SIGNIFYING DIY: PROCESS-ORIENTED AESTHETICS IN 1990s ALTERNATIVE ROCK AND HIP-HOP

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ABSTRACT

BRIAN JONES: Signifying DIY: Process-Oriented Aesthetics in 1990s Alternative Rock and Hip-Hop
(Under the direction of Mark Katz)

This dissertation posits and demonstrates a framework for analyzing how sound recordings convey meaning in rock—considering how listeners experience recordings, not only as fixed products, but also as sonic evidence of implied actions. I call this framework process-oriented aesthetics, and I define it as a sensibility in which musical meaning is conveyed in a record’s sonic foregrounding of its own production process. In this sensibility, recordings sonically evoke what I call a production myth—a real or imagined backstory, nurtured through the surrounding discourse, that adds meaning to the musical sounds. Production myths encourage listeners to aestheticize practices of musical creation and help facilitate intellectual and creative engagement in listening. The effects of process-oriented aesthetics rely upon the interplay between the nuances of recorded sound and the assumed (or imagined) circumstances of their production.

I investigate these aesthetic sensibilities in the music and discourse of 1990s alternative rock and hip-hop. Alternative rock in the 1990s harbored an enduring tension between the small-scale, non-commercial values of its indie roots and the music’s eventual mass-mediated popularity. I use process-oriented aesthetics as a way to address the slippery connections between musical style and 1990s alternative authenticity. I single out three musical trends in alternative music after grunge: lo-fi, hip-hop sampling, and artists’ use of vintage instruments and media. Even as artists and fans of these genres embraced the alternative-culture ideals of
marginal eclecticism, they did so in a self-consciously mediated space. They all, in some way, responded to the generalized angst surrounding alternative rock’s massness by aestheticizing the mediated processes of musical production.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Process-Oriented Aesthetics and Alternative Culture in the 1990s

What do we hear when we listen to rock? Let’s begin by considering the Velvet Underground’s “The Black Angel’s Death Song,” from their landmark album *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1967).¹ Like many great rock tracks, its melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements are rather simple and repetitive. A traditional music analysis might identify its three-chord guitar progression, the open-fifth drones in the viola, or the particular way the vocal phrases meander around the fifth and second scale degrees before resolving to the tonic. But this type of observation misses crucial aspects of the track’s content and meaning. Its most evocative characteristics are atmospheric. We hear bow hair skidding recklessly across the strings of the viola; the abrupt vocal hisses between verses conjure an image of lips pressed against a saliva-splattered microphone. The track’s overall sonic characteristics evoke a gritty, underground sense of live performance, unabashedly announcing to the listener that it was recorded hastily in a small space, probably using cheap equipment. And for many listeners, even a few seconds of the track can evoke rich mythologies of cultural and aesthetic meaning: the artistic communities of the Lower East Side; band member John Cale’s connection with avant-garde composer

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LaMonte Young; or the image of Andy Warhol sitting, blissfully ignorant, behind the recording console.

I will note two essential points in this brief description. First, these aspects of the musical work are conveyed sonically—they could hardly be rendered in a musical score or transcription. Although the qualitative nuances of sound are difficult to analyze in an objective way, they are the very characteristics that tend to create the most immediate, visceral aspects of the listening experience. Second, the meaning of the music relies not only on its aural characteristics, but also on the ways that these characteristics relate to listeners’ conceptions of the music’s creation. In this analysis, then, what is most important is the track’s ability to evoke a sense of action in a particular setting. Its aural roughness suggests aesthetic liberation—of musicians and amateurs collaborating in a freewheeling rock and roll spectacle. From the discourse surrounding the band, a listener is able to reconstruct and vicariously experience this atmosphere, all the while settling into the groove of the music.

In this dissertation, I posit a mode of investigation and analysis that accounts for this type of signification. I call it process-oriented aesthetics, and I define it as a sensibility in which musical meaning is conveyed by a record’s sonic foregrounding of its own production process. In this sensibility, recordings sonically evoke a production myth—a real or imagined backstory, nurtured through the surrounding discourse, that adds meaning to the musical sounds. Production myths encourage listeners to aestheticize practices of musical creation and help facilitate intellectual and creative engagement in listening. The effects of process-oriented aesthetics rely upon the interplay between the nuances of recorded sound and the assumed (or imagined) circumstances of their production.
In process-oriented aesthetics, the technology of sound recording plays a fundamental role in conveying musical meaning. Indeed, the rise of recorded sound marks a crucial development in the history of music. Sound recordings have come to permeate modern life, from phonographs, Muzak, and film scores to CDs, video-game soundtracks, and digital MP3s. These technological developments, however, are also aesthetic. Rather than consisting of notes on a page or actions in a live performance, musical works can be rendered (and heard) as sound itself, physically disconnected from any real-life source. The work of Jonathan Sterne, Mark Katz, Albin Zak, Tim Anderson, and others have investigated the historical developments preceding and surrounding the rising prevalence of sound recording. Rock, as a musical tradition, style, and practice, arose among these technological networks of recording and transmission. Philosopher Theodore Gracyk has argued that, in the aesthetics of rock, the “work is less typically a song than an arrangement of recorded sounds.” Songwriting, performance, and record production combine in a creative process that is sealed with a recording’s commercial release.

The record is rock’s primary medium. In response to this centrality of recording, musicologists have developed various analytical tools—beyond traditional notation-based musical analysis—to address how electronically mediated rock can convey meaning: whether through semiotics, spectrograms, spatial metaphors, gender studies, or genre studies. Still, the nuances of recorded

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sound remain notoriously difficult to quantify and assess. Even minor changes in guitar tone, rhythmic groove, or spatial ambiance can fundamentally alter a recording’s sensibility or genre. And a sound recording, by its nature, does more than represent the notes, rhythms, and timbres of the music. As sound has come to be inscribed or encoded in tangible objects, listeners have changed their conceptions of—and engagement with—music. Consider historian Robert Cantwell’s description of the transmission of bluegrass:

The radio or record . . . reflects only the audial facet of a many faceted tradition; but in reflecting it, it frees it . . . The music . . . presents itself to the ear as itself, an aural effect for which the listener, by a kind of musical detective work, must contrive a physical and mechanical cause. . . . By a strange uncoupling, a social event has retired, like a memory, to inward experience, where the imagination must reach into the darkness surrounding the disembodied music to reveal the human forces that created it.\(^\text{5}\)

Listeners actively reconstruct, and find meaning in, the imagined circumstances of a record’s creation. Process-oriented aesthetics thus draw upon a mode of listening and appreciation that is enabled by the music’s medium. Sound recording technologies may have physically separated music from the actions of its production, but a process-oriented aesthetic imbues the seemingly barren record with a sense of lively engagement by mythologizing the actions behind its disembodied sounds.

**An Approach to Alternative**

Since its effects arise from the characteristics of recorded sound, process-oriented aesthetics could apply to any recording-based musical tradition of the last century or so. But a process-oriented aesthetic is a sensibility, not an inherent musical characteristic. It is a way of listening to

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records, one that not all listeners bring to all types of music. Process-oriented aesthetics, I argue, arise more commonly in response to—and can be particularly useful in understanding—self-consciously alternative, independent, or underground genres, traditions broadly related to what Robert Christgau has called “semipopular” music.\(^6\) Since the 1970s, something of an “alternative canon” has developed among rock intellectuals, college radio culture, and alternative rock publications. Beginning with 1960s iconoclasts such as the Velvet Underground and Captain Beefheart, this canon includes the various punk, hardcore, and new wave genres of the 1970s and early 1980s; underground rock and hip-hop scenes of the ensuing decade; and alternative, electronic, and indie genres since the early 1990s.\(^7\) In these genres, critics and listeners often consider essential musical characteristics as residing in the recorded subtleties of timbre, ambiance, articulation, or layers of noise or distortion. By aurally “showing the seams” of their production process, records from these genres emphasize the “doing” in “do-it-yourself”—whether through interpersonal networks of independent labels, the energy of live performance, a sense egalitarian participation, experimental sound manipulation, or an ironic appropriation of musical style by a marginal subculture.\(^8\) Moreover, in these genres, process-oriented aesthetics align well with an anti-commercial sensibility, valorizing a sense of realness in musical signification and an intellectual engagement in listening. As records from these genres

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foreground their own modes of production, they plug into essential mythologies of authenticity and aesthetic engagement.

The 1990s was a decade in which ideals of small-scale creative authenticity came into sharp relief with a growing sense of the music’s commercial co-optation; process-oriented aesthetics allows a useful perspective for examining this tension. In the early years of that decade, the music of previously underground bands became immensely profitable in the wake of the success of Nirvana. “Grunge” and “alternative” became new industry buzzwords, and scores of independent rock bands were signed to major-label record deals. The “alternative” designation—which in the 1980s had denoted the participatory networks and stylistic eclecticism of opinionated groups of musical iconoclasts—came to be attached in the 1990s to stadium-filling grunge groups such as Stone Temple Pilots, Bush, and Collective Soul, whose increasingly homogenized sound assimilated signifiers of underground rock.⁹ Steve Waksman has described the broader process at play: the ideals of small-scale music-making were transformed into sonic and visual markers of authenticity for a larger market; in turn, “independent” was transformed from “a term used to describe a way of producing music to something more akin to a genre unto itself.” The Seattle record label Sub Pop, in particular, took the live intimacy of an underground scene and brought it into the semiotic field of mass media and marketing:

[Sub Pop] perceived that local scenes were connected to each other through vital networks of economic and cultural exchange. But they went beyond many of their peers in believing that these networks should be used for marketing rock on a mass scale, rather than merely linking together a series of self-sustaining, relatively autonomous entities.¹⁰

⁹ For an effective overview of developments immediately surrounding the commodification Seattle grunge, see the documentary film Hype, directed by Doug Pray (Lions Gate Entertainment, 1996).

¹⁰ Steve Waksman, This Ain’t the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 241, 249, 253.
The breakthrough of grunge in the early 1990s was significant, therefore, not for the rise of a new style or subculture, but for the development of a new national market and a distinctive discourse to promote it.

With alternative rock’s newfound market dominance came an unresolvable tension. In a 1994 *Village Voice* piece, critic (and later scholar) Eric Weisbard explained how members of the 1980s underground scene—described as a loose network of “musicians, label staffs, college radio DJs, zine writers, club workers”—came to bear both the “pride and scars” of their tradition in the mid-1990s. There was pride in the success of what Weisbard described as “a form of rock that could thrive on voluntarism, subsistence and obscurity, where the distance between fanship and participation was no distance at all, so one could be a consumer without the traditional associations of gross commodification, audience passivity, and massness.” Yet there was simultaneously a deep-seated aversion to the transformation of the alternative ideals of the underground—“the indie values of smallness, marginality, antipop as a basis for community formation and everything else”—into “a blueprint for ’90s mainstream rock.” Weisbard asked: “Isn’t that a contradiction in terms, or something even worse: a betrayal of values?” This contradiction permeated some of the more poignant paradoxes of 1990s alternative culture: the mass celebrity of the alternative rock star, a successful band’s dilemma of choosing independent versus major-label production and distribution, and the question of whether to engage the populist power of alternative ideals for wider social good.11

We can discern here the broad, if somewhat conflicted, narrative that came to constitute the practical definition of “alternative rock.” But if true alternative rock was considered as

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having arisen from the small-scale networks of independent music scenes, and if the sound of grunge and other alternative genres purported to represent those scenes, then what happened when those styles came to signify commercial co-optation more than musical creativity? By 1997, *New York Times* pop critic Neil Strauss declared: “Forget Pearl Jam. Alternative rock lives.” He offered a list of “alternatives to alternative rock” that maintained the music’s original ideals of small-scale eclecticism; these alternatives included micro-trends he dubbed “homemade pop,” “communal hardcore,” “cocktail lounge,” and “Velvet introspection.”12 If the heavy, distorted immediacy of grunge had embodied the active, anti-mass ideals of alternative culture, how could the contrasting styles of “homemade pop” and “cocktail lounge” come to act as proof that “alternative [still] lives”?

Throughout this dissertation, I use process-oriented aesthetics as a way to address the slippery connections between musical style and 1990s alternative authenticity. I single out three musical trends in alternative music after grunge: lo-fi, hip-hop sampling, and artists’ use of vintage instruments and media. One commonality among these paths is that, while artists and fans still embraced the alternative-culture ideals of marginality, thoughtfulness, and eclecticism, they did so in a self-consciously mediated space. They all, in some way, responded to the generalized angst surrounding alternative rock’s massness by aestheticizing the mediated processes of musical production.

In these developments, we find various routes toward alternative authentication: a sense of reality grounded in spontaneous expression, anti-commercial creative subversion, ostensibly honest and overt acknowledgment of mediated processes of production, or the embodied pleasures of material engagement in musical performance. In many ways, these frameworks of

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authentication build upon developments of the past—not being limited to the hipster or alternative networks that receive focus in this dissertation. Aural acknowledgement of mediation, for example, has played an essential role in countless trends among recorded music genres: from novelty pop of the early 1950s, to the psychedelic experiments of 1960s Brazilian Tropicália, to Jamaican dub, to 1980s mainstream pop. These developments in 1990s alternative music, then, constitute only one manifestation among many of a foregrounded mediation in recorded music. Furthermore, socio-political and cultural contexts and precedents helped shape the musical developments described in this dissertation. The ideological implications of anti-commercial authenticity and small-scale engagement, for example, drew upon broader developments in American politics and culture—seen, for example, in the gradual disintegration and displacement of Cold War tensions, the long-term economic ramifications of post-industrialization, or the peculiar place of “generation X” in relation to baby-boomer counterculture. This dissertation, then, demonstrates a particular mode of listening that thrived within and among broader technological and cultural developments. The framework of process-oriented aesthetics allows us to view common threads among a diversity of musical sensibilities in the 1990s, while highlighting the essential role of sound recording technologies in aesthetic appreciation of the music.

In addressing “alternative music” of the 1990s, I define the genre not in terms of its musical stylistic attributes, but in terms of the discursive space it inhabits. This encourages us to recognize common ways that critics, listeners, and musicians of various subgenres engaged with

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13 Joshua Clover gives a cultural account of the role of popular music in global political and ideological developments around the turn of the 1990s in *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). For more on the ideological placement of “generation X” and its attitudes in relation to broader cultural developments of the second half of the twentieth century, see Catherine Strong, *Grunge: Music and Memory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 131–52.
notions of creative authenticity. The framework of process-oriented aesthetics helps us to consider these developments as drawing upon powerful signifiers of aesthetic engagement, rather than as essentialized signposts of bona-fide authenticity. Although some approaches to music studies might gladly dismiss the vagaries of musical authenticity as empty signification, the concept remains deeply meaningful to many musicians and listeners. Through the framework of process-oriented aesthetics, we are able to better understand some essential ways that notions of authenticity are constructed and experienced in listening to records from within the perspectives of alternative music culture.

**Conceptualizing the Boundaries of a Genre**

In considering alternative music as a discursive and market-based construct, I draw upon sociologist Simon Frith’s argument that “to understand how a genre label works . . . is to understand a reading of the market.” Listeners tend to conceptualize and choose music according to the genre frameworks presented to them; at the same time, broader shifts in taste effect widespread changes in these frameworks. “Genre origins remain a matter of elaborate and unresolvable debate,” Frith has explained. “Or, to put this more sensibly, the genre labeling process is better understood as something collusive than as something invented individually, as the result of a loose agreement among musicians and fans, writers and disc jockeys.”

The discourse and commerce surrounding the music help set the terms for listeners’ aesthetic engagement.

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But the notion of alternative music has meant different things to different people at different times, and often boiled down to a subjective question of which styles seemed more authentic. This is why I approach the genre primarily in terms of its self-identified networks of discourse: music magazines, record-label promotion, newspaper criticism, independent weeklies, and fanzines. In order to contextualize and frame this project’s examination of these circles of discourse, I conducted personal interviews with a diverse sample of industry figures, including magazine editors, newspaper journalists, authors, publicists, and retailers. These perspectives did much to shape the overall trajectory of this project. We will now consider a few key observations from these interviews to set up the basic genre frameworks through which this dissertation will trace developments in alternative rock through the 1990s.

The role of music magazines is a good place to begin, as they tended to be the most widespread disseminators of music-critical discourse. I consider music magazines as inhabiting a peculiar place in the culture. They reacted to trends perceived by their writers and editors, while at the same time reifying those trends more broadly through their coverage. Two key magazines that laid claim on alternative music leading into the 1990s were Spin and Option. Each, in its own way, came to be considered a standard-bearer for the genre, and each receives considerable attention throughout this dissertation.15 Both magazines were founded in 1985, and both grew to have national circulation. Although Spin and Option could both fall under the category of “alternative rock magazine,” they approached the genre from significantly different perspectives. The New York-based Spin was founded by Bob Guccione Jr. under his father’s Penthouse media umbrella. Guccione described Spin as an “overground underground” magazine, placing rock’s

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largest figures alongside experimental groups at the industry’s fringe. It thus simultaneously reinforced the existing rock canon while positioning itself as progressive. *Option*, on the other hand, considered itself solely a provider of “music alternatives”; publisher Scott Becker explained that the magazine “was born out of a commitment to this widely-held belief: that the independent music community deserves a quality publication which addresses the whole spectrum of music activity.” *Option* had been established from the ashes of the defunct *OP* magazine, a Northwest-based fanzine of the early 1980s that served as organ for an association of independent musicians and tape-traders called the Lost Music Network. As such, *Option* maintained a substantial music review section, covering an eclectic array of musical styles. The contrasting origins and perspectives of *Spin* and *Option* can be used to exemplify some of the tensions of alternative rock’s mainstream expansion into the 1990s.

I asked Eric Weisbard—senior editor at *Spin* and music editor of *Village Voice* in the second half of the 1990s—about the role of these particular magazines in the formation of an alternative music discourse. He described *Spin* as “a publication that covered alternative rock . . . The goal of *Spin* was not trying in any way to reject what a Condé Nast publication [owner of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*] would do, or what *Rolling Stone* would do, or any other men’s magazine. *Spin* was basically a men’s magazine.” *Option*, he says, set itself up as a sort of

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17 Scott Becker, “Publisher’s Note,” *Option*, March/April 1985, 2.

18 For more on the Lost Music Network conference, see John Foster, “Lost Weekend Success!” *OP*, July/August 1984, 3–5.

“gatekeeper,” shepherding bands from all corners of the sprawling underground into broader visibility. “This category of music [alternative rock in the early 1990s] was becoming much bigger. And so, in terms of the press coverage of that music, you had publications like Option or Alternative Press, that were part of the larger story of how the music had risen in the first place. They were part of the fanzine culture, the college radio networks, the different scenes that learned how to connect to each other. Where Spin was concerned, it was much more about how, if this audience was now large enough, there could be a glossy magazine covering it.”20 Among these cultural networks, layers of ideological commitment could stem from different places, whether it be a leftist anti-commercialism, a desire to empower culturally marginalized groups, identity politics, or a stylistic purism for a particular strand of performance or technology. It is thus inaccurate to portray “alternative culture” in the 1990s as any sort of monolithic entity or set of values; rather, it is best understood as a series of discursive networks and ideals that overlapped in complex ways among various groups and organizations.

For an example of how media sources related to the aesthetic ideals of a particular group of listeners, we can consider the memories of musicologist Theo Cateforis, who worked in the late 1980s and early 1990s at an independent record co-op and wrote for the New York zine The Big Takeover. Alternative, he says, meant “that you were choosing. . . . Because what is an alternative? An alternative is something that is not what is prescribed. . . . It implied that you cared enough or were invested enough to go out of your way to find something off the beaten path. So there was a certain agency involved.” For Cateforis and his colleagues, Spin didn’t carry alternative credibility because it gave legitimacy to mainstream established artists: “No alternative magazine would put Madonna on its cover.” A magazine such as Option, however,

20 Eric Weisbard, telephone interview with author, 15 July 2013.
emphasized a sense of consumer agency in making the listener find his or her own tastes among its eclectic coverage and ample record reviews.\textsuperscript{21}

Music journalist Gina Arnold provides another window into the tensions that arose in the dissemination of alternative music and ideals. She had a regular column in the independent weekly \textit{East Bay Express}, contributed to the Sunday entertainment section of \textit{The San Francisco Chronicle}, and wrote for alternative magazines including \textit{Option} and (occasionally) \textit{Spin}. Working around the ideologically intense punk scenes in the Bay Area, Arnold had to navigate tensions among local scenes, translocal networks, and mainstream media outlets. She earned the ire of many local bands for focusing on larger, nationally touring indie groups in her coverage. Yet covering these larger groups brought its own issues. She remembers interviewing Thurston Moore, whose group Sonic Youth had recently left an indie record label to sign with one of the majors. “He kept wanting to talk about his label; why it was okay for him to be on [major label] Geffen . . . and he kept turning the conversation back to that. . . . I was writing for the \textit{San Francisco Chronicle}. . . . How can I use a quote about why he’s on Geffen in an article that’s supposed to showcase Sonic Youth to people who have never heard of them?”\textsuperscript{22} This glimpse of Arnold’s situation shows disjunctions among multiple layers of authenticity. The ideologically-engaged East Bay punk scene sought to further their own participatory purism, even as Sonic Youth traversed a gauntlet of major-label/indie-label authenticities; meanwhile, Arnold’s \textit{San Francisco Chronicle} readership mostly just wanted to hear about the exciting music and personalities of tomorrow’s #1 alt-rock band.

\textsuperscript{21} Theo Cateforis, telephone interview with author, 9 July 2013.

\textsuperscript{22} Gina Arnold, telephone interview with author, 26 July 2013.
Turning to the promotional aspects of the industry, we can see how questions of alternative authenticity resonated among different segments of the record-buying audience. Record label publicists were an essential link in the chain of information from artists, through their labels, and out to listeners through the music press. In the years before the information deluge of the Internet, publicists had significant power in shaping musicians’ image, often being the sole source of information for music journalists.23 Consider an observation from Julie Farman, who worked as an underground club promoter in the 1980s and later became an influential publicist at Epic for Pearl Jam, Oasis, and other alternative acts. She notes an essential difference between the presentation of 1990s alternative artists and those in mainstream pop. For the former, there had to be a “story.” (This relates closely to my analytical construct of the “production myth” in process-oriented aesthetics.) The publicist’s bio for Rage Against the Machine, she says, would have shown that they were “angry, committed, authentic, radical”; or Pearl Jam’s press kit would relate the story of having risen from the vital Seattle grunge scene. Celine Dion, on the other hand, would be presented with high-fashion photos, very little biographical information, and a lot of music. With an alternative artist, she says, “the backstory is going to establish that they are authentic. . . . With Celine Dion, nobody wrote anything about her until after she sold platinum records. . . . To begin with, there was no story.”24 A fan wanting to learn the background story behind a favorite artist is, of course, not unique to alternative rock; but for an alternative artist, the story tended to precede the music—shaping its sonic reception.

23 For more on the role of publicists and public relations teams in the marketing of popular music during this period, see Keith Negus, Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), 62–79.

24 Julie Farman, Skype interview with author, 5 September 2013.
In this way, mass media avenues were enlisted in disseminating the idea of underground musical atmosphere and values.\textsuperscript{25}

At the same time, alternative rock’s ascent into broader markets created new problems in retail. Marc Cusa was in charge of promotional materials for the BMG CD club in the 1990s. When I asked him about the place of alternative music in the market, he emphasized the limitations of economies of scale. With BMG’s 10 million customers and 18 different genre categories for advertising, there was little room for differentiation. It would have been too costly to constantly create new materials for every genre in every month’s catalog. Occasionally, he said, there would be a place for a special genre feature: “I remember we did an alternative issue and it had, like, a cow on the cover. . . . ‘Let’s put a cow on the cover and make it look like he was branded with ‘History of Alternative Music.’” . . . But I feel like that’s what people were doing in the ’90s; just trying to be eccentric for the sake of it.”\textsuperscript{26} Here, since alternative was ultimately grouped into the rock category, newer trends could only be highlighted insofar as they spoke to a significant portion of the audience.

We find similar issues among record stores seeking to organize music in a way that would reach and resonate with the greatest portion of their customer base. Dennis Manzanedo worked as the record buyer for the Virgin Records store in midtown Manhattan in the 1990s. In the years following the breakthrough of grunge, retailers faced a dilemma: where to place the newly popular alternative records of Nirvana. Before this point, independent and alternative records had been placed at the back of the store, where connoisseurs could seek out music that

\textsuperscript{25} This process aligns with Waksman’s previously-mentioned description of Sub Pop. The small-scale values of the musical underground were not mobilized for the scene’s creative viability and self-sustaining existence, but rather to support a mass-mediated cultural phenomenon. Waksman, \textit{This Ain’t the Summer of Love}, 251.

\textsuperscript{26} Marc Cusa, telephone interview with author, 6 August 2013.
wouldn’t be appealing to the majority of walk-in customers. But growing alternative-rock audiences shifted this dynamic. He remembers, “We don’t want to put alternative in a separate section from rock, because people would miss it.” So there was a balance between trying to retain the music’s cultural and commercial identity and trying to increase its visibility and sales potential: “The person coming in for Jimi Hendrix would see the Nirvana record. [And we would say] ‘Well, I think we’d have more to gain by keeping them together.’”

Among the interlocking networks of press, promotion, and retail, members of the industry grappled with how to deal with the burgeoning audiences for what, up to that point, had been a niche market. Although purist fanzines and eclectic media outlets may have remained invested in the small-scale personalization and social connections required for independent media, the growing market potential for these trends sparked the development of new layers of distribution, discourse, and mediation to incorporate signifiers of indie and alternative ideals into broader industry networks.

**Branching Out: Alternative Rap?**

As the decade progressed and alternative rock developed an established place in the industry, its musical styles and market strategies influenced (and were influenced by) other musical genres. One of these genres was hip-hop. Indeed, the audiences for hip-hop and alternative during these years had significant overlap. Furthermore, much of this music traveled through the same circles of discourse and distribution. In the late 1980s, hip-hop held a particular place in college rock, with regular rap reviews and features in *Option*, an established rap section in *CMJ* (the trade journal for college radio stations), and considerable college-radio airplay given to well-respected

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27 Dennis Manzanedo, telephone interview with author, 7 September 2013.
groups such as Public Enemy, the Jungle Brothers, and De La Soul. Both Cateforis and Arnold, when I asked them about the relationship between hip-hop and alternative music, related stories of hearing about hip-hop through their alternative-oriented personal networks. Arnold first heard De La Soul while driving across Texas in a tour van with alternative rocker Gibby Haynes (and subsequently wrote a cover story about them for Option), and Cateforis was introduced to Public Enemy through a mixtape made by a friend. As Cateforis noted, this path of distribution was significant to his reception of the music, relating to the aforementioned ideals of consumer agency and personal investment: “It was something someone got for me. I wasn’t hearing on the radio. . . . Someone tracked it down. . . . a lot of knowledge was passed along this way in the ’80s. It was off the beaten path.”

Even for self-identified alternative music fans who didn’t listen avidly to hip-hop, the genre tended to resonate ideologically with these fans because of its independent means of production and distribution. Gina Arnold remembers considering hip-hop as related to the broader “left-of-the-dial” eclectic project of alternative rock: “I did have a sense that all of the things the indie scene was championing as independent: putting out your own records, making your own networks, selling them in your own store . . . I always thought, ‘Well, that’s what hip-hop does.’”

When we consider alternative and hip-hop as musical genres, we tend to invoke an implicit conflation of demographics and musical style. Yet, there was a diversity of identities within and surrounding the demographic archetypes of genre. Manzenado remembers that,

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28 Cateforis interview.


30 Arnold interview.
working in southern California in the early 1990s, “the same customer would buy the latest country and the hip-hop. It was the car culture. They wanted things that bumped, that rocked their trucks.” Or consider Marc Cusa’s observation about crossover artists: “The big thing to remember is that everyone bought the big albums. . . . Genre labels were a bit flexible. . . . We sold TLC to a lot of alternative people, and we marketed some hip-hop to the alternative crowd.”

But, going into the 1990s, if certain strains of hip-hop were seen as representing independent values similar to those in alternative culture, then what about the underlying tensions and conflicts of commercialism and cultural identity? Naturally, the industry had responded to alternative rock and hip-hop’s joint commercial ascent. By May 1992, on the cover of *Billboard*, Janine McAdams had dubbed a new genre of “alternative rap.” These issues will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three, but a few observations can help illuminate how this combination of alternative and hip-hop genres fit into the musical ideologies of the time. As Eric Weisbard remembers, although hip-hop groups such as Jungle Brothers and De La Soul always had a place in the alternative-genre landscape, by the mid-1990s the idea of alternative crossover played a significant role in expanding audiences: “There was a sense that alternative hip-hop was a possible way to interest readers who rejected mainstream black culture, in at least certain parts of the music.”

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31 Manzanedo interview.
32 Cusa interview.
34 Weisbard interview.
But along with this sense of commercial expansion came an inevitable backlash. Some artists responded by espousing a hip-hop purism, tying their music to particular social issues or to technological aspects of the music’s history. Others saw sub-genre divisions themselves as stifling. I asked Danyel Smith—who contributed hip-hop-based content to *Spin* and *Vibe* in the early 1990s and went on to hold top editorial positions at *Vibe* and *Billboard*—about the place of “alternative rap” in hip-hop culture during these years. She considered the term distracting, at best. “Rap is rap and hip-hop is hip-hop. If you’re in it, you’re in it. . . . But I did feel like certain types of rap get categorized into a subgenre for safety reasons, and that this relates to certain classes. . . . Alternative to what? To gangsta rap? To black people acting like black people? What was it an alternative to? . . . And I’m not disrespecting any of the groups that were labeled that, but I’ve never been into critiquing them from that stance.” Furthermore, Smith hints at the top-down implications of the term; hip-hop artists tended not to self-identify as alternative. “I don’t know how many people called themselves that. I don’t remember Michael Franti [of Spearhead and Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy] coming up to me and saying, ‘Hey Danyel, here’s my new alternative rap record.’ That would be ridiculous.”

Genre crossovers of rap and alternative thus maintained contested identities throughout the 1990s. Yet the inclusion of specific hip-hop groups as alternative—whether through radio formats, coverage in alternative magazines, Lollapalooza appearances, or just the “alternative rap” label itself—demonstrates a desire among some to expand the boundaries of the alternative genre with more diverse perspectives, and to incorporate new aesthetic sensibilities into the alternative ideals of anti-commercialism and stylistic eclecticism. For the purposes of this dissertation, what is most important here are the ways that technological processes of hip-hop

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35 Danyel Smith, telephone interview with author, 29 April 2014.
production came to be associated with ideals of alternative authenticity. This can be seen most clearly in digital sampling. In alternative culture in the first half of the 1990s, production myths developed around the practices of hip-hop sampling. Furthermore, among some hip-hop artists associated with alternative culture during this period, digital sampling was practiced in a way that tended to foreground the “seams” of its production, thus lending itself to the promulgation of production myths. In this way, a process-oriented sensibility contributed to hip-hop’s resonance among alternative-oriented audiences—aligning with the culture’s broader emphasis on media-consciousness in listening.

**Historical Perspectives on DIY and Alternative**

To further set the stage for this dissertation’s examination of alternative, independent, and DIY sensibilities in the 1990s, we should consider the broader historical and social context of these terms and ideals. The idea of a DIY ethos had led a broad, if somewhat ill-defined, history through the 20th century. One trajectory was in domestic hobbies and home improvement; the term “DIY” first appeared in *Suburban Life* magazine in 1912. By the 1950s the idea of DIY home improvement had achieved widespread currency in both American and British middle-class domestic culture, and was considered to reflect democratic ideals of consumer independence, ownership, and pride in one’s own work.36 DIY sensibilities also played an important role in cultures surrounding electronics: consider the participatory cultures of amateur radio operators since the early 20th century; the “tinkering” of the electric guitar developers Les Paul and Leo Fender; or even the more recent “dirty electronics” movement of experimental

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music using live analog electronics. As for the visual arts, although DIY-oriented aesthetics could be recognized in earlier avant-garde movements such as Dada and the Situationist International, the concept took a central role in the participatory artworks of Fluxus and new media artists. Fanzines—non-commercial, self-produced magazines—were another notable manifestation of DIY sentiments throughout the 20th century, with the science fiction zine cultures of the 1930s and ‘40s, radical political zines beginning in the mid-1950s, and punk zines arising in the 1970s.

Punk rock stands as the most overt and influential manifestation of DIY attitudes in popular music and culture. 1970s punk culture asserted an iconoclastic amateurism: “This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. Now form a band.” Punk’s ideologies of egalitarianism, participation, and empowerment found resonance among subsequent independent music scenes of the 1980s and ‘90s, whether hardcore, punk, alternative, or indie. As communications scholar Holly Kruse observes, a DIY attitude has been essential in binding musicians, entrepreneurs, and fans of self-consciously independent scene. Even if a subculture’s DIY construct of egalitarianism may harbor inconsistencies, Kruse notes “the very belief that indie pop/rock music was and is DIY music is crucial in defining the genre.”

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41 Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 11.
Furthermore, the term “alternative” itself had been in circulation in popular music, to a certain extent, since at least the early 1970s. In 1973, the London-based music magazine *Let It Rock* published a two-part feature that specifically described “Alternative Music” in Britain—a self-sustaining network of Marxist-leaning musicians who worked independently, “up against the business” of the established record labels.42 The “alternative” label persisted for underground, iconoclastic networks throughout the 1980s, although the term “college rock” and “modern rock” also gained credence through the second half of the decade.43 This is the situation from which “alternative” became a widespread genre name, and from which it transformed into a designation for some of the more dominant trends in rock of the 1990s.

As seen in this snapshot of various historical developments, there is by no means a unified theory of DIY, independent, or alternative ideals. A few commonalities can, however, be observed. These cultures tend to valorize the role of the amateur, nurturing an egalitarian sense of empowerment by complicating or breaking down boundaries between production and consumption. As media studies scholar Steven Duncombe observes, DIY “is at once a critique of the dominant mode of passive consumer culture and something far more important: the active creation of an alternative culture.”44 The idea of participatory culture, particularly in its later subcultural manifestations, tends to valorize small-scale communities and networks of closely

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43 These terms and categorizations can be seen in the rise of *Option* in 1985, with the subtitle, “Music Alternatives;” the term “college rock” and “modern rock” became significant categories with the rising influence of college radio in the second half of the 1980s, which can be seen in a trade publication such as *CMJ* and in the chart categorizations in *Billboard*.

44 Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 117. As author and cultural studies scholar Amy Spencer writes, “The DIY movement is about using anything you can get your hands on to shape your own cultural entity; your own version of whatever you think is missing in mainstream culture.” Spencer, *DIY*, 11.
associated producer/consumers. In their emphasis on small-scale participation, these communities and scenes come to symbolize non-commercial independence from the perceived manipulation and homogenization of a mass-produced commodity culture. Throughout this dissertation, we see that these types of ideals form the basis upon which many musical production myths are built.

We can also consider 1990s alternative music cultures in terms of broader social, economic, and cultural developments. Sociologist Ryan Force has described this period in terms of shifting tensions, with post-industrialization and post-Fordist economic structures affecting artists’ and listeners’ ideals of cultural identity, aesthetic ideology, and commerce. The aesthetics of opposition and anti-commercialism thus stem not only from technological or ideological developments, but also from the socio-economic position of the music’s practitioners and listeners. Sociologist Richard Lloyd effectively demonstrates the complexity of cultural shifts that took place in the 1990s in response to these socio-economic circumstances, describing urban artists and musicians of the decade as developing a “neo-bohemia” that re-assessed existing notions of creative authenticity to fit into new market structures of media-based commerce.

When we consider the 1990s in terms of ideals of cultural signification, it is also important to recognize that the decade follows on the heels of a late-1980s brand of pop-oriented postmodernism—in which the likes of Barthes and Baudrillard had garnered considerable

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attention among pop intellectuals. A broader sense of “cultural omnivorousness” had crept into aesthetic paradigms of taste and distinction. In this way, the 1990s aesthetic developments described in this dissertation can be seen as playing a significant role in the broader twentieth-century project of complicating or upending existing hierarchies of high and low culture. Alternative-oriented musicians and critics embarked upon renewed consideration of how a mass-produced music genre might still evoke anti-mainstream, anti-commercial, or egalitarian ideals—and whether it mattered. The interpretive framework of process-oriented aesthetics helps explain how these tensions and ideologies came to be negotiated in the mediated sound of the music—thus engaging productively with residual postmodernist attitudes of intellectual engagement in pop culture.

Theory and Methods: Rock Signification and Problems of DIY Authenticity

Much scholarship has considered how the above-discussed ideals of small-scale authenticity have played out among particular communities of independent music practitioners and fans—negotiating tensions and authenticities of creativity, commerce, image, and ideology. But the

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48 These studies have taken various approaches, whether in highlighting the broader unsustainability of small-scale independent record label practices in view of larger economic forces (Stephen Lee, “Re-Examining the Concept of the ‘Independent’ Record Company: The Case of Wax Trax! Records,” Popular Music 14, no. 1 [January 1995]: 13–31; and David Hesmondhalgh, “Post-Punk’s Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry: The Success and Failure of Rough Trade,” Popular Music 16, no. 3 [October 1997]: 255–74); discussing the complex relationships and perceived delineations between mainstream and independent industry forces (Negus, Producing Pop; and Keith Negus, Music Genres and Corporate Cultures [London: Routledge, 1999]); or examining the socio-cultural and aesthetic processes of ideology and aesthetics within independent music scenes (Steven Taylor, False Prophets: Notes from the Punk Underground [Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004]; Kruse, Site and Sound; Fonarow, Empire of Dirt; Strachan, “Do-It-Yourself”; O’Connor, Punk Record Labels; Andrew Mall, “The Stars are Underground: Undergrounds, Mainstreams, and Christian Popular Music,” Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago,
majority of this scholarship has spent little time focusing on the ways that sound recordings themselves aurally signify these ideals. Perhaps this is due, in part, to the ways that long-entrenched conceptions of high and low culture have affected scholarly approaches to interpretation. As Simon Frith wrote in the early 1980s, “High art critics often write as if their terms of evaluation were purely aesthetic, but mass culture critics can’t escape the fact that the bases for cultural evaluation are always social: what is at issue is the effect of the cultural product. . . . The aesthetic question—how does the text achieve its effects?—is secondary.”49 In this project, I place Frith’s “secondary” aesthetic question—the musical how—as my focus of study. There is a musical product that came out of these networks of cultural interactions, and this product (the rock record and its constitutive sounds) invokes and translates the ideological conceptions and contestations of its context in meaningful ways. Thus, beyond examining social and cultural issues and their relation to records’ production and distribution, I focus closely on the music on records themselves and the ways these sounds relate to their surrounding discourse to better understand plausible modes of listener engagement.

One essential aspect of my approach is an acknowledgment that a sound recording is never a transparent document of a performance. The art of record production involves critical decisions that shape the aural character of a record, and thus its musical meaning. Even if a record gives one the sense of being “in the room” with the performer, mediated routes of

recording and production *always* shape the character and effect of the sound. For a listener (whether that be a fellow musician or an unknown mass audience), the sound on record is what constitutes the aural gesture, the rendered act of musical signification. In analyzing music, then, I consider recordings as sonic renderings. I recognize actual modes of production and their contexts, not as litmus tests for authenticity, but as foundational archetypes for mythologized ideals that form the foundations of aesthetic response among groups of listeners.

But if the idea of process-oriented aesthetics essentially attempts to sidestep thorny questions of authenticity in rock production, then how do the actual actions and processes of musical creativity and production relate to the aesthetics of the listening experience? This is where the notion of *production myth* becomes essential. When we consider musical backstories as mythologies, we can examine how they carry aesthetic and ideological meaning without obsessing over the veracity of one story over another. In using the term “myth,” I draw not only from a dictionary definition—being a story that helps explain a world-view or belief—but also look to Roland Barthes’ description of mythologies as form of second-order signification. Barthes goes a step beyond one-to-one correlations between signifier and signified, and posits that the act of signification itself has semiotic meaning. The assumptions inherent in the way a signifier is presented assumes and reifies latent values and ideals. Thus, when listening to a rock record, we can go beyond notes or lyrics and listen for the sonic mythologies—aesthetic and ideological assumptions that can be evoked through, for example, a recording’s lo-fi tape hiss, the overtness of a digital loop, or the aural glitches of an analog synthesizer. Because the

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technologies of record production have always been essential to the sound of rock, the music has maintained a vital tension between signifying performative spontaneity and compositional artifice: the mythologies surrounding artists and genres have vacillated between ideals of media transparency and those of highlighting musical mediation.\(^{52}\)

For a framework to help us engage with this tension, we can look to Elizabeth Outka's idea of the *commodified authentic*, which she developed in the context of consumer sensibilities in early-20\(^{th}\)-century England:

New objects and places were packaged and sold as mini-representations of supposedly noncommercial values . . . images of a purified aesthetic free from any commercial taint of the mass market. It was not simply that marketers were appropriating areas that had traditionally been seen as noncommercial. What made these efforts so distinctive, and what contemporary critics have largely failed to recognize, is how the commercial origins were intrinsic to the allure of these objects and places. Their noncommercial aura made them appealing; their underlying commercial availability promised to make the simulation better than the original, for these new hybrids were accessible, controllable, and—in their ability to unite seemingly antithetical desires—tantalizingly modern. This noncommercial commerce was certainly a paradox, but the powerful underlying promise was that the intrinsic contradictions could be sustained rather than resolved; indeed the paradox was the appeal.\(^{53}\)

A rock record, when viewed from a process-oriented sensibility, can be seen as a commodified authentic in that the inherent contradictions between the commercial medium and the non-commercial “message” creates a uniquely modern experience of pleasure and empowerment. For example, when someone acquires an indie rock record, CD, or audio MP3, everyone knows that the recording is a mass-produced, commodified artifact—something that can be bought and sold for enjoyment or profit. This is ultimately true whether it was bought at Walmart, at an independent record store, or through Amazon.com. But the performance on this artifact seems so

\(^{52}\) Examples of the historical development of this tension between spontaneity and foregrounded artifice will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

real. We hear clicks of the recording apparatus, studio chatter after a take, or the noticeable buzz of the vintage tube amplifier. When the recording aurally acknowledges its own mode of construction, it imbues a recording with an aura of spontaneity and human connection—making the mediated seem immediate.\(^{54}\)

But the idea of the commodified authentic is in no way trying to “unmask the fraud” of these products. As Outka explains, “We usually perceive the selling of authenticity . . . as the inauthentic masquerading as the authentic. Accordingly, we are adept at (and often smug about) unmasking the commerce behind the façade. . . . Such exposure is important . . . but the rush to condemn (or at least ironically smirk) has limited a critical investigation of either the history of such marketing or its powerful allures. In moving so quickly to unmask, we have missed the opportunity to understand.”\(^{55}\) This frank acknowledgement—though not condemnation—of the constructed nature of the commodified authentic is essential to process-oriented aesthetics in rock. We can place our analytical emphasis, not on the veracity of any particular tropes of authenticity, but on the mediated relationships and contradictions that make the music work.

In considering how nuances of sound recordings evoke myths of musical production, this approach also requires an analytical framework from which to accurately discuss sounds on record. Albin Zak’s examination of rock recordings has been particularly useful in this regard, laying out a framework that gives close musicological attention to often-overlooked sonic elements such as equalization, timbre, microtonal inflection, echo, reverb, relative amplitude, dynamics processing, and stereo placement.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{54}\) This concept is discussed by Emily Dolan in “‘. . . This Little Ukulele Tells the Truth’: Indie Pop and Kitsch Authenticity.” \textit{Popular Music} 29, no. 3 (October 2010): 457–69.

\(^{55}\) Outka, \textit{Consuming Traditions}, 5.

\(^{56}\) Zak, \textit{The Poetics of Rock}. 

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To assess how these sonic elements can evoke meaning in relation to related discursive frameworks, I draw upon a foundation of semiotics. The semiotic studies of signs and their interpretation has a long history in popular music scholarship, from Dick Hebdige’s consideration of subversive subcultural signification to Richard Middleton’s and David Brackett’s generalized approaches toward interpreting popular music. These studies tend to draw from a linguistics framework, examining complex series of “codes” in the music that can be interpreted among hierarchies of signification through the development of contextual competencies.\(^{57}\) Rather than focusing on this type of semiotic structure, I follow a Peircian approach, as applied by ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino. I gravitate toward this framework because it allows a fruitful incorporation of flexibility and subjectivity in analysis—this being evident in C. S. Peirce’s broadly inclusive definition of “sign”: “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.”\(^{58}\) Peirce noted the three necessary elements of semiotic analysis: a sign (“something”), its object (“for something”), and an interpreter (“somebody”). Peirce further argues that the act of interpretation creates another thing, the interpretant, in the mind of the interpreter. This interpretant is defined as the resulting connection between the initial sign and its object. It can itself become a new sign, which then can be related to the original object—creating another interpretant that can yet again be related to an object, continuing \textit{ad infinitum} in a semiotic chain.\(^{59}\) I have gravitated toward Peircian semiotics


because it emphasizes the generative role of the interpreter. A sign doesn’t merely signify an object; it represents something to someone.

This Peircian emphasis on active modes of reception encourages the analyst to consider the subjectivity of a listener and his or her interpretive role in the establishment of meaning. As Thomas Turino writes, “Musical signs are sonic events that create an effect in a perceiver; not everything happening in music necessarily functions as signs all of the time . . . but within the Peircian framework if aspects of music create an effect, signs are necessarily involved.”

Compare this to a structuralist analysis, which draws from linguistics to construct webs of relationships among signs and signifiers. Structuralist semiotics tend not only to imply an objectivity of analysis that I believe is ultimately untenable, but in so doing also emphasize the more easily quantifiable, classifiable musical elements of pitch, rhythm, and text—deemphasizing the drastic differences in signification that can arise from the less easily measured elements of timbre, equalization, reverb, and notions of sonic atmosphere and space. While a Peircian analysis certainly could draw upon quantifiable elements of musical sound and style, its emphasis on the subjectivity of an interpreter brings the qualitative elements to the fore.

Turino has laid out an analytical framework that applies Peirce’s framework specifically to musical signification. To put it simply, a musical sound can represent an object in one of three

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62 An example of a structuralist partitioning of quantifiable elements of a musical work is found in Jean-Jacques Nattiez, “Varese’s ‘Density 21.5’: A Study in Semiological Analysis,” trans. Anna Barry, *Music Analysis* 1, no. 3 (October 1982): 243–340. Although Nattiez’s approach is useful in that it makes a clear and necessary distinction between “poietic” and “esthesic” modes of interpretation (something he actually connects to Peirce’s semiotic approach), his idea of a quantifiable, “neutral” analysis emphasizes the musical elements that are most easily categorized, and deemphasizes many of the qualitative signifiers discussed below in my Peircian analysis. See Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 3–37.
ways: through resemblance, through a sense of causality, or as a formalized convention. Then, the sign can be considered as signifying either an imagined object or an object in actual existence. Although a full Peircian analysis can quickly become cumbersome with esoteric terminology, we can demonstrate a few of its salient points with a rather straightforward analysis. Compare the guitar and bass sound from two California rock bands of the 1980s: Black Flag’s “Six Pack” from Damaged (1981), and Metallica’s “Disposable Heroes” from Master of Puppets (1986). Although motivically similar, the tone and production of the two tracks convey starkly different meanings. Black Flag’s guitar and bass tone sound thin, with little low-frequency presence or reverb. Metallica’s guitar and bass tone, on the other hand, echo with booming low end and a punchy, full-sounding production—with multiple layers of overdubbing, wah-wah, and equalization. These differences are obvious on first listen, but how might we analyze the particular effects? These two sounds (hardcore punk and heavy metal, respectively) can draw upon various modes of signification in conveying meaning to a knowledgeable listener. As a sign of real-world causality, the hardcore sound of Black Flag signifies a small, overdriven amplifier—an underground, marginal sensibility of aggressive subversion. The heavy sound of

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63 In his full semiotic framework, Peirce organizes these modes of signification using a set of interlocking trichotomies: Trichotomy I describes the perceptual nature of the signs themselves: qualisigns (relating to a sign’s perceived quality), sinsigns (its actual occurrence, or “token”), or legisigns (an established general “type”). This first trichotomy does not play as central a role in differentiating modes of musical signification, as most recognized musical signs carry meaning as tokens (sinsigns) of recognizable types (legisigns). Trichotomy II deals with how a sign is related to an object in the mind of a perceiver: an icon is related to its object through some type of resemblance; an index is related to an object by some sort of causality or co-occurrence; and a symbol (in a strictly Peircian sense) is related to an object through language or some other formalized type of correlation. Trichotomy III deals with the nature of the interpretant: a rheme indicates a qualitative possibility of being, without asserting any current reality of the object; a dicent is meant to represent an object in actual existence; and an argument represents a symbolic, abstract proposition based on linguistic discourse. Because musical semiotics deals with non-textual aspects of signification, musical analysis will engage with primarily the first two elements of Trichotomy III. See Turino, “Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience,” 225–33.

64 Black Flag, Damaged CD (SST 007, 1990 [reissue of 1981 original]); Metallica, Master of Puppets CD (Elektra 60439–2, 1986).
Metallica, on the other hand, signifies expensive, high-powered equipment and production, thus suggesting a privileged position of resources, talent, and aesthetic power. We can address additional sets of meaning by considering the guitar sounds, not as signifying any real-world occurrence, but rather suggesting imagined spaces. Even if both tracks were recorded in the relatively confined spaces of a professional studio, the reverb and mixing of the Metallica gives the effect of filling a cavernous area with immense sound—something that contrasts the small-scale, in-your-face intensity of Black Flag. These interpretants can furthermore convey aspects of genre ideology. The smaller sound of Black Flag aurally resembles a tight-knit communality of performance—an egalitarianism where members of the audience and the band interact in an underground punk community. The cavernous sound of Metallica surrounds the band with a larger-than-life, almost supernatural aura—lifting the listener out of ordinary interpersonal experience and into transcendent rock spectacle. Although this brief analysis may be ultimately rather simplistic, it demonstrates how Peircean semiotics can suggest routes toward interpreting some of rock recordings’ most crucial, but less easily quantifiable, parameters.

To further explore how sound recordings can convey distinct layers of meaning, we can return to elaborate on Barthes’s idea of second-order signification. When a signifier denotes an object, the very instance of signification implies a set of assumptions and an implicit intentionality. Perhaps the most important aspect of second-order signification lies in its sense of naturalness. Ideas conveyed in this way tend to be taken for granted rather than overtly recognized; they are implicitly naturalized through existence of the discourse.65 From this perspective, the backstories of a rock album’s production process can convey more than narrative fact. They establish frameworks of values and intentions. For example, accounts circulated

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among My Morning Jacket fans in the early 2000s that the band’s first two albums had been recorded in an empty grain silo in Kentucky. This myth does more than provide a factual account of DIY production; it imbues the sound of the reverb with the significance of rural utilitarianism, plays into the geographic significance of center and periphery of the music industry, and grounds the band among the rich musical traditions of the rural South. Barthes’s framework of second-order signification thus can help us recognize crucial ways that the production myths lend meaning to the nuances of recorded sound.

**Means and Ends of Process-Oriented Signification**

The idea of process-oriented aesthetics allows endless possibilities regarding the types of meaning conveyed. We can delineate, however, a few semiotic means and ends that tend to occur in alternative-oriented music. In these genres, a sonic foregrounding of production process is generally accomplished through a transgression of broadly accepted modes of professional music production. Throughout this dissertation, we will see how musicians and recordists sought to work against the established production norms—whether in lo-fi’s seemingly amateur veneer, hip-hop sampling’s rejection of “live band” interactions, or a retro embrace of outmoded analog technologies. I argue that these transgressions have two basic components. First, musicians can transgress *social* aspects of professional studio production. When a recording allows inexactness in rhythm and pitch, or includes of seemingly extra-musical sounds (studio chatter, auxiliary noises, and other imperfections), it gives the sense of spontaneity that undercuts the

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66 This is a narrative I encountered among musician friends discussing My Morning Jacket’s *Tennessee Fire* CD (Darla Records DRL 089, 1999) and *At Dawn* CD (Darla Records DRL 111, 2001).
professionalism of traditional major-label studio productions. A second route toward process-oriented signification is through technological transgression. When a musician misuses equipment, the sonic result foregrounds the act of using it. If an amplifier works within its specified range, the sound is simply made louder; if pushed beyond its limit, the amplifier impinges on the timbre of the signal, creating distortion. This type of transgression, at a basic level, foregrounds processes of technological experimentation. Likewise, when a musician rewires electronic equipment to create bizarre noise, or cuts audiotape into a sound collage, the manipulative act of the artist is brought to the fore. On the other hand, when technologies are used for their intended, seemingly transparent purposes, the mediation is taken for granted and thus loses a measure of its semiotic potency. A sense of transgression can also result from an artist using outmoded or primitive equipment: when the listener hears a sound that seems out of place in a modern recording context, then the act of utilizing vintage mediation is brought to the fore. These practices work to establish meaning in a process-oriented sensibility so long as they are perceived as rejecting or modifying existing practices of musical creation and production.

67 In his analysis of indie rock musical conventions, Robert Strachan refers to this tendency as “purposeful imperfection.” Strachan, “Do-It-Yourself,” 320–24.

68 Of course, this effect depends on the extent to which the sounds and technologies of distortion are already established in a genre. Robert Walser and Michael Hicks both examine the processes and effects of guitar distortion. Although the complex issues surrounding the development of a standardized, sustained guitar distortion do not always align with processes of DIY-oriented signification, both authors note the sense of empowerment that distortion lends to the musician. See Walser, Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 41–44; and Hicks, Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic & Other Satisfactions (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 15–20. For discussion of guitar feedback, see Rebecca McSwain, “The Social Construction of a Reverse Salient in Electric Guitar Technology: Noise, the Solid Body, and Jimi Hendrix,” in Music and Technology in the Twentieth Century, ed. Hans Joachim Braun (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 186–98.

69 For Emily Dolan’s discussion of this point, see “. . . This Little Ukulele Tells the Truth,” 464.
Both of these broader means of signification (the social and the technological) foreground particular types of processes of music production. But to what effect? Among this study of 1990s alternative music trends, here are some of the most common types of meaning conveyed:

1) Empowerment: An act of transgression, whether social or technological, signals to the listener the presence of an empowered artist—an outsider who is able to take the reins of musical expression according to his or her artistic impulses. Notice that the sensibility emphasizes the act of taking power—a freshness of artistic agency—rather than the actions of an already-empowered, stale musical establishment.

2) Experimentation: A sense of experimental spontaneity can provide much of the excitement of a process-oriented aesthetic. An experiment is an act in which the outcome is unknown. It involves a level of risk on the part of the artist. This perceived risk imbues the record with a sense of dynamic vitality. Even though the sound recording may be frozen and largely unchangeable once it is mixed and mastered, these sounds can convey the sense of discovery inherent in creative experimentation.

3) Communality: If a process-oriented record emphasizes social, interpersonal elements of production, it can evoke a sense of egalitarian engagement. Furthermore, a listener’s acceptance of transgressive modes of production creates a sense of communal exclusivity—members of an imagined community who understand and embrace alternative or marginalized modes of musical expression. A recording’s foregrounding of artistic process can also align with DIY’s celebration of the amateur—fostering a communal sense that anyone can and should express themselves through music and art.
4) Honesty: An artist who breaks from accepted modes of musical production in an idiosyncratic artistic act conveys a sense of honesty—as being one who eschews commercial forces in order to follow his or her artistic instincts.

5) Nonchalance: The unfinished roughness of a process-oriented aesthetic can also convey a sense of naturalness. In Emily Dolan’s discussion of 1990s indie pop, she relates this notion to the Renaissance ideal of sprezzatura—the “studied carelessness” described in Castigliano’s *The Book of the Courtier*. It portrays a sense of effortlessness in the accomplishment of otherwise difficult actions. This nonchalance can convey a sense that the music lacks pretense or artifice.\(^70\)

These ideals demonstrate some of the ways that process-oriented aesthetics allow musicians to aurally signify some of the tenets and values of alternative and indie music. Because they are ultimately conveyed using the inherent characteristics of the medium of commercial records, these small-scale ideals can create a powerful experience of personalization, engagement, and aesthetic investment—even when heard in mass-produced records disseminated among a largely undifferentiated audience of listeners.

**Methodological Focus, Sources, and Research Goals**

Now that I have laid out these theoretical underpinnings of a process-oriented aesthetic, I can construct a music-analytical approach that is conceptually rather simple, while allowing for flexibility and nuance in interpretation. First, I examine the popular and critical discourse in which the music appeared. Then, a close listening of the music allows consideration of how particular aspects of the recorded sound relate to the surrounding discourse to evoke meaningful

\(^70\) Ibid., 464–65.
production myths. Although my own experiences as a rock musician and fan inevitably shape my perceptions of the music, for this project, I draw primarily upon sources in the popular music press in order to base my observations on broadly significant modes of interpretation. I have privileged publications that specifically identify as alternative (Option, Spin, and Alternative Press; and, later in the decade, Magnet and Raygun), while also considering publications employing critics who engaged substantively with alternative rock and hip-hop (Rolling Stone, Vibe, The Source, The Village Voice, and major newspapers). I also examined major fanzines (including Forced Exposure, Flipside, Maximum RocknRoll, Punk Planet, and Puncture); but, since my method focuses on how alternative ideals are disseminated through mass media, I focused my research in these sources upon trends and artists that eventually moved into the broader alternative-rock consciousness.

This project, then, does not hunt for an “inside scoop” on aspects of music making or creativity, but rather looks for significant discursive trends that have shaped the larger reception of rock records. Simon Frith notes the role of critics’ discourse in the establishment of popular music attitudes: “Our critical task . . . is first to get people to listen to the right things. . . . Pop culture arguments . . . are not about likes and dislikes as such, but about ways of listening, about ways of hearing, about ways of being.”71 By examining select recordings of 1990s alternative rock and hip-hop within the context of the popular critical discourse, I uncover and delineate plausible modes of listening. The discourse gives the music an imagined social, spatial, historical, and technological context that evokes rich and meaningful mythologies of creative production and expression.

71 Frith, Performing Rites, 8.
Chapter Outline

The following chapters each focus on a trend in 1990s alternative music in the years following the rise of grunge. By examining this set of distinct (yet often related) sub-genres, we can discern the significance of process-oriented aesthetics in musical developments throughout the decade.

Chapter Two focuses on the development of lo-fi as a sub-genre and sensibility in alternative rock in the first half of the 1990s. I consider the ideological, technological, and cultural significance of lo-fi artists and fans who placed the rough edges and distortions of consumer-grade recording media as significant elements of musical expression. I address these trends in two analytical case studies from 1993–94 (Beck and PJ Harvey), showing how conceptions of mediation and fidelity came to be entangled with deeply-engrained notions of anti-commercialism, gender, and creative autonomy. I then contextualize lo-fi as part of a larger “media-centric” sensibility in alternative rock discourse. Looking at the years leading into the 1990s, I show how mediation came to be overtly recognized in the discourse for its aesthetic and ideological effects on the music. Recognizing this emphasis on mediation not only reveals lo-fi as part of a broader cultural phenomenon, but also points out attitudes that would continue to resonate in the musical trends discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter Three considers the meaning of hip-hop sampling in 1990s alternative music and culture. I first investigate interpretive frameworks for hip-hop reception posited by music critics in the late 1980s, and then trace the ways that alternative culture developed meaningful production myths around the sample-based musical practice. I examine the rise of the “alternative rap” and “trip-hop” subgenres to address tensions among racial, aesthetic, and technological conceptions of alternative authenticity. By analyzing the music and discourse of two artists from the mid-1990s (The Roots and DJ Shadow), I show how artists and critics
established aesthetic narratives of music production that ultimately worked to transform the meaning of sampling among alternative audiences.

Chapter Four explores questions of technological obsolescence and nostalgia. Artists resurrected vintage analog instruments, media, and musical styles for use in the late 1990s, demonstrating modes of creativity and appreciation built upon engagement with the materiality of the past. I show how vintage pop styles and their technologies of mediation were appropriated to facilitate musical responses to developments in alternative rock and in the music industry more broadly. This chapter’s analytical case studies (Elliott Smith, RZA, Lauryn Hill, and the Flaming Lips) show how a material engagement with old artifacts of music production and mediation came to signify ideals of stylistic opposition, aesthetic commitment, and creative engagement.

Taken altogether, this project demonstrates the utility of process-oriented aesthetics as an analytical framework that illuminates complex connections among ideologies, technologies, and modes aesthetic appreciation in 1990s alternative culture. Furthermore, the framework of process-oriented aesthetics approach can be useful in broader areas of popular music studies. By considering notions of authenticity in recorded music in relation to production myths, we can address the music’s power and meaning in a way that acknowledges the fundamental effects of its mediated transmission. And these myths can convey their meaning whether or not a listener actually “buys in” to any trope of authentication. In this, process-oriented aesthetics allows for a fluidity of meaning in recorded music, capitalizing on ambiguities arising from the inherent sonic disjunction of the medium—ambiguities in areas such as artistic intentionality, socio-political
ideology, or ostensible reality in signification. Process-oriented aesthetics thus revels in the slippery semiotics of popular music’s rich and diverse modes of mediated sonic representation.
CHAPTER 2
“So Real”: Lo-Fi and an Aesthetics of Mediation

At a basic level, lo-fi can be described quite simply: a recording that sounds as if it were produced in a non-professional setting. The effect comes from perceived sonic imperfection, whether in the recording media (clicks, hisses, abrupt tape cuts) or in performance (amateurish mistakes, poor intonation, weak tone production). This sonic foregrounding of roughness in production process tends to place aesthetic emphasis on seemingly amateur routes of mediation. From this basic premise, the discourse of lo-fi often seems to revolve around a perceptual duality. Even as the music aurally emphasizes its own mediation—or the constructedness of its representation—it paradoxically conveys a heightened sense of reality, intimacy, and immediacy. In this paradox, a lo-fi sensibility seeks an impossible co-existence of the real and the artificial.

Around 1993–94, the idea of lo-fi became a touchpoint in alternative rock discourse. Beginning with indie groups such as Beat Happening, Sebadoh, and Pavement, and coalescing with the success of Liz Phair, Guided by Voices, and Beck, lo-fi sonic signifiers became tokens of the indie reaction to alternative rock commodification. Depending on whom you asked, lo-fi could be considered a new musical “movement,” an aesthetic corollary to the contingencies of small-scale production, or simply the latest catch phrase in an industry frenzy of all things alternative. As soon as it became a recognizable trend, the idea garnered critical pushback—with one Spin reviewer dismissing it as “nothing but distressed jeans in the J Crew catalogue of alt-
In these debates, audible signs of mediation became entangled with notions of authenticity, commercialization, and artistic expression. The notion of “fidelity” came to evoke not only a medium’s faithful reproduction of a musical performance, but also broader issues of institutional power and creative autonomy. The act of foregrounding mediation could be used to assert a variety of cultural and aesthetic ideals.

In this chapter, I consider how alternative rock culture mythologized and aestheticized rough, unpolished processes of mediation—using the rise of lo-fi as a discursive and sonic focal point. I begin the chapter by laying out important aspects of lo-fi sensibilities as seen in the first half of the 1990s. I then consider the role of lo-fi in the music and reception of two notable artists of the period: Beck and PJ Harvey. For Beck, amateur media manipulation was a central part of his musical persona. With Harvey, ideals of lo-fi authenticity intersected with other aspects of her work, including dynamics of gender and performance in her collaboration with producer Steve Albini. At the end of the chapter, I look more broadly in the alternative rock discourse—toward questions of critical stance and the visual layout of print media—to contextualize lo-fi as part of what I see as a larger “media-centric” perspective. Ultimately, this chapter reveals ways that alternative culture became interested in the backstory of mediation itself. Undergirding this entire discussion is the question of what constituted the real in alternative rock signification—or, to put it more specifically, of how listeners’ attitudes toward processes of mediation and fidelity could affect their relationship to the perceived realities of performance, production, and aesthetic experience.

The Conflicted Aesthetics of Lo-Fi

Although lo-fi as a genre term didn’t find widespread usage until the 1990s, the aesthetic effects of self-consciously amateur recording were, of course, nothing new. Rough performance, room noise, and media-related distortions have appeared prominently throughout rock history. In his examination of popular music in the 1950s, Albin Zak describes how the rise of rock itself—in becoming the dominant form of postwar popular music—depended, on the one hand, on the ragged amateurism of rock and roll performance, and on the other, the surrounding musical context of overtly-constructed 1950s novelty pop. Among these developments, issues of intentionality and agency remain difficult to assess. Zak notes that Johnny Ace’s 1952 hit, “My Song”—which was recorded on a whim at the end of a botched recording session—may have had a “remarkably rough, barely demo quality,” but the track held the number one spot on the R&B charts for nine weeks. For listeners, the loose performance and production quality could have enhanced the track’s poignancy and sense of empathy, regardless of the intentions of the performers during recording. Zak contrasts this with the situation of Carl Perkins working with Sam Phillips at Sun Records. Perkins remembered a conversation with the producer: “I’d say, ‘Mr. Phillips, that’s terrible.’ He said, ‘That’s original.’ I said, ‘But it’s just a big original mistake.’ And he said ‘That’s what Sun Records is. That’s what we are.’” Phillips was intrigued with capturing the raw sounds of intuitive expression in his record production.² From its inception, then, the trajectory of rock music grew from tensions of intentionality, spontaneity, and aural roughness—and from the aestheticization of these aspects through the medium of sound recording.

² Zak, I Don’t Sound Like Nobody, 97–104.
In the decades that followed, we could consider countless examples of bands and genres emphasizing the twin attributes of amateur roughness and overtness in mediation. In 1960s garage rock, the fuzz of guitar distortion, raucous experimentation of unencumbered vocal timbres, and an simplicity of fourths-based harmonic construction contributed to a sensibility that musicologist Michael Hicks has dubbed “avant-garage” for its sense of homegrown, communal antagonism.³ Bob Dylan, drawing upon an emphasis on informality among his folk-revival milieu, blurred the lines between studio construction and performance by including a clumsy, laugh-ridden false start in the album release of “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” on Bringing It All Back Home (1965). Later, Dylan’s unfinished musical dawdling was transformed into musical legend through the bootleg circulation (and later commercial release) of his late-1960s basement tapes with the Band.⁴ The broader punk formation likewise tended toward noisy production styles—from the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls, and other punk predecessors, to British DIY trends at the end of the 1970s, to the overdriven brashness of post-punk and hardcore.⁵ Looking to the 1980s, we could draw comparisons between mainstream and marginal artists’ implementation of audible, small-scale mediation in recording. An established rocker like Bruce Springsteen could conjure a heartfelt immediacy with his demo-tapes-turned-LP tracks on Nebraska (1982); while around the same time, the catchy, naïve-sounding melodies

³ Hicks, Sixties Rock, 1–27.

⁴ Greil Marcus uses Dylan’s Basement Tapes as representing an elaborate, evocative myth of an “old, weird America” that had its mediated embodiment in Harry Smith’s 1952 Folkways set of reissues, American Anthology of American Folk Music. For Marcus, the unfinished atmosphere of the Basement Tapes worked alongside the legendary status of the old-time musicians to evoke the spirit and essence of the myth. Greil Marcus, The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes (New York: Picador, 2001); originally published as Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes (New York: H. Holt, 1997).

⁵ In his wide-ranging study of heavy metal and punk, Steve Waksman gives numerous examples of the aesthetics of mediated roughness and amateurism. The self-conscious commodification of these attributes became a central theme among 1970s punk-oriented groups such as the Dictators and the Runaways. Waksman, This Ain’t the Summer of Love, 104–45.
and ad-hoc aura of Daniel Johnston’s recordings evoked a completely different sense of sincerity. Furthermore, self-identifying outsider musicians had been finding pockets of independent-minded fans since the mid-1970s, using low-end, consumer-grade technologies to produce and disseminate their music: artists like R. Stevie Moore and Jandek both hawked their home-recorded wares through self-run cassette labels. From this brief selection of examples spanning nearly three decades, we can see that artists had long capitalized on the ambience and intentional ambiguities arising from the attributes of sonic roughness, consciously-employed small-scale mediation, and independent creative liberty in recording.

But it was in the early 1990s that “lo-fi” came to be established, both as a descriptive term and as an identifiable genre niche. The appearance of lo-fi in alternative culture had a dual impetus. First, alternative rock’s popularity had established a market and a discursive framework for the music’s dissemination; then, alternative culture’s contrarian sensibilities made the thin fragility of lo-fi an appealing response to mainstream rock’s widespread adoption of the heavy, homogenized sound of grunge distortion. Public acknowledgment of lo-fi reached a rock-critic critical mass around 1994 when the New York Times, Musician, and Option all ran full-length features on the phenomenon. By early 1995, the Times was calling lo-fi the latest “industry

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buzzword,” noting that its sonic characteristics were being filtered into more mainstream acts such as Mariah Carey and Sheryl Crow.⁹

Even as lo-fi gained credence as a recognized subgenre and musical sensibility, there was still considerable stylistic and ideological variety among its artists. Beat Happening conveyed a child-like naiveté in their simplistic arrangements and performances. Lou Barlow of Sebadoh used his 4-track recorder as a confessional, conveying an almost painful sense of intimate vulnerability. Pavement and Guided by Voices both found widespread critical acclaim using a hook-saturated style of pop ideas emerging through a haze of tape hiss and jangly guitar. The bedroom-like intimacy of Liz Phair’s 1993 debut Exile in Guyville explicitly addressed female empowerment, giving outlet to a woman’s disgust in the face of male-imposed social, emotional, and sexual mistreatment. And in late 1993, Beck arrived on the alt-rock scene with his hip-hopping single “Loser,” a home-recorded “slacker anthem.” Clearly, the “lo-fi” label encompassed considerable diversity of musical style and artistic disposition. In light of the various lo-fi styles and the foregoing historical perspective, the following discussion of 1990s lo-fi doesn’t seek to prove the genre’s uniqueness in its act of foregrounding amateur performance and mediation; rather, it demonstrates how lo-fi artists used these modes of sonic foregrounding to respond to their generation’s unique set of ideological and technological circumstances. We can better understand 1990s lo-fi, then, by considering it in the technological contexts of digital audio and the ideological contexts of overt media acknowledgment and small-scale alternative authenticity.

Music Formats: The CD Takeover

Technological developments in music listening and production of the late 1980s and early 1990s were essential to the rise of lo-fi. The general shift from vinyl LPs to CDs around the beginning of the decade marked a key point in an enduring, complex, and oft-contradictory debate: analog versus digital. Arguments raged within various subcultures; analog fetishism was espoused by lo-fi indie nerds and hi-fi audiophiles alike.¹⁰

Alternative rock critics and commentators addressed the issue with enthusiasm. At the end of 1989, Option ran a two-part feature by Richie Unterberger titled “The CD Takeover.” He began by relaying “a music junkie’s worst nightmare”: upon visiting your neighborhood record store, you are startled to find that vinyl is suddenly nowhere to be found. Shaken by the horror of it, “you wake up in a cold sweat, reassured by the familiar sight of your beat-up turntable in the corner, yesterday’s vinyl acquisitions stacked neatly to the left.” With the phenomenal rise in popularity of the CD, vinyl sales and availability had dropped dramatically. By the end of the 1980s, as Unterberger noted, this decline of LPs meant that, for alternative audiences shopping in many music outlets, “your bad dream has become reality.”¹¹

A prominent argument against digital audio, forcefully presented by alt-rock forefathers such as Neil Young and Steve Albini, was its technological immaturity and inadequacy.¹²

¹⁰ For a wide-ranging discussion of aesthetic and technological perspectives in this debate, see Greg Milner, Perfecting Sound Forever: An Aural History of Recorded Music (New York: Faber and Faber, 2009), 185–236.


¹² See Neil Young, “The CD and the Damage Done,” Harper’s Magazine, July 1992, 23. See also the back cover of Big Black’s CD-only compilation, The Rich Man’s Eight-Track Tape (Homestead Records HMS 043, 1987) where Steve Albini describes CD audio as “the bastardly first-generation digital home system.” Indeed, the limitations of CD quality audio have been well noted. Milner writes, “As a concept, ‘perfect sound forever’ is like ‘high fidelity’ with a sort of ahistorical arrogance. We define the parameters of perfection, pretend these parameters are objective truth, and then congratulate ourselves for satisfying them.” The 44.1 kHz sample rate and 16-bit resolution of standard CD-quality encoding were the result of industry compromise, based largely on the abilities of existing media (the VHS-based master tapes of digital tracking). Furthermore, the digitization of sound requires the use of a
Among voices in the alternative rock press, however, the commercial implications of digital audio were at least as significant as the technological. There was an enduring suspicion that developments in digital audio were ultimately driven by a desire to artificially boost corporate profits. Consider the words of indie label owner Kate Messer: “Some of my real world jobs were in education media, and I saw the trickle down of technology. I saw a lot of deliberate holding back of technology basically to milk the market. I just have this real cruddy feeling that that’s what’s happening with CDs and that there’s going to be a more efficient carrier and format in the future.” Furthermore, economies of scale and distribution made it difficult for indie labels to remain viable in a market of fast-changing media formats.13

As with many other aspects of alternative culture, commercial questions also became aesthetic. Musicians and critics lauded the tangible pleasures of vinyl’s user experience: note Unterberger’s aforementioned comfort at the “familiar sight” of the “beat-up turntable in the corner,” asserting an *a priori* emotional investment in the tangible experience of LPs. Another example of this aesthetic commitment to vinyl is seen in the early-1990s resurgence of the 7-inch single. In 1993, Michael Azerrad wrote in *Rolling Stone* that “the good old 45-rpm single is back,” citing its popularity at Sub Pop, Dischord, and other indie labels. In the face of high-priced CDs, the cheap, immediate, and tangible pleasures of the 7-inch found new appeal: “For

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13 Richie Unterberger, “Issue By Issue: The CD Takeover, Part 2,” *Option*, January/February 1990, 12. Sound Choice editor David Ciaffardini took an even more accusatory tone: “For the major labels, CD players are a goose that lays golden eggs. The public now has more reason to buy more new recordings, in many cases . . . buying CD versions of recordings they already have in their collection. . . . In addition, CD sales yield a much higher profit margin than vinyl albums.” David Ciaffardini, “Cassettes on Top in Format Wars,” *Sound Choice*, Spring 1990, 23–24.
between three and four dollars, you get the two best songs that that band has to offer at the moment. You also get their artwork and a format that’s beautiful in its brevity—it’s the purest distillation of the pop form.”

For a more ontological perspective on the analog/digital debate, we can consider Philips’s 1992 unveiling of a new audio format, the Digital Compact Cassette. In national magazines such as Spin and Rolling Stone, they ran a 3-page ad beginning with block-letter announcement: “To celebrate the arrival of Philips DCC, there’s a free digital recording on the next page.” Across next opening, under the heading “Mysterious Ways by U2,” was an enormous block of tiny 1s and 0s. The underlaid text explained, “What you see here represents only the first 4.7 seconds of the piece. But, it stands for years of enjoyment to come. It’s all digital. Zero noise, zero hiss.”

Consider the aesthetic implications of Philips’s ad: it showed a tech company taking musical sound—the ostensibly natural result of vocals singing into a microphone, sticks hitting drumheads, guitar picks plucking amplified strings—and transforming it into a string of digits that could be printed in a magazine spread. Analog recording, on the other hand, had always maintained a sense of tangible connection to the source: transmitted through air vibrations, electrical signals in cables and amplifiers, magnetic fluctuations on tape, or the groove of the vinyl, there remained an unbroken (though often heavily manipulated) signal path from artist to listener. Analog audio allowed a particular sense of physicality in the listening experience. With a digital file, the music became an abstract sequence of numbers. A digital recording was essentially a different kind of thing—quite literally a reproducible set of instructions for

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15 Rolling Stone 643 (12 November 1992): 93–95; Spin 8, no. 8 (November 1992): 45–47. Somewhat ironically, in Spin, the ad ran directly after a Sebadoh feature lauding the noisiness and “unruly melange” of their new release.
recreating sound waves. Arguments against this digital quantization of music often prompted organic/inorganic comparisons. For Edward Rothstein at the *New York Times*, digital recording desecrated the part of music that is “human in its origin and character,” while analog purist Michael Fremer framed the question in moral terms: “Digital preserves music like formaldehyde preserves frogs. You kill it, and it lasts forever.”\(^\text{16}\)

To contextualize these ontological questions and their relationship to lo-fi musical aesthetics, we can look to media theorist Andrew Goodwin. In 1987, he described digital audio as contributing to a fetishization of the aura. The clarity of digital sound—its seeming invisibility—created a situation where the imperfections of performance gave a heightened sense of reality.

It is clear that high-fidelity is the very embodiment, in consumerism, of the fetishization of original performance. The digital reproduction offered by CDs takes this process to extremes, but by revealing to the listener at home “imperfections” in the original recording that went unnoticed at the time. CDs of The Beatles’ early recordings apparently expose the sound of Ringo Starr’s squeaky bass drum pedal. In addition, then, to the fetishization of the “original” recorded moment, CD appeals to a belief in a pure, unmediated reality (the location of the aura of music performance) which it supposedly reveals. Thus while digital technologies like CD and DAT no doubt have the capacity to break the barrier between the original and the copy, they are in fact more likely to be used to enhance the power of the aura of the original moment of recording, via the consumerist practices of hi-fi.\(^\text{17}\)

Goodwin’s arguments ultimately reveal some of the complexities in alternative culture’s relationship to digital technologies. Lo-fi sensibilities fetishized the imperfections and spontaneity of the moment of musical performance. But Goodwin’s observation shows that this

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fetishization finds precedent in the “perfect sound forever” paradigm of digital audio.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, even as lo-fi audio reacted against the clarity and perfection of digital audio, it thrived on a sensibility that had been born out of it.

\textit{Contestations Within Lo-Fi}

During its emergence in the first half of the 1990s, the discourse of lo-fi tended to relish the genre’s contradictions. Cultural studies scholar Tony Grajeda has explored important aspects of this dynamic. On the one hand, lo-fi was lauded as spontaneous expression: organic, honest, and non-commercial—providing a window into the idealized soul of the Romantic artist. On the other hand, it was explicitly modernist: emphasizing its own constructedness and inherent fraudulence, thus drawing upon the traditionally avant-garde tendency of revealing “the materiality of the apparatus.”\textsuperscript{19} It valorized a DIY egalitarianism, but ended up fostering an anti-mass-culture elitism. Grajeda rightly summarizes 1990s lo-fi as a genre that “fully embodies the contradictions of its time.”\textsuperscript{20}

In all this, the overriding duality between real and artificial played out among various frameworks of authenticity. Each argument, however, seems to have sat uneasily among lo-fi artists and practitioners; they were unwilling to collectively embrace either side. We can begin with the question of intentionality. Was the lo-fi musician making the most of limited available resources, or rather using low production value as an aesthetic choice? Matt Diehl of the \textit{New

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Aesthetic implications of these interactions among multiple levels of mediation will be explored further in the following section with Bolter and Grusin’s idea of “remediation.”


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 238–43, 246.
\end{flushleft}
York Times framed it as a case of aesthetic symbiosis, where “economic virtues . . . merge with the creative.”

Built into this symbiosis, however, was an inherent conflict between spontaneity versus artifice. Some vowed that unintentional spontaneity was the lifeblood of lo-fi music. Robert Pollard of Guided by Voices referred to his snippets of songs as “homemade accidents,” explaining the live, spontaneity of his sound: “It takes some people three days just to get a drum sound. It takes us about an hour to record a song. If you labor too much on something it becomes stagnant.”

This spontaneity evokes a sense of unfinished-ness: when artist neglects to polish off the rough edges of a recording through studio production, it feels as if the lived experience of music emerges in a raw, unfiltered form. David Berman of Pavement drew upon a similar sensibility in describing Pavement’s first single: “The second side has no drums for the first two minutes. But that’s only because Bob Nastanovich wasn’t home yet from his bus-driving job. So Steve Malkmus and I just started playing and then he came home, got a beer, popped it open, and then joined in. All of that is contained in the recording.”

On the other hand, some lo-fi artists openly acknowledged the genre’s artifice. Lou Barlow of Sebadoh emphasized a protracted intentionality in his recording process: “I spend literally hours on each song. Some were even two- or three-day projects where I would slowly find out if I had a song. I have to do a lot of layering on four track, so I’m really meticulous and methodical in order to get the texture I want.”

This intentionality allowed the establishment of a

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21 Diehl, 26.
22 Lips, 77.
23 Lips, 77.
sort of lo-fi sonic lexicon. Brad Lips of *Option* described this emergence of standardized conventions: “The sound of tape hiss and the click of the ‘record’ buttons being stopped and started conveys a mood of unprofessionalism that adds its own convention to the music, just as slick studio effects are able to conjure very different emotions.”

Thus for some, part of the honesty of lo-fi was an open acknowledgment of artistic intentionality and posturing.

These questions of spontaneity and artifice inevitably led to that perennial sticking point in rock authenticity: profit motive. For Diehl’s *Times* feature, Beck explained the non-commercial impulses behind his work: “Record budgets are out of hand; they give people like $300,000 to make a record. This is sick. Mine cost nothing. It was never the intention to put it out. It was just for fun, just for ourselves.” Contrast this with Lou Barlow, who connected his meticulous craftsmanship to a desire for both artistic and commercial success. “I do all of the recording techniques to totally emphasize the voice and the lyrics and the emotional impact of the song, which to me is being as commercial as I could possibly be. I feel like I have always been completely commercial.”

Likewise, producer Clay Sheff described lo-fi, not as being less commercial, but as part of the broader shift away from the 1980s clean, processed sound. “We’re becoming increasingly conditioned to hear the grit and dirt on records. Aside from that, we’re conditioned to accept a more genuine performer, not someone that’s manufactured by some corporate exec at a record label . . . When *Nevermind* came out, Bon Jovi and Poison were history.”

Thus, in spite of a generalized shunning of the profit motive, prominent artists and

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25 Lips, 79.
26 Diehl, 26.
27 Corbett, 86.
28 Chun, 36.
producers acknowledged that the impact of lo-fi aesthetics would ultimately be measured through a combination of artistic and commercial success.

Another aspect of lo-fi was its claim to intimacy and organicism. Brad Lips described Liz Phair’s early tapes as “disarmingly personal” due to the perceived recording circumstances, “charged with a homespun sound that lets you imagine the walls around her microphone . . . as though she’s struggling to find a level where she can do justice to the song’s perversity—without waking her parents down the hall.”29 Lo-fi music aurally depicted the human aspects of its production. Singer Alastair Galbraith explained this sensibility by contrasting big studio work, which achieved its effects by “sweeping the actual production under the covers,” with a lo-fi approach in which “you can pretty much tell how we put the things together, and it’s got a more human feel to it—more personal.”30 John Leland conveyed a similar ideal in a 1995 piece for Newsweek, describing a moment on Beck’s Mellow Gold where you can hear “banging away on pots and pans” in the kitchen: “It may sound crummy at parts, but at least it sounds virtuous. . . . Low tech arrives as an attempt to strip away artifice. It strives to separate identity from technology, to remind us of who we are.”31 The unpolished, unfinished spontaneity of lo-fi gave the listener a sense of getting closer to the human aspects of artistic expression. We can relate this feeling of organic connection to aspects the analog/digital debate described above. Indeed, many saw lo-fi as a direct reaction to music’s digitalization. Diehl compared the “world of sterile, digitally recorded Top 40” with lo-fi, which “elucidates the raw seams of artistic

29 Lips 77.
30 Ibid., 78.
process;” while for Brad Lips, “the no-polish aesthetic appears as a reaction to the music industry ideal of clean digital sound as reason to replace your dusty old LPs with shiny new CDs.”

Furthermore, lo-fi discourse nurtured a productive tension between ideals of egalitarianism and aesthetic elitism. Diehl wrote that “the combination of available technology and impromptu techniques democratizes pop music, putting creative power into the hands of anyone with a will.” The DIY ideal—that anyone can and should record music and put it out for others to hear—was essential to notions of individual empowerment in lo-fi. At the same time, as with any DIY endeavor, the prospect of an avalanche of mediocre music created its own complications. Mark Kates, A&R of alternative music at Geffen, addressed this issue by attempting to separate the wheat from the chaff: “I think people have gotten into it because they can kind of imagine doing it themselves. When they hear it done by Guided by Voices or Beck though, they realize they could never do it that well.” Furthermore, the listener’s ability to endure and appreciate lo-fi imperfections created its own sense of aesthetic elitism. Brad Lips noted that the Palace Brothers achieved a “special air of intimacy” when the singer “lets his voice break awkwardly.” This effect, however, was not for the casual listener: “Many listeners turn away, but those who remain will have absorbed the vulnerability at the heart of the music. Perhaps this implied challenge thrown down by home-recording is the point of the lo-fi

32 Diehl, 26; Lips, 78.

33 Diehl, 26.


35 Ibid.
aesthetic." It required a particular sense of taste and distinction to recognize artistic merit in the awkward bumblings of a lo-fi record.

In all of these debates, lo-fi artists and critics engaged with well-worn aesthetic questions regarding the competing roles of honesty, non-commercialism, aesthetic frugality, and artistic intentionality in musical expression. From a historical perspective, as neither side of any of these issues ever managed to come out on top, the debates of lo-fi begin to feel like a stale continuation of rock’s old authenticity arguments. So what makes lo-fi distinctly a product of its time? Perhaps the most important aspect of lo-fi discourse was the way that it assigned aesthetic value. In the face of the newly commonplace paradigm of crystal clear digital audio, lo-fi argued that musical meaning wasn’t found necessarily in the *content* of musical expression, but in the *means* through which it was expressed—namely, through its production values. Whether the tape hiss and room noise signified romanticized intimacy or modernist noise, the fact that the noise itself was doing the signifying revealed a particular set of aesthetic ideals among listeners. 1990s lo-fi sensibilities overtly acknowledged and aestheticized larger forces in music production and consumption: recording technologies, economies of scale, and modes of differentiation. The convergence of an overt mediation with alternative rock’s avowed anti-commercial, anti-corporate ideals—along with fans’ palpable discomfort with the mainstreaming of these ideals—constitutes the conceptual nexus around which 1990s lo-fi attitudes congregated.

*Theory of Lo-Fi*

We can also bring in theoretical paradigms from media studies, semiotics, and economics to better understand lo-fi’s aesthetic effects. One way to interpret lo-fi signification is through the

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36 Lips, 79.
conceptual framework of media theorists Jay Bolter and David Grusin. In their 2000 study, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, they describe all media as oscillating between two poles: transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. In transparent immediacy, the viewer looks *through* the media to a purported reality. In hypermediacy, the viewer looks *at* the media, and is brought to “acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgment.”

A mode of media usage that draws from both of these poles is *remediation*, in which signification within a particular medium draws upon and reifies other previous modes of mediation. This framework applies well to lo-fi aesthetics because of the theory’s fluid interchange between layers of transparency and opacity.”

If we use a commercially released lo-fi recording as an example of remediation, the recording’s emphasis on tape hiss and other distortion only serve to make the high-fidelity, commercial recording medium seem more transparent. (This interpretation echoes Goodwin’s fetishization of performative imperfection in digital high fidelity.) This interplay—between media transparency and hypermediacy within the perceptual paradox of lo-fi music on CD—can work to aestheticize the noisy, analog aspects of a record’s production process while enhancing the seeming transparency of the digital format.

Barthes’s aforementioned idea of second-order signification is likewise useful here. Lo-fi music tended to fixate on the very existence of non-overt, second-order signifiers. For example, in Guided By Voices’s 1993 album, *Bee Thousand*, the lyrical content, production style, and formal song structures amount to a series of non-sequiturs. The opening track begins with what sounds like a mechanical malfunction in the recording equipment. After a verse-like section

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38 Ibid., 47–8.

(which never returns for a second verse), the band ramps up to what sounds like a chorus. Just as the dynamics grow and texture begins to thicken, however, the guitar and backup vocal tracks drop out, as if recorded on a cassette tape that was eaten by an old recorder. Throughout the album, a combination of short track lengths, nonsensical verbal imagery, and abrupt tape cuts all preclude any general sense of narrativity or traditional expression. In so doing, the album draws the listener’s attention to the previously unarticulated aspects of record production. This secondary level of signification imbues the imperfections of media transmission with semiotic potential.

For a theoretical foundation of lo-fi coming directly from a practitioner, we can consider the ideas of Calvin Johnson. As founder of Beat Happening and K Records, he was instrumental in the late-1980s indie scene in Olympia, Washington, and consequently in the rise of lo-fi in the 1990s. In a recent interview, Johnson cited E. F. Schumacher’s idea of “appropriate technology” as a rationale for his attitudes toward using small-scale, consumer-grade equipment in music production and distribution. Schumacher was a British economist who was most famous for his 1973 book, Small is Beautiful. He envisioned an economic approach that focused on individual human needs and desires over quantifiable measures of material consumption. Schumacher’s theory provided a useful foundation for participatory, DIY ideals: following the mantra of “production by the masses, rather than mass production.” For Schumacher, the quality of human life is directly connected to opportunities for meaningful work. People crave “creative, useful


work with hands and brains,” rather than the unfulfilling fragmented labor of modern society.\textsuperscript{42}

Johnson cited these ideas as an important element of DIY ideals and aesthetics:

[Schumacher was] saying that the latest and greatest technology isn’t necessarily the most appropriate technology for achieving the ends which you might have. . . . For a lot of the people I knew, they’re just making their songs, they’re playing at the parties, they’re having a good time, and that is its means to the end. The end being having a moment of creation and sharing it with your community. But sometimes, it’s like, “Hey, these songs are really good. Can I buy a copy of your album?” But they didn’t have an album. Because in their world, the people who would actually buy the album might be 30 or 50 people. But when you make an album, you have to make a thousand to even make it worthwhile. . . . But the cassette came along, and it was something where you could just make 30 or 50 cassettes, and it didn’t cost a thousand dollars. . . . So we created our releases using that technology. . . . K has always represented, not a luddite philosophy, but a philosophy of using the newest technology, when appropriate.\textsuperscript{43}

For Johnson, lo-fi represented a pragmatic attitude toward mediation. Speaking to \emph{Option} in 1994, he said, “I don’t consider ‘lo-fi’ a genre of music. I consider it a process. There’s a big difference.”\textsuperscript{44}

The wider popularity and dissemination of Beat Happening records into the 1990s allows us to consider some of the meaningful contradictions inherent in lo-fi aesthetics. By the release of their 1992 album \emph{You Turn Me On}, the band was being featured in larger magazines such as \emph{Spin} and \emph{Option} and was positively reviewed in \emph{Rolling Stone}. At this point, many who listened to a Beat Happening recording would have been far separated from their home-dubbed copies sold at local shows. The music was finding its way into larger patterns of discourse and distribution. But the lo-fi listening experience pushed against this mass-mediation—valorizing

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 70, 143

\textsuperscript{43} Johnson and Svenonius, “Calvin Johnson Talks K Records.” With this, Johnson, much like Ian MacKaye, who is discussed later in this chapter, tied music more to the communities and circumstances of its production than to the abstracted works of art put on record. In this interview, Johnson likewise uses a documentary paradigm to describe his reason for recording music: “And another big influence was Folkways records. The idea there seemed to be documenting things . . . then making it available to whoever was interested in finding out about it or appreciating it.”

\textsuperscript{44} Lips, 76.
and mythologizing the small-scale processes that Johnson described. Using the framework of process-oriented aesthetics, we can consider this disconnect, not necessarily as a compromise of small-scale indie values, but as a layered instance of musical signification. The tensions between art, production, and commerce that sustained lo-fi discourse were manifest and reified in the contradictions between the album’s small-scale sensibility and its actual mass mediation. These tensions played out as important elements of the musical work—allowing a complex experience of media-savvy knowingness, listener empowerment, and aesthetic satisfaction.

Thus far, this chapter has laid out some of the technological, ideological, and discursive conditions for lo-fi aesthetics in the 1990s. By utilizing an interpretive framework of process-oriented aesthetics, we have examined how some segments of alternative culture moved away from the scene-based, interpersonal production myths of 1980s independent music scenes (as shown in the observations of Waksman and Weisbard in Chapter One), and toward a framework that focused more on particular modes of mediation. These backstories of mediation—whether consumer-grade 4-track recording, an unrehearsed spontaneity in recording, or an intimate fragility in bedroom-style confession—were brought into conversation with existing anti-commercial, anti-corporate values espoused by alternative rock. By considering theoretical paradigms of remediation, second-order signification, and economic ideals of small-scale production, we have seen ways that the audible signification of these processes can draw upon indie and alternative ideals in complex, sometimes contradictory ways. Now, we will consider the implications of lo-fi in close analysis of specific artists—Beck and PJ Harvey—and their work amid the burgeoning lo-fi trend of 1993–94. This analysis shows how newly reinforced ideological implications of production process provided a discursive field for musical reception.
Beck: Spending an Afternoon in Karl’s Apartment

With Beck’s 1993 single “Loser,” lo-fi aesthetics hit the mainstream. Originally released on the tiny indie label Bong Load Records, the track generated enthusiastic college radio buzz along the west coast, and Beck soon found himself amid a major-label bidding war. He signed with DGC records for his debut album *Mellow Gold*, released in March of 1994. The contract, however, allowed him to continue working on independent labels, and Beck released two other albums that year: *Stereopathetic Soulmanure* on Flipside and *One Foot in the Grave* on K Records. These three projects reflect diverse musical collaboration, with each showcasing distinct modes of musical engagement. The following analysis connects the sounds of the albums with the surrounding production myths in the discourse, showing how backstories of amateur mediation helped shape the overall reception of the music.

Discourses of Creative Engagement

The discourse surrounding Beck during these years centered around tropes of amateurism, home-recording, and junk-art aesthetics. For example, an *Entertainment Weekly* piece—bearing the headline “Beck’s ‘Loser’ is a Hit: With nothing more than a home studio, the new artists creates a record with little effort”—quoted an anonymous fan to describe the artist’s appeal: “He’s just a kid who wrote a song that makes no sense at all, then he made a video that looks like it was done in his backyard, and he probably didn’t even think it would get on MTV, but it did, and now he’s making a bunch of money. It’s pretty funny.” In interviews, Beck regularly mentioned his

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45 Beck’s other early releases include 1994’s 10-inch *A Western Harvest Field at Midnight* on Fingerpaint Records, 1993’s cassette-only *Golden Feelings* on Sonic Enemy, and a handful of singles and self-released tapes.

recent background in menial employment, working as a sign-painter, a leaf-blower, and a video store attendant “alphabetizing the pornography section for minimum wage.” Beck also tied his amateurism to the junk art sensibility of his Fluxus-artist grandfather Al Hansen, with whom he had spent a year with in Germany in 1989: “He collects cigarette butts and glues them together and makes pictures of naked ladies, then sprays the whole thing silver. His stuff was taking trash and making it art. I guess I try to do that, too.”47 In a Rolling Stone review of Mellow Gold, Michael Azerrad hinted at the broader aesthetic implications of Beck’s sensibilities: “Even the do-it-yourself aspect of the album, which was recorded on 8-track in Beck’s living room, speaks of lowered expectations, and yet there’s a sense of the empowerment derived from that cheap high technology. Beck’s verbal collages get close to the truth of his milieu and our times.”48

Engagement with DIY sound-recording technologies became a central aspect of Beck’s musical persona. An introductory Spin feature in December 1993 wrote that he had “for the last two years . . . busied himself making low-fi home cassettes, pedaling [sic] his tunes to handfuls of wired bohemians in Los Angeles coffeeshops.”49 He spoke of the benefits of casual home-recording practices: “I like to get the whole inspiration in one swoop. I’d write them right there, and that way the feel and the original energy you had writing it usually comes through.”50 By the time he appeared on MTV’s 120 Minutes in February of 1994, he was using cheap consumer

47 David Wild, “Thanks to ‘Loser,’ This Hip-Hop Folk Rocker is the Most Unlikely Success Story of the Year,” Rolling Stone, 21 April 1994, 79.


50 Tom Moon, “Sounds from the Junk Heap,” The Philadelphia Enquirer, 31 March 1994. In another interview, Beck mentioned the lack of pressure as being key to his aesthetic: “I find the way an album track comes out is often determined by the environment in which it’s recorded in. It’s strange, it just seems to come out on the track. Most of Mellow Gold was recorded in a lounge room. It was impromptu and relaxed. I can’t see how people can pay $500 an hour for a studio and expect to make something that’s supposed to sound good. There’s too much pressure involved.” Clayton Doughty, “Beck’s Recipe,” Sydney Morning Herald, 19 August 1994.

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electronics in Dada-inspired stunts. For example, amid being interviewed by Thurston Moore (of Sonic Youth), Beck pulled out a mini-cassette-recorder and started spewing tape-manipulated noise into his lapel-mic. At the end of the show, Beck joined Moore and Mike D (of the Beastie Boys) for a live performance. Moore laid his guitar on the floor, plugging it into a miniature 4-inch Marshall amp and using the amp as a feedback-producing guitar slide, while Mike-D rapped into the studio mic through a handheld consumer microphone-speaker combo. Meanwhile, Beck, sporting a broken-apart cassette tape as a makeshift necklace, played back samples of his own high-pitched vocal interjections on a mini-cassette recorder.\footnote{For details on this appearance, see Rob Jovanovic, \textit{Beck! On A Backwards River} (New York: Fromm International, 2001), 156–57. For footage of this \textit{120 Minutes} episode, see “Beck Interviewed by Thurston Moore, 1994,” \texttt{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdzY49xlvdY} and “Beck, Mike D. and Thurston Moore on MTV (120 Minutes),” \texttt{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dsynln4XII}.}

In this on-air performance, it seems the act of mediation itself carried more priority and significance than any semantic meaning of the textual or musical gestures. A few weeks after this appearance, Beck cited larger traditions of home-made media as a way establish the cultural space for his work. He told Greg Kot of the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, “The whole concept of four-track removes the recording studio and all the cost involved with that, so just the goofing off can become a music. I hope people don’t see it as just one or two people . . . because there’s a whole cassette movement in music, of people making up songs and putting them out themselves.”\footnote{Greg Kot, “Taking Up the Slack for a Whole Generation: Beck Makes a Giant Leap to Anti-Rock Star Status,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, 3 April 1994.} The music’s reception was thus shaped by the stories and myths that came to surround Beck—of amateur-loving artsiness, technological transgression, and lo-fi community.
Sounding Performance and Production: Three Albums in 1994

*Stereopathetic Soulmanure* was released in February of 1994 on Flipside records, and stands as the most eclectic and obscure of any full-length Beck album. Recorded between 1988 and 1993 with several different groups of musicians, the 23 tracks of *Stereopathetic Soulmanure* suggest diverse modes of performance through their sonic ambiance and audible mediation. One way Beck highlights this performative eclecticism is through emplacement—aurally suggesting particular types of performance spaces. A home recording setting, for example, is established in the track “Today Has Been a Fucked Up Day.” Beck accompanies himself with a clumsy clawhammer banjo style while singing the refrain to an Appalachian-sounding melody. Consumer-grade tape-recorder noises and signal clipping are clearly audible, and claustrophobic room reverberations color the sound throughout. Midway through the song, Beck sets the banjo down with an audible thud and begins stomping around the room, clapping to the beat of his vocal refrain. We then hear him scamper back across the room and reset the tape recorder before returning with banjo for final verse. In this track, the sounds of the room and the tape recorder establish a presence almost equal to that of the traditionally “musical” vocal and banjo elements.

Although a few other tracks aurally suggest studio production, the bulk of *Stereopathetic Soulmanure* gives more of a documentary sensibility. “No Money No Honey” sounds like an impromptu performance with a random stranger in the city; while the street recording of “One Foot in the Grave” retains the clicks of the tape recorder and the muffled distortion of a portable outdoor P.A. system. The track “8.6.82” gives another, more peculiar sense of documentation. It simply consists of a fragmented narration whose voice has undergone lo-fi pitch manipulation.

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53 Beck, *Stereopathetic Soulmanure* CD (Flipside FLIP60, 1994).
through cassette-tape dubbing. The tale is perhaps best reproduced in its entirety. (Abrupt tape cuts are indicated with a slash.)

It’s August 6, 1982 / o’clock, and uh / and uh / we were jammin’ over at the house / my pa . . . / my pants caught on fire / we were smokin’ a lot of / whiskey and, uh, chicken / and uh, got some food and / I got some food and came home, and I got a call—uh, no wait, I got some calls, then I came home, and then I got some food / I came home, got some food, and then [cough] got some calls, uh / couldn’t find the fridge for a while and / wait, first we got the food and then—no wait, first we—we had the fridge / [end of track]

Later on the album, the track “11.6.45” gives an even more bizarre narration in which any sense of historical veracity completely breaks down.

It’s November 6, 1945, and we / went up to an—uh, back to the house and watched MTV / were playing Pac-Man / it was all really gross and / all the kids were diseased / giant airplanes, uh, crashing underneath / electromagnetic fuse / guys with flamethrowers, melting / taco trucks were crashed / there was sausage meat all over the front / Sasquatch was eating a burrito / [end of track]

By dictating a documentary-style narration into a tape recorder, Beck pays homage to the oral histories and folk narratives connected to so many of the musical and cultural practices that had informed his music. He often spoke of admiring and emulating Woody Guthrie and Mississippi John Hurt—both of whom were known to give folk narration as part of their performance. However, by gradually jumbling the narrative and chronology—while inserting abrupt tape cuts and tape manipulation—Beck effectively emphasized the act of mediation inherent in his own peculiar mode of sonic documentation.

Stereopathetic Soulmanure’s sharp juxtapositions among layers of recorded music, found sound, and documentary clips foreground the technological mediation of a documented reality—an ambiguity of fakeness made real and reality made fake. The album uncovers and broadcasts

the processes of its production, setting up a variety of circumstances of sonic creation. Thus in the end, this is not a record of music per se, but rather a record about music—a group of tracks that demonstrate how musical sound can be created, manipulated, and transmitted to a listener. By making its mediation overt, it uncovers latent properties of the medium itself in its various functions—whether as a tool for creating musical works, impetus for interpersonal musical improvisation, or document of a real or imagined occurrence. Technological functions are juxtaposed and manipulated as part of the sonic artwork.

Beck’s other indie-label release in 1994, One Foot in the Grave, was recorded with Calvin Johnson at K Records in Olympia, Washington. In line with the K Records sensibility, the project emphasized small-scale intimacy, simple looseness in performance, and bare-bones production. Nowhere do we hear the tape manipulation or electronic improvisation so common in Stereopathetic Soulmanure. In the acoustic guitar tracks, steel strings rattle against the fretboard; often, the guitar is noticeably out of tune. The electric-guitar tracks tend to rely only on effects that can be accomplished directly through a single guitar amplifier—a lightweight, shredded distortion on “Burnt Orange Peel,” a brighter simple distortion on “Atmospheric Conditions” and “Ziploc Bag,” and standard consumer-grade reverb on “Forcefield” and “See Water.” Throughout the album, the drum hits land with a dead thump—eschewing any nuanced stereo placement or crystalline reverb for a cheap, direct feel that sits unassumingly behind the other sonic elements. Some tracks include considerable room noise, while others opt for a close-miked sound—but all convey sonic imperfection. On “He’s a Mighty Good Leader” and

55 Beck, One Foot in the Grave CD (K Records KLP 28, 1994).
56 The kick and tom hits on “I Get Lonesome” and the lightweight drums on “Burnt Orange Peel” provide two different examples of this sensibility.
“Fourteen River Floods,” for example, we hear a small-room sound—with the flutter echo and uneven frequency response of a confined space lacking acoustic treatment. In other tracks such as “Cyanide Breath Mint” and “Girl Dreams,” close-mic techniques minimize room noise, but accentuate the rattles of the guitar and out-of-tune singing. Even when basic studio effects such as double-tracking, stereo panning, or reverb are used in One Foot in the Grave, they maintain a sense of unpolished simplicity. When Beck overdubs a backing vocal to his own melody in the Carter Family-styled “I’ve Seen the Land Beyond,” he seems to forget lyrics, at times haltingly following his own lead melody and at other times singing completely different lyrics. In “Asshole” and “Atmospheric Conditions,” reverb is baldly applied to only the backing vocal and percussion track, lending an endearing awkwardness and inconsistency to the overall sonic ambiance. Throughout the album, these various sonic elements combine to evoke a one-take sensibility of unfinished spontaneity.

Beck’s DGC release Mellow Gold, when compared to the two indie albums, received by far the most attention in the press. The story of the album, as related in multiple newspaper and magazine interviews, began with Beck being discovered by indie producer Tom Rothrock at a Los Angeles folk club in 1991. Beck had recently become interested in trying to incorporate hip-hop into his street/folk material, and Rothrock connected him with producer Karl Stephenson (who had produced the Geto Boys 1988 debut album Making Trouble). From this introduction, “Loser” was recorded at Stephenson’s home in early 1991 and mostly forgotten. Rothrock didn’t release it until April 1993. The 12-inch single only had a run of 400 copies (on his tiny label, Bong Load Records), and it sold out as soon as the college-radio hype caught on. With this newfound attention, Beck, Stephenson, Rothrock, and his colleague Rob Schapf recorded the rest of

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57 Beck, Mellow Gold CD (DGC 6232, 1994).
Mellow Gold in the homes of Stephenson and Schnapf in late 1993. Even though Stephenson, as an experienced producer, had enough equipment to put together high-quality tracks and mixes, Beck and the producers often related stories of the album’s domestic recording circumstances. Beck described, for example, how they had to rush to finish laying tracks before Stephenson’s girlfriend returned from work and reclaimed their recording space to make dinner. 58

Furthermore, the liner notes explicitly refer to the album’s home production: “Recorded at Karl’s house and Rob’s House and Beck’s four track.”

The music on Mellow Gold aligns with the aesthetic ideals of home recording, but in a different way than that heard in One Foot in the Grave. Instead of using sonic markers of amateurism to give the sense of performative immediacy and documentary rawness, Mellow Gold capitalizes on the possibilities made available through newly-affordable technologies—an experimental eclecticism of four musicians in a home studio fooling around with a digital sampler. Sampled drum loops create the backing for many of the tracks, even if the songs depart from hip-hop musical styles. Consider, for example, “Fuckin’ With My Head,” with its varied acoustic guitar progressions, distorted blues harmonica, double-tracked vocal riffs, vocal harmonizing “ooohs,” distorted drum loops, and messy vocal interjections. The eclecticism of production styles here is dizzying, showing an enthusiasm for transgressing boundaries. A later track on the album, “Soul Suckin’ Jerk,” hews more closely to a hip-hop style, yet Beck still branches out with bizarre pitch-sliding buzz sounds, accordion, and distorted layers of bass, guitar, vocals, and electronic noise. Beck eschews direct repetition in favor of eccentric sonic exploration. Other tracks on Mellow Gold demonstrate a similar eclectic variety: “Beercan” raps over a backwards lo-fi piano sample; “Steal My Body Home” uses a tambura sample and thin

atonal string glissandi; and “Blackhole” pairs reverb-drenched acoustic guitars with sitar riffs to accompany a hazy, mesmerizing string doubling of the vocal melody. All in all, *Mellow Gold* eschews predictability and repetition in favor of eccentric sonic exploration.

In comparing the three albums, we see distinct ways that Beck negotiated his relationship to sonic media. Both *Stereopathetic Soulmanure* and *One Foot in the Grave* foregrounded their own mediation by eschewing any sense of studio slickness or professionalism. The former focused on creative engagement with sonic media, showing how recordings can portray a real or imagined sense of documented reality. In the latter, the noticeable roughness of mediation signified to the listener that “recording” aspect of the album was merely an afterthought—capturing the reality of a creative moment that didn’t rely on technology at all. Thus the foregrounding of media contributed to its own aesthetic diminishment. The technological ability to create studio slickness was assumed to be excessive and unnecessary to the needs of these musicians. If we were to place *Stereopathetic Soulmanure* and *One Foot in the Grave* on a spectrum, with the former representing heady abstractions in media manipulation and the latter representing a spontaneous capturing of the moment of performance, then *Mellow Gold* would fall somewhere in the middle. The producers used media as the crux of their creative engagement. In the informal, unstructured setting of a home studio, professional production practices were embraced insofar as they enabled Beck and his associates to conduct their enigmatic sonic explorations.

“*Loser*”

Among all the music on these three albums, it was the hit single “*Loser*” that remained Beck’s sonic calling card. Its patchwork samples, off-the-cuff verses, and murmuring chorus were
infectious, being a perfect soundtrack for a burgeoning alternative rock audience searching for the “next big thing” after grunge. The stories surrounding Beck imbued “Loser” with an air of creative liberty. Moreover, the track aligned with discourses of stylistic inclusivity in alternative rock discourse. *Option* (and to a certain extent, *Spin*) had always made an effort to expose readers to a wide variety of styles and genres, including world music, electronic, hip-hop, contemporary art music, and electronic dance music. In its catchy, accessible samples, “Loser”’s stylistic amalgamation—country-blues slide guitar, sitar, funky drum loop, jangly alternative guitar, and a lackadaisical multi-dubbed vocal chorus—provided an eclecticism that would satisfy the broad tastes of an early-1990s alternative-rock connoisseur.

The significance of hip-hop in the popularity of “Loser” can hardly be overestimated. Alternative rock discourse had long paid attention to rap artists. As will be discussed further in the next chapter, the sample-based construction of hip-hop was considered by many alternative rock critics as a paradigm-shifting musical development. It was lauded as the new cutting-edge tradition, “defying censors” and “releasing challenging records” that capitalize on the aesthetic possibilities of new technologies rather than shunning them. When Beck—a white folk singer with a healthy dose of anti-art pretension—was able to incorporate techniques and styles of hip-hop into his own peculiar style, he capitalized on alternative rock’s fascination with hip-hop and worked it into a fresh musical style for a new generation of media-savvy listeners. *Spin* critic John Leland had described hip-hop as far back as 1987 as something of an antidote for empty media representation: “Hip-hop will not be consumed . . . it is itself a process of consumption.”

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With “Loser,” Beck asserted that this productive “process of consumption” extends to a skinny white kid spouting nonsense syllables and a droning, self-deprecating chorus.

Taken alongside the discourse surrounding Beck in the alternative rock press, “Loser” found its meaning not so much as a song, but as the tangible result of a constantly re-imagined production myth: Beck spending an afternoon in Karl’s apartment. This backstory connected the sound of the record to potent ideals of amateur home recording, playful sonic experimentation, and hip-hop’s processes of creative appropriation.

**PJ Harvey, Steve Albini, and Gendered Notions of Audio Fidelity**

If Beck’s early work rather straightforwardly aestheticized amateur media and production, then PJ Harvey’s 1993 output provides a more complicated case. This is because we can compare two commercially-released versions of essentially the same album—each with its own distinct mythology of production. In December 1992, the PJ Harvey trio recorded their second studio album, *Rid of Me*, with famed indie producer Steve Albini in Minnesota. Harvey had written most of the material in the previous months while at home in rural Yeovil, England. She made a set of home-recorded demo tapes to prepare for the December recording session. The studio album, released in May of 1993, found almost universal critical acclaim and ended up on various “best of” lists at the end of the year. Even so, some felt that Albini’s production obscured Harvey’s vocals behind the noisy sonic presence of the band. The following October, Harvey released the original home-recorded demo tapes as a new album, titled *4-Track Demos*. The production myths attached to these albums drew upon different processes of mediation, and thus

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competing tropes of authenticity. Albini’s Chicago noise-rock aesthetic sought to capture the vital interactions of ensemble performance in a live acoustic space, while the lo-fi, home recorded demo tapes evoked an intimate sense of immediacy.

By and large, Polly Jean Harvey was not considered a lo-fi artist. Her music tended to focus more on the aggressive intensity of punk and blues expression, while conjuring sexualized, sometimes violent, imagery. Her music utilized dramatic dynamic contrast, strained vocal extremes, and complex rhythmic interplay. Channeling legendary blues and rock pioneers such as Howlin’ Wolf and Captain Beefheart, Harvey fit more closely into traditions of transgressive rock expression and the myth of the creative genius. These attributes didn’t align particularly well with lo-fi aesthetics, which so often work against the idea of expressive purity or artistic autonomy. Lo-fi tended to relish in the “happy accidents” and ambiguities of the medium. Indeed, in 1993 Ann Powers described Harvey’s music as possessing “mythic power” and “furious female energy” that “eludes today’s zeitgeist, which prefers the small miracles and accidental triumphs of acerbic do-it-yourselfers.”

In describing the commercially-released demo tapes to her 1992 debut album, Dry, Harvey said, “To me, the demos are completely different songs—they’re brand new, and everything is clear in my head about why I wrote them, but then things get diluted as the process moves on. But what you lose there, you gain in other ways with a band. It’s more exciting to my ears to have other things happening.” Thus, these demo versions evoked for Harvey many of the attributes that were aestheticized and valorized by a lo-fi aesthetic: the raw spontaneity of musical expression, stripped down to its most fundamental elements. But even if the subsequent

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dressing up of instrumental arrangements “dilute” the music’s potency, the effects of professional studio production were, for Harvey, nonetheless considered a legitimate part of a larger creative process. An album such as 4-Track Demos, then, inhabited a peculiar place in her output, presented both as a commercially viable artwork and as a window into her unfinished creative process.

*Gendering Audio Fidelity*

This pair of albums also raises consideration of how gender dynamics played out in attitudes toward studio mediation and audio fidelity. Harvey’s aggressive “neo-feminine” stance was a central topic in her press coverage. Although she disavowed any specific feminist label, her explicit thematic depictions of female desire and sexuality made gender an essential aspect of her sonic persona. She rose to prominence on the heels of Riot Grrrl’s in-your-face assertions of female autonomy, and *Rid of Me* was often discussed alongside Liz Phair’s sexualized critique of male chauvinism, *Exile on Main Street*. Furthermore, Tori Amos had released her searing debut *Little Earthquakes* in 1992—rounding off a historical moment in which social and political critique among women singers found prominence in the discourse. Sheila Whiteley, in her wide-ranging study of women in popular music, credits Harvey as playing an important role in this moment, connecting virtuosic musical expression with Riot Grrrl’s “reclamation of a woman’s right to be sexually ferocious.”

We can consider further implications of this dynamic through scholar Tony Grajeda’s characterization of 1990s lo-fi as a “‘feminization’ of rock.” He describes the genre’s

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“feminization” as relating both to how the genre was attacked by critics—using gendered frameworks of technological control and creative expression—and in the way that it embraced historically-feminized sensibilities as legitimate means toward rock expression. Grajeda cites Simon Reynolds as an example of the former, denigrating lo-fi as a consumption-oriented phenomenon: “the ersatz folk culture of fanzine editors and used-vinyl store clerks.” Echoing modernist, gendered notions of an active (masculine) high culture versus a passive (feminine) mass culture, lo-fi was thus characterized as uncreative and fan-oriented. Grajeda further relates the gendering of lo-fi to a historically gendered conception of “high fidelity,” drawn from the work of Kier Keightley: the technological control of a hi-fi home audio system represented a “masculine, individualistic art,” that allowed “a means of male liberation from feminizing mass conformity.” Grajeda contrasts these general sensibilities with those of lo-fi artists Lou Barlow and Steven Malkmus, who rejected the amped-up aggression and sense of bodily impenetrability seen in post-punk icons such as Henry Rollins. By embracing the historically feminized attributes of lo-fi, the unfinished cuts and casual vagaries of lo-fi production signaled dissatisfaction with the “angry young man” sensibilities then prominent in punk and alternative. Early-1990s lo-fi could thus be seen as a deliberate inversion of gendered norms of professional rock production.

In considering the cultural setting surrounding PJ Harvey and lo-fi, then, we have two separate notions of gender subversion taking place: one with women artists reclaiming cultural space for female sexuality and agency, and another with a lo-fi style of music (by mostly male artists) that asserted the legitimacy of historically feminized modes of expression and technological engagement.

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In contrast to all this, Steve Albini stood as one of the more opinionated voices in an aggressive, male-dominated musical sub-culture.\textsuperscript{67} Being central to the Chicago noise-rock scene, Albini had an unparalleled reputation, both for his ability to capture the gritty nuance of abrasive noise and for his solidly anti-commercial work ethic. Scholar and composer Marc Faris has described Albini as constructing “a gender-, race-, and class-specific workingman persona.” Albini often wore workingman’s overalls, described music-making in terms of “construction” and “putting together,” and touted a “live” sound by avoiding non-essential studio tricks.\textsuperscript{68} With this, Albini and others in the Chicago scene created an aesthetic that drew from both a musically-exact virtuosity and a punk emphasis on communal music production. His production style tended to render drums and guitar with startling immediacy, while vocals were often buried in the mix. Albini described the reasoning behind this sensibility: “In the pop music tradition, the vocal is always the paramount thing. . . . In records that are of a band . . . the vocals may not be the most important thing. Now, I can’t count the number of times that a vocalist has said, ‘Okay, it’s time to do the vocals on this. Give me a minute, I have to write some lyrics.’”\textsuperscript{69} Albini placed the modernist aesthetic of instrumental performance against the historically feminized “pop” aesthetic of vocal expression. Furthermore, his focus on technological mastery aligned with masculine tropes of technological control. This emphasis on control can be seen in the way many

\textsuperscript{67} Some of the gender-related aspects of the Chicago indie scene in the early 1990s are discussed in Richard Lloyd’s examination of Liz Phair. Lloyd, 178–81.


\textsuperscript{69} “Steve Albini Interview,” Leeds Metropolitan University, Faculty of Arts, Environment, and Technology; YouTube.com, 16 July 2013. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRAc3hx5pok.
artists and critics would describe Albini’s work as “capturing” the essence of a live performance.⁷⁰

The Chicago noise-rock aesthetic thus showed a conflicted relationship with lo-fi. Both sensibilities tended to valorize a sense of spontaneity by emphasizing noise and sonic imperfection on record. The noisy imperfections, however, seem to have signified different things. Perhaps it came down to a philosophical question of what constitutes “the music.” For a lo-fi artist, the auxiliary noise signified the fortuitous, amateurish effects of an ad-hoc recording situation. The artist’s lack of preparation added to a recording’s sense of exploration, which was all part of the creative process. The recording apparatus, with its foregrounded distortions, hiss, and imperfections, were retained on the final recording as a sort of badge of honesty—overtly pointing out to the listener the mediated processes of rock production. For Albini’s noise-rock, on the other hand, the power and communication of music came from messy live interactions of the band—organic and dynamic connections nurtured through the band’s diligence in rehearsal. The engineer’s job was to capture this magic, and to make the recording medium as transparent as possible. If the sonic nuances of live performance were either missed or polished away, the music became impotent. Anything added by the studio producer—whether purposeful lo-fi noise or commercial “sweetening”—bordered on dishonesty.

Albini, then, proved an intriguing pick for Harvey’s new album. PJ Harvey’s sound had many things in common with the Chicago noise-rock aesthetic: abrasive guitar, drastic dynamic contrasts, irregular rhythmic complexities, and an emphasis on tight-knit, active ensemble

⁷⁰ Mac McCaughan of Superchunk, soon after recording with Albini, said, “I love the sound Steve is able to capture: that huge, loud guitar. We all loved the last Urge Overkill and Jesus Lizard discs, and the first couple of Pixies records sounded like that. Just totally powerful.” Eric Puls, “Superchunk puts a song under all of its crunch,” Chicago Sun-Times, 21 February 1992, 13.
performance. She spoke highly of Albini’s technical skill in capturing these nuances, citing the Pixies’ Albini-produced *Surfer Rosa* as a favorite album. At the same time, her in-your-face attitude and cynical irony made Albini a worthy opponent in the studio. Albini’s musical persona—which up to this point had included the founding of two rock bands, Big Black and Rapeman—had an abrasive, borderline misogynistic quality that provided a strong thematic counterpoint to Harvey’s sexualized aggression. Indeed, as Harvey’s publicist told the *Seattle Times* just before the December 1992 recording session, “She says she thinks the relationship will be very combative, so she’s confident that interesting things will come out of it.”  

In interviews following the sessions, Harvey spoke approvingly of Albini’s skill and ingenuity in capturing the sound of the performance, agreeing with his one-take production philosophy: “He just sets up his microphones—in a completely different way to how I’ve ever seen anyone set up mics before. I mean, that was astonishing, to have them on the floor, on the walls, on the windows, on the ceiling, twenty foot away from where you’re singing. He just sets it up. And he’s very good at getting the right atmosphere to get the best take.” For Harvey, then, it seems Albini’s mix of professionalism, technological control, and ideological fidelity to the liveness of the studio performance combined to make a unique and productive dynamic for the album’s production.

*Production Myths in the Critical Discourse*

The reviews of *Rid of Me* and *4-Track Demos* relied upon the myths that had come to surround

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Harvey and her work with Albini. Malcolm Mayhew of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* described an aggressive ideological symbiosis between gendered conceptions of the singer and producer, calling *Rid of Me* “an upward kick in the crotch to commercialism, egotism, and male chauvinism, Albini-style.” For Mayhew, the album’s tensions conjured an imagined battle in the studio, a “screaming tournament between Polly’s over-raucous guitar and her mega-feministic mouth. Picture the Jesus Lizard stepping on Pat Benatar’s face.” He thus drew Harvey as a caricature of the aggressive feminist to make sense of the album’s blatantly-gendered aggression.

Evelyn McDonnell and Deborah Frost used their reviews to critique masculine tendencies in rock production. For McDonnell at *Spin*, “Albini is too heavy-handed for the band’s primitive (em)power pop; he’s flattened their joyful bursts and epiphanies, making them sound depressed all the time. In moments prone to conspiracy theory, I imagine he’s buried Harvey’s vocals on several tracks because he’s trying to silence her. But mostly I think it’s because he’s a noise nerd, and just doesn’t get the concept of singing.” For Frost at *Rolling Stone*, Albini’s “abrasive, sonically flat” production “is determined to prove that Harvey’s band can rock as fast and as noisily as any bunch of guys whose dynamic creativity is limited to speeding up and slowing down and rolling over and doing it again.”

Perhaps the most nuanced and evocative assessment came from Ann Powers in her *Village Voice* review. Tying Harvey’s feminine expression to the emotional power of the mystics, Powers noted that the album’s terror and expression “invoke classic rock forms . . . blow them out of proportion, then shred them to pieces.” Among this burst of frenzy, Powers

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saw the producer as would-be oppressor—though one who ultimately failed to keep up with the
carnal energy of the performance. “Steve Albini’s production makes sense of this jones of excess
through wild dynamic shifts . . . . Effects smother Harvey’s words and then she’s pressed up
against the vocal mike, enunciating for her life. On the first few listens . . . his hand seems
mortal heavy, pushing the music in all the wrong directions. Eventually, though, the material’s
emotional depth and the strength of Harvey’s performance cuts through Albini’s attempt to
match this power with his own hand.” Like the other critics, Powers set up a production myth
that pitted singer against producer—a narrative of struggle between musical expression and
technological control. But in Powers’s pop-singer-cum-John-Henry tale, Harvey exploded the
inherent tensions of both technology and gender, breaking down the historical and social
constraints of normative female identity: “Throughout ‘Rid of Me,’ she switches sexual identities
like a runaway darting from one blind alley to another. . . . Harvey refuses not only to speak for
her gender, but to believe in its solidity. . . . PJ Harvey dismantles the customary arrangements of
guitar flash, bass groove, and drum bottom to reach some essence of rock that precedes the
familiar.”76 Among critics, then, the mythologized recording studio became a site for negotiating
and refashioning identity. Harvey’s choice to work with Albini (and his predilection for
instrumental noise) established a field of tension and opposition in her assertion of cultural and
artistic autonomy.

Reviews for 4-Track Demos were generally positive, considered a worthy retort to
Albini’s heavy-handed production on Rid of Me. Charles Aaron in Spin began by noting that the
tensions Rid of Me were ultimately what made the album successful: “Albini’s oppressive hand
might’ve actually been crucial to the album’s palpable frisson. When he reduced Harvey’s vocals

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to a shriek, then let them blast forth, she was a woman fighting for her life, fighting to be heard. . .

. . But *Rid of Me* may be the year’s most bracing album simply because Harvey believed so violently in her songs, and whipped the guy’s ass at his own game.” But while *Rid of Me* shone as a document of performative and technological combat, *4-Track Demos* was remarkable for its intimate intensity: “She sticks ‘Rid of Me’ right up in our face, her voice a hoarse, deep-throated weapon.” The album’s foregrounded mediation—in typical lo-fi fashion—made the artist’s expression all the more visceral. In “Reeling,” the singer “sounds as if she’s screaming out of a transistor radio,” while “‘Legs’ opens up with a tinkly, cocktail-lounge piano. Harvey coughs, guitars reverberate, then suddenly, she’s howling, a howl so startling you half expect the singer to stagger into your bedroom, bloody dress in hand.”77

For some critics who preferred *Rid of Me* to *4-Track Demos*, their critiques of the latter tended to draw upon feminized aspects of the lo-fi sensibility. Robert Christgau negatively compared Harvey’s emotion in the *Demos* to the “marshaled power” of the producer’s technological control: the tracks on *Demos* “share the kind of eager emotionality that makes Steve Albini cringe.”78 An even more overtly gendered assessment came from the aforementioned Malcolm Mayhew, under the heading “Oh, How Cute Rock.” He described *Demos* as “a bunch of studio outtakes and alternate versions” and, invoking a level-headed rationality, hoped that “common sense will overwhelm you and you’ll pass on *4-Track*.”79

77 Charles Aaron, “PJ Harvey, *4-Track Demos,*” *Spin*, December 1993, 118.
Comparing the Records

A close listening to the tracks from the two albums allows us to consider how ideals of expression, performance, gender, and fidelity played out in the sound of the music. The first thing that strikes a listener is the expressive power and technical skill heard in 4-Track Demos. The form of each song is articulated impeccably, along with all of their major rhythmic and melodic elements. (Even the drums’ two-against-three hemiola in Rid of Me’s “Rub ‘Till It Bleeds” is presaged in the background metronome of the 4-Track version.) In these home recordings, Harvey utilized all the tracks of her recorder, often double-tracking vocals and adding contrasting guitar, organ, strings, or percussion. Thus, on a certain level, the seeming domesticity of 4-Track Demos gives a heightened sense of virtuosity and artistic autonomy—a master musician capturing an intimate aural snapshot of her songs.

We can also compare the two albums’ use of sonic space. As noted in many of the reviews, Albini gave particular prominence to the instrumental elements. The drum tracks on Rid of Me are both boomy and crystalline, giving the sense of a powerful, well-tuned drum set filling a medium-sized room with its sonic presence. Guitar and bass tend to be close-miked and up front in the mix, capturing the nuance of guitar and amplifier timbre. The vocal tracks, however, show more timbral and spatial variety. Most of the vocal tracks give a sense of the spatial ambiance of the studio, sonically placing Harvey within the performing space—although without the room-filling prominence of the drum set. The title track, for example, alternates between the close-miked quiet vocals of the verse (capturing puffs of sibilance and breath intake) and a reverberant scream of the louder chorus. The vocal track on “Legs” gives a diverse sense of space and technological mediation: her opening wail meanders across in the stereo spectrum before switching to the verse, which settles into a breathy, yet reverberant mix that allows us to
hear her amplified voice ricochet around the studio. On tracks like “Hook” and “Yuri-G,” her vocals are distorted through studio processing, creating an alienated character that meshes well with the harshness of the rest of the band. The diversity of placement and production style highlights the dynamic creativity of the studio recording process—suggesting a singer and producer in a creative back-and-forth of sonic expression. However, for two of Rid of Me’s most musically aggressive tracks, “50 Ft Queenie” and “Snake,” the vocals don’t inhabit much of a space at all. Without noticeable room reverb, amplification, or distortion, Harvey’s vocals scream against the huge sound of the band. Sonically marginalized through Albini’s “heavy hand” on the mixing board, Harvey’s expression becomes ravenous, lashing out through—and perhaps in spite of—the surrounding cacophony.

The vocals on 4-Track Demos convey a completely different sense of sonic and psychological placement. Although the vocal tracks may alternately include room noise or audio distortion, Harvey’s voice always maintains an almost visceral sense of immediacy. In “Rid of Me,” one hears the small confines of the recording space. In “Snake,” the listener almost feels the mic pushed up against Harvey’s mouth during her moans and shrieks. The blatant application of distortion and delay in “Hook” gives the vocals a palpable presence. The vocal tracks on 4-Track Demos thus convey a sense of constriction; the consumer-grade recording equipment brings about a technological closing-in that makes Harvey’s vocals sound all the more impassioned.  

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80 This effect relates to the signification of power discussed in Robert Walser’s study of guitar distortion and Tricia Rose’s description of hip-hop producers working “in the red.” Walser, Running With the Devil, 41–44; Tricia Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 74–80.
The 4-Track Demos recording of “50 Ft Queenie” includes an audible metronome, which paradoxically gives an even more intense sense of rhythmic drive than that of the studio-produced version. Harvey’s guitar constantly pulls on the reins of the metronomic clicks, providing a vital rhythmic tension to the track. In the Albini production, it seems there was no click track—or it was at least suspended at times—as the tempo is allowed to breathe, organically skipping portions of beats between sections. (An example of this is heard in the track’s transition into the final chorus.) The organic rhythmic interplay on the Rid of Me version allows the sense of a musical conversation among competing voices. The metronome of the 4-Track Demos version, on the other hand, is a restraint of Harvey’s own making—a mechanical constant against which she ferociously pushes, creating a sense of heightened energy and power.

In this analysis, nuances of timbre, ambiance, and performative engagement in the sound of the records suggest production myths that related to the larger ideological battles being waged. As a strong woman in a male dominated cultural and social field, Harvey constantly ran up against gender-based constraints and social norms. For many critics and listeners, Rid of Me seems to re-enact and even embody that struggle, while the DIY brashness of 4-Track Demos thrives upon a power of its own making. Rather than jostling for prominence and presence among the dynamic bustle of the band and its male-controlled studio space, 4-Track Demos simply asserts an empowered, impassioned rejection of the entire apparatus. It portrays an artist working on her own terms. Whether pushing against the mechanical click of her own metronome, cramming a small domestic space with a raucous clamor, or overloading the frequency response of a consumer-grade tape recorder, 4-Track Demos screams autonomously—bursting the seams of its self-imposed artificial constraints.
By considering Beck and PJ Harvey through the lens of process-oriented aesthetics, we see how layers of contested meaning were attached to the sonic signatures of lo-fi audio production. The sonic nuances of these records evoked ideologically loaded myths of production process, and in so doing signified broader narratives of cultural placement, aesthetic antagonism, female empowerment, and creative engagement. Considered more broadly, however, alternative rock’s focus on roughness in mediation was not limited to musical signification. In the next section, we look to the press discourse to see how lo-fi ideals were part of alternative culture’s broader aesthetic emphasis on media and mediation.

Media-Centric Discourse in the Alternative Rock Press

In the discourse of alternative rock, the small, interpersonal networks of 1980s indie rock were foundational. Ideals of localized eclecticism and unbridled creativity constituted, for many, the essence of what it meant for a genre to be independent or alternative. But around the end of the 1980s, with the music’s commercial success and dissemination among wider audiences, the very definition of “alternative” became a substantively different thing. Even if listeners still sought to make meaningful connections between the music’s communal contexts and the sound on record, processes of mediation found new significance in the production myths that shaped the meaning of the music.\(^1\) The lo-fi genre is a prime example of this emphasis on media, but similar

\(^1\)This rough generalization of a historical trajectory is, of course, not absolute. I’m focusing here on how dominant trends in 1980s alternative and post-punk turned from communal performance toward media consciousness. But self-conscious role of media manipulation had been central to pockets of underground culture throughout the 1970s and ’80s. In Chapter Three, for example, I address sample-heavy groups such as Negativland, who were highlighting the aesthetics of mediation since the mid-1980s. And Theo Cateforis shows how the technologies of music production and dissemination were central to some trends in New Wave, from Trevor Horn and the Buggles’ thematic engagement with audiovisual mediation in “Video Killed the Radio Star,” to Gary Numan and the aestheticized electronic machinery of synthpop. See Theo Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave: Modern Pop at the Turn of the 1980s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 1–17, 151–81.
attitudes can be seen in the broader discourse and perspectives of alternative. In this section, I focus on two of the most important alternative magazines of this time, Spin and Option, to demonstrate a more generalized consciousness toward the significance of mediation in alternative culture.

Experiencing a Mediated Underground

Leading into the 1990s, Option tailored its coverage to those who were actually producing and engaging with music media. The magazine devoted much print space to an eclectic assortment of reviews, organized by media type—cassettes, LPs, EPs, singles, and videos. The magazine ran a regular “Home Studio” column, tutoring readers in production equipment and techniques, while addressing practical issues such as cassette fidelity, noise reduction, microphone practices, and MIDI. The editorial “Issue By Issue” column addressed problems facing contemporary independent recording artists and outlets, such as ASCAP royalty payments, the plight of independent record labels, and the demise of the LP. Overall, this coverage gave an implicit assertion: that informed, critical media engagement was a viable way to promote alternative culture.

Although Spin likewise placed media at the center of its encounter with alternative music, its writers took a slightly different approach. We see what I call a “mediated underground.” The magazine’s coverage of underground music focused on records, rather than an engagement in the actual scenes, shows, or social networks from which the music came. This attitude can be seen in the regular “Underground” column, which reviewed 7-inch singles and LPs from independent bands and labels. Andrea ‘Enthal, who penned the column until 1987, described the underground as a progressive musical force whose legacy had not only shaped past rock movements, but also
could foretell of music to come: “Beneath today’s surface, tomorrow’s rock is always twisting, which is why you should always keep an ear underground.”82 To facilitate readers’ education, ‘Enthal included a one-time “Underground Record Stores” feature. The text reads something like a travel brochure, naming particular stores with the most obscure material and giving tips on how to navigate their quirks and staff personalities.83 Readers were assumed not to be part of the underground community—perhaps not even wanting to become part of such a community. Rather, underground culture was something to which a knowledgeable rock listener should pay attention—a pure source for noncommercial musical experimentation and exploration.84 Likewise, when Byron Coley took over the column in the late 1980s, he brought a record-collector’s mentality—focusing on the recorded output of particular labels and subgenres. In this way, Spin asserted that the way to engage with alternative musical cultures was not necessarily to attend shows or perform music with local musicians in a scene, but to purchase and listen to records.

By the 1990s, Spin and Option were becoming significant cultural forces in the wider music industry—their circulations having grown to 225,000 and 22,000, respectively. Spin had established itself as a major national music magazine (though always significantly behind the more general interest Rolling Stone), and Option was gaining widespread credibility as a legitimate alternative voice.85 The rising influence and prevalence of alternative music, however,


84 A reader’s letter published in December of that year attests to this. Adrienne Byrd from Greensboro, NC states that the “Underground” column is “one of the main reasons I buy the magazine,” not because it encourages participation or vitality of particular scenes, but because “I can always get the best information on what I want to listen to.” “Letters,” Spin 1, no. 7 (December 1985): 6.

caused tensions in the ways that critics would engage in the culture. In July 1991, Richie Unterberger, *Option*’s founding music editor, wrote a self-reflective piece announcing his resignation from the magazine, taking the occasion to air his thoughts on the state of alternative music. Some of his complaints are what one might expect: he mentioned pushy promoters, and the rise of overly commercial alternative bands such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Tears for Fears. But Unterberger’s main reason for leaving is somewhat surprising, considering the DIY-oriented, eclectic nature of the magazine. Instead of pushing for a more participatory alternative music scene, Unterberger felt that *too* many people were playing and recording alternative music. And he felt the majority of it was derivative, uninspired, or just plain bad. In this complaint, Unterberger talked almost exclusively about *records*, invoking a high-culture paradigm: “I still view music, records even, as an art.”

Considering the national scope of *Spin* or *Option*, it should perhaps be expected to see an emphasis on records and media over live scenes and personal engagement. After all, as Simon Frith observed, “to be a rock critic was to be a record critic.” Still, this media-centric coverage carried its own set of assumptions and biases. As a foil, we can consider comments made in 1992 by pioneering independent musician Ian MacKaye. He described the label he founded, Dischord Records, as “an independent label, an alternative label. . . . The idea was to document a certain community of musicians in Washington, D.C. We pretty much have succeeded in what we set out to do, and will to do it as long as that community exists. When the community stops, so does . . .

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Neither Unterberger’s “records as art-works” ideal nor ‘Enthal’s advice to “keep an ear underground” sits particularly well with the communal impetus described by MacKaye. Or consider this 1992 critique of Nirvana by Samuel Nathan Schiffman in the leftist Berkeley-based punk zine *Maximum Rocknroll*. For Schiffman, the interpersonal values of the community were paramount: “Nirvana’s success says that it’s O.K. to fuck over not only your friends, but also the value system from which your career was built. If the complex support system which enabled Sub Pop to thrive did not exist their [sic] would be no Nirvana.” Schiffman played down the significance of artistic merit in rock records, emphasizing instead the cultural values of the scene: “Whether *Nevermind* is a piece of shit or a masterpiece is beside the point. The point is that like Elvis, Nirvana’s success has metamorphosized them from being a representation of the counterculture to being nothing more than a mainstream caricature of us all.”

Thus we see essentially different frameworks of what it meant to be “alternative.” For MacKaye and Schiffman, the abstract artistic merit of the record was subordinate to the vitality of the underground. For Unterberger and many at *Option* and *Spin*, on the other hand, the very act of listening to records, if approached from an engaged, critically-aware perspective, could be its own means to an artistic end.

*John Leland and Critical Evaluation of Media*

In *Spin’s* fifth issue, Guccione, in a bit of editorial bravado, outlined what a competing magazine would have to do to copy *Spin*: “As to the matter of editors, more advice: if they look like sane,

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88 “Interview with Ian MacKaye of Fugazi,” *TV Enemy*, vol. 1 (Studio K7, 1992), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xk4Lm5YtgeI.

89 Quoted in Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 23.
reliable, good editors, don’t hire them. . . . No, you must look for misfits. . . . Part of copying
*Spin* has to include predicting it. This is impossible. It may have been possible if we had ever
decided where we were taking the magazine. We didn’t. We like not knowing anyway.”

In its calculated heterogeneity, *Spin* nurtured a readership of cultural omnivores—of people who
possessed the skills to be able to appreciate a wide variety of media, styles, and aesthetic
sensibilities. Perhaps the most assertive of *Spin*’s early writers in this attitude of eclectic pop
appreciation was John Leland, who began as a record reviewer in 1985 and worked up the ranks
to serve as a senior editor from 1987 to 1989. One of the central premises of Leland’s brand of
sophisticated pop consumption was an overt acknowledgment of the effects of mediation in
popular culture.

In an introductory column for the August 1987 issue, Leland issued a call for a thoughtful
readership: “The so-called information revolution means an increase not just in the data available
to us, but also in the forces influencing our interpretation of that data.” He asserted that media’s
“intermediary forces”—its subtexts, contexts, and codes—created layers of meaning in any mass
communication. He concluded his piece with a broader observation: “The big problem with
peeling away ideological biases is that the process disguises your own. So you can trust us, but
maybe you want to cut the cards.” Thus, we end up with a sort of postmodern “medium-is-the-
message” in which Leland overtly encouraged fans to critically analyze media itself in order to
discern underlying meaning and ethics. Later that year, he blamed rock’s broader

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91 Peterson and Kern, “Changing Highbrow Taste.”
92 Leland went on to become a senior editor at *Newsweek* and the editor of *Details* magazine, before signing on at
commercialization on the insidious influence of television. The rock star, he argued, had been rendered aesthetically impotent by being segmented into a series of commercially-driven images. He ended the column by describing hip-hop (as mentioned above in the “Loser” analysis) as an antidote to the aesthetic bankruptcy of mainstream culture. “Hip-hop will not be consumed. With the privilege it allots to cannibalizing both itself and other musics, it is itself a process of consumption.” Leland here touched upon a particularly thorny ontological question (the creative nature of digital sampling, an issue which will be addressed at greater length in the next chapter), but the overall arc of his argument is clear: certain modes of mediation could nullify or obscure meaning, while others were active and oppositional—and thus aesthetically legitimate.

From a broader perspective, these attitudes regarding media, meaning, and social change followed a long tradition. With New Journalism of the 1960s, writers such as Richard Goldstein and Robert Christgau at the Village Voice had drawn from the aesthetics of Pop art and the rising influence of media studies to launch a social critique and assert a place for the broader possibilities of rock. This type of intellectualism in rock criticism fell out of favor around the beginning of the 1980s. But by the second half of the decade, it had returned in full force in Spin and among academic-oriented British critics such as Simon Reynolds and his colleagues at Melody Maker. A new emphasis on cultural theory, including semiotics and the French post-structuralists, took hold among a younger generation of rock intellectuals. (Consider how, by

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95 See Devon Powers, Writing the Record: The Village Voice and the Birth of Rock Criticism (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 43–73.
96 These developments are discussed in greater detail in Ulf Linberg, Gestur Gudmusndsson, Morten Michelsen, and Hans Weisethaunet, Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-Headed Crusiers (New York: Peter Lang, 2005): 244–46.
1990, Baudrillard’s analytical study *America* ended up on *Rolling Stone*’s “hot list.”\(^{97}\) Through popular press outlets, this late-1980s flowering of self-consciously post-modern sensibilities worked its way into circles of popular discourse—thus playing a significant role in the generalized emphasis on the aesthetics of media consumption in 1990s alternative culture.

*Visually Foregrounding Mediation*

In the second half of the 1980s, alternative rock magazines also used visual print effects to highlight the effects of media and mediation. In discussing these elements of publication, I am considering music magazines not only as sources of discourse, but as sites where fans perceived and developed cultural norms and expectations. Illustrations, advertisements, and accompanying photographs can be studied fruitfully alongside the written discourse as part of a cohesive arena of culturally relevant media.

From its inception, *Spin* would often frame photos of punk bands with a rough border or ripped edges, signifying a certain amount of haste in getting the image out to the public—a fresh-off-the-press kind of realism.\(^{98}\) Other times, photos would be published with the camera film’s edge labels visible in the frame, hinting at a similar straight-from-*Spin*’s-camera kind of feel.\(^{99}\) By foregrounding their own processes of transmission, these images sought to take the viewer beyond the oft-assumed invisibility of mediating technologies. Into the 1990s, with the growing use of digital desktop publishing software, these media-heavy effects become even more

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\(^{98}\) Examples from *Spin* include Scratch Acid, the Replacements, and the Meat Puppets: *Spin*, October 1985, 35; and *Spin*, June 1987, 21–22, 34. *Option* used a similar effect for Van Dyke Parks in *Option*, January/February, 46–47.

prevalent and stylized—particularly in coverage of lo-fi oriented bands and artists. Between 1993 and 1994, for example, *Magnet* featured a heavily-pixelated photo of Archers of Loaf; *Option* used a contact-sheet cutout effect for their photos of Pavement; and *Spin* presented Beck as a fractured portrait, seemingly pieced together with pieces of clear plastic tape. By 1995, even *Rolling Stone* jumped on the lo-fi bandwagon, using a similar tape-collage effect for their feature on Sebadoh.100

These magazines also used media-centric visual effects to overtly emphasize their written content. One particularly striking example is found in Leland’s aforementioned piece discussing television’s impact as a medium.101 (Figure 1) Alongside his column we see a still image from

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**Figure 1:** “Antihero” Illustration. *Spin*, November/December 1987, 76–77.


a Whitesnake music video. The camera-film printing is visible in the frame, and the photo was enlarged to the point where the television pixilation becomes obvious. This layout calls attention to three layers of mediation: 1) the image printed in the magazine, which was 2) originally a photograph of 3) a television screen. Thus, in a column addressing the ideological effects of visual representation, the illustration highlights its own status as a representation of a representation of a representation.

Of course, in their visual foregrounding of their own mediation, these magazines’ effects were not without precedent; we can find parallels, for example, in collage art, or in the gestural brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionist “action painting.” The most relevant predecessor, however, was the print culture of fanzines. Stemming from a long history of amateur publishing, self-produced fanzines gained a renewed relevance with the rise of punk in the 1970s. By the mid-1980s, a lively subculture of self-run mailing networks had arisen. The visual aesthetic of punk zines emphasized DIY processes of production: ransom-note lettering, scribbled texts, or photocopied collages. Steven Duncombe’s study of zine culture discusses the ideologies inherent in their rough aesthetic: “Zines are bursts of raw emotion. Their cut-and-paste look is a graphic explosion. . . . Saying whatever’s on your mind, unbound to corporate sponsors, puritan censors, or professional standards of argument and design, being yourself and expressing your real thoughts and real feelings—these are what zinesters consider authentic.” Duncombe describes historical precedent for these sensibilities, including Dada, the “propaganda of the

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102 The physicality of the paint and its conveyance of physical gesture was a central tenet of Abstract Expressionism. As critic Harold Rosenberg noted: “What was to go on the canvas was not a picture, but an event.” Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 22. See also Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

deed” ideologies of turn-of-the-century radicals, and various other modes of anarchist expression. Thus, when *Spin*, *Option*, and other alternative rock magazines used rough-cut visual effects that emphasized DIY-styled processes of media transmission, they drew upon rich traditions and historical ideologies of media-driven revolt against the status quo.

Further evidence of the aesthetics of mediation in alternative rock culture can be seen in the magazines’ printed advertisements. As a particularly vivid example, we can consider advertisements for one of the most popular of consumer media: audio cassette tapes. Throughout the 1980s, cassette tape ads had tended to rely on some sort of visual gimmick to depict their brand’s effectiveness and fidelity. (A well-known ad for Maxell depicts a man sitting in his living room in front of his speaker with his hair blown back and his martini knocked off the end

![Figure 2: TDX Advertisement. *Spin*, January 1990, 8–9.](image)

104 Dunncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 32–33, 35.
table.\textsuperscript{105} By the end of the decade, however, TDK cassettes began running a campaign that asserted another type of fidelity. (Figure 2) In an ad appearing in a 1990 issue of \textit{Spin}, a two-page photo spread of young adults joyriding in a convertible is distorted with television pixilation and color processing.\textsuperscript{106} To its left, in professional lettering, are claims that “some love” the hi-fi specifications of TDK cassettes. In modern lettering over the photo, however, the ad retorts that “some just love the music.” At the top right, a TDK logo with the catchphrase “So Real” seems to have been cut out of some sort of translucent plastic and slapped atop the ad. At the bottom right is a high-definition rendering of a cassette tape that appears to float, lifelike, above the ad’s surface—casting a shadow on the pixilated photo spread.

The effects of this advertisement catered to a readership sensitive to the ideological effects of mediation. The pixilation of the photo put a degree of separation between the viewer and the scene—giving an otherworldly representation of the carefree pleasures of musical experience. The cassette tape and logo, however, suggested the viewer’s own liberation through media—the idea that music is available to anyone (as signified by the visual immediacy of the cassette) and that it need not be hindered by corporate professional homogeneity (as signified by the DIY logo). The advertisement evoked an individual’s “real” experience with media itself as much as it did technological audio precision.\textsuperscript{107} This example visually illustrates one of the central paradoxes of lo-fi signification: by using low-fidelity imagery to advertise high-fidelity cassettes, it gave the viewer a seemingly \textit{immediate} experience of an inherently \textit{mediated} culture.

\textsuperscript{105} An instance of this ad can be found in \textit{Spin}, November 1988, 38–39.

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Spin}, January 1990, 8–9.

\textsuperscript{107} This particular campaign ran from 1988 to 1990, in magazines including \textit{Spin}, \textit{Rolling Stone}, and \textit{Alternative Press}. One of the other ads showed two musicians hanging around the back of an old pickup truck, while yet another featured a skateboarder performing tricks at a graffiti-strewn beachfront. All the ads, however, featured the hyper-real cassette tape and the DIY “So Real” logo.
Too often, when we consider the rise of alternative rock in the early years of the 1990s, we focus on the well-noted tension between interpersonal networks of underground music and the ostensibly corrupting forces of mass-media commodification. This chapter has shown another, technologically-based lens through which we can understand these developments. In shifting from a small-scale to a large-scale phenomenon, alternative music saw a generalized shift in its authenticating frameworks. Beyond valuing small-scale media for its ability to document a participatory scene, mediation itself came to be emphasized. This authenticity could be asserted not only through the work of musicians—as with the participatory networks of *Option* and the domestic ideals of lo-fi recording—but also in the actions and attitudes of listeners. Lo-fi aesthetics asserted that listeners could find musical and ideological meaning in the layers of mediation inherent in modern musical cultures. Knowledgeable, critically-aware consumption of alternative media came to take on an authenticity of its own.\(^{108}\)

To conclude this chapter’s discussion of lo-fi representation and media-centrism, let’s consider one more example: a scene from Richard Linklater’s 1992 independent film, *Slacker*. We come across a disheveled twenty-something, holed up in a windowless apartment full of glowing televisions. One TV is duct-taped behind his shoulders as a makeshift backpack, with a dozen others perched among piles of VCRs and VHS tapes. He explains to a visitor,

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\(^{108}\) This trend is further reflected in critics’ early-1990s laments of a new interpersonal disconnectedness among aesthetically progressive cultures. In the *Village Voice*, C. Carr wrote of a “bohemian diaspora.” Rather than being concentrated in Paris or East Village, the artistic energy of bohemian expression had “atomized now into trails that can’t be followed: the ’zine/cassette network, the living-room performance spaces, the modern-accessed cybersalons, the flight into neighborhoods that will never be Soho.” “Bohemian Diaspora,” *Village Voice*, 4 February 1992, 27; reprinted in *Village Voice*, 26 October–1 November 2005, 112. Likewise, Dudley Saunders wrote in *Option* that the “only real bohemia today” was different from the previous urban “official bohemia”—lying in the “electronic wiring . . . or in the cassettes that travel from outback to outback.” “Alternative America: Today’s Bohemia: Location or Lifestyle?” *Option*, July/August 1992, 44–45.
To me, a video image is much more powerful and useful than an actual event. Like, back when I used to go out, I was walking down a street, and this guy came barreling out of a bar—fell right in front of me, and he had a knife right in his back . . . and well, I have no reference to it now. I can’t refer back to it. I can’t press rewind, I can’t put it on pause. I can’t put it on slow-mo and see all the little details. And the blood, it was all wrong; it didn’t look like blood. And the hue was off, and I couldn’t adjust the hue. There I was, seeing it for real, but it just wasn’t right.\textsuperscript{109}

In Linklater’s micro-dystopia, where constant media bombardment negated in-person experience, the medium of television enabled a new sense of reality itself. His double-edged critique pointed out both the absurdity and the appeal of a media-centric sensibility. In this new existence of self-imposed, media-saturated exile, the real world just couldn’t live up to the reproducible, adjustable nature of a life experienced through television pixels.

CHAPTER 3

“We Maraud For Ears”: Hip-Hop Sampling in 1990s Alternative Culture

In a 1984 episode of Sesame Street, the children visited legendary jazz musician Herbie Hancock in his studio. He greeted them from behind a large keyboard hooked to a computer. To demonstrate this contraption, he had one of the children speak her name into a microphone: “Tatiana Ali.” With the touch of a key, he instantly replayed the sound of her voice; with a few other buttons and knobs, he changed the sound’s pitch, chopped it into pieces, looped it, and modified multiple loops—all in real time. Tatiana smiled widely to hear the sound of her own voice stretched and scrambled, and the rest of the children giggled at the novelty. But Hancock, too, seemed genuinely excited.\(^1\) Indeed, this was much more than a party trick. For over twenty years, Hancock had been pushing the limits of jazz creativity and expression, participating in landmark developments of style, harmony, form, and timbre. But here, he possessed a new technology that gave him seemingly limitless and immediate control over sound itself.

The instrument was a Fairlight CMI. In addition to being a synthesizer, the Fairlight could capture digital sound samples. Instead of storing the sound magnetically on tape, which had to be mechanically handled, the samples were encoded into computer memory. What made the Fairlight so revolutionary is that, with the push of a button, any sound could be \textit{instantly} sampled, digitally manipulated, reconfigured, and played back at any pitch. When Fairlight

keyboards appeared in 1979, forward-looking musicians immediately sought its musical possibilities; Stevie Wonder, Peter Gabriel, Kate Bush, and Trevor Horn began using them as soon as they were available. In the years following, other sampling keyboards came to market, such as the Synclavier, the E-mu Emulator, and, by mid-decade, the more affordable Ensoniq Mirage. Meanwhile, digital sampling technologies crept into other aspects of pop production. In 1980, Linn Electronics released the LM1 drum machine, which sequenced and played back pre-packaged digitally-sampled drum sounds. Other machines soon followed, and the crisp, angular sound of digital drums became one of the defining sonic characteristics of 1980s pop.2

Digital sampling expanded musicians’ sonic palette, but its broader effects were conceptual as well as aural. Digital manipulation could, for example, signify “a whole world of new sounds” through the “high-tech computer-run synthesizer” being used for the soundtrack of Disney’s 1982 film Tron. Mundane sounds could be seamlessly refashioned into music, like in the 1985 Cosby Show episode where Stevie Wonder turned the family’s spoken words into an impromptu song, or a scene in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1986) where teenaged Ferris (Matthew Broderick) fashioned a sampled-cough rendition of Strauss’s Blue Danube on the E-Mu Emulator.3 The novelty of instant sampling and manipulation transformed the way that people conceptualized recorded sound and its uses.

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In the second half of the 1980s, hip-hop producers incorporated new developments of digital sampling into another framework of creative reproduction: the breakbeat. A foundational aspect of hip-hop since its inception in the 1970s was the practice of taking the short drum break featured on many funk and soul records and looping (repeating) it, thus prolonging the energy of what was considered the catchiest part of a song. This creative repurposing of sound recordings contributed to a hip-hop sensibility that drew on characteristics of musical drive and repetition. As sampling technology became more affordable in the mid-1980s, hip-hop producers began digitally sequencing beats, piecing them together from different records. This new type of sampled breakbeat had the repetitive precision of a drum machine while still retaining the timbral crack and compression of funk drums on vinyl. From pioneers such as Marley Marl to golden-age masterworks by the Bomb Squad (with Public Enemy) and Prince Paul (with De La Soul), hip-hop producers wove sonic tapestries of sampled drums, instrumentals, singing, and spoken word. This collage structure became a fundamental aspect of hip-hop’s musical form and style.

From an aesthetic perspective, practices of hip-hop sampling have raised profound and enduring questions about the nature of musical composition and production. As Mark Katz has observed,

Too often discussions of sampling treat the practice simply as technological quotation. . . . However, sampling is most fundamentally an art of transformation. A sample changes the moment it is relocated. Any sound, placed into a new musical context, will take on some of the character of its new sonic environment. Every ‘Funky Drummer’ sample, however recognizable, leads a distinct life in its new home. . . . There is both art and craft in the chopping, looping, tweaking, and shuffling that so often accompany digital sampling. The sampled sounds are really only raw materials, waiting to be mined and refined.

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4 For more history on the development of the hip-hop breakbeat, see Schloss, Making Beats, 25–43; and Katz, Groove Music, 122–26.

5 Katz, Capturing Sound, 174–75.
Sampling has become a distinct form of creative practice. Its acts of reconfiguration take on meaning beyond the sounds and rhythms of the samples themselves. Katz shows, for example, how Public Enemy’s sampling of diverse sources from African American history and the news media evoked political and aesthetic ideals that helped shape and reinforce the impact of the music.6

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, these technological processes of sound production helped shape the burgeoning genre of hip-hop. When we consider these developments alongside those in alternative rock, several key parallels arise. As discussed in the previous chapter, alternative rock nurtured a media-centric approach to musical appreciation during these years. And both alternative rock and hip-hop broke into mainstream acceptance around the turn of the 1990s. This chapter, then, explores how alternative audiences nurtured and developed production myths around processes of hip-hop sampling. First, I examine interpretive frameworks toward sampling practices posited by rock critics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These frameworks—including notions of postmodern pastiche and illegal media appropriation—set a conceptual field upon which ideals of alternative authenticity would be navigated. Next, I consider how alternative music discourse developed a media-savvy appreciation of the creative processes of sample-based hip-hop production. I investigate the workings of these sensibilities in the music and visual representations of A Tribe Called Quest. Then, I discuss the appearance of “alternative rap,” a crossover sub-genre label that sought to reassess the role of sampling in hip-hop music and culture. After addressing some of the authenticity debates that accompanied the rise of this new genre, I consider the Roots—a hip-hop band that avoided samples and favored

6 Ibid., 160–65.
live instrumentation. The Roots aestheticized processes of sampling by enacting their sounds through live performance. Finally, I consider the rise of a new genre label in mid-decade, trip-hop, along with an artist (DJ Shadow) whose musical persona related closely to its discourse. Trip-hop took the production process and creative impulses of sampling and separated them from their traditional rap-based contexts, thus developing its aesthetic frameworks within and among vital discursive dynamics of race, gender, and artistic legitimacy.

All of this discussion points to the chapter’s central question: what did the sounds and practices of hip-hop sampling mean to alternative listeners in the 1990s? In a traditional rock band, the drumbeat had signified the visceral energy of a live musician pounding at the drum kit. The “boom-bap” of a hip-hop beat, however, came to signify something different: DJs searching through crates of obscure records for just the right sonic snippet; producers on turntables and samplers, meticulously piecing together the syncopated thump of a kick and sharp crack of a snare. In alternative culture, various production myths developed around the newly aestheticized beat-making processes of hip-hop DJs and producers. These frameworks of appreciation destabilized some of rock’s long-standing notions of performative authenticity. Moreover, the creative implications of sample-based music making drew upon hip-hop’s rich historical, cultural, and ethical foundations—discourses that adapted well to contemporaneous frameworks of alternative-culture appreciation. Ultimately, then, the developments discussed in this chapter demonstrate how production myths can develop among and between divergent genres, discourses, and demographics—transforming the broader meaning and significance of a musical practice.
Conceptions of Sampling During the Rise of Alternative

Discourses in and around sampling in the late 1980s set the stage for a 1990s alternative-culture reception of hip-hop sounds and practices. Among rock critics, the primary interpretive framework applied to practices of digital sampling in the late 1980s was one of postmodern collage. Whether in art music, college rock, dance, or hip-hop, critics tended to connect the creative recontextualization of sampling with avant-garde subversion. Then around the turn of the decade, legal ramifications came to the fore, bestowing air of creative transgression upon sample-based musical practice.

Sampling as Postmodern?

Drawing upon histories of musique concrete and found-sound experiments of art composers since mid-century, pop musicians and critics of the 1970s and ’80s tended to approach notions of sampling from the perspective of avant-garde expression. In the late 1970s, Cabaret Voltaire fed upon the anarchic creative energy of the punk movement to release music with cut-ups of pre-existing tape sounds; while the vocals from David Byrne and Brian Eno’s My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (1981) came exclusively from pre-recorded material. 1980s art-rock singers such as Kate Bush and Peter Gabriel took up sampling technologies in earnest, while more abstract experiments were undertaken by Trevor Horn and The Art of Noise. By the late 1980s, a more

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7 These mid-century composers included Pierre Schaffer, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Alvin Lucier—all of whom incorporated existing sonic materials into new contexts for their art-music composition.


overtly ideological brand of sampling practice had gained prominence in college radio circles. Bay Area band Negativland used themes of media piracy and manipulation to shape their recorded output and publicity.\(^{10}\) And Canadian composer John Oswald embarked on a veritable crusade of copyright infringement.\(^{11}\) Similar sensibilities can be seen among British electronic dance and pop artists around 1990. Pop Will Eat Itself openly referred to their sampling practices as “stealing,” while Jesus Jones described their musical style as a creative fusion: “A third of our music is dance music, whether that involves house or rap . . . A third of it is rock music, which involves an element of tradition, the standard pop approach . . . . The other third is completely different, maybe even an avant-garde approach to sampling, like making chainsaws play the melodies. That’s the mystery element.” Notice that the group places rap in the “dance” category, while the sampling practices fall into the more subversive sensibilities of avant-garde mystery.\(^{12}\)

Throughout all these artistic/activist music-sampling approaches, a sense of irreverent playfulness emphasized the artists’ open critique of copyright laws. Practices of reconfiguration,

\(^{10}\) Leading up to the release of their 1989 EP *Helter Stupid*, the group manufactured a media hoax asserting that their music had inspired a real-life teenage murderer. For the EP, they pieced together the sounds of news coverage surrounding the event, along with samples from the Beatles’s “Helter Skelter,” thus bringing to the fore the bizarre malleability of reality through media representation. See “The Negativland Story,” *Negativworldwidewebland*, accessed 10 June 2014, http://www.negativland.com/news/?page_id=277; Negativland, *Helter Stupid* LP (SST Records SST 252, 1989).

\(^{11}\) From 1987 to 1990, Oswald distributed LPs and CD compilations entitled *Plunderphonics*—consisting completely of pre-existing pop music material—free of charge to radio stations and libraries. Oswald openly flouted copyright laws in the name of free expression and anti-capitalist activism *Plunderphonic*, 69/96 CD, liner notes (Seeland/Fony Records, 2001).

recontextualization, and parody were woven into pointed sonic critiques of broader media-saturated musical cultures.

The music-critical discourse toward hip-hop sampling tended to evoke similar ideals of progressive creativity and artsy experimentation. Even as early as 1981, Ken Tucker’s *Rolling Stone* coverage of “The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel” described it as a “rap-as-art . . . masterpiece” that falls into the “avant-garde type” of compositional practice—”the Grandmaster plays funky Eno.”¹³ In 1987, Don Howland’s review of the Beastie Boys’ debut *Licensed to Ill* discussed the album’s connection to white avant-garde and industrial music’s affinity for media manipulation and destruction: “One of the real perplexities of the past few years has been whitey’s reluctance to pick up heavy on post-Run-D.M.C. hardcore rap . . . You’d think with its power beats and mutilating-records-on-turntables mode, hardcore rap would attract the artcore crowd if not the hardcore one.”¹⁴ In a 1987 *Spin* feature, Harry Allen described the pioneers of hip-hop as “the real purveyors of New Music: the most radical disruptors of American pop musical form since the beginnings of so-called jazz.” Allen noted the “forced, culture-jarring juxtaposition” of this art form, stemming from “the complications of hip-hop’s postmodernity.” He placed creative sound reproduction as a building block of a subversive African American tradition: “Not bad for two turntables, a cross-fader, and a mic, huh?”¹⁵

By 1989, a critical focus on the postmodern aspects of sample-based hip-hop had become commonplace. John Leland’s work in *Spin* in the late 1980s addressed hip-hop in terms of anti-

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establishment deconstruction.\(^ {16}\) In his “Singles” column, for example, he related the fractured, non-linearity of hip-hop structure to altered consciousness and listener engagement. When hip-hop DJs would juxtapose bits of music simultaneously over long periods of time, “it’s up to the listener to put the pieces together. . . . It is difficult to listen to the music passively.”\(^ {17}\) Pop critics at the *New York Times* forwarded a similar postmodern interpretation. In 1990, Jon Pareles declared that rap “moves to television’s beat,” with its backing tracks consisting of “mix-and-match collages that treat the history of recorded music as a scrapheap of usable rubble.” For Peter Watrous, also at the *Times*, “Hip-hop has become a repository for nearly all recorded information. The form is capable of absorbing almost anything.”\(^ {18}\)

By the end of the 1980s, then, the music press had endowed the creative practices of hip-hop sampling with an air of postmodern legitimacy. But more recently, scholars have questioned the suitability of postmodern aesthetics to hip-hop beat production. Joseph Schloss has argued in his 2004 ethnography of 1990s hip-hop producers that, rather than a postmodern emphasis on juxtaposition and fragmentation, hip-hop producers tend to focus on unity among sampled elements. “To say that hip-hop is about fragmentation because it is composed of samples is akin to saying that a brick wall is about fragmentation because it is composed of individual bricks.”\(^ {19}\) Schloss’s assertion can be bolstered by statements from hip-hop musicians themselves: when addressing the role of sampled fragments in their tracks, aesthetic pragmatism seems to have reigned. In 1988, Leland asked Chuck D of Public Enemy of the role of noise in his patchwork

\(^{16}\) In his “Antihero” column that we considered in Chapter Two, he described of hip-hop as being both a product of and antidote to the emptiness of postmodern semiotic nullification. Leland, “Antihero,” 81.


\(^{19}\) Schloss, *Making Beats*, 65.
tracks. He responded, “When I originally made it, I wanted some shit where, when a car passed my house, I know that’s my song. It grew into a political thing, but I’m telling you the basis.”

In a recent YouTube discussion about his 1980s production work, Marley Marl explained a similar role for sampled noise in M.C. Shan’s “The Bridge”: “I decided that this track needed to be very noisy. I wanted this track to be heard blocks and blocks down the block, before it got to you. For that noise . . . I just went into my brother’s records, and found one of the records that they used to play to get the crowd moving.”

So, for these seminal artists of golden-age hip-hop, the role of sampling and noise had less to do with postmodern juxtaposition, and more to do with the aesthetic needs of the music within a particular community and urban cultural space. And, based on the discourse of DJs and producers, even if we were to relate the sampling of hip-hop DJs and producers to broader art-world developments, one could argue that the practice adheres more closely to modernism. As Mark Katz has shown, many hip-hop DJs consider their work in terms of innovation, competition, and “taking it to the next level” of musical practice. In this perspective, hip-hop sampling seeks to build from the past, enacting a paradigm of modernist progress rather than one of postmodern historical break.

Nevertheless, regardless of its applicability within the self-identified hip-hop community, the idea of postmodern pastiche was a significant factor in the reception and significance of hip-hop sampling among broader audiences. For an interested listener around 1990 who opened up Spin, The New York Times, Rolling Stone, or The Village Voice, one of the primary reasons for

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23 Katz, Groove Music, 85, 251–52.
hip-hop’s legitimation—a genre that was finally having regular hits on the *Billboard* charts—dealt directly with the technological processes of its production. Sample-based production was presented as an avant-garde, postmodern practice that allowed for jarring discontinuities and multiplicities of meaning.24

*Sonic Theft?*

At the turn of the 1990s, questions surrounding the legality of digital sampling began to take center stage in the discourse, effectively reframing questions of cultural legitimation. In hip-hop production throughout the 1980s, attitudes toward the legality of sampling had been rather lax. Commercial sales had remained limited for most hip-hop records, so producers either didn’t worry about copyright, paid a relatively small fee up front, or settled with a rights-holder only after a rap record became a hit. Two lawsuits changed these attitudes and practices. In 1989, Howard Kaylan and Mark Volman of the Turtles filed a 1.7 million dollar lawsuit against De La Soul for using an unauthorized Turtles loop during an intermission section on the album *3 Feet High and Rising*. Although the case was settled out of court, the sheer monetary value of the suit drew considerable publicity and caused labels to reconsider the financial liabilities of sampling. Then in 1991, Gilbert O’Sullivan filed a suit against Biz Markie that had an even more chilling effect. Markie had recorded a parody of O’Sullivan’s “Alone Again” for his new album *I Need a Haircut*, and tried to defend it in court as an instance of musical borrowing. The judge, who had no background in hip-hop or R&B music, ruled Markie’s track plagiarism, beginning his ruling by citing the biblical commandment, “Thou shalt not steal.” An injunction stopped all sales and

24 The troubling racial implications of these developments—a group of mostly white critics legitimating an African American creative practice by comparing it to a mostly-white postmodern art tradition—will be addressed at greater length later in this chapter.
distribution of existing copies of the album, striking a severe economic blow to Markie and his label.

These two cases spurred considerable public discussion over the legitimacy of sampling. In terms of ethics, many hip-hop artists and observers noted that musicians had always been appropriating musical material. After all, the argument went, how many white rock artists had lifted, note-for-note, the famous Chuck Berry “Maybelline” guitar riff? But when black artists used a new technology to draw upon existing material as part of a set of creative musical practices, the older generation of (mostly white) musicians and judges clamped down with established structures of moral and legal authority.\(^{25}\) For a critic such as J.D. Considine, on the other hand, sampling could be acceptable as an artistic practice only if it fit into a framework of postmodern creative renewal. He argued that when the Bomb Squad brought together multiple layers of small samples to create a new eclectic texture, the practice could be justified; but that when De La Soul ripped a four-bar drum beat and chord progression to rap over, it was lazy and uncreative.\(^{26}\)

Sample-Based Creativity in early-1990s Alternative Discourse

By 1992, just as the idea of “alternative” became a viable and influential aspect of mainstream popular music culture, the discourse surrounding sampling had thus already followed several

\(^{25}\) This type of argument is found in Robert Christgau, “Tale of Two Weirdos,” *Village Voice*, 21 January 1992, 79. For another example, see KRS-One’s comments *Rolling Stone* in 1990: “Elvis Presley made millions ‘sampling’ Little Richard. The whole Chess Records catalog has been sampled by most of the heavy-metal and rock artists you hear today. No one’s really talking about their sampling, because they sampled actual human beings, and the problem we have in America is that people place human life below actual material items. They’d rather bring people to court for sampling music and not look at the ethics of sampling another artist’s style.” Quoted in Jeffrey Ressner, “Sampling Amok?” *Rolling Stone*, 14 June 1990, 105.

avenues of criticism and commentary. At this pivotal moment for alternative music—amid questions of corporate appropriation and anxiety over the artistic costs of commercial success—practices of hip-hop sampling could fit well into the alternative-culture narrative. Many alternative critics and commentators framed sample-based hip-hop artists as forward-looking, independent agents fighting against the big-business forces who sought to quash their subversive creative practice. Mark Kemp, for example, penned a piece for Option in 1992 that lamented the “death of sampling,” describing the situation as “a highly charged issue of ownership, often pitting young, black, inner-city experimental hip-hop musicians against older, baby-boomer pop stars of the ’60s and ’70s.” He noted the Turtles’ lawsuit against De La Soul as a “symbolically perfect case” in which the plaintiff and the defendant respectively “represented the past and future of pop music.” In arguing for the legitimacy of sampling in Option—a bastion of alternative rock ideology—Kemp invoked the history of sample-based musical practices, discussing many of the avant-garde and electronic musicians I have discussed above. But the new legal climate, he argued, “stands to put a damper on such experimentation.” He quoted hip-hop producers Hank Shocklee and Daddy-O in order to explain legitimate approaches to sampling.27 For Kemp, the ethical and legal issues around sampling were crucial to the aesthetics of progressive musical creativity—and hip-hop sampling stood on the front lines of that ideological battle.

Alt-rock pioneer Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth took a similar stance in 1992 in a published conversation with Mike D of the Beastie Boys. Describing an experience of seeing Gilbert O’Sullivan on an airplane (this being just after the court injunction against Biz Markie), Moore said he wished he could have “beat the shit out of him and say, ‘This is for the Biz.’”

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the ideological fight over creative freedom, Moore stood clearly on the side of hip-hop: “I mean, it was such a great opportunity. Gilbert O’Sullivan created much damage, man, much damage.”  

Beyond questions of ethics and legality, alternative discourse at this time also sought to come to terms with aesthetic aspects of hip-hop production. In the same Option piece as Moore’s O’Sullivan anecdote, Mike D described a Schooly D single as “a great punk rock record. Right down to the cover. He just drew his own fucking cover, it was on his own label.” And Moore lauded Schooly-D’s lo-fi characteristics: “He did it on a little fucking drum machine with lots of reverb. It totally jammed.” The same year in 1992, Spin writer Bob Mack interviewed Biz Markie. Although the interview appeared only months after the court injunction, Mack’s piece neither fixated on the ethical quandaries of sampling nor wallowed in the injustice of the courtroom battle. Instead, it simply celebrated breakbeat sampling as the cultural foundation of hip-hop. Markie gave Mack “a lesson in the art of finding ‘beats,’” with Mack explaining to Spin readers in very basic terms what, exactly, constitutes a hip-hop beat. Mack evocatively described Markie as an artist who would search far and wide for unusual beat sources: Godzilla movies, cartoons, video games, television shows, and old records from Marva Whitney to Foghat. Markie provided a list of his favorite breakbeats in order to, in the words of Mack, help the reader “get started source-locating—gathering sampling factoids to impress your friends.”

This piece by Mack hints at a fundamental shift in the coverage of hip-hop sampling—particularly in regards the nature of the audience. Kemp, Leland, and Pareles had lauded sampling as something of a vernacular postmodernism, extending the iconoclastic and liberatory


29 Ibid., 79.

practices of the avant-garde; while Considine focused on questions of its creative legitimacy. In contrast, Mack wrote his *Spin* piece for the younger, burgeoning alternative rock audience—an audience only superficially familiar with hip-hop and not at all concerned with rock orthodoxy. For this generation, hip-hop sampling could be defined not necessarily as avant-garde, but simply *cool*. Mack’s piece helped *Spin* readers understand sampling practices in relation to a group of “real,” small-scale hip-hop artists keeping the tradition alive in spite of its mainstreaming by the likes of Vanilla Ice or M.C. Hammer. As hip-hop had become a mainstream, corporate affair—in which the idea of stadium-filling rap superstars was no longer a novel concept—the sampling practices of a down-to-earth artist like Biz Markie could take on a new type of cult appeal.

A *Tribe Called Quest and a Mythologizing of Hip-Hop Mediation*

As sample-based aesthetics found a new place in alternative rock discourse, hip-hop artists readily found audiences among its listeners. One of the most enduring of these groups was *A Tribe Called Quest*. Particularly in their releases in the first half of the decade—*Low End Theory* (1991) and *Midnight Marauders* (1993)—*A Tribe Called Quest* made the mediated processes of sample-based creativity and production an overt aspect of their musical sensibility.

Perhaps the group’s most striking representation (and mythologization) of musical production process is found in the video for the second single from *Low End Theory*, “Scenario.”³¹ The video begins by showing a computer interface with animated visuals for each aspect of the mix—a vinyl record on a turntable, a kick, a snare, stereo levels, and a wave-

form—thus giving a stylized visual representation of the digital technology used for the music’s production. Beyond this, the video is full of visual gags playing on the malleability of digital representation. Digital menus appear on screen throughout, showing hypothetical options for audio-visual manipulations. When a video of Phife Dawg (one of the MCs) appears in the first verse, a computer pop-up window appears. The menu label switches from “Phife” to “Clone,” and immediately two other versions of Phife walk into the frame to take over the next line of rapping. In the verse by Q-Tip (the other MC), an on-screen menu appears with the title “Look.” It scrolls through the list of options, manipulating the rapper’s video image in real time, from “Blown” (high contrast) to “Ill” (the picture turned into a negative) to “Vid” (pixelated).

Throughout the video, the group constantly plays upon the absurd possibilities of digital representation by using on-screen computer menus to instantly change clothes, hairstyles, and artificial backgrounds. By presenting the video as a digitally-mediated—and manipulated—series of video clips, it overtly signals to the viewer that A Tribe Called Quest was peddling a constructed image. It foregrounds the bizarre types of image-based decisions that musicians had to make in disseminating their music.

At the same time, the “Scenario” video emphasizes the real-life interpersonal connections that A Tribe Called Quest maintained in hip-hop culture. Not only does it incorporate rap verses from members of Leaders of the New School (Charlie Brown, Dinco D, and Busta Rhymes), but it also features numerous other members of the hip-hop community such as Spike Lee, Redman, Fab Five Freddy, and De La Soul. The nature of their real-life hip-hop community is highlighted further by the vibrant nature of the video clips being used. Some consist of the artists and friends in a film studio (with a digitally-altered background), jumping around in almost a mosh-pit-like frenzy in front of the camera. Other clips show concert footage of venues packed with
enthusiastic audiences. Among these dynamic scenes, the video’s fragmentary, unfinished nature and its foregrounded digital interface gives the viewer a sense of realness and spontaneity in portraying the group’s communal playfulness and creativity.

A Tribe Called Quest’s third album, *Midnight Marauders* (1993), continued along similar lines: sonically and thematically emphasizing the dual importance of mediation and community to the group’s musical expression.\(^2\) The album begins with a “tour guide”—a parody of a vintage instructional video, complete with an easy listening jazz record behind its soothing, yet haltingly robotic, female voice. This introductory track sets up a sense of consciously mediated, self-referential parody. The tour guide announces that she will be “enhancing your cassette and CDs with certain facts that you may find beneficial.” With tongue-in-cheek precision, she relates facts and information that are of interest to the record producers: the average “bounce meter” will be 95 beats per minute. She goes on to explain that the album’s title relates directly to the practices of sampling: “The word ‘maraud’ means to loot. In this case, we maraud for ears.” As a clever framing device, this “tour guide” for *Midnight Marauders* recalls the storybook and game-show formats of earlier records by De La Soul.\(^3\) But while the De La Soul albums play upon aspects of television culture or listeners’ experience, *Midnight Marauders* mythologizes the practices of hip-hop beat-making itself.

Furthermore, *Midnight Marauders* goes beyond explaining the practices and concerns of hip-hop production; it *sounds out* these practices and mythologies. First, the easy listening jazz

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\(^3\) De La Soul’s first two albums, *3 Feet High and Rising* (Tommy Boy TBCD 1019, 1989) and *De La Soul Is Dead* (Tommy Boy TBCD 1029, 1991)—both foundational albums in the development in hip-hop—used skits as framing devices for the tracks of the album. The former set up a mock game-show format, with group members answering absurd questions to studio applause between tracks. The latter used a mock children’s audio book format, complete with school-child narratives and audible bell tones to signify page-turns.
background begins with the sound of someone slowing down and releasing the vinyl under the needle. The tour guide’s voice is overtly mediated as well: the timbre suggests that it is being played through a consumer-grade speaker and the unnatural pauses and jerky cadence recall vintage instructional records, the kind that DJs and producers often find in the second-hand stores where they search for vinyl. In all this, they foreground a sense of obsolete media and vintage vinyl within the hi-fi medium of a commercial album, thus aestheticizing the processes of hip-hop sampling that permeate the record.

In this mythologization of their production process, A Tribe Called Quest signified the processes of sampling to an audience beyond their immediate community of practicing hip-hop producers. The press had already given sampling a rather diverse set of associations: whether in Harry Allen’s description of hip-hop as the last “transformation” in musical creativity, John Leland’s and Jon Pareles’s postmodern reconfigurations of meaning and perception, or Bob Mack’s depiction of Biz Markie’s fun-loving eclecticism in his unadulterated search for the perfect beat. A Tribe Called Quest built upon the myths and associations around hip-hop creativity by making the mediated processes of sampling an aesthetic tool with which to frame musical meaning.

Viewed from a wider cultural perspective, when alternative-oriented listeners put the practices of sampling at the center of their hip-hop aesthetic, it allowed them to sidestep some of the thorny issues surrounding hip-hop appreciation. Since the late 1980s, gangsta rap had gained considerable commercial clout in the industry—and had consequently sparked a veritable moral panic. Even prominent members in Black culture, such as Spike Lee, had very real concerns with
the genre’s violent, misogynistic predilections.\textsuperscript{34} The production myth of sample-based creativity thus provided alternative audiences an alternative to gangsta rap’s focus on the social and racial conditions of urban experience. Furthermore, the practices of sample-based production maintained a creative genealogy leading directly back to hip-hop’s foundational communities, and thus to the African American identity of the genre.\textsuperscript{35} In these modes of aesthetic appreciation, audiences negotiated broader tensions of racial and technological authenticity in hip-hop expression. The contested implications of technology and racial identity would soon further play out in the discourse surrounding a newly dubbed hybrid sub-genre: alternative rap.

**Alternative Rap as an Alternative to Sampling: The Roots**

With the phenomenal popularity of alternative rock in the early 1990s came a commercial impetus for genre crossover, and the market responded. In May 1992, *Billboard* published a front-page story by R&B editor Janine McAdams entitled “Alternative Rap Beating Its Own Path Within the Genre.” She portrayed alternative rappers as a “new breed” of hip-hop artists that questioned rap’s identity of “DJ-manipulated R&B beats, sampling, and aggressive urban-oriented lyrics.”\textsuperscript{36} This use of the “alternative” moniker was certainly timely from a commercial standpoint, but what aspects of alternative culture were being tagged on these hip-hop artists? Just as the exact definition of alternative rock had always remained somewhat slippery, this new

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\textsuperscript{34} Further discussion of these larger tensions can be found in Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 145–51; and Rose, *Black Noise*, 99–145.

\textsuperscript{35} The ideal of sample-based production as an intrinsically African American practice—though remaining available to any and all who want to learn it—is a powerful one. Joseph Schloss, in setting up his in-depth ethnographic investigation of sample-based aesthetics among hip-hop producers, makes the provocative statement that “All producers—regardless of race—make African American hip-hop. . . . The rules of hip-hop are African American, but one need not be African American to understand or follow them.” Schloss, *Making Beats*, 9–10.

\textsuperscript{36} McAdams, “Alternative Rap,” 1.
application of the term to hip-hop signified various (and at times contradictory) trends and attitudes.

One aspect of “alternative” was its sense of oppositionality—signifying rap artists who were diverging from the commercial mainstream.\(^{37}\) And this opposition included an embrace of new musical approaches, especially those of live musical performance instead of sampling. To demonstrate these trends, McAdams cited the live instrumentation employed by Arrested Development, Basehead, and the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, along with the rap-rock fusions of Public Enemy (who had collaborated with Anthrax), the Beastie Boys (who had played their own instruments on many of the tracks of *Check Your Head*) and Ice-T (with his new metal band, Body Count). A second implication of “alternative” was as a practical framework for marketing and promotion. McAdams explained: “The cross-cultural acceptance of alternative bands by the college-age audience is encouraging to rap’s new breed.” Alternative rap drew upon these “street-oriented tactics” by focusing on “clubs, video, airplay at college and alternative radio, press, and local appearances.”\(^{38}\) From a strictly business perspective, then, the alternative rap category was a way to utilize existing commercial networks to promote new types of product. A third implication of the genre was alternative music’s historical association with the progressive, intellectual curiosity of college rock. In this, the new alternative rap sensibility could claim the political aspirations and Black Power ideologies of Public Enemy, as well as the clever wordplay and thoughtful sonic juxtapositions of De La Soul.\(^{39}\) In July of 1992, Peter

\(^{37}\) The mainstream here referred both to the recent success of gangsta rap and to pop rap artists such as MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice.


\(^{39}\) This type of impulse can be seen in the anti-capitalist wordplay of the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy.
Watrous of the *New York Times* summed up alternative rap’s intellectual aspirations by describing it as “a bit more literary and less self-promoting; violence isn’t one of the issues.”

The over-arching promise of alternative rap was that hip-hop artists could productively engage with the frameworks of authenticity put forth by alternative culture: anti-commercialism, historical-minded intellectualism, and a sense of small-scale liveness in performance. Many critics and commentators saw this as a way for rap to transcend some of the negative characteristics that had served as barriers to its wider appeal: its violence, misogyny, and crass urban audacity. And, for some, these barriers included hip-hop’s “unmusical” dependence on sampling; alternative rap acts could demonstrate a more conventionally acceptable form of musical expression by embracing live instrumentation.

But there was something in this new “alternative rap” designation that left many in the hip-hop community uneasy. One issue was the top-down image of the term. It came into usage after being posited by editors and critics at *Billboard* and the *New York Times*, and almost no hip-hop artist self-identified with the genre. The alternative ideal—which itself invoked a sense of community that transcended commercial interests—could thus easily come across as a shrewd corporate marketing scheme meant to cash in on the new cachet of underground music scenes.

Interwoven in all of this is the much larger question of hip-hop’s racial identification. “Alternative” as a genre was, by and large, coded white. To embrace an alternative aesthetic could thus come off as betraying the roots and foundations of hip-hop culture, as it had developed in primarily African American and Latino urban communities. Issues of race, culture,

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41 A cover story in the *Wall Street Journal* lauded the genre as a new “positive turn” in rap that had won over a new audience, saying that “Arrested Development sings as much as it raps, and its favorite ‘F’ word is ‘freedom.’” Meg Cox, “Rap Music is Taking a Positive Turn and Winning Fans,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 October 1992.
and commerce appear prominently in one of the more pointed published critiques of alternative rap during this period: Danyel Smith’s 1994 Vibe feature on Arrested Development.\(^{42}\) Beyond her barbs against the group’s singer—portraying him as a controlling, calculating showman whose only real priority was the financial bottom line—Smith suggested that the group’s overall stance undermined the solidarity of African American cultural expression. With all their popularity in the mainstream press, Arrested Development’s message, she said, began to “smell of smugness.” They “made a myth out of country life, tapping into the reservoir of spiritual power in the segregated South. . . . Predictably, many white folks adored them. . . . The press and fair weather fans reduced his reasoned, poetic lines to catchy choruses . . . and images of joyful black folks singing and dancing.” Smith then quoted a line from their hit single “Tennessee”: “I ask you Lord why you enlightened me, without the enlightenment of all my folks,” noting that “lines like that are bound to make folks uncomfortable.”\(^{43}\)

Alternative rap ran squarely into long-contentious issues of race and cultural representation in hip-hop more generally—with Chuck D’s famous description of rap as the “black CNN,” or Tricia Rose’s 1993 discussion of rap’s stories as “articulat[ing] the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture.”\(^{44}\) But, as many critics and commentators had publicly discussed, rap’s audiences had shifted in the early 1990s to include a large constituency of suburban white listeners.\(^{45}\) This dynamic, Rose noted, allowed rap to act as

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\(^{42}\) Questlove later described her piece as “the most scathing story I’ve ever seen . . . . She just exposed it all . . . any cynical questions you ever had about left-leaning or alternative music.” He joked that, when it came to alternative hip-hop in the mid-1990s, “she just killed it all.” Quoted in Charles Aaron, “The Spin Interview: ?uestlove,” Spin, June 2008, 84–85.


\(^{44}\) Rose, Black Noise, 3.

\(^{45}\) The actual racial demographic makeup of hip-hop consumers during this period has been a matter of some debate. Bakari Kitwana addresses this issue in his book, Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop. Around the end of 1991, many
a “form of testimony,” articulating, by its very presence in the cultural sphere, “the struggle over access to public space, community resources, and the interpretation of black expression.” In this African American “testimony,” the practices and significance of sample-based production remained foundational. But the appearance of alternative rap, with its de-emphasizing of digital sampling, implicitly suggested that European art-music aesthetics of live music performance and virtuosity were more legitimate creative outlets than the African-American based traditions of sampled hip-hop beats and loops. Or for others, alternative rap could displace sample-based production with a sense of organic, live performance. Basehead, for example, nurtured a sense of small-scale, performative liveness similar to that of lo-fi; and Arrested Development nurtured a sense of spectacular celebration of an imagined rural past.

With these contestations of authenticity, alternative rap had, by mid-decade, fizzled as a commercially- and culturally-viable music genre. Of the highly touted groups from its first wave around 1992—Basehead, Digable Planets, Arrested Development, or Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy—none ultimately acquired significant cultural or commercial staying power. Consider a 1996 Vibe cover story on the new up-and-coming voice in hip-hop, the Fugees. It posed the question: “Are Haiti’s funky ambassadors the real future of hip-hop? Or are they this year’s Arrested Development?”

cultural critics claimed white suburban listeners were a major part of hip-hop’s listenership, and certain analyses of Soundscan data seem to back up that assertion. But others have pointed out inconsistencies in the data. Although the actual numbers remain in dispute, it remains clear that white listeners constituted at least a significant portion of hip-hop listenership in the early 1990s. Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 81–106.

46 Rose, *Black Noise*, 5, 144–45. Furthermore, in speaking to a Black audience, hip-hop had engaged in traditions of racial identification and communal critique that drew on historical structures of Black discourse in the United States—what Mark Anthony Neal has described as the “the Black Public Sphere”—in order to come to terms with the social realities of the postindustrial urban plight. According to Neal, however, this process worked simultaneously as a commodification of the black underclass. Neal, *What the Music Said*, 131, 135–51.

With the mid-decade rise of a new hip-hop band called the Roots—who bore the “alternative rap” tag due to their use of live instrumentation rather than sampling—we see a group navigating well-worn but complicated ideological terrain in order to carve out a place of cultural and musical legitimacy. They ultimately accomplished this by emphasizing the historical aesthetic and technological practices of hip-hop—especially the sample-based production ideals that had come, in the minds of many, to define the sound and sensibility of the genre.

*Placing the Roots*

The two founding members of the Roots, rapper Black Thought (Tariq Trotter) and drummer Questlove (Ahmir Thompson) met while attending the Philadelphia School for the Performing Arts in the late 1980s. Among their classmates were numerous musicians who later would find world renown for their performances: jazz virtuoso bassist Christian McBride, jazz organist Joey DiFrancesco, and members of what would become the enormously popular R&B group Boyz II Men. From their inception, then, the Roots were nurtured in an environment that prized skill and musicality in live performance. Furthermore, Questlove was literally reared to be a performer, touring since childhood as the drummer for his father’s doo-wop revival band, Lee Andrews and the Hearts. When the Roots began gigging in the early 1990s, they quickly developed a solid regional reputation for their live act—carried by Questlove’s powerful hip-hop beats on drums and Black Thought’s intricate lines laced with internal rhyme and rhythmic complexity. After procuring a bass player, a keyboard player, an additional MC, and a beat-box specialist, the group signed a record deal with Geffen at the end of 1993. Their music found almost

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immediate critical acclaim—both with *Do You Want More?!?!??!* (1994) and *Illadelphia Halflife* (1996)—while their sales followed more of a slow-build trajectory up to their commercial breakthrough in 1999 with *Things Fall Apart.*

The timing of the Roots’ major-label record deal in 1993 is significant. Following on the heels of Arrested Development’s popularity, Geffen was specifically looking to sign—in the later words of the Roots’ manager Richard Nichols—“a rap act that played their own instruments and didn’t talk about guns.”

Flush with cash from the success of Nirvana, Aerosmith, and Guns N’ Roses, Geffen was looking to move into alternative rap in order to build new audiences; the Roots fit an alternative-rap niche of artistically adventurous hip-hoppers with talent and urban credibility.

Early on, members of the Roots emphasized the group’s claim to musical legitimacy through their skill and talent in traditional performance. As Malik B., the second MC of the group, explained to *Billboard* in 1993, “We’re all classically trained musicians. Each member has a solid history with music. It’s all second nature to us.”

Music critic Bobby Hill of the *Washington Post* used this sentiment as a springboard to decry rap’s current state of affairs: “After two decades of existence, rap is in dire need of some substance. Enter the Roots, a Philadelphia-based ensemble that emphasizes live performance. The Roots . . . just may be what’s new: rap that’s more about substance than style.” He bolstered this position with a quote from bassist Leonard Hubbard giving a “kids-these-days” lament on current music-making:

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49 The album received a Grammy nomination for Best Rap Album, and its lead single “You Got Me” won the Grammy for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group.


“When I came up, there were thousands of live bands . . . So pop stars were people that actually played musical instruments . . . {[Now,]} a whole generation is coming up where their pop stars don’t even play musical instruments at all. . . So we are trying to bring that back to the people.” This emphasis on live performance enabled critics to apply various images of authenticity to the group, from being “100 percent organic and homegrown,” to mirroring the “changing moods and tempos” of “mini-jazz suites,” to presenting a fresh sound for “fans bored by stale ‘gangsta’ posturing and half-baked beats.” Rob Runett of the Washington Times evoked these notions of performative vitality and organicism when he wrote that Questlove “smashes out drum beats with an emotional fervor that makes one wonder why anyone ever used a cold, inhuman drum machine.”

As time went on, however, this emphasis on live performance prompted some to question the group’s connection to the traditions of hip-hop. As Dan DeLuca wrote in 1996, “Because the Roots . . . are hip-hop practitioners who play their own instruments and rarely employ prerecorded samples, the album also saddled the band with an ‘alternative’ rap tag. In the hip-hop world, ‘alternative’ means ‘soft,’ and potential record buyers who heard that the Roots came with a ‘jazz/hip-hop’ approach might have doubted the band’s command of hip-hop fundamentals.” If the group’s sole claim to originality was its ability to play hip-hop music


54 Runett, “Roots’ Popularity Keeps Growing.”

with live instruments, it would seem to lodge an implicit critique: that hip-hop should be played with instruments, if only it weren’t for a lack of ability among its practitioners.

The Roots, however, counteracted this notion of performance-based legitimacy by showing an overt respect and homage to the traditions of hip-hop. They went to great lengths to demonstrate their affinity with the foundational aesthetics of hip-hop breakbeats. Black Thought said that their live instrumentation arose more from necessity than from any ideological position: “We didn’t have any turntables or actual deejaying equipment. From the beginning it was with live instrumentation. Our intention was to actually get a contract as an orthodox rap group, two turntables and a microphone. But because we started early on with the live instrumentation, and as we grew closer together, the live instrumentation was what we grew to know more.”56 Indeed, Dan DeLuca’s May 1995 feature in the Philadelphia Inquirer began with an announcement. “The Roots want the world to know this: They are not a jazz/hip-hop group.” He quoted Black Thought: “There’s no slash in it. We’re just a hip-hop group. People who think they don’t like hip-hop like our music, so they think it must not be hip-hop. But that’s not the case.”57 One way they bolstered this type of credibility was through a regular “Hip-Hop 101” segment in their live shows, in which they recreated seminal tracks from the history of rap. Furthermore, in interviews, group members deferred to foundational figures in rap history. As Questlove told Charles Aaron from Spin in 1995: “We’ve never felt any pressure to confine ourselves to what purists say we should be. All the rule books were thrown out when Public Enemy did It Takes a

56 Hill, “A Grass-Roots Movement.”
Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back anyway. Right then, we had total artistic license to do whatever we wanted in hip-hop.”

With this ideal of upholding a cultural heritage, Questlove became essential to the group’s public image, combining a firm commitment to the history of hip-hop with a healthy desire to expand its possibilities. Questlove established himself as something of a hip-hop scholar—brimming with facts and perspectives that enabled him to elucidate and navigate his own role in the progression of hip-hop as a cultural and musical art form. Mike Rubin of *Spin* described Questlove as “a passionate and obsessive hip-hop historian . . . . A voracious record collector with an encyclopedic knowledge of pop music in general and rap in specific.”

Questlove placed the Roots historically in relation to the state of the art and the failures of other alternative rap acts: “Hip-hop is disposable—it’s not treated as art. Only rarely do they let you reinvent yourself. Look at Digable Planets; they got stuck in a jazz hole. Arrested Development got stuck in Afro-centrism.”

This line of argument spilled over into critics’ reception of the music. Selwyn Seyfu Hinds’s review of *Illadelph Halflife* called the album “an artistic progression, an added confirmation of the Roots’ place at hip-hop’s vanguard.”

As drummer, Questlove essentially took upon himself the role that vintage records had played for other hip-hop groups. Mike Rubin, in an extended *Spin* feature on the group, gave context for Questlove’s role as human sampler: “When the 25-volume *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* series came out in the late ’80s to provide budding DJs with their rhythmic DNA,

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[Questlove] Thompson was already fluent with most of the material.” Questlove accentuated the point, saying “When I was young, every kid wanted to be [rock drummers] Neil Peart or Stewart Copeland; meanwhile, I wanted to be an SP1200.” Indeed, even as early as their Geffen debut, Charles Aaron described Questlove as a de-facto replacement for sampled vinyl, saying that the drummer would “be in greater demand than an undiscovered Meters sample.”

Performing the Aesthetics of Sampling

Ultimately, the Roots aestheticized the practices of hip-hop sampling by embodying and performing them. But because they were departing from hip-hop production norms, they worked even harder to establish their connection to the history and creative practices of hip-hop. These trends can be heard in their first two Geffen albums Do You Want More?!!!??! and Illadelph Halflife. Each develops musical approaches that engage with the public discourse surrounding questions of hip-hop sampling, musical performance, and historical authenticity.

Do You Want More?!!!??! opens by aurally emphasizing live performance—beginning with a recording excerpted from a club show, complete with audience chatter in the background. Black Thought announces, over a background vamp on drums and Rhodes piano, “You are all about to witness some organic hip-hop jazz. 100% groove, and you don’t stop. It’s from the Roots; Philadelphia-based rap group.” The track then moves directly into an ensemble

62 Rubin, “No Turntables and a Microphone,” 74–75. In the Times in 1995, Neil Straus had elaborated on a similar idea when describing their live show: “[Questlove] thumped on his trap set as if he had learned to play by listening to a drum machine. He beat out simple, precise rhythms that were amplified to sound tinny and machine-produced. The rapper Rahzel (The Godfather of Noyze) played the part of a live D.J. by using his voice to imitate the sounds of turntables whirling backward, beats being sped up to 78 r.p.m. and needles picking up fuzz on vinyl albums.” Neil Strauss, “A Performance Trip Through Hip-Hop History,” New York Times, 28 January 1995.


64 The Roots, Do You Want More?!!!??! (DGC GED-24708, 1994); The Roots, Illadelph Halflife (DCG DGCD-24972, 1996).
performance: with upright string bass followed by drums, keyboard, and a call-and-response vocal chant.

Throughout the album, the band plays upon ambiguities between liveness and mediation. Leading into the track “Distortion to Static,” for example, the drums fade out and we hear a scratchy voice enter as if through an intercom mic: “All right. Yeah. Now, bring in the static. Now check this out.” A repetitive loop of vinyl pops and cracks fade in. The group thus verbally points out to the listener the intentionality—and artificiality—of the sonic imperfections and static. The drums then enter with a thick, heavy kick and a contrasting crack of a snare: the mythologized “boom bap” that forms the sonic backbone of sample-based hip-hop.65 The sonic elements of “Distortion to Static” thus simulate the characteristics of digitally sampled vinyl: mechanically-reproduced loops of static, and the contrasting drum timbres of individually-manipulated components of a breakbeat. In the CD liner notes for the track, the band highlights this aural ambiguity, listing Questlove as “the human SP-1200 (no sample!).”

On other tracks, the Roots emulate various timbral effects of sampling, but using acoustic instruments not traditionally found in hip-hop. The title track has repetitive riffs on bagpipe, and “Datskat” features background kazoos. In the latter, the kazoo sound begins covertly, blended behind the chorus in a way that sounds more like a distorted studio effect. At the end of the track, the instruments gradually fade out, leaving the lone kazoo exposed for what it is, and ending with an awkward drop-off in pitch—as if the kazoo player didn’t notice the cue that the song had ended. Other sonic aspects of Do You Want More?!!??!! emulate non-digital effects, like an

65 The “boom bap” phrase is an important one in hip-hop during this period, being used as short-hand to describe the visceral effects of the hip-hop sampled breakbeat. Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest using the phrase prominently in his rhymes (heard, as “boom bip,” in “Push It Along” from People’s Instinctive Travels and the Paths of Rhythm [1990] and “We Can Get Down” from Midnight Marauders). Legendary old-school rapper KRS-One even titled his 1993 album Return of the Boom Bap.
instrumentally performed re-creation of a record skip at the end of “Mellow My Man,” and a vocal emulation of record-scratching on the title track. The liner notes emphasize these aural effects with a running gag of bogus sample credits: “‘Mellow My Man’ contains a portion of ‘Brad Had Better Have Our Advance On Publishing Cash Or Else!!!’ (Trotter/Thompson/Smart Adbud-Basit/Hubbard/Storch).”

In this record, then, the Roots play on the practices of sampling through their own references and emulation, going to great lengths to ground their music in the values, sensibilities, and practices of sample-based hip-hop. From the perspective of process-oriented aesthetics, we could think of the Roots as completing the process of mythologizing the creative practices of sampling and turntablism. Their drums, vocals, and horn riffs are being performed by live musicians, so there is no practical cause for the sounds of hip-hop mediation—the crunch of an 8-bit sampler, the pitch distortions of a turntable, or the strict repetition of a drum loop. The effects are purely aesthetic. A significant part of this album, then, is for the listener to imagine the musicians working within the aesthetic frameworks of a sample-based tradition, but using live instruments and voices. It evokes a second-order production myth, in that the tracks foreground not the process of digital sampling, but the evocation of that process. This is a mode of signification, not with a technological causality, but with a conceptual and aesthetic one.66

The Roots’ label A& R representative, Wendy Goldstein, drew attention to their performance of sampled aesthetics in an early feature in Billboard. “We’re hoping that people will catch on that this is a live album. Some people may not even realize the difference. I

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66 One way to conceptualize this effect is through Peirce’s concept of rhematic signification, as noted in Chapter One. The sign is meant to signify, not an object in actual existence, but rather the idea of the object. In these live performances of sample-sounding music, the Roots play upon listeners’ conceptions of how sampling functions as an aesthetic and musical framework, rather than as an actual technological process.
imagine people will discover that the music is live from the press and video.” Questlove elaborated by stating that “all the sample credits in the liner notes are a joke . . . because we do all the samples live. I will play the drums as if I were playing a sample.” Listeners were meant to recognize the creativity and spontaneity of the musicians—drawing on the hip-hop tradition in non-traditional ways as part of an exploratory process of performance and recording.

The group’s follow-up album, *Illadelph Halflife* released in September 1996, backed away even more from the group’s previous emphasis on live jazz and further emphasized the tight, stripped-down sound of contemporary sample-based hip-hop. When the first beat of the album enters in “Respond/React,” we don’t hear a “100% organic” groove, but the heavy, compressed sound of a processed kick and the short, high crack of a sampled snare. The liner notes for this track credit Questlove, not as the drummer, but as being “on the trigger”—suggesting his place triggering beats through a sampler. Questlove had thus circled back into the literal practices of sample-based production, while retaining a performance aesthetic by hand-triggering the beats. Another overt connection to sampling in “Respond/React” is the piano line: its repeating high-pitched chromatic figure that recreates a sample used by A Tribe Called Quest in the chorus of “Electric Relaxation” on *Midnight Marauders*.

Two tracks from *Illadelph Halflife*, however, actually do use pre-existing samples in a traditional hip-hop fashion. “Concerto of the Desperado” builds upon a four-bar orchestral loop taken from Acker Bilk’s 1965 pop orchestration of “From Russia With Love.” The Roots use the sample as a jumping-off point for the track’s musical construction. Questlove supplies a live

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67 Atwood, “Roots Seek Roots of Hip-Hop/Jazz.”

68 This track also appears in the lyrics of the Roots’s track “Lazy Afternoon” from *Do You Want More?!?!?!?* Each verse of “Lazy Afternoon” ends with the spoken refrain: “Electric Relaxation from A Tribe Called Quest, with a boom, tokin’ smokin’, coolin’ out, as I parlay in my room, ’cause it’s a lazy afternoon.”
drumbeat behind the loop, slightly altering his patterns in relation to the flow of the song.\textsuperscript{69} Instrumental elements blend with the sampled loop: Leonard Hubbard’s cello melody flows seamlessly into the clarinet note on the last beat of the sample, while guest vocalist Amel Larrieux contributes an operatic-styled melody over the sampled strings.

The following track, “Clones,” credits a sample from Quincy Jones’s 1973 rendition of “Summer in the City.” The Roots use this sample more sparingly than that of the previous track, taking two bars of what had been an interlude and looping it twice between each of the verses of their new track. The sample consists of strings, a female vocal melody, drums, bass, organ, and electric piano. If we turn briefly to a more traditionally musicological approach to analysis, we can address how the harmonic, motivic, rhythmic, and timbral elements of “Clones” are built upon the musical elements of the sample; the Roots dissect, unpack, and expand upon the musical materials of the sample. First, consider harmonic implications: the sample, in its original context of “Summer in the City,” [1:58–2:03] articulates the song’s tonic chord of B minor moving to a G-phrygian VI chord. The Roots take this tonic-to-submediant motion and make it the harmonic anchor of a repetitive, linear chromaticism in “Clones”—its verses are based on a repetitive bass motion (in piano and timpani) alternating between G-sharp to A-sharp. The piano plays a repeated E-natural over the A-sharp leading tone, creating a stalled tritone that eventually resolves to the sampled B minor. Next, consider motivic construction: the repeated piano line of “Clones,” with a dotted-eighth rhythm followed by repeated eighth notes, echoes the syncopated electric piano riff of the sample. Then there are the rhythmic elements: Questlove’s syncopated kick in “Clones” emulates that of the sampled drums’ off-beat accents, while not strictly

\textsuperscript{69} Wayne Marshall analyzes Questlove’s performative alterations in this track in his article, “Giving up Hip-Hop’s Firstborn: A Quest for the Real after the Death of Sampling,” \textit{Callaloo} 29, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 883–86.
mimicking the rhythm by rote. And finally, timbre: the piano riff of “Clones” is heard in repetitive pairs, with the first iteration having the higher frequencies filtered out to give a warped, detached sound to the piano, and the second iteration sounding cleanly with the full frequency spectrum. This processing places the timbre of the piano in dialogue with the peculiar sound of the “Summer in the City” sample, whose low bit-rate creates an almost underwater ambiance and warble.

In “Clones,” then, we can hear the Roots engaging as live-performing musicians with the timbre, rhythms, motives, and harmonic content of the sampled source. In this way, the Roots were no longer only emulating and riffing off of the mythologized processes of hip-hop sampling. They were taking their performative practices and mixing them on multiple levels with the characteristics of the samples themselves. Having placed themselves solidly within the mythologized traditions of sample-based production, the Roots were now able to perform a nuanced back-and-forth with the sensibilities, practices, and sonic signatures of hip-hop sampling.

The music video for “Clones” further engages with hip-hop’s mythologized creative history, with the group placing themselves solidly within the tradition while likewise portraying themselves as in control of their own mediated image. First of all, the video minimizes any jazz affiliation of live performance by placing the group on a street corner without musical instruments. Instead, the MCs sing into a mic while surrounded by the rest of the crew on the street and sidewalk. Questlove and Jamal (the keyboard player) appear on screen with handheld camcorders, filming the rappers’ verses. The video feed cuts between full-color external shots

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and the black-and-white, shaky clips of self-filmed video. This portrays the Roots as simply a group of down-to-earth guys on the street—documenting themselves as they spread their hip-hop message.

The video also explicitly depicts the Roots’ cultural proximity to the history of hip-hop, using overlaid text to set up a narrative. Its on-screen introduction reads: “The City of Hip-Hop Culture has Four Avenues.” Each verse in the video then features one of these “avenues”—b-boying, MCing, graffiti, and DJing—by including appearances from important figures in the respective spheres of hip-hop culture. The Arsonists crew represents and demonstrates b-boying (along with “b-boy advocate” Bobbito Garcia); the Cold Crush Brothers represent the history of MCing; artist Phase 2 appears as a “founding father” of the graffiti movement; and legendary Philadelphia-based DJs Tat Money, Cash Money, and Cosmic Kev give a sidewalk demonstration of the turntables. Members of the Roots greet these figures as colleagues, showing both their respect for the cultural history of hip-hop and their social place within it.

Overall, in their public persona, their video imagery, and the sound of their records, the Roots counterbalanced the unorthodox liveness of their performance with an emphasis on the aesthetics and history of sample-based hip-hop creativity. In so doing, they ultimately reified the production myth of hip-hop sampling. The pops, hisses, sharp cuts, compression, and distortions of sampled vinyl were, for a live band such as the Roots, obviously not required from a practical standpoint. But these sounds had moved from being technological by-products to aesthetic necessities in a particular brand of hip-hop expression. Moreover, these sounds didn’t just signify a desirable musical style or trend; they took on meaning through the history, culture, social atmosphere, and creative practices of a broader hip-hop tradition.
DJ Shadow and Trip-Hop

DJ Shadow, a beat-maker and producer from Davis, California, showed a hip-hop purism of another kind—one that aligned well with alternative notions of anti-commercial creative autonomy while remaining in an overtly sample-based creative context. Shadow became an important musical and cultural figure by isolating the practices of sampling from other characteristic features of contemporary rap. In his debut album, *Endtroducing*....., he crafted large-scale sonic tapestries, woven completely from pre-existing sampled material. He centered his art on the breakbeat itself as a compositional unit—as something to be molded, shaped, and manipulated over time to create coherent sonic architectures and narrative.71 At the same time, DJ Shadow went to great lengths to emphasize the material processes of beat creation—of finding obscure LPs, manipulating records on turntables, and digitally looping and sequencing samples. He discursively framed these processes as constituting the very essence of hip-hop, placing himself within a self-consciously historical tradition of musical production, innovation, and expression.

To consider Shadow’s place, we also need to recognize related genre developments in alternative music and hip-hop. Of particular importance is the rise of a new genre category around 1995: trip-hop. The following consideration of the discourse and reception of trip-hop reveals new transformations in the meaning and production myth of hip-hop sampling. Trip-hop articulated a sample-based aesthetic stemming from a cultural sphere that was culturally and geographically removed from the urban, African-American contexts of hip-hop’s development.

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71 We can note here that many of Shadow’s samples weren’t “breakbeats,” per se—in that they were not solo samples coming from the drum break of a track. Here, I use the term breakbeat in the sense laid out by Joseph Schloss, where for producers, “the term ‘break’ refers to any segments of music (usually four measures or less) that could be sampled and repeated. . . . In contemporary terms, then, a break is any expanse of music that is thought of as a break by a producer.” Schloss, *Making Beats*, 36.
As such, it allowed listeners and fans to reassess the significance of race, gender, and geography in hip-hop-derived production practices. Furthermore, its atmospheric, abstract sensibilities encouraged critics and fans to place sampling in an art-based paradigm. These trends give crucial context to DJ Shadow and his portrayal of sample-based creativity. DJ Shadow’s work in and around Entroducing..... illustrates a particular re-evaluation of sample-based practice. It posits something more akin to a high-art narrative: of purist practitioners working in a self-consciously historical tradition of aesthetic abstraction and non-commercial autonomy.

A New Genre from Across the Atlantic

In 1995, the new genre label of trip-hop moved from the British pop press into American circles of music discourse. The genre had arisen primarily around a group of electronic dance musicians in Bristol in the late 1980s before settling into a more relaxed, atmospheric, sample-heavy sound in the 1990s. Massive Attack was the first of this scene to have widespread success, with their 1991 album Blue Lines. In the following years, James Lavelle founded a record label in London (Mo’ Wax Records) that focused on drawn-out, experimental uses of hip-hop sampling. (It was in reference to Mo’ Wax that the term “trip-hop” was coined.\(^2\)) In 1995, the music made a bigger splash in the industry with albums by two artists who had initially been affiliated with Massive Attack: Portishead’s Dummy and Tricky’s Maxinquaye became standard-bearers for the new genre.

\(^2\) The term “trip-hop” is generally acknowledged to have been coined by Andy Pemberton in a 1994 issue of the British magazine MixMag, having been used to describe DJ Shadow’s Mo’ Wax 12-inch single, “In/Flux.” See Andy Pemberton, “Trip Hop,” MixMag, June 1994; republished at MixMag.com, 17 November 2011, http://www.mixmag.net/words/from-the-archives/classic-features/june-1994---trip-hop.
The sonic calling card of trip-hop was its use of hip-hop sampling within a predominantly ambient, atmospheric sensibility. It tended toward gradually shifting soundscapes that, as Simon Reynolds wrote in the *New York Times*, were “intended for headphone-listening, not parties; for reverie, not revelry.” Critics often related these soundscapes to the spatial and visual aspects of cinema. Portishead even released a 10-minute art film in lieu of a music video in order to promote their album debut.74

Critics often described these spatial sensibilities as marking a step forward in hip-hop aesthetics—moving beyond what they saw as the stale stereotypes of American rap. Larry Kanter wrote that Portishead “has taken the language of hip-hop to create a sound that’s world’s away from the genre’s birthplace on the streets of urban America.” Reynolds wrote that trip-hop’s style “is contemplative and low-key, as opposed to the bombastic self-projection of most American rappers.” In framing it this way, critics made latent (and sometimes overt) value judgments about what constituted the fundamental character of hip-hop: the aesthetic act of sampling was principal, while the genre’s racial, biographical, and cultural identities were considered superficial and fleeting. Consider Reynolds’s assertion that trip-hop [emphasis mine] “retains the musical essence of hip-hop—fundamental rhythms, samples, turntables-manipulation effects like scratching—but takes even further the studio wizardry of pioneering American producers like Hank Shocklee and Prince Paul.” Reynolds then wondered aloud whether this new brand of hip-hop production would resonate with an American audience engrossed in what he

75 Ibid.
76 Reynolds, “Another City, Another New Sound.”
saw as the banal identity politics of such rappers as Tupac Shakur, Biggie Smalls, and Snoop Dogg: “Trip-hop artists could be the vanguard of a new British pop invasion of the United States, but they could equally run aground on the hostile bemusement of an American hip-hop audience that appears to grow ever fonder of formula.”

Other critics framed the genre more in terms of postmodern or art-world associations. Tricky, according to Ann Powers in a 1995 issue of *Spin*, was “cultivating a strain of music that not only goes beyond any musical genre you can think of, but derails the process of even making such distinctions.” She wrote that Tricky “takes hip-hop’s collage techniques to the next step—he smears his fragments with bits of his own psychic blood.” Speaking to *Rolling Stone*, Lavelle spoke of Mo’ Wax’s cultural aspirations: “There is a huge interest and demand by people for music with a cultural and more experimental element.”

In *Option*, Marisa Fox drew upon similar modes of legitimation, noting that DJ Krush’s 1995 album *Krush* consisted of “postmodern soundscapes” that sounded like “crossing John Cage with A Tribe Called Quest.”

At times, this sentiment of aesthetic progress drew overtly upon conceptions of racial identity and expression. This appears, for example, in notions of a suburbanification of hip-hop aesthetic practices: in an *Option* feature, one public-radio DJ described Portishead as “trip-hop shoe-gazing. It’s this white, suburban hip-hop that has a jazzy street vibe.” With Tricky, on the other hand, who identified as a mixed-race British man, trip-hop inhabited a space of alternative...

77 Ibid.


81 Fox, “Trip-Hop,” 62. Reynolds alludes to a bourgeois, white-culture sentiment when describing Portishead’s appeal among American alternative rock fans, it being “currently popular background music in cafes and boutiques.” Reynolds, “Another City, Another Sound.”
racial possibilities. In *Vibe*, Ekow Eshun described Tricky as offering “new possibilities for black creative expression.” Rather than taking his troubled past and churning it into “the self-aggrandizing melodrama of hardcore hip-hop,” Tricky “transforms himself into both the villain and victim of his own troubled reality.” Tricky embraced this sense of racial unsettling by describing himself as a “mongrel,” noting that “they always say the mongrel is the cleverest animal in the litter.” DJ Krush, one of the principal artists of Mo’ Wax, was from Japan, thus further widening the cultural, racial, and geographical breadth of trip-hop standard-bearers. With the new genre of trip-hop, then, the creative practices of sampling took on a more racially fluid identity.

For Tricky, this racial eclecticism extended to a fluidity of gendered expressions, as well. Powers noted that Tricky “likes to put on a dress and cruise for girls.” And Tricky himself questioned hip-hop’s frameworks of masculinity: “I’ve seen my granny have a fistfight in the middle of the street. The question I’d ask a man is, can you act macho in a dress? If you can survive in a dress, you’re a tough guy.” He later said, “I love hip-hop so much, but sometimes I listen to all the tough-boy stuff and I think, well, maybe the only way I could do hip-hop is to be like that, but I’m not like that.” His reception among American rappers and hip-hop artists was generally positive, but issues of gender identification did not go without notice. RZA, producer of the Wu-Tang Clan, praised Tricky’s musical sensibilities by saying that his beats were “slow and dark, but fat. It’s like confusion that’s organized.” But he added a caveat: “Only thing that

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84 Ibid.
85 Norris, “Brother from Another Planet,” 159.
fuck him up over here is how he be dressing. People won’t take it as art, they’ll think he’s on some homo drag-queen shit.” In contrast to RZA’s narrow heteronormativity, Chuck D described Tricky’s iconoclastic identity in a positive light, as fostering a “relentless not-give-a-fuck attitude.”

Trip-hop thus allowed somewhat greater flexibility of gender dynamics in sample-based music: Tricky, Massive Attack, and Portishead all had mixed-gender line-ups and prominently featured women vocalists. At the same time, however, it appears the technological control and experimentation remained primarily among the men. The narrative in the discourse was typically that the male producer (Tricky or, in the case of Portishead, Geoff Barrow) would craft a sprawling soundscape, then give it to the female singer (Martina Topley Bird with Tricky, and Beth Gibbons of Portishead) who would furnish a melody and turn it into a “song.” For the DJ-centric sensibilities at Mo’ Wax, the producers and rappers were entirely male, whether with artists such as DJ Shadow and DJ Krush, or in James Lavelle’s own collaborative project, U.N.K.L.E. As Eric Weisbard noted more broadly at the end of 1996, the role of women musicians in the industry remained limited: “Women now own the category of confessional singer/songwriter . . . . Men, on the other hand . . . use sonic dislocations as a personal cloak.” He noted a persistent trend with nascent genres like trip-hop and DJ music: “Infiltrate one boy’s club, up springs another.” This preponderance of male DJs and producers in hip-hop has been explored in greater depth by Mark Katz and Joseph Schloss, showing that deeply-ingrained

86 Ibid., 159.
gender roles among cultural conceptions of technology, experimentation, and creative genius have tended to inculcate themselves into even fledgling new musical genres and traditions.  

In its emphasis on technological experimentation, trip-hop also drew upon a lo-fi sense of DIY empowerment through a narrative of stripped-down, bedroom-style production. This comes up prominently in the coverage of Portishead’s Geoff Barrow and a Mo’ Wax-affiliated organist named Money Mark. Indeed, it seems that the most sure-fire way for a white, male producer to achieve artistic legitimacy was through a peculiar combination of obsessive aesthetic devotion and self-effacing amateurism. In Larry Kanter’s coverage in Option, for example, Barrow was just “like suburban kids everywhere,” taking “refuge in music, particularly American hip-hop. . . . His interest became an obsession when he discovered he could mix samples and beats in his own bedroom. He spent hours there, with a stack of LPs, a sampler, and a couple of cassette decks, making tapes and dreaming of escape.” Money Mark was a tinkering American keyboardist who regularly collaborated with the California production duo the Dust Brothers (who had worked with the Beastie Boys and Beck). Peter Margasak’s coverage of Mark in Rolling Stone in 1996 focused on the carefree vitality of his “low-key funk.” He described Money Mark as a funk/hip-hop equivalent to lo-fi rocker Lou Barlow—quoting the keyboardist’s open admission: “I’m in my element when I’m in the bedroom.”


89 Kanter, “Portishead,” 55. A similar narrative appeared in Vibe’s coverage of Portishead: “I was what you would call a bedroom DJ. I would be in my room, scratching records of Run-D.M.C., MC Shan, or Roxanne Shanté. . . . It was nothing special, and my equipment was cheap. It wasn’t a club thing, just a little something for me and my friends.” Michael A. Gonzales, “Next: Portishead, A British Brew of Hip Hop and Alternative Blues,” Vibe, June/July 1996, 50.

This association with lo-fi amateurism gave a sense of quirky realness in the domesticity of white artists such as Barrow and Money Mark. But with Tricky, we see a different take on the role of DIY technological engagement. In a 1996 *Spin* feature, Charles Aaron described the importance of technological accessibility for Tricky, but did so within the framework of the artist’s rough, unstable upbringing. “Hip-hop opened up his head . . . . It gave him an artistic belief that the world was his for the taking, whether he was a proper musician or not. It positively asserted his blackness, a factor white Brit rave aesthetes always underplay.”⁹¹ So for Aaron, the musical possibilities of amateur creative sampling didn’t lead Tricky to a sense of lo-fi realism, but to a cultural power through the malleability of black musical expression.

Overall, in the coverage of trip-hop artists such as Tricky, Portishead, Money Mark, and DJ Krush, we see the ways that gender, race, and technology interact in the development of trip-hop’s production myth. These developments combined to frame trip-hop as a new, forward-looking genre in the contested cultural fields of hip-hop and alternative music. The genre allowed a new venue through which alternative sensibilities could appreciate the creative practices of digital sampling. As most of these artists came from England—even DJ Shadow’s early releases were sold in the United States as imports from the U.K.—many American fans saw trip-hop as a space where the established commercial and cultural trends in American hip-hop could be exploded and upended. By the time DJ Shadow’s *Endtroducing.....* appeared at the end of 1996, the situation was ripe for a new American artist who might embody these shifting ideals in a large-scale work of sample-based sonic art.

Placing DJ Shadow

The coverage of DJ Shadow in many ways followed in line with trip-hop discourse. The public backstory emphasized his bedroom origins, with an obsessive amateur devotion to hip-hop culture, vintage records, and the creative possibilities of consumer-grade equipment. Erik Davis in *Spin* wrote of how Shadow initially built his reputation “using cheap JVC turntables and a four track.” Jason Fine in *Option* described Shadow in terms of a stripped-down technological purism: rather than using the state-of-the art Macintosh computer setup, he stuck with a simple mixing board, turntable, sampler, and DAT machine. As Shadow explained, “A lot of people start buying new equipment when they run out of creative ideas about how to use their old stuff. I prefer to keep things simple.” Fine went on to explain how this affected the music’s broader aesthetic: “That lo-fi aesthetic infuses all of DJ Shadow’s work . . . . His material is driven by gritty, hard-edged beats and a knack for weaving myriad fractured bits of sound into seamless new sonic wholes.” This lo-fi economy of resources emphasized Shadow’s commitment to his craft and his ingenuity in bringing incongruous material into musical continuity.

DJ Shadow’s coverage, even more than is seen in the general trip-hop discourse, tended to emphasize the high-art, compositional sensibilities of his music. In *Rolling Stone*, Peter Margasak described his 1993 single “In/Flux” as “a veritable symphony of samples and scratches lovingly sculpted over a gritty profusion of breakbeats . . . ‘In/Flux’ transformed the building

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92 We should note that DJ Shadow himself eschewed the “trip-hop” label, considering himself simply a hip-hop artist. Regardless, Shadow and Mo’ Wax were firmly associated in the discourse with trip-hop and its aesthetic sensibilities. See Erik Davis, “The Alternative to Alternative: Beats Generation,” *Spin* 12, no. 1 (April 1996): 72, 74.

93 Ibid., 74.

blocks of hip-hop into something astonishingly ambitious.”95 Note the progress narrative here. For Margasak, it seems that the Bomb Squad and Marley Marl weren’t necessarily landmarks to be revered on their own merit, but “building blocks” toward something more “symphonic” and “ambitious.” Ken Micallef of Musician magazine introduced Shadow as being “as musically astute as many ‘traditional’ musicians”—quoting the DJ’s own explanation of using metrical irregularity as a compositional device.”96 Larry Flick of Billboard described DJ Shadow’s work in terms of an artistic progression of the genre—as being “the future of hip-hop. It ain’t butch jock-holding, bang-bang gangsta ranting or even posturing unity chants; this is simple, virtually wordless fare that lets insinuating hooks and tight grooves do the talking.”97 Taken together, these comments harbor troubling racial implications: with the work of a white college-educated artist being given a high-art veneer, and African-Americans’ work being framed as primitive building blocks. Of course, there were critics who placed the African-American history of hip-hop as its own artistic legacy to be revered. Josh Kun’s Rolling Stone piece described Shadow as a “dedicated student” of the “artistry of pioneering DJs like Red Alert, Grand Wizard Theodore, and Afrika Bambaataa.” He quoted Shadow describing these foundational figures as “mentors from a distance,” and thus demonstrating his enduring debt to the African-American cultural roots of the genre.98 Sia Michel of Spin noted Shadow’s reliance on African-American creative


96 “Talent: DJ Shadow,” Musician, February 1997, 13. Sia Michel likewise emphasized DJ Shadow’s art-music timelessness; his was an ‘urban classical music’ that was “orchestrally welding the music of the adademy to the beat of the streets.” Sia Michel, “Platter du Jour: DJ Shadow, Endtroducing……,” Spin, January 1997, 81.


history while invoking a hip-hop ideology of universal inclusion: “Shadow’s approach is closer to Afrika Bambaataa: an infatuation with pure sound.”

Of course, we should note that the academic/high art implications of DJ Shadow’s persona do align relatively well with his actual background in a college-town scene. (As early as 1992, The Source had given coverage to DJ Shadow and UC-Davis’s vibrant college hip-hop scene in their “Unsigned Hype” section.) Furthermore, many critics rightfully found parallels to indie and alternative rock’s frameworks of authenticity. In Spin in April 1996, Erik Davis introduced Shadow in terms of his cultural and geographic proximity with indie rock: “a 24-year-old white kid who grew up in the same California Central Valley that gave us Pavement.” Shadow didn’t align with the pragmatic ideal of “getting paid” that was then common in hip-hop; he overtly espoused an anti-commercial sensibility. He described money as a corrupting force behind the music, making it stale, lifeless, and formulaic: “People who look at rap as a game and a hustle are not doing service to the culture. You’re not contributing anything to the genre by putting out a record that sounds just like somebody else. All you’re doing is weighing it down.” Shadow maintained the anti-rock star sensibility of indie rock, noting that one of the problems in hip-hop is that it caters to “the flashy types of rappers” that are easier to market.

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99 Michel, “Platter du Jour.” This ideal of universality and inclusion was itself an important and recurring aspect of DJ Shadow’s definition of hip-hop: “Hip-hop, to me, is not a genre of music, but the mind-state in which genres no longer exist.” Fine, “Revolutions Per Minute,” 60. See also Katz, Groove Music, 95.


101 The question of commercialism in hip-hop is discussed in a 1992 Option piece about Eric B. and Rakim. The duo is portrayed as having a no-nonsense attitude toward the business: “They don’t give a shit about much, if anything, except making their music and getting paid. The duo grew up on a lot of music history, and it’s reflected in their grooves.” Amy Linden, “Eric B. & Rakim: For Money or Art’s Sake?” Option 46 (September/October 1992): 46. For another example of economic pragmatism in hip-hop of this period, note the business-savvy sentiments of the Wu-Tang Clan in the radio interview featured as the track “Intermission” from Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers) (RCA 07863-66336-2, 1993).

Even his “Shadow” moniker, he said, “represented the fact that I prefer to be in the background.” DJ Shadow connected his aversion to flashy public image to his aesthetic purism, saying that “the music should speak for itself, and the person that’s doing the music should just be some kind of unseen figure.” These attitudes allowed him to reframe questions of biographical authenticity and urban experience—some of the very questions with which alternative rap had recently struggled. Shadow claimed a legitimacy that stemmed simply from an obsessive love of the music—a type of music that should be strong enough to stand on its own. He even described his suburban background as a positive element, allowing a more direct focus on the music itself. If you lived in the city, he said, “hip-hop would define you. You wouldn’t define your own spin on hip-hop.” Overall, by de-emphasizing urban experience and identity-based authenticity and focusing more on anti-commercial creative autonomy, DJ Shadow nurtured a following among a particular segment of the alternative audience: critically-minded listeners who sought to take hip-hop seriously as an aesthetically progressive tradition.

103 Fine, “Revolutions Per Minute,” 73.


105 With this, DJ Shadow also deflected attention away from questions of his whiteness. He addressed the race issue openly in the Option piece by Jason Fine by describing his upbringing as a white suburban kid immersing himself in hip-hop culture: “I think other people would look at me and my friend and it was almost as if they were trying to transplant their own insecurities about other cultures onto me. I was never raised to trip off things in that way, and my attitude was always like, ‘Well, I’m sorry to make you uncomfortable. But that’s your problem, not mine.’” Fine, “Revolutions Per Minute,” 70. In this way, Shadow contrasted with the situation of, for example, 3rd Bass, who in the early 1990s were constantly asked to address their whiteness. They did so regularly by denigrating Vanilla Ice (even hiring Henry Rollins to parody him in their music video for “Pop Goes the Weasel”) and touting their New York urban credibility. See Jon Shecter, “Soul in the Hole,” Source, August 1991, 32–35.

Visual and Aural Representations of a Production Myth in Endtroducing.....

But DJ Shadow did more than present the hip-hop album as a self-contained work of art. Perhaps more than any other major hip-hop producer, he aestheticized the processes of its creation. By surrounding his own persona in a shroud of quasi-mystery, Shadow fostered perceptions of himself as a reclusive artist working in subaltern spaces of unhindered possibility. Although this image was an important part of his press coverage, the sensibility is perhaps most clearly conveyed in the liner notes for Endtroducing..... and in the music video for its lead single, “Midnight in a Perfect World.”^107

The cover of Endtroducing..... consists of a photo of two men in a record store, flipping through an aisle of LPs. One of the men (the rapper Lyrics Born) is seen in a blur, with his head turning toward the camera just as the photo was being taken. It gives the sense that this was a quick snapshot of crate-digging beat-heads in their natural habitat—an everyday occurrence intruded upon by the photographer. Inside the liner notes, we find a large photo-spread: a mess of vintage record sleeves, 7-inch singles, sketches, and studio-session lead sheets scattered across a floor or table top. Among the items are ironically-placed bits of consumer culture: a green plastic G.I. Joe action figure, a polaroid photo of dilapidated cardboard boxes full of records, and a cartoon sticker of Cornelius from Planet of the Apes. One partially-visible lead sheet has a photocopied grid with the names of different samples written into each box: “Beat . . . Piano . . . All Pianos! . . . Aaoh chorus, flutes . . . scratch . . . singing . . . scratch.” The sheet’s header lists studio personnel; each space is filled with confident handwriting, “Client: DJ Shadow. Artist: DJ Shadow. Producer: DJ Shadow. Engineer: DJ Shadow.” Thus, in the visual design of the album’s

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cover and liner notes, Shadow set the scene for his music by laying out a mythologized creative setting: that of a self-sufficient artist/producer/engineer, working among a community of vinyl-obsessed DJs, painstakingly yet playfully piecing together a sonic masterpiece from pop-culture ephemera.

The text in the liner notes of *Endtroducing.....* more explicitly lays out DJ Shadow’s process and philosophy. He baldly states his rationale: “This album reflects a lifetime of vinyl culture.” Then, placing himself within a historical procession of DJ “innovators,” Shadow gives a categorized list of his musical forebears: “pioneers” (including the likes of Kool Herc, Grand Wizard Theodore, Flash, Bambaataa, D.ST, and others), “groundwork” (with adventurous sampling innovators such as Steinski, Marley Marl, Trevor Horn and Art of Noise), more recent “masters” (including Prince Paul, Dust Brothers, and Large Professor), and a host of others. He finishes his historical homage by giving “all respect due to James Brown and his disciples for inventing modern music.” If the visual aspects of the liner notes placed the album in its immediate creative setting, the text gave the music a venerable intellectual history.

The music video for the album’s lead single, “Midnight in a Perfect World,” takes this creative and intellectual mythology one step further, overtly depicting the technological and material processes of the music’s production. It begins with a video clip of a needle lifting off the groove of a turntable, showing the material apparatus of the opening vocal sample. As the sample fades out, the camera pans across the bedroom to DJ Shadow stepping away from his Akai MPC sampler, removing his headphones—as a sort of “it is finished” gesture—just as the track’s background music fades in. The remainder of the video incorporates looped visuals as analogues to the audio samples (showing the hands of an organist, a cellist, or a singer in a studio). Between the recurring video samples, in grainy black-and-white film-stock, DJ Shadow
walks somberly down a sidewalk, wearing baggy pants, a white t-shirt, and baseball cap, with a vintage portable child’s turntable hanging loosely from one hand. He enters a record shop and walks past the two men who were featured on the album cover, thus recreating the album’s record-collecting cover photo. Shadow walks past the aisles of LPs, through a dark threshold, and downstairs into the cluttered basement of the shop—where unkempt piles of records are strewn among dilapidated cardboard boxes. After flipping through the dusty piles, DJ Shadow returns upstairs. He barges with the suspender-clad elderly shop owner to find a reasonable price for the spoils of his basement expedition. The video then cuts to Shadow back in his bedroom—itself cluttered with gratuitous stacks of old records—cueing LPs through his headphones and feeding them into the sampler. At the end of the scene, the camera meanders among the piles of records and ends with the sampler in the center of the frame—fixating on the Akai MPC as a central piece of the production myth. The final vocal sample, chopped and repeated with an electronic stutter, finally blurs out the imagined timeframe of DJ Shadow’s solitary sonic explorations: “Now approaching midnight.”

As a means of music analysis, it may seem strange to give a play-by-play description of this music video and the visual layout of the album’s liner notes. But these details emphasize the amount of time, effort, and forethought DJ Shadow put into representing and aestheticizing his creative processes of digital sampling. His was “a lifetime of vinyl culture,” and he felt it essential that listeners understand and reimagine the modes and circumstances of musical creation that went into the album.

This elaborately-woven production myth encourages a particular type of listening experience for Endtroducing..... It takes into account communities of DJs obsessively scouring a used record store, a canonized history of creative vinyl manipulators, and the exclusivity of being
able to find obscure records that had been lost to the dustbins of history. From this perspective, the new-age dreaminess of the album’s harp, organ, vocal samples, and hypnotic drums come to signify something more than just the atmospheric sonic patchworks of trip-hop. Aesthetic value is placed on the act of finding the sources and the ability to put them together in a meaningful way. It is an album that rewards close repeated listening—requiring concerted effort to hear past the veneer of its sprawling soundscapes. As Jason Fine wrote in his *Rolling Stone* review, “the album is built on funky rhythms that never sound like they’ve been cut and pasted together. In fact, it’s not until you listen closely that a more subtle web of aural imagery—’70s TV-show dialogue, traffic reports, chanting monks—emerges from beneath the surface, like sounds coming from the apartment door.”¹⁰⁸ For other critics, Shadow’s mythologization invited an attitude akin to reverence. According to Fred Mills of *Magnet*, “The gatefold sleeve depicts the well-stocked bins of a used record store on the outside, a tabletop overflowing with album sleeves and 45s on the inside. . . . I can’t begin to dissect the complexity of his riffs; when in the presence of genius, keep your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open.”¹⁰⁹ The music and myth invited the listener to recreate Shadow’s sonic treasure hunt, and to relish the hidden concordances among forgotten snippets of sound.

Furthermore, the intentionality implicit in this production myth allows for particular modes of aural signification. Consider the track “Why Hip-Hop Sucks in ’96.” DJ Shadow samples a simple synthesizer line—in what sounds like a parody of the immensely popular G-funk style of rap production. To answer the query of the track’s title, Shadow doesn’t mince


words. A cartoonish enthusiasm comes across in the track’s brief vocal line: “It’s all about the money.” Other uses of sampling and sequencing in *Endtroducing*... served as multi-layered commentary on the state of music production. As musicologist Michael D’Errico notes in his analysis of “Napalm/Scatter Brain,” DJ Shadow made a parody of prepackaged drum beats, then layered it with complex, mechanical polyrhythms as a critique of machine-dependent trends in electronic beat-making. Shadow extends these polyrhythms, however, into an ear-pounding climax. The texture then gradually recedes into the ephemeral stillness of the following track, “What Does Your Soul Look Like.” Shadow’s structural narratives thus play upon technological and cultural aspects of sample-based production, while working them into large-scale musical developments.

Furthermore, DJ Shadow portrays ideals of hip-hop’s stylistic eclecticism in the music of the record itself—incorporating sounds and textures that traditionally had not been prominent in the hip-hop. We hear the shimmer of new age piano chords (in “Building Steam with a Grain of Salt”), docile harp arpeggios and orchestral bells (in “Stem/Long Stem”), and the slow build of trance-like synth repetition (in “What Does Your Soul Look Like (Part 1).” In other tracks, he pays homage to traditional sonic elements of hip-hop. Consider the spoken-word collage of “Best Foot Forward” and the hard-hitting DJ-battle-esque chop-up of “The Number Song.” Both

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110 DJ Shadow has explained more recently that this track had nothing to do with Dr. Dre—who was the most prominent representative of the G-funk style—and that that he always held Dre’s 1993 album *The Chronic* in the highest regard. (Shadow noted this specifically in an unpublished interview with Mark Katz.) But regardless, Dr. Dre was the one with whom “Why Hip-Hop Sucks in ’96” was associated in the contemporary discourse. For example, Sia Michel, in her *Spin* review of the album, referenced Dre’s most popular single when giving her take on Shadow’s answer to the track’s query, giving readers a “hint: it’s a g-thang.” Michel, “Platter Du Jour,” 81.

hearken back to the shouts, chants, scratches, boasting, and wordplay of old school hip-hop.\textsuperscript{112} Shadow further emphasized this with his choice of beats throughout the record—sets of chunky drum loops, emphasizing the heavy downbeat and funky syncopation that act as sonic signatures of hip-hop production and culture.

DJ Shadow’s production myth evoked particular images of community, history, DIY ingenuity, and creative genius. By incorporating these settings in an aesthetically intentional way, Shadow posited an ideological purism as constituting the essence of hip-hop creativity. In this, he de-emphasized many long-standing issues of hip-hop identity—questions of urban experience, racial identification, and implicit political activism—instead carving out a cultural space for sample-based abstraction and aesthetic self-sufficiency.

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By considering how the sounds and practices of hip-hop sampling took on meaning among alternative discourse, this chapter has shown the semiotic malleability of a production myth. Hip-hop’s audience (and influence) grew exponentially during the 1990s—alongside a similar burgeoning prominence of alternative rock. When we consider the development of production myths around hip-hop sampling among new groups of alternative-oriented listeners, we ultimately see a process of transformation—or, more cynically perhaps, of distortion. The alternative-culture mythologization of hip-hop sampling resituated its musical sounds and practices into a new cultural and stylistic space. These movements took place among complex currents of race, demographic difference, and symbolic capital. Indeed, we cannot ignore the broader racial implications of having (mostly) white music critics legitimizing and elevating a

\textsuperscript{112} For discussion of this track’s connection to turntable battling, see Katz, \textit{Groove Music}, 195–96.
(mostly) black sample-based tradition by likening it to the (mostly) white cultural frameworks of postmodern juxtaposition, high-art aesthetic progress, or alternative anti-commercialism. Still, by examining the development of new production myths around hip-hop sampling among critics, musicians, and fans of alternative culture, we find a window into the development of particular modes of interpretation and meaning. The imagined actions, circumstances, and ideals attached to the sounds of sample-based records reveal the cultural freight that the music could carry among listeners.

The discursive development of new production myths thus worked to shape and reshape musical significance. Sampling took on a mantle of hipness in 1990s alternative culture: whether in A Tribe Called Quest’s clever play in media manipulation; the Roots’ self-conscious, performative embodiment of sample-based musical sensibilities; or DJ Shadow’s paradigms of aesthetic purism and abstraction. Each of these artists engaged with the history and creative circumstances of hip-hop sampling, even as they invited the listener to become more invested in mediated processes of hip-hop creativity. The recorded sounds of sampling thus came to represent values that had long resonated with alternative rock audiences: conveying a dual sense of media engagement and creative autonomy.
CHAPTER 4

Old Stuff, New Music: The Materiality of Retro at the End of the Millennium

In 2008, the Polaroid Corporation announced that it would cease production of its iconic line of analog instant cameras and film. Competing against the convenience and low cost of digital photography, the company could no longer sustain its business model. There remained, however, a robust niche market for the old Polaroid cameras. Many consumers were still enamored with the camera’s signature exposure style and graininess, harboring nostalgia for a format that had been one of the most popular consumer camera brands of the second half of the 20th century. In 2009, Austrian entrepreneur Florian Kaps bought the last functional Polaroid film factory in the Netherlands and started a new company to manufacture film for existing Polaroid cameras. He named his business venture The Impossible Project.¹

The “Impossible” moniker emphasizes a particular aspect of the aesthetic effect of 21st-century Polaroid photography. Polaroid’s general popularity in the 1970s and the 1980s made it an iconic format. By the end of the 1990s, however, what once was a representation of the everyday became a signifier of a bygone era. Thus, in the second decade of the 21st century, as consumers are again able to take Polaroid photos—with their hit-and-miss picture quality,

yellow-tinged exposure, and grainy texture—there is a sense of the impossible. A shot taken in the present is instantly transformed into what feels like a haunting specter of the past.

These recent developments illustrate a peculiar aesthetic phenomenon: a sensibility that relies on the seeming impossibility of integrating obsolete methods and materials with the freshness of contemporary artistic production. Beyond any desirable attributes of a particular medium, the effect relies on a sense of mixed temporality, while highlighting an acknowledged scarcity of materials. A similar type of phenomenon occurred in alternative rock and hip-hop from the mid- to late 1990s. Not only were listeners enamored with “retro” styles of various periods from the past, but they placed an emphasis on the sounds and ambiance of vintage sound equipment and media—from analog synthesizers, Mellotron keyboards, and tube amplifiers, to forgotten records, schlocky vintage pop, and the murky sonic haze of some types of 1960s studio production.\(^2\) We can draw parallels here to the lo-fi sensibilities examined in Chapter Two—there was a visceral sense of materiality and organicism in the mediated imperfections. But in the case of vintage equipment, there was also an element of scarcity. Generally speaking, vintage keyboards, equipment, and media were no longer being produced, and thus had to be bought on the second-hand market. Technical breakdown, maintenance, and replacement parts had to be sought outside of established commercial networks. Thus, the buzzy sound of a vintage synthesizer, in the mid-1990s at least, signified not only the materiality and dynamic imperfections of the analog electronics, but also the presence of a relic from the past. And although new recordings were generally being digitally encoded for CD release—with its

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“perfect sound forever” paradigm—the materials of the music’s initial production were finite, degrading, and of limited supply. Artists could aestheticize and mythologize these processes of production, making sonic art out of the material experience of struggling with old, outdated, non-standard, equipment. As this engagement was captured on the seemingly immaterial medium of digital recording, it could evoke a sense of temporal in-between-ness. Much akin the “impossible” effect of 21st-century Polaroid photography, the incorporation of old-sounding media in another (seemingly) more immediate context makes the music feel perpetually fresh.

This chapter examines the aesthetics of making new music with old stuff—and I use the rather nondescript term “old stuff” in order to specifically emphasize the role of materiality in this aesthetic. Considering the bewildering diversity of retro sensibilities in the 1990s, we certainly see more than a trendy infatuation with a particular retro sound: all sorts of old materials were resurrected and recontextualized by alternative-leaning musicians. Of course, a retro or revivalist sensibility is not at all unique to the 1990s. Incorporating materials from the past is common through music history. The Rolling Stones emulated the sounds and timbres from old blues records; New Wave bands at the end of the 1970s resurrected the keyboards and straightforward harmonies of 1960s pop; and in the 1980s bands such as the Cramps and the Stray Cats brought back the reverb, twang, and tremolo of mid-century rockabilly. Still, musical developments in the 1990s responded to their particular ideological, aesthetic, and technological circumstances: the developing trends covered earlier in this dissertation—media consciousness, lo-fi aesthetics, the rise of digital media, and hip-hop sampling—are essential to how retro sensibilities play out in 1990s alternative culture. In order to explore these ideas of oldness, in

3 For an in-depth discussion of retro sensibilities in the context of late-1970s New Wave, see Cateforis, Are We Not New Wave? 95–150.
this chapter I first identify and discuss relevant broader trends, definitions, and scholarship. Next, I consider a few cultural touch points of retro sensibilities in the 1990s: as seen in film, visual effects in advertising, and the hip consumerism of the lounge revival. I then look at particular ways that musicians in the second half of the 1990s creatively engaged with retro materials and culture. I consider Elliott Smith, who arose as part of a new generation of singer-songwriters in the wake of lo-fi; RZA and Lauryn Hill, who each looked to old materials to find new modes of engagement in hip-hop; and the Flaming Lips, whose uncanny appropriation of vintage pop orchestrations led to new musical articulations of DIY and punk rock values.

What makes these examples—and the 1990s brand of retro nostalgia more generally—so striking is their peculiar emphasis on the *materiality* of the past. These trends weren’t simply enamored with a creative re-imagining of a bygone era; they focused on the sensuous experience of material engagement with the oldness of vintage artifacts, equipment, and media. In some ways, this is another example of a media-centric sensibility—giving critical attention to the effects of mediation in artistic expression. But the additional sense of temporality—or, more specifically, the temporal mixing of old artifact and contemporary creativity—lent a peculiar, at times almost metaphysical, aura to the aesthetics of mediation. The juxtaposition of technologies from different eras emphasized an end-of-the-century sense of temporal displacement. And process-oriented aesthetics—by mythologizing this engagement and, in turn, sonically depicting it on record—adds yet another layer of mediated aesthetic appreciation. In a sense, it is the *hearing* of age and fragility in the music’s production apparatus—and the central role of these materials in the imagined musical creative process—that becomes essential to the listening experience.
Definitions and Trends: Retro, Nostalgia, and Vintage

The most common term used in the 1990s to describe a fascination with old, outdated cultural and material expression is retro. Because of the term’s broad and varied usage, it is worth untangling some of its major features. In her book-length examination of retro, art and fashion historian Elizabeth Guffey traces the origins of modern retro to the mid-1960s revival of Art Nouveau, describing “the beginning of a unique post-war tendency: a popular thirst for the recovery of earlier, and yet still modern, periods at an ever-accelerating rate.”[^4] The term itself came into common parlance in the early 1970s and gained further cultural associations with postmodern commentators of the 1980s and subsequent retro trends in the 1990s. Although Guffey notes the various associations to which retro can refer—from ostensibly backward-looking social attitudes, to mid-century styles of design, to technological obsolescence—she notes in retro a persistent, overriding sense of detachment. This unsentimental knowingness, she argues, is what differentiates retro from previous ideals of revivalism, which stemmed from 19th century Romanticism. She thus describes retro as a “deviant revivalism” that “does not glance nostalgically at pre-industrial times. . . . It is suffused with an ambivalent view of Modernity and challenges positivist views of technology, industry, and, most of all, of progress itself. Rather than evading the symptoms of Modernity like so much of nineteenth-century revivalism, retro is an attempt to come to terms with Modernity’s ideas, as well as its boundaries and even its mortality.” In this, Guffey argues, retro’s most “enduring quality” is its peculiar mix of irony and sincerity. “The seriousness of purpose that shaped older revivals destabilizes retro’s non-serious

and subversive instincts. Retro does not seek out proud examples of the past; it shuffles instead through history’s unopened closets and unlit corners.

The place of nostalgia and its relationship to retro is somewhat fraught, as retro sensibilities so often seek to undermine the sentimentality of nostalgia while still capitalizing on its inherent charms. At its most basic, nostalgia is quite different from retro. As has often been noted, the roots of the word “nostalgia” come from an 18th century medical condition describing Swiss mercenary soldiers’ longing for home when on their tour of duty. By the end of the 19th century, the term had been largely taken over by poets and Romantics, describing a longing for an idealized past, often experienced with a tinge of pleasure.

Prominent studies of retro, nostalgia, and memory in the last decades of the 20th century focused on a broader postmodern re-organizing of historical consciousness. For theorists Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson, retro and nostalgic sensibilities signified a new sort of semiotic bankruptcy in modern culture. Baudrillard associated retro with “the death pangs of the real and of the rational” in contemporary culture, consisting of merely empty representational forms; while Jameson described a new “nostalgia for the present” in which society’s “indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions” ultimately reduce modern cultural expression to empty stylistic gestures. Others have described this rise in popular awareness of recent history as a coping strategy for our new media landscape of constant representational bombardment. Andreas Huyssen explains a late-20th-century “culture of memory” as arising, not

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from a Modernist sense of guilt or alienation, but from a more recent “informational and perceptual overload combined with a cultural acceleration neither our psyche nor our senses are that well equipped to handle.”

The late 20th century thus saw peculiar developments in the ways people engaged with the past—being confronted with a bewildering array of cultural and material representation.

But not only do retro sensibilities in popular culture tend to undermine the sentimental aspects of nostalgia, they often relate to a past that the consumer has never even experienced. Simon Reynolds makes this point in regards to the late-1990s retro appeal of the 1960s’ much-mythologized “be here now” immediacy. Cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai views the phenomenon more widely: an “imagined nostalgia” (or “armchair nostalgia”) is one where mass advertising teaches consumers to miss things they have never personally experienced. “Rather than expecting the consumer to supply memories while the merchandiser supplies the lubricant for nostalgia, now the viewer need only bring the faculty of nostalgia to an image that will supply the memory of a loss that he or she has never suffered.”

Retro sensibilities as examined in this chapter, then, in drawing upon the seeming impossibility of experiencing nostalgia for an unexperienced past, often bring a playful sense of irony to the sentimental pleasures of memory.

To accomplish this, retro tends to focus specifically on the material culture of the recent past. As

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8 Andreas Huyssen, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 35. Huyssen’s arguments here are likewise applied to the related, but fundamentally different concept of “public memory,” with its memorialization, “musialization,” and overall public structuring of historical events. But, as he notes in the article, structures of local and individual memories and sensibilities are likewise shaped by the “new configurations of time and space” that are effected as memory practices “contest the myths of cyber-capitalism and globalization,” 37.


Reynolds notes, audio recording and visual documentation allow a sense of exact recall that enables retro’s peculiar sensations and pleasures. This experience is based “on obsessive repeat-play of particular artifacts and focused listening that zooms in on minute stylistic details. . . . The phonographic recording is something of a philosophical scandal in that it takes a moment and makes it perpetual; it drives in the wrong direction down the one-way street that is Time.”

This sort of perceptual time-space reconfiguration took on a new significance in 1990s music cultures. Reynolds describes this as a “retromania”: an almost apocalyptic cultural feedback loop that over-rides the creative authenticity of Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” with an embrace of an ersatz creativity based more on reference than creation. “Not only has the anxiety of influence faded away, so has a sense of shame about being derivative.” Others, including sociologist Ryan Moore and musicologist Timothy Taylor, look at retro sensibilities in the 1990s from a less alarmist perspective. For Moore, the throwback sounds and styles of 1990s rock and pop culture demonstrate a Bakhtinian dialogic engagement with the past. Drawing on models of nostalgia utilized by George Lipsitz, Moore argues that 1990s alternative artists such as Uncle Tupelo and Rocket from the Crypt summoned the past in order to “symbolically resolve the structural crises” of class, gender, and socio-economic uncertainty. Taylor, on the other hand, considers the 1990s appropriation of 1960s materials by lounge revivalists and related bands. Drawing upon anthropologist Grant McCracken’s notion of “displaced meaning,” Taylor argues that their retro attitudes effectively displaced a contemporary set of meanings onto an external set of cultural materials, “available to be recalled at a moment’s notice, but safe from whatever

12 Ibid., 177–78.
dangers their real world presents.” As an example, Taylor notes the 1990s “technostalgia” impulse of collecting 1960s space-age exotica. The (mostly white male) collectors were able to displace anxieties of race, gender, and otherness into an even further “other,” whose temporal and cultural distance allowed an immersion into the material and communal acts of collecting and commodity culture. For both Taylor and Moore, then, retro ultimately served as a cultural tool for navigating one’s sociocultural placement or reasserting group identity.

Another aspect of retro culture in music denotes the age of the objects themselves: the idea of “vintage.” Reynolds describes vintage as being “related but not identical” to retro, noting that in fashion, vintage refers to the actual period garments, while retro can denote new clothes that rework the older designs. He discusses the notion of vintage as being just as much of a rebranding as it is a sensibility, essentially replacing the notion of “second-hand” or “used” with the more elevated aspects of aged wine. In terms of consumer culture, we can relate vintage sensibilities with Appadurai’s conception of “patina” (or a sense of oldness conveyed by an object) and the symbolic distinction conveyed by “wear.” Age can be a symbol of high status by signifying duration, but there is the constant semiotic dilemma of “distinguishing wear from tear.” As Appadurai explains, “the patina of objects takes on its full meaning only in a proper context, of . . . persons who know how to indicate, through their bodily practices, their relationships to these objects.” The implied age of patina allows an object’s owner to take upon him or herself a “well-managed” aura of “temporal continuity undisturbed.” A vintage patina

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15 Reynolds, Retromania, 192–93.
16 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 75–76.
can thus work to create a sense of socio-economic exclusivity as much as it does a sense of aesthetic beauty.

These broader frameworks of retro, nostalgia, and vintage, demonstrate some key sensibilities that arise in an aesthetic engagement with cultures and artistic materials of the past. Alternative culture in the 1990s, as we will see, built upon these sensibilities through a focus on materiality and mediation. By developing meaningful production myths of creative material engagement, alternative musicians and fans nurtured a peculiar aesthetic of temporal disjunction.

**Retro in 1990s Popular Culture and Discourse**

Popular culture in the 1990s saw a prevalence, not only in the “20-year rule” of retro/nostalgia—with the rising generation of adults looking back to the years of their childhood—but also with a more generalized revival of music and fashion from throughout the previous half-century.\(^{17}\) Films such as *Dazed and Confused* and *Velvet Goldmine* revisited the styles and sounds of the 1970s, along with *That Seventies Show* on TV. Punks revived not only the mohawks and safety-pins of 1977, but the greaser look of 1950s motorcycle gangs and the bold lipstick and hairstyles of mid-century pin-up girls.\(^{18}\) There was the mid-1990s lounge revival of space-age pop, along with the subsequent swing revival (with its 1940s-era zoot suits and two-toned wingtips). And the latter half of the 1990s saw two separate-but-related “revivals of a revival” with third-wave ska and “oi” punk.\(^{19}\) Even as early 1994, in his “Year in Music” feature for *Spin*, Eric Weisbard

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\(^{17}\) Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, 164.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 156–96

noted the ever-increasing interest in the styles of earlier eras: “Retro flourished as never before—wait, that happens every year, doesn’t it?”

By 1997, the satiric newspaper The Onion published a story entitled, “U.S. Dept. of Retro Warns: ‘We May Be Running Out of Past.’” They quipped that the only way to prolong the life of ever-more-recent “retro-ironic appreciation” was through “meta-retro recycling,” citing the recent film Boogie Nights as an example: “simultaneously a ’70s retro allusion to Saturday Night Fever and a late-’80s retro allusion to the Beastie Boys’ seminal ’70s retro video ‘Hey Ladies’—an homage to an homage, if you will.”

To consider the breadth of retro sensibilities in alternative culture by the end of the 1990s, we can peruse a single issue of Spin magazine—May 1999. Much like the discussion in Chapter Two of visually foregrounding mediation through roughness, here we see a visual foregrounding of mediation through temporal stylization. Red Kamel cigarettes was advertising with a sepia-tinged photograph of a sexualized World War II-era Freedom Fighter in a pinup-styled pose; and Lucky Strike used a grainy black-and-white photo of a James Dean-styled motorcycle rider lighting up in a black leather jacket. The shoemaker Vans was sponsoring a “College Tour” throwback screening of the 1982 film Fast Times at Ridgemont High. An ad for Camel cigarettes gave a surreal scene of a retro-chic human terrarium, complete with mid-century furniture and a stuffed swordfish on the tiny wall; the terrarium itself sat in a household corner surrounded by 1970s-era wood paneling. The issue’s cover story discussed the new animated series Futurama, which combined tropes of retro-futurism with biting critiques of

Ground Zero: As the Millennium Approaches, the Ska Goons are High-Fiving on Frat Row,” Spin, November 1997, 145.


ongoing trends in commercialism. Its fashion feature, titled “Majestics,” presented members of a low-rider car club lounging around re-vamped vintage cars from the 1940s to the ’70s. And then there is the music coverage: Matt Sharp from the Rentals waxed poetic about his collection of vintage Moog synthesizers, Fender introduced a new line of “Relics” guitars that were factory-distressed to look like road-weary 1960s models, and Ben Folds released a new album with “lush orchestration . . . and Bacharach-style flügelhorns.”

In all of this, we see that the overall experience of the magazine had shifted from the rough-around-the-edges stylizations of early-1990s alternative and into a new post-grunge slickness. But there was still a sense of media-savvy edge—often accomplished through a retro/vintage approach. These playfully mediated recreations drew upon process-oriented sensibilities by overtly constructing the effects of media from another time.

But this late-1990s sense of historical borrowing is essentially different from the previous 1980s postmodern mixing of styles and sensibilities. It is not a juxtaposition of surface that creates these effects, but a feeling of sensory immersion in another time. Consider the aforementioned Red Kamel advertisement. (Figure 3) Instead of a flashy post-modern retro styling, it sports an aged monochrome logo; the tone and contrast of the image is slightly washed, and its colors cover broad fields, as if the advertisement was originally a black-and-white photo that was afterward filled in with watercolor. The train in the background doesn’t pop out like a modern special effect, but contains a lack of detail as if it were a small model—a toy used in an old-timey special effect.

Thus, rather than simply borrowing design features and

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22 *Spin*, May 1999, 31, 38, 52, 54, 56–7, 73, 94–100, 109, 112–14, 116–23,

23 Examples of this visual sensibility from musical sources can be seen in music videos such as Redd Kross’s “1976” (1990) and Jellyfish’s “Baby’s Coming Back” (1990).

juxtaposing them with a postmodern flair, this ad reproduces the subtle material aspects of vintage reproduction, including its color-tone, fashion, poses, and printing style.

Retro Music in Early 1990s Film

Another window into retro attitudes in the 1990s is through film music. Self-consciously old musical styles appeared with varying levels of aesthetic detachment. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey have discussed this phenomenon in terms of a “cheese” sensibility, which they
describe as a rhetorical embrace of the detritus of recent consumer culture that fosters an aesthetic ambivalence toward the categories of good and bad: a “mixture of emotional involvement and ironic detachment.”

They discuss *Wayne’s World*’s early-1990s parody of late-boomer rockist culture, which blurred the lines between homage and parody in its famous “Bohemian Rhapsody” car-ride lip-sync and in Garth’s extravagant pantomime of “Foxy Lady.” Although both of these scenes fall squarely in the realm of the ridiculous, they still seem to evoke a genuine respect for the music. Then, during the closing credits, Wayne himself (as played by Mike Myers) lays out the film’s outlook quite succinctly, as if reading a cue card to the viewers: “Well, that’s all the time we have for our movie. We hope you found it entertaining, whimsical, and yet relevant, with an underlying revisionist conceit that belied the film’s emotional attachments to the subject matter.” To which Garth adds: “I just hope you didn’t think it sucked.”

Dettmar and Richey contrast the self-aware sentimentality of *Wayne’s World* “cheese” sensibility with the more confrontational approach of Quentin Tarantino around the same time. In the famous torture scene in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), Mr. Blonde (played by Michael Madsen) turns the radio to the “pop bubblegum favorite” by Stealer’s Wheel, “Stuck in the Middle.” The cognitive dissonance of the pop music intensifies the heartless brutality of the scene while bringing a sense black humor with the song title’s double meaning for the helpless captive.

Furthermore, as film theorist Lisa Coulthard notes, the “retro-nostalgic” characteristic of the

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26 *Wayne’s World*, dir. by Penelope Spheeris (Paramount, 1992).

music facilitates an affective detachment for the viewer; the pleasure of the old music creates “a kind of present nostalgia in retro hipness” that gives a sense of “anticipated satisfaction to be experienced after the film’s end”—an effect that she describes as a thoroughgoing sense of “afterwardness.”

In *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Tarantino likewise evokes layers of mediation and stylization in the music, creating a rich network of cultural and stylistic references. As Coulthard notes, Tarantino’s “visual imaging of the process” of sound performance and technology in the film’s diegetic music—a close-up on the needle hitting a vinyl record, the use of cassettes and a reel-to-reel tapes—creates a sense of temporal dislocation, thus emphasizing to the listener the materiality of the film, and the viewer’s passive pleasure in the spectacle. With his use of retro-nostalgic music, then, along with a foregrounding of their technologies of reproduction, Tarantino emphasizes a knowingness and hipness between the movie producers and the viewer. This emphasis on taste and style—on surface richness—through a retro musical sensibility likewise relates to a broader sense of exclusivity and non-conformity in taste. Although he proclaimed in a *New York Times* interview that “I don’t believe in elitism,” Tarantino also boasted in an interview for the liner notes to the *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack that he liked “certain music that nobody else on the planet has an appreciation for.” Tarantino signaled his place in a subculture of aesthetic distinction through his sense of retro appreciation—one that sought to transgress established values of musical taste.

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28 *Pulp Fiction*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Miramax, 1994).


Lounge Revival

Tarantino’s aesthetic of anachronistic eclecticism can be connected to the lounge revival in alternative culture of the mid-1990s. As Chris Morris wrote for the cover of Billboard in 1995: “Bachelor Pad Music from the ’50s, ’60s is Swingin’ Again.” Morris described a new, young audience hungry for the easy listening, exotica, and tropical jazz sounds of vintage pop. A record-collectors’ underground had bubbled up to garner broader interest. Indie publisher RE/Search had published an influential two-volume guide of Incredibly Strange Music in 1993–94, providing interviews of prominent lounge music collectors and musicians. Pop composers such as Martin Denny, Esquivel, Les Baxter, and Perry & Kingsley all saw reissues of their material in the years following. Combustible Edison and other bands recorded new music in this retro pop style—even the Beastie Boys released an instrumental pop album, titled The In Sound from Way Out in homage to Perry & Kingsley’s 1966 album of experimental electronic pop. Simon Reynolds summed up the appeal of lounge in the New York Times in 1995: “It’s official: It’s hip to be square. The music’s quirky arrangements and zany sound effects, its aura of opulence and optimism, are providing light relief for latter-day hipsters who have tired of the heaviness—musical and emotional—of today’s alternative rock.” Even as late as 1998, Jon Pareles of the New York Times wrote that the revival of 1960s French pop was not only a needed musical contrast, but a philosophical foil for rock’s failed authenticity. In their own time, these

31 Chris Morris, “Bachelor Pad Music from ’50s, ’60s is Swingin’ Again,” Billboard, 9 September 1995, 1, 114, 123.


33 Beastie Boys, The In Sound From Way Out!, LP (Grand Royal GR 013, 1995); Perrey-Kingsley, The In Sound From Way Out!, LP (Vanguard VSD-79222, 1966).

easy-listening pop styles had “seemed sappy or trivial, lacking the immediacy and perceived authenticity of rock. Now, when rock itself often stands revealed as a series of stale poses, the once belittled styles have their own charms. . . . They imply a double escape, into the sensual comforts they once promised and into a knowing nostalgia. Even better, it’s impossible to take them too seriously.”

Thus the archaic pop sounds of space-age bachelor pad music provided a multi-layered, if at times self-conscious, “escape” from the seemingly double-faced commodification of alternative authenticity.

In V. Vale and Andrea Juno’s 1993 book *Incredibly Strange Music*, we can see how these particular types of music consumption were given ideological value. The authors defined the limits of “incredibly strange music” for their project: vinyl recordings (circa 1950 to 1980) whose music fell outside the purview of the usual critical tastemakers’ designations (classical, opera, jazz, blues, or rock). In so doing, Vale and Juno touted an “alternate aesthetic philosophy” that relied upon an acceptance of strangeness for its own sake and allowed listeners to transgress the confines of established taste structures. Running throughout their project was a tension between populism and elitism. Much of this music was cheap and accessible, giving an egalitarian bent to the endeavor. But the music’s aesthetic relied upon the idea of having “trailblazing collectors” who were able to gain a “deviant perspective” through a “discriminating eye.” In this construct, the role of technology was central. Modern technologies were simultaneously vilified for creating a society of passive consumers and vaunted for their potential in providing radically new access to cultural materials. Building upon a punk ethos of DIY cultural activity (although overtly rejecting punk’s “strict codes regulating rigid styles of fashion and music”), *Incredibly Strange Music* posited a cultural, political, and expressive power.

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through allowing a “fluid multiplicity of identities” in cultural consumption.”  

Strangeness emerged as a musical value in and of itself. As collector Mickey McGowan said in his interview for the book, strange music “should be challenging, unfamiliar, even intimidating. It has to take you to another level.” Furthermore, the circumstances of production for this music were meant to reveal an uninhibited sense of sonic exploration and human creativity. McGowan described this music having been “done by people just having fun . . . trying to reach that pinnacle of personal self-expression.” 

As Juno and Vale explained in the introduction, it was by rejecting music critics’ established structures of taste that musicians achieved untethered expression through spontaneous inspiration. 

Ultimately, *Incredibly Strange Music* and the accompanying lounge revival espoused particular ways of aestheticizing and dealing with cultural artifacts from the past. Timothy Taylor discusses the lounge revival’s mentality of quirky collectorship as constituting not only an alternative, anti-commercial, anti-conformist mode of musical appreciation that spoke against the reigning sensibilities of alternative rock, but also a sensibility through which listeners could negotiate gender constructions, embark on a lay “vinyl anthropology” of culture, and articulate a disillusionment with well-entrenched notions of technological progress. Literary scholar John Sears explains RE/Search’s historical categorization of “incredibly strange” in relation to

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36 Vale and Juno, *Incredibly Strange Music*, 2–5. Regarding this relationship to punk, it should be noted that RE/Search publications had extensive roots in the Bay Area punk scene, beginning with the zine *Search and Destroy* in the 1970s. V. Vale eventually moved away from the punk scene, considering it too stylistically ossified and restrictive, founding the RE/Search series of publications to document and disseminate various forms of countercultural expression. For more on the shifting ideologies and tensions in the history of V. Vale and RE/Search, see Michael Lucas, “RE/Search in Context,” *European Journal of American Culture* 30, no. 2 (August 2011): 83–97.


38 Ibid., 3.

Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “reterritorialization,” in which consumers reassess and re-claim music from genres that had been critically neglected. In so doing, Sears argues, Vale and Juno followed in the Surrealist tradition of imbuing bizarre, neglected objects with poetic purpose. They accomplished this in conjunction with the social networks within which they acted: “A rhetoric of sub-cultural social inclusion and exclusion, of identifying and defining objects and constituencies as belonging and not belonging, thus underpins the process of conceiving and defining the ‘incredibly strange.’” Indeed, for Sears, Vale and Juno’s endowment of “strangeness” related closely to similar movements in the late-20th-century avant-garde, especially in its “strange temporality . . . its apparent double arrival from the past and return from the future.” This version of the “strange,” he writes, is the “uncanny temporality of popular culture as lived experience.”

The retro-futuristic styles and artifacts brought a dual sense of hip irony and intellectual seriousness to the appreciation of long-neglected cultural artifacts.

In lounge revival aesthetics, then, engagement with material culture from the past drew from frameworks of consumer identification, distinction, rebellion, and temporal repositioning. Lines between the music and the artifact became blurred, allowing listeners to simultaneously take pleasure in the music, appreciate its well-crafted construction, and intellectually place themselves within and against the temporal ebbs and flows of style, coolness, and material consumption.

For an example of this double-minded enjoyment of music and its temporally-coded mediation we can return briefly to Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction (1994), at the opening of the heroin scene with Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) and Vincent Vega (John Travolta). After a night of

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drinking and dancing at a 1950s-themed retro restaurant, Mia sets an atmosphere of sensuous musical enjoyment by cueing up a song on her top-of-the-line TEAC reel-to-reel player. The song is Urge Overkill’s 1992 cover of Neil Diamond’s 1967 “Girl, You’ll Be A Woman Soon.” Mia loses herself in the music, dancing around the living room. Tarantino emphasizes the materiality of the musical media with close-up shots of Mia’s finger hitting the “play” button and of the reel hub’s mechanical spinning. At the same time, the materiality of the musical experience is heightened by the retro nature of the equipment and the music. This reel-to-reel represents a dying technology—the luxurious warmth and clarity of a hi-fi past. Likewise, Urge Overkill’s music re-performs the bygone sounds of a golden age of orchestral pop. The tremolo guitar, reverb-drenched snare click, and vibrato-laden baritone vocals evoke a lush musical past. Mia sings along with the track and dances with unselfconscious abandon. Thus Tarantino doesn’t simply use music to establish an atmosphere or affect, but uses the materiality of retro-styled mediation to portray the enjoyment of music—aestheticizing the temporal pleasures of music consumption, rather than simply the music itself.

In the mid-1990s, with the explosion of digital media and unprecedented access to a wide variety of musical sounds, styles, and ideals from the past, popular culture aestheticized the consumption of music from bygone eras as a peculiar form of consumption and appreciation. Whether in an ironic knowingness, an avant-garde reterritorialization of style, an uncanny mixture of pastness and presentness, or the nonconformist urge to seek out the obscure, listeners developed aestheticized processes of consumer engagement with material musical cultures of the past.
Musical Approaches to Resurrecting the Old

Having now considered some of the ways that 1990s retro sensibilities dealt with the material culture of the past, we can look more specifically to how musicians drew upon these sensibilities. Even early in the 1990s, we can see that the media landscape had encouraged musicians to immerse themselves in technological artifacts. In December 1993, Simon Reynolds wrote a piece in the New York Times lamenting the new aesthetic of “record-collection rock,” in which twenty-something artists made music that said more about their taste in records than it did about their own creative expression. Reynolds connected this trend to technologies of music consumption: “The CD reissue boom has made all kinds of obscure artists readily available. As baby boomers replace their worn LPs with CDs, there’s a glut of used vinyl on the market. All this encourages bands to scale new heights of perversity and obscurantism when it comes to reference points.” Reynolds listed artists such as Lenny Kravitz, with his late 1960s style and vintage analog equipment; Pavement, with their knowing irony in obscurely referencing past pop styles; and Stereolab, who drew equally from the 1960s experiments of the Velvet Underground and the unabashedly commercial “exotica” of Martin Denny.41

For Reynolds, this record-collector’s mentality ultimately left little room for authentic expression, with the retro-rockers providing a “counterculture for couch potatoes, a consumer package of groovy idealism with all the confrontation and commitment removed,” and indie bands simply “making music about music, scribbling footnotes in the Great Book of Rock.”42 Of course, in hindsight, we can note that these artists’ sound was distinctly of their time. Kravitz and Urge Overkill incorporated retro styles into the production values of 1990s rock—the recordings’

42 Ibid.
crystalline drums, enhanced lows, and compressed sound provide a distinctly 1990s sonic punch. And the sonic scribblings of Pavement, however referential they may have been, certainly evoked a lo-fi aura of their own time.

Other musicians drew less on older genres and focused more closely on vintage equipment—evoking a sort of musical resurrection of production materials. These modes of musical creation relied on a production myth of consumption: of acquiring, repurposing, and otherwise appropriating aging media into new contexts of music making. This type of creative consumption recontextualized the sounds of older technologies; the materiality of analog modes of sound production—the ways they mechanically fail and glitch—contrasted with the listener’s experience of digital clarity in modern production. And the listener could then hear and memorialize the falling-apart-ness of vintage analog sonic media and production. Music critic Robert Everett-Green described this as a “miraculous” revival of “apparently obsolete synthesizers.” He dwelled on the fickle mechanics of these devices—the Mellotron was described as a veritable “chaos generator”—noting that these “old machines” are “fragile, temperamental devices that require constant coddling to function.”

Others even more overtly aestheticized a sense of mechanical age. In Charles Aaron’s description of Aphex Twin’s *I Care Because You Do* (1996), he wove an imaginary narrative, describing the album as a “soundtrack for a millennial fairy tale—computer geek from the boonies breaks into a chain-locked factory in an abandoned industrial town . . . tinkers with and revives the dead machinery.”

This sense of resurrection can also be tied to an aesthetic of destabilizing the forward progress of time. By taking technologies that were once cutting-edge, but had since fallen into

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43 Everett-Green, “Good, Good, Good, Good Vibrations,” R1.

obscurity, artists were able to explore something akin to an alternate history—to go back and live history anew, on a fresh path. Note how Chris Norris, in his *Billboard* feature on the lounge revival in 1995, introduced the topic by reimagining historical progress. For Norris, 1956 marked “a great divide in American popular culture,” with Elvis Presley (the “King of Rock’n’Roll) on one side and Les Baxter (the “Godfather of Space Age Bachelor Pad Music”) on the other. To explore space age pop was to follow a path of history that had fallen into neglect. Musicians, by resurrecting old instruments and styles, could enact a similar sort of sensibility. Speaking in 1997, Money Mark, who had just released his solo album *Money Mark’s Keyboard Repair*, spoke of the project as positing a historical/aesthetic re-assessment, bringing to light long-obscure trends: “I’m trying to go back to these various points in time and take over and evolve things. I consider it almost reparation for a certain moment.”

Or as Tim Gane of Stereolab put it, “The whole point of the Moog was that it didn’t sound like anything else. It sounded like what it was: a weird view of the future that never happened.” To play the Moog synthesizer, then, was to reify its imagined alternative future. Ana Marie Cox likewise described musical production as a rewriting the ethos of a historical moment; in her *Spin* review of Belle and Sebastian’s *If You’re Feeling Sinister*, she wrote that the album’s “light and sunny puppy-love fantasies” were “the kind of music you might expect to hear on the soundtrack for a Swinging London-era scooter commercial. But the songs’ resemblance to jingles ends with their irresistibility; careful attention reveals a morbid complexity.”

Other critics discussed these temporal ambiguities in more philosophical, almost metaphysical terms. Jud Cost of *Magnet*

45 Smith, “Isn’t It Ironic?” 54.


described Mercury Rev’s *Deserter Songs* as “beautiful, mind-expanding sound collages” that “can take you anywhere you want to go: the future, the past, or scenic points in between.” The group’s frontman Jonathan Donahue discussed the musical stylistic basis for this sensibility: “We’ve always tried to achieve something that’s timeless with our music, where if you hear it, you would say, ‘I have no idea when that record was made. It doesn’t sound like something from 1998.’”

We find a particularly interesting mix of these purposefully-anachronistic sensibilities in a late-1990s group of bands known as the Elephant 6 Collective—consisting of Neutral Milk Hotel, the Olivia Tremor Control, and the Apples in Stereo. Olivia Tremor Control used eclectic electronic experimentation to create heady re-creations of 1960s pop soundscapes. A review in *Magnet* described their 1996 album as flowing “effortlessly between jaunty, ’60s-flavored pop tunes (echoes of the Beatles, Badfinger, Big Star, and the Beach Boys abound) and trippy psychedelic passages.” The songwriter for the band, Will Cullen Hart, described their sensibility: “The band is a complete contradiction. We’re moving into the future, but a lot of the time we’re trying to sound like it’s 1968. I just want modernism to set in, for real. Today. Now. The future just won’t come.” Hart’s impulse was thus not only to re-create older styles, but to actually experience a historical moment—to actively reshape the already-failed progress of a musical past.

Neutral Milk Hotel touted a more pointed sense of historical fluidity. One reviewer described their historically eclectic style as “folk-pop rooted in, rather than deconstructed by, a


backwoods musical circus.” Mike McGonical of *Puncture* described frontman Jeff Mangum’s home in great detail, as a sort of metaphor for the group’s peculiar sensibilities:

Their house is a sloppy, brilliant mess—pretty much what I’d imagined. CDs and melodicas are strewn about. I spot discs by bizarre, genre-hopping ’70s Brazilian rock act Os Mutantes; jazz bassist/bandleader Charlie Haden; and musique concrète composer Pierre Henri. . . . Old keyboards and reel-to-reel machines clutter the house. . . . A door is posterred with photocopied images from turn-of-the-century editions of the *New York Times*, and in a corner there’s a beautiful old organ a friend of Jeff’s bought for 15 bucks and gave to him. Next to the organ there’s a physics book by Einstein, and another by John Cage on nothing.

He then quoted Mangum’s quasi-philosophical musings on the group’s sense of temporal in-betweenness. Discussing the World War II-era themes of their 1998 album *In The Aeroplane Over the Sea*, Mangum said that the album “doesn’t necessarily take place in that time period so much. It’s a reflection of how I see that time. I’m not even sure anyway if time is linear, if it’s all going in one direction. The world is an incredibly blurry, crazy dream I’m sort of stumbling through.”

This sense of temporal fluidity allowed for imaginative musical play. Vintage timbres, media, and sounds were able to transport musicians and listeners to different times and places; having thus traversed history, they could creatively destabilize, rework, and rewrite its progression.

In these artists’ eclectic attitudes toward pop appreciation, the materials of the past held almost a supernatural power. For artists to engage with old materials and artifacts was—to repurpose Reynold’s words—to drive “the wrong direction down the one-way street that is Time.” By imbuing acts of material engagement with a sense of temporal destabilization, this discourse sets up a powerful production myth. In these artists’ recordings, then, the sounds of old

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53 Ibid., 22.
instruments, styles, and media conjure imagined experiences of unstable temporalities that enrich
the listening experience.

**Stereolab**

The group perhaps most often associated with the resurrection of vintage instruments and sounds
during this period was Stereolab. Beginning in 1990 with songwriter/guitarist Tim Gane and
singer/lyricist Laetitia Sadier, Stereolab maintained a consistent musical output throughout the
decade, releasing music that drew upon and mixed influences such as space-age pop, the Velvet
Underground, 1960s French yéyé pop, and German motorik rhythms of Neu! and Can. Although
their records were well received throughout the first half of the decade, it wasn’t until *Emperor
Tomato Ketchup* in 1996 that the group received widespread press coverage and acclaim. By the
end of the decade, when Moogs and Mellotrons had become a dominant trend in indie and rock
music circles, Stereolab was hailed as a trendsetter. Steve Tignor described Stereolab’s infectious
retro styles—1960s pop, lounge exotica, drone, and electronic music—as “the collective base of
a ’90s post-alternative music scene.”

Musicologist Timothy Taylor has shown how Stereolab’s peculiar evocation of vintage
signifiers drew from the sounds, visual iconography, and discourse of mid-century hi-fi. As Gane
said, “I like the idea of people listening to a record and being aware of what went into it, the
mechanics of it.” In this, we can note that Gane practically laid out the definition of what I am
calling process-oriented aesthetics. He was not particularly concerned with the actual production
processes, but with the aesthetics (the “idea”) of knowing the mechanics of production. This


sensibility comes across in the tongue-in-cheek titles and visual layout of Stereolab’s early albums. The title of *Transient Random-Noise Bursts with Announcements* (1993) doesn’t actually explain the album, but rather presents faux-technical language that evokes the technical aspects of hi-fi recording. The cover and liner notes of the album present highly processed images of analog musical equipment. The cover of their next album, *The Groop Played “Space Age Bachelor Pad Music,”* (1993) shows vaguely scientific imagery, without serving any actual informational purpose: a diagram of the atom and three overlapping sine waves lie in front of a grid, the entire image showing the slightly distorted edges of vintage printing technologies.56

The music of these two early Stereolab albums foregrounds the analog nature of the instruments by using a messy, overdriven distortion of vintage keyboards, guitars, and amplifiers. The primary stylistic touchpoint for these albums would be the Velvet Underground, with their drone-like repetitions of simple harmonies and drawn-out experiments with the textures and timbres of feedback, distortion, and improvised noise. (The tracks “We’re Not Adult Orientated” and “Jenny Ondioline” are good examples of this sensibility.) The Velvets’ more subdued pop sensibilities—more along the lines of “Sunday Morning” or “I’ll Be Your Mirror”—are heard in in tracks such as “Ronco Symphony” or the (suggestively titled) “Avant-garde M.O.R.”57 In drawing so directly on the sonic and stylistic characteristics of a foundational band like the Velvet Underground, Stereolab expresses their ideas through a sense of improvisatory re-creation—reviving aspects of a bygone sound as embodied in vintage instruments.

56 Ibid., 107–11.

*Emperor Tomato Ketchup* followed a similar path in refashioning sounds from the past, but took more creative risks and drew from a broader stylistic palette. From the very beginning of the album, we hear a funky, hard-hitting drum beat with staccato guitar, punchy bass, and a wah-sounding electronic chirp that almost sounds like turntable scratching. Strings and brighter sounds from the analog synthesizers then add a slightly more adventurous bent to the band’s sonic explorations. What is perhaps most interesting here in terms of musical signification is the group’s masterful juxtaposition of disparate types of sonic production—what Timothy Taylor describes as “a kind of chronoschizophrenic quality.”

The track “Olv 26,” for example, begins with a muffled, vintage-sounding drum beat from what sounds like a 1960s-era Wurlitzer organ. The fuzzy yet mechanical drive of an added organ bass-line complements this loop to create a dense sonic cushion for the track. Prolonged vibrato chords on organ fill out the middle harmonies. On top of all this, we hear staccato guitar noodling and a crystal clear vocal line, bringing the track’s temporal soundscape back into the 1990s professional studio. This contrast—between the vintage consumer-grade drums and bass-line with the modern clarity of the vocals—emphasizes the nostalgic warmth and quaintness of the analog sounds. Another element in this track is the faint sound of improvised electronics, floating above the layers of organ. Unlike the sound of the drum and bass-line loops, which sound markedly *old*, these electronics come across as simultaneously old and new. The timbres of electronic improvisation carry connotation of 1950s and ’60s experimentalism, yet the sound itself is consummately in the present: ethereal beeps and swoops move in and out of the texture effortlessly. At the end of the track, an edgy saw-tooth synthesizer sound enters, with improvised

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glissandi and varying oscillations. It moves back and forth across the stereo spectrum above the other layers of sound. This sound comes across as present and immediate because of its thoroughgoing sense of human play and improvisation. Overall, then, this track simultaneously sounds out three different layers of historical temporality. The drum and bass loops quaintly sound out a passive, consumer-level music from the past. The vocals and guitar stand solidly in the present. And the electronic improvisations stand somewhere in the middle—with the characteristics and qualities of the electronic sounds themselves being antiquated, yet the sense of engagement in their production feeling immediate. It is as if the musicians were able reach out and articulate their own voice through a musical past—embodying and sounding out Gane’s “future that never happened.”

Other tracks on *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* likewise tinker with and manipulate sonic layers and eras of mediation. “Tomorrow is Already Here” begins with crunchy guitar stabs—that could almost come from early Kinks or late-’60s/early-’70s Rolling Stones—with an organic-sounding maraca recalling the Stones’s 1968 “Sympathy for the Devil.” Yet the track’s stripped-down organ, relentless drum kick, and irregular 5/8 time signature evoke a New Wave nervousness. In terms of timbre and materiality of sound, it’s as if the track finds a happy medium between two versions of the classic song “Satisfaction”: the Rolling Stones’ organic-sounding 1967 original and Devo’s erratic 1979 cover. Later in the track, Stereolab throws in a Reichian marimba pattern, and the track’s genre mixture is complete. But the juxtaposition of each of these elements—the warmth of 1960s rock, the neuroticism of late-1970s New Wave, and the timeless/timely experiments of minimalism—goes beyond implications of musical style. From a process-oriented perspective, in which a record’s listeners are meant to, in Gane’s words, be “aware of what went into it, the mechanics of it,” each of these sounds represents a particular
state of mind, a particular mode of mediation, and a particular sense of materiality in performance. Ultimately, then, this music plays upon tensions that arise from conflicting material modes of historical sound production.

Elliott Smith and the Return of Pop

At the end of 1997, Erik Pedersen wrote a piece in *Option* about “the new easy listening”: alternative-oriented, quirky songwriters who idolized both the melodicism of 1960s pop giants such as Burt Bacharach and Jimmy Webb, and the pop experimentation of Van Dyke Parks, Brian Wilson, Scott Walker, and Serge Gainsbourg. Pederson noted that this new generation of pop troubadours was “balancing an affinity for melodic songs and lush arrangements with do-it-yourself attitude.” Indeed, throughout the 1990s, and especially among indie labels from the Northwest such as K Records and Kill Rock Stars, a DIY reaction against traditional punk and alternative styles gained momentum. In 1997, Ann Powers wrote about this “new generation” of singer-songwriters whose “style is grounded in the punk and indie subculture of the 1980s, the same milieu that produced Kurt Cobain.” Powers noted that, whether in the activism of Ani DiFranco, the soft melodicism of Elliott Smith, or the idealistic storytelling of Ben Harper, these new artists were forging their own path within the counter-cultural tradition of singer-songwriters.

This new move toward song-craft likewise flourished in punk-rock circles themselves, with some self-identifying punks becoming disillusionsed on two fronts—both with the hardline stylistic conformity of the Berkeley-based zine *MaximumRocknroll*, and with the streamlining of

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the new stadium pop punk of Green Day and the Offspring. The Chicago zine *Punk Planet*, for example, began publishing in the mid-1990s as a more inclusive venue for punk culture, covering more diverse musical styles whose artists still adhere to the DIY punk ethos.\(^\text{62}\) Slim Moon, founder of Olympia-based indie label Kill Rock Stars, even published, on the back of one of the label’s 1997 promotional flyers, an impromptu conversation between himself and a fan (identified only as “j”) about being “unpunk”:

\begin{verbatim}
  s: wanna know how unpunk i am?
  j: i can one up you in unpunk.
  s: no dude, check this out, i’m listening to sheryl crow.
  j: you wanna know how unpunk i am? . . . i own every single morrissey record and have every single and b-side save two.
  s: that is punk in my book.
  j: okay fine. let’s see here, i’m also a big faith no more fan.
  s: the guys in the band are punk even if their music isn’t.
  j: dammit, i don’t think i’m going to be able to beat you. fine you’re more unpunk than i am… one day though. one day.
\end{verbatim}

The conversation went on to examine other “unpunk” topics, from Bob Dylan to the Bloodhound Gang. Moon concluded, “Real punk is about making up your own mind, fucking shit up, not following some Epitaph fucking dress/behavior code.”\(^\text{63}\) The dynamic of this argument shows how some members of an alternative-oriented genre reacted to the mainstreaming of previously underground styles. Moon upended the traditional authenticity arguments of what constituted “real punk,” openly embracing “unpunk” artists such as songwriter Sheryl Crow, rap-rock group the Bloodhound Gang, and the legendary Bob Dylan. In this, he situated himself as oppositional,


\(^{63}\) Flyer in the Kill Rock Stars Collection, ARC-0152, Box 8, Folder 8, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum Library and Archives. “Epitaph” here referred to the Silver Lake-based punk label started by Brett Gurewitz of Bad Religion; the label had recently found unprecedented commercial success with pop-oriented punk groups such as The Offspring, Rancid, and Pennywise.
not to the mainstream music industry, but to the newly profitable punk establishment (as embodied by the massively successful pop-punk label Epitaph).

With these rebellions against the punk establishment, we see a veritable rewriting of the genre’s production myth. Rather than focusing on fast tempos, dynamic intensity, and amplifier-blasting distortion, this new generation of artists sought to use a wider variety of musical styles to signify (whether in music-making or in listening) the punk ethos of aesthetic self-sufficiency and personal authenticity. Ani DiFranco portrayed her singer-songwriter craft as a punk DIY endeavor by using the metaphor of wilderness survival: “Give somebody a blowtorch, send them out to the woods, and say make a fire. That’s not hard. That’s rock with the amplifier turned up to 11. But send them out with two sticks, and say make a fire. . . . Now that—that’s punk rock.”

This pushback against the overused sound of overdriven guitar led others to embrace “sappy” styles of orchestral pop. Consider the words of David Fridmann, a member of Mercury Rev who produced and recorded for the Flaming Lips: “I think some people would think it’s cheating . . . or falsely sappy or manipulative to use orchestral textures. But to us at this point, it feels like cheating to think, ‘Oh, we know that we can get to this chorus and kick in a bunch of distortion guitars, and everyone will turn their lighters on and be happy.’”

This rewriting of the production myths of punk allowed for artists to re-code earlier pop styles into a DIY ethic. Previously “middle-of-the-road” styles were taken by a new generation and imbued with an aura of aesthetic opposition.

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64 Powers, “Singer-Songwriters of a New Generation Rewrite the Rules.”

Elliott Smith became one of the more high profile artists in this new generation. Initially making his name in the Northwestern DIY scene with a noisy punk trio called Heatmiser, Smith struck out on his own in 1994 with a self-recorded indie release, *Roman Candle*. He soon signed with Kill Rock Stars, releasing two more albums of intimate, yet hard-edged, lo-fi songwriting. His career shot to prominence when his music was nominated for an Academy Award in 1997 for its place in Gus Van Sant’s critically-acclaimed *Good Will Hunting*. In a surreal moment of the DIY underground meeting show-biz, Smith appeared in a white suit, alone and in the spotlight at the Oscars, to sing his nominated song “Miss Misery” to a full orchestral accompaniment. With his new mainstream visibility, Smith was able to sign with Dreamworks Records for his 1998 album, *XO*.66

In Smith’s music from this period and the discourse surrounding it, there is an underlying tension between the unpolished intimacy of lo-fi recording and the meticulous craft of pop songwriting and production. With his 1997 release *Either/Or*, writers lauded the fractured beauty and fragility of his “angelic, hopeful harmonies,” that “resonate a hair’s breadth from damaged pop perfection.”67 Some explained this sound in paradoxical terms, as evoking an emotional intensity and immediacy through unplugged instruments and thin vocals: “Smith’s acoustic guitar and high, wavering voice beat the hell out of your subconscious.”68 The fanzine *Pulse!*

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66 For more the trajectory of Elliott Smith’s career, see William Todd Schulz, *Torment Saint: The Life of Elliott Smith* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).


described Smith as finding a redemptive amalgam of opposing forces, one who worked to “restore grit and dignity to the tarnished role of the confessional singer/songwriter.”

With the release of *XO* the following year, Smith used his major-label resources to expand his recording process while still maintaining a certain sense of DIY oppositionality. In response to indie purists who questioned his appearance at such a mainstream venue as the Oscars, he maintained a disarming sincerity. In describing the orchestral accompaniment by Danny Elfman, he said, “It was easier than I thought. I was surrounded by perfectly tuned notes instead of my normally untuned guitar.” Rather than scoffing at the overt commerciality of Celine Dion, Smith described her as “super supportive” and “the nicest person I’ve met in a while.” He even lashed out at members of the underground community for their close-mindedness in the issue: “Afterward I’d get these indie-rock kids saying, ‘I can’t believe you had to hold Celine Dion’s hand.’ I said, ‘I liked holding her hand because she’s a nice person. In fact, right now you’re, being much more narrow-minded and shallow than she is.’” With this stance, Smith invoked a down-to-earth honesty that didn’t worry about aligning with a particular punk, indie, or alternative orthodoxy. He used a similar no-nonsense logic in justifying the use of pop sounds and styles in *XO*: “I was paying more attention to the musical side of things than I had

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71 Matthew Fritch, “Down on the Upside,” *Magnet,* September/October 1998, 59; Chris Mundy, “Misery Loves Elliott,” *Rolling Stone,* 3 September 1998, 48. It should be noted, however, that Smith maintained an aversion to insincere, over-production of the Academy Award production process. In one particularly evocative example, he explained that the producers had several over-wrought ideas to present him on stage, including the “idea for me to sit on the steps of the stage—like a down-home jamboree. ‘C’mon people, follow me along in this song. I’m just hunkerin’ down on the steps.’ That was just ridiculous.” See Fritch, “Down on the Upside,” 59.

before, just because I could. . . . There was going to be more tracks and resources, and it was an opportunity to build up a bigger soundscape.”

Yet the production myth of Smith’s pop orchestrations and multi-tracking lent a sense of personal intimacy and material experience to the sounds. The roughness of their vintage analog instrumentation allowed the pop sounds to evoke an almost supernatural aura of the past. Critics noted that Smith’s multi-tracked vocals sing “like the ghost of Nilsson backed by a glee club of adolescent Brian Wilsons who reel you in,” while the instrumental arrangement “sequesters Smith with handmade sounds that last appeared no more recently than the 1960s.” There was an over-riding sense of historicity, with one reviewer describing the record as sounding like “a lost follow-up to Revolver.” At the same time, the home-production feel and quirky turns of British-Invasion-era pop created a charming intimacy and sentimentality. Magnet noted that “Smith’s greatest achievement was making fans of his ‘Northwestern basement’ period believe that, just as they cuddled up to his stark indie records to commune with a similarly damaged psyche, they could do the same with the strings, piano, and horn that elegantly furnish XO. Hugging an orchestra never felt less awkward.”

Furthermore, the Beatles-era pop sounds allowed Smith to aestheticize and recreate the human experience of pop listening. When asked about the creative impetus for songwriting and production, he said, “If I could write something that made me feel the way I do when I hear my


favorite songs that other people wrote, that would be my dream come true.” He connected this act of listening to questions of humanity itself: “It might be good or it might be bad, but I’m gonna show what it’s like to be a person.” This human approach to mediation surfaces in his descriptions of XO. He singled out the Beatles’ _Magical Mystery Tour_ as a key influence, not only for its songs and melodies, but for its “cool, murky quality.” The quirks of old records were something he sought to bring out in his own music. He spoke of the sonic eccentricities of “sappy” old pop—referring to the Carpenters, Bread, and Burt Bacharach—and its usefulness in contemporary musical creativity: “Whatever one person thinks is ridiculous might not be ridiculous to somebody else, and you can take it out of that ridiculous situation and put it in your own ridiculous situation. Which I plan to do.”

In listening to XO, we hear not only vintage pop styles—melodic hooks, stepwise harmonic progressions, and bouncy Mersey Beat quarter-note rhythms—but also vintage-sounding production circumstances. The piano, for example, often sounds distant, with limited frequency range—consider the tracks “Pishele” and “Oh Well, OK.” This contrasts with the

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79 Pamela Chelin, “The Oscar-Nominated Songwriter and his Writing Process,” _The Big Takeover_ 43 (n.d.): 136–39, news clipping found in Kill Rock Stars Collection, ARC-0152, Box 12, Folder 9, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum Library and Archives. See also Colin Helms, “Elliott Smith: Bottled Up and Waiting to Explode,” _CMJ_, 31 August, 1998, 61. In a 1997 interview with _Tape Op_, Smith also spoke about having researched the Beatles’ production process, saying, “I got extremely interested in the technical stuff in the last year. I read all this stuff about the Beatles’ sessions, even though there’s no way to recreate those kind of sounds now.” “Elliott Smith,” _Tape Op_ (n.d.): 16, magazine clipping found in Kill Rock Stars Collection, ARC-0152, Box 12, Folder 8, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum Library and Archives.


81 Elliott Smith, _XO_, CD (Dreamworks DRMD-50048, 1998).
close-miked, sibilant-heavy vocal sound, which gives a sense of proximity and intimacy. When placed against the immediacy of the vocals, these bygone pop accompaniments evoke a certain sense of timelessness. Sonically, it’s not entirely clear whether the piano part could have been recorded in a basement in 1998 or in a 4-track analog studio in 1967.

The murky sonics of the pop orchestrations are heightened by Smith’s incorporation of organ and keyboards. In the warbly Hammond B3 sound on “Baby Britain” and “Bled White,” for example, Smith not only created a sense of mediated distance (similar to that just discussed in terms of piano), but also highlighted the materiality of the analog instrument itself. Each of these tracks uses the organ in the context of a broader rock orchestration, with layers of guitar, vocals, drums, and bass—evoking the lushness of 1960s-era pop experimentation. But at the end of both of these tracks, after all of the other instruments had dropped out, we hear the final organ note alone to reveal its analog imperfection. The effect is especially strong in “Bled White,” where the higher partials of the organ tone move in and out of earshot with the spinning of the Leslie speaker. As the note sustains toward the end of the track, the spinning intensifies for a moment—an instance of the material fallibility of the apparatus. In an era when digital effects had become broadly available at the push of a button, Smith thus sonically emphasized the actual presence of the Leslie speaker and its effects on sound in real time.

**Jon Brion’s Performative Contributions**

One musician who contributed to *XO* was Jon Brion—multi-instrumentalist, producer, studio musician, and “golden boy of the L.A. music scene.” He had recently produced critically-acclaimed albums by Aimee Mann and Rufus Wainwright, and would soon produce Fiona

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Apple’s much-lauded sophomore album, *When the Pawn...* (1999). Since 1997, Brion had been playing weekly gigs at the Largo club in Los Angeles, giving largely-improvised performances to a star-studded crowd—including Elliott Smith, Fiona Apple, Grant-Lee Phillips, and Michael Stipe—who would sometimes join him on stage for impromptu performances. In describing his performance demeanor, Brion sought to avoid using a stale routine: “Whoever the band is, I’m not seeing you, I’m seeing you go through your motions of ‘performing’ for me. . . . I’d like to give people an alternative: Falling on your face is actually an interesting thing for an audience to see!”

Even more than his penchant for improvisation and spontaneity in performance, Brion was known for his collection of “half-busted synthesizers.” He was “the weird keyboard guy” who would wrangle with his vintage instruments to find unique sounds. One critic described his shows at the Largo as being akin to a mad scientist in his laboratory:

> It’s Friday night, and Jon Brion is doubled over, looking a bit mad about the eyes. He’s fiddling with the knobs on a box that sits on the floor. The box begins to produce sounds—at first a gauzy sort of scratching, then a steady stream of woolly beats. . . . Finally satisfied with the swarm of frayed sound loops he’s managed to coax from the box, Brion raises his lanky body and turns his attention to a Yamaha home organ perched on the tiny, cluttered stage. . . . Brion runs the old organ through a couple of fuzz boxes, making the usually braying keyboard squeal and sparkle. Suddenly a lush melody pours off the stage, and Brion’s eye brows rise with the swell of gorgeous notes. He seems to have surprised himself and quickly stretches for another keyboard.

Brion’s desire to discover, deconstruct, and re-arrange vintage sounds and equipment helped him shape his signature sound and reputation—including pop timbres and textures while

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maintaining a experimental DIY spontaneity. And Elliott Smith’s fans took note. According to one fanzine author, “Elliott’s most recent affiliation with the LA scene, and more specifically Jon Brion, has given him the proper tools to expand his craft without any sense of exploitation or insincerity. . . . Everything from strings, vocal overdubs, drums, piano, and the assorted odd keyboard instrument Mr. Brion keeps in his pocket helps paint Elliott’s world.”

Brion appeared on three tracks of XO, playing his signature Chamberlin organ. The Chamberlin—an American-made predecessor to the Mellotron—produced music by having each key activate a pre-recorded sound on audiotape. Its string, wind, and vocal sounds can create lush, if somewhat quirky orchestrations. When used in the context of modern production, its grainy sounds evoke the warmth of a bygone era of pop, rock, and prog styles. XO’s “Waltz #1” and “Bottle Up and Explode!” use the Chamberlin in this way, with Brion contributing a syrupy, lo-fi warmth to the mix.

For the penultimate track of the album, “Everybody Cares, Everybody Understands,” Brion gave a different type of contribution. The lyrics of the song consist of an angry tirade against the ill-received “synthetic sympathies” of well-intentioned friends—presumably in reference to Smith’s often-discussed struggles with depression, drug abuse, and mental illness. The song’s two verses sing over acoustic guitar, ending with a pointed imperative: “You say you mean well. You don’t know what you mean. You fuckin’ ought to stay the hell away from things you know nothing about.” At this point, the track explodes into a full band, with electric guitars, drums, and bass. The Chamberlin organ enters with a flute melody, but the sound

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86 Pat Pierson, “Elliott Smith: XO,” Yeah Yeah Yeah 12 (n.d.): 40, clipping found in Kill Rock Stars Collection, ARC-0152, Box 12, Folder 10, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum Library and Archives.

87 For more on the history and use of the Chamberlin and Mellotron, see the documentary film Mellodrama: The Mellotron Movie, dir. Dianna Dilworth (Bazillion Points, 2009).
is run through a fuzzy distortion. Toward the end of the track we hear layers of guitar, piano, vocal harmonies, and strings, all added to the distorted flute sound on Chamberlin. The distortion gets heavier and more erratic, and the pitch becomes wobbly and unstable. Meanwhile, the strings proceed in a contrary-motion contrapuntal procession, with the upper and lower voices each moving toward its respective climax—perhaps a musical reference to the fade-out ending of the Beatles’ experimental-sounding “I Am the Walrus.” The combination of melodic intensification in the strings, rock-band jamming, and visceral freak-out in the vintage Chamberlin organ creates a chaotic sense of climax that seems to demonstrate the alienation and in-the-moment intensity of mental illness while maintaining the haunting familiarity of 1960s-era pop sounds and conventions.

Overall, Elliott Smith and Jon Brion’s work on XO demonstrate a late-1990s DIY engagement with pop sounds from the past. By resurrecting archaic sounds and practices into the murky, heavily mediated sound world of indie rock, they demonstrate an earnest aesthetic engagement that melds the personal authenticity of songwriters of the past with a self-assured, experimental punk confidence. The old pop sounds can carry these peculiarities of meaning because of the context in which they were engaged. Smith’s production myth combines a lo-fi and punk sense of technological self-sufficiency with his temporally-based fascination with records. The myth thus depends upon not only Smith’s ideological placement, his temporal placement in relation to the musical instruments, styles, and materials he is using.

**Vintage Materials in Hip-Hop: RZA and Lauryn Hill**

In this chapter’s discussion of resurrecting vintage sounds and media, we can likewise revisit some of the hip-hop trends addressed in Chapter Three. Of course, hip-hop production had
always relied on recycling and revitalizing existing sound materials (through sampling), and the historicity of the sound materials took on different types of significance throughout the development of the genre.\textsuperscript{88} Public Enemy’s production team, The Bomb Squad, for example, drew the historical significance of spoken-word samples from figures such as Malcolm X, and the old sound of vintage James Brown riffs and jazz horn stabs contributed to a type of historical irreverence that gave the music its vital energy.\textsuperscript{89} With the rising prominence of Dr. Dre and G-Funk in the early 1990s, the practice of re-performing classic Parliament/Funkadelic sounds on sine-wave analog synthesizers gave the music an anchor in the past while maintaining an immediate, contemporary tightness and clarity in production. And, as discussed at length in the previous chapter, Questlove and other “alternative hip-hop” artists delved deeply into pop music history to recreate traditional sounds and affect, while DJ Shadow and other high-minded beat-makers sought their particular atmospheric effects by patching together old materials to make something new. Joseph Schloss’s ethnography of hip-hop producers in the 1990s demonstrates the depth and nuance of this tradition, laying out particular rules and practices that dictate aesthetically legitimate ways to find, sample, and reconfigure material from old records into new hip-hop beats.\textsuperscript{90}

In practices of sonically foregrounding an active, material engagement with old sound media, RZA, producer in the Wu-Tang Clan, stands out. Beginning with their 1993 debut album, \textit{Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)}, the 9-member Wu-Tang crew gradually built a veritable hip-hop empire, with RZA producing a string of platinum-selling solo albums by various members of


\textsuperscript{89} Katz, \textit{Capturing Sound}, 160–65.

\textsuperscript{90} Schloss, \textit{Making Beats}, 101–68.
the group throughout the decade and beyond. By the mid-1990s, they had achieved widespread respect in both the hip-hop and alternative circles of discourse, landing on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in 1997 in anticipation of a much-hyped (but ultimately ill-fated) joint tour with Rage Against the Machine.⁹¹ RZA’s production style was famous for its disjunct eclecticism, sonically emphasizing tensions of competing rhythms that arise through loose juxtaposition. As RJ Smith described in *Spin*, RZA “courts confusion, looks for the mystery spot where sounds don’t quite harmonize, where a beat falls out of synch... He uses ill moments from a tune nobody else hears, or defaces a classic until it’s a piece of Coke-bottle sea glass. His music is a sleeping place that the resurrector brings to life, a funky-smelling wax museum.”⁹² At the same time, RZA’s recordings—while sounding something like warped, sonic histories of pop music—stand as documents of the creative production processes that went into them. RZA said, “The way I look at it is, whatever we do in that studio is a recorded part of our life.... Whatever happens, happens. Sometimes there’ll be all kinds of errors in the music, and to me it makes it sound fatter because you can never expect an error, or you wouldn’t make it.”⁹³ In this way, the hip-hop record sonically represents the musicians’ actions in the studio, thus allowing RZA to

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⁹² RJ Smith, “Phantoms of the Hip-Hopera,” *Spin*, July 1997, 74; Jon Pareles, in describing RZA’s production on Ghostface Killah’s album debut, used a similar description, noting classic, nostalgic songs that are recontextualized into a hip-hop harshness; the tracks, “are steeped in 1970’s soul, with relaxed Memphis drumbeats and touches of vocal-group harmony, including a guest appearance by the Delphonics. There’s no comfort in the old songs; hollowed out and layered with dissonance, they can’t shield listeners from street-level strife.” Jon Pareles, “Mad at Everybody, Including Themselves,” *New York Times*, 5 November 1996.

aestheticize the mistakes and rough edges that arise while piecing together mediated snippets of the past.⁹⁴

These attitudes toward revitalization of vintage sound materials are present in the texts, textures, and timbres of the music. The album Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers) is framed with audio clips from old kung-fu films, especially Shaolin and Wu Tang (the 1983 film from which they drew their name).⁹⁵ In this, the group established their own mythology—using “Shaolin” to denote their home borough of Staten Island—and sonically emphasized the importance of media consumption in their aesthetic. Spoken word clips and fighting sound effects appear throughout the album, whether as introductions, within tracks, or in the background of skits. The films they sampled all come from the late 1970s and early 1980s, bringing the compressed, messy sound of old, low-budget film technologies up against the chest-thumping immediacy of the album’s hip-hop beats. The group’s blurring of personal identification and media consumption draws upon similar ideals of roughness in mediation that we see in lo-fi from around the same period. By taking older films, they inject highly mediated sounds and narratives into a mythologized present. This sense of chaotic timelessness in amplified by the nature of the other samples on the record. For example, on “Clan in the Front,” a Thelonious Monk piano sample (from “Ba-Lue Bolivar Ba-Lues-Are” on the 1957 LP Brilliant Corners) is used as an angular melodic loop. The piano’s bright tone quality provides a timbral contrast to the track’s crunchy drum loop and

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⁹⁴ Wu-Tang member Ol’ Dirty Bastard likewise spoke of this process of resurrecting pieces of the musical past, but put it in the context of live performance. When asked about his style, he said, “It’s like opera mixed with hard-core hip-hop mixed with Patti LaBelle mixed with Janis Joplin. Everything is in one. . . . I’m comin’ with that ol’ Diana Ross and the Supremes shit. The Vandellas. Temptation-al shit. [Interviewer:] It’s like you’re pulling shit out of the grave. [ODB:] The grave! The grave! I’m pulling niggas out the grave! . . . You could see Al Green on the stage for a second, then he’ll disappear. Then you close eyes—boom, it’s Dirty again. Then I’ll go into Patti LaBelle. Then I’ll change it up.” Rob Marriott, “The Nutty Confessor,” Spin, July 1995, 59.

⁹⁵ Wu-Tang Clan, Enter the Wu-Tang.
punchy bass. In a later track of the album, “Da Mystery of Chessboxin’,” RZA adds a bright electric keyboard line whose disjunct melody, faux-childish harmonies, and erratic major-second dyads evoke the style of Monk. But this is obviously no sample, being messily performed and variable among repetitions. RZA thus takes certain aspects of the old sound of Monk—including its musical features and timbral qualities—and riffs upon them in an improvisatory way to make a dynamic, fresh-sounding background to the track.

The spoken sentiments on certain tracks of Enter the Wu-Tang likewise reinforce a sense of aesthetic weight through age. The openly nostalgic track “Can It Be All So Simple” begins with a street conversation about “back in the days,” with Wu-Tang members trying to decide whether 1979 or 1987 was the best year. The track then goes directly into a sample of Gladys Knight: “Hey, you know, everybody’s talking about the good old days, right? Everybody. The good old days, the good old days. Well, let’s talk about the good old days.” The track then uses her sung chorus, “Can it be that it was all so simple then?” as a refrain to the rhymes of a retrospective narrative of urban crime, drugs, and violence. Behind this reflective, gritty-but-nostalgic narrative, RZA uses the vintage bass sound of early-70s funk and a lo-fi warbly synthesized string melody. Thus, in the sound, the production, the samples, and the spoken rhymes, this track invokes a sense of knowledge and emotional strength gained from the lived experiences of urban life in the 1970s and ’80s.

This sensibility—of oldness itself lending aesthetic weight to the music—is echoed in a spoken line from Wu-Tang member Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s later solo record, Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version (1995). At the end of the track “Raw Hide” (which itself borrows a chorus and title from an early-1960s television show), he addresses the audience directly: “We gotta keep it fly for ya. See this ain’t somethin’ new, that’s just gonna come out of nowhere. No.
Using a play on words with his moniker, Ol’ Dirty Bastard makes a statement of the Wu-Tang production aesthetic. Something “new” would be at risk of simply having “come out of nowhere,” without being grounded in the established traditions of hip-hop and Black American experience. It’s the sense of the “old” and the “dirty” that gives the music its heft. Thus, when RZA mythologized the group’s work in the studio as “a recorded part of our life,” the oldness of the sounds and media—whether in kung-fu movies, musical snippets from vinyl, or a messy re-performance of vintage sounds—became an essential part of the processes of musical creation.

Lauryn Hill was another hip-hop artist who found wide exposure among alternative-oriented audiences in the late 1990s while emphasizing vintage media and production styles. Hill initially gained prominence as a member of the Fugees, whose 1996 album The Score became a smash hit, remaining in the Billboard top ten for more than six months. With its cover versions of songs by Roberta Flack and Bob Marley, the album did much to place itself within a broader historical trajectory of Black musical expression. As Charles Aaron wrote, “For anyone who’s followed hip-hop’s emergence as the most influential pop music of the past 20 years, it’s damn near stupefying to see that journey so effortlessly condensed on The Score.” In live performance, the Fugees likewise placed an emphasis on historical predecessors: like the Roots, they too performed medleys of hip-hop history into their shows, giving live-instrument recreations of hip-hop classics. In Hill’s public description of her own musical development as a

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96 Ol’ Dirty Bastard, Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version, CD (Elektra 61659-2, 1995).


98 There was apparently some tension between the two groups, with the notion that the Fugees had pilfered the Roots’s idea. Questlove claimed the tensions were resolved with the two groups toured together in spring of 1996. See Mike Rubin, “No Turntables and a Microphone.” See also Sacha Jenkins, “Ready Or Not.”
child, she placed old records as central. Describing her discovery of her mother’s basement collection of 45s (including Gladys Knight, Donny Hathaway, and Curtis Mayfield), she noted that “I haven’t slept in my bed since, like ’86 or ’87. . . . I got these big-ass headphones with leather cushions and went to sleep on the floor listening to music. I became, like, the musical historian. My family would go, ‘Lauryn, baby, who wrote that song, that “Hypnotized”?’ And I’d be like, ‘Linda Jones, 1967.’”\(^{99}\)

Hill’s vocal skills went well beyond rapping by incorporating rich melodies of the past that evoked historical styles of soul and R&B. In this, she aligned with the new trend of “neo-soul” artists such as D’Angelo and Erykah Badu, who, in the words of Ann Powers, “savor the essence” of old soul sounds and styles while updating the music for new audiences “in the service of soul’s integrationist spirit.”\(^{100}\) Toward the end of the decade, these neo-soul artists incorporated more and more signifiers of oldness in to their portrayal of vintage musical styles. Consider, for example, Erykah Badu’s 2000 album Mama’s Gun, which not only incorporated 1970s-sounding organ, wah-wah guitar, flute, bongos, and Philadelphia Soul-styled strings, but used the packaging and design to take on the visual patina of the era. The album cover used a funky post-psychedelic font in subdued tones of orange, red, and olive green, and featured a darkly-shadowed close-up photo of Badu in a vintage-looking knit tam.\(^{101}\) Lauryn Hill likewise used fashion and style as a way to place herself aesthetically: Spin coverage of a 1999 concert described her style as “‘70s chic,” with a “crocheted poncho, brown leather pants, five-inch

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\(^{101}\) Erykah Badu, Mama’s Gun, CD (Motown, 153 259-2, 2000). These sonic elements can be heard particularly in the tracks “Penitentiary Philosophy,” “My Life,” and “Hey Sugah—Interlude.” It should also be noted that many of the tracks on this album were co-produced by Questlove, which relates to the discussion in Chapter Three regarding his and the Roots’s importance on the history of hip-hop and Black musical expression.
heels, and dread-filled white tam,” thus demonstrating that “it was obvious she wasn’t putting the past behind her.”\textsuperscript{102}

Hill’s material engagement with the past—through sounds, styles, clothing, and media—became a central part of her 1998 solo album debut, \textit{Miseducation of Lauryn Hill}.\textsuperscript{103} The album is built around a skit sequence that gives a faux-documentary sense of a classroom setting: beginning with a school-bell and roll call, the teacher marks each student as present, then pauses on “Lauryn Hill”—with no response. The later skits proceed as a classroom discussion, with the teacher asking students to explain what “love” means to them. As background music to the skits, Hill uses various older musical styles, from Hammond B3 organ (at the end of “Lost Ones”) to funky electric piano with tremolo guitar (at the end of “To Zion”), to easy-listening flute melodies and Motown style vocal harmonies (at the end of “Forgive them Father”). The skits thus depict a sort of autobiography missed—an imagined past that Hill could have experienced, but didn’t.

The musical styles of the album reinforce this nostalgia for the past. Choosing to work as the album’s sole producer, Hill brought in diverse musical worlds through her varied instrumentation—creating what Greg Kot called “a savvy mix of . . . early-Seventies songcraft and late-Nineties beats.” Hill herself described \textit{Miseducation} as “a hip-hop album that has the roots, the integrity, and the sound of an old record.”\textsuperscript{104} In preparing for recording, she stocked


\textsuperscript{103} Lauryn Hill, \textit{Miseducation of Lauryn Hill}, CD (Ruffhouse Records C2 69035, 1998).

her studio with “every instrument I had ever heard on a record,” including a harpsichord, timpani, trombone, and Hammond B3 organ.\footnote{Ibid., 43; see also Christopher John Farley, “Lauryn Hill,” \textit{Time}, 8 February 1999, 50.}

With this diversity of instruments, she evoked not only the styles, but the production materials of the older music. “Doo Wop (That Thing)” uses bright, plucky piano chords with doo-wop vocal harmonies and horn accents. “Superstar” uses a harpsichord to evoke the 1960s pop instrumental experiments, while repurposing the words and melody from the Doors’ “Light My Fire.” Her ode to urban nostalgia, “Every Ghetto, Every City,” uses vintage instrument sounds to accompany reminiscent descriptions of her childhood. The track begins with a funky Clavinet and hand-claps, and later verses incorporate Hammond B3 stabs and another layer of funky electric piano. “Forgive them Father” invokes the reggae tradition, with lush horn and organ harmonies, accentuated with punchy guitar and bass. With all of these examples, it is not only important that she is borrowing from older musical styles—which would be an essential aspect of most any form of musical expression; her production goes to great lengths to re-create the particular sonic nuance of older production styles and instruments. By paying attention to these particularities of sound, she evokes the visceral sense of materiality in their production.

Still, \textit{The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill} plays upon the sounds of the old instruments in a distinctly contemporary context. This recontextualization of various eras of music production creates a sense of musical engagement in mediation, while also giving a mythologized “timeless” veneer to the sound of the record. The album’s final track, “Miseducation of Lauryn Hill,” evokes upon this sense of oldness even more overtly, applying repetitive vinyl pops and clicks onto the classic pop instrumentation of string orchestrations, electronic synthesizer arpeggios, piano, and organ.
Two of the music videos from *Miseducation*, “Doo-Wop (That Thing)” and “Everything is Everything,” reinforce this stylized portrayal of vintage materials and mediation.106 “Doo-Wop” plays out with the screen divided into halves: the left side of the screen takes place in New York in 1967, and the right side in 1997. Having two Lauryn Hills sing simultaneously—with a beehive hairdo and a chrome microphone on the one side, and dreadlocks, a denim shirt, and a cordless mic on the other—creates a temporal destabilization. It suggests the message of the song is timeless by reinforcing the music’s transcendent existence. As the track fades out, the two singers even sing a duet, with 1967 Lauryn singing a melismatic R&B melody and 1997 Lauryn rapping underneath. The video for “Everything is Everything” takes different approach. Using computer effects, it transforms the entire island of Manhattan into a turntable platter—with the Empire State Building as spindle and the Brooklyn Bridge as the tonearm. A 10-story cartridge and needle runs along the city streets to play the musical track. These two videos aestheticize the idea vintage mediation by giving a fantastical experience of the technologies and materialities of a musical past.

Lauryn Hill thus took a playful, creative approach toward emphasizing vintage sounds, media, and styles. Touré of *Rolling Stone* described *Miseducation* as a creative representation of the past, “a talking book that tells the history of soul, R&B, reggae, and hip-hop.” Hill’s sense of narrative construction thus blurred the boundary between revival, mythologization of the past, and temporal immediacy. Questlove described Hill in a way that played upon this type of significance even further, using the then-20-year-old *Star Wars* films as a frame from which to simultaneously draw a fictional analogue of historicity while lauding her landmark musical

creativity and production: “Black music right now is like this whole Star Wars battle. . . . There are very few people who are on the side of art and are goin’ up against the Death Star. D’Angelo is Luke Skywalker. Prince, Stevie, James, Marvin and George are our Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi. And, most definitely, Lauryn is Princess Leia.”

Uncanny Orchestrations: The Flaming Lips’ The Soft Bulletin

Flaming Lips likewise employed the sounds of vintage pop in the late 1990s—bringing echoes of the pop past into a psychedelic, experiential celebration of the present. The group began their long career in the 1980s, gaining a reputation in underground rock for their intense live shows and “free-form freakouts.” Even in 1994, after the release of their hit single “She Don’t Use Jelly,” Neil Strauss of Rolling Stone described the Flaming Lips as a group that delivered “a winning thrash performance that fills every venue’s second-stage area.” By the mid-1990s, they had moved toward more bizarre sonic experimentation, staging public “boom-box experiments”—in which they would “conduct” a group of audience members outfitted with synchronized cassette-tapes—and releasing Zaireeka, a multi-disc album meant to be played simultaneously on four separate CD players to create a sort of DIY quadraphonic experience. With Zaireeka, the Flaming Lips sought to aestheticize the music consumer’s listening experience; it forced CD listening to be a process of technological and social engagement. As producer Dave Fridmann said in a 2000 interview, “We wanted it to be more interactive. . . . It’s

110 These activities are examined in the documentary film The Fearless Freaks, dir. Bradley Beesley DVD (Shout Factory, 2005).
very difficult for one person to even hear the record: you need to have some people there. It’s not something you can passively sit down and do. We hope that people will get more involved in it. You can just get some boomboxes, a couple of friends, and have a good time.”

From the Zaireeka sessions came the Flaming Lips’ critical breakthrough album The Soft Bulletin, released in 1999. It received widespread acclaim for its singular mixture of prog-rock grandiosity and heartfelt lyrical sincerity; while its lush, vintage-keyboard orchestrations created a sonic landscape to fit its cosmic thematic scope. Singer Wayne Coyne described the album as “experimental music done with commercial music. I like to call it a ‘psychological pop record.’” We can recognize the pop sensibility of The Soft Bulletin perhaps most clearly when comparing it to the music of the 1970s easy-listening duo, the Carpenters. (Flaming Lips drummer and multi-instrumentalist Steven Drozd later said, “My ideal for kick-ass rock’n’roll or psychedelia was pretty heavy, but deep down, I also loved seventies Carpenters and stuff like that.”) For example, we could compare the opening harp and string orchestration of Carpenters’ “Superstar” with that of The Soft Bulletin’s “A Spoonful Weighs a Ton;” or the vocal “aahs” of Carpenters’ “For All We Know,” with their prominent major-seventh chord, with similar effects in The Soft Bulletin’s “The Spark that Bled.” Critics described The Soft Bulletin’s mixture of old and new sounds as an imaginative, creative engagement with the past. Michael Segal of Alternative Press described the “layers of beautiful orchestration” in the Lips’ sound as “Neil Young’s After the Goldrush transmogrified into the Beatles’ Strawberry Fields

111 San Inglis, “David Fridmann.”


"Forever session," while its peculiar brand of psychedelia was able to “color kaleidoscopically outside of these lines . . . meshing the antique with the futuristic, the jolting with the pleasant, and the somber with the orgasmic.”¹¹⁵ Eric Weisbard in the Village Voice described its orchestrations as “an updating of Pet Sounds helped by 30 years of tech,” and Barney Hoskyns at Spin similarly described it as sounding like “Brian Wilson remixed by [1990s electronic musician] µ-ziq.”¹¹⁶ In these descriptions (similar to those discussed above in regard to Stereolab or Lauryn Hill), we see a creative reworking and rewriting of pop music history.

This sense of historical play is augmented by the curious, carefree approach the group conveyed in describing their production process. Having recorded the album at Tarbox Road Studios, Dave Fridmann’s home studio in upstate New York, the band openly acknowledged that they had given themselves plenty of time to experiment in making the record. The liner notes state that it was recorded between April 1997 and February 1999. Coyne described this drawn-out process neither as a high-minded quest for artistic greatness nor as a meticulous crafting of a commercially viable product. He described it, rather, as a curious meandering through a sonic forest, saying, “It isn’t like we have this standard set of sounds . . . . We just start to do things . . . . It really is like walking through a forest and saying, ‘Look at all these good trees!’ and not really knowing where you’re going.”¹¹⁷ In essence, the production myth for The Soft Bulletin was one of a group of musicians combining old and new technologies of pop production to tinker with the sounds of the orchestral palette, working and reworking them into their own idiosyncratic alt-symphonic masterpiece.

In this strange mix of old sounds in a new-fangled context, the Flaming Lips aurally asserted their independent creative presence by rendering the orchestral accompaniments with unmistakable stamps of studio mediation. Immediately in the opening track, for example, the two voices of a synthesizer string melody are digitally pitch-bent, creating a neighbor-tone effect [0:02–0:34]. This bend is executed at a slightly different timing among phrases, and each voice differs independently within the phrase—as if the entire first and second violin sections of an orchestra had executed a neighbor tone figure unnaturally identically within sections, but out of sync between sections. This effect immediately signifies to the listener both artificiality (in the unnaturalness of the bend) and human agency (in its irregularity). This effect highlights the performative aspects of the studio work by giving a sense of liveness and unpredictability to a synthesized violin line.

Background vocal harmonies reveal more of the Flaming Lips’ overt technological manipulation. In “A Spoonful Weighs a Ton,” high-pitched vocal samples double the root and fifth of a subdominant chord, sustained over changing harmonies in the orchestra [0:50–1:04]. The pitches of these notes are microtonally inflected—they begin just under pitch, then bend just above. Much like in the string melody I just mentioned, although the effect is one of a virtual ensemble of musicians, the microtonal inflection is unnaturally exact. The overall effect is one of displacement and instability, adding a layer of weirdness to an otherwise straightforward orchestral accompaniment.

The violins in the track “Suddenly Everything Has Changed” likewise betray a peculiar set of musical priorities. After the song’s title phrase, floating strings enter over orchestral brass [0:54–1:13]. The string sound is heavily processed, with its low frequencies filtered and its amplitude maxed out, creating a slightly distorted antique effect, complete with faint pops and
clicks. In spite of this meticulous processing, the MIDI envelope of each violin note is left easily audible. Unlike a real string section where melodic notes flow smoothly into each other, each note in this track has the identically delayed attack so characteristic of hastily compiled synthesized strings. It thus seems the Flaming Lips had specific, painstakingly applied production values. Trying to make the violin samples sound like real instruments simply wasn’t one of them.

By constantly asserting their idiosyncratic creative presence in *The Soft Bulletin*, the Flaming Lips remind the listener that the orchestral elements weren’t simply “commercial sweetening” from a run-of-the-mill studio recording session, but an eccentric exploration of sonic experience. In this way, they can evoke the nostalgic, accessible elements of orchestral pop while still maintaining a sense of the homemade, unselfconscious individuality that has always been the group’s hallmark.

But how does this production myth contribute to the album’s larger aesthetic objectives? *The Soft Bulletin’s* overall narrative tends to emphasize the efficacy of everyday mundane experience. Although the album begins with scientists “racing for the good of all mankind,” it soon reinforces the small-scale human elements, noting that “they’re just humans with wives and children.” The lyrics describe life-changing moments that occur while putting away the vegetables, driving home, or folding the laundry. Coyne alluded to this sensibility when he said of the album, “I want you to listen to it while you’re eating a sandwich. . . . Ideas can be of all qualities. That’s the magic of music. It doesn’t have to be about complicated things. . . . I do think normal life is extraordinary.”

At the same time, *The Soft Bulletin* assumes a cosmic

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scope, making quasi-philosophical observations about the struggles and essential incongruities of human existence. Coyne said the album is “about love and death and the gap in between.”\textsuperscript{119} In one of the central tracks of the album, for example, he used the super-hero archetype to address the limitations of human capacity, singing, “Tell everybody waiting for Superman that they should hold on the best they can. He hasn’t dropped them, forgot them, or anything. It’s just too heavy for Superman to lift.” The album’s climactic track, “The Gash,” depicts a “last volunteer” who battles against overwhelming obstacles. In the midst of this, Coyne’s lyrics address the disillusionment of the modern condition, asking, “Will the fight for our sanity be the fight of our lives, when we’ve lost all the reasons that we thought that we had?” This climax is followed by an experiential resolution, of simply “feeling yourself disintegrate.” In this loose narrative, \textit{The Soft Bulletin} investigates the limits of the human condition—boundaries between the experienced and the unknown.

\textit{The Soft Bulletin}’s stylized orchestrations provide a perfect vehicle for conveying these themes. First of all, they reify everyday experience by evoking genres that had become cliché—commercial music heard for decades in grocery aisles, department stores, and elevators. Furthermore, the invocation of orchestral instruments emphasizes organic elements in the narrative. After all, there is something very human about the sound production of the orchestra: the weight of a musician’s arm drawing bow-hair across a violin string, itself strung over a hand-carved wooden cavity; or, lips and lungs forcing air between two pieces of a meticulously-carved cane oboe reed. On the other hand, the electronic reordering processes of keyboard-based sampling suggest the themes of modern disenchantment and bewilderment. They take the human

elements of the orchestra and fit them into a new aural mold—humanity recast into an artificial, modern condition.

Perhaps these aesthetic characteristics can be best addressed using the concept of the *uncanny*. Freud described the uncanny as the “class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us—once very familiar.” As examples, he gave a life-size puppet with human eyes, “a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist . . . [and] feet which dance by themselves.”

An essential aspect of the uncanny was that it must transgress reasonable expectations of occurrence. An object, however familiar it might be, became uncanny when one realizes that it isn’t *supposed* to be there. In the more recent discourse of contemporary art, the uncanny has been used in relation to the notion of the sublime—in the sense of an encounter with the limits of human perception or contemplation. A discussion between artist Mike Kelly and academic Thomas McEvilley echoes Coyne’s description of *The Soft Bulletin* as being about “love and death and the gap in between.” McEvilley describes the uncanny as “the interface between life and death . . . animate and inanimate. . . . You propose to show that form from which life has just departed—or might be just about to depart—into that hypothetical beyond. So you’re showing the small formed reality into which the sublime is ingressing.” Kelley responds by describing the uncanny as “coming from the natural limitations of our knowledge; when we are confronted with something that’s beyond our limits of acceptability . . . then we have this feeling of the uncanny.”

In the DIY orchestrations of *The Soft Bulletin*, the Flaming Lips dismembered and reanimated the sounds of the orchestra. Because its textures reveal an uncanny resemblance to

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formerly ubiquitous pop styles, *The Soft Bulletin* suggests a re-evaluation of the meaning and context of everyday experience. Its uncanny effects create an atmosphere of peculiarity, uncertainty, and wonder—an atmosphere especially well-suited to the exploration of the boundaries between humanity and whatever lies beyond.

A final intriguing aspect of the orchestrations in *The Soft Bulletin* is their absence in the concluding track. Sampled orchestral sounds appear consistently throughout the album—through its depictions of struggle, love, vulnerability, awakening, and existential resolve. After the ego-annihilation of “Feeling Yourself Disintegrate” comes the final track, “Sleeping on the Roof.” Reverb-drenched electronic sounds float over a background of crickets and insects, presumably depicting a state of post-existence—of whatever comes after the disintegration of the self. This last track features none of the orchestral accompaniments of the earlier portions of the record—no strings, brass, or wind instruments. These sampled instruments—in their liminal state of being, both human and electronic, organic yet digitally modified—seem to have been an essential element to the narrative of human struggle against the unknown. Once the battle has been finished—the self let go—these orchestrations have no place in the musical texture.

In the context of an alternative culture that was reviving various vintage pop styles in the second half of the 1990s, the title of *The Soft Bulletin* takes on particular significance. The title apparently comes from the track “The Spark that Bled,” where the narrator notices his head has been bleeding, having been hit by “the softest bullet ever shot.” A play on words converts this “soft bullet in the head” to a “soft bulletin.” Of course, the very idea of a “soft bullet” is somewhat contradictory. A bullet shoots and penetrates—actions diametrically opposed to the notion of softness. *The Soft Bulletin* establishes a similar contradiction, taking “soft” musical
styles of old-fashioned easy listening and orchestral pop, but refashioning them into an alternative rock album of musical directness.

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This chapter has sought to untangle some of the peculiarities of late 1990s retro sensibilities, looking at specific ways that tensions between new and old technologies can carry significant semiotic potential. To conclude, we can lay out a categorization that will perhaps shed more light on the performative and material tensions at play. In musicians’ use of vintage materials and styles, we can see oscillation between ideals of re-creation and recreation. The former is the idea of being true in every practical way to a historical past—to the sounds and practices of a particular tradition in a particular time. This approach could constitute an earnest critique of the present state of music production methods and technologies, a nostalgic escape to the past, or an ironic sense of detachment through historical revivalism. The latter, recreation, implies non-goal-directed play, the idea of an artist completing creative actions for their own sake. This includes acts of tinkering and aimless sonic experimentation. In this approach, vintage instruments could be prized for the peculiarity of their sounds—the accidental faults introduced by analog technologies—as well as for the exclusivity of being able to physically handle a hard-to-find historical artifact. The parallel impulses of re-creation and recreation allowed various avenues for artists to explore the sense of material oldness in music production.

As these dual ideals played out among the artists and trends covered in this chapter, we can discern rich and evocative myths of production—myths that capitalized on a sense of creativity, exploration, and engagement with the materiality of the past. Within a context of the self-conscious aesthetic reconfigurations of the lounge revival, Tarantino’s evocative cinematic
depictions relied upon the viewer’s vicarious experience of retro music media consumption. Bands such as Neutral Milk Hotel and Stereolab framed vintage media engagement with an almost supernatural sense of rewriting the teleology of pop music history. Elliott Smith—within the context of a punk re-appropriation of old pop—fixated on the experience of listening to classic records, and sought to re-create this aura by sonically foregrounding the fallibility of analog production and media in his own music. The hip-hop examples likewise drew upon popular music’s rich material history: RZA mythologized the LP’s place in hip-hop creativity by allowing the sounds of studio sampling and record manipulation to represent “a recorded part our life,” while Lauryn Hill wove the technological frameworks of turntables, vinyl, and vintage instruments into a fantastical representation of personal, cultural, and musical history. And the Flaming Lips reshaped the vintage sounds of orchestral pop into uncanny soundscapes, sonically highlighting creative exploration through media manipulation. In all of these examples, the artists’ music sonically evoked, not only the sounds of vintage music, but also the experience of engaging with the materials that constitute that music. Thus—in the waning years of a century full of technological advancements in musical recording, listening, and production—listeners could hear artists engaging with the materiality of old technologies as part of a creative reclamation of pop music history.
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, the framework of process-oriented aesthetics has shown a way to account for the role of sound recording technologies in the aesthetics of rock listening. By positing the idea of production myths, it has delineated modes of listening that connect conceptions of production process from the music’s surrounding discourse with the sounds as heard on records. This has allowed us to discern particular modes of listening and shows how sets of meaning can develop and change among various circles of culture and discourse.

As seen in Chapter Two, lo-fi discourse connected rough-hewn, technologically-mediated musical sounds to specific ideologies of its time—whether a non-commercial artistic liberation found through only using “appropriate technologies,” a romanticism of finding an artistic expression unencumbered by external corporate meddling, or a self-conscious type of artistry that revels in meaningful layers of sonic imperfection. We saw how gendered conceptions of technology and agency played out significantly in all this, whether overtly in PJ Harvey’s use of lo-fi as an assertion of feminine empowerment in the face of masculine studio control, or more implicitly in Beck’s use of technological tinkering, mediation, and experimentation as a way to assert a quirky, bizarre aesthetic response to the emotional heaviness of the recently-mainstreamed grunge genre. Lo-fi asserted its discursive place in the 1990s by distinguishing itself from the larger trends in a burgeoning alternative rock culture. It repackaged sounds and practices that had been used in various ways throughout rock history—sounds of performative
roughness, foregrounded analog mediation, or constrictions of recording space—and injected them with a sense of hip currency within the current alt-rock conversation.

Chapter Three’s discussion of hip-hop sampling in alternative culture showed ways that a production myth can be transformed among various groups of audiences, critics, and listeners. The backstory of hip-hop beat-making was imbued with various sets of contested meaning. We saw invocations of postmodernist disjunction, illegal commercial subversion, and a hip knowingness of a foregrounded mediation. Process-oriented aesthetics allowed us to consider how these myths of production could both draw upon and subvert aspects of hip-hop’s African American history. The discourse surrounding the genres of alternative rap and trip-hop showed ways that critics and musicians navigated the racial, geographic, and technological, and aesthetic implications of this history. The Roots sought to further legitimize this past by taking the sonic tokens of sample-based mediation and elaborating upon them in a performance-based setting. They established, in performance and production, a conceptual back-and-forth among the sounds and concepts of sample-based practice. But they worked within and against a framework of alternative rap that had struggled to maintain a sense of cultural efficacy. DJ Shadow and trip-hop demonstrated ways that a discourse could seek to even more fundamentally transform the meanings and associations of a production myth, de-emphasizing the implications of racial, geographic, and socio-cultural identity and instead seeking to approach the music from a paradigm of aesthetic abstraction. In the discourse associated with DJ Shadow, the music ostensibly “speaks for itself;” thus working to minimize its racial, gendered, and geographic identifications. Overall, although Chapter Three may have not come up with a specific answer to “what hip-hop sampling meant in 1990s alternative culture;” it untangled many of the particular

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tensions and contestations of meaning surrounding the culture’s engagement with hip-hop sampling.

With Chapter Four, we saw how the materiality and age of musical instruments, production equipment, or media could become essential to modes of listening. Within a broader retro sensibility, 1990s alternative culture sought to transform the meaning and aesthetic experience associated with older forms of mediated musical expression. The lounge revival, “record collector rock,” and the “new easy listening” demonstrated examples of these aesthetic transformations. New production myths thus developed that relied specifically on the material experience of old media, whether in vintage analog synthesizers and organs, hip-hop’s repurposing of old LPs, or the act of reconfiguring the sounds of vintage pop orchestrations. Through the second half of the 1990s, with constant re-evaluations of frameworks of creative authenticity, alternative discourse brought these production processes into dialogue with its foregoing sense of media-centric knowingness—adding a layer of temporality to the culture’s fascination with meaningful media engagement.

Among the modes of listening discussed in this dissertation—and with the various ideological, political, or aesthetic ends they could lead to—it is essential to remember that process-oriented aesthetics does not prescribe any particular sets of meaning that a genre must convey. Rather, it conceptualizes how a listener could come to find these meanings. Alternative rock discourse—a concept that I have considered rather broadly, whether as experienced through the popular music press, as read in CD liner notes, as seen in music videos, or even as encountered in conversation with fellow fans—allowed a listener to take the sound of the music and imagine (or re-imagine) certain aspects of its production. To return to Robert Cantwell’s observation discussed in Chapter One, listening to recordings can become “a kind of musical
detective work . . . where the imagination must reach into the darkness surrounding the disembodied music to reveal the human forces that created it.”

The imagined processes of musical creating can then be imbued with various modes of political, cultural, aesthetic, and ideological meaning. This dissertation, by focusing on the correlation between music recording technologies and aesthetic sensibilities, did not prioritize untangling the ideological ends—the particularities of political or social meaning toward which process-oriented aesthetics have led. But it clearly delineated specific ways that the sounds of recorded music can interact with its surrounding discourse (broadly conceived) to reach these sets of meanings among different groups and types of listeners. This dissertation, then, has made room in analysis for considering music-critical discourse not only as reception history or as a source of factual or discursive frameworks, but also as helping set the conceptual field within which a listener can creatively and imaginatively engage with the sounds of popular music recordings.

My application of process-oriented aesthetics as an analytical framework has also allowed a reconsideration of some of the central tensions of meaning and authenticity in alternative-oriented music of the 1990s. On the one hand, these tensions centered on the authenticated ideals of small-scale production, a communal sense of participation in self-identified independent music networks, and an aversion to the commercial motives of large-scale business structures. On the other, the tensions highlighted the paradox of having a growing commercial market for these very notions of anti-commercial authenticity. The technology-based approach of process-oriented aesthetics has provided fresh perspectives on ways that alternative music and discourse navigated these tensions—moving beyond stale laments of the music’s commercial co-optation. It reveals modes of signification and interpretation that didn’t merely

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1 Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 155.
tolerate alternative music’s tensions of commercial authenticity, but thrived in them. By using Outka’s notion of the commodified authentic to address alternative-oriented sound recordings, we see that the music’s non-commercial ideals can become significant because of—rather than in spite of—its mass-mediated framework. From this perspective, it makes sense that alternative music continued to grow and develop throughout the 1990s—even among its unresolved tensions of authenticity. The “noncommercial commerce” (to borrow Outka’s term) of 1990s alternative music proved remarkably viable.

Furthermore, process-oriented aesthetics has allowed us to consider how diverse styles of music draw upon common aesthetic sensibilities. Because the alternative music phenomenon of the 1990s encompassed many genres, attitudes, and motivations, we would not expect all alternative-identified styles in the 1990s to share stylistic or ideological characteristics. But among these differences, we saw striking similarities in how production myths functioned in the discourse. All of these genres fostered an active, critical attitude toward listening, requiring fans to nurture a knowledge of the background discourse, its ideals of authentication, and the significance of mediation to the music’s meaning. Regardless of the style, process-oriented aesthetics required listeners to bring something to the music. In spite of the music’s mass-mediated, commercial attributes, its vibrant production myths allowed listeners to make the music their own. This point is key to connecting process-oriented aesthetics to broader tensions and developments of 1990s alternative rock. It connects the aesthetic sensibilities discussed throughout this dissertation to Weisbard’s 1994 description of indie as a set of values in which “the distance between fanship and participation was no distance at all, so one could be a consumer without the traditional associations of gross commodification, audience passivity, and
Along the same lines, it connects to Cateforis’s description of alternative as espousing a sense of agency: “An alternative is something that is not what is prescribed. . . . It implied that you cared enough or were invested enough to go out of your way to find something off the beaten path.”

Process-oriented aesthetics as manifest in 1990s alternative culture provided a means of incorporating the ideals of active, participatory consumer agency into the consumption and appreciation of mass-mediated music.

This dissertation’s application of process-oriented aesthetics has relied on the particular historical, cultural, technological, and ideological circumstances of 1990s alternative rock. Future work can consider the ways that production myths have functioned in other genres and cultures of popular music. Alternative music relied on a particular discourse of distinction between corporate commercialism and small-scale authenticity—and process-oriented aesthetics has allowed us to consider ways that music was able to incorporate aspects of this distinction into mediated musical expression. But these developments drew upon a complex history of popular music signification. Using the perspectives and approaches set forth in this dissertation, broader historical examination could reveal a more nuanced picture of the aesthetic role of sound recording technologies in the history of rock and pop. Furthermore, looking beyond the 1990s into the 21st century, we could consider how paradigm-shifting developments of MP3 distribution, web-based music criticism, YouTube, and streaming audio have brought changes in the ideological, political, and aesthetic meanings attached to the sounds of production technologies.

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3 Cateforis interview.
In the end, the framework of process-oriented aesthetics attempts to help us better understand how we listen to recorded music. By consciously considering the material circumstances through which people hear the music, the sources of discourse that listeners have historically had access, and the ways that this discourse has shaped broadly-conceived notions of the technologies of music production, we can better account for the central role of sound recording technologies—materially, ideologically, and aesthetically—in the development of popular music across the twentieth century and into the present.
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