The medium and materials of popular music: 'Hound Dog,' turntablism and muzak as situated musical practices.

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Abstract:

Popular music studies has rarely exhibited the kinds of disciplinary coherence found in closely related disciplines mostly due to the field's adoption and adaptation of methodological and theoretical innovations from a variety of disciplines, notably sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, media studies and musicology. However, many commentators continue to seek disciplinary coherence without making any critical aesthetic distinctions between the medium and materials of popular music. Distinctions and interrelationships between the literal or material aspects of popular music and the social or cultural processes of making meaning from popular music are central to the definition of a particular but not exclusive field of analysis. Through such distinctions, the very category 'popular music' can be understood as a more flexible and supple distinction based on an understanding of methods of construction, production and mediation in specific relation to the technical, contextual and sociological aspects of music. I use different performances of 'Hound Dog,' the practices of 'turntablism,' and the exigencies of Muzak as examples for analysis offering ways in which the aesthetic, material and contextual aspects of popular music can be understood in order to incorporate the actual sound of music into the analysis of its social, cultural and musical construction.

 'We seem collectively unable to recognize the theoretical basis of our work…and to move beyond our own individual agendas and unreflective, unacknowledged theoretical assumptions.' (Grossberg, 2002, p. 41)

A foundational struggle in the field of popular music studies has been to define itself on its own terms; that is to create theories and methods particular to its objects of analysis. And yet despite, or perhaps because of, the significant theoretical and methodological debts it carries from sociology, anthropology, media studies, cultural studies, literary theory, phenomenology and varied forms of musicology, the study of popular music has rarely exhibited the theoretical or analytic coherence found in closely related fields. As Lawrence Grossberg noted in a scathing essay in which he registered his disappointment with the entire field, we have a lot of theoretical problems, but not a lot of theories to solve them. For Grossberg, few of the explanations we have are specific to a discipline that lacks a common analytical language.

(Grossberg, 2002, p. 41) While his existential angst is well-placed, it is ultimately misleading. His list of theoretical deficits for which we have no solutions justly criticises a familiar array of trans-historical, de-contextualised, apparently universal concerns of a field he seems to suspect may not actually exist (ibid., pp. 40-1). But the distinction "popular music" upon which so many of his careful ruminations are based is itself a false analytic category. There are no unifying processes, principles or materials that all versions or iterations of what we call 'popular music' share. Significant exceptions to the standard array of definitions can always be found within music which is nevertheless broadly recognised to be firmly within the family. What we collectively deem to be popular music has been and continues to be the product of supreme literacy, sublime ignorance, wild improvisation, strictly-notated control, joyously unkempt public performances and acts of private, precise compositional acumen.

I have a modest goal for what follows. Not to identify *the* object of analysis, but to make a series of distinctions between the varied ways in which popular music is produced, distributed and mediated that can help to explain how these objects of analysis are rarely ontologically stable enough to inhabit pre-existing analytic categories that have been so thoroughly worn thin, such as 'authenticity,' 'genre,' or 'subculture.' The arguments which follow here are not designed to point out the inherent flaws or fatal fallacies of existing concepts or methods nor to point out their shortcomings in the face of the overwhelming competence of my own ideas. Instead, I aim to put forward an argument about the ways in which we can take into account the irreducible aspects of popular music, not as part of a unique method of analysis, but as a central set of social and material facts to which we can relate existing methods of analysis. When we take into account those things which are unavoidable to a piece of music, we can more clearly acknowledge what existing methods can and can not tell us about it.[i]

Ontological distinctions and social categories

The crucial analytical distinction on which my arguments turn is between ontological distinctions and social processes. I am not presenting these two modes of analysis as a fixed binary, but as a way of distinguishing between different parts of a larger whole in specific relation to one another. The most important difference between the two is based on determining what exactly the irreducible and unavoidable elements of a particular piece of music are and understanding the relationship these elements have to the social processes which surround, contextualise and give meaning to them. I offer no fixed template for determining what these irreducible elements might be. In the examples which follow, these elements are diverse, including the specifically rendered sounds of recordings, the actions taken to produce particular sounds and the contexts in which musical sounds are made public. In each case it is crucial to understand that while the material aspects of music might be subject to misunderstanding or reinterpretation, they are mostly unchangeable regardless of the meanings that might be ascribed to them. When I say I am trying to identify the irreducible aspects of a piece of music, I am arguing that that our understanding of the social inscription of the meanings of music can not proceed as if those meanings are divorced from the actual sounds we hear or the manner of their creation.

By themselves, social categories such as "popular music" are simply not valid as criterion for making the kinds of ontological distinctions needed to contextualise the

sounds with which we often find ourselves confronted. Social categories that masquerade as aesthetic facts simply reinscribe essentialist notions of music that precede analysis. Analysis should be grounded in the material and social facts at hand, not in idealist categories which have only a slight hold on the material weight of sound, other than as tacit social agreements to call a spade a spade. There is no question that such social agreements are central to the discourses which constitute the cultural mediation of music. Categories such genre and style represent a kind of collective set of agreements about how to talk about music and as such are important, but they should not be reproduced uncritically as the basis upon which analysis proceeds. The social inscription of the designation "popular music" has to be understood as implicitly present within the sounds produced, shaping and organising productive intent, aesthetic assessment as well as social reception. The processes of production and reception surely shape each other, working together in a kind of seesaw relationship, balanced over the fulcrum of mediation which, despite several decades of academic fumigation, still informs myriad agendas intending to conflate taste and power with truth and beauty; there remain many such hegemonic concepts comfortably ensconced in the everyday lives of a great deal of music.

To get around these analytic roadblocks, I want to think about music in a more material and literal way. Through Nattiez, Allan Moore has provided us with three important analytic critiques to help us do this: the immanent, the poietic and the aesthetic. (Moore, 2001:5-6) These three critiques give us some of the tools we need to be able to analyse what we tend to call popular music. First is the 'immanent' critique. This is a critique of the sounds themselves considered as music. What is in the music? How can we describe it? What makes a piece of music what it is? What makes it work on its own terms? Second is the 'poietic' critique. This critique is supposed to divine the intent and purpose of those creating music. Why does this music exist? What is its ideal artistic purpose? Third is the 'aesthetic' critique, a critique of the lived, situated experience of sound. What meanings do people produce from it? What musical affects does it produce? What associations do particular kinds of music have at different points in their historical and social lives? In short, what is the music actually doing out there in the world? Unfortunately, these critiques, crucial as they are, still don't actually tell what it is we are analysing, in large part because they make only generic distinctions between the parts of a general aesthetic process. They could be applied to divine the intent, content or experience of a painting, a building or a pop song without much in the way of fundamental alteration.

Trying to discern the object of analysis from such a generic critique is fairly difficult, mostly because music is so deeply social and subjective. It always means slightly different things to different people at different times in different places. Meanings change and can even invert as circumstances change. The processes of making meaning from popular music aren't ever really complete. They are shaped through the evolving contexts in which we confront and consume it. But Moore's schema does a great service in one crucial respect. It helps us to think about music simultaneously as actual sounds, as a kind of record of the consequences of a set of aesthetic intentions and as socially inscribed, interpretable and evolving sets of affects and meanings. This way, we can analyse music for what it is, what its creators supposed it to be and what people generally think about it after it has been produced using these overlapping and interrelated categories of analysis. These critiques can help us recognise the ways in which organising terms such as genre or style, through which we both construct and receive meaning, are not autonomous pre-existing

forms, but are instead evolving, communal, cultural practices which are inherently related to the specific material forms in which they reach us.

With this in mind, the major questions for analysis here are not 'How do we define "popular music" or "popular music studies"?' as distinct and bounded entities or enterprises. Instead, I will ask two closely-related, but distinct questions: how do we create a mode of analysis that is appropriate to how our chosen objects of study actually exist in the world and how do we create analytic methods that take into account the collection of material and social facts we have unavoidably at hand? Both questions require us to decide what social and materials facts do we have at hand and what analytic methods might best acknowledge their shape and character. It is important to note that the ideas I am pushing here are not co-terminus with those forms of common sense analysis underlying the field of popular music studies which mostly assume the primary need to analyse the collective social interpretation of texts, but whose material grounding in sound is often left largely undetermined. I am arguing that the actual material contours of musical texts themselves and the particularities of their mediation and circulation constrain, frame, shape and organise our interpretations of them in myriad ways, inevitably. Every piece of music arranges producers and consumers in specific but dynamically evolving social relationships which are always pegged to the originating text, not necessarily to any particular set of meanings drawn from that text, but to the literal thing itself. The cultural contests between producers and consumers so many have examined are not only about differences of textual interpretation, but about the very structures which scaffold our subjectivity. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the processes through which the often stormy relationships between producers and consumers are constructed. There are two key concepts we can use to help us do this: the medium and materials of popular music.

A network of social conventions

Generically, the term 'artistic medium' describes the specific and discrete set of tools artists use to express themselves. Their obvious intent is to create something that is recognised as a work of art. With popular music, the artistic medium would probably be most recognisable as a song or an album. Most descriptive analyses rely on concepts such as genre or style to specify and frame the content of the aesthetic analysis of such an art object, often accepting the means of expression as givens. Ideas like style or genre are often used as presumptions, implicitly thought to possess a collection of generic attributes which are, by definition, tautologically demonstrative of their own descriptive validity. In order to craft analytic tools which are appropriate to my chosen objects of study analysed below, I want to draw on another definition of 'medium,' one that is not defined by the art artists make, but what they do to make it. This definition of medium is shaped and specified by the context through which art is made public, and thus made socially meaningful. Following on from Gracyk (1996), an artist's medium is not simply a set of materials, but rather a network of historically situated social and cultural conventions which define the realm over which those physical materials and the aesthetic qualities ascribed to them are mediated. (Gracyk, 1996:70-1) Instead of thinking about a medium as an immutable set of characteristics or expressive tools, this conception of an artist's medium arises from a set of human practices exerted on some recognised or recognisable range of materials.

For popular music, a central part of the medium is how the range of what Gracyk calls 'allowable sounds' taken together with principles for structuring those sounds are recognised and used both by artists and their audiences to make meaning. (ibid.) An audience's reception of a work of art requires a general understanding of how aesthetic qualities and meanings emerge from the artist's particular use of their materials. Therefore, the medium of popular music is made tangible when a range of sounds is recognised in relation to the conventions of the particular traditions of practice from which they arise taken together with the principles used to structure those sounds in a particular way. When we listen to music, we listen to sounds against a 'horizon of potentialities and limitations' explored by artists with their materials in relation to a set of social conventions that can help tell us what sounds matter to a given tradition of practice and how they matter. The materials of popular music are not only musical instruments and the notes played on them, but also the many layers of sound production that stand between the audience and the artist, through which sounds are manipulated and shaped to produce a mutually recognisable object of meaning. (ibid.:72-4) I would further argue that the particular ways in which each layer of material is used to produce sound through specific media of presentation constitutes an historically situated paradigm of practice each part of which has to be taken into account in order to more fully understand the object of meaning upon which we work our analyses.

The meanings of particular pieces of music grow and evolve through the contexts in which these sounds become public, through the techniques of production used to create them and the social circumstances of the experienced meaning of those sounds as music. These meanings expand and contract, altered constantly by use and by each situated utterance or iteration in ways that can eventually become visible and knowable over time, but which are never complete. In order to understand the relationships between ontological distinctions and social processes, I would argue that we have to understand how the material consequences of aesthetic practice shape the ways in which the meanings of an artist's work grow through their use of materials publicly recognised to be idiomatic and situated expressions of familiar musical conventions. This conception of an artistic medium is based around the character and type of social relationships created through the long string of actions which link the production, distribution, mediation and consumption of popular music.

Even in the abstract and generic form I am describing here, this set of relationships is extraordinarily complex. For example, when a work of popular music begins to travel through a medium, it already has inhered within it a series of social relationships the existence of which we can sometimes hear, sometimes not. The material consequences of these relationships are the collection of material and social facts whose shape and form I am trying to specify. These include the compositional processes through which the music is created and the realisation of that music through particular performances using specific instrumentation and arrangements. (Zak, 2001:24-5) We can add to this those evanescent qualities of sound which often go unmentioned such as ambience, timbre or texture. The interpretable aural facts of most recorded music are often subject to intense aesthetic debate during their creation. When musicians create a recording, the final sound of that recording is the result of extensive creative argument which takes place within a culture of creativity often too complex to map out completely.[ii] The results of these debates are by definition clearly audible, but since we are not often privy to these debates, they remain difficult to analyse. (Zak, 2001: 49-50) Further, the aural contours of public

versions of most popular music are dependent on particular configurations of technological filters and mechanisms of circulation which are both historically and economically contingent; that is to say the state of the art is constantly changing and not everybody has the social or practical capital to access it. This collection of facts further includes numerous performances of musical materials which are recorded and then shaped and reshaped repeatedly into a form acceptable to the performers, composers and producers, a process which continues long after all of the musical performances themselves are complete. The collection of fixed sounds we hear have been mixed and remixed together in a potentially infinite number of iterations until the one final version is agreed upon by those involved. The final material version is itself dependent on the varied involvement of all manner of people and institutions which have an interest in the outcome of this often long and complicated process. This includes musicians, producers, the record company and marketers, all of whom are enmeshed in particular kinds of power relationships with each other which ultimately shape the literal form of the final product.

But the processes of making meaning and assigning value or status to popular music is further transformed when that music is made public, that is when the 'final' product begins its journey through the purview of various cultural intermediaries eventually to be consumed by audiences in forms and contexts too diverse to imagine much less predict and quantify. What we are faced with in the analysis of the music we call popular is a bewildering series of distinct, but overlapping contexts and practices of creative and compositional knowledge and activity, technological tools and aesthetic judgments which shape the use of these tools, as well as the historical, economic and cultural contexts which shape and direct production, distribution and reception. However, we still need to find ways to identify what it is we are actually talking about in order to fight our way through this thicket of circumstance to discover our elusive analytic object, made tangible as the socially recognisable materials we call popular music.

Recorded sounds and the history of their production

In order to understand how the context of production and the socially inscribed meanings attributed to that production are linked, we have to ask if is there are any elements that are common and irreducible to our experience of popular music. Gracyk, argues that the rock object, in particular, is constituted as the recorded sounds themselves. For Gracyk, the primary unavoidable form of rock is its material existence as a specifically constructed collection of recorded sounds. These sounds are not the 'performance' of a work. These sounds are the work itself. They are carefully put together piece by piece and crafted with the tools at hand for a particular purpose within a specific series of contexts to form an irreducible material fact. The meanings we ascribe to rock grow primarily from how sounds are arranged in recordings; different versions of the same song can have drastically different meanings because of the ways some of the same musical materials, whether these are instruments, harmonic patterns or melodic contours, are arranged sonically. The associations we make with music are based in large part on the way these very particular sounds are fixed and then made public. (Gracyk, 1996:18-19)

Given that the recording is most often the primary link between the producer and the consumer, it is the recording that shapes our perceptions of a work's distinctiveness and identity. It is the unique and identifiable sounds of particular recordings

that we identify as the work. We recognise the genuineness of it, its exactness and its irreducibility specifically by making fundamental distinctions between the sounds of one recording and another. Each recording, each work, can have only one history of production; it is only possible for one set of events to have resulted in *that* particular work and it is this connection between the context in which a work was produced and the act of discriminating recognition inherent in the act of consumption that most directly connects the producer with the consumer. While the recorded sounds we hear might be subject to misunderstanding or reinterpretation, they are unchangeable regardless of the meanings that might be ascribed to them. The material aspects of a piece of music I am trying to identify are those that are not based on the competencies of a consumer or listener for their existence nor are they dependent on some requisite level of knowledge for their identification. Put simply, regardless of what we might think of a piece of music or a particular recording, once it is produced we can't really do much to alter the history of its production or the aural contours of that production itself. Every work we consume was created by a specific series of activities which are complete by the time we consume them, by definition.

Obviously, this holds true even if a work is a derivation of an original; regardless of any similarities between the two, we have two distinct works. Any remix, re-mastering or re-interpretation of an original is itself a new work because each new derivation or version has resulted from a new history of production. Every new work, no matter how derivative, already has a different and unique trajectory through the world. It has been produced by a new set of actions, inserted into a new context of consumption and will have new destinations which it will reach in new ways and it will produce new meanings. It is inserted into a context that has changed because of its existence, however slight or nearly invisible this change might appear to be. This new work is not a new work simply because it sounds different. It is a new and distinct work because there was a unique series of actions which produced it; a new work results from that new history. There may seem to be only trivial distinctions to be made in many cases, but this is not necessarily true. These distinctions, no matter how small, make it possible for us to deepen our descriptive analyses of popular music in order to understand the ways in which an ontologically distinct work shapes and produces the meanings which are later ascribed to it. And this is the key point: the actions which constitute the history of production are the irreducible and unavoidable elements of a recorded piece of popular music. Basing our analysis on what happens to shape and determine the social and technical processes of music and the trajectories of meaning that trail behind and eventually overtake completed works would seem to at least sidestep some of the dilemmas of disciplinary incoherence Grossberg noted with such despondency. Further, taking as our analytic objects, those contextualised material facts of music we hear as they are made meaningful through social processes of production, mediation and consumption, can further help us out of his bind.

The contrasting mediums of 'Hound Dog'

> *I never heard screams like that in my life. I showed them sons of bitches.*
> (Elvis Presley, quoted in Fink 2002:99)

I'll follow Gracyk's example and present a few 'thought experiments' in order to make my use of these concepts more clear. I'll do so first, by analysing the familiar musical materials of two versions of 'Hound Dog,' those recorded by Big Mama Thornton and

Elvis, around which there is a detailed documentary record. Part of my motivation for doing so comes from an odd fact about 'Hound Dog' that isn't always recognised as an important analytical fact. Between the time Thornton recorded the song in 1953 and Elvis recorded it in 1956, there were six other commercial recordings of the song. (*The R&B Box: 30 Years of Rhythm and Blues*, 1994:29). There is little doubt that Elvis' version is by far the most commercially successful and historically definitive version. Why? Is it because Elvis was an organic, instinctive genius who understood the needs and desires of the greatest number of music consumers from 1956 to the present? Alternatively, we could argue that Elvis' unique melding of country and R&B was instantly appealing to white southern teenagers who were ripe for 'corruption' and rebellion. His charismatic hip-grinding stage presence was simply the first crack in the wall of mid-50s repression through which a torrent of pent-up youthful energy could burst forth with all its subversive, revolutionary power to change forever the heart and soul of American popular culture. While there is some truth to these myths, they are not sufficiently explanatory in many respects. So, instead of providing what Grossberg might identify as one more trans-historical, de-contextualised explanation based on some set of allegedly universal cultural constants, I want to apply another layer of explanatory tools to phenomena whose complexity is rich enough to warrant it.

Elvis' Sun sessions are widely regarded as representing a fundamental shift in the way in which the recording studio was used. (Gracyk, 1996:13) According to those involved, the sounds produced during these sessions were recordings first and musical performances second; no longer a medium for capturing and smoothing live performances delivered into microphones and cut into grooves on discs, the actual recordings from the Sun sessions are the primary texts. Instead of a one-take-fits-all paradigm, the advent of reusable magnetic tape allowed Presley to use the recording studio to capture the favoured recorded performance exhibiting the "right" set of sounds for release to the public specifically by listening to each take and re-recording songs in reaction to them. According to a series of commentators, magnetic tape freed Elvis and his collaborators from both audience approval of new material through live performance and the 'tyrannies' of the songwriters who provided them, instead allowing them to place their own aesthetic judgements at the centre of the creative process. Those judgements, however, were by no means autonomous. They were clearly made with both the experience of past performances and the demands of future performances in firmly mind. (Gracyk, 1996:13-15) In this case, the social milieu in which the recording session occurred had a defining effect on the sounds of 'Hound Dog' and its meanings.

The contrasting promotional cultures surrounding R&B and Rock n' Roll, embedded as they were in deepening social crises over race and sexuality in 1950s America, definitively shaped both recordings. The central difference between R&B and Rock n' Roll were the ways in which each form was distributed and presented publicly. These contrasts had identifiable material affects on these two recordings. When Elvis went to record 'Hound Dog', released as a B-side to 'Don't Be Cruel' in 1956, he would have been considered an accomplished recording artist by that time. Given the success of his Sun sessions, it is clear that he didn't change his process all that much, not surprising given the size of the investment RCA made to buy out his Sun contract. (Starr and Waterman, 2003:221-2) According to most sources, he recorded 'Hound Dog' with the same general set of aesthetic intentions and sound practices as the Sun sessions. The fact that it took   thirty-one   tries   to   get   the   version

most fans finally got to hear on record is hardly irrelevant to the meaning of his version of the song. (*The R&B Box: 30 Years of Rhythm and Blues*, 1994:29; *Elvis in the 50s*.) According to the uncredited liner notes of 1958's *Elvis' Golden Records*, Elvis didn't particularly like 'Hound Dog' as material for recording, 'but Steve Sholes decided it should be on wax since it had always caused such a sensation in his theater act.' (*Elvis' Golden Records*, 1958) If it seems unclear why Elvis would spend so much energy recording a song he didn't really like, Robert Fink convincingly argues that this particular recording session was part of a 'short, bitter struggle over the performance of sexuality in America's mass media.' (Fink, 2002:97) The day before the recording sessions started, Elvis appeared on the Steve Allen Show to give what he later called 'the most ridiculous performance of my entire career.' (*Elvis in the 50s*.) He performed 'Hound Dog' in white tie and tails, clothes which were intentionally designed to be so tight he couldn't move freely. Worse, he was compelled to perform the song to an actual hound dog wearing a top hat who seemed unimpressed by the proceedings. It was a clear attempt to neuter after the hysteria created by his appearance on the Milton Berle Show the previous month. For Fink, the sound of this particular 'Hound Dog' was an angry response to the 'carnival of sexual panic' (ibid.:98) then enveloping Presley. The result was a 'menacing, rough-trade version of the song quite different from the one they had been performing on stage.' (ibid.:97)

Consider the similarities and differences between Elvis' 'Hound Dog' and Big Mama Thornton's original production of Lieber and Stoller's 'imitation' blues opus released in 1953. Thornton recorded 'Hound Dog' for Houston's Peacock label while on tour in California in 1952 with Johnny Otis' band. They more than likely rehearsed until they got it right, recording the final version in a single live performance, the sonic contours of which were honed and specified by the same kind of musical practices as Elvis and his band used. As they could not afford thirty-one takes while on tour recording for a small independent label, most of the aesthetic judgements made by Thornton and her band were probably worked out and resolved before the final cut was made. (*Big Mama Thornton…*, 1992) Her single was written and produced by the songwriters themselves especially for her vocal style, a fact which Thornton capitalised on during the sessions. In referring to Lieber and Stoller she says 'they had this song written out on the back of a brown paper bag. So I started to sing the words and I put in some of my own. All that talkin' and hollerin', that's my own.' (*Big Mama Thornton…*) The resulting record went to the top of the R&B charts in 1953 becoming the third best selling R&B single of the year. (Edwards, 1981:58) Given the technology available to Thornton, she and Otis' band produced 'Hound Dog' in one live take, perhaps relying on the luxury afforded by multiple takes, perhaps not.[iii]

Whether or not Thornton's production process was exactly the same as Elvis' is not all that central to the meaning of her work. The distinctions between each work, as speculative as some of them are, are legion and most are actually audible. Thornton's slower more languorous version is centred around the sexual innuendo of lines such as 'You can wag your tail but I ain't gonna feed you no more' and 'You made me weep and moan. You ain't lookin' for a woman, you just lookin' for a home.' Elvis sings to a dog whose efforts have failed to satisfy; the 'witty multiracial piece of signifyin' humor' which defined his live performances of the song didn't make it through the recording process. (Fink, 2002:97) Big Mama's voice is improvisatory, unadorned by heavy affects and sits immediately and intimately front and centre in the mix. As Fink succinctly notes, 'Elvis just shouts.' (ibid.:97) He repeats line after line in virtually identical fashion. The electric guitar in Thornton's version uses clean, smooth sounds

reminiscent of the subdued guitar playing on blues recordings such as Little Walter's 'My Babe' (1955) or 'Nobody But You' (1957). (*The Chess Story*; *Little Walter: Hate to See You Go*) Otis' guitarist uses a series of restrained fill-in lines relying on bent bluesy notes in a call and response pattern trading measures with Thornton's full and throaty singing. These guitar sounds are a clear contrast to the heavy strumming and crunching, jagged guitar lines in Elvis' version which seem to back up, but not interact with the singer.

Just as importantly, in Thornton's version, drummer Johnny Otis accentuates off beats on the toms and rims, completely avoiding the heavy use of the snare drum on two and four as well as what Fink calls the 'tommy-gun burlesque lick' which anchors the end of each section in Elvis' record. (ibid.:101) In fact, the rhythm section of Otis' band, which includes hand claps distinctly accenting two and four, grooves in a remarkably understated and rhythmically complex way. Thornton both pushes and pulls the beat, cleverly singing around the downbeats by anticipating or following the first beat of a measure and hitting the downbeat at different points of the verse each time, creating a subtle and constant tension between the vocal lines and the band so often characteristic of interwar and late 40s blues.[iv] Finally, the Thornton version has all the conscious earmarks of a specific live performance, such as a vamping Big Mama slyly encouraging her guitarist to 'play boy play,' during his solo, telling him how it 'makes me feel good,' not to mention the barking finale in which the whole band joins. Thornton's very medium, that network of meanings that grows from a particular range of materials was different than Elvis', realised through a distinct collection of sounds made public in a dramatically different context. Thornton's band uses the markers of early 50s R&B, the necessary and distinct ancestor of rock and roll. Elvis and his band are clearly more concerned with thrashing out something else entirely, and for entirely different reasons.

Both recordings were commercially validated, albeit in very different ways. Thornton's recordings went on to the R&B charts, R&B being code for 'black music' growing as it did out of the old 'race records' category. As Alan Govenar notes, the record was popular, but limited in distribution because of its 'low' and 'degrading' status as an R&B song. (Govenar, 1990:8) Elvis' version was eligible for the both the R&B and Rock and Roll charts, doing so well on both that RCA was forced to use the pressing plants of other record companies to meet demand. (Edwards, 1981:95-102; *Elvis in the 50s*)[v] Nevertheless, both recordings have been historically validated, despite the fact that one is still regarded as far more important to the history of popular music than the other. The point here is not to make the case that Thornton's version is more real than Presley's or vice versa, but simply to note the array of factors that go into any assessment of the evolving meanings of each work. They reflect different paradigms of musical practice despite the fact that they were recorded in markedly similar ways. This is evident in the ways in which the song was chosen for or by the artists who recorded them, the ways in which the musicians worked each version of the song into shape, how this process shaped the eventual outcome and the specific contexts through which the sounds of each recording were fixed and shaped in reaction the expectations of those for whom those sounds were intended; for Elvis, the song was shaped by the expectations of those for whom the sounds were specifically not intended. The meaning of each version of 'Hound Dog' has evolved over the years since their production. The debts owed by those who created rock and roll to their rhythm and blues forebears have been more widely acknowledged since the early-1950s, no doubt affecting the ways in which some new   listeners   approach   these

sounds. These 'same' materials have been travelling through contrasting, but increasingly overlapping mediums for decades and they have been producing distinct sets of meanings which continue to evolve in specific relation to the originating texts.

If we take into account a broader range of factors which go into understanding the technical, aesthetic and social processes that inform our foundational assumptions of what exactly constitutes the medium and materials of this or that particular recording, we find that even with clear cut cases such as this, things can get complicated. I do not harbour any illusions that this brief exegesis of these two particular versions of 'Hound Dog' has in any way exhausted all possible analytical avenues. I am simply trying to demonstrate the kinds of questions this analytic framework can help us ask. For example, what material affects do social factors have on the sound of a recording? To what extent is the realisation of a piece of music dependent on performance practices, those conventions and innovations that mediate between aesthetic ideals and actual sounds, shaping the particular structure of the sounds most of us will eventually hear? What material affects do different regimes of aesthetic and commercial validation have on the sound of recording? The promotional cultures surrounding each song and their performative histories, both in the studio and out, had notable material effects. Further, the context in which each was recorded and the ways in which each recording was shaped and reshaped had a lot to do with each performers' career as a performer. At the time Thornton and Elvis recorded their versions of 'Hound Dog,' both were working musicians. Thornton toured mostly small clubs in the southwest and west and no doubt had a different relationship with her audiences than did Elvis as he played set after set on the Las Vegas strip. Finally, Thornton was never enveloped by a 'carnival of sexual panic' despite her far more blatant vocal stylings. This was not because her recording died an obscure death; in fact, the opposite was true. In contrast, Elvis clearly noted that his live and recorded versions of 'Hound Dog' were fundamentally shaped by 'them sons of bitches' who seemed intent on containing him through variously contrived comic humiliations. In both cases, there are clear and mostly specific relationships between actual sounds of each recording and the social processes from which we continue to produce meaning.

Turntablism as ontologically unstable sound practices

> *The turntable is a musical instrument as long as you can see it being a musical instrument.* –Rob Swift.[vi]

The dynamic relationship between ontological distinctions and social processes can often extend to the most foundational elements of music, such as determining what counts as a genuine instantiation of a particular work and what elements count as part of that work. 'Turntablism' is a form of popular music in which various kinds of extremely context-specific compositional and performative gestures can be just as integral to 'the music itself' as the actual sounds produced by these gestures. The ontological analysis of this form of music can not distinguish a work simply by identifying the status of the fixed collection of sounds we hear. Instead, works by turntablists can exist without any clear lines between constitutive elements some of which are compositional, performative, theatrical and, in this case, almost bureaucratic. A key theoretical insight again made by Gracyk, can help us understand the processes through which particular iterations of this kind of music can be recognised as genuine and through which their constituent parts can be recognised   as   part   of   the

larger whole. Relying this time on the literature in the aesthetics of music, Gracyk argues that different iterations of particular pieces of music can be understood as ontologically thicker or thinner depending on what is required to reproduce them. By this he means the extent to which the recognisable particularities of a piece of music are embodied in sounds fixed by recording or in a score realised through performance practice makes a difference in how we understand what constitutes a piece of music, a distinction he draws using Nelson Goodman's terms 'allographic' and 'autographic.' For a piece of music to be autographic, notation can play no part in its material constitution and reproduction. Instead, the history of production is central to its definition. (Gracyk, 1996:31-4)

For example, a muzak version of 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' will be recognised as a completely different version of that song never to be mistaken for the original; the muzak version is simply not Nirvana, it is a derivation. It only references, but does not reproduce, the original. Nearly all of the elements of the original that carry much of the meaning of the song, such as the discordant mixing of heavy metal and punk, the scratch in Cobain's voice, his varied guitar sounds as well as the alternatively thundering and thudding rhythm section, are gone. However, if a performer wants to reproduce the Goldberg Variations on a piano, no one can think back to Bach's 'original' performance and listen to the one they are experiencing in relation to it. They may not like the performer's interpretation, but few will say the performer is not playing Bach. In such cases, Gracyk argues, the performance is the end product. The standards for what counts as an 'accurate' reproduction of each piece of music are simply very different. (Gracyk, 1996:18-20)

According to Gracyk, rock is more often than not, an 'autographic' form which is 'ontologically thick.' It can not be reproduced from its source because its source is so specific. There is only one autographed version, the master recording from which copies are made for us to hear. For Gracyk, the recording is, ontologically speaking, a "thick thing" because it is stands as the primary form of the work itself. To put it another way, it is a heavy thing that has to carry most of the weight of the music's intentional, or poietic, meaning which then shapes all that is immanent in the music as well as the subsequent aesthetic experience of that music precisely because the genuine version cannot be reproduced in any form other than itself. (ibid.:31-36) For turntablists, is it not simply the sounds created using historically situated and socially recognised performance practices that carry the weight of the meaning, it is the specific timbres, textures and arrangements of the sounds themselves that do the heavy lifting. In this case, the categories allographic and autographic are not always fixed, but can have considerable overlap and interplay. While we can rely on this distinction to help us understand an artist's practice and intent, it cannot define a work's meanings any more than the distinction between medium and materials can. A work created by a turntablist is not just fixed record of artistic intent, but an act of communication, one that may not always a central or defining fact in the aesthetic life of a piece of music whose meanings, subsequent to their recorded form, exist within a larger and longer context of meaning. These may include performances, reactions to those performances and subsequent alterations of practice that may entirely reshape the way an artist's works as well as public perceptions of that artist's work.

Several telling examples of the ways in which improvisational forms of composition, subsequent forms of notation and a distinct paradigm of performance practice can intertwine over time, appear in the film 'Scratch.' The film, which documents the birth and growth of 'turntable-ism' and the DJ culture, has several sequences which

show how the modes of composition, notation and aesthetic assessment within this culture are anything but clear cut. 'Scratch' tracks the development of turnablism as a distinct form of DJing with its own methods of composition, performance and culture of aesthetic judgements. In several telling scenes filmmaker Doug Pray shows turntablists working in a variety of contexts, including one scene with the four members of the Xecutioners jamming in a room together like a garage band, as well as several long shots of dozens of well-known practitioners performing at contests and house parties; these are the kinds of performances that establish DJs in their field. In one remarkable scene, John Carluccio, director of the film series 'Battle Sounds' explains a transcription system he helped develop to score specific pieces for other turntablists to use to analyse and learn from the work of their peers. These transcriptions work within this network of aesthetic practice to facilitate the trading of skills and moves in ways distinct from both recordings and performances. (Carluccio et.al, 2000)

The development of techniques such as beat juggling and body tricks, which cannot be demonstrated through recordings or transcriptions, as well as the mastery of established skills such as scratching or breaking, are shown circulating through local, national and international competitions. They evolve through uniquely interwoven cultures of live performance, recording and notation, each of which is a crucial component of the overall aesthetic culture. Turntablists shape their work by composing through improvised performances for peers and one another, in public contests and through recordings, often distributed both formally and informally through networks of contacts and aficionados. These networks are paths to employment, peer assessment and fan pleasure all at the same time in ways that seem impossible to untangle. The networks of aesthetic judgement used by turntablists seem no less rigourous than similar networks that exist amongst jazz fans and rock guitarists, all of whom trade sounds, charts and transcriptions in similar ways. According to many practitioners, DJs appear as singular figures who work almost as early 'country blues' guitarists once did, that is as musicians working to display their own technical abilities, improvising within a clear but flexible set of aesthetic criteria and performance practices who then lay their work open to the aesthetic judgement of their peers in socially approved forums, both formally and informally. (Haslam, 1997:169; Poschardt, 1995:172)

The questions we can ask about turntablism in relation to the concepts of medium and materials might then take into account the various interrelated parts of the process through which their works are created, circulate and find their places in the world. For example, was a particular piece of music scored or created improvisationally? Was there some opaque combination of compositional techniques involved, such as a DJ carefully notating a series of moves produced while working at home? To what extent is the composition and realisation of a piece of music dependent on performance practices, those conventions and innovations that mediate between aesthetic ideals and actual sounds, shaping the particular structure of the sounds most of us will eventually hear? For turntablists there is no one primary medium, no one network of social conventions through which aesthetic credibility is conferred and artistic success confirmed. Nor are there any clear demarcations between the types of materials, sounds and performative gestures allowed into a composition. In fact, while the distinction between allographic and autographic forms might lend some idealist clarity to ontological debates, it seems to falter at describing exactly what constitutes the works that turntablists create, partly because of the improvised nature of the compositions themselves, but also because of the explicitly competitive culture

of tricks and moves that act as core markers of innovation and distinction. This competitive culture even extends to 'digging,' or searching out the best breaks from old vinyl records from second-hand record stores which specalise in selling these primary materials. The ontological instability of this form of music is rooted in the ways in which materials are recognised within the medium as part of the form while the compositional form itself is not clearly set, but is instead heavily context dependent. Some techniques are compositional and performative simultaneously, evoking a sense of the theatrical in the context of battle for example, or the oddly bureaucratic when a DJ demonstrates his 'digging' skills live in performance by playing a sample from an obscure piece of vinyl that no one else owns; the recognition from peers and the audience is multi-layered, respecting how the DJ works both in the performance context and elsewhere.[vii]

DJs work within a collection of distinct, overlapping mediums, both professional and personal, the value of which grows or ebbs depending on the context in which they are employed and experienced. Recordings are not necessarily created to stand in for performances nor are performances necessarily expected to be recreations of particular recordings. Performances work as public showcases for the demonstration of new techniques or they can be more intimate and personal, relying on the feedback of friends to shape and reshape subsequent work. These three mediums, compositions distributed amongst friends, works that are transcribed and made available as published works, and performances in public contexts, demonstrate in distinct ways the aural, visual and written evidence of a set of skills and ideally, a fluid mastery of particular kinds of compositional and performance techniques which are not fixed, technologically, socially or ontologically.

Muzak as public sound practices

> 'What businessman could ever want more, than to have us sucking in his store?' –Fugazi, 'Merchandise.'[viii]

One final collection of material and social facts I want to briefly analyse is muzak. Muzak is a particularly useful phenomenon to analyse in part because we can dispense with so many of the traditionally dominant kinds of analysis noted earlier which have come to dominate popular music studies. Muzak is clearly not amenable to analysis as a genre or a style because it is primarily defined by what it does and where it does it; anything can be muzak given the right circumstances. (Owen, 2006, p. 66) It is also hard to imagine a study of muzak as a subculture because its social uses are produced through a series of largely utilitarian or bureaucratic decision-making processes and values, not as the result of the considerably less predictable processes of communal musical creativity. The hopes and myths of authenticity and authorship are displaced and reception is reduced to a series of supposedly universal, trans-historical and nearly Pavlovian responses which are constantly being analysed through our laboriously abstracted demographic characteristics. (ibid., pp. 66-7) In fact, muzak exhibits such a radical absence of nearly everything many assume to be of value in popular music that it is a striking test case of the limits of the discipline. Any broadly critical understanding of muzak as popular music seems to have little choice but to start with the medium and materials of the form in order to grapple with its larger meanings. In this case, we find a form of music whose clear and straightforward intent reveals a surprising underlying complexity.

If we accept the fairly traditional definition of muzak as atmospheric music used to create commercial environments that 'produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase intentions' (Kotler cited in Areni, 2003, p. 161) then it is clear that muzak's medium is shaped specifically by the contexts in which it is experienced, much more so than the versions of 'Hound Dog' or the work of turntablists. In fact, muzak's medium is unusually complex. A prodigious technological infrastructure of recording studios, systems of repetitive replay on tape, cd, satellites or broadcast stations and an exacting and precise legal infrastructure governs its distribution and public presentation. The distribution of muzak is tightly controlled as a kind of private commercial resource; it is not bound to any culture of personal expression. (Owen, *op.cit*.) But the network of aesthetic meanings produced by muzak, that network of musical conventions which specifies the ways in which the materials of muzak are mediated and accrue meaning, are incalculably diverse, despite its producers' manifestly uniform intent. This is because the actual sounds of muzak are intended to be precisely tuned to the contexts in which they appear. This overarching goal shapes the meaning of muzak's materials to a remarkable extent. Muzak uses popular texts, musical forms and aural gestures with which we are assumed to be familiar, reproducing or recontextualising those texts, forms and gestures in a bounded, precise way. The intended aesthetic experience of muzak is mediated through the meaningful associations produced through specifically shaped versions of familiar types of sound which are dependent on the context in which they are experienced. Muzak's producers and users deliberately confine themselves to referencing what we might consider real music, music whose primary experience is necessarily recognised to happen elsewhere. And it is this secondary layer of meaning that defines the form's medium. Muzak's materials are constructed from referential meanings, not direct ones. There are rules to muzak and there are standards, but they are not standards of positive aesthetic 'authenticity,' 'excellence' or 'virtuosity.' They are instead the negative aesthetic standards of shaping familiar sounds to conform to a particular series of commercial tasks.

The sounds of muzak are purported to produce specific musical affects. While the research is flatly contradictory on what exactly these affects are, the intent rarely changes. (Sweeny and Wyber, 2002, pp. 62-4; Herrington and Capella, 1994; 1996, pp. 36-8) A broadly uniform intent shapes the sounds we experience, arguably more so than most forms of popular music. Muzak is intended to be unremarkable, inoffensive and familiar in its aural contours. The genre conventions and musical gestures of muzak are supposed to be uniquely tuned to the lives of those of us who are expected to turn up in the environment in which they are presented. Once discovered, a carefully contextualised musical affect apparently becomes a permanent part of the literature. (see Areni, 2003, pp. 161-2) Despite the fact that muzak uses other people's music as its materials, it does so in ways that are obviously distinct from the ways in which turntablists use other people's music as their materials or in the way Elvis used someone else's music to suit his own agenda. Thus when we apply the same concepts to forms of music that have few social facts in common, we find we have to do so in ways that take into account what those forms actually are in intent, realisation and experience.

Given that the clear intent of muzak's producers is to mediate social relationships exterior to it through symbolic means, these exterior relationships are primary in shaping our experience of this music. Muzak is explicitly mercenary and our experience of it should ideally be a no-brainer, so to speak. As such, muzak is rarely

accidental. If you hear it, there must be a reason for it, even if you are unaware of it, even if it isn't working on you. Muzak is assumed to be so heavily context dependent that most summary generalisations of the form in the academic literature actually excise the consumer from the equation entirely. Instead, strategies are offered specifically to avoid the particularities of taste and preference, offering firm conclusions only in relation to contextual factors such as how to use it in different types of business and the times of day at which it is most effective, factors which are within easy reach of practical entrepreneurial remedy. (see Herrington and Capella, 1994, pp. 59-60; 1996, pp. 38-9) In this sense, muzak inverts the traditional social relationships created by most popular music. We aren't necessarily expected to listen to or love the music nor are we expected to actively consume it or invest our subjective and emotional sense of self in it. It is presumed we've already done that. (see Owen, *op.cit*.) Instead, we are expected to barely notice and passively perceive it, hopefully investing our agency elsewhere in response.

Yet despite its particularities, there are many generic commonalities between muzak and other forms of popular music. As Joseph Lanza has valuably demonstrated, muzak has a history of varied and complicated intent, a history that is still evolving as the consumer contexts in which it exists evolve. (Lanza, 1994) Muzak is a tradition of cultural practice whose meaning is never stable and never complete, changing as the forms and spaces of consumption it exists to facilitate evolve. Remarkably, it fits the generally accepted definitions of popular music floating around in the field. It is 'made commercially,' 'in a particular kind of legal and economic system,' it is 'made using an ever-changing technology of sound storage', it is 'significantly experienced as mass mediated,' it is clearly music 'made for social and bodily pleasure' and it can easily be seen to describe at least one of the 'general conditions of music in the contemporary information society.' ('Can we get rid of…', 2005, pp. 133-2) However, while muzak may seem fairly obvious about why it is where it is and what it's doing there, its exhibits characteristics which stretch well beyond traditional modes of popular music analysis. To understand the aesthetic experience of muzak, we have to look at the things muzak is actually doing and how the contexts in which it acts shape its material contours and accrued meanings. Given its ambiguous ontological status and complexity, I don't think it is to much too say that muzak can provide popular music studies with more than a few insights into our objects of analysis. It is, after all, among the least pretentious and most widely experienced music we have.

Conclusion

The lack of disciplinary coherence cited by Grossberg and others serves to highlight the diversity of approaches taken within the field of popular music studies. For some this constitutes a 'crisis,' and for others it embodies a defining strength of the field. (see also McRobbie, 1995) As Frith has argued, the body of theory Grossberg claims popular music studies lacks, apparently never developed because it is missing three things: a 'level of abstraction that makes it impossible to relate its descriptive nouns to anything in musical experience,' a 'methodological imperative to pursue conceptual development rather than empirical data,' and a grand, unified statement of purpose 'which can only be described as a metaphysical belief…in the connectedness of everything.' (Frith, 2004, p. 367) Given the preceding analysis, I

would push Frith's arguments even further. I would argue that the broad set of musical practices that we tend to call 'popular music' exhibits such a range of ontological diversity, that it is hard to imagine any theoretical coherence growing organically out of the materials organised under this rubric. The perceived lack of a common theoretical language does not necessarily constitute a disciplinary 'crisis,' any more than the diversity of practices subsumed under the label 'popular music' does.

It seems clear to me that understanding popular music as a collection of material and social facts whose direct material consequence is an 'ontologically thick' thing from which we draw, receive and make meaning within particular contexts and larger historical trajectories of meaning is a reasonable starting point for analysis. I have tried to present 'Hound Dog,' turntablism and muzak as distinct examples of sound practices in which the aesthetic meanings of an artist's work grow through the use of specific materials and are recognisable as representative of, or at least related to, a particular tradition or idiom through the contexts in which they are made public, through the modes of production used to create them and through the particular circumstances of the experienced meaning of those sounds. Sometimes one of these factors might matter more than the others; they certainly can't all matter the same way, all the time. The ways in which the sounds used in some music are produced can matter much less than the ways in which they are presented in a particular time or place. The cultural moment that defined the context of production might matter a lot more for 'Hound Dog' than for an obscure mix tape made by a turntablist exclusively for friends while muzak paradoxically functions to erase the particularities of the moment of consumption while also being unusually sensitive to them. There is an unavoidable and often unbearable density and diversity of musical practices that are routinely subsumed under the label "popular music." It seems foolhardy to think we can claim them all as our exclusive domain, or imagine them all to be uniquely pliant to a unified disciplinary language or particular mode of understanding.

Notes

[i] There are several collections of essays which address the limits of the many, varied approaches scholars use to analyse popular music. See Moore (2001; 2003) and Middleton (1990).

[ii] Toynbee (2000) presents a compelling attempt to map the culture surrounding acts of musical creativity through a concept he calls 'the radius of creativity.'

[iii] On the Peacock compilation of her work (*Big Mama…*, 1992), the song 'I've Searched the World Over' includes a false start with the band regrouping on tape. This recording, from the same session as 'Hound Dog' suggests that all of the songs from this session were done in one take.

[iv] See Fink's provocative and eloquent reading of each version. (Fink, 2002:95-102) See also the four disc retrospective compilation of Blackbird Records, *When the Sun Goes Down*. While Blackbird's white producers clearly laid down an explicitly formulaic approach to interwar blues (see Kenney, 1999:134), many of stylistic traits exhibited by Thornton and Johnny Otis's band are apparent in these recordings as well.

[v] As Kenney (1999) shows, this was standard treatment of 'race' or 'rhythm and blues' records for the better part of the 20th century. (Kenney, 1999:110-3; 130-1)

[vi] 'Scratch' (2001)

[vii] 'Scratch' shows how 'digging' can be as competitive as actual battles, with several DJs recalling the tricks they employ to prevent their peers from finding and exploiting 'their' sources of their vinyl raw material. Many DJs have even taken to pressing their own vinyl copies of primary materials, such as full albums of guitar sounds.

[viii] (Fugazi, 1990)

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