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## LIFE AND DEATH ON THE NEW YORK DANCE FLOOR 1980–1983

TIM LAWRENCE

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Cultural historian Tim Lawrence's first book *Love Saves the Day* adopted a chronological approach to East Coast disco's dramatic arc through the 1970s. Then his follow-up *Hold On to Your Dreams* widened the timeline, honing in on a valuable contributor to New York's downtown music scene—cellist and composer Arthur Russell. While *LStD* ranged widely across many spaces, DJs, artists, assorted characters and issues, the Russell biography was an intimate portrait of a key player, who died from AIDS-related complications in 1992.

*Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor 1980–1983* (henceforth *Life and Death*) is the third segment in Lawrence's New York project. Now he narrows the timeline and brings a forensic examination to just four years in the party scene. On the title, Lawrence explains, "the reference to life is intended to evoke the way that New York party culture didn't merely survive the hyped death of disco but positively flourished in its wake". And he clearly and convincingly argues that the short period was one characterised by a stirring artistic ferment, across music, art, dance and club space innovation. Lawrence explains: "instead of depicting the 1980–1983 period as a mere bridge that connected the big genre stories of 1970s disco and 1980s house and techno, I submitted to its kaleidoscope logic, took my foot off the historical metronome, and decided to *take it—the book—to the bridge*" (ix).

His excavation uses all available sources to bulk out the progression through the years across a variety of intersections, downtown and uptown; legal locations such as clubs and galleries, to homes, disused industrial spaces, drilled DJs to first comers, established genres such as disco and R&B and the fresh fusions, collisions and cross pollinations garnered from a quintessentially New York DIY outlook pickled by new keyboard and synthesizer,

recording and sound system technology. Lawrence's greatest resource is the many era participants happy to recall their exploits and share their knowledge. But early on he cautions, "Because the story of a person can never be fully re-created, it follows that the portraits developed here will inevitably appear slim, yet the broad intention is to show how the multitude of participants . . . helped create and in return received sustenance from a towering scene" (xii).

Lawrence begins with downtown's punk-art nexus, chronicling the opening of the Mudd Club and the lesser known Studio 57. Whereas Mudd promoter Steve Mass's White Street alternative to Studio 54 catered to a fashionable elite—including Andy Warhol—and in time built a strong reputation internationally, 57 was smaller, emphasizing bizarre happenings and intimate collisions. Soon-to-be influential artists of the era—Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and others—found their graffiti art and mixed-media explorations promoted and supported within these frenziedly creative spaces. To follow, scaling up, was Danceteria, which had floors dedicated to video and music. Soon Lawrence's attention turns to the subcultural happenings in African-American communities away from downtown, across the city in the Bronx, where discrete expressions—graffiti, breakdancing, rapping and DJing—were gradually pulling together and, in time, powering downtown and midtown venues such as Negril and the Roxy.

Having established the degree of (sub)cultural ferment, Lawrence launches a trenchant analysis of the post-disco formation. Honing in on the medium-to-large clubs—The Funhouse, Paradise Garage, The Saint, The Loft and Better Days—he illustrates time and time again that early 1980s New York seldom lacked a valid replacement to fin de siècle disco, hardcore punk and embryonic hip-hop. We are introduced to the key players: The Loft's David Mancuso again (although he is given a much less prominent role than in *LStD*); former rocker Mark Kamins; the fiercely exact groove-master of new R&B mixing Tee Scott; the progenitor of Latin hip-hop and electro funk dub John "Jellybean" Benitez; the richly creative Arthur Baker who realized the seminal "Planet Rock"; Tony Humphries who laid waste at the Zanzibar in New Jersey; radio mix-master deluxe Shep Pettibone; and the acknowledged genius of the day Larry Levan.

If *Life and Death* has a centre—and determined researcher Lawrence crafts horizontal accounts of cultural production wherever possible—then it has to be Levan. The author charts his ascent from jobbing DJ, to the visionary behind the Garage's legendary sound (with top audio designer of the period Richard Long), to master artist on the decks always re-shaping his eclectic track list, to remixer and producer of some of the R&B post-disco dubified classics of the day, and on, sadly, to his death, weakened by long-term heroin use. Lawrence does not get caught up in the mix too much, but the sections on the Levan peaks are strong, such as the story behind arguably the era's most throbbing, sublime track—the nine-minute remix of the Peech Boys' "Don't Make Me Wait". Insights, stories and gossip on Levan and Garage culture spill from participants eager to share memories.

A DJ—or, rather, a track selector as he never mixed records—David Mancuso can be viewed as a central thread, a solid presence through this fast-moving scene. His Loft club on Prince Street, although small, was still the favourite for many African- and Latin-American dancers, Mancuso's fierce attention to sound always the prime focus. Mancuso tells Lawrence why in 1983 he removed the mixer from his system: "Without the mixer there was a three-decibel increase in the sound, which was a lot. It was like I was 97 percent of the way up the mountain, and that last 3 percent made a big difference" (387). Mancuso and Levan were at opposites poles: Levan forever re-calibrating the music in line with his restless spirit on a system which would "break light bulbs in the apartment building next door (Bruce Forest interview, 388), while Mancuso's search for a sonic purity—a steady centre in the ecstasy of flow—was produced on an admittedly superlative but nevertheless home-sized system. And he never touched the tracks, wanting to remain true to the creator's vision.

Indeed, the Garage and Loft peaks chime with the heights of the downtown scene in general. Lawrence watches as the Mudd Club and other iconic locales lose their edge, and others such as The Roxy and Area come into vogue (this latter period also sees the emergence of Madonna). Readers may be surprised that relatively little time is awarded to major threats like the rise in hard drug consumption and the proliferating AIDS crisis. However, these key areas are judged contextually rather than given a life of their own. Towards the end of the riveting account, Lawrence senses, "Even when confronted by the spectre of decay and even death, New York's partygoers lived for the night – for the meeting of friends, for the embrace of strangers, for the performance, for the immersion, for the surge, for the scream" (457).

In summary, Lawrence reflects from a number of vantage points. He assesses that with the rise in rents and ongoing gentrification, fewer artists and alternative creatives could survive in downtown, and the political landscape became increasingly demoralising. Finally, as Lawrence draws his paean to the era's ethic of "democratic socializing" (461) to a close, he draws out parallel urban lives and deaths: "Clearly the task of redemocratizing New York and indeed other global cities remains daunting, yet the gathering desire to listen to music, dance, and engage creatively with a level of public freedom that was once taken for granted is visceral. Feeding the appetite for change, the downtown era and its scarcely believable level of activity attest that, given the right conditions, a different kind of city can exist" (483).

*Life and Death* is a major contribution to scholarship on cultural production. Its fine-slicing of a short, fruitful period in one great city's life helps better situate both well-known and little-known music cultures. Lawrence charts the dawn of electronic dance music with verve, detail and sensitivity. What's next for him?

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**OS DJS DA PERIFA:  
MÚSICA ELETRÔNICA, TRAJETÓRIAS E MEDIAÇÕES CULTURAIS EM SÃO PAULO**  
IVAN PAOLO DE PARIS FONTANARI

Porto Alegre: Sulina, 2013.  
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The DJs that Ivan Fontanari studies in *Os Djs da Perifa* (henceforth *The Periph DJs*) may be traced back to the dances that, in the early 1970s, started spreading across Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Salvador and Porto Alegre. These events gathered a mostly black young crowd from lower-class neighbourhoods who would dance to rhythm and blues derived genres played by the first Brazilian DJs. As African-American music evolved from soul to funk, Philly soul, disco and Euro-disco in the 1970s; to hip-hop, electrofunk, electro, house, garage, acid house and techno in the 1980s; and to jungle, drum 'n' bass, trap and dubstep in the 1990s, Afro-Brazilians picked on whatever African-American music they identified with and made it pivotal to their cultures.

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, DJ Nazz and others brought from Europe and the US the synth-pop, electrofunk, electro, Miami bass and Latin freestyle tracks that, subjected by *funkeiros* (funksters) and such DJs as Grandmaster Raphael to various processes in cities around the Guanabara Bay, gave rise to funk carioca, the first Brazilian genre of electronic dance music (see Palombini 2014). More restricted in popularity and influence, the group Fontanari studies rose from the working-class Zona Leste (henceforth East End) of São Paulo in the 1990s to gain notoriety at the turn of the century through the performances and productions of DJs Marky, Patife and Xerxes (a.k.a. XRS), who highlighted a subgenre of drum 'n' bass sometimes designated by the terms sambass, drum and bossa or bossa and bass.

Drum 'n' bass arose in the UK in the 1990s as a derivate of jungle, the first native genre of British electronic dance music, which emerged in the late 1980s. Between 1992 and 1993 drum 'n' bass reached Brazil (190–1), where a 1997 boom was followed by decline (204). Yet at the turn of the century Brazilian drum 'n' bass was back in the spotlight. Marky, Patife and Xerxes released albums, DJ mixes and singles on various formats (acetate, CD, vinyl) in Brazil and in the UK; the Italian label Cuadra distributed four double volumes of the *Sambass* compilations; and EMI included drum 'n' bass remixes by Brazilian DJs on the CD *Rewind*, a compilation of Wilson Simonal songs.

When Fontanari started fieldwork in 2005, the São Paulo techno and drum ‘n’ bass scene perceived itself as in danger. Three historical East End venues had closed their doors, and the relatively upscale nightclubs that catered for a white middle-class clientele in *the centre* were discontinuing techno and drum ‘n’ bass events. This did not pose a threat to Marky, Patife and Xerxes, who could pursue their careers elsewhere. The earlier generation though had not enjoyed the same amount of public recognition and depended on those venues for survival. By contrast, a new generation of aspiring professionals, to whom Marky and Patife had been inspirational, relied on menial jobs to earn their living while collaboratively staging parties in the periphery out of which their role models had come. Fontanari turns his attention to this group. He asks: “why were drum ‘n’ bass DJs the most prominent in Brazil if the genre was viewed as unappealing to the local market?”

The author has previously conducted ethnographic research into the white middle-class Porto Alegre rave scene. *The Periph DJs* derives from his 2008 doctoral dissertation in Social Anthropology, which won a National Arts Foundation Award for Critical Writing on Music in 2012. From May to December 2005 Fontanari participated in 27 parties and conducted 18 formal interviews in the course of which he came face-to-face with 22 DJs, a record-shop owner and a party promoter. He suggests that, “as they learn the mixing potential of the machine called mixer, DJs incorporate its properties while attributing to the machine creative powers undifferentiated from their own, in a process of biomechanical-symbolic feedback” (226).

Fontanari narrates how he built up the character of the ethnographer so as to become *another*—rather than *the other*—and thus conveniently circulate among periphery DJs and partygoers; among residents of the working-class neighbourhoods where periphery DJs and partygoers lived; among people in the unmarked territories periphery DJs and partygoers named *the centre*; and to cross these boundaries without attracting hostility or unwanted attention. The function of the periphery DJ is to “bring closer to the periphery a world of distant references through the performance of electronic music while promoting the distancing of themselves and their followers from the periphery world” (81). He explains: “For this reason, the most valued performances were those by periphery DJs who had followed the longest trajectories, individualizing and personalizing themselves to the utmost degree in relation to the periphery audience” (112).

This is Fontanari’s leitmotiv, which the reader follows through a set of anthropological methods systematically pursued: ethnography of periphery-DJ parties in the periphery and in the centre; semi-structured interviews with periphery DJs and a promoter working in the periphery; semi-structured interviews with periphery DJs and one record-shop owner working in the centre; analysis of technical devices in their relations to periphery DJs’ existence; and analysis of two drum ‘n’ bass hits released by periphery DJs in 2001. This leads him to the recognition of a direct relationship between the mixing potentials of drum ‘n’ bass/techno and the modes of interaction in the periphery/centre: “In the periphery there was collaboration between DJs. The centre was a place for individualized initiatives” (239).

However, “there were no mixes of drum ‘n’ bass with axé-music or pagode” (243).<sup>1</sup> Mixing and combining possibilities were defined by “ethnic signification, class signification and geopolitical signification” (243–4). At this point we come across a most intriguing trait of musical appropriation and re-signification processes within the African diaspora: Afro-Brazilians tend to associate such African-American genres as disco, house and techno to whiteness, whereas a Black-British genre such as drum ‘n’ bass retains persistent links to blackness (240–1).

*The Periph DJs* offers an x-ray view into a culture that risked falling into oblivion since the day when Brazilian techno and drum ‘n’ bass started to fade out of mainstream earshot. Interviews are especially engrossing and leave us wondering what career paths the author’s collaborators may have subsequently taken. *The Periph DJs* sets a high standard for Brazilian scholarship in the field. Additionally, those who wish to challenge currently held assumptions on funk carioca shall find in this study something akin to a control group.

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## NOTES

1. Axé-music and pagode are two genres of Brazilian Afro-pop: on axé-music see Guerreiro (2014); on pagode see Lima (2014).

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## APHEX TWIN'S SELECTED AMBIENT WORKS VOLUME II (33 1/3 SERIES)

MARC WEIDENBAUM

New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

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Richard David James—known by his moniker Aphex Twin—has created an almost mythical status in music history. Albums like the fragile *Analogue Bubblebath* EPs and the ghostly pop of *Selected Ambient Works 85-92* set James up as one of the most original and free-thinking of electronic producers. But nothing he had created previously quite compared to the austerity and ephemerality of his uncompromising 1994 album *Selected Ambient Works Volume II* (henceforth *SAW II*). Devoid of titles or descriptions, each individual track was only marked by a thumbnail image, symbols floating between alphabet and hieroglyph. This ambiguity carries through to the music, without fixed genre, constantly hovering between beautiful and menacing, tense and relaxed, comprehensible and obfuscated.

This difficult and uncompromising nature of the album makes it the perfect object of study for Marc Weidenbaum's contribution to Bloomsbury's revered *33 1/3* series—a collection of books designed to shed new critical light on well-established canonical albums. Weidenbaum's central tenet is that, despite a well-documented reputation for being 'beatless', the album is actually always 'in time' (even if perhaps a fragmented time), suggesting the work as a sonic metaphor for our technologically mediated era. Weidenbaum's project is to help demystify and elucidate the vaporous nature of this music, to return it to a rightful place in the canon of experimental beat music, and to apply a more critical ear.

Rather than placing the ambience of James' music in the all-too-forgiving context of sound art, Weidenbaum situates *SAW II* firmly in the functional space of post-rave chill-out rooms, offering sanctuary for clubbers to 'come down' from long hours of dance and drugs. But, rightly, he also acknowledges that the album owes a great deal of debt to the more esoteric aesthetic perspective of early electronic music, paying clear homage to the likes of Brian Eno, Jon Hassell, Philip Glass and even the grand masters of *musique concrète*, figures like Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry. In many ways, *SAW II* provided a new ambient manifesto for the first generation of listeners from a technological (or at least internet-led) epoch, drawing creatively from this tension between low and high art to create a truly genre-breaking work, firmly grounded in mainstream culture. Weidenbaum's

account provides an in-depth examination of the album in this context, focusing his critical apparatus on the context and reception of the album to create a space for the reader to explore the work on their own critical terms.

Weidenbaum avoids an obvious track-by-track breakdown, instead focussing on creating a narrative of the album's history and reception through the book's seven chapters. Nevertheless there are several highly compelling accounts of tracks from the album, providing the attentive and imaginative readings that form the book's backbone. One such example occurs in a discussion of 'white blur'. Picking up on the track's opening gesture—the solitary sound of a wind chime—Weidenbaum deftly opens up his analysis into a broader discussion of how the wind chime as a generative instrument (in that it is simultaneously system and instrument) relates to systems-based compositional approaches used by James, questioning exactly where the creativity and artistry come in creating the electronic equivalents of these generative instruments.

This concept of machine-generated compositional systems is an interesting recurrent thread, and central to much of the analytical thinking of the book. Another interesting critical lens that Weidenbaum often touches on, though in less detail than systems and technology, is the notion of repetition. Much of the surface tensions in *SAW II* involved small-scale repetitive ostinato and sonic gestures, often involving subtle changes in timbre over the course of the track to create long-scale narrative. A particularly fine example of this occurs in Weidenbaum's discussion of 'Rhubarb', which neatly analyses the relative simplicity of its repetitive surface details (moving from a five-note melody, to a six-note one, and back to five notes with a 'missing space') in the broader aesthetic context of early-twentieth-century modernism, in particular channelling the spirit of Erik Satie.

Nevertheless, Weidenbaum is at his best when he writes about the non-musical issues of the album; its complicated inception, the unconventional track listing method (and the interesting relationship with fans which this fostered, as they took the onus of naming James' tracks themselves), the reception of the album in general, and its legacy both in media syncs and as an inspiration to future works. There are also nods to the issues of canonization and the creation of a 'high' form of dance music in the album's invented genre of IDM ('Intelligent Dance Music'). Whilst now the grandiose 'high' art connotations of IDM's genre label might come across as snobbish or alienating, Weidenbaum makes the compelling point that when *SAW II* was released, such a bold gesture had an important impact on the broader public perception of electronica as either four-to-the-floor dance music or the a-rhythmic background to a narcoleptic come-down.

Weidenbaum's journalistic tone leads the reader effortlessly through his carefully constructed narratives, always respectful of Aphex's artistry without ever falling into uncritical hagiography. It is a shame though that he did not get the opportunity to interview the elusive producer for his book, though hints of James' personality occasionally appear in reference to an earlier telephone interview the pair had in the mid 1990s. Indeed, the myth around James' work runs so deep in discourse around the album that it is often hard to tell what is fact or fiction, even from seemingly reliable sources. Weidenbaum all too often



skirts around these problems, avoiding discussion of James' complicated public persona and the problems this causes in understanding his work.

One area where this is particularly noticeable is that of James' creative process. A lot of the myth circulated in fan literature talks about his obsession with homemade synths and circuit-bending, yet Weidenbaum tantalisingly refers in several sections to the possibility of a lot of the album's sounds being made from distortions and manipulations of off-the-rack equipment. This relationship between the album, the creative process and its technological mediators is a particularly rich one, and a more in-depth discussion of some of these issues would have benefited the broader cultural considerations at play in the book.

However, these are just small issues. In general, the grand project of this book—to demystify the layers of complexity in this seminal album and its reception—is accomplished successfully. One of the biggest appeals of *SAW II* lies in the invitation to find meaning in it and Weidenbaum's account is the perfect vehicle to do this, helping the listener to connect up the disentangled sonic fragments and re-assemble them in a personal way.

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## BRIAN ENO: OBLIQUE MUSIC

SEAN ALBIEZ AND DAVID PATTIE (EDS.)

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The influence and impact of Brian Eno ripples across various music genres. While widely known as a producer of a selection of the world's most successful rock bands, electronic dance music has connections to some of Eno's most important and influential work, perhaps most notably in the ambient genre. Furthermore, some of Eno's most innovative work with U2 coincided with the band's explorations of dance music rhythms, electronic sounds and remixing, while Eno's more recent output has involved collaborations with Underworld's Karl Hyde. Eno's presence looms large over EDM. And yet, of course, his work draws on and crosses over into much more, and as this rich, engaging and thought-provoking collection from Sean Albiez and David Pattie demonstrates, the man and the myth of Eno provide fertile topics for critical and analytical discussion. While Eno has also contributed his talents to other media fields such as sound design, art installations, software design and

writing, this book focuses on his work as a musician, and the many collaborations and productions this has involved.

Albiez and Pattie have gathered together a collection of insightful and stimulating chapters from an international selection of scholars. While they cover a broad array of topics and moments from Eno's long career, there are a handful of key themes and issues that re-appear throughout and neatly tie the collection together. While the authors clearly demonstrate the importance of Eno's work, they do so by situating it in relevant social and cultural contexts and acknowledging the contributions of the other musicians Eno has constantly surrounded himself with. At the core of the book and its explorations sits Eno, but this is countered by the acknowledgement that Eno himself doesn't sit at the core of his projects. Rather, as Pattie and Albiez note in the introduction, Eno is "somewhere in the system as part of the ecology of the recording, but not its focal point" (2). The chapters explore the various processes, systems, technologies and theories that have shaped Eno's solo and collaborative projects, in which Eno is positioned as "a key part of the creative structure, but not necessarily its centre" (7).

The book is divided into two sections. Part One explores "Eno: Composer, musician and theorist", while Part Two considers "The University of Eno: Production and collaborations". Both provide an abundance of fresh interpretations of Eno's work. Notably, even with Eno's public profile as a producer being arguably greater than his profile as a composer (even if that production work simultaneously involves composition), the book's second half manages to present some familiar histories in new light. In Part One, the first of two chapters from David Pattie introduces us to some of Eno's background and influences, framed in a discussion of his role in Roxy Music in the early 1970s. Pattie explores the tensions that surfaced between Eno and singer Bryan Ferry, and situates the band's pioneering work as emerging from the British art-school system that encouraged the experimental tendencies of many key popular music figures from the 1960s. Eno's production work on Ferry's compositions helped to position him as a key figure in the popular music landscape in the 1970s, and even if his time in the band was only brief, Pattie demonstrates how Eno was beginning to formulate some of the key principles that have continually informed his work since. As Pattie concludes, the creative relationship between Ferry and Eno fractured due to their distinct approaches to composition, with Ferry "drawn towards the shaping of a musical object", while Eno "preferred to explore systems and processes" (26–7).

Cecilia Sun's chapter explores some less familiar territory through a consideration of Eno's experimental work in the 1970s with the Portsmouth Sinfonia and the Scratch Orchestra. Eno, of course, is well-known for acknowledging his lack of formal musical education and defining himself as a "non-musician", and Sun discusses how Eno harnessed this "non-musicianship" to engage in experimentation and explore new approaches to music creation. While Eno may ultimately have shifted his attention away from the more radical avant-garde, he was able to incorporate his experimental experiences into creative processes that challenged traditional conceptions of music creation, and, as Sun notes, in doing so he identified technology as "the greatest compositional tool for a non-musician" (46).

Patties's second chapter traces Eno's progression in the 1970s from the glam sound guru of Roxy Music to a popular music polymath with an intellectual orientation embraced by music journalists of the time. Pattie focuses on Eno's early solo material to sketch out more of the processes that have since underpinned Eno's innovations and inventions—"the period in which all the main components of what we might call the Eno myth came together for the first time" (50). The following chapter from Chris Atton furthers this portrayal of Eno the intellectual, with an analysis of media representations of Eno from the British weekly music press of the late 1970s and early 1980s. As well as demonstrating Eno's approach to framing his work in interviews, Atton makes some broader observations about how the music press shapes and influences audiences. For Atton (and indeed most of the other authors in this collection), Eno's work sits somewhere between the avant-garde and the popular, in the process stimulating debates about authenticity and originality.

Perhaps of most interest to scholars of EDM will be Mark Achtermann's chapter on Eno's ambient music, specifically the *Ambient* four-album series released between 1978 and 1982. Achtermann develops this into a broader discussion of the purposes and uses of art, drawing on the work and arguments of writers J. R. R. Tolkien and R. G. Collingwood. While on occasions this makes for a somewhat dense philosophical journey through fairy storytelling, Achtermann arguably delivers one of the collection's most unique and engaging chapters, locating some of Eno's most influential work in a broader context of aesthetic purpose. Achtermann uses Eno's ambient output to consider how one defines such music, and the extent to which it can be considered as actual music, concluding that Eno's work, while presented as art, also calls into question the nature of art, encouraging listeners to "reappraise their understanding of music and the uses of music" (103).

The first section is rounded out by a chapter from EDM scholar Hillegonda C. Rietveld, who extends the discussion of Eno's ambient music with a focus on his soundtrack work and a close analysis of the 2009 film *The Lovely Bones*, and a chapter by Sean Albiez on Eno's use of the voice (both his own and that of others) in solo and collaborative work between 1991 and 2014. Albiez considers the way Eno has used various technologies and production techniques to challenge traditional conceptions of the role of the voice and words in songs, arguing that this evidences a "post-humanist stance that . . . raises issues concerning the liminality of identity, and the slipperiness of technologically mediated subjectivity in the contemporary period" (119).

Part Two begins with an expansive co-written piece by Sean Albiez and Ruth Dockwray that provides a fascinating exploration of the historical precedents and broader cultural contexts that connect to Eno's 1979 lecture "The Recording Studio as Compositional Tool". As well as tracing a journey through Eno's education in the 1960s and his time in New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Albiez and Dockwray unpack the lecture's main themes, and then link these back to the work of seminal composers who came before Eno such as John Cage, Erik Satie and Pierre Schaeffer. In doing so they position Eno's lecture and theories not as breaking new intellectual ground, but rather as breaking down boundaries between different musical worlds, with Eno acting "as a conduit for these ideas to enter discourses around studio production in popular music" (168).

No discussion of Eno is complete without a consideration of his *Oblique Strategies* cards, developed by Eno and Peter Schmidt in 1975 as a way to generate creativity in the studio through presenting collaborators with various cryptic messages. Kingsley Marshall and Rupert Loydell contribute an engaging chapter that takes one particular card strategy as the theme and focus for each of its sections. Within these they explore how Eno has articulated and responded to the strategy through his many collaborations. This provides a rich exploration of Eno's working practices throughout the years, set against the authors' questioning of collaborative practice in the digital age when they ask "Is there value in returning to limited systems (such as *Oblique Strategies*) that deny creators opportunities, somehow allowing them to realize something different?" (176).

The book's final four chapters focus on specific production collaborations in Eno's career. Elizabeth Ann Lindau provides a comprehensive overview of Eno's work with David Byrne of Talking Heads on the album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* from 1981, a work that fused African rhythms, sampled vocals, loops and more. Released a few years before sampling came to dominate popular music and the rise of "world music" as a marketing category, Eno and Byrne's project can be seen as a pioneering forerunner of more commercially successful releases such as Paul Simon's *Graceland*. While acknowledging the criticism that has been levelled at Western artists appropriating/exploiting non-Western sounds, Lindau argues that ultimately Eno and Byrne's album stands as an example of "ethnographic surrealism" (206).

A book on Eno with no discussion of U2 would arguably be missing something. Yet the abundance of written material on the band makes it difficult to present anything new. As such, Noel McLaughlin deserves credit for tackling an obvious topic and providing some fresh insight on the band's work with Eno, framing his discussion around the issue of nationality, playing U2's Irish background against Eno's English heritage and uncovering how each has influenced the other. McLaughlin provides a valuable assessment of some of Eno's most commercially successful work, at the same time taking to task and building a solid argument against those critics who have dismissed U2 and subsequently Eno for choosing to work with such a commercially-focused act.

While *Oblique Music* does a fine job of mapping and reinforcing the significance of Eno's work and practices, two of the most intriguing chapters are those from Jonathan Stewart and Martin James, both of whom challenge the Eno myth through case studies that problematize as much as they praise Eno's approaches to collaboration. Stewart presents a fascinating account of Eno's production of Devo's 1978 debut album. While still delivering a discussion that argues for the importance of Eno's work, Stewart draws on interview material to unpack some of the tensions and "irreparable methodological differences" (211) that ran through the album's production. As well as providing a comprehensive analysis of the album's tracks, the project background sketched by Stewart demonstrates that, while band and producer may have shared an appreciation of synthesizer technology and the avant-garde, conflict arose in other areas, such as the band's refusal to engage with Eno's *Oblique Strategies* cards, Devo's Jerry Casale describing how the band's response "was pretty

disrespectful . . . we were good at spinning off humorous smart ass quips and he didn't appreciate it" (217).

In the book's final chapter, Martin James considers Eno's role as "urban ethnographer" through exploring his work in documenting the No Wave New York music scene of the late 1970s, resulting in the *No New York* compilation. Sketching the city's vibrant art scene that Eno landed in upon arriving in 1978, James details the events leading up to Eno's engagement with the No Wave movement made up of bands that "each applied avant-garde tendencies to eclectic pop frameworks" (262). We learn that Eno's approach of selecting just four bands to record for his compilation was just one of several issues that generated tensions between Eno and some of the artists involved in the scene. In contrast to his other work, James explains how Eno's No Wave production displayed "little evidence of . . . using the 'recording studio as a compositional tool' with the majority of the recordings having no separation between instruments and no overdubs" (264), and instead James suggests Eno's aims were to use the studio as "an *ethnographic tool*" (265, original italics). Yet, as James argues, despite Eno's efforts in bringing this music to wider public attention, his approach was miscalculated. With some of the artists criticising Eno's production techniques, and James describing how Eno's celebrity served to exaggerate his importance in the scene, the project is presented as somewhat flawed. James' chapter thus captures how not all of Eno's projects can be framed as success stories.

This much needed book explores the many trajectories of Eno's varied career, and it will engage and excite any music lover, regardless of your opinion of Eno's work. It's a richly rewarding collection that deftly explores and unpacks the work of one of popular music's pioneering figures. While much has been written on Eno, and no doubt will continue to be written, *Oblique Music* does an outstanding job of critically capturing both the well-known and less familiar elements of Eno's work. Beyond the specifics of this work, the book provides some thought-provoking material on broader issues such as collaboration, composition, creativity, experimentation, musicianship, technology and more, and as such will stimulate the interest of anyone engaged in music creation and production. This is a book that you will return to time and again—like Eno's best work, its rewards make themselves most evident after repeated visits.

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## SONIC POSSIBLE WORLDS: HEARING THE CONTINUUM OF SOUND

SALOMÉ VOEGELIN

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“That quality we call beauty . . . must always grow from the realities of life.” This statement by Japanese novelist Jun’ichirou Tanizaki, from his essay *In Praise of Shadows*, evokes a sense of the aesthetic being rooted in lived experience. Having experienced, we then categorize, judge and assign value to the “reality” our senses provide. It is on this phenomenological foundation that author Salomé Voegelin builds *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum of Sound*. The central tenet of Voegelin’s work is that traditional musical compositions and contemporary sonic works are investigated through separate and distinct critical languages (and histories), and thus no continuous study of both as a unified field is possible. Thus, she proposes a new analytical framework that can access and investigate works across genres and times, enabling a comparative engagement, including soundscape composers whose works involve a visual context. But in the process of sound creation there can arise great discrepancies concerning what we believe we have listened to versus what we have heard, revealing more sophisticated sonic life realities from which our personal views on aesthetics and truth grow.

Methodologically, the book is a philosophical project: a philosophy “not about objects and ideas but about the transient ephemerality of sonic materiality and subjectivity. It aims to create a philosophical experience that might not convince in terms of philosophical orthodoxies and histories but through the reader as listener’s own experience, her simultaneity with the heard, from where he struggles between language and listening, producing a philosophical place made of sounds and words” (5). This, as Voegelin states, is directly built on Theodor Adorno’s concept of the essay as a formless form of text that “makes no claim of being anything other than an experiment, a suggestion, a provocation maybe, and relies on the fact that as an essay it has no obligation to be all inclusive . . . and does not have to come to firm conclusions either” (4).

Indeed, this reflects the idea that the “quest for certainty ends up narrowing and ‘colonizing’ the realm of the possibilities, in terms of diversity of approaches, and ways of being and thinking” (Williams 2015: 28). Thus Voegelin states that her aim is “not to listen

to understand, judge, categorize, or preserve the soundscape, but to illuminate and generate the plural possibilities of the landscape as an environment that involves everything that is and that could be” (13–14).

The book begins with a fascinating quote from Voegelin’s blog entitled “My Room”. In it she describes how sound enters her room from all angles, and is invisibly present in her visual world: a set on which “sound plays invisible narratives (cheerful, sinister, unnoticed, etc.), testing notions of intimacy, neighborliness and so on. Unseen protagonists who might really be there, or just invented by me play out fantastic scenarios that might be real . . .” (1). Similarly, she quotes a later post wherein she describes an autumn walk through fallen leaves as a “sound of memory and perennial joy at the weather turning cold, sounding the idea of autumn as an ‘iconographic’ sound: a sonic emblem that sounds its emblematicness through my participation, and thus is clearly not an icon at all . . . I activate it and hear it sounding us together, a socio-symbolic relationship” (9).

Such descriptions of sonic presence in visual space are referred to by Voegelin as “textual phonography”, which produces not a recording of the heard but of listening, which “produces another sound in the imagination of the reader that is not the sound I heard but the sound generated in her action of perception of reading about sound”. This “recording in words” does not create recognition of an object or subject, but triggers a generative interpretation, what the reader imagines or remembers of what Voegelin heard, and what one might go on to hear as a result of these words (1). This textual phonography Voegelin describes is not only a fascinating manner of writing, but also has a practical aspect in research on sonic materiality that supports Voegelin’s thesis of critical language lacunae. Thus, Voegelin contributes a valuable rubric that has already shown itself to have practical use, one such lacuna being made apparent recently during a personal visit of my own to the Temple of Confucius in Hanoi, Vietnam. Văn Miếu – Quốc Tử Giám is a Hanoian Confucian Temple that also held the ancient Imperial Academy, Vietnam’s first national university. Built by emperor Lý Thánh Tông in 1070, Văn Miếu is a place of serenity and history: its various gardens, courtyards and stele aimed at honoring its cultural heritage and inspiring Vietnamese to “follow the traditions of respecting the [sic] teachers, talented scholars, fondness of learning, and high ethical behavior” (Văn Miếu Center pamphlet).

Walking through the various pavilions and courtyards, my intention was to document the temple’s architectural and aesthetic features to complement similar research I have done in East Asia. But this effort was interrupted by loud pop music blaring into the temple complex from an adjacent store located on the northeast side of Văn Miếu Street. The music, with its cheery electronic beat, filled courtyards and gardens: its presence inescapable and embedded within the temple’s spatial and acoustic ecology. Immersion in its sonic materiality created a very real socio-symbolic presence (intrusion), a new social relationship within an environment meant to be its opposite: quiet, scholarly and ethical. Văn Miếu, in this moment, ceases to be an inclusive, well-defined conceptual Confucian whole, and becomes something different. Being present in Văn Miếu as a site of unintentional pop music meant I was occupying it as a socio-acoustic plurality, a reality of its milieu, and Voegelin’s textual phonography would provide invaluable insight into this circumstance.

Such phonography truly succeeds in making her case both plausible and imaginable to the reader, due to its alterity, its “otherness”, beyond standard epistemology employed by ethnomusicologists, for example. Thus, Voegelin makes a very practical, thoughtful contribution to philosophical aesthetics, and inclusion of engaged textual phonographies would surely broaden and revitalize current debates in ethnography, ethnomusicology and musicology.

Voegelin’s phonography, though, unfortunately becomes problematic as the book progresses. Not because her approach yields ineffective conceptual or imaginative alterities, but rather that it treats traditional musical composition and the academy heuristically in anti-disciplinarian rhetoric, a kind of methodological monism that assumes that current formal structures of music composition, ethnomusicology and so on are universally agreed upon to be the sole correct approaches. Thus, her writing does not achieve the goal of providing an organized structure for formal analysis that is free of the very bias she proceeds to suggest in the preceding traditions.

For example, Voegelin defines music as the organization of sound into a shape “privileged by history and canons, set apart by virtuosity and the esoteric knowledge of the discipline: knowledge built from inside the discourse to retain control from outside interference, to remain self-sustaining within its own ideology that justifies its existence to an outside world, while keeping it out” (122). The culprit in this case is “the professional”, who is “allowed to define the very standards by which its superior competence is judged”. This professional autonomy allows “the experts to select at will the inputs they receive from the laity”, their autonomy isolating them. Thus, in part, professionals live in “the ideologies of their own creation, which they present to the outside as the most valid definitions of specific spheres of social reality” (187).

Voegelin also asserts that “having lost our measure in the dialectic authorities of God and science means that our own identity has lost the transparency that it held in opposition to them also. So now a contingent subjectivity needs to be found through the obscure mobility of sound in the mirror of silence that does not hold still” (47). She does not name specific individuals, institutions, Gods or scientific fields that are responsible for identity loss—those who organize sound into privileged shapes that resist alterity—but proceeds nevertheless to characterize organization of sound as inherently esoteric, set apart, controlled and self-justifiably isolated from an outside world by “experts” (187). Voegelin even goes so far as to state that in her plurality of possible worlds, music itself “loses its hegemony and discipline” (14).

Since there are no given exceptions to this characterization, this is a categorical proposition lacking any evidence to the contrary. Lacking such evidence, Voegelin commits a conjunction fallacy, assuming that the co-occurrence of professionals and acts of superiority, controlled input and ideological validation is more likely than a single act by a single professional. This representative heuristic eliminates the possibility of proof to the contrary, and thus weakens Voegelin’s case for a comparative language. As a result, there is now “no longer a need to locate musical value in the score, the musical text . . . this is a



musicality not delineated by genius, perfection, and the right interpretation of a piece of work, which protects a specialism from outside influence and interference” (124).

This supposed lack of musical value being a necessity in the creation of a score, sounding everything without becoming anything, is not the comparative study Voegelin promises, but might be read as *prima facie* iconoclasm, appropriation by negation, or a socio-centric privileging of a purposefully uncritical aestheticism within which Voegelin acknowledges “right from the start that we might as well misunderstand each other and that it is only through the effort and desire to be understood and to understand that temporarily, with a lot of good will and timing, in moments of coincidence, shared understandings will be found, while the rest remains experience” (5). She also does not address motor-intentionality, and how the body (dancing) might play a part in textual phonography of EDM or other genres that share intimate group socialities.

But Voegelin herself is a senior academic and critical participant in the very structures she examines, thus *Sonic Possible Worlds* is best understood not as an organized structure for formal analysis, but rather a useful aesthetic manifesto on sound and textual phonography that will no doubt provoke meaningful debate on epistemology and aesthetics.

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