The Entextualization of Performative Sociality: Ethnomusicological Approaches to Sonic Encoding and Decoding

Jeremy Wallach

What was the most historically significant musical instrument of the 20th century? I have asked 21st-century students this question numerous times, and it tends to perplex them. The computer? (*Wrong!*) The electric guitar? (Better, but still wrong). The keyboard synthesizer? (Nope). The correct answer, of course, is the multitrack recording studio. I suspect the reason contemporary university students have such trouble naming the multitrack studio as the most impactful musical instrument of the last century is because its seismic transformation of musical experience has become taken-for-granted. Moreover, studios themselves, as specialized, professionalized spaces for sonic production, are often viewed as obsolete these days.

Once only possible to create in rarefied conditions requiring substantial capital investment, high-quality recordings can now be produced in a bedroom. What, then, is the use of studying old-fashioned recording studios? While earlier generations of transcultural musicologists[1] conducted fieldwork in recording studio environments (myself included),[2] these specialized, sequestered facilities for the social production of musical artifacts are in danger of consignment to the ash-heap by a younger generation of scholars, and I find myself in the strange position of having to justify their serious ethnomusicological study to the current rising generation of ethnographic researchers.

But what exactly do recording studios do? What makes them important to contemporary musical life? Eliot Bates writes: «I contend that studios must be understood simultaneously as acoustic environments, as meeting places, as container technologies, as a system of constraints on vision, sound and mobility, and as typologies that facilitate particular interactions between humans and nonhuman objects while structuring and maintaining power relations» (2012, n.p.). I agree they are all of these things, but while Bates focuses most of his essay on the ways in which the studio as 'container' structures and constrains social practice, in what follows I offer a few remarks on studios as 'meeting places', of selves, sounds, and audiences.

---

1 A type of researcher that includes those who identify as ethnomusicologists and popular music scholars. In the words of Giovanni Giuriati, transcultural musicologists can be said to conduct: «research on living contemporary musics that unfold and develop in cultural contexts increasingly interconnected and complex... [while] adopting comparative, transnational, transcultural perspectives...» (Giuriati 2017: 8).

2 Exemplary recording-studio ethnographies include Bates (2016), Meintjes (2003), Moehn (2012), Scales (2012), and the essays found in Greene and Porcello (2005). Rather than adopting a critical "culture industry" approach to these facilities as subordinated commodity "assembly lines," these studies tend to take an approach inspired by Steven Feld's phenomenological ethnoaesthetics (1988, 1994, 1996, 2012[1982]), investigating situated language use, sensory experience, and social practice (see Wallach 2019). It is worth noting that Feld himself voiced criticism of sound recording technologies (e.g., 1995) and has since moved on from this approach (2017).

The recording studio is a site of encounter and alchemic serendipity. Recording studios 'encode' (Hall 2012) performances, rendering them as 'texts', or at least as strange artifacts with textual properties, namely authority and unlimited repetition (Wallach 2003). Recordings, then, are hybrid things: 'entextualized' (Silverstein and Urban 1996) musical gestures that generally come to exist as a consequence of a social process. While the manufacturers of audio equipment tempt the consumer with promises of 'every sound you can imagine' (Théberge 1997), Matthew Rahaim reminds us, through his explication of Levinasian philosophy, that it is social encounters with other living subjects that truly contain infinite possibilities (2017), not technological wizardry.

I have written about creative social processes in the studio (Wallach 2005, 2008: Ch. 4). But the one thing more tedious than authors who cite themselves is authors who quote themselves, so instead I would like to discuss an article by Rowan Oliver, an excellent study of Jamaican popular music (2017). Drawing from interviews with legendary Jamaican session players, Oliver suggests that: «by empathising with the song, with the genre, and with one another, the musicians are able to spontaneously create a stylistically effective arrangement during the recording session» (Oliver 2017: 197). In turn, the 'vibe' generated by the original performers is detected, accentuated, and modified by the dub remix producer:

> Although the sound engineer needs to engage empathically with both the feeling of the song and the recorded groove of the instrumentalists...[the engineer] also has the potential to extract new, different feelings from the recording, and to communicate these by altering the existing groove factors so that the listener's perception of the performance is changed; sometimes this shift is subtle, but at others it can be more radical (Oliver 2017: 206).

Moreover, Oliver argues, the grooves empathically, collectively created by the instrumentalists and the sound engineers move the eventual listeners of the recording (who are generally perceived as dancing in response to it). Indeed, that's the point. Thus it is vital that workshops for producing music recordings be socially gregarious spaces because their products must likewise engage listeners in empathic musicking activities (such as dancing) if they are to succeed as pleasurable commodities.

Studios remain vital sites for likeminded musical subjects to collaborate and to 'hang out' – that is, to co-perform subjectivities informed by shared musical experiences that can be drawn upon as creative resources in emergent polyphonic social interaction (Clinton and Wallach 2016). At times the need for sociability and the technocratic disciplinary regime that tends to be in effect in a high-tech environment like the recording studio come into conflict. Unlike situations in South Africa (Meintjes 2003) and Brazil (Moehn 2012), sound engineers and producers in Indonesia were not members of more powerful cultural groups, nor were they highly formally trained. The result is the 'power relations' of the studio to which Bates refers in the passage above are distinct in the Indonesian case. I saw little effort to enforce technocratic discipline in Indonesian studios, and as a result, activities that were discouraged or prohibited in US studio environments, such as drinking, smoking, eating, inclusion of session non-participants, and loud fraternizing (including during recording takes), were commonplace.[3]

The Simulacrum of the Social Encounter

All multitrack recordings must at some point be mixed down to two stereo tracks, an art form whose subtleties remain unappreciated by most of the public. Like a great novelist, a skilled stereo mixer creates a quasi-social terrain on which the narrative/song unfolds (see Bakhtin 1981). This terrain is multi-voiced, containing a heteroglossic collectivity of sound sources

3 Viewed through the lens of postcolonial theory, this could be viewed as a salutary form of resistance to the neoliberal hegemony of technocratic hygiene. On the impact of postcolonial thought on ethnomusicology, see Wallach and Clinton (2019).

balanced and arranged to produce a self-contained 'society' (if you will) with an autonomous socio-spatial logic.[4] The listener(s) imagine themselves inside this simulated social space, and in doing so, like the dancers in Oliver's study, become *participants* in the music. They become links in what Oliver terms the: «causal chain of empathy» (Oliver 2017: 199).

The listener's desire to fully participate in the musical event brings us to live albums, which are supposedly *not* produced in studios. However, the vast majority of commercially-released 'live' albums aren't actually live (Horning 2018: 216). Electric guitarist Alex Skolnick's autobiography contains a rare behind-the-scenes admission of this industry open secret:

> It would be a rock producer, one that had worked with Aerosmith and other hard rock giants of the 1970s, who would one day explain this to me, shattering the illusion of all my favorite live albums. "Alex, you know that in rock 'n' roll, there's no such thing as a 'live' record right?" he'd say. I'd ask him what he meant. "Usually what they do is record everything on multitrack, but they only keep the drums. In fact, it may claim to be one concert, but often, it's the best tracks compiled over several concerts. Then, the guitars are fixed or redone entirely. And the vocals are almost always redone unless you have the rare singer that can pull it off live, but that's unheard of in hard rock. The crowd noise is usually real, but it's sometimes taken from other sources. When all is said and done, it sounds like a perfectly recorded concert, but it's more like a studio album than a live one."
>
> "Isn't that lying?" I'd ask.
>
> "Well, Alex, it's like this," he'd say, "In rock 'n' roll, there is 'the truth' and there is 'the legend.' If the legend is more exciting than the truth, go with the legend" (2012: 19).

It is telling that Skolnick was already several years into a professional music career, as a guitarist with the Californian heavy metal band Testament, when the interaction described above took place.

If the music on the record is not really indicative of a band's live sound, then why purchase it? One answer: the "crowd noise" (real or otherwise) on a live recording is akin to a sitcom laugh-track—it cues the listener and instructs in proper audience comportment at rock concerts. More important than this instruction, however, especially for those already familiar with the rituals of concert attendance, is the creation of *a quasi-social space of encounter* in which the listener is invited to imagine immersion in an immense, engaged collective simultaneously imbibing music. It is unsurprising, then, that music genres better known for concert audience enthusiasm (thus, audible crowd noise) than danceability (that is, immediate embodied responses to the groove) have the most live albums.

A more recent manifestation of the desire for (vicarious) social/musical experience is so-called "reaction videos" on YouTube. What I find striking is the number of user comments that indicate prior familiarity with the music being reacted to—these viewers evidently watch for the experience of re-experiencing sounds, by observing another person encountering them in real-time.[5] Thus the impulse is similar to the pleasures of live albums—one is invited to re-hear familiar music in new ways with virtually present others with whom one can imagine quasi-social relationships. Moreover, the reception of sound as social activity is not only pivotal to the experience of the popular music listener; over twenty-five years of ethnographic research in recording studios has revealed that the collective, ongoing assessment of sonic material by performers, engineers, and producers is the essential cultural function of these spaces.

---

4 To posit a relationship (iconic, indexical) between virtual stereo space and actual social space is to indulge in homological reasoning. Such a move gets a bad rap these days, but in this case I believe it is justified.

5 Interestingly, in the last five years an increasing number of reaction videos have been made to non-Anglophone popular music, from Serbian hip hop to Indonesian death metal. These metacultural (Urban 2001) texts have drawn unprecedented international attention to these artists, and, if the responses in the YouTube comments are any indication, are a source of national pride for fans in the artists' home countries.

Conclusion

Like the printed book, paper magazine, and vinyl record, the recording studio is an old format that has not outlived its usefulness. As sites of often-serendipitous encounters between self and sounds, miscellaneous sound sources, and, most of all, self and the "infinite totality" of others' consciousnesses,[6] studios remain valuable workshops for producing compelling popular music. The "legend" lives on...

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Esther Clinton[7] as well as the organizers and participants of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini Intercultural Institute of Comparative Music Studies 25th Annual International Seminar, especially Serena Facci and Giovanni Giuriati.

References

BAKHTIN, Mikhail M.
1981 *The Dialogic Imagination*. Michael Holquist (ed.), Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist (trans.), University of Texas Press, Austin

BATES, Eliot
2012 'What Studios Do', *Journal on the Art of Record Production 7.* Available online: https://www.arpjournal.com/asarpwp/what-studios-do/, last access December 28th, 2023
2016 *Digital Tradition: Arrangement and Labor in Istanbul's Recording Studio Culture,* New York: Oxford University Press

CLINTON, Esther and Jeremy WALLACH
2016 'Talking Metal: A Social Phenomenology of Hanging Out in Metal Culture', in Nelson Varas-Díaz and Niall W. R. Scott (eds.), *Heavy Metal Music and the Communal Experience,* Lexington Books, Lanham, MD: 37-55

FELD, Steven
1988 'Aesthetics as iconicity of style', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* XX: 74-113
1994 'From Ethnomusicology to Echo-muse-ecology: Re-reading R. Murray Schafer in the Papua New Guinea Rainforest', in *Soundscape Newsletter* VIII: 9–13
1995 'From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis', in George Marcus and Fred Myers (eds.), *The Traffic in Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles - London: 96 -126
1996 'Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea', in Steven Feld and Keith Basso (eds.), *Senses of Place*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe: 91-135
2012 *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC [1982]

---

6 This essay was completed in imposed social isolation during a global pandemic. It might therefore be understandable for one to overvalue and even idealize face-to-face contact given the condition of its scarcity. This is not my intention. Face-to-face encounters are actually more fraught than comfortable, precisely because their trajectories elude a single agent's control. But it is through such risky, fraught, frictional interactions that great art is made, and studios are a primary site where they occur.

7 After Jeremy Wallach delivered his chapter to us, during the editorial process for this volume Esther Clinton sadly passed away. On this occasion we would like to remember her with gratitude. She was a gentle presence during the Seminar in Venice, providing precious contributions to our debate [the editors].

2017 'On Post-Ethnomusicology Alternatives: Acoustemology', in Franscesco Giannattasio and Giovanni Giuriati (eds.), *Perspectives on a 21st Century Comparative Musicology: Ethnomusicology or Transcultural Musicology?*, *Nota*, Udine: 82 - 98

GIURIATI, Giovanni
2017 'Foreword', in Francesco Giannattasio and Giovanni Giuriati (eds.), *Perspectives on a 21st Century Comparative Musicology: Ethnomusicology or Transcultural Musicology?* Nota, Udine: 6 - 8

GREENE, Paul D. and Thomas PORCELLO, (eds.)
2005 *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures,* Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT

HALL, Stuart
2012 'Encoding/Decoding', in Meeknakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (eds.),
[1980] *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, 3rd Edition, Blackwell, Malden, MA: 137 - 144

HORNING, Susan Schmidt
2013 *Chasing Sound: Technology, Culture and the Art of Studio Recording from Edison to the LP,* Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore

MEINTJES, Louise
2003 *Sound of Africa! Making Music Zulu In A South African Studio*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC

MOEHN, Frederick
2012 *Contemporary Carioca: Technologies of Mixing in a Brazilian Music Scene*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC

OLIVER, Rowan
2017 'In Dub Conference: Empathy, Groove, and Technology in Jamaican Popular Music', in Elaine King and Caroline Waddington (eds.), *Music and Empathy*, Routledge, New York: 194 - 208

RAHAIM, Matthew
2017 'Otherwise Than Participation: Unity and Alterity in Musical Encounters', in Elaine King and Caroline Waddington (eds.), *Music and Empathy*, Routledge, New York: 175 - 193

SCALES, Christopher
2012 *Recording Culture: Powwow Music and the Aboriginal Recording Industry on the Northern Plains*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC

SILVERSTEIN, Michael and Greg URBAN, (eds.)
1996 *Natural Histories of Discourse.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL

SKOLNICK, Alex
2013 *Geek to Guitar Hero,* Louder Education Press, Brooklyn, NY

THÉBERGE, Paul
1997 *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology,* Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT

URBAN, Greg
2001 *Metaculture: How Culture Moves through the World,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis

WALLACH, Jeremy

2003 'The Poetics of Electrosonic Presence: Recorded Music and the Materiality of Sound', *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 15(1): 34 - 64

2005 'Engineering Techno-Hybrid Grooves in Two Indonesian Sound Studios', in Paul D. Greene and Thomas Porcello (eds.), *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures,* Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT: 138 - 155

2008 *Modern Noise, Fluid Genres: Popular Music in Indonesia, 1997-2001,* New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies, Volume 3, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI

2019 'Rainforest to Raves: Ethnomusicological Forays into Popular Music', *Journal of World Popular Music* 6 (2): 223 - 227

WALLACH, Jeremy and Esther CLINTON

2019 'Theories of the Post-Colonial and Globalization: Ethnomusicologists Grapple with Power, History, Media, and Mobility', in Harris M. Berger and Ruth Stone (eds.), *Theory for Ethnomusicology: Histories, Conversations, Insights; Second Edition*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ: 114 -139