

SOUND IN THE MACHINE

Hearing the Music and Listening to the Record



published 8 May 2009 at soundinthemachine.org.

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TRANSCRIPT

For the past year or so I've been thinking a lot about how we listen. Recently, I've been intrigued by how we listen to recordings, especially recorded music. In a nutshell, it seems that we tend to hear recordings completely divorced from the apparatus that makes them possible, as if we weren't listening to recordings at all, but something somehow self-contained and one-dimensionally diegetic: it's a given that any particular recorded piece of music is nothing but that piece of music, performing itself as we perform ours. But this is what we've learned from an industry that was only ever concerned with obliterating our conscious awareness that recordings are in fact different from live performances (Sterne). Hear any popular song and notice how loud the voice is in relation to the drums or how the guitar is awash in reverb while the bass is completely dry or consider that, simply with the touch of a button, you can make a whisper out of any triple forte passage of an orchestral piece. Think of all the editing that is intentionally hidden from the listener: the compressors, companders, converters, equalizers and exciters and tons of other processing elements that combine to make a recorded sound. Hell, even "live" albums with their much-touted "authenticity," are demonstrably different than the events they claim to so purely capture. Same thing goes for lo-fi recordings, however much the followers of that pretentious movement would like to believe otherwise. It's a wonder that the truism of notated music as somehow less inspired than if there were no written artifacts doesn't apply to recorded music. But there's an explanation for this: where other art forms readily use the medium itself for interpretation, recorded music has almost always sought to silence the medium. That's weird. And contagious: I'm going to screw up words when I read this podcast, retake that section, edit out the stuff I don't like and you won't hear any of it!

In this episode, I'd really only like to open the conversation and get the juices flowing. I plan to get into the recording process and the cultural apparatus that makes it possible on some future episode. For now I'd like to get into some ideas (and examples) of some of this

playing out in popular music. I'm thinking that best way to do that is to talk about the concepts of remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy.

So, let's begin with "remediation." It was thought up by professors David Bolter and Richard Grusin in the late 90s as a way of making sense of the deluge of new media and all the proclamations that got tacked on to it. Remediation posits every quote, new, technology as not 'new' but as an interpretation of what preceded it. Remediation is "the representation of one medium in another" (Bolter 65, 2000). Seems pretty obvious, right? In a way it is, but a decade ago, intellectuals were flipping out over media like the Web, virtual reality, digital photography, trumping them up and making more level-headed thinkers want to puke. Then they went ontological, extolling the manufactured as somehow more real than real, and, if not more real, certainly better. Bolter and Grusin acknowledge the possibilities of these technologies but reframe them as wholly dependent on the technologies that preceded them and argue for an understanding of all the factors that informed their cultural significance. This understanding could not be had by willfully dismantling the very origins that made them relevant in the first place. So that, very broadly, is remediation. Bolter and Grusin also came up with the terms "immediacy" and "hypermediacy" I mentioned a minute ago. For now, I'll talk a bit about remediation, then move on to the other two.

Again, remediation is "the representation of one medium in another" (Bolter 65, 2000). A musical recording is a remediation of both a concert hall and a score—that score exists within the concert hall when it's performed and both the score and the concert hall exist with the recording. At the same time, the recording influences our perception of the score and hall: in hearing the moment of recording, we form an expectation of what subsequent interpretations, performances and recordings should sound like. Because of the CD, for instance, radio and records, which worked their way into the cultural fabric and paved the way for the CD, are heard in a different way. Remediation contextualizes iterations of technology and is a kind of reversal: new technologies actually change prior technologies because they change the cultural apparatus.

I think the idea that new technologies depend on their predecessors is apparent. It's more interesting to think of the possible influences subsequent technologies have on their predecessors. To talk about at least one way in which recorded music has acted on music proper, take the Led Zeppelin song "Dancing Days:"

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I think it gives the impression of a skipping record, which certainly would've been obvious as listened to with the ears of a record-listening culture. Yet we could be content to say that it's just an interesting syncopation. I mean, if you listen to live performances of the song, the effect is not as apparent. From the How the West Was Won live recording:

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More aggressive playing along with the extra noise in the performance space bleeds over the syncopation, lessening those definitive breaks that are so apparent on the studio recording. But the similarity is still obvious and stands as a great example of remediation: the music was composed to mimic, which is an ancient musical technique. First of all, certain musical figures, as well as scales, modes, and instruments, have long histories of association with certain emotions, gestures, and actions. Add to that mimicking trains with harmonicas and snare drums is a staple of the blues; evoking industrial machinery is a recurring idea in experimental and pop music; evoking a hunt or the ocean or hiking a mountain is often done in symphonies and tone poems. That Led Zeppelin would have a similar motivation is completely reasonable.

Remediation has also changed notions of performance. One example is that so much reliance on "studio magic" to give bands a particular sound has caused many bands to combine canned music with live performance. These tracks are created in the studio for a particular 'vibe' or character for a recording. When it comes time to perform, it's obvious that the vibe is missing so you have to figure out how to get it back in there. You could just have hired guns perform the canned tracks but, for many highly-visible / popular bands, presenting the audience with random musicians is apparently too distracting. So they sometimes stick them off stage. Or they sync the recording to the band's live performance, requiring a musical technician to begin and end the recorded performance and for the band to play a tempo that matches the recording. Where else do the piano and percussive organ sounds come from on the U2 Slane Castle shows?

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Is that really so different from what Ashley Simpson got busted doing on SNL? At least Snoop puts his DJ right up on stage with him. This is nothing new in rock music. A generation earlier, on The Last Waltz "rockumentary" by Scorsese and The Band, there is an interesting moment in the song "Helpless" where a female voice can be heard in the mix with no female body on stage. Where is that voice coming from? The camera then cuts to Joni Mitchell

singing backstage. The audience wouldn't have seen her, nor would the listener of the audio recording have known she was not on stage. The film bridges the gap it created; audio would've kept mum.

Last point about the remediating effects of recorded music. This one comes up from time to time with my musician friends. Unwittingly, artists have exploited the tools of the studio to produce an aesthetic that, among many other properties, is notoriously error-free. After so many decades of listening to recorded music, most of us have come to expect this level of technical perfection in every performance. We may not even be interested in the idiosyncrasies and mistakes that invariably happen in every performance; we want precision and artistic interpretation and all of it to sound at least as good as the recording. Listening to the recorded performances of renowned classical musicians back in the day reveals tons of idiosyncrasies and mistakes: wrong notes, fluctuations in tempo, damper pedal noise, someone coughing, a train rumbling by. If today's audiences scoff, it's the industry's own fault. Obviously the performer avoids making mistakes; the emphasis is on creating music. But, to take a line from Victor Wooten: mistakes are opportunities for increased drama, emotion, and authenticity.

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So that's some remediation for you. There's far more layers to pull apart than I've done here. In the interest of time, let's move on and talk about, rather, I will talk about, the ideas of "hypermediacy" and "immediacy." In Bolter's words, hypermediacy is "an intense awareness of and even reveling in the medium [flipping us back and forth]...between a desire for transparent contact with the ostensibly real...world and a fascination with the possibilities that media offer us" (Bolter 25). Another way to say that is hypermediacy is directly experiencing the medium and thinking about all the implications it could have. So, as my title suggests, you would hear the music but listen to the record. In opposition to hypermediacy is the idea of immediacy. Immediacy is the total erasure of the medium so as to make you think what you're experiencing is the real thing (Bolter and Grusin 272-73). Hypermediacy draws attention to the medium while immediacy conceals the medium. It may come as no surprise that immediacy, not hypermediacy, is something of an intrinsic value in recorded music. That's why it's so cool to come across those moments in recordings when artifacts of the medium are revealed. Case in point: when the cassette tape was king in 1988, Bon Jovi put out a song called "Ride Cowboy Ride":

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The extremely antiquated vinyl sound is intended to evoke the state of the technology in the era the lyrics allude to. We know that this is an 'old' recorded sound, but we may tend to miss any greater significance in terms of hypermediacy. When the next track begins, the sheer sensation of the sound in relation to the previous one seals the hypermediacy intention: without all that noise, unfamiliar equalization, and at a much higher volume, it proclaims forcefully, "I am the better technology!" (Bolter 26).

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You thus have to hear the medium. The prior technology, vinyl, is made obviously obsolete by the higher 'fidelity' of the then-current technology, magnetic tape.

The Bon Jovi song is not how hypermediacy is typically presented. As I said, immediacy is the intrinsic value in recorded music. You're not to hear the tape or the microphones, temperaments or editing. You are supposed to hear the music as if it were being born before your very eyes. Hypermediacy, where it exists in popular music, seems to be only a curious intrusion and you really have listen closely for it. The first track on U2's debut album begins:

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A tape speeding up. Or a tape machine cut-off sound from Ben Folds

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Here, the ubiquitous needle scratch and lift at the end of a Peter Fox song

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and radio tuning sounds on Speakerboxxx.

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Sometimes, listening for hypermediacy is not enough. You have to watch for it, like the empty tracks at the end of Under the Table and Dreaming that eventually reach #34. Or you have to read the liner notes to know its all Bill Evans on Conversations With Myself and not three different pianists. And what if you didn't know that Stand by Me from the "Playing for Change: Peace Through Music" documentary wasn't made all over the world at different times?¹

¹ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us-TVg40ExM>>

Though these are examples of hypermediacy, I don't want to spend any more time on them because they do so little in their particular contexts. Needle lifts, machine sounds, and hidden tracks draw your attention to the medium but only incidentally. At least one example of hypermediacy has a strong presence. That is record surface noise on digital recordings. Artists have figured out that they can draw attention to the medium and its cultural position while at the same time delivering immediacy. From soul artist Erykah Badu

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to jazz trumpeter Dave Douglas,

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To the Stones

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it's all over the place. It comments on previous recording eras and creates a certain affect in the music. It's there and you might catch it, but it's presented so as to be as transparent and immediate as possible.

And that's where I'll have to leave it for now. The promoters of early sound reproduction products succeeded in making the technology culturally valid precisely by playing on authenticity and immediacy. The development of those technologies continued to strip away lingering doubts, every new technology proclaiming its superiority over the one preceding it. And with each iteration the medium has disappeared just a little bit more. Started with records revolving out in the open under a needle that needed to be lifted and set in a groove and an RPM that also needed to be set then went to tapes playing behind plastic covers or partly disappearing into dashboard players, to recently where we have nearly two decades of a recording medium, the CD, that plays out of view and is hardly able to be manipulated. That, I'd say, has been a good lead-up to all of the current electronic formats that pretend to require no medium at all. It comes as no surprise, then, that the wildly popular MP3 slips by almost without comment when that format derives its popularity from the very degree to which it alters the sound of that which it encodes. And from the poshness of the devices that play it, let's not forget that part. It's easy for us to hear the difference between a vinyl record and a CD, for example—we have a particular awareness of that—but lossy codecs such as MP3 or Ogg Vorbis, Advanced Audio Coding or Musepack seem to be judged as equal to lossless codecs and formats- if they're judged at all. Maybe because lossy codecs don't take up as much hard drive space or it's all just "digital" or the contexts in which

we now listen to music are so varied or because we've listened to way more recordings than we've ever been to folk jam sessions. It's hard to say.

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But at least we have some tools to break some of these layers apart. Remediation, immediacy and hypermediacy are just a few examples of media concepts that give us a space to question assumptions. When we try to listen to the record while the music is playing, those assumptions come readily to the surface. More often than not, we realize that there may be nothing bearing all the weight but convention and the past glories of advertising campaigns.

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