest she is, how brave (or delusional) she feels to me in that moment: she embraces this vulnerability in a way that transforms into strength. Whatever fame Judee and Connie have now acquired is mostly posthumous, their cult following built after Connie disappeared and her work was rediscovered, after Judee died tragically at the age of 35. Both of these artists, like other favorites of ours who died young and left a finite amount of recordings behind, seem to attract this fervor (I'm thinking also of Arthur Russell). People write long books about them and crowdfund for

documentaries, while archival record labels put together collections of their unreleased recordings. And those of us who encounter these artists feverishly try to communicate our love for their work, the way we are enraptured by their sound, and the great injustice we think their lack of recognition constitutes. I remember at least three questions to the director after the screening of the Judee Sill documentary in London starting with some variation of “I must be one of her biggest fans.” Jonathan Sterne writes that “in every case of posthumous fame, audiences must negotiate their own understanding of the meaning of death within their understanding of the meaning of the medium” (2005). In this case, I wonder whether the premature death or disappearance of these artists, along with their (perceived) lack of adequate recognition, shifts our understanding of ourselves as listeners—somehow conditioning our relationship to the recorded material, and therefore, even more so, to the snippets of themselves which we believe we catch in these moments of excess.¹ Here, feeling like we’re getting to access another part of the performers becomes imbued with additional weight. Maybe, we think, this will help us understand them better, or act as a form of repair or redress... but of course this relationship is always fraught: we don’t know them better because we listened to Connie’s unauthorised recording, or because we were moved by Judee saying “it was writing this song or suicide.” Nevertheless, something happens in our longing.

I’ll end with a specific request: I would like you to speak about Nina, about her recorded excess(es).

Warmest,
Sophie

Dear Sophie,

I’m starting this on the same day you wrote to me, although I may not finish it. I was writing this at my desk, but there’s no window and I need to feel like there’s some more space in the world than here.

I love all the recordings we’ve mentioned so dearly. When listening to/watching them it’s like, you know when someone yawns or laughs and you involuntarily join them. You can almost trace the success of each person we’ve spoken about by their ability to behave well as an artist. How much they conformed, how little they let the masks slip, and how long they were alive to keep performing or not. This is at the core of the “performative bargain” which is only fully revealed when it’s broken. We feel like the immensely successful artists we’ve talked about are able to do this miraculously and without effort, but no one can do so forever. The failure to “perform” socially or musically has consequences. With Nina Simone, she refused to be the perfect artist her entire career, mainly because she was never allowed to be it in the first place. I find it uncomfortable the way her suffering is almost fetishized. She indeed was magnificent, and she indeed had an incredibly difficult life. Just because she “succeeded”

¹ Thank you to reviewer C for encouraging us to think more in depth about this aspect of the argument, and for recommending the Sterne reading.

doesn't negate this, nor does the magnificence of her refusal to be constrained by the racism and misogyny she experienced negate it either.

I'm thinking in particular of her performances at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1976. She's blistering, in utter control. She tells an audience member to shut up, she gets up and walks around in the middle of songs as her band plays, she improvises above and beyond the structures of the song. It's as if she's completely and utterly following instinct, what feels good and correct for her body beyond the sea of white European fans there to observe the great pianist who wasn't allowed to be a classical performer. Her performance of *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free* starts so hushed, a quiet stride piano plinky-plonk. Her voice emerges, and again it's like the song is a structured notion rather than a perfectly composed object, one she can move freely within. She goes from extremely quiet to extremely loud. We're left holding on the edge of our proverbial seats waiting and dying for some explosion. At moments she stops singing and hums, clicking her fingers, shimmering. The music misbehaves and evades aural capture. At the culmination of the song, she starts repeating "I already know" as her hands expand "I already know" encompassing the entire keyboard. *"I found out... how it feels... not to be chained... to any thing... to any race... to any faith... to any body... to any creed... to any hopes... to any, anything, I know how it feels to be free!"* And her piano almost explodes from the tension then all of a sudden it's over. She gets up and everyone starts clapping.

For me, the song is a pedagogical experiment in freedom. She's literally teaching us, in her responses, her intentions, her interruptions and movements, changing of pace and direction, what it actually *feels* like to be free. Even if it's for just a moment.

In a famous interview which always breaks me, she's asked about freedom and replies ("THE SUNDAY DICTIONARY / That's What She Said- Nina Simone on 'Freedom'" 2020):

*"It's just a feeling. It's just a feeling.
It's like, how do you tell somebody how it feels to be in love?
How are you going to tell anybody who has not been in love, how it feels to be in love?
You cannot do it to save your life. You can describe things, but you can't tell them.
But you know it when it happens. That's what I mean by free.
I've had a couple times on stage when I really felt free and that's something else.
That's really something else!
I'll tell you what freedom is to me: NO FEAR!
I mean really, no fear.
If I could have that half of my life. No fear.
Lots of children have no fear.
That's the only way I can describe it.
That's not all of it, but it something to really, really feel.
Like a new way of seeing.
Like a new way of seeing something."*

I've often wondered why we call live performances "live" performances. Are we implying that recordings are dead? Do things become dead when we can't alter them, but they still alter

us? Does “liveness” mean the possibility of imperfection? There’s something so wonderful about these misbehaving objects. They’re gifts we latch onto and hold, that we share in the feelings they inspire in us, that move us and take us out of the world. We may be decades apart, but we feel so close to them as we listen. Part of the journey with these fixations is just that the songs are so good and the sounds fill my soul, but these particular renditions turn on something more. I love them because, in part, I wish I was their friend. I am so curious about these people, and I want to know their hopes and sadness and give them consolation. Is that just vain? I want to be in their corner and reminisce with them, learn their ways. And sharing in these feelings is the closest thing we have. I can’t speak to Connie Converse, but I can listen to her music and imagine she did actually run away to the mountains and is maybe still there. I can dream of a freedom Nina is trying to teach us how to feel and try my hardest to reach it, for all of us. *No fear. I mean really, no fear. If I could have that half of my life. No fear.* What else is there for us to do but dream to have no fear?

Warmest,
Ruari

P.S. (*to the reader*): One of our reviewers pointed out, really helpfully, that the format of this creative response invited its own kind of performative bargain: you, the reader, accepted the performance we put on of sharing meandering thoughts with each other, and we pretended that they were written as a correspondence. And it is partially true; we did write the first draft of this piece around six months ago, writing to each other on a Google Doc. But then we read through the piece in full and edited each other’s sections, suggesting the other add some elements that we thought up but fit better within their section. Our reviewers thoughtfully went through this piece and pointed out places where we could flesh out our reflection and clarify a concept or two. They too, like the editors, are part of this conversation. But this performance, hopefully, enabled a different kind of contribution to an academic conversation—one that’s more tentative, more reflexive of the threads we pull at when trying to understand an obsession. Ultimately, this is all an illusion. We know there is no distinction between the true self and the performed self, no space where either is ever fully present or absent. The piece is about the desire to find something that doesn’t really exist. A feeling more than anything. In the audiovisual file attached to our writing, all these sonic moments have been meshed together. We wanted them to be heard as a coalition, an ode to the experiences that drove our fascination. We hope that they begin to make more sense and that you become fascinated with them too.

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