Ethnography, Sound Studies and the Black Atlantic

A Conversation Between Michael Veal and Whitney Slaten

The following discussion between Michael Veal and Whitney Slaten emerged amidst Veal's presentations for Columbia's Center for Jazz Studies in the 2015-2016 academic year. Drawing from the current research of Veal and Slaten, as well as the recent work in sound studies, this discussion explores the status of the human in black popular music studies. It begins by tracing the significance of how Veal situates his subjects locally, yet also in dialogue with important centers of black popular music throughout the Atlantic. In the wake of oppressive histories that have associated black musical expression to the permanent objectifications of slavery, the discourse about Fred Moten's important analysis of Aunt Hester's scream as the supposed object's resistance, and sound studies' new turn to decenter social categories in favor of foregrounding sounds and sonic phenomena as objects, the second section asks the following question: how does post-humanism juxtapose with scholarship on black music? Considering the complexities associated with human and post-human approaches, the final section considers how blackness and labor figure in Slaten's ethnographic research on professional live sound engineering in New York City.

Michael Veal's Work

Whitney Slaten: Since reading *Dub* (Veal 2007) and reviewing it in 2008, and hearing you speak about your research as recently as the 2014 Tony Allen Center for Jazz Studies book talk, I've long admired your work—particularly the expansiveness of its presentation of a global and historical arc, that remains close in its intricate analyses of local and individual concerns. How would you describe this arc in your research? It does so well in complicating traditional ideas of area studies and it always has seemed so stable in representing the cultural dynamics of black music.

Michael Veal: I would say that there is a connection across the entire arc of my work, and my first three books exemplify what I work on, which might be described as black music, broadly construed. When my first book was published, people tried to position me as an Africanist. I consider myself an Africanist, but not only an Africanist. When my second book came out, people wanted to position me as a Caribbeanist or a Jamaicanist.

And I consider myself those things as well, but not only those. My current book project, which has to do with a specific period in the career of John Coltrane, is a jazz project with a strong Africanist underpinning, conceptually speaking. When that book is published—and I consider it to be the completion of a trilogy of sorts—I think the overall arc of my work will be clearer. So one reason that I've kind of operated under the radar until now is partially strategic on my part, but also because I haven't really been slotted into a received category that people can recognize per se. And over the long term, I think that's a good thing. It's enabled me to pursue my work in a more expansive way than I might have otherwise.

It's not only me. Other ethnomusicologists such as Ingrid Monson, Paul Austerlitz and others have what you might call multi-sited interests across the black world. They may have made their initial reputations as jazz scholars, Africanists or Caribbeanists, but they are moving around the black Atlantic in their research interests. And in fact many of the older American scholars of African music—I'm talking about people such as Charles Keil and Paul Berliner—came out of earlier interests in blues and jazz. Steven Feld, also. So it's really nothing new, but it's still exciting to work that way.

WS: Your readers encounter the excitement of thinking through specific genres of popular music in ways that encourage them to consider the historical and contemporary flows of globalization, particularly within and beyond the black Atlantic. I've always known you to do so well in achieving this without compromising your depiction of individuals and their agency. How you have treated Fela comes to mind as an example of this. You never merely simplify his experience as just Nigerian. You show how his experiences and the experiences of him and his music socially construct cultural expressions of himself, Afropop, West Africa, the United States, and Europe, for instance.

MV: You know, with the Fela Kuti book (Veal 2000), there are people out there writing and talking about him as if he never left Abeokuta—which is preposterous. You know, the whole "I knew his family" angle. But the reality is that this is a guy whose musical identity was formed in the cosmopolitan African city of Lagos; it was transformed in the colonial center of London when he encountered jazz musicians, Caribbean musicians and musicians from other African countries; and it was transformed again in Los Angeles, with African American funk, soul and free jazz musicians. And then it was transplanted back into an even more cosmopolitan Lagos in the 1970s to serve a particular purpose during a period of social transformation and turbulence and cultural questioning. So although you can't really talk

about Fela Kuti without talking about the impact of highlife musicians like E. T. Mensah, Bobby Benson and Victor Olaiya, you also have to talk about him in terms of James Brown, John Coltrane, Louis Armstrong, Sun Ra, and many other musicians that his work was in dialogue with.

So I would say that the study of any musical tradition of the black Atlantic today (if you want to use Paul Gilroy's term as a point of reference) is most profitably predicated on this kind of comparative approach. In other words, one understands any particular location in Afro-America, the Caribbean or West Africa as inherently in dialogue with the other locations. And, let's face it—I was born in the early 1960s, I caught the tail end of the pan-African generation. I like the idea of African Americans, Caribbeans and Africans being in dialogue.

WS: I see. Foregrounding such dialogues between individuals, groups, and places and how their expressive practices that entangle with hegemonic structures, has impressed upon me how you generally approach your representations of culture. Considering power, particularly its historically uneven distribution among black people in Africa, the Americas and Europe, how does your research negotiate this approach to culture of African Americans, West Africans, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Europeans?

MV: I have a vision of cultural interconnectedness; that's one of the things driving my work. And it's political at the heart. Because there is a strong streak of Afrophobia in African American culture (not to mention in the world at large, of course), as a result of colonization, slavery, racism and also the complexities of contemporary Africa. A scholar like Edwards Sassine would refer to it as "Afro-Pessimism." But the truth is that African Americans will never be healthily oriented in the world until we come to terms with our African heritage—not in terms of Afrocentric fantasies or mythological thinking. I'm talking about concrete historical and contemporary awareness of Africa—culture, politics, etc. We cannot do it without that. We're the only ethnic grouping in the United States that has had our connection to our ancestral culture systematically erased. That gives us a problematic relationship to history. African Americans are probably the only culture on planet Earth in which every generation has to essentially reinvent the wheel. And while it's great for things like artistic creativity, it's terrible for long-term cultural stability. Only a small number of exceptional people are going to be able to prosper within that paradigm. So until we deal with that reality, we won't be able to set the proper course into whatever the future may hold.

WS: Many producers of popular culture, following the ideological expectations of culture industries, profit from the exaggerated vernacularisms and

stereotypes of commodified blackness. Would you say that your work is a critique of Nativism, stereotypes and essentialisms?

MV: Yes, indirectly, in the sense that, by working comparatively, you automatically decenter the consolation of nativisms and essentialisms that have hobbled a lot of scholarship around black music. And that's important because the ultimate goals are cultural and historical clarity and the transcending of a discourse of mere blackness, in order to recognize the universally human aspects of our experience.

Take the Jamaica book [*Dub*]. You can talk about those studio production trends as if they're something specific to Jamaica, which in a way they are. But they are also in dialogue with what was going on in the United States, not to mention what was going on in the centers in which a lot of the sound technology was being developed, like the post-war technological environments of Japan and Germany. So in that sense the cultural sphere becomes wider. It's no longer just the black Atlantic. You can trace it out along the global contours of the musical and technological environments of the post World War II era, the Cold War era.

WS: Your work continually deconstructs stereotyped imaginings of societies as premodern or pre-technological, usually by highlighting the complexities and cross-cultural circulation of your research subjects. Your activities with this in Jamaica and the United States exemplify this—but especially your presentation of Tony Allen takes what would have otherwise been understood as a West African drummer and shows how a local musician generates new definitions of African drumming locally and globally.

MV: Tony Allen belongs to a lineage of great Nigerian and Ghanaian highlife drummers that includes people like Kofi Ghanaba, Akanbi Moses and Rim Obeng, but he wouldn't be who he is had he not been inspired by the great African American jazz drummers like Max Roach, Tony Williams, Philly Joe Jones, and Elvin Jones. And he himself is very clear about that. So, this is a way that we can see these cultural locations as inherently dynamic and in dialogue. In a way, it dramatizes the pan Africanist ideal — regardless of the political contingencies of any particular moment. But then it goes beyond that, because the latter part of that book is as much about France, Europe, "World Beat" and globalization as it is about jazz, Lagos, Nigeria or West Africa. . . . So, ultimately, all of these are human issues with global resonance.

WS: It became clear to me that I could see and feel the extent to which your work has focused on specific places and artists across the black Atlantic.

You have done this while there is so much tension and anxiety about ethnography and globalization, especially in relation to capturing the global flows of certain musical activities. I'm thinking of your book *Dub* as somewhat biographical, but also a history.

MV: Yes, somewhat. I would call it a genre study interpolated by historical, biographical and interpretive writing.

WS: I took the interview-based engagement in the Tony Allen book as a very humanizing approach to studying his work. I found it both local and intimate and also broad, as it encapsulated the larger, nationalistic, international stylistic dimensions of his time.

MV: Yes, I think I tend to write about specific things—be they genres, musicians or issues—and work outward from there. Everyone is concerned with the big picture issues at the moment—for crucial reasons and also because as scholars, we have to be systematic thinkers who can draw the big connections. But if it's handled properly, the specificity of the biography or genre study can be an equally potent medium for concretizing broader issues. Especially when you consider the fact that one of the primary symptoms of globalization and neoliberal economic policies is the individual's loss of a sense of agency. Furthermore, I am a musician myself and I am invested in documenting the important advances made by musicians.

Black music—by that I mean the musics of Africa and the African diaspora—has been the musical driving force of the twentieth century. But the truth is that seventy-five percent of the histories will never be written. Meanwhile, many of the scholars of the Western classical tradition have moved on to other methodologies, because most of the historical and analytical accounting has been done at this point. Those new methodologies are not inherently superior, they just reflect a different set of priorities.

WS: How does your engagement with all of this intensify your choice to write in the ways that you do?

MV: I simply wanted to do justice to these topics and the human beings behind them. I wanted readers to understand and experience the humanity and the complex histories behind these musical moments and movements. And I wanted to write in a way that was accessible to the people and cultures whose histories I was trying to represent.

For me, it's intuitive. I approach my writing more intuitively than I approach my music. In my musical projects, I'm pretty focused on which parameters I want to manipulate. I'm focused on that in writing, too. But I don't always think about it in terms of clear-cut methodologies. In fact,

with some projects, the methodology sometimes doesn't become clear until I'm substantially underway, because there are some things that I have to write my way through, just like there are some musical environments that you have to improvise your way through. In my current book, I used more of that approach. Now that I'm reaching the end of it, the methodology is clear and transparent. But that shouldn't give the impression that it was that way when I went into it. I had to keep writing, reading and keep listening until a clear vision emerged. And I'm sure the book will be much richer for it.

Of course, now that the methodology is transparent, I have to take my thumb and smudge the writing a little bit. I don't want it to feel too clinical in the end—I want it to have some visceral, aesthetic power to it . . .

When Ornette Coleman told A.B. Spellman that "Sometimes I don't know how it's going to sound until I play it," that was a heretical statement in the context of bebop. Jazz musicians were really up in arms about that statement. The post-Charlie Parker bebop orthodoxy held that you had to have such complete mastery that you could hear everything in your head before you played it on your instrument. And teachers began to teach students that they should be able to sing everything that they played. Obviously, you should have control over your improvising. You can't be up there just moving your fingers. And playing any musical instrument is ultimately a form of singing. But there is also an element of adventure and of sometimes even surprising yourself. Otherwise it's too predetermined and rule-bound. Some of the great improvisers have said "Let the music come to you." And I think a lot of that also applies to the art of writing… It depends on the kind of thinker you are. Sometimes you want to start with a set methodology and outline. You know what your methodological points are, you know what your interpretive axes are going to be, and you proceed on that basis. Other times you have a loose idea, set of points or assertions or analyses or interpretations you want to make, or you might even begin with just a loose set of literary gestures, or images. Then you start to work your way through "the stuff."

Object-Oriented Ontology, Speculative Realism and Black Music

WS: I am thinking about a current philosophical trend in music studies: object-oriented ontology. This movement, ascribed to Graham Harmon, takes speculative realism and resists a human-focused, anthropocentric Kantian thought—as well as twentieth-century phenomenology—in favor of the activity, or charisma, of objects and their networks.

From what I understand, the current critique of this new movement is that object-oriented ontology is too dehumanizing. The encroachment of

object-oriented ontology and the study of black music and popular music could too quickly become a research trend that reinstantiates the problems and oppressions of structuralism yet again. I can see how useful an extension of a poststructuralist effort like object-oriented ontology could be in analyses of societies for whom Western philosophic traditions of humanism are outright oppressive. But there are also other models that more compassionately decenter Western conceptions of the human—Steven Feld's (2015) concept of "acoustemology" stresses relationality between the human and nonhuman, and Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier's (2014) critical juxtaposition of the linguistic and speculative turns reconsiders the oppressive arm of colonialism and elitist modernity in assessing the politic of the voice among people in nineteenth-century Colombia.

I am curious about your thoughts about this movement. I would like to hear more about how you think about your work—coming into focus through a process of improvisation, and its humanizing effort—in relation to black people who are located in the nodes of globalization, late modernity and late capitalism, committed to continually fighting for the adequate recognition of their dignified humanity in the wake of the spoils of colonialism and the failures of Reconstruction.

MV: I can see it in resonance with ideas of the "post-human" that are currently fashionable. And it's true that the "human" is merely one very fluid identity on a continuum of possible identities in our reality. But even if it were true that humans were used by other forces in the creation of these objects, removing the human from the equation altogether strikes me as too nihilistic. I can see the organic benefits of that view: after all, so many problems in this world have been created by the human race's disconnection from the world around us—nature, other species, etc. In fact, we're not even connected with each other as part of the same species! But at the end of the day we're still human beings, and the discourse of the post-human still arguably has its roots in human experience.

In a way, what I have just said is very old school in its placement of the human at the center. I don't mean to do that. My actual point is that instead of trying to depart from the category of the "human," humans should be trying to reconsider the category of the human. It's one thing to say it like that, and another thing to say that we're going to analyze these as objects as existing in and of themselves.

WS: I have hesitation about an effort to just think about objects and networks and to assert human beings as objects. It has potential to reproduce a very troubled past. The Atlantic slave trade and early ethnology come to mind, a tragic objectification and technologizing black people as permanent laborers and symbols of primitivism.

MV: Well that's probably because it can be a double-edged sword for people coming from a history of slavery—it can easily be redeployed to resonate with the consideration of human beings as objects.

WS: From the standpoint of a late postcolonial critique, I can understand an anxiety around perpetuating European continental philosophy. We must respect that there are many diverse ontologies around the notions of "being" among different societies that allow us to reconsider the human. While there's growing interest in and excitement for these new approaches, the work of representing humans and human movements in music is not finished.

MV: Maybe the question is which discourse is best suited for the task at hand—the philosophical discourse or the ethnographic discourse. The whole effort to do away with the category of "human," in some cases, reflects a profound fatigue with the experience of being human. If we're looking at all of this from the vantage point of the Western philosophical tradition (which is not my area), we have to observe that European culture has gone through so many dramatic upheavals in the twentieth century. All cultures have, in fact. But the point is the composite knowledge of humanity, and the composite ways of understanding human experience are still largely separated out across all these disparate cultural and geographic networks. Until we can take account of the full store—globally speaking—of understandings of the category of the human, ways of being human, ways to understand the experience of being human, these individualized local cultural systems are going to continue to experience profound breakdown and fatigue because people are essentially culturally myopic and stubbornly resistant to engaging the ontologies of other cultures. But the flip side of it is that they are often liberated when they are forced by circumstances to engage them. For example, there's a lot in the sub-Saharan African cultural traditions that could rehabilitate the concept of the human in places like Europe where a profound fatigue with the category of human has led them to propose all these post-human ontologies. Even though Africa gets almost nothing but negative press in the world today, there are many Europeans, Euro-Americans and African Americans whom I know whose concept of what it means to be human was radically revised through their encounter with African culture. Their lives were changed forever. And having come up through ethnomusicology, I have a lot of first-hand knowledge of people whose lives were permanently altered (for the better) by their encounters with various cultural "others."

It's hard to be human today. I get it. So many systems seem to be on the verge of collapse. But that's where ethnomusicology and the other dis-

ciplines that are concerned with cross-cultural inquiry can be helpful on a profound level. They expose people to different understandings of what it means to be human. It's not only a question of different ways to be humanly musical, but different ways to be human. That's the profound potential of ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, comparative literature, and those types of fields.

You can see an example in the sphere of jazz as a refraction of Western European harmony, the tradition of functional harmony. After all of the massive upheavals after the Second World War, many Westerners wanted to do away with that system because it was seen as too intimately linked with cultural ways of being that seemed to be outmoded or bankrupted. But that simultaneously provided an opening for jazz musicians. One of the most iconic photographs of John Coltrane—in my opinion—was taken in Stuttgart, Germany in 1963. He's holding his tenor sax, leaning against a piano. And in the background you see all these Germans seated as if at a concert of classical music (although they are much more casually dressed). The whole idea is that picture portrayed the way that jazz paved the way for a radically different understanding of the Western musical system. It didn't necessarily need to be completely abandoned. It simply needed to be reconceptualized through an encounter with a different cultural-musical system. In this case, that was the African American musical system (which of course, had partial roots in Europe). That helped transform the understanding of music in Europe.

Everyone benefitted from that. When you look at the impact that jazz had in Europe during the 20th century—you know, from the old days of Montmartre and expatriate New Orleans musicians all the way up through experimental collectives such as the AACM and the BAG, it had a profound impact on the musical landscape. That's an example of a related-but-different musical ontology, having impact in a location where the so-called indigenous system was considered to have become bankrupt or obsolete. So what we see in music is true for culture in general.

WS: Extending from this, I would like to ask you about sound studies. How do you see the current trends in sound studies in relation to African-derived musical practices in ethnomusicological literature or beyond?

MV: In a way, it continues on from your previous idea. From the standpoint of musical scholarship, one way the sound studies discourse can be understood as a reflection of this profound fatigue with the concept of the musical—as well as resentment at the monopoly that music scholars have held over the discussion of music. So, the philosophers want to get in on it. Basically, everyone loves music and wants to talk about it. In addition to

enabling a broader sonic interrogation of the world, sound studies also allows scholars to engage the thing we call "music" from what we might call a post-musical perspective. The potential flip side is that the sound studies way of thinking will ultimately influence the music making of musicians and the musical thinking of music scholars.

But I would say that, for the most part, the sound studies discourse has not been brought to bear on African-derived musics. There are some scholars that are doing it, like my colleague Daphne Brooks. She's bringing it to bear. Steven Feld's book on Accra draws on it in an interesting way. I myself am toying with it in my current book project. But of course, there are many different cultural ontologies that problematize the Western category of "music" and propose radically different ideas about the relationship between the human and the sonic that themselves could modulate the Western tradition and lead to new understandings about those relationships without moving into this sphere of kind of disembodied—"we're not talking about music anymore. We're talking about sound." It's really not necessary to make that distinction so hard and fast. Better to see them as existing on a continuum. Keep in mind, I'm talking about the sound studies work that engages music, which is really only a particular portion of it.

There are cultures that don't have a word for "music" as we understand it in the Western sense of the term. We as Westerners hear their sound production in a musicalized way because it seems to conform to our own experience of what constitutes music. That in itself is a very provocative question for sound studies. Where do you draw the boundary between music and sound, music and language, music and philosophy, music and spirituality, music and healing? All it takes is a willingness to engage other paradigms. If you take cultures and put them in dialogue with each other, they're automatically going to be transformed.

WS: I am teaching a world music history course at The New School this semester. Randy Weston is the artist-in-residence there right now. I was fortunate to have him come to my class, along with Abdellah El Gourd, playing the hajhuj, and Gnawa musicians, who performed. El Gourd spoke about colors and healing, which resonates with how you spoke of certain societies in Africa that do not think of music in Western terms.

MV: Yes. What the Gnawa create is not unilaterally understood as music. It's considered as much a curative practice as a musical practice.

WS: It's medicinal based on a kind of sonic color associated with each performance. My students are in awe of this.

MV: Sure. It's like Muslim devotional practices such as the adhan—the call to prayer—or like Koranic recitation. It strikes the Western ear as very

musical, but within Islam it's not considered music, although it's heard aesthetically.

WS: What, in your view, are the best ways to ethnographically represent the human-nonhuman encounter? I am thinking about this in relation to my own ethnographic study of live sound engineers, and the importance of representing humanized engagements with technical objects in my work.

MV: I think of some of Jonathan Sterne's observations about recording devices, sound technology, and visual technologies essentially serving the prosthetic function of increasing the sensory capabilities of human beings. He's not an ethnomusicologist but I still think that was a very helpful intervention and provides a useful bridge. Beyond that, ethnography has always dealt with objects as components of culture. For example, what's called "material culture" has always been a component of ethnography. Musical instruments are objects. Anytime you isolate something for study, in fact, it has been transformed into an object—an object of study. We could be a little more provocative and understand the ethnography itself as an object. And in the ethnographic fields, all of them are understood to be in dialogue with human beings.

Blackness Beyond Black Bodies

WS: I am currently working on my dissertation, "Doing Sound: An Ethnography of Fidelity, Temporality and Labor among Live Sound Engineers." The project is comprised of three case studies. One is about my own sound engineering at *Jazzmobile*,[1] Grant's Tomb concerts in particular. Another case is about a freelance engineer of rock concerts at Hammerstein Ballroom. The third case examines the engineer of *Porgy and Bess* on Broadway in 2012, starring Audra McDonald and Norm Lewis.

MV: This is wonderful. You've got three different sites.

WS: Three different sites and three different genres. The project extends from Thomas Porcello and Louise Meintjes' work on recording studio engineers, Aaron Fox's work on class culture, Chris Washburne's work on musical labor, Jonathan Sterne's work on fidelity and science and technology studies and George Lewis's work on technology and improvisation. I aim to contribute to sound studies scholarship by expanding discourse about "sound" beyond the recorded object, through describing how live sound is not natural in ways that current scholarship on music and technology emphasize.

MV: So what you do in your work is look at the particular mix as an object.

WS: Yes.

MV: And at the event as an object.

WS: That's right. It's a labor ethnography, on one hand, in that I talk about the shop floor experiences of amplifying sound in a given genre and venue. I have also been inspired by the phenomenological approach of Tom Porcello (1998) and write about encountering sounds as electronic signals transduced into air. Something else that became really salient to me is the phenomenon of blackness and the extent to which all of the engineers wear black as a method to cloak themselves. This is an example of a predominantly white labor force temporarily participating in capitalist, modern ideologies of black labor as invisible. I am pondering object-oriented ontology not only in relation to black people who make black music, but I am also thinking about how humanistic and object-oriented analyses bode for studies of racially diverse listeners, musicians, producers and technicians who make, participate in, and transact blackness.

MV: That's a literary move right there. If you're trying to reconcile that with "black" understood as a cultural or ethnic or racial designation, then you're conjugating all of the different resonances of the term "black." But you have to connect the dots at the lower levels. You can do it as long as you understand that it's a literary interpretive move. Its power is more in the rhetorical than the empirical. But you can bring it to bear on the empirical.

WS: Right. But at the same time, it's been interesting to analyze how they wear black and how the equipment is all black, as you know. I observed the modern appeal for live sound engineers to be out of the sight lines of the audience, and the view of the artists. So there's a politic of being hidden laborers. There's a notion of transparency in the sense that, as people dressed in black, these live sound engineers could be seen through.

My observation of the pervasiveness of black attire as a uniform for live sound engineers is influenced by Miles Grier's (2015) historical and literary work on ink culture, blackness, and character.[2] Grier asserts blackness as a character in premodern and modern contexts, as well as how ideas and practices associated with black character transpose across different registers of meaning within the print industry and theater.

MV: Well, I sometimes think live sound engineers need to hide themselves because 80 percent of them are terrible at what they do. Terrible.

WS: Sure. Then there's a dominant ideology, where the technique of engineering rock shows is placed on everything. I see it as imperialism.

MV: That's right. So many engineers transpose a rock mode of mixing to totally inappropriate genres. I've seen engineers destroy so many great concerts. I have a big problem with live sound engineers. Big problem. That's why, ideally, every band should carry their own engineer.

WS: I found in my study that there's a lot of resistance to artists among engineers. Many of them feel subjugated by artists.

MV: So there's automatic resentment built into it. But a lot of that goes back to the 1960s. You look at the battles that had to be fought in the recording studios. Musicians were becoming increasingly technologically savvy, but because of the labor structure of the music industry, musicians and studio engineers were in different categories and often at odds with each other. Musicians were coming up with ideas, and the technicians felt that their territory was being encroached upon. Some of them weren't flexible about it. That's what led to the spate of artists building their own studios because the artists didn't want to have to deal with the guys who were beholden to the labor unions and their regulations. Musicians were trying to execute creative ideas and the engineers would resist them, saying, "You can't do this, you can't do that. We're on the clock. You can't push it over into the red. This is a violation of procedure." The whole environment of electric and electronic instruments was becoming increasingly sophisticated, and artists were developing a lot of sophisticated knowledge themselves.

That is the problem right there. Back in the 1950s, someone like Elvis or Little Richard, they were not knob twiddlers. Musicians would go into a studio and sing and bang on the piano or play it with their feet, and that's about as technologically advanced as they were going to get. All the while, engineers were trying to keep everything out of the red.

WS: Below zero.

MV: When it should have been going a little bit into the red.

WS: In analog you could.

MV: Back then it was not an issue. But then in the 1960s, it started to become an issue and I think some of that resentment is still playing out today. An engineer can't tell a musician, who probably has an entire studio in his or her home, to "sit down, and let me handle this." It's not going to happen.

WS: Right. And they're also hidden by the dimension of engineering that is a service-oriented practice. And now, in the encounter with the musician, there's an opportunity to resist this social and labor position by explicitly effecting the concert. The engineer may be thinking: "This is just another

gig. Here we go. Here comes the artist. I had this time to set up. And now I had my zen space here, the empty stage. I had my gearboxes. And now I'm bracing myself for the artist to show up. Because I know that they are difficult. I already know it." Those are the feelings that I observed.

MV: That's another angle. Some artists are unpleasant to work with and they buy into this idea of the hierarchy. But musicians need to adjust their attitudes, too, because the fact of the matter is that the engineer is nothing but a musician. You should bring that angle out in your project. That in fact, live sound engineers are—in the same way that studio engineers and producers in the current musical landscape—musicians, not just as technicians or functionaries. Because what they do is as important to the realization of musical sound as the musicians.

WS: Right. Live sound engineers' work is the last gesture that transduces into the sound of the system.

MV: That's right. Sometimes it's more than the last gesture, depending on the skill level of the musician. Sometimes it could be 50 percent of the whole presentation. That's why the musicians themselves should understand the importance of engineers and not just see them as passive technicians, or as impediments, or necessary evils. And I mean that across genres.

WS: Sure. Further, the corollary of working in a service industry—and the legacy of being an invisible worker—differed between my experience as a black sound engineer and the experience of white engineers.

MV: How so?

WS: At *Jazzmobile*, however, there is a black audience, there are black artists, there is a black engineer, which exemplifies an alternative to my larger narrative about service and labor and blackness. At *Jazzmobile*, unlike the rock and music theater events, people show up early to sit where I'm [the sound engineer] sitting. It's as if the invisibility is gone. Audience members want to get the best seat in the house because they know that I'm mixing for that spot.

MV: I've never heard of that before, but I find it very interesting—a form of connoisseurship. But of course the average jazz listener has acutely sensitive ears, because they're so attuned to the aesthetics of sound recordings. And part of it might be attributable to the fact that *Jazzmobile* is an outdoor event.

WS: In addition to the audience's audile techniques as listeners, the audience, performers, promoters and myself as a sound engineer, participate

in a subject-to-subject encounter that John Jackson describes as racial sincerity in his 2005 ethnography of Harlem. This interaction also exemplifies Elijah Anderson's analysis of the cosmopolitan canopy, an urban constructed space in which individuals and groups interact in ways that promote comity and civility.

The last part of my project has to do with temporality. When you say that live sound engineers are artists, I agree with you. In fact, I argue this in the dissertation.

When I study live sound engineers, I see them performing many roles—at one moment, they are technologists, at another point they are manual laborers, lifting everything. Then at the point when they're mixing, they're artists. Mixing is the moment of artistry. I use Alfred Schutz's ([1951] 1977) phenomenonology of time to describe various moments in live sound engineering labor—including engineers' becoming artists, and their moves back into subjugated labor. Thinking about how temporality determines different parts of a live sound engineer's labor has repeatedly pointed me to your work, especially when as I've been thinking through object-oriented ontology in writing about the nuance in being human.

MV: Well, it probably wouldn't have been so surprising if you hadn't abandoned the human in the first place! (laughs) There's so much incredible nuance to being human, that if we can find a way of explicating that, we don't have to go with these nihilistic rhetorics of the post. And when we do finally morph into the post-human reality, it will be as the famous Zen poem about death—"like a snowflake melting into pure air . . ."

Notes

1. Dr. Billy Taylor and Daphne Arnstein founded *Jazzmobile* in 1964 and it is the first not-for-profit arts organization committed to jazz. Taylor founded *Jazzmobile* to present live jazz, free of charge, to the greater Harlem community that would not otherwise have access to professional jazz performances. A festival spanning the months of July and August, *Summerfest* features professional live jazz performances throughout New York City neighborhoods. Along with support from contributing corporations, community boards, block organizations, churches, and park associations co-host the outdoor concerts in addition to weekly performances at Grant's Tomb in Harlem. Taylor's vision was to bring jazz to the communities from which the genre developed, "directly to the people where they live."

2. Grier writes, "Indeed, the racial palate has become a 'metaphor we live by' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003), capable of linking not only distinct, and sometimes far flung collectives in black ethic groupings, but also, occasionally, but predictably, imputing to persons the qualities associated with animals, objects, and colors" (2015, 195).

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