

Draft Essay for Performance Research: On song  
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Dead Animals: Ontologies of Recorded Songs Through the Analogue of Taxidermy.

The possibilities of the recording environment offer a unique palette to the songwriter who produces (in the vernacular of Popular music), and with each wave of technology, the relationship between recording and performance becomes more complex. I have become increasingly fascinated by this relationship and what it means practically and in terms of meaning making and the status of performance in songs. This fascination stems from a panicked moment of realising what a recording is. That *being* for a recording is not what it appears to be.

If we record a sound and play it back, we assume that what we hear is the sound we made, captured by the technology we used to make the recording and returned to us through playback. There is an almost magical quality to the process, but any interrogation of this causes a collapse of any poetic assumption about the nature of the recording. In wax cylinder recording, the wax is cut at different depths by a needle moved by a diaphragm. On playback, a different stylus traces the grooves in the wax, moving another diaphragm that causes the air to vibrate at the similar frequencies to the source. This principle carries through all audio recording: sound waves in the air translate to another form and are recreated by technology to move the air at the point of playback. With analogue recording the waves become electrical voltage, the electrical signal being an analogue for the movement of air pressure. In digital recording, binary is employed. The process is reversed for playback.

Essentially all of our audio recordings are facsimile. What we hear is technology recreating sound waves. That is not our voice we hear, is it? We are confronted, in the end, by a kind of ontological catastrophe. One that profits a beautiful space for creativity and innovation, indeed a collapsing of fact that allows for the building and sculpting of an infinite number of fictitious performances, events and details. What follows is a brief glossary of a proposed way of thinking through the ways in which we respond to this set of different ontologies, to play with the performance of song,

making sets of signifiers which often become what we think of as definitive performances, though they may be nothing of the sort.

It is appropriate to question and dismiss any empirical notion of a 'good' recording, and we can quite comfortably work within a set of ideas that assume qualitative statements about a recording arrive through cultural negotiation as much as through any rendering of a likeness to its source.

It is via an analogue of taxidermy that questions about the reification of musical performance find a comfortable discursive space. There is always a trace (trace being of significance here) of Bakhtin's 'Postupok' within a recorded sound; a conjuring of the past, which once rendered, over and over again, becomes iteratively once occurrent: every playback poses a new ontology and cultural experience. We find here too Derrida's 'Différence' 'for wherever a sign is repeated it (re)-appears in a different context and the contextual shift invariably alters its meaning.' (Zima 1999: 151). Popular Music recording is one kind of fixed media. Captured, mixed, mastered. These processes allow for considerable intervention and creativity. For many, the activity we call production remains composition. Our relationship with the meaning of recordings is various and has recourse to industry, art, style, and genre. Furthermore, the choices of capture and production signify, and much like any other performance of identity, we can construct.

Since the invention of multi-tracking, the methods of recording/producing music have 'acknowledged that the performance isn't the finished item, and that work can be added to in the control room, or in the studio itself'. (Brian Eno in Ed. Cox & Warner 2004: 128) As such, we should accept from the outset the uselessness of thinking about *the* recording, much in the same way Roland Barthes considers photography:

The Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See' 'Here it is;' it points a finger at certain *vis-a-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language. This is why, insofar as it is licit to speak of a photograph, it seemed to me just as improbable to speak of *the* Photograph. (Barthes 2000: 5)

We must allow for the subjective imposition of what any individual may find emotive, resonant or of quality. We might also apply Barthes's thoughts concerning the reduction or elevation of photographs to a generic term of 'photography':

So I went on, not daring to reduce the world's countless photographs, any more than to extend several of mine to Photography: in short, I found myself at an impasse and, so to speak, 'scientifically' alone and disarmed. (Barthes 2000: 7)

Barthes cannot diminish some photographs or elevate his own to sit within the same notion of photography. With recording, as with the photograph, the 'good' is always dependent upon context. Recording is a cultural act, with any number of motives or contexts for playback, all of which must carry their own unfixed meanings. Like Barthes's impasse, one cannot consider a professional symphonic recording in the same way as a child making their first attempts at song on a cassette recorder, though, both may be wonderful.

Let's begin with Zagorski-Thomas's assertion that, 'the judgment of what makes a 'good' or even an 'accurate' recording is as much a culturally determined decision as a perceptual one' (Zagorski-Thomas 2005). The audibility of the means of production means that the signification possible extends beyond what is strictly 'musical' (I use the term problematically: where does one become the other?) to allow a further reading of ideological and aesthetic factors that run concurrently to the specific narrative of the words of a song. The signification of fidelity and production instantly allows a work to be culturally located, through recognisable tropes and timbres, giving any artist an ideological position. The relationship between performance of song and its production has become interdependent. Paul Théberge goes some way towards simplifying this:

Such a premise demands that one develops an understanding of music technology as more than a random collection of instruments, recording and playback devices. Technology is also an environment in which we experience and think about music; it is a set of practices in which we

engage in making and listening to musical sounds; and it is an element in the discourses that we use in sharing and evaluating our experiences, defining in the process what music is and can be. (Théberge 2001: 3)

I propose here a thinking about the recording of performance that accepts, encourages and uses the audible presence of technology and media, so we start to see how the studio as compositional tool (Brian Eno in Ed. Cox & Warner 2004: 127) might offer us an entire and pliable resource for the construction and/or representation of sound, voice, space, place, performance, writing/composition and subsequently meaning. Eno asserts that the studio-based composer can ‘think in terms of supplying material that would actually be too subtle for a first listening.’ (Ibid) To this end, Kim Cascone reminds us that:

After advances in sound technology gave birth to the recording studio, the record shifted from document to that of a highly crafted object of “ideal, not real, events.” The final product was created by an invisible assembly line of composers, musicians, producers and engineers, who created an aura that operated at a meta-level to the star performer. (Cascone: online)

Consider recording as a taxidermy of performance. Production follows the same shape as the idealisation of anthropomorphic changes we see in the preservation of animals. Rachel Polinquin’s questioning of ‘Animal or object? Animal and object?’ (Polinquin 2012: 5) and what she calls ‘irresolvable tension’ seem to have common ground with Cascone, the ideal set against the implication of performance and the desire for reification; music as a ‘thing’, conceptually and literally. A stuffed bird is at once a real bird and not a real bird, a recorded song is at once a real performance and not. Playing live and producing recordings become related but very different disciplines. I don’t mean by this to say that recorded music is ‘dead’, but rather that it can be controlled and manipulated in the process of its reification to behave in ways in which a live performance cannot. The animal in life occupies its surroundings as they happen to it, but the taxidermied animal/object is dressed and arranged to suggest narrative and context in perpetuity. The (implication of) performance then, is only ever a taxidermy; object rather than animal. The

performer(s), for this fixed time, are reified in a blur of ontological fluidity. I cannot escape here a similarity to the actions of Rudolf Schwarzkogler, whose performance exists only as photographic tableaux, implied liveness in tightly controlled, private conditions.

In taxidermy, one must build an artefact that has the appearance of something living. Performance becomes a thing that exists within the artefact (and has indeed been performed); it is at the same time a performance manufactured and constructed. The discourse of realism (as supposed by the 'capture' of a live performance) therefore reveals itself to be a discourse of mythology. If production centres within the 'ideal', which does not necessarily mean 'best', 'cleanest' or 'most accurate' (although these are slippery terms in this context), but rather that the choices of recording, production, fidelity etc., are ideological, political, and aesthetic all at once. The Moldy Peaches are a useful example here. Belonging to a set of New York Anti-Folk artists, their song 'Who's Got the Crack?' (2001) contains within it a manifesto of DIY, anti-industry principles, via the simplistic amateurish writing and performance (an apparent live take recorded on none-too-clean tape), its recording and production. Recording on tape live in a basement carries with it signifiers of trend, versions of authenticity, of resistance to industry norms or demands. We hear those things in the timbre of the production as much as we hear them in the performances of the band. To this end, fidelity becomes genre, lo-fi becomes methodology. Beck's 'Odelay' (1996) is a detailed and laboured production (with a team of no less than six producers) that employs the aesthetics of lower fidelities throughout, not through cheap or simplistic methods, but as a clear aesthetic. The performances of the songs are built and shaped through their production to signify specific cultural values.

In recording we find power over time, over event, and over truths, but this version of power fairly reeks of sadness and of death. 'Taxidermy wants to stop time. To keep life. To cherish what is no longer as if it were immortally whole.' (Poliquin 2012: 6)

For Poliquin, 'taxidermy is always a gesture of remembrance. The beast is no more.' (Ibid: 7) I compare here the motive for recording musical performance, even at the very origins of the technical ability to do it with this same 'longing'. The ephemeral

nature of the playing of music means the feeling of experience drifts from us even as the final sound passes away. Consider the sea of mobile phones at contemporary gigs, trying to force the atmosphere and players into the little box to keep as 'things', brought out as proof of wonder. Recordings of performance serve at least in part as souvenir; they are souvenir to our longing.

Longing is itself a peculiar condition. It works as a kind of ache connecting the stories we tell ourselves and the objects we use as storytellers. In a sense, longing is a mechanism for both pacifying and cultivating various lusts and hungers by creating objects capable of generating significance. And here, objects of remembrance or souvenirs are exemplary. (Ibid: 7)

We collect recordings, and their souvenir status is further underscored by interest in artwork, sleeve design, liner notes. We arrange, alphabetise, pour over reviews. We order, exercise versions of control and take ownership of artists we admire. The legacy of these reified objects and their meanings form through the continued and shifting (re)contextualisation of the recordings (as distinct from the songs) as Eisenberg frames 'our conception of poetry', offering 'For us, the book is the work.' (Eisenberg 1987: 10) Eisenberg's book introduces some of the key themes at play here, considering that difficult ground between the music and its physical media (or to extend the analogue of taxidermy, the animal/object). Various factors are involved in the preparation of an animal skin to render the appearance of 'life'; some practical and some philosophical (these we see rendered in Poliquin's book). Eisenberg finds similar layers in recorded music in regard to preservation,

'Perfect preservation is a matter not simply of technology, but of ontology as well. A defect of preservation is a defect of reification, and this is the trouble with clef and quavers. They aren't music; they just represent it. The music itself is sound.' (Ibid: 11)

The role of the recording as souvenir reveals itself here too. Eisenberg writes about a collector called Clarence who he describes as 'Blessed' because through his record collection 'He has a past to mourn.' (Ibid: 16) Mourning and loss belong to this

discourse. In the reification of the ephemeral event of music we encounter a number of passing aways, and eventually autobiography.

A souvenir is a token of authenticity from a lived experience that lingers only in a memory: - without the demands of nostalgia, we would have no need for such objects of remembrance. But nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss, and souvenirs are always only fragments of increasingly distant experiences or events, and so are necessarily incomplete, partial, and impoverished. (Poliquin 2012: 7)

In our romanticising of artists and their songs we can trace through this discourse of taxidermy much of the tragedy, potency and value of what might tentatively be considered a canon of recordings. These recordings approach a status that Poliquin describes in her writing as 'at once symbolic and individual.' (Ibid: 5) Recordings become monumental. They are preserved moments of ephemeral expression, and even now we seek to 'improve' and re-master those finished and fleeting moments, and so recordings of songs become somehow definitive 'performances'. Of course, arriving here we must reckon with the inevitable collapse in the recording/production of music of terms like performance, event, and moment. What can be said of live music through these terms becomes immediately slippery as we start to fix the skins of songs.

This is a complex narrative though, the 'thingness' of recorded music. When we make an object of music, we also provide the potential for product, just as with the animal/object. The collectable souvenir has financial worth as well as emotional and cultural value, and recorded music, whether complicit in or resistant of it, is defined by capitalism. Attali usefully unpicks this thread as he writes on repetition and reproduction,

For with the appearance of the phonograph record, the relation between music and money starts to be flaunted, it ceases to be ambiguous and shameful. [...] It becomes a material object of exchange and profit, without having to go through the long and complex detour of the score and performance any more. (Attali 1985: 88)

It is worth establishing that beyond the fixing of music as recording lies this 'death of the original, the triumph of the copy, and the forgetting of the represented foundation' (Ibid: 89) that marks our severance from any real association with live contexts (except as a kind of relic or impression). But I don't mean this in any particularly dystopian way. Indeed, while the recording of music allows for industry and 'announces the entry of the sign into the general economy' (Ibid: 88) it also (perhaps not without a kind of irony) opens up a space for fascinating creativity and frameworks of meaning that belong exclusively to the realm of the recording.

The playback device is distinct from the instrument, and the musician distinct from the engineer, but instruments are technology, and engineers are creative.

Considering that,

[...] an instrument is mechanical to the degree that it performs musically important tasks for the player, the guitar takes care of intonation for you. The piano takes care of intonation and (to a degree) timbre. The Hammond organ takes care of intonation, timbre and chording. The phonograph takes care of everything, (Eisenberg 1987: 145)

We might note that the architecture of the nature of playback (which of course exists in time ephemerally like performance) is less an abstraction of liveness and more a kind of time dilation. Or to comply with my own analogue here, a fixing of the lifelike posture that implies a version of liveness over the eventness of playback. By which I mean that the performance is at the point of and within the process of production. As such, let's adjust the metaphor of the animal. Rather than accurately posturing the corpse to suggest 'life' in perpetuity (the 'accurate' reification of the trace of performance), we might consider the means of fixing, dressing and the narrative implied by it as a more contemporary way of thinking through a musical taxidermy. Much like Kanye West's manipulation of the voice in 'I Thought About Killing You' (2018), the voice becoming monstrous underscoring the violence of the words, reinforcing their meaning. What can we make the animal say? What can we make the animal do? What can we make the animal be?



All taxidermy renders animals immortal, and through that immortality they exist apart from lived reality while still physically lurking in this world. This is taxidermy's psychological potency: dead yet still animate, these animal-things offer something more than words alone can describe. (Poliquin 2012: 198)

The fixing of song in media, its permanence and its malleability provides a unique advantage to the producer. While the performance (or at least the implication of performance) continues to lurk in the world as file or artefact, the moment of recordings makes a new kind of material. If performance plays the animal, the recording becomes (albeit in facsimile) the skin. Its posture, its space, its context and so on become choices rather than memories, sand and skin rather than muscle and bone.

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