

Lo-fi Listening as Active Reception

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ABSTRACT

Literature on sound reproduction is largely concerned with “high-fidelity” recording, despite a multiplicity of modes of recording in practice throughout history. As a result, histories of listening have often tacitly privileged standards of appreciation rooted in high-fidelity culture. In an attempt to expand our conception of different listening styles, the author draws attention to latent histories of low-fidelity listening, positing “lo-fi” as a receptive mode that appreciates amateur and failed musical performances, aestheticizes noise in soundscapes and encourages listeners to participate in the construction of sonic experience at the time of playback.

In histories of recorded sound, high-fidelity listening culture has assumed a default status. Discussions of recordings typically center around standards of appreciation associated with high fidelity, even as alternate modes of sonic creation and reception have been, and remain, in operation. In an effort to enrich our understanding of aesthetic and social contexts of listening to sound recordings, this article will consider what a lo-fi listening posture might entail, situating it within broader historical narratives of listening. High-fidelity and lo-fi modes will be juxtaposed to ultimately suggest the limits of such a dichotomy in contrast with a fluid conception of sonic experience.

High-fidelity (“hi-fi”) practices of sound recording aspire to pristine reproduction of an ordinary musical event, by which the medium of recording is rendered transparent through noise reduction and other strategies of purification [1]. High-fidelity sound recording, conceived as verisimilitude in reproduction, has been debunked as an idealized impossibility—sound recording neither reproduces nor represents reality; it constructs a version of it. As early as 1939, a General Electric ad for high-fidelity radio receivers expressed this using the phrase “spectacular realism,” sound more real than reality itself [2]. That said, even today, the seeming pos-

sibility of perfectly faithful recordings remains at the center of discourse about audio fidelity [3].

The widespread pursuit of high-fidelity reproduction as a tacit or overt goal of recording has produced a corresponding protocol of listening [4]. Listeners to hi-fi recordings desire to be engulfed within the sounds of the recorded track and to exclude unwanted sounds in the listening environment through noise reduction [5]. Sociologist Antoine Hennion describes such conventions of listening to recordings as a hybrid of active and passive engagement: “Listening is a precise and highly organized activity, but its aim is not to control something or to achieve a specific goal . . . its objective is to bring about a loss of control, an act of surrender” [6]. The archetypical high-fidelity listener actively seeks immersion in a hyper-real sonic world.

In a 1954 article in *High Fidelity* magazine, Thomas I. Lucci conceived of the ideal hi-fi listening experience in terms of enclosure, writing that “the listener is not outside the music, but literally right in the middle, feeling every note” [7]. Media scholar Keir Keightley interprets such aspiration to immersion as escapism, which offered hobbyists at mid-century relief from domestic duties through listening that “abhors distractions of any kind” [8]. This listening posture assumes that a recording is an “independent, pure, almost sacrosanct, musical object” [9]. If recordings are regarded as such, then they can be valued and exchanged on capitalist markets. Since at least the 1940s, the idealized purity of high fidelity has been exploited as an advertising ploy by mainstream record labels, stereo manufacturers and lifestyle magazines [10].

As a counternarrative to high-fidelity recording, lo-fi (“low fidelity”) has been conceived as a style of recording that eschews high-fidelity standards. Within lo-fi culture, aspects of recordings that are conventionally unwanted, such as distortion and mistakes, carry aesthetic value as pure sounds. While high-fidelity logic operates according to pretenses of transparency, a lo-fi recording exposes its devices of recording, “foregrounding its own constructedness” [11]. Lo-fi engineers embrace obsolescent recording technologies, an ethos

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that is often politicized as a countercultural gesture, counter to high-fidelity's logic of technological advancement [12].

One example of a lo-fi recording is an acoustic version of the song "I Want to Be Cold" from the album *Blood* (2001) by experimental band the Microphones. It features Phil Elverum singing a short tune over acoustic guitar [13]. Sounds that should be eliminated or masked are allowed to linger: A layer of crackling persists through the recording, a close microphone position captures Elverum's breath and the buzzing of frets, and a chair audibly creaks [14]. Halfway into the recording, a distant siren sounds, causing Elverum to pause a phrase and start again. Flouting conventional standards of perfection by documenting human failure, Elverum's approach to recording documents aspects of performance often made inaudible on studio recordings; further, it produces a sonic texture that is interesting in its own right. Far from signs of negligence, these lo-fi sounds are welcomed by Elverum's listeners as evidence of humanity. In literature on sound recording, this approach to recording "I Want to Be Cold" has been codified as a genre; it is widely acknowledged that lo-fi techniques of *performance* and *recording* deal with musical experience differently than their high-fidelity counterparts [15]. And yet, corresponding lo-fi techniques of *listening* are rarely addressed.

The unique soundworld of "I Want to Be Cold" invites listeners to engage differently than they would with a high-fidelity recording. High-fidelity listeners interpret degraded sound quality as a loss; for a lo-fi listener, the transformation that inevitably occurs during recording produces new types of meaning [16]. The layer of crackling on the track, pleasing to some listeners in its own right, also asks them to consider the nature of reproduction. On this track, the human breath, room noise and errant siren orient the listener. She might become receptive to noise in her own soundworld at the time of playback: a speaker's hum, traffic outside. Lo-fi listeners are not passively transported *to* a contained musical world but actively participate *in* the construction of such a world.

Beyond sound and music, reception theorists have considered how creative agency is enacted at the point of reception. High-fidelity media, musical or otherwise, have been understood as limiting involvement. In 1979, Jean Baudrillard compared high-fidelity recordings to the vivid colors of television. He writes:

One gives you so much . . . that you have nothing to add, that is to say, nothing to give in exchange. Absolute repression: by giving you a little too much one takes away everything. Beware of what has been so well "rendered," when it is being returned to you without you ever having given it! [17]

In this sense, high-fidelity recordings preclude listener involvement by providing a surplus of information [18]. By contrast, semiotician Umberto Eco has suggested that some art requires completion by performers and listeners; he explores degrees of openness in artworks and "semantic plurality" across history [19].

Marshall McLuhan grappled with the difference between repressive and open media by using the terms "cool" and "hot" to describe how media are more or less susceptible to certain modes of reception depending upon how much information they offer the receiver [20]. Extending McLuhan's conception to sound, if recordings are missing information due to degradation, they require a filling in of gaps by the listener. For Eco, incompleteness is inherent to certain artworks, whose openness is a product of historical circumstances; McLuhan's theories are similarly deterministic.

This article instead suggests that all recordings are open to some degree, contingent upon a listener. The logic of the soundscape, as conceived by R. Murray Schafer and widely borrowed, is that listeners perceive all environments, whether built or natural, as "works"—objects of appreciation that are coherent and complete. However, as Jonathan Sterne notes, the notion of soundscape is always "endowed with perspective, however mutated or distorted" [21]. This is true of all listening postures, regardless of the perceived quality of the object under attention. Recordings such as "I Want to Be Cold" exemplify the paradoxes at play here: They manage to be both artful—worthy of contemplation—and "real"—admitting their own inadequacy and inviting participation. Lo-fi recordings call for a listening mode that appreciates something already rendered, but that also renders further.

In 1961, Raymond Williams suggested that reception of art should be the recreation of an experience in real time. He writes, "To succeed in art is to convey an experience to others in such a form that the experience is actively recreated—not 'contemplated,' not 'examined,' not passively received, but . . . actually lived through" [22]. A lo-fi sound world, according to Emily Dolan, foregrounds "the actual experience of listening," drawing the listener's attention to mediating technologies of playback [23]. Dolan suggests a listener who contemplates not only the recording, but the experience of reception itself.

If it is possible to become aware of one's own listening habits, then it is also possible to alter such patterns through sustained awareness. Susan J. Douglas discusses the diversity of ways that listeners engaged with early radio, observing that "individuals developed their own repertoires of listening styles out of these modes and moved fluidly between different cognitive and emotional levels" [24]. Although a particular recording might encourage a corresponding style of listening, recordings and listening styles are not bound together. In the words of Williams, "Communication is no longer, in most cases, a single act" [25].

Music critic Heather Phares describes an album by the Microphones as "something of a rarity: a lo-fi album designed for headphones" [26]. In other words, an immersive, transportive listening experience, which has historically been attached to high-fidelity recordings, might be applied instead to a category of recording—in this case, a "lo-fi album"—that has conventionally been understood to warrant only distracted listening. This juncture between the conventions of a listening object and its subsequent genre of playback by listeners opens up an opportunity for conscious choice, in

which a learned listening style might be modified or applied differently.

Histories of listening, like listening and like the objects to which we listen, are subject to constant transformation. My goal has been to illuminate the presence of engrained, historical relationships between subcultures and associated styles of listening, which are derived from convention. Beyond “I Want to Be Cold,” many lo-fi recordings prompt their own unique listening postures: Live jazz recordings fossilize spontaneity and make it accessible to listeners at a later date; songwriter Elliott Smith’s recordings from the 1990s invite listeners to enter an intimate sonic space; and William

Basinski’s *Disintegration Loops* (2002) allow listeners to both witness and expedite the physical transformation of recordings over time.

Although current literature has tacitly privileged high-fidelity listening, listeners have enacted lo-fi postures throughout the history of recorded sound, choosing to listen through and to noise. As Williams writes, “Like new ways of seeing [hearing], old ways must be actively learned” [27]. Amidst our present plurality of listening styles, no one mode takes obvious precedent—and thus our choices about how to listen must, like sounds themselves, become objects of our attention and care.

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References and Notes

- 1 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). Attali writes of recordings: “What counts is the clinical purity of the acoustics” p. 106.
- 2 Quoted by Keir Keightley, “‘Turn it down!’ she shrieked: gender, domestic space, and high fidelity, 1948–59,” *Popular Music* 15, No. 2, p. 177 (May 1996).
- 3 Joshua Glasgow, “Hi-Fi Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 65, No. 2, pp. 163–174 (Spring 2007). Glasgow discusses hi-fi, lo-fi and no-fi aesthetics and maintains that perfectly transparent sound reproduction is possible.
- 4 Jonathan Sterne calls habits of listening “audible techniques.” See Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003).
- 5 For a discussion of noise-canceling technology and neoliberal subjectivities, see Mack Hagood, “Quiet Comfort: Noise, Otherness, and the Mobile Production of Personal Space,” *American Quarterly* 63, No. 3, pp. 573–589 (September 2011).
- 6 Antoine Hennion, “Music Lovers: Taste as Performance,” *Theory, Culture, Society* 18, No. 5, p. 10 (2001).
- 7 Thomas I. Lucci, “After binaural—what? Or Uncle Tom’s Cabinet,” *High Fidelity* (March 1954) p. 37.
- 8 Keightley [2] p. 169.
- 9 Stan Link, “The Work of Reproduction in the Mechanical Aging of an Art: Listening to Noise,” *Computer Music Journal* 25, No. 1, p. 37 (Spring 2001).
- 10 For discussion of advertising and fidelity, see Keightley [2].
- 11 Tony Grajeda, “The Sound of Disaffection,” in Henry Jenkins III, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, eds., *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2002) p. 368.
- 12 Andy Kelleher Stuhl, “Reactions to Analog Fetishism in Sound-Recording Cultures,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 74 (Fall 2014) pp. 42–53.
- 13 The Microphones, “I Want to Be Cold (Acoustic),” *Blood*, 2001.
- 14 Friedrich Kittler calls this the noise of the *real*: “the waste or residue that neither the mirror of the imaginary [film] nor the grid of the

symbolic [typewriter] can catch: the physiological accidents and stochastic disorder of bodies.” See *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1999) p. 14.

- 15 Adam Harper, “Lo-Fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse” (PhD Dissertation, Wadham College, University of Oxford, 2014).
- 16 Jonathan Sterne’s history of the MP3 file format emphasizes the significance of loss as central to histories of recorded sound. See Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2012).
- 17 Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, transl. by Brian Singer (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1979, 1990) p. 30.
- 18 R. Murray Schafer conceived of lo-fi soundscapes as urban noise, “overdense” in sounds—a surplus of presence, in which perspective is lost. I conceive of lo-fi differently.
- 19 Umberto Eco uses works by Stockhausen, Berio and Boulez as examples of “open” musical art works. Eco, *The Open Work*, transl. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962, 1989).
- 20 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994).
- 21 Jonathan Sterne, “The Stereophonic Spaces of Soundscape,” in Paul Theberge, Kyle Devine and Tom Everett, eds., *Living Stereo: Histories and Cultures of Multichannel Sound* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015) p. 69. See also Sterne’s discussion of “situated omniscience,” p. 73.
- 22 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961) p. 51.
- 23 Emily Dolan, “. . . This little ukulele tells the truth’: indie pop and kitsch authenticity,” *Popular Music* 29, No. 3, p. 464 (October 2010).
- 24 Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) p. 8.
- 25 Williams [22] p. 53.
- 26 Heather Phares, “Review of *The Glow*. Pt. 2,” <allmusic.com>, accessed 15 December 2015.
- 27 Williams [22] p. 53.

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