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# Chasing Sound: Technology, Culture and the Art of Studio Recording from Edison to the LP

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**Chasing Sound: Technology, Culture and the Art of Studio Recording from Edison to the LP. Susan Schmidt Horning. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013. 320 pp. \$45.00 hardcover.**

In *Chasing Sound: Technology, Culture and the Art of Studio Recording from Edison to the LP*, Susan Schmidt Horning grants readers an intimate glimpse into the recording industry, focusing on the evolution of technical processes in this field. The history of sound recording, starting with the invention of analog processes at the end of the 19th century through the electronic innovations of the 1960s and 70s, and continuing digitally into the present day, has always been a field rooted as much in art as in technology, influencing musical culture and technological innovation simultaneously. This duality is ably navigated by Schmidt Horning in this engaging book.

An Associate Professor of History at St. John's University with research interests in the history of technology and science, sound studies, and popular culture, Schmidt Horning provides a diligent and thoughtful contribution to the history of the recording industry. Reflecting the fact that this profession has been long undervalued and records of its innovations and day-to-day processes have not always been retained for historical purposes, the vast majority of information in this book was collected not from archives or documentary evidence, but from more than 135 hours of recorded interviews with sound engineers, conducted by the author for her postgraduate dissertation. The well-presented, highly detailed narrative harvested from those oral histories is a valuable addition to the body of scholarship on the recording industry.

Recording sessions and the stories behind them are the stuff of legend and rock biography, potentially fascinating to any music lover, but the innovators behind each unglamorous alteration required to move the technology forward, and the technicians who were there all along to make sure each recording came out just right, have rarely been recognized by musicians, let alone the public, as an active part of the process. Each generation of studio engineer has interacted with, and often influenced directly, the legendary musicians of the time, in order to make sure they are recorded in the best way possible. In the analog days, this literally meant manipulating the singers and pushing them forward and back for low notes and high notes, or directing the location of band members so that their instrument would be correctly "mixed" relative to the rest of the group. Later on, it meant collaborating in an increasingly creative capacity on multi-track recordings, for instance on the innovative late-sixties albums "Pet Sounds" by the Beach Boys, or "Sgt. Pepper" by the Beatles, devising innovative methods to help the artists achieve the exact effect they desired.

Schmidt Horning's emphasis on the interaction between technology and art brings to mind Marshall McLuhan's oft-quoted maxim, that the "medium is the message," which can be taken literally in this instance. The physical medium on which a recording was made, the architecture of each studio, and the limitations of each era's technology, all affected what kinds of music could be recorded and popularized in each decade, and competition between studios drove the technology forward. Schmidt Horning presents this narrative with an extraordinary level of detail sure to charm pop culture scholars, music historians, and music fans alike, not to mention a niche audience of "audiotechnophiles" (i.e. fans of the recording equipment itself, lovers of the sound of music, processed through a recording, in its own right).

Containing 13 black and white photographs and five diagrams, more images would have been welcome as a way to visually chart the evolution of the technology and to enhance the human faces behind the

studio recording process. Each chapter has a helpful conclusion at the end, which sums up the detailed anecdotes from each chapter into more universal trends. Schmidt Horning includes copious endnotes as well as an essay on sources in which she narrates her process for compiling interviews and secondary sources for this book. This is a scholarly resource, potentially appealing to upper-division undergraduates and above, and to scholars on music history, pop culture, and American studies. Open the book to any page, read an anecdote about one studio engineer's interaction with an influential musician, then another, and another, and marvel at the intricacy of the art, the miracle that we can preserve and retrieve sounds from decades ago, and appreciate the individuals who worked so thanklessly for the love of the music.

Robin Potter is a Reference and Instruction Librarian at Santa Fe Community College Library.