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Lo-Fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse

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Abstract for 'Lo-Fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse'

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During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, 'lo-fi,' a term suggesting poor sound quality, the opposite of 'hi-fi,' became a characteristic perceived in certain popular-music recordings and eventually emerged as a category within independent or 'indie' popular music. It is typically taken to express the technical and technological deficiencies associated with amateur or 'DIY' musical production, namely at home using cheap recording equipment. However, this thesis rejects the assumption that lo-fi equates to a mode of production and charts it as a construction and a certain aesthetics within popular music discourse, defined as 'a positive appreciation of what are perceived and/or considered normatively interpreted as imperfections in a recording.' I chart the development and manifestation of lo-fi aesthetics, and the ways it focuses on various 'lo-fi effects' such as noise, distortion ('phonographic imperfections') and performance imperfections, in several decades of newspapers, magazines and websites covering popular music in the English-speaking world.

I argue that lo-fi aesthetics is not merely the unmediated, realist authenticity that it is often claimed to be, but one that is also fascinated with the distance from perceived commercial norms of technique and technology (or 'technocracy') that lo-fi effects signify. Lo-fi aesthetics derives from aesthetics of primitivism and realism that extend back long before phonographic imperfections were positively received. I also differentiate between lo-fi aesthetics and aesthetics of noise music, distortion in rock, glitch, punk and cassette culture. An appreciation for recording imperfections and the development of 'lo-fi' as a construction and a category is charted since the 1950s and particularly in the 1980s, 1990s and in the twenty-first century, taking in the reception of artists such as the Velvet Underground, Bob Dylan, Hasil Adkins, the Shaggs, Jandek, Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening, Pavement, Sebadoh, Guided By Voices, Beck, Will Oldham, Ariel Pink and Willis Earl Beal.

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Chapter 1. What is Lo-Fi? What is its Discourse?

As lo-fi itself is often considered to do, this thesis works backwards from the contemporary situation. The project was conceived in 2009, at a time when lo-fi sounds had not been as popular in indie music cultures since the early 1990s, and the overall aim was to give an account of lo-fi and its aesthetic significance that would incorporate analysis, psychology and sociology, and that would trace its historical origins in the twentieth century.

From my twenty-first-century vantage point, the category of lo-fi seemed more or less stable: 'lo-fi' described a form of popular music that had poor sound quality (being the opposite of 'hi-fi') and other rough qualities because it was recorded in a 'do-it-yourself' fashion by amateurs on amateurs' equipment, and its practitioners and fans liked it that way. I was to examine how and why. My assumption - and that of some secondary sources I will turn to - was that the positive reception of poor sound quality was basically coextensive with amateur home-recorded music, and that it could accordingly be mapped out alongside the spread of portable magnetic tape technologies and the compact cassette in particular.

The problem with this narrative suddenly became apparent when I began to open magazines from the 1980s that had championed amateur musical production on cassette. I struggled to find the word 'lo-fi' or its synonyms and I struggled to find any clear indications of an appreciation for poor sound quality. On the contrary - where sound quality was mentioned at all, poor sound quality was criticised and good sound quality was praised. Then, attempting to find some historical basis for the near-ubiquitous contemporary idea that the scratchiness of old recordings has a special evocative charm, I turned to the reception of folk

recordings during the 1950s and 1960s. In almost every case, as far as sound quality was concerned, only the best was acceptable.

It soon became clear that I had been operating under a number of assumptions largely unique to the contemporary era, in which poor sound quality, home-recording and amateurism, and even a certain romanticism about all three, had all been entwined within and conflated as 'lo-fi.' I would discover that what I knew as lo-fi was an aesthetics that originated in certain, more unusual contexts, and not a natural consequence of musical production outside the professional industry. Not all home or amateur recordings had or were considered to have poor sound quality, of course, not all 'poor sound quality' was considered so in decades past, not all amateurs sound 'amateur,' and whether or not the recordings were made in a 'home' or 'garage' ultimately had little aesthetic or technological significance beyond a few particular discourses.

The conflation of all these things had not quite been made as the cassette began to emerge as a medium for producing and releasing music in the 1980s, and was still less evident in the early 1960s, when the cultural and technological distance between portable or domestic recording technologies and studio recording technologies was considerably narrower.¹ Although I subsequently uncovered ample evidence for the appreciation of imperfect recordings, I could no longer see 'lo-fi' as providing an objectively identifiable category or property, a lens through which to better understand the poetics and aesthetics of musical amateurs: it was a particular construction rooted in a particular set of historical contexts and particular discourses, always already a particular (inverse) relation to a perceived norm. Moreover, that construction had come into effect, quite

¹ When it was introduced in the late 1960s, the compact cassette had too poor a sound quality for audiophiles and was aimed at the bottom of the consumer market, where it remained for decades. By the 1980s, industrial popular-music recording studios typically used digital technology and multi-track recording employing twenty-four tracks or more. Morton 2000, 42-44, 163-168.

clearly, in the 1990s, and had then worked retroactively by establishing a category and a canon that, while alluding to a broad locus of aesthetics and creativity (amateurs, roughness), unknowingly excluded amateurs making music from the wrong genres - electronic music, dance and jazz - or whose sound quality had not been poor enough.

One could well argue that all categories along the lines of 'lo-fi' are constructions. In the case of 'lo-fi', however, the basis for a coherent scholarly account ensuing from the given subject matter, one that could transcend its discursive formation, dissolved quickly and dramatically. If I were to take the claims of discourse on 'lo-fi' seriously, practically all rough-seeming musical techniques, all home-recordings and all amateurs of twentieth-century popular music would be brought within the remit of this study, irrespective of the clear discontinuities between these three areas or in the ways they were characterised in their times and places. An account of qualities of 'roughness' or 'sloppiness' in popular music, for example, might well be obliged to address unconstructively broad swathes of the field. Moreover, the term 'lo-fi' has been used to describe much more than music - even methods of travel.² So instead of following the purported locus of 'lo-fi' to the point of incoherence or absurdity, it seemed most appropriate to work backwards from its present status, to adopt a critical eye, to archaeologically trace and historicise its constructions in all their discursive detail with a focus on reception and aesthetics, and hopefully provide, in the process, a meaningful statement under the heading of 'lo-fi' for any future researchers who are considering it as a category or a characteristic.

Ideally, however, this thesis also offers more than that. It offers a detailed case study in popular music aesthetics and its production (including the

² 'Stylish travelers seeking lo-fi experiences are cruising cross-country in Airstream trailers' - *New York Times* 2007.

production of value and authenticity), in the role of ideology - here, chiefly anti-commercial - in forming aesthetics, and in the reception of recordings, particularly characteristics that are unique to the medium of recording. It also ventures into the foundational principles of a smaller but growing area of scholarship, independent popular music, and my methodology of historicising discourse analysis is intended as a corrective to a number of studies we will encounter, both inside and outside academia, that have taken too uncritical or too unempirical an approach to narratives of popular music aesthetics and history.

What is Lo-Fi Aesthetics?

This aim of this thesis, then, is not in itself to develop or derive an aesthetics of lo-fi. It offers aesthetics *in discourse*, aesthetics as the product of (counter-)cultural ideological positions and technological milieux at particular points in twentieth- and twenty-first century popular music. Lo-fi as it is normally understood is less a genre or mode of music-making than a confluence, in the reception of certain recordings, of various aesthetic currents that run through the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century - known under further headings such as primitivism, realism, postmodernism and archaism - and their manifestation in the changing relation of portable magnetic-tape-recording technology to the wider landscape of music-technological (and particularly industrial) production.

At its most crudely sketched, lo-fi was primitivist and realist in the 1980s, postmodern in the 1990s, and archaicist in the 2000s. Such historical differences within the category of lo-fi informed the historically delineated (rather than, say, thematically delineated) structure of this thesis, but the continuities - archaisms also appear in the 1960s, and primitivisms appear in the 2010s - are such that observations can be made on a *lo-fi aesthetics* spanning the mid-1980s and the

present day with certain precursors in the preceding decades. In lieu of assuming a clear-cut category of lo-fi as a form of music-making that can operate stably outside of its discourse, I focus on lo-fi aesthetics within that discourse, defined as *a positive appreciation of what are perceived and/or considered normatively interpreted as imperfections in a recording, with particular emphasis on imperfections in the recording technology itself.*

These normative interpretations vary in their degree of actual normativity - what is important is less whether these norms were actually in operation than whether they were or are *perceived* to be. In the early 1980s, imperfections were more usually considered detrimental to a recording, but in 2014, the idea that a recording imperfection might offer something positive, such as nostalgia or realism, is widely accepted. In the 1980s, lo-fi's few adherents widely assumed that recording imperfections were unacceptable to a normative-professional 'mainstream.' Today, it is widely understood that in the first instance, recordings are or were not normatively *supposed* to be imperfect, and the irony resulting from the value now ascribed to imperfections has been a source of great interest (see Chapter 7).

Whether in the 1980s or today, then, lo-fi aesthetics would not be lo-fi aesthetics without the understanding that the recordings in question *do* have significant imperfections, especially those that some Other - the mainstream music industry or what I will call 'bad listeners' - is projected to perceive as imperfections. Thus despite the oft-used rhetoric to the effect that in lo-fi the imperfect is in fact 'perfect,'³ the perfect / imperfect binary nonetheless remains inscribed, with only the privileged term changing. A writer or a notional listener who is in no meaningful way mindful of a sense in which aspects of a recording

³ 'You know what's so perfect about Sebadoh? They realise that perfect doesn't have to mean smooth, shiny, verse-chorus middle eights and top name producers twiddling millions of knobs' - Joy 1992, 30.

are or may be considered imperfect is not practicing lo-fi aesthetics, and would merely be a part of a potential disagreement about what constitutes imperfection. This is an especially good reason to map out lo-fi aesthetics *in discourse*, where attention is given to imperfections, positively or negatively, rather than to impose one particular a priori sense (mine, for example) of what constitutes imperfection from outside it.

I will turn to the nature of these recording imperfections shortly, but first an introduction to the term and category of 'lo-fi' itself is necessary, since it forms a key correlate with lo-fi aesthetics in discourse. Often spelled 'low-fi' before the 1990s, the term originally functioned simply as an abbreviation of 'low fidelity,' being the negative of the older term 'high fidelity.' 'High fidelity' is both an indication of higher standards of sound reproduction in the post-war era and the name for what Timothy Taylor calls a 'craze' for assembling and maintaining cutting-edge high-fidelity sound systems in the home, written about most comprehensively by Keir Keightley.⁴ Probably because the inversion of 'hi-fi' was so easily suggested and its meaning so clear, the term appears to have originated separately a number of times in the mid-twentieth century, shortly after the acceptance of 'hi-fi.' For example, in his role as a jazz critic Kingsley Amis used the term in 1958, as part of a protest against an album called *Bob Crosby's Bob Cats in Hi-Fi*. Criticising the fact that the album had not been recorded by the original Bob Cats but by 'an almost entirely new group,' Amis exclaims 'for heaven's sake, let us have the real Bob Cats, even in lo-fi.'⁵ Even this early, the term is used to express the idea that poorer sound quality might be associated with a more authentic and desirable recording - an idea often expressed in the independent music discourse of the 1980s.

⁴ Taylor 2001, 79; Keightley 1996.

⁵ Amis 1958.

The term 'low-fi' was apparently well-known enough to have appeared in the headlines of some national newspapers during the 1960s, where it related to sonic technologies rather than new music. In 1964, under the headline 'The Low-Fi Invasion,' one journalist complained about the use of sound trucks to publically address voters during election campaigns, drawing particular attention to their low-sound-quality and thus often incoherent messages:

What [the writer] is concerned with is the exacerbation of the annoyance [of sound trucks] by the insufferably low quality of the sound many of the trucks put out. At worst the sound was so poor that the words were meaningless gobble. The operative could have been campaigning for Mao Tse Tung or the annexation of Patagonia, for all his listeners could tell. In the majority of cases most of the words could be understood but the distortion was so high that one's ears were irritated almost beyond toleration.⁶

Noting that 'the overall performance of the trucks was an affront to the state of the art,' the writer suggested some explanations for the poor sound quality: 'second-line, antiquated or temporarily assembled equipment; it seems likely that owners of sound trucks would find it economically impracticable to maintain first-line equipment... it was clear too, that many of the people operating the trucks were inexperienced' - all scenarios that would be considered the cause of more positively received low sound quality by the 1990s, once the privileged term within the same perfect / imperfect binary had shifted.

A more positive, almost nostalgic account of antiquated music technology, not unlike the reception of lo-fi in the 2000s, appeared in 1970 in an article on music boxes under the headline 'It Was Low-fi, but it Played.'⁷ In 1966, the term 'low-fi' became wordplay in an psychoanalyst's column about the married lives of men who were 'addicted' to their hi-fi sound systems, 'Hi-Fi Addicts With Low-Fi

⁶ Syrjala 1964.

⁷ Jenkins 1970.

Wives.' It told the story of a 'Hi-Fi addict who was ruining his fairly wealthy wife by his purchases of expensive equipment while she was finding instinctual gratification elsewhere; and his somewhat rueful remark, "She's fond of low fidelity and high frequency."⁸

In 1977, the term became a significant part of R. Murray Schafer's theory of soundscapes in *The Tuning of the World*.⁹ 'Lo-fi' was defined in the book's glossary:

Lo-Fi: Abbreviation of low fidelity, that is, an unfavourable signal-to-noise ratio. Applied to soundscape studies a lo-fi environment is one in which signals are overcrowded, resulting in masking or lack of clarity.¹⁰

Very much a negative term - Schafer alludes to 'the lo-fi problem' and refers to 'the lo-fi state' as a 'sound sewer'¹¹ - modern urban soundscapes since the Industrial Revolution were lo-fi for Schafer in contrast to the more hi-fi soundscapes of earlier eras. While *The Tuning of the World's* critique of sonic modernity resembles the countercultural position of the independent music discourse that would soon promote lo-fi aesthetics, Schafer's definition of lo-fi is almost the reverse of that given it by much popular music discourse, which came to consider lo-fi as a benign and frequently minimal soundscape, and as a protest against industrial modernity rather than the problem itself. As we will see, however, some musicians associated with lo-fi, such as The Velvet Underground, Pavement, Beck and various acts from the 2000s, were received in terms akin to Schafer's lo-fi, as manifestations of a sublime composed of obfuscated sonic signals, or as interesting embodiments of a modern malaise.

⁸ Bowes 1966.

⁹ Schafer 1977.

¹⁰ Schafer 1977, 272. A longer description appears on 43.

¹¹ Schafer 1977, 91, 237.

Due to the new availability of portable single-track and multi-track tape recorders from companies like Tascam, Fostex and Yamaha, the 1980s saw an increase in the production of music cassettes outside the industrial studio system, and, crucially, a discourse for them. As shown in Chapter 3, the use of the term 'lo-fi' to describe these cassettes was relatively rare in the early 1980s, though it provided a useful shorthand for those of lesser sound quality. A key moment in the association of the term and connotations of 'lo-fi' with home-made cassettes appears to have been a radio programme hosted by Bill Berger on the influential US east-coast college radio station WFMU, called 'Low-Fi.' In a schedule printed in the Summer 1986 issue of WFMU's magazine *LCD*, the programme was subtitled 'Home Tape Showcase' and ran between 6pm and 6:30pm on a Friday night - a primetime slot - and was followed by a session simply named 'Bill Berger' that ran until 9pm.¹² In the next, Fall issue, 'Low-Fi' was given a description that concisely expresses the definition lo-fi would have by the early 1990s: 'thirty minutes of home recordings produced on inexpensive equipment. Technical primitivism coupled with brilliance.'¹³ The conflation of 'home recordings,' 'inexpensive equipment' and 'technical primitivism' (as well as 'brilliance') is clearly made. Later the show was listed under the increasingly preferred spelling 'Lo-Fi,'¹⁴ but by Fall 1987 it was no longer listed in Berger's slot.¹⁵ By 1987, however, the association between 'lo-fi,' home-recording and primitivism was frequently being made elsewhere, most noticeably in the reception of Daniel Johnston. This association would inform the categorisation of lo-fi widely seen since the 1990s.

¹² *LCD* 1986a, 3.

¹³ *LCD* 1986b, 3.

¹⁴ *LCD* 1987b, 19.

¹⁵ Between approximately Fall 1987 and Spring 1988, the 6-9pm slot was listed simply as 'Bill Berger' - *LCD* [1987?]b, 19; *LCD* 1988a, 36. From Fall 1988, the name Berger's 6-9pm slot was listed under the title 'The Hip Bone' - *LCD* 1988b, 35; *LCD* 1990, 7.

'Lo-Fi' entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 1976, carrying the definition that had been familiar since the 1960s: 'sound reproduction less good in quality than "hi-fi."' In 2003, a second definition was added, reflecting a sense of the term that had taken root in the 1990s: 'a genre of rock music characterized by minimal production, giving a raw and unsophisticated sound.' Though not especially instructive, the words 'raw' and 'minimal,' are nonetheless two of the most common terms used to describe or substituted for 'lo-fi' (the other being 'primitive.')

In 2008, a third definition reflected the increasing usages of the term outside matters of sound altogether: 'Unpolished, amateurish, or technologically unsophisticated, esp. as a deliberate aesthetic choice.'¹⁶

The OED successfully reflected definitions of lo-fi in presupposing causal links between 'minimal production' and 'raw' and 'unsophisticated sounds.' 'Raw,' as we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, was an especially flexible term carrying the same connotations of intensity, emotionality and authenticity with which lo-fi was and is often associated. The third definition loosely conflates lack of 'polish' with amateurs and a lack of technological sophistication (again, the latter usually labelled 'primitive' in the 1980s). These connotations do not travel far beyond a particular cultural context around the turn of the millennium: minimal production need not be unsophisticated or raw, amateurs need not be unpolished.

Constructing 'Lo-Fi'

As the *OED's* first definition of lo-fi showed, 'poor sound quality' is always defined in relation to perceptions of 'high sound quality,' with the latter increasingly understood as the professional and industrial norm as the twentieth century progressed. Sound quality is not inherently or objectively poor or good - lo-fi or hi-

¹⁶ *OED*, s.v. 'lo-fi.'

fi - (at least not within popular music discourse), but must be constructed as poor through its relation to any given technical and technological milieu. In this thesis, when I refer to 'poor' or 'good sound quality' or similar, I do so within the constructions of the discourse at hand. And since the sense of the term 'lo-fi' tends to fall in most of the contexts under discussion somewhere between the OED's first and second definitions, I generally refrain from using the phrase 'low fidelity' to describe poor sound quality or lo-fi music, even if some texts do. Since the term 'lo-fi' now refers not just to lack of success in recording or reproducing sound accurately but to a wide range of manifestations of a lack of technical and/or technological capacity, 'lo-fi' becomes something quite apart from 'low fidelity.'

Similarly, musicians and their music are constructed as 'amateur' or 'amateurish' far more by an impression derived from particular elements in their music than by their actual professional status. The complex nature of the category of the 'amateur' was uncovered by Ruth Finnegan in her study of music-making in Milton Keynes. She noted that the designations 'amateur' and 'professional' often designated a relation to proficiency rather than paid work: 'when local musicians use the term "professional" they often refer to evaluative rather than economic aspects: the "high standard" of a player, his or her specialist qualifications, teachers, musical role, or appearance as a regular performer with musicians themselves regarded as "professional."¹⁷ Similarly, for popular music discourse, an 'amateurish' recording is one of a low standard, where notes are played out of tune and out of time, and poor recording and mixing of the audio signals has caused hiss, distortion and room acoustic to become audible. It is not, strictly speaking, one that was necessarily recorded

¹⁷ Finnegan 2007, 15.

outside a studio or distributed in a 'do-it-yourself' fashion, though the latter was regularly assumed or implied. In many respects, as we will see in Chapter 5 particularly, this amateurism can be a performance just as much as - if not more than - a natural state. And in the same way, the compact cassette had to be constructed as sounding poor in relation to the (perceived) sonic standards of vinyl and CD. As we will see in Chapter 3, it was not the prevailing opinion that cassettes were fundamentally 'lo-fi' in the 1980s, though it was very much so by the late 2000s (see Chapter 7).

These sorts of inconsistencies in the way musical value is constructed in relation to perceived technological norms were noted by Simon Frith in 1986: his essay 'Art Versus Technology: The Strange Case of Popular Music,' is particularly central to the investigations of this thesis.¹⁸ In the years following its publication, lo-fi would become a signal example of Frith's observation that:

The continuing core of rock ideology is that raw sounds are more authentic than [(technologically)] cooked sounds. This is a paradoxical belief for a technologically sophisticated medium and rests on an old-fashioned model of direct communication - A plays to B and the less technology lies between them the closer they are, the more honest their relationship and the fewer the opportunities for manipulation.¹⁹

Finding that technology is opposed to 'nature,' 'community' and 'art,' Frith concludes that 'what is at stake in all these arguments is the authenticity or truth of music; the implication is that technology is somehow false or falsifying.'²⁰ In the case of lo-fi, Frith's observations can be extended beyond resistance to what is normally understood by the term *technology* - tools, equipment, usually at the cutting-edge - and into resistance to *technique* in general, or opposition to what might be called *technocracy*. 'Technocracy' refers to a system in which power is

¹⁸ Frith 1986, 263-279.

¹⁹ Frith 1986, 266-267.

²⁰ Frith 1986, 264, 265.

earned through the skilled employment of techniques, and, as we will see in Chapter 2, was called by Theodore Roszak 'that social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration.'²¹ In this study, 'technocracy' - a word more typically used to refer to actual government by experts - will stand as a shorthand for the modern, commercial, urban and industrialised ('mainstream') norms of technique and technology use that were (perceived as) culturally powerful. Lo-fi, which grew out of a discourse that considered itself not just non-industrial and non-commercial but frequently *anti*-industrial and *anti*-commercial, can be seen as anti-technocratic in both ideology and aesthetics.

Yet as Frith saw, the extent to which any given musical milieu is anti-technocratic can be deeply relative. Lo-fi aesthetics presents one of the most extreme cases of an anti-technocratic aesthetics in popular music - a number of acts who were thought to have no conventional musical ability at all were praised in the highest terms - but it is still reliant on some minimum of technical and technological standards: as one writer noted, 'any lower-fi, and you might as well be beating rocks against each other.'²² What can often be seen in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (see Chapters 2 and 3) is an anti-technocratic aesthetics operating in the domain of traditional musical technique (singing or the playing of instruments) but not yet clearly in the domain of phonographic technology (the operation of a tape recorder). With lo-fi aesthetics proper, phonography and the process of recording in general are *incorporated within* the domain of an anti-technocratic aesthetics where before they were merely a frame around the music, either not meaningfully perceived or left unaddressed (even if they resulted in

²¹ Roszak 1969, 5.

²² *Melody Maker* 1993 / 1994, 42.

what other listeners might call imperfections), or criticised when they interfered with or failed to sufficiently present what was being recorded.

Put another way, lo-fi aesthetics introduces one more layer of techn(olog)ical surface to musical listening, that of recording technology. Ironically, the audible mediation of this surface (in hiss, distortion, and so on) is considered to index and attest to a less mediated form of musical communication. Yet really this is no irony at all, since hiss, distortion and the like are byproducts of a reduction in technocracy, the negatives, as it were, of technocratic mediation. What are these byproducts of lesser technocracy?

Lo-Fi Effects

In this study, I call these various imperfections of a recording on which lo-fi aesthetics focuses *lo-fi effects*. Lo-fi effects are the musical objects that signify a less technocratic music-making context, functioning as indexes of realism and intimacy and icons of cultural distance and struggle. While elements outside of a sonic recording itself, such as text, imperfectly handmade or hand-drawn packaging or design or even live performance style, are often understood in the same way as recording imperfections and could conceivably be considered lo-fi effects, lo-fi effects are generally characteristics that have made the process of recording and its product appreciably imperfect, or what I will call *recording imperfections*. Unfortunately, though they are routinely alluded to, the terminology used to describe lo-fi effects in popular music discourse is far from precise, and it was not common for individual lo-fi effects to be singled out for substantial discussion in popular music discourse. As we will see, however, the few cases in which certain lo-fi effects are isolated and discussed are illuminating.

It should be noted that generally, 'recording imperfections' are under discussion here and in lo-fi aesthetics in discourse rather than merely 'sonic imperfections.' A number of sonic imperfections can occur as a result of imperfect sound-reproduction or -modulation equipment (a record or tape player, an amplifier, a loudspeaker) but these *playback imperfections* will vary between contexts of reproduction, and are typically not taken into consideration in discourse on lo-fi.²³ Hypothetically, at least, lo-fi effects are created during recording and production itself, and perceptibly remain in master recordings that are then identically copied for release. In practice, this process of copying, as well as transferring to new audio formats, will introduce further lo-fi effects, especially in analogue reproduction and especially on magnetic tape - such *post-production reproductive imperfections* were a major cause of the lo-fi characteristics of bootlegs. Digital copies of cassette albums by, for example, Daniel Johnston that are available online vary considerably in their degree of analogue lo-fi effects, effects which may have been caused by non-optimal use or maintenance of either the cassettes themselves (over many years) or of the equipment used to reproduce them for digital transfer. This often makes isolating specific recording imperfections that would have been heard upon release by those participating in popular music discourse somewhat difficult - another reason to follow the lead of discourse and what it identifies.

Recording imperfections divide into two categories: *phonographic imperfections* and *non-phonographic imperfections*. This division was suggested by the development of lo-fi aesthetics itself - non-phonographic imperfections were more usually accepted earlier than phonographic imperfections were. In many ways, an acceptance of and interest in non-phonographic imperfections -

²³ Arguably, playback imperfections do not end with sound technology, since there are differences and potential imperfections in the auditory systems and perceptive capabilities of listeners themselves.

most noticeably the cracking or otherwise imperfect voice - paved the way for an acceptance of and interest in phonographic imperfections and thus lo-fi aesthetics proper.

It could be said that a 'recording imperfection' and a 'phonographic imperfection' are basically no different, since the words 'recording' and 'phonographic' mean much the same thing. In this case, however, 'recording' refers to the general process of capturing a performance, while the less informal term 'phonography' refers strictly to the operation of the sound-recording technology itself, however automated or manual that operation is. For example, if a guitarist plays a wrong note during recording, that might make the resulting recording 'imperfect' (and the producer might want to retake the performance) but if the phonographic process was operating optimally while the wrong note was played, it was not a phonographic imperfection. Or if environmental noise such as the sound of a passing car or a cricket is captured on a recording, that is not an imperfection of the phonographic process - which, again, was working optimally - but a sonic element outside of the sound-recording equipment and normatively considered an undesirable intrusion into the recording that would make it imperfect.

Though we might informally say that phonographic imperfections are 'technological' in nature while non-phonographic imperfections are 'technical' in nature, ultimately, phonographic imperfections and non-phonographic imperfections ought to be considered on a spectrum of (anti-)technocratic signification, since the boundary between technical and technological capacity is blurred, and since a musical instrument and a method of playing it are no less a 'technology' than a tape recorder. For example, the distortion caused by too much air leaving the mouth and entering a microphone - a 'pop' - could be

attributed to poor microphone technique (holding it incorrectly, vocalising too closely into it), but it could also be attributed to a poor microphone, or a lack of further technologies, such as a pop filter.²⁴

Phonographic Imperfections

Phonographic imperfections are elements of a recording that are perceived (or imagined to be perceived) as detrimental to it and that originate in the specific operation of the recording medium itself. Today, they are usually the first characteristics people think about when the subject of 'lo-fi' is brought up.

Phonographic imperfections can occur because a technology's capabilities are (experienced as) limited (in the parlance of lo-fi discourse, this equipment is usually 'cheap' or 'primitive'), or because that technology has not been constructed, used or maintained optimally, or because its components have degraded with use or time.

A number of recording imperfections are described in the extensive literature on phonography and audio systems engineering. They fall loosely into two categories, *distortion* and *noise*, and unlike in discourse on lo-fi aesthetics, they are almost never treated as benefits to the recording process, even recently: 'audio professionals will all agree that a mix needs to be free of noise and distortion,' wrote professional recording engineer and music producer Gary Gottlieb in his 2007 manual.²⁵ A similar book published in 2013 includes a small section on 'lo-fi aesthetics,' but only recommends it in combination with hi-fi sounds: 'the contrast of clean and dirty sounds, modern and vintage, can add a lot of sonic interest.'²⁶

²⁴ A pop filter or shield is a mesh placed in front of a microphone's sensor in order to filter out plosive and sibilant sounds - White 2005; White & Louie 2005, 300.

²⁵ Gottlieb 2007, 265.

²⁶ Bartlett 2013, 233.

This literature usually differentiates between distortion and noise: 'noise, interference, or hum are not considered forms of distortion,'²⁷ noise is 'any unwanted sound, except distortion'²⁸ and 'can be defined as any unwanted sound that is not related to the wanted sound (if it is related, it is called distortion).'²⁹ Most commonly, distortion and noise are positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum of dynamic range: 'any audio transmission system is limited in dynamic range by noise at low levels and distortion at high levels.'³⁰ Wayne Wadhams uses the terms 'in the mud' and 'in the red' to differentiate between areas of the dynamic range likely to risk noise and distortion respectively.³¹

Phonographic Imperfections: Distortion

In general, distortion's effects relate to the specific audio signal with which it is associated, whereas noise is simply added to the signal. It can be defined as 'any change in the waveform or harmonic content of an original signal as it passes through a device'³² and 'any change in the waveshape of a signal that occurs between the input and the output of an audio device.'³³ Some writers recognise a definition broad enough to include noise - Glenn White and Gary Louie note that 'theoretically, any addition to a signal caused by any type of equipment could be called "distortion," but the term has come to be somewhat more restricted in its use.'³⁴ According to broader definitions of distortion, it is often a desired effect

²⁷ Cameron 1978, 15.

²⁸ Wadhams 1988, s.v. 'Noise,' 153.

²⁹ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Noise,' 259.

³⁰ Eargle 1992, 146. See also: Gottlieb 2007, 27.

³¹ Wadhams 1988, s.v. 'In the Mud / In the Red,' 114.

³² Everest 1994, 439.

³³ Wadhams 1988, s.v. 'Distortion,' 65.

³⁴ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Distortion,' 114.

used to deliberately modulate and reshape sound - Wadhams sees equalization and compression as, 'strictly speaking... types of distortion.'³⁵

Many types of distortion have been defined, and they need not all be detailed here.³⁶ The most prevalent in lo-fi aesthetics is *harmonic distortion*: 'distortion of the original relationship between a tone and other tones naturally related to it,'³⁷ or 'the unwanted addition (by an acoustic environment or electronic device) of harmonics of a pure tone when that tone is propagated in the environment or input to the device.'³⁸ It typically occurs when a signal is amplified beyond the dynamic range of a device - 'overdriven' or 'overmodulated' - and thus clipped.³⁹ Again, harmonic distortion is often actively sought in sound reproduction, and considered far from an imperfection: electric guitars in rock and the 'analogue warmth' pursued since the rise of digital audio systems are famous examples.⁴⁰ Distortion generated in the process of recording, however - *phonographic distortion* - is avoided in typical professional contexts, especially when higher degrees of distortion result in a harsh, unnatural or 'unpleasant' sound.⁴¹ In magnetic tape, harmonic distortion can occur when the tape approaches or becomes 'saturated.' 'Saturation is the maximum magnetization that a tape can attain'⁴² and Wadhams calls 'saturation distortion... the distortion that results on magnetic tape when the applied audio signal is greater than its saturation point.'⁴³ Such forms of distortion are very common in the recordings whose reception is discussed in this thesis.

³⁵ Wadhams 1988, s.v. 'Distortion,' 65.

³⁶ See Alten 2014, 53-54; Cameron 1978, 15-17, 263; Illingworth ed. 1998, s.v., 'Distortion,' 146; Wadhams 1988, s.v. 'Distortion,' 65; White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Distortion,' 114.

³⁷ Cameron 1978, 263.

³⁸ Wadhams 1988, s.v. 'Distortion,' 65.

³⁹ Cameron 1978, 17.

⁴⁰ For the latter, see Robjohns 2010.

⁴¹ Gottlieb 2007, 371.

⁴² White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Saturation,' 339.

⁴³ Wadhams 1988, s.v. 'Saturation Distortion,' 204.

Though they are less often associated with typical use of the term 'distortion,' F. Alton Everest notes unwanted 'distortions in time' - or *frequency modulation* - as a form of distortion which results in shifts of pitch: 'if a tape travels across the head at any other than the recording speed, the frequency components are shifted up or down in frequency. If there are slow or fast fluctuations in that speed, wow and flutter [respectively] are introduced and the signal is degraded.'⁴⁴ The distinction between wow and flutter (and the much slower or aperiodic 'drift') is both quantifiable in Hertz and qualitatively distinct as a change in timbre.⁴⁵ Wow can be heard in Boards of Canada tracks such as 'Ready Let's Go,'⁴⁶ but the clear appearance of such frequency modulations are rare in the discourse of lo-fi aesthetics.

If equalization - the deliberate alteration of the levels at which different frequency components of a signal are boosted or attenuated - can be considered a form of distortion, then so can the less deliberate or (professionally) desirable alterations of frequency response that are very common in lo-fi. Higher frequencies are most vulnerable to being weakened or removed by a range of potential impairments and impediments in the magnetic tape-recording process (see discussion of 'lo-fi causes' below), leading to a 'muffled' sound. Moreover, higher frequencies are more easily masked (or obscured) by noise.⁴⁷

A momentary attenuation or loss of any signal is called a *dropout*. These can be caused by faulting recording equipment, but also by a number of imperfections and misuses of magnetic tape itself. For Finn Jorgensen, 'a dropout is defined as a 50 percent (or greater) amplitude reduction in the reproduced data. This is a tape error and is generally caused by poor head-to-tape contact

⁴⁴ Everest 1994, 93.

⁴⁵ Benson 1988, 12.48.

⁴⁶ Boards of Canada 2002 (disc.). Wow can be heard from the beginning.

⁴⁷ Moylan 2007, 34.

during recordings and/or playback.' White and Louie add that 'the combined effect of small dropouts is an increased noise level in the reproduced signal.'⁴⁸ Two dropouts in the Guided By Voices track 'Hardcore UFOs,' one caused by loss of signal in the recording equipment and one caused by a tape player having 'eaten' the master tape on a separate occasion, are both clearly noticeable and discussed (see Chapter 6) and progressive dropouts became the defining compositional process in William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops* (see Chapter 7).

Phonographic Imperfections: Noise

In audio systems literature, noise is routinely defined in its broadest form as 'unwanted sound.' 'Noise - unwanted sound - is the number one enemy in audio production,' writes Stanley R. Alten.⁴⁹ But it has a more specific definition too: the noise referred to as mixing with a signal that is 'in the mud' is a random noise occurring across a range of frequencies that can and will be generated in any electrical audio system⁵⁰ due to the 'random motion of charge carriers in a conductor or semiconductor, giving rise to a fluctuating voltage.'⁵¹ In this vein, John Eargle notes more specifically that 'although we can describe any unwanted sound as noise, the term is usually reserved for waveforms... [that have] no discernable period,⁵² that is, no periodic frequency with which the ear might isolate particular pitches as opposed to others. This subcategory of noise has been termed (or included within terms such as) 'system noise,'⁵³ 'background noise,'⁵⁴ 'internal electronic noise,'⁵⁵ and 'electronics noise.'⁵⁶ Greater amounts of

⁴⁸ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Dropout,' 122.

⁴⁹ Alten 2014, 29.

⁵⁰ Cameron 1978, 73; Everest 1994, 89.

⁵¹ Illingworth ed. 1998, s.v. 'Noise,' 384.

⁵² Eargle 1992, 3.

⁵³ Alten 2014, 29.

⁵⁴ Cameron 1978, 260.

⁵⁵ Ford 1993), 27.

this noise can be generated by faulty components and connections,⁵⁷ and when intermittent, it can be called *static*.⁵⁸

Even when no signal has been recorded onto it, a similar noise can be heard on magnetic tape as *tape hiss*.⁵⁹ Eargle notes that 'the listener is almost always aware of tape noise under critical listening conditions.'⁶⁰ This is separate from *modulation noise*, or 'noise that is present only in company with a signal... in analog tape recorders, the recording process has a certain "granularity" due to the fact that the magnetic characteristics of the tape are not completely uniform... A recorded signal has an irregularity that sounds like the addition of noise.'⁶¹

Hum is usually recognised as a form of noise, but has a discernable period and pitch content. Often its frequency is the same (or a multiple of) the frequency of the local alternating current,⁶² and 'imposes itself on a signal through the effect of stray magnetic fields, the proximity of AC lines, or through improper grounding.'⁶³ Hum-like noises can be heard throughout Guided By Voices' album *Bee Thousand*. Other forms of electromagnetic interference can be caused by fluorescent lamps, computers, radio transmitters and even radio and television broadcasts.⁶⁴ Like vocal pops, it can be debated as to whether hum and electrical interferences are specifically phonographic imperfections rather than technical oversights, but they are closely involved with phonographic technologies themselves.

In a similar fashion, acoustic noises generated by phonographic technology can be recorded onto the medium. Ty Ford warns that 'amp circuits,

⁵⁶ Jorgensen 1974, 103.

⁵⁷ Cameron 1978, 73.

⁵⁸ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Static,' 373.

⁵⁹ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Tape Hiss,' 386.

⁶⁰ Eargle 1992, 315.

⁶¹ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Modulation Noise,' 241.

⁶² White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Hum,' 189.

⁶³ Wadhams 1988, s.v. 'Hum,' 112.

⁶⁴ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Electromagnetic Interference,' 135.

mike cables, and instrument cables can become microphonic... when this happens, the device conducts any physical vibrations and turns them into thumps, clicks, or other noises... Mike or instrument cables can generate noise by being slapped, tapped or simply moved during the performance.⁶⁵ A relatively low-frequency acoustic noise sometimes picked up by a purpose-built microphone, too, is *rumble*, which can originate in the mechanical operation of a tape recorder or turntable.⁶⁶ The motor of Daniel Johnston's cassette recorder, for example, can be heard throughout digital reissues of his album *Hi, How Are You*.

More Complex 'Lo-fi Causes' in Phonography

As well as 'lo-fi effects,' it is useful to briefly consider 'lo-fi causes', especially when the resulting lo-fi effects are often so multifarious. Improper use and maintenance of phonographic devices - compact cassette recorders as well other tape recorders - and storage media can cause a wide variety of lo-fi effects, and this is likely to be the main cause of them in independent and indie music. Troubleshooting guides tabulating imperfections, their causes and ways to correct them are provided in manuals such as those by Jorgensen and Bruce and Jenny Bartlett.⁶⁷

A lack of care and cleanliness in handling magnetic tape and tape recorders can cause a number of lo-fi effects - largely dropouts, high-frequency loss and frequency modulation - and such equipment must be cleaned regularly and stored properly. Sweat and oil from skin can break down the binder holding the oxide to the tape, causing dropouts, and can attract dirt and dust, compromising the recording and playback of signals, especially at high

⁶⁵ Ford 1993, 26.

⁶⁶ Cameron 1978, 44.

⁶⁷ Jorgensen 1974, 142, 148-152; Bartlett 2013, 247-254.

frequencies.⁶⁸ Dirt and debris on the tape heads or capstans can scrape the oxide coating off the tape, causing dropouts and frequency modulation.⁶⁹ Tape can be distanced from the recording and playback heads by accumulated dirt and shed oxide particles in the equipment and by creases in the tape resulting in *separation loss*, causing dropouts and a loss of high frequencies.⁷⁰ Stretching tape can cause frequency modulation,⁷¹ and tape should be stored away from moisture, heat, direct sunlight or magnets.⁷²

One less well-known aspect of tape recorder maintenance is that the tape heads should be demagnetised (or 'degaussed') using a special tool every 8-10 hours of use, since residual magnetism builds up in them. Magnetised heads can erase high-frequency signals and increase harmonic distortion and noise levels.⁷³ Similarly, the positions of the recording and playback heads and their relation to the tape (variables of 'height, azimuth, zenith, wrap, rack') can shift, compromising signals - again, especially in the high frequencies - and must periodically be readjusted.⁷⁴ (Ironically, both demagnetising and head adjustment were recommended in the same independent-music magazines in which lo-fi aesthetics can first be seen - see Chapter 3).

Copying analog tape signals will always result in 'some degradation in noise, distortion, and time base stability [i.e. frequency modulation]'⁷⁵ and 'at least 3 decibels more noise than the original, no matter how good the tape recorder is.'⁷⁶ This was a particular problem for cassette releases and bootlegs. Another form of copying, internal to the production process but also adding these lo-fi

⁶⁸ Gottlieb 2007, 92.

⁶⁹ Jorgensen 1974, 142, 150.

⁷⁰ Huber & Runstein 2005, 206; Jorgensen 1974, 143.

⁷¹ Gottlieb 2007, 92.

⁷² Gottlieb 2007, 93.

⁷³ Huber & Runstein 2005, 206; Jorgensen, 1974, 143.

⁷⁴ Eargle 1992, 3; Huber & Runstein 2005, 206.

⁷⁵ Eargle 1992, 316.

⁷⁶ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Noise,' 258.

effects, is *bouncing*, in which multiple tape tracks in a multitrack recorder are copied onto a single, different track in order to free up those tracks for the recording of further parts.⁷⁷ Bouncing would have been commonly used by multitrack-tape-recording artists such as Guided By Voices and Ariel Pink, especially when their recorders were 'four-tracks' - the cheapest and most basic form of multitrack recorder, allowing only four tape tracks to be recorded and mixed for a master.

The greater vulnerability of high frequencies in tape-recording results in a key characteristic of most recordings considered lo-fi - their 'muffled' sound. The word 'muddy' is similar and is frequently seen in writing on such recordings, and appears in audio production literature too. Bruce and Jenny Bartlett define muddiness as a lack of clarity, and attribute it to a lack of high frequencies, but also to leakage between tracks and excessive reverberation.⁷⁸ Such a conflation of different forms of lo-fi effects is common in popular music discourse. As we saw with Wadhams's 'in the mud,' one of the most common metaphors for lo-fi sound involves 'mud' and 'dirt.' This association stretches from the equipment itself being literally compromised by dirt, to - as we will see - a characterisation of lo-fi artists as existing in or obscured by a kind of cultural dirt.

Non-Phonographic Imperfections

Even the literature dedicated to audio technology recognises a range of imperfections and unwanted sounds that we might call non-phonographic, and though 'lo-fi' is named after a phonographic imperfection, non-phonographic imperfections play an important role in characterisations of it. One category of these is what I will call *performance noises*. As well as pops, the noises

⁷⁷ White & Louie 2005, s.v. 'Bounce,' 51.

⁷⁸ Bartlett 2014, 247-248, 474.

emanating from a vocal performances might be mouth clicks (resulting from a mouth that is too dry or too wet)⁷⁹ and excessive sibilance (which can be exacerbated by saturation distortion).⁸⁰ Too wide a dynamic range within vocal delivery and an excessive bass boost due to too close proximity to the microphone are also considered problems.⁸¹ In his book on microphones, John Borwick identifies performance noises derived from the use of instruments as well as voices, calling them 'mechanical noise,... a variety of incidental... noises, sniffs or grunts, and microphone placement needs to... keep them to a minimum.' Focussing largely on classical recording, Borwick identifies 'pedal action on piano, key rattling on wind instruments, page turning and foot stamping by the conductor,' as imperfections to be avoided.⁸² Such performance noises can frequently be heard in recordings considered lo-fi during the 1980s and 1990s. They include coughing, sniffing, page-turning and chair sounds and will be discussed in the relevant chapters.

Non-phonographic noises not generated by a performance, or *environmental noises*, are present but slightly less common. Within a realist aesthetics, they provide evidence of a recording setting that is not a soundproofed professional studio, and include sounds of passing vehicles, household noises, the sounds of neighbours and animals. Other evidence of recording setting can be inferred from the subtle reverberation surrounding recorded signals due to a *room acoustic* that differs from the acoustically dry conditions preferred in a professional popular-music recording studio (a factor that appears to have played a significant role in Jandek's reception - Chapter 4). Alten notes that the particular dimensions and shape of a room can cause certain

⁷⁹ Ford 1993, 26.

⁸⁰ Huber & Runstein 2006, 170-171.

⁸¹ Huber & Runstein 2006, 170-171.

⁸² Borwick 1990, 180.

frequencies to resonate more than others.⁸³ Reverb has little to do with fidelity itself, but as in the Bartletts' manual, it can contribute to a 'muddy' quality and was often confused or conflated with phonographic imperfection, especially in the 2000s (Chapter 7).

Some lo-fi effects - *production imperfections* - derive from using tape-recording equipment with a less than professional standard of editing or mixing, and might fall in to the realm of technical rather than technological imperfections. Professionally, retakes and edits are not supposed to be noticeable, but in recordings considered lo-fi, they often are. Similarly, tape or other media simply running out would not be tolerated on most professional master recordings, but can probably be heard on Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes (at the end of the track '900 Miles') and on Jandek's *Ready for the House* (at the end of 'European Jewel'). Often the sounds of an operator pressing the record, pause and stop buttons remain on a master tape, too. On some recordings (such as those of Daniel Johnston), material recorded earlier can be briefly heard prior to its erasure or overlay by new material such as new song, and lo-fi artists often chop and change between recording sessions on the same tape.

'Mistakes' of a more traditionally musical sort - typically attributed to 'amateurism' - such as wrong chords, imperfect timing or tuning are also common and can be considered *performance imperfections* (the larger category within which performance noises can be included). Such imperfections have fallen within an aesthetics of primitivism and naivety, which also extends to the use of 'primitive' equipment itself. Beat Happening and Willis Earl Beal, for example, sometimes used pots and pans or clapping rather than more conventional

⁸³ Alten 2014, 32-36.

percussion instruments, and continuous with this is the ubiquitous characterisation of the instruments of lo-fi artists as 'cheap' or 'toys.'

Lo-Fi Aesthetics versus Aesthetics of Distortion, Noise and Glitch

The appreciation of distortion and noise is not limited to lo-fi aesthetics, of course, and lo-fi aesthetics - or, certainly, the category of lo-fi that arose late in the twentieth century - does not extend to all appreciations for distortion and noise. The difference lies in the ways in which distortion and noise are understood to be *imperfections* in lo-fi. Though lo-fi effects might not ultimately be considered by their adherents to be imperfections, the harmonic distortion of the electric guitar is still less often understood as an imperfection by its adherents. More specifically, a distinction should be made between lo-fi aesthetics' understanding of distortion and noise as a *lack* of technique - the result of an impaired or impeded music-making context - that is generally more *passively* accepted, and other understandings of distortion and noise as becoming a *technique* itself, *actively* employed. In other words, whereas lo-fi aesthetics is non- or anti-technocratic, other aesthetics of distortion and noise constitute new kinds of technocracy - something quite different. Furthermore, however close together they get, 'the music' (in a limited, more traditional sense) and its recording imperfections are always considered to be differentiable in the aesthetics of lo-fi, the latter merely framing the former. In other aesthetics of distortion or noise, the imperfections cannot be formally separated from 'the music' - distortion or noise *becomes* the music.

Again, however, lo-fi aesthetics and other aesthetics of (former) imperfections exist on a continuum. The harmonic distortion employed on many

electric guitars can be considered an imperfection inasmuch as the more extreme distortion heard in rock music was partly a result of broken or damaged and thus impaired amplifiers in the 1950s. Michael Hicks shows how this gave rise to greater distortion and a form known as 'fuzz' in particular.⁸⁴ By the 1960s, however, fuzz came to be created using new technologies: 'fuzz controls' incorporating switches, and later, more timbrally complex amplifiers and effects pedals. Distortion aesthetics do not develop as that of an imperfect, impaired or impeded sound as the phonographic timbres of lo-fi aesthetics do, however. Hicks sees it as prefigured in the 'growl and plunger' style of playing jazz and the 'boot' style of playing tenor saxophone in rhythm and blues, and in the tradition of early twentieth-century futurism: 'through its aggressive, futuristic sound,' he writes, 'fuzz was at the core of the machismo aesthetic of a new rock avant-garde.'⁸⁵ Music critic Lester Bangs wrote in 1971 about 'the fuzztone subways of the future,'⁸⁶ and musicologist Robert Walser notes that distortion came to be 'perceived in terms of power rather than failure.'⁸⁷ In most cases, power, intensity and modernity or the future are the antithesis of lo-fi and even indie aesthetics as a whole. And as we will see in Chapter 3, the aesthetics of punk rock were somewhat different from lo-fi aesthetics in this regard, at least in the 1970s and 1980s.

The literature on noise's meaning and aesthetics, both philosophically and in music, is extensive, and often sees techn(ological) noise as continuous with the wider category of unwanted sound, and as a negationist form of social protest.⁸⁸ The latter is appropriate to lo-fi, especially where its anti-technocratic

⁸⁴ Hicks 2000, 12-22.

⁸⁵ Hicks 2000, 22.

⁸⁶ Bangs 1971a, 55.

⁸⁷ Walser 1993, 42.

⁸⁸ Levarie 1977, Attali (1977) 1985, Kahn 1999, Worby 2000, Collis 2008, Hegarty 2009, Demers 2010, Novak 2013.

aesthetics intersect with the anti-industrial and anti-normative politics of indie music. As Hicks does with distortion, however, an aesthetics of noise is frequently traced back to Luigi Russolo's futurist manifesto *The Art of Noises*, which, again, expressed an aesthetics of power, intensity and modernity.⁸⁹ Noise has typically been considered the Other of music, and after Russolo, what is sometimes called 'noise music' has sought to include hitherto non-musical sounds within the domain of music: Paul Hegarty asserts that the history of noise 'is a history of how, in the twentieth century, noise has become a resource, was incorporated into musicality and rejected musicality, all the while occurring in the place of music.'⁹⁰ In such cases, noise is no longer 'unwanted sound' but 'formerly unwanted sound' or 'sound unwanted by other listeners' and in some senses is no longer noise *per se*, especially when it becomes a dominant compositional technique - a 'resource' - or is considered a dominant appeal. In lo-fi aesthetics, noise is typically less a resource than a comparatively incidental effect. Even in the 2000s, when lo-fi effects were often considered on a par with musical instruments in aesthetic significance (Chapter 7), the lo-fi effects could not have dispensed with the music they acted upon, however obscured it was, or else the aesthetics of ghosts, memory and pathos that arose during that period would have been impossible.

One category of late twentieth-century popular music that might be considered to impinge upon lo-fi aesthetics is 'glitch,' written about by Kim Cascone, Torben Sangild and Eliot Bates.⁹¹ Glitch is a genre of electronic music that developed during the 1990s based on the glitching sounds of digital technologies such as CDs, and although Cascone, Sangild and Bates define glitches broadly as any form of malfunction in musical technology, even 'the

⁸⁹ Russolo (1913) 1986.

⁹⁰ Hegarty 2009, ix.

⁹¹ Cascone 2000, Sangild 2004, Bates 2004.

fragility and vulnerability of technology'⁹² itself, this genre is at the centre of their accounts. As with distortion and noise, digital glitches become a musical technique rather than lo-fi's lack of technique or technology: as Cascone writes in his essay 'The Aesthetics of Failure,' 'today's digital technology enables artists to explore new territories for content by capturing and examining the area beyond the boundary of "normal" functions and uses of software.'⁹³ As Bates writes, 'what in one context is considered a poor representation of music, in another [i.e. glitch], becomes music itself.'⁹⁴ While Cascone, Sangild and Bates recognise and are interested in the ways that, like the damaged amplifiers of the 1950s, glitch originates from an impairment or impediment, in their accounts glitch becomes not an 'aesthetics of failure' but a new, if somewhat ironic, futurist-leaning aesthetics of sonic-technocratic achievement.⁹⁵ A monograph by Caleb Kelly, *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction*, includes both glitch and noise within its comprehensive discussion of 'cracked media,' but again, the cracking of this media is not ultimately an impairment of that technology but a new technology itself: "Cracked Media" are the tools of media playback expanded beyond their original function as a simple playback device for prerecorded sound or image. "The crack" is a point of rupture or a place of chance occurrence, where unique events take place that are ripe for exploitation toward new creative possibilities.'⁹⁶ Rhetoric of this sort is hardly to be seen in the discourse of lo-fi.

Of course, the distinctions between lo-fi and other instances of distortion, other instances of noise, and other instances of technological malfunction are not absolute so long as some part of a discourse recognises them as imperfections

⁹² Sangild 2004, 268.

⁹³ Cascone 2000, 14.

⁹⁴ Bates 2004, 275, 287.

⁹⁵ A clearer 'aesthetics of failure' can be found in the reception of recordings by William Basinski and *The Caretaker* - see Chapter 7.

⁹⁶ Kelly 2009, 4.

to whatever extent, however remotely. A thesis taking in a broader area would have incorporated them. However, this would have entailed moving further away from the category of lo-fi in popular music discourse, because - and this is another reason distortion, noise and glitch are not discussed more extensively in this thesis - there is very little overlap between the discourse of lo-fi and discourses of guitar distortion, noise music or glitch. Before we continue, then - what is this discourse of lo-fi?

The Discourse of Lo-Fi

If lo-fi aesthetics is the protagonist of this thesis, then its discourse - no less significant - provides the setting, the plot and many of the supporting characters. Much of what this thesis hopes to offer lies in the uncovering, curation and presentation of this discourse, which to date has been hardly engaged with in research on lo-fi and in much of popular music studies in general. The 'popular music discourse' of this thesis's title refers to publications in which popular music is reported on, reviewed, and discussed in other ways, and everything within them. This includes books and films chronicling popular music history or criticising recordings, periodicals ranging from the *New York Times* to small homemade music fanzines such as *Vicious Hippies from Panda Hell*, and texts including articles, reviews, websites, blogs, letters, advertisements and design elements. It is limited to English-language publications and in particular those of the USA and UK, which appear to have the most extensive role in defining lo-fi. As writers such as Matthew Bannister have noted, it is produced by and caters to a predominantly white, male and middle-class social group.⁹⁷ This is generally also the social group occupied by many of the musicians involved, but with a few

⁹⁷ Bannister 2006b.

notable exceptions that express lo-fi's periodic interest in the exotic. In particular, a notable trend among musicians considered lo-fi is that they made their music in the less metropolitan geographies of the US, while the discourse interested in them was mostly based in New York or London. As we will see, the geographic dimension plays a role in narratives of musicians and the aesthetics of their music, paralleling notions of sonic and temporal distance.

My unusually extensive and detailed citation of and engagement with this discourse is quite deliberate. As well as the fact that the manifestation of lo-fi aesthetics *in discourse* serves as my necessary and key focus, the amount of evidence I present serves to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced account of popular music aesthetics and history than has been provided by other studies in this area.⁹⁸ But discourse does a lot more than simply give an account of lo-fi, and my usage of the term follows Foucault's, together with the latter's observations and conclusions thereon.⁹⁹ I do not assume that an accumulation of 'statements' (in Foucauldian terms) on lo-fi amounts to a transparent representation of it as a really existing object. Lo-fi is an idea, a space of possibilities and impossibilities, constructed by its discourse for certain enunciative purposes concerning aesthetics and ultimately ideology, which I hope will slowly become clear. Nor do I assume, indeed, that the unity and continuity of a discourse on lo-fi or on popular music is a simple given: it is a raft of smaller continuities between individual statements, supplied by the recurring identification of certain recording imperfections, the recurring focus on certain musicians and recordings, the use of terms like 'lo-fi,' and the continuity and intertextuality with which the particular statements and institutions through which all of these appear

⁹⁸ As well as the less critical or historicising accounts of lo-fi in non-academic texts (e.g. Spencer 2008), McConnell's research on the aesthetics of cassettes in the Pacific Northwest of the early 1980s (2006) is particularly undermined by a less detailed reading of the surrounding discourse. These problems are discussed in Chapter 3.

⁹⁹ Foucault (1969) 2002.

are disseminated and consumed. This raft is subtly balanced and lashed together according to my own critical judgement.

This process involves much discontinuity, too, through which some definitions of lo-fi, and ultimately the concept itself, begin to disintegrate. Following Foucault, lo-fi 'is no more than an initial approximation that must allow relations to appear that may erase the limits of this initial outline.'¹⁰⁰ It is useful to define lo-fi as much by what it was not as what it was, and while time is taken to explore continuities in the rhetoric used by previous generations of participants in its discourse, time is also taken to register discord and differentiation within it where it has previously been missed, together with their outcomes: discontinuities in the reception of non-phonographic and phonographic imperfections, discontinuities between different levels and subcategories of the discourse, aesthetic discontinuities between different genres and different eras, and the limits of a positive appreciation for imperfection. I have also made minor departures from the mapping of this discourse throughout, intervening in order to examine the associated recordings and their imperfections in more detail than it does (as I did above, when drawing on the quite differentiable discourse of audio engineering), or to neglect certain artists and genres sometimes associated with lo-fi but only rarely actually brought within its aesthetic by the discourse, whatever the rhetoric.

We thus begin to see what is at stake in the discursive formation of lo-fi: knowledge - the very generation, dissemination and comprehension of ways and objects of listening, and the complex networks of feedback between the discourse's participants in musicians, writers, listeners and ideas. It involves not only the establishment of certain rules and objects in the field of aesthetics (such

¹⁰⁰ Foucault (1969) 2002, 33.

as lo-fi effects and that they are attractive), but the (in)visibility and intelligibility of certain musics as a whole and as opposed to others. From its position of authority in the form of widely trusted periodicals largely assumed to have access to the world of popular music, its truth and its best texts past and present, this discourse decides which musicians are visible and how visible, and what is salient about their lives and music. It decides, for example, that amateur cassettes are to be generally considered lo-fi while passing over their heterogeneity in favour of certain prominent rock bands, and it decides that Willis Earl Beal is an 'outsider' who should be appreciated as such. As Bannister has noted, these decisions regularly accumulate - positively or negatively - along lines of race, gender and geography;¹⁰¹ this thesis can elaborate on these observations, and add disability and mental illness to them. All these discursive decisions about music become assumptions, in turn informing the writing of history inside and outside of the academy, the production of new music (see the 'curation' of Willis Earl Beal - Chapter 8), the production of ideology at large, and ultimately the production of reality.

Independent and Indie Music Discourse

One major subcategory of popular music discourse to concern us here is independent or indie music discourse, the area where the most and earliest evidence for a lo-fi aesthetics emerges. Independent or indie music is generally understood to be produced away from the music industry's largest record labels. During the 1980s, 'independent' was a quite sharply delineated category: *Op* magazine, for example, would review anything except records on 'labels distributed or owned by the entertainment giants (e.g. WEA, CBS, RCA, MCA,

¹⁰¹ Bannister 2006b

WMI).¹⁰² But since the 1990s, it has become 'indie,' a term that usually connotes particular forms of rock and pop music rather than a relation of the music's production to commercial industry. In this thesis, I differentiate between these two phases of a discourse that is, loosely, continuous at a higher level.

The 'independent' music discourse of the 1980s was based in magazines with smaller circulations and often claimed no genre preferences at all, only that the origin of the music was 'independent,' and was frequently explicit about the politics of this position. Thus, independent music magazines wrote on electronic, experimental, non-Western and even classical musics, reviewing cassettes that readers sent in. These things were not generally done in 'indie' discourse, which here refers to the expanded and often more commercially developed discourse (regarding both the musicians it covered and in sales of publications) that followed, for example, the triple-platinum-selling punk or 'alternative' album *Nevermind* by Nirvana, released in 1991. In the US, indie was in some ways the alternative to 'alternative,' and lo-fi, certainly, was seen as a resistance to any commercial encroachment upon indie music in the wake of *Nevermind* (see Chapter 6).

Anthropologist Wendy Fonarow also notes that the term 'indie' no longer reflects the relation of the music's production to commercial industry.¹⁰³ Though focussing almost entirely on the UK, her book *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* offers one of the most comprehensive studies of indie music. For Fonarow, indie's ontology lies in discourses and practices: 'indie is not a thing at all and is therefore not describable in the same manner as a stable object. Although indie has no exact definition, the discourse and practices around multiple descriptions and definitions of indie detail a set of principles that

¹⁰² *Op* 1982, 15.

¹⁰³ Fonarow 2006, 39.

reveal the values and issues at stake for the community... indie is constituted by a distinct discourse, a discourse typified and consolidated by the British weekly music press.¹⁰⁴ Fonarow too readily dismisses the US as having a category of 'alternative' instead of an 'independent' or 'indie' music, and her study does not engage with the US music press. Her observations on the role of the British weekly music press, however, can well be extended to US-based indie discourse. She continues on the power of discourse: 'for young fans, these papers are highly influential in shaping their opinions. Often, they directly paraphrase the weekly press reviews when giving their opinions about bands... They attribute their purchases to recommendations from the weekly press and from friends.'¹⁰⁵

Fonarow sees indie discourse as based around an aesthetics that has much in common with Puritanism and Romanticism. As such, it 'protest[s]... against the church of mainstream music. Indie calls nostalgically for a return to and restoration of "original" musical practices and ideals.'¹⁰⁶ It is:

A community shaped by similar concerns regarding authority, exploitation, the nature of "authentic" experience... Indie is a musical community centrally focused on how an audience can have the purest possible experience of music. In this endeavor, indie fans locate themselves as the anointed disciples of music who, through their own system of authenticity, recognize true value in music.¹⁰⁷

In indie, the aesthetic outcome of this ideological position is 'an espousal of simplicity and austerity, a hypervaluation of childhood and childlike imagery, a nostalgic sensibility, a technophobia, and a fetishization of the guitar... [indie is] anti-technological, anti-futuristic, and longs for the presumed purity of the past.'¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Fonarow 2006, 25, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Fonarow 2006, 26.

¹⁰⁶ Fonarow 2006, 28.

¹⁰⁷ Fonarow 2006, 30.

¹⁰⁸ Fonarow 2006, 39, 50.

Many of these aspects can be associated with lo-fi - indeed, Fonarow observes that 'much of indie music has a raw, underproduced quality, and occasionally even established and popular performers release four-track or eight-track recordings as opposed to the industry standard of twenty-four tracks... for indie, a raw, simple, underproduced quality to sound suggests closeness to the wellspring of musical creativity.'¹⁰⁹ These raw qualities are technical as well as technological - echoing Frith:

Many indie bands are considered lacking in technical proficiency, but this is viewed as a positive attribute within the indie community, because musicianship is viewed as formal training that distances a performer from the essence of music... Formal musical training is seen as a form of mediation between musician and music. One of the most damning insults that can be levelled at a musician is to be called a "muso," implying a technically proficient musician without spirit or emotional attachment to the music he or she plays.¹¹⁰

Seeing indie as 'forged in opposition to... "the mainstream,"' Fonarow uses the term 'lo-fi,' finding that 'indie opposed mainstream's many stylistic flourishes, such as studio overdubbing or pre-programmed dance rhythms, hence indie's persistent lo-fi production style.'¹¹¹ The idea that practically all of indie is lo-fi, or mildly so, is common,¹¹² but this thesis is concerned in particular with that subcategory of indie that is perceived as marked by significant numbers and intensities of lo-fi effects, or routinely considered to fall within a category called 'lo-fi.'

Matthew Bannister's *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock* is the other key monograph on indie music.¹¹³ Focussing on

¹⁰⁹ Fonarow, 2006, 41, 42.

¹¹⁰ Fonarow, 2006, 42-43.

¹¹¹ Fonarow, 2006, 63.

¹¹² E.g.: Reynolds (1986) 2007, 15; Dolan 2010, 457.

¹¹³ Bannister 2006b.

gender and use of the guitar particularly, it gives a detailed account of the category of indie and its use and ideologies of technology.¹¹⁴ Another key text on indie as a discourse is Ryan Hibbett's article 'What is Indie Rock?'¹¹⁵ Hibbett focuses on rock within mainly US indie and takes a more critical approach, but reaches similar conclusions to Fonarow. He persuasively characterises indie rock as an arena for the accumulation of Pierre Bourdieu's 'cultural capital,' concluding that 'indie rock exists largely as an absence, a nebulous "other," or as a negative value that acquires meaning from what it opposes. Indie rock is far from a static entity; rather, it is a malleable space filled by discourse and power, whose meaning is always under construction by various agents (bands, listeners, labels, critics, etc.) with diverse objectives.'¹¹⁶ Within this negative framework, 'obscurity becomes a positive feature, while exclusion is embraced as the necessary consequence of the majority's lack of "taste." Indie rock enthusiasts (those possessing knowledge of indie rock, or "insiders") comprise a social formation similar to the intellectuals or the avant-garde of high culture.'¹¹⁷ As we will see, Hibbett goes on to locate the function of lo-fi effects within this discourse.

David Hesmondhalgh's essay on indie describes it as a 'popular music genre,' that emerged in the 1980s.¹¹⁸ For him, the aesthetics favoured in UK indie was backward-looking, 'constructing a canon of white, underground rock references.'¹¹⁹ Hesmondhalgh notes 'indie's celebration of obscurity and failure,' but concludes that it 'was intended as a gesture of contempt for those who revelled in a notion of success founded on competitive individualism.'¹²⁰ By

¹¹⁴ Bannister 2006b, 57-90, 112-131.

¹¹⁵ Hibbett 2005.

¹¹⁶ Hibbett 2005, 58. Sarah Thornton offers a very similar concept, calling it 'subcultural capital' - (1996).

¹¹⁷ Hibbett 2006, 57.

¹¹⁸ Hesmondhalgh 1999, 35.

¹¹⁹ Hesmondhalgh 1999, 38.

¹²⁰ Hesmondhalgh 1999, 55.

contrast, the ideology of US lo-fi aesthetics was quite different - it was the gesture of the individual in defiance of technocracy, its normative standards, and the resulting expectations of society at large.

Independent music and its discourse generally shared a similar, relatively minor cultural location and mode of production. Periodicals that predominantly covered independent music were either reproduced using a photocopier or reached a minimal industrial standard of magazine or newspaper production. In the main part of the thesis (Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5), a significant proportion of the discourse is maintained by three US publications: *Op* (1979-1984), *Sound Choice* (1985-1992) and *Option* (1985-1998). Based in Olympia, Washington, and edited by John Foster, *Op* is regularly considered to be a foundational publication in US independent music, and developed out of the radio station of Evergreen State College, KAOS, and its policy of playing independent records 80% of the time.¹²¹ *Op* and the 'Lost Music Network' which it represented became a way to keep track of this music, and was organised along the lines of a directory or encyclopaedia, with each issue being assigned a letter rather than a number and much of its contents (musicians, geographies, genres and so on) focussing on words beginning with the assigned letter. Issued bi-monthly from January 1982, *Op* covered music of all genres, and issues contained articles, interviews, lists of radio stations and other periodicals, advertisements and even guides to music technology, but extensive sections in which new releases - including cassettes - were given reviews of usually 100-200 words increasingly came to constitute most of the magazine's content. By the time it finished with Z in 1984, *Op* had approximately a thousand subscribers.¹²²

¹²¹ Azerrad 2001, 457; Dominic dir. 2006 (film.); McConnell 2006, 164-170; Spencer 2008, 231-232; Baumgarten 2012, 29-37.

¹²² Woodward 1992.

Sound Choice and *Option* were set up by separate staffs in Ojai, California and New York respectively with the aim of continuing the work and format of *Op*. Edited by David Ciaffardini, *Sound Choice* maintained *Op*'s handmade design style and expressed strong political opinions on the place, value and preservation of independent music. In 1991 it had more than 5000 readers.¹²³ Originally edited by Scott Becker and Richie Unterberger, *Option*'s design was more formal, and by the early 1990s had turned away from its previous independent music remit to one more centred on indie rock and pop, running advertisements from much larger businesses and depicting Nirvana on its cover in 1992.¹²⁴ That year, *Option* had reached a circulation of 'about 24,000.'¹²⁵

Also launching in 1985, the monthly *Spin* magazine soon became the premier magazine for alternative music in the US with a circulation of 225,000 in 1990.¹²⁶ Much of the magazine's earlier expressions of lo-fi aesthetics are to be found in Byron Coley's 'Underground' column, which surveyed less well-known releases from the independent scene. In the 2000s, *Spin* faced competition from the website *Pitchfork*, which was receiving 150,000 visits a day by 2006.¹²⁷ US-based fortnightly magazine *Rolling Stone*, as the long-standing most prominent rock magazine in the world, did not often cover music as peripheral as lo-fi, but where it did it is included in this study.

As Fonarow notes, in the UK indie music discourse was maintained by three weekly newspapers, colloquially known as the 'inkies'¹²⁸: *New Musical Express* (or *NME* - founded 1952), *Melody Maker* (1926-2000, when it was merged with *NME*) and *Sounds* (1970-1991). In 1993 - the height of interest in a

¹²³ Woodward 1992.

¹²⁴ *Option* 1992a.

¹²⁵ Guy 1992, 6B.

¹²⁶ Rosen 1990.

¹²⁷ Itzkoff 2006.

¹²⁸ Fonarow 2006, 26.

category of lo-fi - *NME* and *Melody Maker* had a combined circulation of 175,000.¹²⁹ General national newspapers in the UK, Ireland, North America and Australasia are also included in this study, since they have often covered independent or indie music and musicians.

Below the level of newspapers and magazines, with much smaller circulations and production costs, are what are known as 'fanzines' or 'zines.' In his key study of fanzines, Stephen Duncombe defines them as 'noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish and distribute by themselves.'¹³⁰ He estimated that (in 1997) 'zine readership... [was] most likely in the 500,000-750,000 range,' and that music zines 'make up the largest genre of zines in the United States today.'¹³¹ By the late 1990s, indie music discourse based in fanzines was in decline, their format increasingly outcompeted by the internet and the weblogging opportunities of platforms like Blogger. Chapters 7 and 8, focussing on the 2000s and 2010s, refer to a number of websites and blogs maintaining a discursive role much like that of fanzines in the 1980s and 1990s.

A Category of Lo-fi and its Canons

Lo-fi itself - or at least the term 'lo-fi' - garnered most attention in popular music discourse when it was perceived as an emerging or stable category (even a 'movement') of music-making according to the narrative I gave above: a form of popular music that had poor sound quality and other rough qualities because it was recorded in a 'do-it-yourself' fashion by amateurs on amateurs' equipment, and its practitioners and fans liked it that way. There are certain key texts in the

¹²⁹ Fonarow 2006, 13.

¹³⁰ Duncombe 1997, 6.

¹³¹ Duncombe 1997, 14, 9. My research takes in the Factsheet Five Collection at the New York State Library, an archive of fanzines of all kinds dating between 1985 and 1992. At the time of writing, no such public archive apparently exists for UK fanzines.

establishment of this discursive category in popular music which will be further engaged in the main part of the thesis whose status and claims require introduction here.

The most widely-read of these was probably an almost full-page article by Matt Diehl published in the *New York Times* in August 1994 under the headline 'Lo-Fi Rockers Opt for Raw Over Slick:'

In using a more stripped-down approach to recording, such artists draw on methods that are rooted in rock-and-roll history. Alternately called lo-fi, referring to the rough sound quality resulting from such an approach, or D.I.Y., an acronym for "do it yourself," this tradition is distinguished by an aversion to state-of-the-art recording techniques. Professional recording studios are often passed over in favor of four- and eight-track recorders or even Sony Walkmans... Instruments and amplifiers also tend to be whatever's cheap and available rather than high tech, their sonic limitations central to the esthetic... In a world of sterile, digitally recorded Top 40, lo-fi elucidates the raw seams of the artistic process.¹³²

Note that, as is often the case, Diehl conflates 'lo-fi' (by implication, low-fidelity), 'D.I.Y.' (by implication, amateurs 'doing it themselves') and a 'rough sound quality.' This stands in clear contrast to another article published in the *New York Times* seven years earlier on the amateur production of cassettes - announcing that 'the artistic freedom, low cost, privacy and spontaneity of cassette recording have encouraged thousands of performers to bypass the music business and do it themselves' - but which makes no mention of poor sound or other 'rough' qualities of those cassettes.¹³³

As we will see in Chapter 6, a number of similar articles on lo-fi appeared in the dedicated music press between 1992 and 1994. Of these, the most significant appeared in *Option* as part of a special lo-fi themed issue or 'Lo-Fi

¹³² Diehl 1994.

¹³³ Pareles 1987, C13.

Lovefest:' Brad Lips's 'We'll Take the Lo Road.'¹³⁴ Lips noted that 'more and more indie bands are shunning the studio polish needed to fit into "alternative" radio formats, and while still marginalized, their homemade sounds are finding welcome outlets like never before... Recording at home takes indie rock's do-it-yourself aesthetic to its extreme... [and] avoids the industry glitz associated with major label contracts.'¹³⁵ The 'Lo Road' of Lips's title is an ironic inversion of both the term and meaning of 'the high road,' reflecting the common idea that lo-fi is a more culturally noble and authentic form of musical production than that of the commercial music industry.

Bannister observed the formation and use of canons - or 'canonism' - in an article published alongside his *White Boys, White Noise* (and sharing some of its material).¹³⁶ Like Hibbett's 'What is Indie Rock?,' Bannister's is one of the more critical studies of indie, and like Hibbett, he sees it as a discourse founded on privileged knowledge:

Indie did not simply arise organically out of developing postpunk music networks, but was shaped by media (particularly print), and was not just collective, but also stratified, hierarchical, parochial and traditional. Canon (articulated through practices of archivalism and connoisseurship) is a key means of stratification within indie scenes, produced by and serving particular social and cultural needs for dominant social groups (within indie scenes, for example, journalists, scenemakers, tastemakers, record company owners, some musicians)... But canon is also a way of historicising indie, not just because it is historic (literally) but also because it can be read historically as an archaeology of knowledge - it shows how the discourse of independence was shaped. Canon-related practices such as archivalism are not simply cataloguing of the past - they are political and selective.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Lips 1994.

¹³⁵ Lips 1994, 76, 77.

¹³⁶ Bannister 2006a.

¹³⁷ Bannister 2006a, 78.

Bannister shows how canonism manifested in criticism, second-hand record shops, record-collecting and pedagogy, and how it excluded women and black musicians. As we will see, lo-fi's canon was partly built during a process by which newer artists were repeatedly likened to older ones, especially favourably. But the process of canonism is also remarkably clear in a number of publications from the 1990s that consolidated categories of indie and indeed lo-fi by assembling discographies and lists of great works and musicians. These texts are included in my study, and among the most prominent were *The Spin Alternative Record Guide* (1995), *The All Music Guide to Rock* (first edition: 1995, second edition: 1997, third edition: 2002), *Rolling Stone's Alt-Rock-a-Rama* (1996), *The Trouser Press Guide to 90s Rock* (1997), *The Great Alternative and Indie Discography* (1999) and its revised and updated successor *The Great Indie Discography* (2003).¹³⁸

Rolling Stone's Alt-Rock-a-Rama contains lists such as 'The 100 Most Influential Alternative Releases of All Time,' 'The Greatest Garage Recordings of the Twentieth Century,' 'The Fifty Most Significant Indie Records' and 'Fifteen Essential Obscurities,' but perhaps the clearest and most pertinent example of lo-fi canonism is one that I will return to throughout the thesis, written by Mark Kemp (then editor of *Option*) called 'The Lo-Fi Top Ten.'¹³⁹ Mentioned were Hasil Adkins, The Velvet Underground, Half Japanese, Billy Childish, Beat Happening, Royal Trux, Sebadoh, Liz Phair, Guided By Voices, Daniel Johnston, Beck and Pavement. The reception of all of these artists will be focussed on in subsequent chapters, with the exception of Billy Childish (because his reception in the UK during the 1980s does not significantly reflect lo-fi aesthetics), Royal Trux

¹³⁸ Weisbard & Marks eds. 1995, Erlewine et al eds. 1995, Erlewine et al eds. 1997; Bogdanov et al eds. 2002, Schinder et al eds. 1996, Robbins & Sprague eds. 1997, Strong 1999a, Strong 2003.

¹³⁹ Kemp 1996.

(because, again, their reception does not significantly reflect lo-fi aesthetics - their difference from norms was typically seen as avant-garde rather than an imperfection) and Liz Phair (because she became a studio artist with her debut album, and her inclusion in categories of lo-fi rests on a series of demo tapes, *Girlysound*, that were not widely covered in popular music discourse). In writing each entry of the list, Kemp noted lo-fi as 'a self-conscious Artistic Statement,' and that 'by the late eighties, the lo-fi aesthetic had been overrun by geeks who wore coke-bottle glasses and spent their non-social lives in the basement experimenting with tape loops on their four tracks.'¹⁴⁰ Almost certainly a reference to what was then known as Cassette Culture (see Chapter 3), this latter comment expresses the exclusion of certain sorts of home-recording, particularly experimental and electronic musics, from preferred categories of 'lo-fi.'

Despite the increasingly held idea that all home-recorded music was 'lo-fi,' the *All Music Guide* provided separate entries for 'lo-fi' and 'cassette culture' in its genres section. The entry for 'lo-fi,' by former *Option* editor Richie Unterberger, is perhaps the most comprehensive and accurate account of what lo-fi was held to be by the 1990s: 'One of the most influential trends of alternative rock in the '90s has deliberately cast itself in opposition to studio sophistication. Called "lo-fi" artists... they see simple, even primitive recording quality as an advantage, not a hindrance.'¹⁴¹ Although, like many writers on lo-fi, Unterberger sees it as stretching back to the birth of rock 'n' roll, he nevertheless concedes that 'virtually all of the earlier records sounded primitive due to financial limitations rather than conscious decision' (though he stops short of observing that those earlier records probably did not 'sound primitive' to most listeners at the time). Thus for

¹⁴⁰ Kemp 1996, 429.

¹⁴¹ Unterberger 1995a.

Unterberger, lo-fi necessitates a 'conscious' (artistic) 'decision.'¹⁴² A similar summary of lo-fi appears in Unterberger's book *Unknown Legends of Rock 'n' Roll*, which contains some passages on lo-fi and lo-fi artists,¹⁴³ noting that 'the occasional shiver in the vocal, or even click of the tape machine or wrong note, let[s] us know that people, not machines, are behind the music.'¹⁴⁴

Two non-academic books are of particular relevance to lo-fi. The first is Amy Spencer's *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture*, published in 2005 with a revised and updated edition in 2008.¹⁴⁵ For Spencer, 'lo-fi culture' is synonymous with independent, 'do-it-yourself' culture of all kinds and only approximately half of the book is concerned with music (the other half is concerned with independent publishing), with only a small proportion of that devoted to music more usually considered 'lo-fi' and still less to phonographic imperfection. Some of Spencer's claims will be addressed in Chapter 3.

The second book is Irwin Chusid's *Songs in the Key of Z: The Curious Universe of Outsider Music*. As a DJ for WFMU, Chusid was an influential figure in independent music during the 1980s. Intended as an equivalent of 'outsider art' (art by those outside of the artistic establishment, especially those with mental illnesses or intellectual disabilities), his category of 'outsider music' has a significant overlap with lo-fi, since such artists often lie outside of technocratic norms or record their music away from professional studios. Chusid's 'outsider music' and many of his observations reflect the 1980s atmosphere of primitivism

¹⁴² While the idea that lo-fi artists were being consciously and deliberately lo-fi became important in popular music discourse during the 1990s (less so in the 1980s, when naivety was admired and often presumed), the intentionality behind lo-fi is both difficult to establish and of little use to this study, which focuses primarily on perceptions in discourse.

¹⁴³ Unterberger 1998, 155-157 (on 'idiot savants' such as Daniel Johnston and Jandek), 302-321 (on 'Lo-Fi Mavericks').

¹⁴⁴ Unterberger 1998, 321.

¹⁴⁵ Spencer 2008.

that preceded lo-fi proper, and prefigured (and perhaps influenced) the reception of Willis Earl Beal as an outsider in 2012 (see Chapter 8).

Other Research Relating to Lo-Fi

Academic discourse on lo-fi aesthetics will generally be treated separately from popular music discourse, both because it is different from that of journalism and because, often with a delay of years from the emergence of the music, the less historicised, less diachronic nature of such studies sometimes causes a retroactive selection bias for elements that emerged in discourse later on. This leads to the simplistic impression left by, for example, the studies of Fonarow, Hibbett, Kathleen McConnell¹⁴⁶ and Emily Dolan¹⁴⁷ that indie or independent music has always been or was always considered to have been anti-technocratic or 'lo-fi.' Nevertheless, a few key studies in this area should be addressed.

The study with the most comprehensive overlap with my own - though it focuses only on the 1990s category of lo-fi - is Tony Grajeda's 'The Sound of Disaffection.'¹⁴⁸ Seeking a 'genealogy of lo-fi,' Grajeda's interest is in 'how production values become coded as either corporate or alternative':

What is often at stake in the ethos of (anti-corporate) independent music is precisely what it means to *sound* alternative, to signify sonically an oppositional sensibility, regardless of one's position in relation to the music industry. While the cultural politics of popular music are frequently limited to an analysis of the economic struggle between independent and major labels, much less attention has been given to how that struggle is played out both aesthetically and technologically.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ McConnell 2006.

¹⁴⁷ Dolan 2010.

¹⁴⁸ Grajeda 2002.

¹⁴⁹ Grajeda 2002, 358.

Recognising that lo-fi is 'a discursive formation,' Grajeda sees it within a dialectics of 'perfection': 'once it has been socially and culturally determined what constitutes "perfect" sound (the flawless performance for instance), what returns dialectically as the other of this order is nothing less than imperfection - the "flawed" performance as a privileged (anti-)aesthetic for what the system supposedly can never tolerate.'¹⁵⁰ Grajeda assumes too much continuity between the 'lo-fi' movement within indie rock and long-term discourse on recording fidelity specifically, quoting texts on early sound reproduction technologies that precede the antithesis that is lo-fi - as I show in Chapter 2, a more appropriate origin might be found in discourse on folk music. In general however, my study is in agreement with Grajeda's, and aims to considerably expand his 'genealogy of lo-fi' with extensive discursive evidence.

Hibbett and Bannister, aware of indie's discursively constructed nature, see lo-fi as one of its key signifiers. Hibbett shows that lo-fi effects are integral to the cultivation of indie rock's cultural capital, seeing indie 'in the "bad voice" tradition of Bob Dylan and Neil Young... attaining through lyrical depth and minimal production a sound that is conscientiously "backwoods" or "bedroom,"' and finding that:

When one hears the crude "makings" of the song - the hiss, the pressing of buttons, technical glitches, distortions - one comes to trust it as both honest and real, or to read in its imperfections a kind of blue-collar integrity. In the strangest of ironies, the most direct evidence of production connotes its absence, and a claim for artistic distinction is forwarded through an aesthetics of working-class deprivation.¹⁵¹

The primitivism and anti-technocracy of indie is a consistent theme in Bannister's *White Boys, White Noise*: 'musical creativity is equated with amateurism -

¹⁵⁰ Grajeda 2002, 357, 361.

¹⁵¹ Hibbett 2005, 59, 62.

technique and mastery with redundancy. Skill is compromising as it implies that one has been 'taken over' by technology or sees technique as an end in itself... incompetence proves that, far from being a godlike 'star,' you're just an ordinary guy, like the audience.¹⁵² Bannister sees qualities associated with lo-fi as central to the category and function of indie, it being 'defined in terms of what it was not':

Recordings often sound cheap, with amateurish, childlike or obscure cover art. There is a tendency towards an aesthetic of minimalism - 'less is more.' Some of the limits were in some cases pre-given: cheap guitars, primitive recordings, and relatively amateur musicianship (especially singing), but equally there was a tendency to regard such "limitations" as intrinsic to the genre, as marking "difference," making a virtue of what was not always a necessity.¹⁵³

Dolan's discussion of lo-fi in the context of a subcategory of indie, indie pop, will be looked at further in relation to the band Beat Happening in Chapter 5. Her conception of lo-fi's authenticity is persuasive - for Dolan, the honesty in lo-fi is not merely a kind of unmediated transparency, but an honesty about mediation itself:

The lo-fi sound world... draws attention to the mediating technologies at work. Just as scratches on an old record or the hiss of cassette tape break the illusion of an unmediated experience with the music, so too the outdated instruments and amateur playing draw attention to the technologies behind the production. Here the 'honesty' of this music does not arise from the illusion of unmediated communication... but rather from openly emphasising the process of mediation.¹⁵⁴

Borrowing Frith's terminology of 'raw' and 'cooked' sounds as signifiers of authenticity, we might say that lo-fi effects 'cook' the music they appear in for

¹⁵² Bannister 2006b, 117.

¹⁵³ Bannister 2006a, 91; Bannister 2006b, 87.

¹⁵⁴ Dolan 2010' 464. Bannister makes a similar observation - 2006b, 121).

anti-technocratic audiences, but the more appropriate term (if it were a verb) would be that lo-fi effects 'raw' it.

The extensive literature on authenticity in popular music need not be surveyed here, but one study aptly summarises it and will be used throughout this thesis: Allan Moore's 'Authenticity as Authentication.'¹⁵⁵ Moore views authenticity as a product of an authenticating process, a 'matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed... it is a construction made on the act of listening.'¹⁵⁶ Rather than asking '*what* (piece of music, or activity) is being authenticated,' Moore asks '*who*,' since:

[Authenticity] is used in a socio-economic sense, to refer to the social standing of the musician. It is used to determine the supposed reasons she has for working, whether her primary felt responsibility is to herself, her art, her public, or her bank balance. It is used to bestow integrity, or its lack, on a performer, such that an 'authentic' performer exhibits realism, lack of pretence, or the like.¹⁵⁷

In accordance with Frith, Moore notes the inverse relationship between authenticity and mediation ('unmediated expression'), that 'the distance between [musical expression's] (mental) origin and its (physical) manifestation is wilfully compressed to nil by those with a motive for perceiving it' and that (anti-)technocracy is involved: 'technological mediation... is equated with artifice, reinstating as authentic/inauthentic the distinction between 'vernacular' and 'trained' or 'professional.'¹⁵⁸

Moore then uses these observations to present the first term in his tripartite model of authenticity: 'First person authenticity... arises when an

¹⁵⁵ Moore 2002.

¹⁵⁶ Moore 2002, 210.

¹⁵⁷ Moore 2002, 220, 211.

¹⁵⁸ Moore 2002, 212, 213.

originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience.¹⁵⁹ Many musicians in this thesis are received in terms clearly congruent with this first-person authenticity - Woody Guthrie, Roscoe Halcomb, Hasil Adkins, The Shaggs, Sebadoh, and particularly Daniel Johnston, who as we will see in Chapter 4, was positioned as the ultimate in first-person authenticity.

Moore's 'second person authenticity' ('which occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that a listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is "telling it like it is" for them')¹⁶⁰ is less clearly in evidence with lo-fi aesthetics, partly since exoticisms are such a leading characteristic of it, and partly because writers in popular music discourse rarely express their own subjectivities. The most useful term for this research is 'third person authenticity,' which 'arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance.'¹⁶¹ Third-person authenticity explains why tribute bands, for example, are not rejected as imposters. In the case of lo-fi aesthetics, it answers the pressing question of why artists whose archaism, primitivism, realism or lo-fi effects could be considered contrived are nonetheless praised in terms of their authenticity alongside their 'first-person' peers. Musicians in this study whose reception is particularly dependent on third-person authenticity include the New Lost City Ramblers, Jonathan Richman, Beat Happening and most of the musicians in the 2000s and 2010s (Chapter 7). Both Woody Guthrie and the New Lost City Ramblers were praised in the same fanzine, and both Beat

¹⁵⁹ Moore 2002, 214.

¹⁶⁰ Moore 2002, 220.

¹⁶¹ Moore 2002, 218.

Happening and Daniel Johnston were praised in several publications during the 1980s.

What this research may have shown is that the leap from first-person to third-person authenticities is not a major one, and in fact they probably lie on a spectrum as their music resonates differently with different listeners, who have different degrees of knowledge of the musicians' biographies. Interestingly, in the absence of a biography, Jandek was considered to have a first-person authenticity by default. Beat Happening were sometimes considered in first-person terms before the idea that their naivety was contrived became clearer to some writers. Some artists, such as Beck, Guided By Voices and Willis Earl Beal, seem to have been considered to have both first-person and third-person authenticities, in having a realist authenticity of origin at the same time as channelling the musics of the past - even with something of a causal relationship between the origin and the use of archaisms. In any case, Moore's model proves the most useful insight into and method for charting the production of authenticity in lo-fi aesthetics.

Continuing Themes in Lo-Fi Aesthetics

*My voice is a little hoarse
Gallop lost through the woods
Calling your name*

- Daniel Johnston, 'My Yoke is Heavy'¹⁶²

Before I examine in detail how lo-fi aesthetics was expressed in its various contexts, some initial findings on characteristics that appear throughout the period under discussion can be ventured. I have already noted that lo-fi aesthetics is an expression of non- or anti-technocratic / commercial ideology that

¹⁶² Johnston 1982 (disc.).

seeks to establish authenticity and value in musics unmediated by the norms of the major music industry. The apparent realism of phonographic media such as tape (which Phil Ford describes as 'photoreal')¹⁶³ is underscored by lo-fi effects, which function as its sonic indexes as the above writers have noted. But the expression of lo-fi aesthetics is no mere collapse of technocracy and the consequent establishment of an unmediated, transparently realist channel of communication between artist and listener. Lo-fi is nothing if not mediated by sound objects derived from technology - lo-fi effects - and in fact, lo-fi aesthetics is based just as much in the establishment of *distance* as it is in the realist, first-person-authentic intimacy that supplies it with much of its rhetoric.

Lo-fi aesthetics involves a two-way or reciprocal process. Lo-fi musicians and their music, and what they evoke, are simultaneously distanced and made close and present by lo-fi effects. Lo-fi aesthetics locates lo-fi musicking at a point nearly out of reach - 'so near and yet so far' - positioning it on a sonic, ontological and cultural threshold of closeness. Distance and closeness define each other: intimacy has no meaning without an establishment of distance prior to that intimacy or that jeopardises that intimacy. Authenticity has no meaning without the risk of inauthenticity. Without the lo-fi musician and listener alike struggling with or having overcome distance (from technocratic culture), there is no aesthetic value or achievement in lo-fi.

This reciprocal dependency is reflected in the relationship of lo-fi effects to the music upon which they act. Lo-fi effects are not experienced in isolation from music (nor vice versa), but as a frame or qualification on that music and its meanings. Throughout decades of lo-fi aesthetics, 'the music itself' (in a traditional sense) and its lo-fi effects were considered differentiable. Sometimes

¹⁶³ Ford 2008, 118.

recording imperfections are claimed as details of only incidental interest, or obstacles that should be surmounted, sometimes they are characterised as of crucial importance to the music's effects and meanings, but the notional separation internal to the recording between music and recording imperfections is always perceived and maintained. This separation replicates the dichotomy in audio technology discourse between signal (or, in older texts, 'program material')¹⁶⁴ and noise, with music as the signal and lo-fi effects as the noise. Typically, signal is seen as communicable information, order, whereas noise is seen as the negative of information, disorder. Crucially, however, noise can carry certain forms of information too. As Adam Collis explains about communication theory:

The presence of circuit noise or interference alerts the recipient [of a communication] to the quality or condition of the transmission system. Errors in the information of a message at its source can provide the recipient with information about the sender of the message; their standard of verbal or written communication skills or even their cultural background, for instance. The additional information which the noise provides is thus specific to the communication system and is independent of the message being communicated, but this information may be useful in interpreting the message being sent. Noise therefore, while potentially distorting or even destroying a message, can also play an important role in the clarifying and interpreting of it.¹⁶⁵

This is precisely the role that lo-fi effects play in lo-fi aesthetics: they are separable within a channel of communication, but also informative like a frame around a picture or the stained, rough surface of a treasure map in period pirate dramas. Note that the information to be gleaned from noise hinges on imperfections in technocracy: reductions in the effectiveness of the signal.

¹⁶⁴ Jorgensen 1974, 30; Cameron 1978, 270.

¹⁶⁵ Collis 2008, 32.

Moreover, the channel is technocracy itself - not an *absence* of technocracy, or else no message would have been sent at all, but a (lesser) degree of technocracy. Lo-fi is typically just above the threshold of technocracy - 'in the mud,' where signal mixes with noise, but is not quite destroyed by it. It is also simplistic to say that lo-fi effects are merely enjoyed in lo-fi aesthetics, since they lend pathos of the signal by playing its antagonist: distancing it, working against it and even threatening it.

Lo-fi effects are perceived as attesting to realism, but they do not collapse distance - they establish it. Greater noise across an analogue-electrical channel of communication is a signifier of distance, since it increases in proportion to the length of the wires and expanse of atmosphere that must be traversed - the greater the noise, the greater the distance. A signal that struggles to be heard over noise must come from very far away - exotically far, perhaps. Collis's informative noises represent distance from technocratic norms, and in lo-fi aesthetics, this distance from technocracy comes in the form of *impairments* - regressions from technocracy - and *impediments* - obfuscations of technocracy. The connotations of disability in these terms are quite deliberate and will become explicit in Chapters 2 and 4 (and are far from being used in praise of lo-fi aesthetics). By extension, these impairments and impediments represent distances from the centre of civilised, industrialised, modern culture and the aesthetic norms that accompany it. These distances may be the result of an exotic primitivism, an innocence of technocracy, an apathy towards or refusal of technocracy, or an archaism laden with pathos. It is not direct communication and intimacy *in itself* that makes lo-fi valuable, as the realist rhetoric of lo-fi aesthetics tends to suggest. It is that direct communication and intimacy can be established in the context of the distances, impairments and impediments - *across* and *in*

spite of them - that makes lo-fi musicking so precious. Lo-fi maintains and is fascinated with distance because its heroic negations are not possible when there is no technocratic distance to be negated. Thus, though rarely understood as such in discourse on lo-fi aesthetics, the establishment of distance from technocracy becomes at least as important a component of that discourse as the more typically purported collapse or removal of that distance. It is how, as we will see again and again, a lo-fi context makes simplicity, naive sincerity, archaism and even 'pop' kitsch not just palatable, but deeply appealing.

Impairment is 'deterioration; injurious lessening or weakening.'¹⁶⁶ In lo-fi aesthetics it manifests in a number of forms that imply a regression from technocracy. As a phonographic imperfection, it is the attenuation of a signal, especially in the upper and lower frequencies, or sometimes a distortion. As a non-phonographic imperfection, it is the thinning or fragility of the human voice, instruments that have less sonic power or richness than others, room acoustic that serves to remove a musician from proximity to the microphone and thus the loudspeaker, imprecise timing or tuning in performance, or an apparent inability to write complex music for a complex ensemble. Impairment manifests on the cultural stage as *primitivism* - a perceived lack of technocratic influence. In lo-fi aesthetics, the primitive is an extreme amateur, an artist who expresses her/himself in a childlike way, who is too poor for technocracy, who is marked by mental illness or disability, or who simply has not (yet) been affected by modernity. Impairment also manifests as *minimalism* - not as in the repetitious music of American composers, but in the 'minimal production values' of a band like Beat Happening, who recorded simple songs without a bass guitar. *Archaism* - the use of archaic musical technocracies such as styles or instruments from

¹⁶⁶ OED, s.v. 'impairment.'

previous decades - can also be a form of impairment, since it can imply a refusal or unawareness of the norms of modernity. The difference between primitivism and archaism is that primitivism represents a comprehensive lack of technocracy, whereas archaism merely implies regression to a technocracy understood to be superseded by newer technocracies.

An impediment is a 'hindrance' or 'obstruction.'¹⁶⁷ Whereas impairment is a regression or weakening, impediment involves the intervention of a new element - namely noise - or another complication of communication. In lo-fi aesthetics, this impediment is most commonly 'dirt' or some variation thereon. Dirt is both the material that intervenes in, impedes and obscures phonographic technologies, the metaphor of choice for an impeded sound, and the cultural context of the lo-fi musician. Dirt is the obscurity in which 'underground' lo-fi artists labour, as well as the disdained culture of modernity that surrounds them, and the 'grit' in 'gritty realism.' In the 2000s, when analogue technology had become archaic, this 'dirt' became 'dust' and ectoplasm. Another form of impediment is *obfuscation*, its verb defined as 'to make (a subject, etc.) unclear, obscure, confused, or difficult to understand...' and 'to use obscure or impenetrable language.'¹⁶⁸ Lo-fi effects of all kinds serve to obfuscate the music they appear alongside.

Whether they can be described as impairments or impediments, the distance constructed by lo-fi effects places lo-fi musicians and their music on a *threshold*. Like the archetypal figure of the wild man (see Chapter 2), lo-fi musicking is liminal, both sonically and culturally. It is on the cusp of being, perception, coherence, presence, sensibility, maturity, sanity, emotional release, emotional catastrophe, availability, and civilisation - frequently in jeopardy of

¹⁶⁷ OED, s.v. 'impediment.'

¹⁶⁸ OED, s.v. 'obfuscate.'

oblivion by the inexorable forces of technocracy and history. Like an electrical communication engulfed in noise, music on the threshold can be considered *incoming* or *receding*, the threshold as a point of entry or exit. Artists like Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening and Pavement were incoming, since they had made the first faltering steps towards contacting technocratic civilization. The music of artists like Boards of Canada, The Caretaker, William Basinski, Bob Dylan on the Basement Tapes, or the threatened folksingers on *The Mountain Music of Kentucky* (Chapter 2) was 'the sound of fading memories,'¹⁶⁹ about to be destroyed entirely by the onward march of modernity and time itself. It is not the vector that matters so much as the position of the threshold itself - whether coming or going (it is often difficult to say), the lo-fi artist is a creature of the forest, only glimpsed briefly and indistinctly at its outer boundary.

This fine balance of distance and presence can be considered not just as a threshold, but as a struggle. As well as distance, the presence of noise in a radio communication can denote a storm. Since there is a differentiation and antagonism between signal and noise, lo-fi effects furnish recordings with inner antagonisms between 'the music' and the imperfections, and lo-fi musicians fight to be heard underneath them. This is considered both a personal struggle to express oneself, despite impairments and impediments, a struggle of the underground against the mainstream, of the golden age against the fallen present, of pop simplicity against phonographic complexity, of continuity and meaning against entropy, and a struggle to be recognised as valuable by a narrow-mindedly technocratic listenership. Lo-fi musicians and their adherents struggle against these *bad listeners*, and in some cases, lo-fi effects represent the protestations of these listeners - after all, a good listener to lo-fi would not

¹⁶⁹ Keenan 2002.

have perceived imperfections at all, but so many confirmations of authenticity. If the channel is technocracy itself, the noisy sounds it makes sometimes represent (following Schafer) the low-quality modern musical 'garbage' it produces, impeding the precious inner music it carries and distracting the listener.

Indeed, the struggle is not just undertaken by the musician - the listener too must struggle against the challenging obfuscation of lo-fi effects, the derision of bad listeners, and debased and commercialised forms of popular music. It is in overcoming this challenge that the cultural capital Hibbett sees at work in indie rock will accumulate. Arguing for the superiority of lo-fi, Lips noted of the increasingly commercial status of indie rock bands, 'if Dinosaur Jr. is on the *Wayne's World II* soundtrack, then the "truly" alienated seek more obscure, more difficult music to identify with.'¹⁷⁰ That music was what would eventually be known as lo-fi, during the folk revival, the rise of punk, the rise of alternative and indie rock, and during the ubiquity of digital technologies such as CD, mp3 and the internet. Lo-fi was always *ever more* challenging, real, authentic, primitive and weird. It was considered the ultimate in these qualities - entirely beyond inauthenticity, for example. Lo-fi was regularly positioned as the *quintessence* itself of a number of musical genres, their spiritual and historical core. It takes the aesthetics of indie understood by Bannister, Dolan, Fonarow, Hesmondhalgh and Hibbett to greater extremes of distance from technocracy. To re-invert Lips's title, 'The Lo Road,' lo-fi was always *the high road*, the aesthetic and ideological high ground, and in many respects it was the highest road that could be taken by participants in indie discourse and popular music discourse at large. What matters is not whether the road is low or high, but the differential between the two

¹⁷⁰ Lips 1994, 76.

terms - the shift in what was favoured. In this, lo-fi reappropriated the prestige that once belonged to hi-fi.

Chapter 2 will chart the precursors to an aesthetics of phonographic imperfection in Romantic, realist and primitivist aesthetics between the late eighteenth-century and the 1980s. Incorporating philosophy, literature, classical musics, folk revivals, countercultural rock and early independent music, it investigates similarities to and influences upon the expression of lo-fi aesthetics in the late twentieth century. In Chapter 3, continuities are exchanged for discontinuities as we examine the divergence between lo-fi aesthetics and its canon and other areas with which lo-fi is now retroactively associated - punk and cassette culture. Chapter 4 looks at the reception of Jandek and Daniel Johnston in independent music discourse in the 1980s and 1990s. Both were considered primitives whose non-technocratic qualities extended into phonography. The band Beat Happening and their record label K are the subject of Chapter 5 - both were particularly known for their childlike naivety and use of pop idioms. Lo-fi effects played a key role in this and even when the band were understood as a 'concept,' their authenticity was not compromised. Chapter 6 concerns some of the most famous lo-fi acts, the establishment of a category of lo-fi, and the widespread coverage of both in the 1990s. In Chapter 7, analogue phonography itself becomes archaic in the 2000s, entailing a shift of focus in lo-fi aesthetics. Chapter 8 looks at the coverage of new artist Willis Earl Beal in 2012 - his characterisation and curation as a lo-fi outsider, and the doubts expressed about his authenticity. In the Conclusion my observations will be collected together and re-examined, and further directions for research will be explored.

Chapter 2. 'Strangeness and Aukwardness': Primitive, Romantic, and Realist Aesthetics before Lo-Fi

It would be anachronistic to suggest that a lo-fi aesthetics - especially one concerned with phonographic imperfection - is clearly recognisable before the 1980s, but an antipathy towards technocracy and a concomitant appreciation for imperfect recordings that took hold during that decade did not emerge from nowhere. A general history of imperfection in aesthetics would be too broad to attempt here, but the beginnings of a preference for imperfect, simple and rough idioms, as well as their association with deeper value and less mediated forms of expression, date back at least as far as the early nineteenth century. Late-twentieth-century anti-technocratic and lo-fi aesthetics borrowed from much older aesthetic narratives that had been established before the spread of recording technology and that reacted to or otherwise ensued from Enlightenment perspectives: forms of primitivism, Romanticism and realism.

In many cases, these narratives extend beyond matters of content or subject matter or 'signal' (such as rural or lower-class life, as opposed to that of the aristocracy), and into its framing by form or a potentially noisy 'channel' (such as adopting idiomatic speech associated with lower-class expression) in the same way that during the 1980s the technologies framing home recording, constructed as lo-fi, came to represent a deeper, formal commitment to a realism of the primitives believed to lie beyond the technocratic music industry. Moreover, lo-fi was to function as a negation of professional conventions of music-making in the same ways that these nineteenth and twentieth-century aesthetic narratives set themselves in opposition to, variously, classicism, urban life, commercialism, and other conventions of beauty perceived as false, unacceptable and culturally

dominant. As part of this negation, Western culture and popular music discourse turned towards its primitively untechnocratic Others, constructing them through romances of authenticity and distance even as they adopted the rhetoric of realism.

'Primitivism' is a concept now largely defunct as anything but an ideological construction and its influence. It is (or was) frequently understood as a subcategory within modernism applicable to artists such as Gauguin, Picasso and Klee,¹ or writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Hermann Melville,² and thus could be embodied in a range of different contents (such as depictions of 'primitive' peoples) and forms (such as simplicity in visual representation). At its most general, however, it was associated with the perception of an attractively simple and natural state of innocence that occurs in inverse proportion to the rise of civilisation and its technocracies, often going as far as seeing them as having resulted in an aesthetic decline. As such it entails the veneration or imitation of those seen to embody that earlier, 'primitive' state - typically cultures of the past and the Others of comparatively powerful white Western classes but also, by the same token, children, people with mental illnesses or people with intellectual disabilities (with whom Africans, for example, were compared).³ Primitivist narratives like these can be observed following colonial encounters, where they relate to the myth of the 'noble savage' (a concept not clearly, as is popularly

¹ Goldwater (1938) 1986. Rubin ed. 1984, Rhodes 1994, Connelly 1995, Flam 2003. Primitivist art of the sort described in the aforementioned studies can be found on the covers of a number of albums relevant to lo-fi aesthetics which often hand-drawings or -paintings and collage in a childlike style (e.g. covers of Beat Happening's releases, Half Japanese's releases, Daniel Johnston's cassettes, Pavement's *Slanted and Enchanted*, Sebadoh's *Bubble and Scrape* and *Bakesale*, and several Guided By Voices releases).

² Bell 1972.

³ Flam 2003, 7. The art of children and the mentally ill or impaired was pursued by artists such as Jean Dubuffet and Asger Jorn as *art brut* or 'raw art' - outsider art is a broader and overlapping category, though its primitive qualities are considered uncultivated, unlike those of Dubuffet and Jorn. See MacLagan 2009, Rhodes 2000, Russell 2011.

believed, attributable to Jean-Jacques Rousseau),⁴ and in the early twentieth century were traced further back to medieval narratives such as that of the Fall of Adam⁵ and to the Cynics and Golden Age traditions of Ancient Greece.⁶ Positive use of terms such as 'primitive,' or 'primal' in popular music criticism often, if not always, indicates something of a primitivist aesthetics at work, but, as we will see, primitivism and the term 'primitive' manifest differently in various cultural contexts. The concept of primitivism is invoked here less as a tool of contemporary aesthetic theory - as it has since the 1980s been superseded and critiqued by postcolonial and other critical theories⁷ - but as a construction and a narrative that was active (often self-consciously so), during this period.

In her monograph on 'the primitive,' Marianna Torgovnick highlights the flexibility in what the category has afforded Western ideologies, observing that 'the primitive as an inexact expressive whole - often with little correspondence to any specific or documented societies - has been an influential and powerful concept, capable of referring both to societies "out there" and to subordinate groups within the West.'⁸ In the field of visual art, Francis Connelly notes that rather than a sudden modernist impulse,

The notion of "primitivity" as an infant state of development through which all cultures passed was an invention of Enlightenment universalism. "Primitive" art... would be more accurately described as a collection of visual attributes that Europeans construed to be universally characteristic of early, or primal artistic expression... the term does not describe a Yoruba figure or an Egyptian relief, but a set of ideas belonging to Europeans.⁹

⁴ Ellingson 2001.

⁵ Boas (1948) 1997.

⁶ Lovejoy & George Boas (1935) 1997.

⁷ E.g.: On colonial constructions of the primitive: Achebe 1977, JanMohamed 1983, Mudimbe 1988, Torgovnick 1990, Said 1993, Moffitt & Sebastián 1996, Ellingson 2001. On constructions of disabilities and ethnicities (as freakish): Bogdan 1988, 105-111. On constructions of madness: Foucault (1964) 2001. On constructions of childhood: Ariès (1960) 1996, Kessen 1979, Cunningham 2006.

⁸ Torgovnick 1990, 20.

⁹ Connelly 1995, 5.

As Jack Flam writes, 'the idea that the origins of Primitive art... were lost in the mists of time allowed for a fair amount of romantic speculation and rumination about it... [its] figures are usually represented as being outside of ordinary activities and outside of ordinary time and space.'¹⁰ There was, he continues, 'the romanticised view that Africans embodied a surviving instance of the noble savage, a precivilized state of humanity... whose naturalness and authenticity was set in contrast to the decadent West.'¹¹ Colin Rhodes finds that the unequal power dynamic of colonialism 'lies at the heart of theories about primitivism' and that 'the primitive was regarded, on the whole, as always more instinctive, less bound by artistic convention and history, and as somehow closer to fundamental aspects of human existence.'¹² He explains that,

The word 'primitive' generally refers to someone or something less complex, or less advanced, than the person or thing to which it is being compared. It is conventionally defined in negative terms, as lacking in elements such as organization, refinement and technological accomplishment... The fact that the primitive state of being is comparative is enormously important in gaining an understanding of the concept, but equally so is the recognition that it is no mere fact of nature.¹³

As will become clear, this 'comparative' nature of primitivism is precisely that which the rhetoric of independent popular music discourse of the mid-twentieth century would embody in the attack on the technocratic conventions of commercial music that constructed lo-fi. We must note a distinction, then, between 'the primitive' or 'primitive art' - a colonialist construction - and the 'primitivist' art or aesthetics, practiced and observed by the colonisers, which result from such a construction. Towards the end of this chapter, we will see how

¹⁰ Flam 2003, 3-4.

¹¹ Flam 2003, 6-7.

¹² Rhodes 1994, 7-9.

¹³ Rhodes 1994, 13.

this primitivist aesthetics informed the atmosphere of 1980s independent music in which lo-fi aesthetics developed.

Like primitivism's 'primitive art', realism's 'reality' is a construction with similarly ideological functions, stemming in particular from the tendency to focus on the lives of lower social classes.¹⁴ Amy Kaplan writes that 'from an objective reflection of contemporary social life, realism has become a fictional conceit, or deceit, packaging and naturalizing an official version of the ordinary' and that, in the context of the turbulent social atmosphere of late nineteenth-century America, the realism in the period's novels is 'a strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change.'¹⁵ Romanticism, too, has been challenged as a category by more recent scholars and critics.¹⁶ It is with the awareness of their constructed nature, then, that I draw on such categories and chart the use of their rhetoric.

The purpose of this chapter is not to give a comprehensive account of primitivist, Romantic and realist aesthetics in the century and a half before lo-fi, nor to propose them as some continuous lineage for the latter - the complicating differences in hand (not least technological) are undoubtedly more numerous than the clear similarities. Rather, it is to outline them and similar cultural ideas as precursors to lo-fi aesthetics that, even apart from phonographic technology, supplied it with much of its rhetoric.

¹⁴ Miller 1971; Barthes (1970) 1974; Lyotard 1984, 73-79; Kaplan 1988. For a detailed history of realism in America, see Shi 1995.

¹⁵ Kaplan 1988, 1-14.

¹⁶ Some of the many critiques on the category of romanticism can be found in Copley & Whale 1992.

'What it *sounds* like may not be what it is': The Long

Nineteenth Century

Though it is not difficult to see that lo-fi aesthetics romanticises (with a small r), for example, a relatively impoverished recording context or a lack of conventional musical ability, its relationship with nineteenth-century Romanticism is less immediately obvious. Romanticism's association with powerful subjective emotions in its authors and artists might be found in the reception of Jandek, Daniel Johnston and Sebadoh, but its interest in nature and the sublime is not so clearly reflected in the imperfections of recording technology or technique. The intersection between the two lies the opposition of both to urban, industrial and commercial culture and a concomitant fascination with and faith in the past, the gothic, 'primitive' creativity and the self-expression of lower class or rural people, all accompanied by a rhetoric of aesthetic and social progressivism.¹⁷ By the late nineteenth century, such people would be widely referred to as 'the folk,' a category that can be traced back, as Regina Bix does, to the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writings of German philosophers such as Johann Gottfried Herder.¹⁸

Following Rousseau, Herder held the 'natural poetry' of a *Volk* - 'old and wild peoples' - in the highest esteem, and argued for spontaneity and distance from the artifice of established modes of culture: 'the more wild and freely acting a people is,' he wrote in 1773, 'the more wild, that is, the more lively, free, sensuous and lyrically acting its songs must be...! The farther from artificial, scientific ways of thought, speech and letters a people is, the less its songs are made for paper and for dead literate verses.'¹⁹ An archaic Gaelic epic attributed

¹⁷ Abrams 2005, 185-188.

¹⁸ Bendix 1997, 27-67.

¹⁹ Herder (1773) 1906, 17, 5-6, quoted in Bendix 1997, 38.

to Ossian (which would later emerge as the work of eighteenth-century poet James Macpherson) provided a focus for Herder's ideas, prompting him to call for the discovery of more 'folk songs, provincial songs, peasant songs which would be equal in liveliness and rhythm [and] naive manner,' since they were under threat from the spread of 'so-called culture.'²⁰ As Bendix notes, 'Herder's letters on Ossian... incorporated the ennobling, innocent variety of native authenticity, and wild and natural - coterminous with politically free - authenticity.'²¹ Bendix also sees the importance and authenticity of 'original language' for Herder, who worried that a 'German translation might no longer be the true *Ossian*.'²²

Similar cultural and aesthetic concerns motivated William Wordsworth at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) he explained his desire to 'imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men.'²³ He noted that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'²⁴ and that rural people embody this, 'convey[ing] their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.'²⁵ The adoption of their idiom stands in opposition to 'that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets' who 'separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression.'²⁶ Wordsworth thus hopes 'that there is in these Poems little falsehood of description'²⁷ - poetry ought not to be a falsely elevated medium but a physical and human one:

Poetry sheds no tears "such as Angels weep," but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same

²⁰ Herder (1773) 1906, 19, in Bendix 1997, 39.

²¹ Bendix 1997, 39.

²² Herder (1773) 1906), 1, in/and Bendix 1997, 38-39;

²³ Wordsworth 1802, xviii

²⁴ Wordsworth 1802, xi.

²⁵ Wordsworth 1802, ix.

²⁶ Wordsworth 1802, ix.

²⁷ Wordsworth 1802, xix.

human blood circulates through the veins of [both poetry and painting].²⁸

As a result, 'they who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness.'²⁹ He concludes that 'in order entirely to enjoy the Poetry which I am recommending, it would be necessary to give up much of what is ordinarily enjoyed,' assuring the reader that 'poetry may give other enjoyments, of a pure, more lasting, and more exquisite nature.'³⁰ These sentiments - the authenticity of simplicity and spontaneity, the struggle with unfamiliarity and imperfection that must be undertaken for greater rewards, the earthy physicality of the medium, and the opposition of all this to the falseness of other artists - were many of the justifications made for lo-fi aesthetics in the following century. Wordsworth only goes so far, however. He repeatedly asserts that poets should remove anything which might cause displeasure from their art, that it should be 'purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust,' and 'excitement' should not be 'carried beyond its proper bounds.'³¹

Walt Whitman, who has been described as a 'ferry linking antebellum romanticism to late nineteenth-century realism,'³² pursued Wordsworth's logic into an adoption of free verse. Writing in the wake of both Wordsworth and American Transcendentalist philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Whitman's extension of Wordsworth's aesthetics can be found in his major work

²⁸ Wordsworth 1802, xxiv.

²⁹ Wordsworth 1802, v-vi.

³⁰ Wordsworth, 1802, lxii.

³¹ Wordsworth, 1802, viii, xlvi.

³² Shi 1995, 33.

Leaves of Grass (1855), where he asserts - with strong Biblical overtones - the worth of 'great' people despite meagre outward circumstances:

The great city is that which has the greatest men and
women,
If it be a few ragged huts, it is still the greatest city in the
whole world.³³

Echoing Wordsworth's poem in *Lyrical Ballads* 'The Tables Turned,' which opposed a traditional education in favour of communion with nature, Whitman's Romantic subject could not be grasped by conventional learning, but rather by those who might have been regarded as least civilised:

No shuttered room or school can commune with me,
But roughs and little children better than they.³⁴

The year before, Henry David Thoreau, another writer influenced by Emerson, had published *Walden*, which expressed his social and aesthetic philosophy in the context of his life near Walden Pond in the forests of Massachusetts. Echoing the Cynic philosophers of Ancient Greece, Thoreau argued at length for the greater philosophical benefits of a frugal existence.³⁵ For Bendix, '*Walden* bears testimony to Thoreau's (undoubtedly beautified) effort to live and create independently and individually and to experience in such independence his true self.'³⁶ This coincided with a tendency toward 'the wild': after some time living in the woods:

I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher,
or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and
another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I

³³ Whitman (1855) 2004, 344.

³⁴ Whitman (1855) 2004, 247.

³⁵ Thoreau (1854) 2004, 122.

³⁶ Bendix 1997, 75.

reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good.³⁷

In one passage Thoreau describes his fascination with an acquaintance from the area who had not received the writer's education. As it would for writers on folk and independent music over a century later, the value of such a man's expression lies in its untainted originality. We even see the ascription of 'depth' to such people, even if they might be impeded or 'dark and muddy' (the latter a term frequently used to describe poor-quality sound):

There was a certain positive originality, however slight, to be detected in him, and I occasionally observed that he was thinking for himself and expressing his own opinion, a phenomenon so rare that I would any day walk ten miles to observe it, and it amounted to the re-origination of many of the institutions of society. Though he hesitated, and perhaps failed to express himself distinctly, he always had a presentable thought behind... He suggested that there might be men of genius in the lowest grades of life, however permanently humble and illiterate, who take their own view always, or do not pretend to see at all; who are as bottomless even as Walden Pond was thought to be, though they may be dark and muddy.³⁸

Though popular musical forms had been explored in European art music since for centuries, many nineteenth-century composers moved further from the conventions of the classical era in doing so. Nineteenth-century realism, which is typically identified by its subject matter of contemporary lower-class life as much as, if not more than, its form, is understood to be a primarily literary phenomenon, and does not easily find an analogue in art music, which was called 'Romantic' throughout the nineteenth century. This complex problem is examined in Carl Dahlhaus's *Realism in Nineteenth-Century Music*, which finds evidence for

³⁷ Thoreau (1854) 2004, 273.

³⁸ Thoreau (1854) 2004, 227. Like Wordsworth, Thoreau does not go as far as dedicating himself entirely to such a man's expression, as writers would following punk: 'Yet his thinking was so primitive and immersed in his animal life, that, though more promising than a merely learned man's, it rarely ripened to anything which can be reported.'

realism in the musics of, among others, Berlioz ('realistic trappings... at the expense of beauty'),³⁹ Bizet, Janáček and the 'folklike tone' of Mahler. Modest Mussorgsky in particular is noted for a musical language that might be mistaken for 'naivety' and 'the blunder of the dilettante' but in fact represents 'realist, historical local colour.'⁴⁰ When Dahlhaus summarises the 'aesthetic premisses' of nineteenth-century musical realism, first among them is 'the accentuation of the true instead of the beautiful as the goal of art and the element of sedition and rebellion implied by the choice of subject matter once regarded as unsuitable.'⁴¹

Romantic and realist tendencies find a particular resonance with the music and aesthetic philosophy of Charles Ives, who explicitly worked under the influence of Emerson and Thoreau. In his *Memos*, the composer recalls an episode in which his father described the singing of a local stone-mason:

Once a nice young man... said to Father, "How can you stand it to hear old John Bell (the best stone-mason in town) sing?"... Father said, "He is a supreme musician." The young man (nice and educated) was horrified - "Why, he sings off the key, the wrong notes and everything - and that horrible raucous voice - and he bellows out and hits notes no one else does - it's awful!" Father said, "Watch him closely and reverently, look into his face and hear the music of the ages. Don't pay too much attention to the sounds - for if you do, you may miss the music."⁴²

Ives agreed with this perspective whole-heartedly, even famously crying:

My God! What have sounds got to do with music? Why can't music go out in the same way it comes in to a man, without having to crawl over a fence of sounds, thoraxes, catguts, wire, wood, and brass?... What [music] *sounds* like may not be what it *is*.⁴³

³⁹ Dahlhaus 1985, 30.

⁴⁰ Dahlhaus 1985, 77.

⁴¹ Dahlhaus 1985, 121.

⁴² Ives (1932) 1991, 132.

⁴³ Ives (1920) 1962, 84.

It is only a short leap from 'not paying too much attention to sounds,' because 'sounds' and 'what it sounds like' have nothing to do with music, to ignoring or faithfully persevering with poor sound quality and musicianship in search of a deeper appeal. For Ives and his father, 'sounds' were superficial, masking the inner beauty of the music, and thus substituting the term 'sound(s)' with 'sound quality' - regularly its synonym in twentieth-century popular music discourse - results in something noticeably reminiscent of the lo-fi aesthetics of the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing Ives together with Emerson and Thoreau, Marc E Johnson finds that 'Ives's realism, like Whitman's, encompassed more than its subject matter, determining its formal language (its 'channel') as well. Rather than introducing "real life" as a narrative or dramatic element, reality is pursued on a deeper, structural level.'⁴⁴ The composer thus represents, in *Gong on the Hook and Ladder (or, The Firemens' Parade on Main)* or 'Putnam's Camp, Redding Connecticut' (from *Three Places in New England*) for example, the lesser skill of local brass bands through the rhythmic and tonal discontinuities in the music he quotes on their behalf. As with Wordsworth, Ives's realism was evident in the imperfections shaping his quotations of everyday American life - they served as a reminder of the sort of cultural distance and humble origins that gave rise to authentic greatness.

'No Sham': Folk, Folkum and Old Time Music

In the UK, meanwhile, as in other Western countries, the climate of a folk song revival was combining the nineteenth-century aesthetics of Romanticism and realism with nationalism and primitivism in constructing an urgently valuable 'Folk.' According to Georgina Boyes, 'the eighteenth-century "discovery" of the

⁴⁴ Johnson 2002, 218.

existence and contribution of rural labor in contemporary life,... developing with and into Romanticism,... produced an intellectual climate in which the countryside and its workers were presented as a locus of spiritual values in a rapidly industrialising, urban age,' as 'simple, untainted, country-dwelling peasants - "the Folk"' whose 'spontaneous simplicity' opposed the 'sophistication' of urban art music.⁴⁵ She explains that 'the possibilities the Folk offer for the construction of cultural alternatives' supported this understanding, because 'their existence as a source of 'otherness,' of a better and more natural state, offers a powerfully attractive rationale for their acceptance as fact.'⁴⁶ The perceived decline from primitive purity in the revival's rhetoric was counterpoised to the growth, urbanism and perceived crassness of commercial popular music and the threat it posed to folk music. It was in such a context that composer Hubert Parry asked in his inaugural address to the British Folk-Song society:

How has the unregenerate public arrived at such a happy result that in true folk-songs there is no sham, no got-up glitter, and no vulgarity? Yet so it is; and the pity of it is that these treasures of humanity are getting rare... there is an enemy at the doors of folk-music which is driving it out, namely, the common popular songs of the day... And it is this product which will drive out folk-music if we do not save it... The old folk-music is among the purest products of the human mind. It grew in the hearts of the people before they devoted themselves so assiduously to the making of quick returns.⁴⁷

An anti-commercial primitivism would come to characterise several strands of oppositional popular music aesthetics in the twentieth century, and remained at the heart of lo-fi aesthetics in the 1990s. In the intervening period, a racialised

⁴⁵ Boyes 2010, 7. Studies such as E. B. Taylor's *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* drew explicit equivalences between contemporary rural cultures and those indigenous to Central Africa (8).

⁴⁶ Boyes 2010, 17. A similar rationale would make the reclusive, all-but-anonymous Jandek appear as an authentic primitive - see Chapter 4.

⁴⁷ Parry 1899, 1-2.

primitivism could be found in jazz criticism in the early twentieth century ('the best jazz was the most "low down" jazz; it was best played by black jazz musicians and... by "those lower members of the white race who have not yet lost their feeling for the primitive"),⁴⁸ in the jazz-related writing of the Beats, who 'certainly trafficked in primitivisms,'⁴⁹ and in the folk revival of mid-twentieth-century North America.

Much has been written about this latter movement, which was urban-led and constructed a similar dialectic of urban and rural cultures as the English folk revival.⁵⁰ Especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, the making and dissemination of recordings played a much greater role than before - as folksong recordist Alan Lomax put it, 'for the first time there was a way to stick a pipeline right down into the heart of the folks where they were and let them come on like they felt.'⁵¹ Furthermore, the musical focus extended beyond what was traditionally (by Parry, for example) considered folk music. Robert Cantwell notes that 'many kinds of music that had already been commercially recorded - blues, oldtime, bluegrass, early jazz and swing, jugband and country western, even a few gems of early rock-and-roll, music in any case chiefly of southern rural origin - came to be regarded as "folk" music.'⁵² Benjamin Filene writes at length of the complex and constructed nature of the American folk revival in *Romancing the Folk*, observing that 'just as isolated cultures became harder to define and locate in industrialized America, the notions of musical purity and primitivism took on enhanced value, even in avowedly commercial music.'⁵³

⁴⁸ Frith 1996, 40-41. See also Darius Milhaud on the 'savage... African character' of jazz - Gendron 2002, 86-89.

⁴⁹ Whaley 2004, 28.

⁵⁰ Cantwell 1996, Filene 2000, Cohen 2002, Mitchell 2007.

⁵¹ Lomax 1988.

⁵² Cantwell 1996, 2.

⁵³ Filene 2000, 3.

Different elements within the folk revival pursued this 'enhanced value' to varying degrees. By the early 1960s a differentiation within the folk revival had emerged, with some writers and listeners rejecting the more popular and commercially successful folk acts in favour of the greater authenticity of even more 'primitive' and archaic rural musics and their lesser commercial compromise - a 'high road.' Much like in Hibbett's analysis of cultural capital within indie rock, a richer critical discourse with which to map these musics was needed, and fanzines such as *Caravan*, *Gardylloo* and, especially, the *Little Sandy Review* took on this role, airing sentiments as early as 1958 such as 'most so-called folksingers today are metropolitan reared intellectuals pretending to be peasants... There is the true folksinger, who is real primitive; and there is the minstrel, who is a trained musician not aping the folk.'⁵⁴ *Little Sandy Review* led the way: as Brian Jones notes, 'exhibiting their discerning taste in folk music, the editors of the *Little Sandy Review* sought to distinguish themselves from the hoi polloi of the newly popularized folk craze.'⁵⁵ As well as these bad listeners, the fanzine was highly critical of 'bad performers,' and would regularly denounce the most popular contemporary singers, such as Harry Belafonte, Leon Bibb, Paul Robeson and Odetta, for the ways in which they had modified folksong style, removing its harsher or more challenging aspects and making it 'slick' - the term 'folkum' was used to denigrate these singers and their approach.⁵⁶

One of the most frequent criticisms made of these singers was the expanded orchestration in their recordings. For example, songs on a new LP from long-established folksingers the Carter family, 'with their electric guitar sections and vulgar choral backing, can only be regarded as grotesque parodies

⁵⁴ Kornfeld 1958, 9.

⁵⁵ Jones 2010, 414.

⁵⁶ Nelson & Pankake [1960?]f, Henthoff 1961.

of songs which once were rich with dignity and charm.⁵⁷ Recordings of Leon Bibb and Harry Belafonte singing chain-gang and other work songs were positioned at an absurd and artificial remove from the hardship of their original context:

If you sent your child to a summer camp last year, perhaps you made a mistake. Maybe this year you should send him down on the chain gang. They have all kinds of facilities: orchestras and choruses by the hundreds, Harry Belafonte, Milt Okun, Bob DeCormier, Leon Bibb, Freddy Hellerman, and guitarists and arrangers too numerous to mention; all are there... Messrs. Belafonte and Bibb and their cast of thousands make the chain gang seem like a pretty nice place: all the boys sit around at the end of the day reading dialogue credited to Lee Hays while electronic rain murmurs on the bunk house roof... None of the terrible suffering, the nobility, or the feel of the real thing is contained in either one of these records.⁵⁸

The implication is that 'the real thing' entails a more challenging listening experience, one that approaches the 'terrible suffering' of the workers themselves.

Besides this requirement for what would later in the twentieth century be called 'minimal production values,' another important site of primitive authenticity was to be found in voices and styles of vocal delivery that were considered to appear imperfect and unattractive to the uninitiated, and as such, the imperfect voice was a significant precursor to the imperfect recording. Echoing Wordsworth, if folkum artists were to sing 'real folk music,' they would have to relinquish their training and adopt vocal techniques that by classical conventions would be considered undesirable:

[They] would have to throw out or deny all their musical training and do things that would be completely unmusical

⁵⁷ Nelson & Pankake [1964?].

⁵⁸ Nelson & Pankake [1960?]c.

to them - crack their voices, sluff or hold notes, ignore the strict musical time of a piece, etc - things that would make anyone trained in classical music shudder.⁵⁹

In one instance, a singer managed to differentiate himself from folkum by the emotionalised roughness (again, 'cracking') of his vocal delivery:

[Rev. Gary Davis's] approach to Dink Song is a good one also: he does not croon it like so many singers do. Instead he does it as it should be done: as a rough-hewn prison love song and is not afraid to let his voice crack and go harsh to bring out the deep hurt and wanting that is in the song.⁶⁰

In a quote *Little Sandy Review* attributed to the novelist John Steinbeck, folksinger Woody Guthrie was described as embodying these qualities, and, using realist rhetoric, they are almost conflated with the social milieu and its struggle he is seen to represent:

He sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people. Harsh voiced and nasal, his guitar hanging like a tire iron on a rusty rim, there is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of the people to endure and fight against oppression.⁶¹

Bob Dylan and Daniel Johnston would subsequently be described as nasal and challenging in their vocal style, but nonetheless important for what they expressed and how they embodied struggle. For the *Little Sandy Review*, Guthrie 'CONFRONT[ed]' the listener with 'the real and the beautiful in folk art - not the cheap or the easy or the flashy. You do not sing like Woody Guthrie by taking voice lessons or going to Juilliard. Nor do you get the same effects by "improving"

⁵⁹ Nelson & Pankake [1960?]f.

⁶⁰ Nelson & Pankake [1960?]a.

⁶¹ John Steinbeck, quoted in Fowke 1960.

a song.' Along primitivist lines, Guthrie is portrayed as 'finding beauty in simplicity, and retaining the innocence that so many have lost.'⁶²

As well as the smoothness of the voice and excessive orchestration, a wrongly or excessively skilled approach to instrumental technique could betray the inauthentic or bad performer: 'virtuosity is not by a long shot the same as virtue... In folk music, a simple guitar or dulcimer accompaniment, or even the absence of any accompaniment, can be, and often is, productive of infinitely more art than the most dazzling display of ten-finger picking with hammered-on, cross-thumbed double flamadiddles.'⁶³

All of these negative characteristics were associated with professionalism by the late 1950s, often explicitly so: as the prominent folk musician Mike Seeger wrote, 'Folk music is fun to listen to and perform; especially when it is amateur and not professional.'⁶⁴ There was a sense that the term 'professional' might be disparaging and thus in need of clarification - one record was 'superbly professional, in the non-pejorative sense of the word as applied to folk-music... polished but completely free from any trace of slickness or commercialism.'⁶⁵ And as the authentically 'primitive' was always a desirable quality, its 'awkward' or imperfect effects were cherished by association: as *Little Sandy Review* wrote about the Child Ballads, 'the awkwardness of the verse and the quaintness of the imagery is the hallmark of this most primitive of our literature.'⁶⁶

This preference for unprofessional techniques and even 'awkwardness' led to a letter to *Caravan* complaining that the magazine seemed 'to be more and more emphasizing the kind of folk music I personally despise - the 'authentic'

⁶² Nelson & Pankake [1960?]e.

⁶³ Beadle 1960.

⁶⁴ Seeger 1959.

⁶⁵ Lass 1958.

⁶⁶ Nelson & Pankake 1961.

types (and the worse the singer, the more 'authentic' he is).⁶⁷ A response to this in *Gardylou* explained that a direct relation between a bad singer and an authentic singer was 'quite obviously not so.' Rather, there were two 'different cultural groups' (by implication, folk music and urban music) with 'different criteria' and 'what is "bad" to one culture may be "good" to another.'⁶⁸ Although it resembles and in some senses prefigures punk's wilful preference for the 'bad' as the rebellious inversion of mainstream aesthetics, then, the folk revival's fondness for the 'bad' was an artifact of its interest in folk as a cultural alternative and not an end in itself. Folk was not un- or anti-technocratic, but merely a different technocracy that to the untrained ear could resemble a lack of technocracy.

Little Sandy Review was well aware of the untrained ears of these bad listeners and the imperfections they heard, however, and came closest to championing the untechnocratically 'bad' in the context of these bad listeners with the primitivist-realist rhetoric used in reviews of blues records, mostly by Barry Hansen. Hansen preferred 'the real blues in all their raw and unpolished reality,'⁶⁹ and argued that its most vital qualities were 'roughness,'⁷⁰ a "'dirty" sound' and aspects 'which many people would call "crude."⁷¹ 'Primitive' qualities and provenance were praised highly - Robert Johnson's was a 'fabulous primitive style, fully developed in an isolated environment which can never again be duplicated.'⁷² One review (by Dave Glover), even begins with a 'WARNING: this record is NOT for those who like an "easy listening folk blues" sound - it's primitive, harsh and sometimes savage.'⁷³ The idea that the most authentic blues was also the most challenging was expressed regularly, a rhetoric that would

⁶⁷ Bob Coulson, quoted in Hoffman 1959, 7-8.

⁶⁸ Hoffman 1959, 8. Similarly: Nelson & Pankake [1960?]f.

⁶⁹ Glover [1960?]a.

⁷⁰ Hansen [1961?]b.

⁷¹ Hansen [1961?]a.

⁷² Hansen [1961?]c.

⁷³ Glover [1960?]b.

inform punk and lo-fi aesthetics. Hansen enthusiastically quoted a passage in the liner notes to one Muddy Waters record that attested to the music's romantically liminal and highly emotive status:

A music shot through with the tension, bitterness, stark power and raw passion of life lived at the brink of despair. Poised between life and death, the delta bluesman gave vent to his terror, frustration, rage and passionate humanity in a music that was taut with dark, brooding forces and blinding intensity, that was jagged, crude, raw as an open wound, and profoundly - inexorably - moving.⁷⁴

Hansen would go on to become one of the most influential figures in the often primitivist aesthetics of bad taste, novelty pop and the bizarre during the 1970s and 1980s as the popular California-based DJ Dr Demento. Hansen would popularise the music of Frank Zappa⁷⁵ and various musicians who would later be termed 'outsiders' including Jandek, about whom he was interviewed in the documentary film *Jandek on Corwood* in 2005.⁷⁶

No matter how much they favoured roughness, amateurism and other challenging aspects of a folk recording however, reviewers in the revival's fanzines were rarely well disposed or even interested in poor sound quality and other phonographic imperfections themselves, mentioning them almost solely as a drawback of a recording or an aspect that could be grudgingly tolerated. The oppositional constructions of folk aesthetics - 'roughness' versus 'slickness' - were not yet mapped onto the recording medium as clearly as they would be in lo-fi aesthetics by the 1990s. Despite the roughness required of its performance, reviewers were pleased to find the blues 'recorded in magnificent hi-fi'⁷⁷ and criticised records because, for example, 'the sound quality is poor. There is... a

⁷⁴ Hansen [1966].

⁷⁵ Sterling ed. 2004, 776.

⁷⁶ Freidrichs dir. 2003 (film.).

⁷⁷ Hansen [1960?]

great amount of surface noise. This isn't too annoying in most cases, but on several bands it all but drowns out the music.'⁷⁸ Even recordings whose poor fidelity would be immediately noticeable to many listeners today, such as those of Robert Johnson, were not heard as such in the early 1960s, but rather were praised as 'amazingly clear, brilliant and lifelike for their time and place.'⁷⁹

On some occasions, however, the folk revival's discourse began to approach an aesthetics of imperfect recordings. One reviewer noted a 'general air of sadness and nostalgia' about a recording that aimed to collect Southern folksongs before they disappeared, finding that 'perhaps the most poignant sound on the record is the background roar of a tractor and passing automobiles.'⁸⁰ Here recording imperfections do not simply spoil a recording but rather lend it pathos, even if they risk masking the folksongs.

In another case, lesser recording quality was associated with the archaism of bygone musical traditions. Those elements in the folk revival discourse that sought deeper authenticity tended to favour older recordings and artists over contemporary urban folksingers of their own (as *Gardylou* put it) 'cultural group,' but there were new performing groups, of which the New Lost City Ramblers were particularly well known.⁸¹ This group, made up of Mike Seeger, John Cohen and Tom Paley, closely recreated the style of pre-war bluegrass and string band music in their performances and on their recordings, and even dressed the part (thus exemplifying Moore's third-person authenticity). More archaic than primitivist, the band called this style 'oldtime music,' and though they knew it to have been commercially motivated in its time, they endeavoured to 'avoid the

⁷⁸ Kaplan [1960?]

⁷⁹ Hansen [1961?]c.

⁸⁰ Nelson & Pankake [1960?]d.

⁸¹ For more on the New Lost City Ramblers, see Allen 2010.

most commercial aspects and try to stay fairly close to genuine "folk" material.⁸²

Ronald D. Cohen writes that the band were 'successful in planting the seeds of an old-time revival throughout the country.'⁸³

In *Gardylou*, Seeger elaborated on the recording process of the New Lost City Ramblers debut album in 1958, and in doing so provides an example of home-taping conferring on a recording not just an inferior sound quality, but one that can be positively associated with the music of the past:

A number of the audiophiles down here in Washington complained about the poor recording engineering, to which I replied, "Bosh, that's oldtime recording for oldtime music". I thought it was good. I had only heard the master tape, and thought that if there was any bad recording it was probably on 'East Virginia' and three other songs that I recorded myself with my Tandberg in a living room. When I did hear the finished record I objected... that the echo sounded unnatural (it was dubbed in) and also the filters (to make it sound ("hi-fi"), to which [the label's director] replied effectively, "I've got to - the other companies in the field are forcing it". The future NLCR records (if there are any) will not have the filtered, bathroom-sound so popular with today's recordings.⁸⁴

Seeger rightly notes that reverb was commonly added to popular and folk music at the time, yet he goes further than advocating its removal, finding the 'poor recording' to have an 'oldtime' quality suited to the music because it had been recorded himself at home. Home-recording was by no means unheard of in 1958, and Seeger would go on to release other home-recordings during the 1960s.⁸⁵ Yet the difference in quality between a home-recording and a studio recording was not as great as it would be following the introduction of digital recording technology (raising studio standards) and the compact cassette and its portable

⁸² Paley 1958.

⁸³ Cohen 2002, 144.

⁸⁴ Seeger 1959, 6.

⁸⁵ Such as Seeger 1962 (disc.).

recorders (lowering the price but also the quality of home recording) later in the century.

Another member of the New Lost City Ramblers, John Cohen, took a portable tape recorder to Kentucky and recorded folk songs there, releasing them in 1960 on a compilation entitled *Mountain Music of Kentucky*. In a 'Technical Note' included in the liner notes to the 1996 CD re-release of this album, Pete Reiniger describes how the lack of a "modulometer" in Cohen's equipment resulted in distortion on some of the tracks, which he digitally corrected for the reissue.⁸⁶ In 1960 the *New York Times* said that the record, 'for all the roughness of its recorded sound, is proof that the true grass-roots folk tradition is alive and kicking in America.'⁸⁷ While this statement is open to interpretation and certainly isn't referring to the album's distortion exclusively, there is nonetheless the suggestion that 'roughness of recorded sound' and 'grass-roots folk tradition' coincide and may even be causally related.

One of the artists on the compilation, Roscoe Halcomb, would go on to further performances and recordings with Cohen's help. In the notes to a subsequent recording, Cohen builds a sense of challenging and 'unadorned' realism, writing that 'in Roscoe's singing, there is a sophistication which derives from the unadorned, almost bare quality he brings to each songs. In terms of finesse, it is full of errors in its lack of refinements, but as a human and artistic statement, it has a brutal reality.'⁸⁸ Furthermore, the liner notes to *Mountain Music of Kentucky* contained Cohen's photographs of the people of Kentucky, including home-made banjos and the hands of the banjo-player Roscoe

⁸⁶ Reiniger 1996.

⁸⁷ Shelton 1960.

⁸⁸ Cohen 1962, 2. Brian Jones writes extensively on the relationship between Cohen and Halcomb, aesthetic and personal in 2010.

Halcomb, 'cracked' by manual labour but nonetheless able to play.⁸⁹ These images functioned alongside the music in a similar way to the 'crack' in Rev. Gary Davis's voice and the sounds of nearby vehicles in portraying the rough, painful and challenging physical consequences of occupying the position of the authentic folksinger in the modern world, under threat from its encroachment, its demands and with the passage of time aging the fragile bodies of folksong's last performers. Such lo-fi effects (if they can be called such) represented the threatened and archaic nature of folk music, on the threshold of extinction - not undermining it, but heightening its distanced and embattled reality.

White Light / White Wonder: The Velvet Underground and Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes

It is tempting but simplistic to date the beginnings of lo-fi aesthetics to the beginnings of an attraction to distorted or otherwise noisy timbres in the early post-war period, for all the reasons already outlined in this and the previous chapter. By the 1980s, however, lo-fi aesthetics was considered to find one of its precursors in the distorted 'garage rock' of the 1960s, and in the Velvet Underground particularly.

This band presents one of the most famous cases of phonographically generated distortion - that is, distortion caused in the recording process as opposed to, for example, by a pedal or amplifier in itself - in 'Sister Ray,' the closing track on their second album *White Light / White Heat* (1968). By the mid 1990s, the Velvet Underground - who in an earlier incarnation has been called the Primitives - had become one of the bands most frequently compared to lo-fi

⁸⁹ Cohen 1960. Nelson & Pankake [1960?]b added a warning to bad listeners: 'Those seeking 'easy listening' or 'light entertainment' had best keep hands off - they might get hurt.' Such disclaimers would become common in reference to punk and indie later in the century.

artists, and were included in Kemp's 'Lo-fi Top Ten' as their progenitor.⁹⁰ During the late 1960s, however, the band were primarily noted for their intense, noisy, 'ugly' and apparently chaotic sound.⁹¹ The band also explored lower-class and marginal urban life in their lyrics, for which reason Lou Reed, one of the group's members, considered them to be 'antedated realists.'⁹² Rock critic Wayne McGuire agreed, seeing - in a narrative much like those used in lo-fi aesthetics - a 'folk mythology of New York City and our generation which rings deep and true through the pap of fumbling unfocused artificial surrealistic imagery and facile pseudo-mystical morality lessons produced by most new groups.'⁹³ Another rock critic, Paul Williams, noted that the band's music was real and 'human' in its intimate physicality:

Not just the words, which really do speak directly to our human situation, but the music, especially the performances: there is something so real, so immediate and personal, in the movement of these songs, the touch of fingers to guitar strings, the extension of energy through a drumstick so that it is strike and touch both, an intimate, human action.⁹⁴

The band were known to have an unprofessional sound - Andy Warhol said about his producing the band's debut album that he 'was worried... that it would all come off sounding too professional. But with the Velvets, I should have known I didn't have to worry - one of the things that sounded so great about them was they always sounded raw and crude.'⁹⁵

'Sister Ray' is the track that concludes *White Light / White Heat*. According to Richard Witts, 'it has become a cliché to write, as far too many have, that

⁹⁰ Kemp 1996, 428.

⁹¹ Cannon 1968; Jahn 1970; Bangs (1970) 1996, 43.

⁹² Lou Reed, quoted in Bockris 1994, 143.

⁹³ McGuire (1968) 1997, 27.

⁹⁴ Williams (1969) 1997, 13-14.

⁹⁵ Andy Warhol, quoted in Bockris & Malanga 2002, 120.

White Light / White Heat is the worst-recorded album in the history of music.⁹⁶

Band-member John Cale described the album as 'a very rabid record' and 'consciously anti-beauty',⁹⁷ and band-member Sterling Morrison related that the recording process consisted of the band playing only a single live take, resulting in considerable amounts of leakage between tracks (signals from instruments 'leaking' into the tracks allocated to other instruments due to the first instruments' volume and proximity) and thus distortion:

Overall I think the album is a technical failure. We didn't want to lay down separate tracks, we wanted to do it studio live with a simultaneous voice, but the problem was that the current state of studio art wouldn't let us do it. There was fantastic leakage because everyone was playing so loud and we had so much electronic junk with us in the studio - all these fuzzers and compressors. Gary Kellgran, the engineer, who is ultra-competent, told us repeatedly, 'You can't do it - all the needles are on red.' And we reacted as we always reacted: 'Look, we don't know what goes on in there and we don't want to hear about it. Just do the best you can.' And so the album is all fuzzy; there's all that white noise.⁹⁸

Jeff Schwartz examines the aesthetic consequences of this at length in his essay on 'Sister Ray,' writing that 'the instrumental tracks are too hot, leaking and bleeding over one another's boundaries, until it becomes difficult to separate one from another. Furthermore, the whole recording, the body of the text, is too hot, captured in a permanent state of over-excitation.'⁹⁹ 'Sister Ray' is 'lo-fi' in Schafer's sense of the term and the Velvet Underground's 'worst-recorded album in the history of music' is the byproduct of their predilection for the intensity, sonic excess and laissez-faire attitude to technique that would characterise punk rock.

⁹⁶ Witts 2006, 61.

⁹⁷ John Cale, quoted in Watson 2003, 335.

⁹⁸ Sterling Morrison, quoted in Bockris & Malanga 2002, 143.

⁹⁹ Schwartz 1996 (1997), 100.

The late sixties also saw the widely noted proliferation of imperfect recordings in the form of bootlegs. On bootlegs - unlike in *White Light / White Heat* - a significant proportion of the lo-fi effects were reproductive imperfections, the consequence of the unofficial manufacturing and copying of the recordings. Although bootleg-like recordings had occasionally been made and distributed prior to 1969, that year's release of *Great White Wonder*, a collection of Bob Dylan recordings, is regularly cited as the archetypal bootleg album.¹⁰⁰ It contained songs from what had become known as The Basement Tapes, a series of recordings made by Dylan and The Band in 1967 at the house where they lived in Saugerties, New York. Various extracts from the tapes would be copied and circulated on tape, bootleg vinyl and CDs and one official release (1975's *The Basement Tapes*) over the subsequent decades, and The Basement Tapes would become a key instance of home-recording, poor sound quality, music-making outside of the industry and its technocracies, and anachronistic style, all coinciding in a highly admired and culturally 'underground' work, much as in the lo-fi of the 1980s and 1990s.

The fact that the music on bootlegs was accessible at all usually took priority over any interest there might have been, positive or negative, in their sound quality. A degree of poor quality could be assumed, but commentators would report that it was worth tolerating, or even that the quality was relatively good. The Basements Tapes received widespread attention when *Rolling Stone* magazine ran an article entitled 'Dylan's Basement Tape Should Be Released,' with the words 'The Missing Bob Dylan Album' on the cover. Inside, Jan S. Wenner described the tape as 'rough but very listenable,' and elaborated:

¹⁰⁰ Cable 1978, 86; Heylin 2003.

The quality of the recording is fairly poor, it was a one-track, one-take job with all the instruments recorded together. The highs and lows are missing, but Dylan's voice is clear and beautiful. Additionally the tape has probably gone through several dozen dubs, each one losing a little more quality.¹⁰¹

The Washington Post wrote that the number of times the tape had been copied 'should mean a beggar's banquet of surface noise, high and low frequency loss, and general disaster,' but 'in fact, the quality is surprisingly good - not professional, obviously... but it's usable... and there is a wide range in the sound quality.'¹⁰² Another *Washington Post* article even appeared fond of the poor sound quality for its subversive, anti-corporate connotations: 'As benefits any enterprise in which anonymous promoters challenge the corporate omnipotence of CBS... these tracks sound furtive and bootlegged, the recording quality being something akin to that of the Edison roll. The poor sound, however, cannot mask what are some fine - even great - songs.'¹⁰³ One of the more prominent Dylan biographies notes that the Basement Tapes' 'roughness... pleased many,'¹⁰⁴ and Paul Williams described the tapes as 'marvellously unselfconscious,' and 'like looking at a series of brilliant sketches, captured by the artist's hand but not yet integrated (if they can be) into his vision.'¹⁰⁵

Rock critic Greil Marcus wrote on The Basement Tapes in *Invisible Republic* in 1997, re-released as *The Old, Weird America* in 2001, in which he situated the Tapes in the context of the folk revival and the influence of a 1952 compilation of tracks from Depression-era 78 records, *The Anthology of American Folk Music*.¹⁰⁶ This compilation is also well known as an influence on

¹⁰¹ Wenner 1968.

¹⁰² Woods 1969.

¹⁰³ Bernstein 1969.

¹⁰⁴ Shelton 2011, 265.

¹⁰⁵ Williams 2004, 223, 226.

¹⁰⁶ Marcus 2001.

the members of the New Lost City Ramblers¹⁰⁷ and other folk revivalists - Katherine Skinner concludes that 'rather than serving as an inspiration for the revival's inception, the *Anthology* seems to serve as shorthand for a complicated historical context and as an authenticating agent for many of the revivals' performers.¹⁰⁸ The Basement Tapes are also characterised by an often archaic pre-war style, and Marcus explores the aesthetic effect of this in depth, finding not just the romance and realism of a golden age but, in its haphazard and incomplete nature, the pathos of that age's decline and the decline of the folk revival moreover:

What [Dylan and The Band] took out of the air were ghosts... For thirty years people have listened to the basement tapes as palavers with a community of ghosts - or even, in certain moments, as the palavers of a community of ghosts.¹⁰⁹

Later:

In the basement tapes, an uncompleted world was haphazardly constructed out of the past... The uncompleted world of the basement tapes was a fantasy beginning in artifacts refashioned by real people, dimly apprehended figures who out of the kettle of the folk revival appeared in the flesh to send an unexpected message. The vanished world they incarnated - as history, a set of facts and an indistinct romance; as a set of artifacts, as a work of art, complete and finished - was going to die, and you were going to be the last witness.¹¹⁰

The Basement Tapes 'dimly apprehended' (a description evoking the indistinct sonic and technical qualities of the recordings) a lost demographic of socially marginal figures both archaic and exotic - the 'weird' in the 'Old Weird America.'

The cover of the 1975 release of *The Basement Tapes* reflected this, depicting

¹⁰⁷ Jones 2010, 416-418.

¹⁰⁸ Skinner 2006, 72. See also Cantwell 1996, 189-240.

¹⁰⁹ Marcus 2001, 86.

¹¹⁰ Marcus 2001, 196.

figures associated with circuses: (as Shelton puts it) 'a dwarf, a sword-swallower, a weight-lifter, an Eskimo, a fat lady, a nun, a belly dancer and a ballet dancer,'¹¹¹ and this interest in exotic and socially marginal figures, again mixed with the claims of realism, would become more radical in the subsequent two decades.

'Wild Thing': Primitivism in the Countercultural Climate of Rock, Punk and Post-Punk

Fram and Deutch's volume *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art* collects hundreds of expressions of primitivist aesthetics and ideologies from 1755 up until and including the postcolonial turn (which for visual art Fram sees as precipitated by a 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York comparing early modernist painting and sculpture with a variety of non-Western art objects).¹¹² In a 1910 article entitled 'The Wild Men of Paris,' the American artist and writer Gelett Burgess wrote about a number of modernist painters including Derain and Picasso, repeatedly framing their work as monstrous and grotesque yet fascinating and associating these qualities with what was then considered 'primitive' art:

I had entered a new world, a universe of ugliness. And, ever since, I have been mentally standing on my head in the endeavor to get a new point of view on beauty so as to understand and appreciate this new movement in art.

It was an affording quest, analyzing such madness as this. I had studied the gargoyles of Oxford and Notre Dame, I had mused over the art of the Niger and of Dahomey, I had gazed at Hindu monstrosities, Aztec mysteries and many other primitive grotesques; and it had come over me that there was a rationale of beauty; that, perhaps, one was but the negative of the other, an image reversed, which might have its own value and esoteric meaning. Men had painted and carved grim and obscene things when the

¹¹¹ Shelton 2011, 265.

¹¹² Flam 2003, 17-19.

world was young. Was this revival a sign of some second childhood of the race, or a true rebirth of art?¹¹³

Not only does Burgess conflate the primitive with 'madness' and the childlike, he expresses the idea that it represents an inversion of beauty that might itself be appealing, if the challenge is met with appropriate effort - a logic that would still be employed in commentary on lo-fi artists more than seventy years later in the 1980s.

Understandably, then, a similar primitivist aesthetics can be seen in the intermediate period, and it can be found in 1960s and 1970s discourse on rock, where it plays a part in the imagery and philosophy of counterculture in the years before and after punk (the aesthetics of which in relation to lo-fi will be examined in the following chapter). Distinctions that might be made between 'garage rock' (considered a category of 1960s rock) and 'punk rock' (often considered to have emerged in the 1970s) are far from clear, with the 1980s American tendency to refer to 'garage punk'¹¹⁴ and 'sixties punk'¹¹⁵ and books like Clinton Heylin's *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for the Post-Punk World* undermining the sense of radical aesthetic break implied by punk's frequent characterisation as a 'year zero.'¹¹⁶ Hicks identifies 'garage rock' as the response by hundreds of bands to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the latter offering inspiration in their 'homely, uncouth, sloppy, and musically rough' qualities.¹¹⁷ Noting their 'minimal technique' and that 'a garage is a rougher, dirtier place than where humans typically reside... it is a place of noise and alienation, a psychological space as much as a physical one,' he sees in garage bands the Futurist poet Marinetti's call of 'Let us be barbarians!... Hail the savagery... and

¹¹³ Burgess (1910) 2003, 38.

¹¹⁴ Bale 1982o.

¹¹⁵ Stigliano 1981.

¹¹⁶ As seen e.g. in the Billy Bragg quote on the back cover of Robb 2006. This characterisation is described and challenged in Percival 2010, 202.

¹¹⁷ Hicks 2000, 26.

the fury of the muscular.¹¹⁸ Hicks also observes that a common trend in the names of garage bands was for the 'downwardly mobile': suggestions of violence, criminality, mental illness and, particularly, names that 'identified the groups as pre-civilized: the Cavemen, the Primitives, the Hairy Ones, the Woolies, the Wooly Ones, the Untamed, the Pack, the Bushmen, the Cavedwellers, the Barbarians, the Young Savages, and the Wild things - this last taken from the hit by the Troggs, a name that itself was short for "troglodytes."¹¹⁹

In 1971, the Troggs' primitivism was a key theme in an extended piece by one of the most prominent American rock critics of the 1970s, Lester Bangs.¹²⁰ He opened by lamenting the demise of their namesake 'Troggs,' a group of 'beatnik'-like youths who occupied Derbyshire caves in the mid 1960s and whose discovery he luridly relates:

A naked mangy teenager coming round the mountain covered head to toe in grime and shit. On sighting them his panther eyes blazed up and his gnarly jaw dropped and he let out the most bloodcurdling howl heard by human ears since a yard of aeons B.C. at least, and then he *pounced*... I didn't even know that terrain so remote and rasty [sic] existed in Merrie Olde, but it's all true.¹²¹

Bangs then imagines the cultural craze these 'junior jackels' might have inspired - 'caveman rock groups' dressed in 'loincloths and ashes and play[ing] guitars made of bones... pigmy bands, Motown Zulu chiefs and every conceivable stripe of aboriginal entrepreneurs,' the 'primordial rhythms of... primal Piltdown Pissoffs' and a 'Paleolithically prepubescent band... called "The Littlest Yeti."¹²² The Troggs themselves were 'starkly pure... churning out rock 'n' roll that thundered

¹¹⁸ Hicks 2000, 38, 25-26.

¹¹⁹ Hicks 2000, 120.

¹²⁰ Bangs, (1971a) 1996.

¹²¹ Bangs (1971a), 1996, 53-4. Bangs regularly coins new words, in this case, 'rasty.' The Troggs were prominently reported on in American newspapers: Toth 1966, Farnsworth 1966. These articles leave the impression that Bangs's account is probably exaggerated.

¹²² Bangs (1971a), 1996, 54-55.

right back to the very first grungy chords and straight ahead to the fuzztone subways of the future.¹²³ Both the Troggs and the Troggs they evoked presented Bangs with a significantly more radical and bizarre image of a primitive rural folk than that of the now declining folk revival. It was not at all pleasant or bucolic, instead pushing folk's rough purity into a surreal, challenging and thrillingly grotesque expression of primitivism, and it is this version of the aesthetic that runs through much late 1960s and 1970s countercultural rock and punk discourse.

Bangs frequently stressed the value of simplicity, aggression and the grotesque in rock music in discussing artists such as Count Five and Iggy and the Stooges and consistently favoured the primitively bizarre, awarding it the highest praises in the strongest terms, especially when it implied the radical inversion of conventional taste.¹²⁴ This frequently brought him to the point of finding a lack of conventional technical skill attractive, and one band he wrote about in such a way was the Godz, whose debut album *Contact High* was released on a label famous for avant-garde recordings, ESP. The album has long been notorious for music that, as Patrick Burke puts it in his article 'Clamor of the Godz: Radical Incompetence in 1960s Rock,' is 'sloppy and discordant by most conventional notions of commercial pop music.'¹²⁵ Burke situates the Godz in the context of New York's bohemian 'countercultural community' and their opposition to what Theodore Roszak in his influential 1969 book *The Making of a Counter Culture* (the book that popularised the category of 'counter culture') called 'the technocracy... that social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration.'¹²⁶ 'Roszak believed,' Burke continues, 'that the

¹²³ Bangs (1971a), 1996, 55.

¹²⁴ Gendron 2002, 234-236. See also Bangs (1981) 1996, 376.

¹²⁵ Burke 2011, 42.

¹²⁶ Roszak 1969, 5.

playful, sometimes surreal or irrational, style of 1960s youth culture represented a noble effort to restore mystical experience and human passion to the cold, repressive society created by technocratic control and expertise.¹²⁷ He thus concludes that the Godz 'made the case for the liberating potential of unashamed badness in an era when technical proficiency and expert know-how often were seen as emblems of a failed, inhumane society.'¹²⁸

Naturally this prefigures the rhetoric of lo-fi aesthetics strongly, there being not far to go to incorporate phonographic imperfection, too, within the remit of an anti-technocratic 'incompetence,' though this would not begin in earnest until the late 1980s. Indeed, Burke notes that 'The Godz' recordings... rarely appear to involve overdubbing or other studio finesse, and frequently terrible recording balances suggest that the Godz simply turned on the microphones, rolled the tape and started playing, without any particular concern for artifice, technology or the listener' and that the bands legacy has been associated with 'the widely noted lo-fi movement of the 1990s.'¹²⁹ According to the primitivist Bangs, the Godz 'sometimes approximate that nth devolution of [garage band] the Fugs' yawp to the point of squatting dogmen sitting around the cannibal fire,' adding 'it was so awful I dug it!'¹³⁰ It was not an unselfconsciousness or innocence that Bangs admired in the Godz, however, so much as the conviction and confidence of the band's flagrant 'awfulness,' traits that would be valued in 1970s punk.

Bangs was not the only one to explore the musically primitive. Phil Ford has examined the commercial 'exotica' music of the 1950s, which mixed constructions of 'savage' Africa, South America and the Pacific with orchestral

¹²⁷ Burke 2011, 42.

¹²⁸ Burke 2011, 57.

¹²⁹ Burke 2011, 56-57.

¹³⁰ Bangs (1971b), 1996, 85.

productions akin to the film music of the time for a hi-fi audience.¹³¹ Significantly, he then sees this tendency continued in a magical realism practiced by counterculture ('the Movement'), even as it set itself against 'the consciousness that underwrites hegemony... that of Western, capitalist, technocratic man, whose mind alienates nature and spirit from itself.'¹³² Rejecting this,

[the Movement] set their sights... on a utopia that could be fashioned from odd and ends of American history reclaimed and twisted into strange new shapes. To the square American myths of Davy Crockett and George Washington the Movement counterpoised a hip countermyth of America: backwoods, poorly mapped, shadowed, magic-realist - a preserve of cranky characters and arcane manners. And, most crucially, it imagined it might live there.¹³³

Ford follows the observations of Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* in positing that although (as Ford might have put it) the combination of 'magic' and the claims of exotica to 'realism' and truth might seem to present a paradox, 'the audience takes pleasure in believing' in it nevertheless.¹³⁴ He aptly situates Dylan's Basement Tapes and Captain Beefheart's 1969 album *Trout Mask Replica* in this context, as the latter combines a surreal take on folk poetry with an unadorned recording process that results in lo-fi effects:

The unaccompanied songs... were done as 'field recordings' at the house where Beefheart and his band lived. Frank Zappa, the album's producer, was careful to preserve the clicks of the tape recorder's pause button, the ambient room sound of domestic space, and the imperfections of Beefheart's delivery as the contingent traces of his social medium. That medium is an imaginary locus that stands for and alongside the known America... *Trout Mask Replica's* social image is a double exposure - a ghosted image of the old weird America superposed on the photoreal present... Beefheart sings... with such penetrative force the... taped sound distorts - a mistake that, like Thelonious

¹³¹ Ford 2008.

¹³² Ford 2008, 115.

¹³³ Ford 2008, 117.

¹³⁴ Ford 2008, 123.

Monk's split notes or the feedback screech on a Velvet underground record, is really no mistake at all, but a trace of social contingency capture, fixed in LP grooves, and drawn into a record's rhetoric of authenticity.¹³⁵

The role of the 'photoreal' medium of magnetic tape in authenticating the 'old weird America' in all its exotic roughness is of particular importance here, allowing the 'magic' to become 'real.' Filene saw a similar ability in the tape recorders used by John and Alan Lomax to collect archaic folk-song - 'the recorder appealed as an incontrovertible source of truth. How could a recording machine lie?'¹³⁶ The same effect can readily be seen in the aesthetics of subsequent recordings associated with lo-fi, its potency and urgency intensifying as the degrees of magic (i.e. exotic distance from technocratic culture) and realism increased in equal proportion, with recording imperfections both establishing technocratic distance and underscoring the medium's unwavering commitment to truth.

Following Captain Beefheart, and again with the help of Frank Zappa, were a number of artists - Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer, The Legendary Stardust Cowboy, The Shaggs, Hasil Adkins and Half Japanese - in whom even more radical evocations of the 'primitively' surreal coincided with the undeniable realism of their having been recorded (even if the phonographic imperfections that might have represented this do not, on the whole, figure in their reception until Jandek and Daniel Johnston in the 1980s). This celebration of such exotically primitive recordings represents countercultural aesthetics taking at face value, for example, Roszak's fear, that 'the capacity of our emerging technocratic paradise to denature the imagination by appropriating to itself the whole meaning of Reason, Reality, Progress, and Knowledge will render it impossible for men to

¹³⁵ Ford 2008, 118.

¹³⁶ Filene 2000, 56.

give any name to their bothersomely unfulfilled potentialities but that of madness.¹³⁷

Whether primitive, kitsch, bathetic or reminiscent of European avant-garde composers that famously influenced him (such as Stravinsky and his primitivist *Rite of Spring*), Frank Zappa's career is widely considered a celebration of the grotesque. Ben Watson begins one of his books on Zappa by asserting that his music 'is above all a provocation, a smack in the face for public taste.'¹³⁸ This was not the anti-commercialism of folk revivals or lo-fi, however: 'Zappa wasn't innocent of commercial manipulation; indeed his whole 'anti-commercial' shtick was predicated on the idea of how oppositional, non-conformist, *freaky* culture could attract attention and sell records.'¹³⁹

It would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that when a double LP by the mentally ill Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer, knowingly given the meek title *An Evening With Wild Man Fischer*, was released on Zappa's Bizarre label in 1969, Fischer was appearing as a magical-realist object of otherness, as Zappa's real-life freak. Fischer was a street performer Zappa encountered busking on Los Angeles's Sunset Strip, and his realism is emphasised immediately in the notes Zappa provided for *An Evening's* back cover:

Wild Man Fischer is a real person who lives in Hollywood, California... Everyone thought he was crazy. His mother had him committed to a mental institution twice.¹⁴⁰

Further emphasising the realism, the records' liner notes disclosed the recording process in detail - much of it 'recorded... on a Uher portable stereo tape

¹³⁷ Roszak 1969, xiii.

¹³⁸ Watson 2005, 6.

¹³⁹ Watson 2005, 9. Indeed, Zappa's first album was called *Freak Out!*

¹⁴⁰ Zappa 1969b.

recorder.¹⁴¹ The process of making 'field recordings' of Beefheart was also applied to Fischer, who was recorded in his usual context on the Sunset Strip. As if addressing a culture resembling Roszak's technocracy, Zappa adds, 'Please listen to this album several times before you decide whether or not you like it or what Wild Man Fischer is all about. He has something to say to you, even though you might not want to hear it.'¹⁴² To whatever extent we interpret Zappa's statement as an echo or a parody of folksong recordists such as the Lomaxes, it is reminiscent of Steinbeck's comments on Woody Guthrie nevertheless, as well as prefiguring commentary on the also mentally ill Daniel Johnston.

Zappa described his project as 'sociological' or of an otherwise detached and disciplined character, and many commentators have agreed with him. As the Bizarre label stated, 'we present musical and sociological material that the important record companies would probably not allow you to hear;'¹⁴³ Zappa 'wanted to do [Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*] as if it were an *anthropological field recording*.'¹⁴⁴ Recent writers refer to the way he would bring people into 'his sociological project'¹⁴⁵ and describe him as a 'latent anthropologist' who, according to typical realist rhetoric, 'deciphered the nuance and textures of American society like no other.'¹⁴⁶ Biographer Barry Miles traces a dubious 'anthropological' interest throughout Zappa's career, observing that 'so much of his work was journalistic or broadly anthropological.'¹⁴⁷ Zappa's was a 'ruthless, flat, accurate portrayal [of Los Angeles] seen without emotion, viewed as if he

¹⁴¹ Zappa 1990, 52.

¹⁴² Zappa 1969a.

¹⁴³ James 2005, 108.

¹⁴⁴ Zappa 1990, 51. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁵ Lowe 2007, 144.

¹⁴⁶ Gaines 2007, 129.

¹⁴⁷ Miles 2004, 64, 158, 218, 383.

had no thoughts and no moral or aesthetic prejudices about what he saw; his was a sociological, almost zoological approach.¹⁴⁸

A process that ostensibly involves 'no thoughts and no moral or aesthetic prejudices,' however, was in Zappa's case actually one that merely and repeatedly generates the *inverse* image of existing tastes as if deliberately seeking them out. The tendency for terms like 'anthropological' to suggest cool, unmediated, even academic documentation of 'real life' might have supplied a rationale for representations of bad taste and the grotesque, but it can hardly be considered genuinely objective or any less a construction than those behind other realist rhetorics that have associated 'reality' with depictions of the apparently more sordid, marginal and supposedly challenging aspects of society. One wonders what it is about Captain Beefheart or Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer that makes them more 'real,' more worthy of anthropological focus than any of the other musicians in Zappa's late 1960s California milieu: such allusions to objectivity serve, as in nineteenth-century American realist literature, for example, to tame a social "other half" located within the cityscape.¹⁴⁹ For disability activist David Hevey:

The use of disabled people is the anchor of the weird, that is, the fear within. They are used as the symbol of enfreakment or the surrealism of all society. 'Reactionary' users of this notion hunt the 'crips' down to validate chaos within their own environment... 'progressive' users of this notion hunt them down within their own environment to find an essential romantic humanity in their own lives... The US 'crip' symbol denotes alienation.¹⁵⁰

Experiences of primitivist art function in a similar way. As Connelly puts it: 'Like representations of violent natural phenomena in the sublime mode, the idols of

¹⁴⁸ Miles 2004, 217. These claims are also made in Sutton 2005, 102.

¹⁴⁹ Kaplan 1988, 44-64.

¹⁵⁰ Hevey 1992, 72.

Picasso are frightening yet pleasurable, because they, like the primitivism they embody, are framed and controlled by the broader aesthetic norms of "fine art."¹⁵¹ There is also, in accepting such a challenge, the reward of cultural capital that Hibbett finds in indie rock. Even scholars such as David Sanjek have reproduced the aesthetics of a grotesque, unpalatable realism uncritically, finding that 'Zappa does not attempt to avoid or elude any of [Fischer's] emotions, however disturbing, annoying or audience-inhibiting they might be' and, aiming at bad listeners, that the 'excesses of Fischer's delivery' are 'intimidating (for many).'¹⁵²

That Fischer is recorded through the unflinchingly 'photoreal' medium of the portable tape recorder only heightens the sense of apparent documentary authenticity with which this process was undertaken, and this presentation can be considered a form of the 'enfreakment' Hevey notes in the equally unadorned photography of Diane Arbus in the late 1960s.¹⁵³ Like Arbus's famous photograph *The Jewish Giant* (critiqued by Hevey) of a man with gigantism standing next to his parents, the cover of *An Evening With Wildman Fischer* depicts the singer standing over a smaller, elderly woman labelled 'Larry's Mother,' enhancing his difference just as nineteenth-century photographs of freaks did.¹⁵⁴

As both Ford's essay and Robert Bogdan's historicisation of the freak show explain, exoticising depictions of 'primitives' were often accompanied by affectations of scientific and ethnographic study.¹⁵⁵ The nineteenth-century category of 'freaks' included both people with disabilities and people representing cultures outside the West, with the 'Wild Man' a common form of exhibit in the

¹⁵¹ Connelly 1995, 114.

¹⁵² Sanjek 2013, 157, 161.

¹⁵³ Hevey 1992, 53-74.

¹⁵⁴ Thomson 1996, 8. On the cover *An Evening With Wild Man Fischer* Fischer's mother was represented by a cardboard cut-out of an elderly woman.

¹⁵⁵ Ford 2008, 110; Bogdan 1988, 105-111.

freak show, variously represented by great apes, hirsute people, people of colour (particularly of African descent) and people with intellectual disabilities.¹⁵⁶ In the pre-colonial era, the 'wild man' of art, literature and folklore was the 'Other' of civilization,¹⁵⁷ a liminal figure representing the margins of medieval society by straddling the line between civilized human and irrational beast,¹⁵⁸ 'the abstract concept of "noncivilization" rendered as a fearful physical reality'¹⁵⁹ and 'everything [people] hoped they were not.'¹⁶⁰ After the medieval era, the wild man 'elicited envy' because 'he indulged his impulses at will and without guilt... the woodlands were now celebrated for their freedom from the trammels of convention and the corruption of man's society.'¹⁶¹ It was more than the epithet that remained the same in the case of Zappa recording Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer. A similar dynamic has long regulated modes of society, behaviour and otherness, and is active in lo-fi, with descriptions of Daniel Johnston as 'backwoods'¹⁶² (note the near-homophone with 'backwards') and Beat Happening's lead singer as a 'bumpkin bopping about the sleepy woods,'¹⁶³ and the regularly noted rural or marginal location of many lo-fi artists.

The artist most akin to Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer in these respects was the West Virginian rock-n-roll singer/songwriter Hasil Adkins. Adkins was one of a number of rural or smaller-town musicians whose recordings made during the 1960s, then comparatively little noticed, were reissued during the 1980s to much underground music press enthusiasm, leading to new recordings - the others including, as we will see, The Legendary Stardust Cowboy and the Shaggs, and

¹⁵⁶ Bogdan 1988, 69, 119-146.

¹⁵⁷ Bartra 1994.

¹⁵⁸ Yamamoto 2000.

¹⁵⁹ Husband 1980, 5.

¹⁶⁰ White 1972, 5.

¹⁶¹ Husband 1980, 13.

¹⁶² Bent 1988.

¹⁶³ Stirling 1988, 9.

others such as Dennis Carleton and Roky Erickson. Appearing immediately before or coinciding with the reception of 1980s lo-fi artists, these reissues provided much of the comparison and context by which lo-fi artists would be understood, and began to establish a canon of 'primitives.' As with Fischer and Beefheart, the apparent realism of the recording medium itself served to enhance the 'strange but true' exotic authenticity of these technocratically-distant artists, as did classically primitivist assumptions of naivety and a lack of self-consciousness on the musicians' part. (By 2000, these musicians would be gathered together, along with Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer, Jandek, Daniel Johnston and others, as part of Irwin Chusid's category of 'Outsider Music.'¹⁶⁴)

In 1996, Adkins appeared as the first entry in Kemp's 'Lo-Fi Top Ten,' establishing him as the root of a lo-fi canon and describing him as 'the original DIY artist' and 'this wild man.'¹⁶⁵ Labels began to release rock 'n' roll singles he had recorded at his home in 1961, and a compilation LP, *Out to Hunch*, was released in 1986 by Norton, a new label co-founded by Billy Miller and Miriam Linna, a former member of the Cramps. Adkins had already been an influence on this New York band who mixed punk with early rock 'n' roll and horror themes and who had covered Adkins's song 'She Said' in 1981.¹⁶⁶ In doing so the band's lead singer Lux Interior sang with a styrofoam cup in his mouth throughout in an apparent attempt to mimic Adkins's speech, which listeners unfamiliar with his West Virginian accent might find difficult to decipher. As one chronicle of the band (offensively) puts it, 'the track features Lux affecting a convincing toothless redneck vocal by the simple mechanism of stuffing a Styrofoam cup into his mouth.'¹⁶⁷ An indication of how the Cramps heard Adkins as well as a kind of lo-fi

¹⁶⁴ Chusid 2000.

¹⁶⁵ Kemp 1996, 428.

¹⁶⁶ The Cramps 1981 (disc). See Johnston 1990, 67; Porter 2007, 90.

¹⁶⁷ Porter 2007, 90.

effect, the styrofoam cup served as both a (speech) impediment and a heightening of ethnic and disabled otherness.

A newly recorded follow-up to *Out to Hunch* was titled *The Wild Man*, and Adkins was repeatedly labelled as a 'wild man' well into the 1990s, a term that, though a self-identification dating back to Adkins's teens, nevertheless allowed the discourse around him to conflate his rural origin, the energy of his music and a distance from social and musical norms.¹⁶⁸ Drawing attention to the recording medium as a form of realism, Miller announced in the liner notes of *Out to Hunch*: 'friends, we have the proof here in plastic. You are holding in your hands right now one of the most psychotically wild collections of sounds ever to have been captured on wax - the primitive sound of Hasil 'Haze' Adkins - the One Man Band.'¹⁶⁹ Miller wrote an extended piece on Adkins for his 1950s-early 1960s rock 'n' roll-themed fanzine *Kicks*, calling Adkins 'rock & roll's premier wild man,' and describing Adkins's recording equipment itself as 'crude' and 'primitive.'¹⁷⁰ This blurring-together of the culturally and technological primitive is more obvious in a review of *Out to Hunch* for another retro rock 'n' roll fanzine, *Fuzbrains*:

When you talk of the roots of Rock 'n Roll, you might as well include the dirt that surrounds the roots. Right in this damp, dark area is where Hasil Adkins strums out his primitive sound. Sounds that may scare or bewilder the casual listener; this LP of the best of Hasil Adkins is definitely for the rockin' mature. Recorded on primitive equipment, this record is not recommended for those C.D. listeners.¹⁷¹

Out to Hunch was a collection of recordings with a number of obvious lo-fi effects, particularly phonographic distortion and loose timing, and this review associates them and Adkins's cultural and historical distance with dirt, in much the same way

¹⁶⁸ Lipton 1995.

¹⁶⁹ Miller 1986b.

¹⁷⁰ Miller 1986a, 6.

¹⁷¹ *Fuzbrains* [1986?].

as Bangs's Trog ('covered... in grime and shit') and Jandek and Johnston were (see Chapter 4). The review also carries a warning to bad listeners, much like that Hansen gave his listeners concerning 'primitive' blues, that the record is challenging and not for casual listeners to 'easy listening,' but now, in the mid-1980s, it is directed at those listeners who opt for the high fidelity of CDs.

Option called *Out to Hunch* 'a minimalist delight... truly primitive rockabilly... Haze is wilder than a hurricane.'¹⁷² Writers were particularly preoccupied with portrayals of Adkins's rural American origin many would find offensive today. One wrote that a subsequent EP 'sounds like authentic mountain man music, a raw soundtrack for incest and tender bestiality. In super lo-fi.'¹⁷³ Byron Coley, a critic who wrote the 'Underground' column for *Spin* in a style reminiscent of Bangs, called Adkins (referring to a live gig) 'a cave-crawling West Virginian one-man band... looking like a guy you just caught with a mouthful of your best goat. Haze tore up the club with a set of primitive hunch-rock that had even the staidest dinks doing belly rubs in the dirt.'¹⁷⁴ This was very much the preferred representation of Adkins and the argument for the value of his music. As Adkins himself put it, however, 'I had pretty songs - hundreds of 'em - but the people all want 'em crazy and the worser it is the more they go for it.'¹⁷⁵

Similar to Adkins in his reception is Norman Odam, better known as The Legendary Stardust Cowboy, a Texan whose rural ethnicity was emphasised by the full cowboy costume he wore in performance. His single 'Paralyzed' was, as *New York Rocker* noted in 1982, 'the novelty song of 1968,' reaching number 98 in the Billboard chart that year. Consisting of 'a hyped-up West Texas beat' and sounding 'like a cowboy Captain Beefheart left out in the desert sun too long' and

¹⁷² Kristel 1986, 55.

¹⁷³ Leland 1986, 41.

¹⁷⁴ Coley 1987d, 39.

¹⁷⁵ Adkins, quoted in Miller 1986b.

'the sort of serious, flat-out derangement that could have originated only in Texas,' the single was promoted as 'the worst record in the world.'¹⁷⁶ Odam returned in the 1980s with a new album *Rock-it To Stardom*, whereupon *The New York Times* recalled that 'Paralyzed' had sounded 'to the uninitiated like three minutes of incoherent bellowing, interspersed with whoops and hollers, fractured drumming and periodic blasts on a bugle.' Like Adkins, Odam was also retroactively understood to have been a precursor of punk: 'to many early punk and new wave performers, "Paralyzed"... proved conclusively that one could put utter anarchy and mayhem on a 45-rpm record and get away with it.'¹⁷⁷ And also like Adkins, Odam would be championed in independent music discourse. *Op* called him 'one of the great primitives,' noting, 'although not in possession of anything approximating proper pitch... [he] does have a lovely voice,' and calling *Rock-it To Stardom* 'one of the most original and sincere albums of the year.'¹⁷⁸ Coley wrote about him regularly for *Spin* and *Forced Exposure*¹⁷⁹ calling him 'uniquely American' and 'primitive but effective.'¹⁸⁰

Another noted 'primitive' from this era was Jonathan Richman, who had a less rural or archaic status than Adkins, Odam or the Shaggs but who would, like them, become a point of reference in describing 1980s lo-fi artists. With the Velvet Underground as an avowed influence, Richman was primitive in the simple garage rock he recorded as one of the Modern Lovers in the early 1970s, which was eventually released as *The Modern Lovers* in 1976.¹⁸¹ *The New York Times* called this album 'neoprimitive art-rock, with those determined twanging variants

¹⁷⁶ Mortland 1982.

¹⁷⁷ Palmer 1984.

¹⁷⁸ Foster 1984b.

¹⁷⁹ Coley 1985; Coley 1987b, 35; Coley 1989c, 108.

¹⁸⁰ Sled 1987.

¹⁸¹ For more on Jonathan Richman, see Mitchell 1999.

on the same three chords.¹⁸² However, subsequent albums *Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers* (1976) and *Rock 'n' Roll with the Modern Lovers* (1977) revealed that Richman had since changed his style to something much more childlike: 'semi-infantile joy and silliness'¹⁸³ with 'songs about ice cream men and rocking leprechauns and the like.'¹⁸⁴ Mark Perry, author of the punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*, wrote that the latter album recalled childhood holidays but was nevertheless 'very primitive - medieval even!'¹⁸⁵ Richman maintained this style throughout the 1980s, during which time he would be described as 'treat[ing] pop music as a sort of semi-moronic form of folk music,'¹⁸⁶ 'rock 'n' roll's best example of an unspoiled, unaffected, primitive artist,'¹⁸⁷ 'a wide-eyed, overgrown child,'¹⁸⁸ 'rock's happiest amateur,'¹⁸⁹ and 'willing to open up his feelings without the protection of hipness or technology.'¹⁹⁰ Following a live performance, one *Washington Post* reviewer wrote:

Last night Richman was proof positive that in rock 'n' roll, genuine emotion can overcome technical shortcomings. Richman's lack of technical skills was staggering. But his childish delight in the mundane and his adolescent yearning for happiness were so convincing that they transcended technical questions. By assuming the odd persona of the *troubador-naif*, the idiot savant, the rock 'n' roll chronicler of innocence unlost, he made everything sound too original to ever be hackneyed.¹⁹¹

In accompanying childlike themes with simple and amateurish music - constituting a form of crudeness outside of the aggression and intensity of 1970s punk - Richman would provide independent music discourse with a model and

¹⁸² Rockwell 1976.

¹⁸³ Robbins 1976.

¹⁸⁴ Rockwell 1976.

¹⁸⁵ Perry 1977f.

¹⁸⁶ Niester 1981.

¹⁸⁷ Himes 1982.

¹⁸⁸ Pareles 1983a.

¹⁸⁹ Pareles 1983b.

¹⁹⁰ Himes 1984.

¹⁹¹ Himes 1979.

comparison for the reception of lo-fi artists, particularly Daniel Johnston and Beat Happening.

Another prominent act of the time to be associated with naivety was the Shaggs. During the 1970s, Frank Zappa praised this band of teenaged sisters from New Hampshire as being better than the Beatles,¹⁹² and the irony of such a statement would have been apparent to anyone who heard their 1969 debut album, *Philosophy of the World*. Much like the Godz, the Shaggs were not poorly recorded but plainly did not meet conventional standards of musical skill. But whereas the Godz had been part of the New York bohemian scene, the Shaggs were considered to be more authentically primitive and the recording of their album (in a studio, paid for by their father, as was the release) a naive and fascinating accident. When *Philosophy of the World* was reissued in 1980, it made the pages of *The New York Times* ('they didn't seem to know anything about music of any sort... *Philosophy of the World* may be the worst rock album ever made')¹⁹³ and *Rolling Stone*, where Debra Rae Cohen wrote:

Philosophy of the World is the sickest, most stunningly awful wonderful record I've heard in ages... The Wiggins sisters hail from rural New Hampshire, but they hack away at their instruments with the combined burbling intensity [sic] and utter talentlessness of a year's worth of [New York punk club] CBGB audition nights... The Shaggs are an anachronistic treasure. They're both priceless and timeless. I'd call *Philosophy of the World* a work of primitive American genius, but I'm too busy rolling on the floor with laughter.¹⁹⁴

Not only did the reviewer note the 'rural' origin of the Shaggs, juxtaposing it with the urban punk club, and invoke the 'primitive,' she also associated their playing

¹⁹² Hamelman 2004, 35; Newman 1995, 348.

¹⁹³ Palmer 1980.

¹⁹⁴ Cohen 1980.

with mental impairment - they sing like 'a lobotomized Trapp Family Singers.'¹⁹⁵ In separate articles, *Rolling Stone* awarded the Shaggs the title of 'comeback of the year'¹⁹⁶ and wrote 'it's a cacophony so amiable that it's immediately endearing' and that the LP was 'unrivalled for sheer, unabashed, good-natured musical ineptitude. Without exaggeration, it may stand as the worst album ever recorded.'¹⁹⁷

Though it received prominent national attention, *Philosophy of the World* was also championed in the emerging independent music discourse of the 1980s. By the mid-1990s they were canonised as one of indie rock's earliest bands, appearing in the *Spin Alternative Record Guide* and *Alt-Rock-a-Rama*, where *Philosophy of the World* was listed as one of 'The 100 Most Influential Alternative Releases of All Time,' number three in 'The Original Punks: The Greatest Garage Recordings of the Twentieth Century' ('the Shaggs' naïveté is what makes them so endearing') and one of the 'Fifty Most Significant Indie Records.'¹⁹⁸ In 1980, in its third issue, *Op* magazine published an article on the Shaggs that carried the folk-revival rhetoric of *Rolling Stone* further, noting 'angelic voices with strong New Hampshire accents,' and urging 'LISTEN TO THIS MUSIC! This is ethnic music in a truly American frame of reference... The Shaggs' integrity and purity of vision shines through like a 50,000 watt lighthouse on a stormy night. Listen to this record. It *will* change your life.'¹⁹⁹ The 'stormy night' might be taken to represent the band's technical disorganisation, and the trope of lo-fi artists 'shining through' lo-fi effects would be repeated in the independent and indie discourse on them in subsequent years. *Op* also observed that although the band

¹⁹⁵ Cohen 1980. The album's credits also prompt the question, 'what does it mean... when the Wiggins thank "the whole town of Fremont, N.H."? Is the place an *asylum*?'

¹⁹⁶ *Rolling Stone* 1981, 31.

¹⁹⁷ Connelly 1980.

¹⁹⁸ Newman 1995; Strauss 1996, 5; Hull 1996, 12; O'Connor 1996, 61.

¹⁹⁹ Fisk [1980/1981?].

used to be 'the object of ridicule' when they performed live, 'the younger children loved the Shaggs.'²⁰⁰ The high value of a more primitive aesthetics and musical ability, especially that of children, would be a recurring theme in independent music discourse throughout the 1980s, especially surrounding Beat Happening, who were closely involved with the making of *Op* and made their first appearance on its pages in 1984.²⁰¹

In fact, *Op*'s pages were decorated with childlike drawings throughout the early 1980s, which coincided with - but is not simply a consequence of - its status as a an amateur, fanzine project. In 1985, *Sound Choice*, too, would decorate its pages with primitivist art.

²⁰⁰ Fisk [1980/1981?].

²⁰¹ Ingels 1984e.

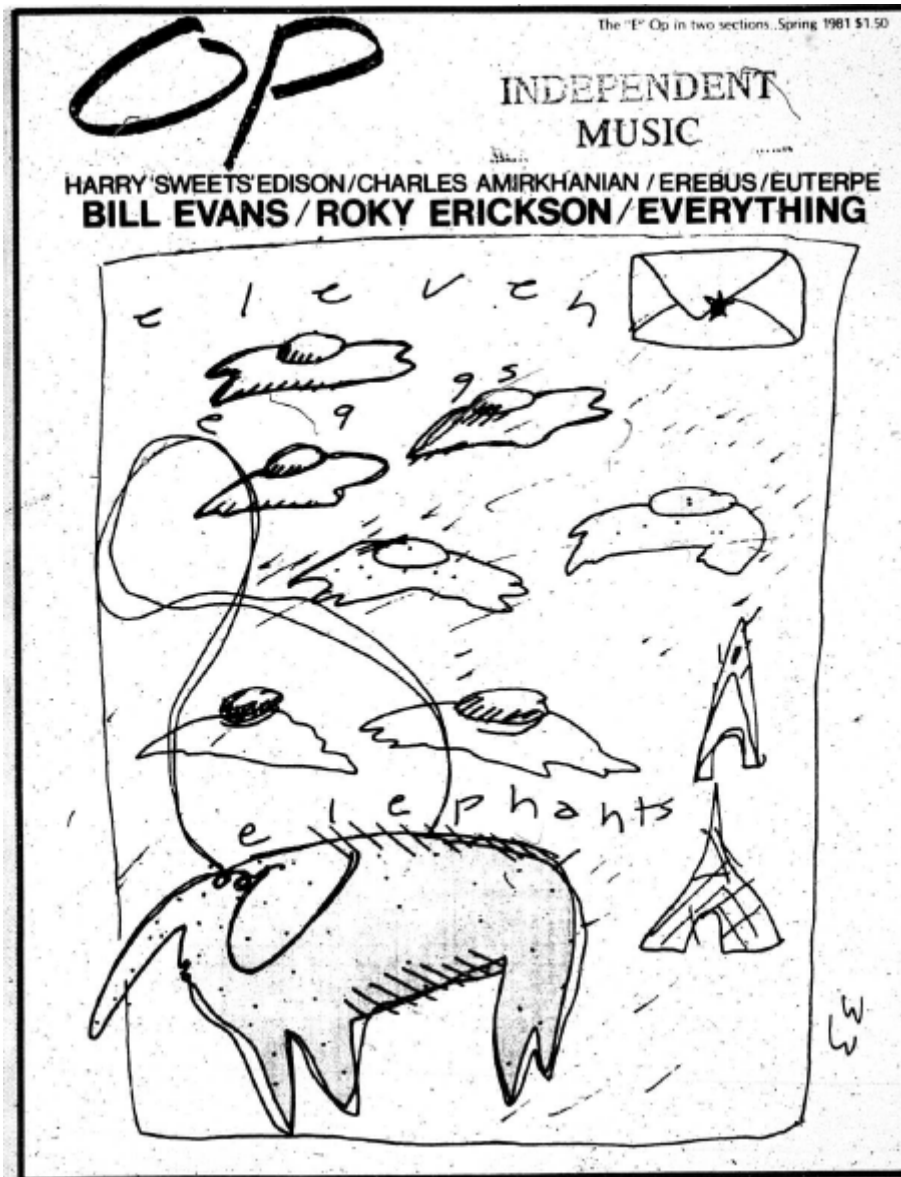


Figure 1 Eggs, elephants and Eiffel Towers in a child-like style on the cover of Op's E issue, Spring 1981



Figure 2 Primitivist illustration in *Sound Choice 3* (Fall 1985), 61, 65; *Sound Choice 9* (Winter Solstice, 1987), 69.

Primitivism was in fashion in the early 1980s, and the 'Primitivism' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984 was part of this. This primitivism in early independent music discourse echoed that of many of the British post-punk releases of the time - the Slits appeared naked except for mud and loincloths on the cover of the 1979 album *The Cut* and the cover of The Pop Group's 1979 album *Y* featured a photograph of the 'Mudmen' of Asaro in Papua New Guinea.²⁰² Half Japanese, a band from Maryland, released their debut album *1/2 Gentlemen / Not Beasts* in 1980, with photographs of semi-naked figures wearing stylised modernist-primitivist costumes on its cover and enclosed inside.

²⁰² Reynolds 2005a, 83-85.



Figure 3 The cover of Half Japanese's *1/2 Gentlemen / Not Beasts* (1980)

Half Japanese were noted for having recorded their material at home and having released on it cassette, but their style of instrumental playing usually took aesthetic precedence over any attention to phonographic imperfection. Like the Godz and the Shaggs, Half Japanese, and its figurehead Jad Fair (who often recorded and performed solo) particularly, were notorious for their lack of conventional musical ability, and the band's reception has carried a consistently primitivist rhetoric throughout a career which spans the 1980s independent music discourse and 1990s indie rock (when they supported Nirvana) and is still ongoing. When *1/2 Gentlemen / Not Beasts* was re-issued in 2013, *Pitchfork* praised the 'primitive, raucous debut' for its 'caveman racket,' 'naked emotion' and 'fearless amateurism.'²⁰³ In 1996, Half Japanese followed Hasil Adkins and The Velvet Underground as the third entry in Kemp's 'Lo-Fi Top Ten,' where Kemp relates, with irony, that band-member Jad Fair had considered their music 'very

²⁰³ Masters 2013b.

accessible... very normal... straightforward,' thus emphasising the primitivising narrative of unselfconsciousness.²⁰⁴ It became something of a tradition to heap hyperbolic praise on Half Japanese which, however ironic it might have been, maintained this atmosphere of naivety.²⁰⁵

Trouser Press wrote of Half Japanese that 'this primitive music has all the adolescent charm of rock 'n' roll,' calling them 'raucous and chaotic.'²⁰⁶ *Op's* editor John Foster called them 'primals' and 'primitive-ironics,' observing that 'in the Half Japanese morality play, nobody grows up' and that 'Fair shows all the maturity of your average creative 9-year old.' He concluded that the band overcame their 'faults': 'I've looked at 'em cross-eyed, examined their faults one at a time (they're all here), and they're still one of the most interesting, most important bands I'll ever hear.'²⁰⁷ Another *Op* reviewer, Paul Lemos, called Jad Fair's album *Monarchs* 'an eccentric, sensitive set of folk ballads... stamped with Jad's unmistakably beautiful sincerity,' comparing it to the Shaggs and 'Wild Man Fischer,'²⁰⁸ and called Half Japanese 'one of America's best,' finding that 'melodies are nowhere to be found. Mind you, this is not a complaint, but rather a positive note, since the group has always been heralded for its unparalleled havoc.'²⁰⁹ By the early 1980s, this rhetorical construction - noting a deficiency of conventional or commercial aesthetics but counting it as a direct benefit - had become common in punk and independent music discourse, and it is in such a context that lo-fi aesthetics took hold in subsequent years.

²⁰⁴ Jad Fair, quoted in Kemp 1996, 428.

²⁰⁵ E.g.: 'Lester Bangs noted that Half Japanese (perhaps the finest band of all time) were so great that he hadn't even been able to listen to their three-LP opus' - Coley 1988a, 36; 'Jad is the embodiment of style, class and guts' - Cosloy 1987a.

²⁰⁶ Ross 1981.

²⁰⁷ Foster 1981, Foster 1983.

²⁰⁸ Lemos 1984a.

²⁰⁹ Lemos 1984c, Lemos 1984b.

As the following chapters will make clear, primitivist and realist narratives are at the core of lo-fi aesthetics, but as this chapter has shown, they did not begin with lo-fi. In developing an aesthetic that incorporated phonographic and other recording imperfections, even naming it after them, the independent music discourse of the 1980s and 1990s drew on the aesthetic rhetorics of 1960s and 1970s countercultural rock, the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s, and even the broad historical backdrop of Romanticism. Lo-fi represents the incorporation of phonographic imperfection into these longer aesthetic traditions of distance from modern technocracy. There are similarities in the anti-establishment socio-cultural dynamic that finds deep value and authenticity in the 'imperfect' or 'awkward' expressions of Wordsworth's 'real men,' Thoreau's 'murky' acquaintance, Ives's stone-mason, Woody Guthrie, blues singers, Roscoe Halcomb, Marcus's 'Old Weird America,' Bangs's Trog(g)s and Godz, Captain Beefheart, Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer, Hasil Adkins, the Legendary Stardust Cowboy, Jonathan Richman, The Shaggs and Half Japanese. These recurrences only emphasise the deeply-ingrained nature of a model that would, with the addition of phonographic imperfection, be repeated in the reception of Jandek, Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening, Guided By Voices and other lo-fi artists, and again in 2012 with the reception of Willis Earl Beal (see Chapter 8).

But before we see how phonographic imperfection and other lo-fi effects were incorporated into this process with the reception of these artists, we must look more closely at the discourse of the early 1980s and examine the relationship between lo-fi aesthetics and the cultural milieus with which it is frequently associated: punk and the cassette medium.

Chapter 3. 'We're Better Than We Sound:' Punk and Cassette Culture on Amateurism and Sound Quality, 1976-1992

It is often assumed that punk music, recording cassettes at home and lo-fi all broadly fall into the same category - 'do it yourself,' regularly shortened to 'the DIY ethic.' This ethic is typically recognised as resulting in music whose rougher qualities are either excused or, more usually, proudly 'celebrated.' But were the categories and discourses of punk, home-recorded cassettes and lo-fi really this coextensive during their early development? To what extent was the aesthetics they were built on really a celebration of roughness, and phonographic imperfection particularly?

Even in its title, Amy Spencer's 2005 book *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* draws an equivalence between the categories of DIY and lo-fi, and the terms are used interchangeably throughout, even when applied outside of recorded music or outside of music entirely. Spencer uses the term 'lo-fi culture' to refer to do-it-yourself production in a range of media throughout the twentieth century: fanzines as early as the 1920s and many varieties of 'lo-fi music' - skiffle, punk, post-punk, queercore and riot grrrl. Summarising 'lo-fi music' and beginning with skiffle:

The do-it-yourself approach to music making is all about producing your own music using whatever resources are available to you... [Earlier in the twentieth century] the most celebrated example of this approach was skiffle... This was a democratic form of music, which almost anyone could produce, usually played on home-made or improvised instruments... So began the tradition of lo-fi music, the concept of not trying to seek out new technology to produce your music. This was based in the realization that you don't need the most expensive instruments or the most high tech recording equipment to make good music, but can instead celebrate what resources you have.¹

¹ Spencer 2008, 187-188.

For Spencer, punk is also a form of DIY / lo-fi music, one which 'directly' negates the music industry and its technology:

To the punks, well-rehearsed performance and technically advanced production were not standards to aspire to but rather something to rebel against. This set their attitudes directly against those of the music industry, who made use of the ever-improving music technology. Many punk musicians were notoriously amateur in their approach to music making; often claiming that they did not even know how to play their instruments before starting their bands. Using cheap, basic equipment, they simply improvised as they went along. This epitomized the punk attitude.²

In a section entitled 'Cassette Culture,' lo-fi music adopts a new medium: 'in the late 70s there was a new format rising in popularity in which lo-fi musicians saw potential. The cassette tape seemed perfect for their needs.'³ She thus suggests that 'lo-fi music' preceded the cassette.

Though Spencer's use of the term 'lo-fi' is broader than usual (so broad that 'low fidelity' is only barely implied), she is certainly in line with a prevailing view in popular music discourse, originating in the 1990s, that constructs the home-recorded cassettes of the 1980s as lo-fi and their creators as lo-fi musicians. As the section's title implies, Spencer recognises that during this period, the amateur recording of cassettes developed into a category named 'cassette culture.' And she would not be incorrect to see the aesthetics of punk and lo-fi to overlap - both are concerned with rejecting mainstream technocracy, inverting its aesthetic standards, and celebrating rough, amateur sounds in an independent context. But at what points did punk, cassette culture and lo-fi aesthetics diverge during the period under discussion?

This chapter examines the extent to which lo-fi aesthetics was actually at work in discourses on punk and cassettes (or cassette culture) in the 1970s and 1980s. The picture that emerges is a complex and sometimes contradictory one -

² Spencer 2008, 196-197.

³ Spencer 2008, 305.

neither punk nor cassette culture during this period represent a clear and uniform negation of what might be regarded as commercial standards of musicianship and sound quality through an appreciation of recording (especially phonographic) imperfections, as would align them with lo-fi aesthetics. It is certainly the case that low standards of musicianship and sound quality, both of which were judged in relation to musical production on major labels, were not favoured equally and inseparably from each other. In the early-to mid-1980s the courtesies often extended to musical technique constructed as 'amateur' - to performance imperfections - were much less often also extended to sound quality constructed as 'poor,' although in subsequent years the latter would be increasingly tolerated and enjoyed as a lo-fi aesthetics developed.

The discourses on punk and cassette culture most tolerated or enjoyed performance and phonographic imperfection under certain particular conditions. Firstly on the condition that neither - phonographic imperfection especially - detracted from what were held to be the primary appeals of the music. In punk's case the overriding aesthetic of 'rawness' - roughness, intensity and simplicity - was potentially endangered by poor musicianship and poor sound quality. For the most part, cassette culture saw poor sound quality as a concern but an extra-musical one, and tended not to mention it unless it was particularly pronounced and thus jeopardised the music or an artist's creative expression. Moreover, cassette culture discourse regularly argued for the quality and optimal usage of home-recording media.

Secondly, poor musicianship and poor sound quality were excused, expected and even enjoyed in particular formal, stylistic and cultural contexts that had become well established by the mid-1980s. One of these was live recordings, where low sound quality could be expected and thus would not invalidate a release. The others were particular genres. The most common was 'garage' music or 'garage punk,' whose name derived from the recording context

and a tradition of rock music dating from the 1960s (as discussed in the previous chapter). For both punk and cassette culture, the garage was effectively a safe-house for an early form of lo-fi aesthetics, and the word 'garage' fulfilled many of the functions that 'lo-fi' would by the 1990s in denoting lesser technocracy: lesser musicianship and sound quality together. Poor sound quality was also forgiven of noise, industrial and experimental music, where it was considered the natural result of loud and intense sound or blurred, often indistinguishably, with potentially intentional use of noise and distortion.

The goal of this chapter is to establish a comparison between lo-fi aesthetics and the aesthetic areas immediately adjacent to but not entirely continuous with it in the independent music discourse of the long 1980s and often conflated with lo-fi since then. Where the previous chapter charted only continuities in the many decades leading up to lo-fi, this one charts discontinuities in the much narrower slice of time in which lo-fi arose. The goal is to historicise these points of similarity and dissimilarity rather than to separate concepts lo-fi, punk and cassette culture as they might or should be understood today. To a significant degree, this chapter demonstrates why punk and home-recording on cassette are not in themselves the subject of more extensive study in this thesis. It examines forms of discourse - fanzines and magazines - comparable with those in which lo-fi aesthetics is more evident later in the century, and indeed takes in many of the same publications that would later promote lo-fi aesthetics, canonical lo-fi artists and a category of 'lo-fi.'

Punk Rock Aesthetics and Punk Fanzines

Ever since its beginnings in the 1970s, punk discourse's defining musical aesthetic has been one of roughness, intensity, simplicity and, perhaps most of all, the opposition all of this is held to pose to a cultural status quo, indexed by its technocracy. A number of books have been written on the subject since the

1970s, prominent among them being cultural studies by Hebdige (1979), Laing (1985) and edited by Sabin (1999) (with a passage on punk appearing in a wider study of rock by Frith, 1983) and histories by music critics Marcus (1989) and Savage (1991).⁴ Hebdige's book is more focused on style in general than music, and for him the 'graffiti' signifying punk style is a 'gesture of defiance or contempt... it signals a Refusal' with 'the power to disfigure.'⁵ For Hebdige 'the punks... were *dramatizing* what had come to be called "Britain's decline" by constructing a language which was, in contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of the Rock Establishment, unmistakably relevant and down to earth... it was fitting that the punks should present themselves as "degenerates."⁶ He also notes the lo-fi-like aesthetic effect of imperfections in the production of punk fanzines, which resembled communications sent from and garbled by struggle:

Typing errors and grammatical mistakes, misspellings and jumbled pagination were left uncorrected in the final proof. Those corrections and crossings out that were made before publication were left to be deciphered by the reader. The overwhelming impression was one of urgency and immediacy, of a paper produced in indecent haste, of memos from the front line.⁷

Similarly, Frith notes the 'realism' of punk, with its:

Real / unreal distinction [that] depended on a series of musical connotations - ugly versus pretty, harsh versus soothing, energy versus art, the "raw" (lyrics constructed around simple syllables, a three-chord lack of technique, a "primitive" beat, spontaneous performance) versus the "cooked" (rock poetry, virtuosity, technical complexity, big-studio production). The signs of this musical realism, this form of "unmediated" emotion, were, in fact, drawn from well-known rock 'n' roll conventions - conventions which had been established by American garage bands.⁸

⁴ Hebdige (1979) 2003; Laing 1985; Sabin ed. 1999; Frith 1983, 158-163; Marcus (1989) 2001; Savage (1991), 2005.

⁵ Hebdige (1979) 2003, 3.

⁶ Hebdige (1979), 2003, 87.

⁷ Hebdige (1979), 2003, 111.

⁸ Frith 1983, 158-159.

Laing's comprehensive study of the musical, performative and social aspects of punk rock draws on its discourse in search of meaning, which he sees as lying in its 'oppositional stance,' 'negative unity,' and 'shock effects.' The latter are tied up with 'truth-telling' and their production 'involves confronting an audience with unexpected or unfamiliar material which invades and disturbs the discourse to which that audience is attuned.' This shocks bad listeners, since punk finds 'a pleasure in the awareness of how the other, "traumatized" listener will be discomforted.'⁹ 'The identity of punk,' Laing concludes, 'depends in part on its achieving a disquieting impact on listeners whose expectations are framed by mainstream popular music and values.'¹⁰ Sabin summarises punk as 'part youth rebellion, part artistic statement' and 'dissatisfied rock and roll,' whose 'identifiable attitudes' are 'an emphasis on negationism (rather than nihilism); a consciousness of class-based politics (with stress on "workingclass credibility"); and a belief in spontaneity and "doing it yourself."¹¹

In the first major article to discuss British 'punk rock' as a movement with a particular aesthetic and cultural context, Caroline Coon wrote for *Melody Maker* in 1976 that 'punk rock sounds simple and callow. It's meant to.'¹² She continues:

The equipment is minimal, usually cheap. It's played faster than the speed of light. If the musicians play a ballad, it's the fastest ballad on earth. The chords are basic, numbers rarely last longer than three minutes, in keeping with the clipped, biting cynicism of the lyrics. There are no solos. No indulgent improvisations. It's a fallacy to believe that punk rockers like The Sex Pistols can't play dynamic music. They power through sets. They are never less than hard, tough and edgy. They are the quintessence of a raging, primal rock-scream.¹³

⁹ Laing 1985, 38-39.

¹⁰ Laing 1985, 76-81.

¹¹ Sabin ed. 1999, 2-3.

¹² Coon 1976, 25. Frith would misquote this as 'punk rock sounds basic and raw. It's meant to' - 1986, 266.

¹³ Coon 1976, 25.

With the important exception of speed, 'biting cynicism' and being 'hard, tough', many of these qualities - being 'callow', using 'minimal' and 'cheap' equipment, being a 'quintessence' of (in this case) rock, being 'primal' (primitive) - also converge within the lo-fi aesthetics that was evident by the late 1980s. And in both punk and lo-fi aesthetics, opposition to the cultural status quo was expressed in a musical aesthetics given as the precise inverse of conventional technocratic aesthetics - preferences for 'dirty,' 'messy,' sounds, for example, and even 'incompetent' lack of conventional technique. But while punk so notably extended its DIY philosophy beyond forming a band and into making recordings and releasing them, the home-recording process and its narratives which would become so central to lo-fi aesthetics were not central in punk. Moreover, lo-fi is fundamentally an aesthetics of recordings, whereas in punk, as Hebdige and Laing show, the live gig and other performances - on television, through clothing - was an important aesthetic and social focal point.

It is far from obvious that early punk's musical aesthetics extended its affinity for roughness or simplicity to phonography itself - often quite the contrary. Where punk aesthetics found favour with conventionally low standards of technical ability, as if often did, it only rarely did the same for low standards of sound quality or recording, especially before the mid-1980s. Far from being the hallmark of heroic amateurism it would be for lo-fi aesthetics, for punk poor sound quality was regularly characterised as detrimental, both because at the time it was largely outside musical or aesthetic considerations and because it risked undermining what was so crucial to the enjoyment of punk music: the intensity - the volume, the high and low frequencies (Coon's being 'hard, tough') - and the coherency of lyrics (Coon' 'biting cynicism'), which often contain politicised messages.

Yet while narratives relating to the appeals of phonographic imperfection itself are only occasionally and partially recognisable, the concept of the 'garage'

certainly is. As well as providing a context and an excuse for phonographic imperfection to be merely accepted or actively enjoyed, it carried connotations of 1960s garage bands and the characteristics of the music they played - 'fuzzy' guitar timbres, organs and a historicised sense of psychedelia. In America, particularly, there was a significant overlap in the early 1980s between punk and what was regularly termed, retroactively, '60s punk,' which was on one occasion even dated back to 1959.¹⁴ This widespread interest in the 1960s manifested not just in an attention to reissued recordings from that era, but also in the new bands that emulated them, and both were discussed extensively in punk fanzines such as *Maximumrocknroll*. The trope of the garage was also recognised earlier, by the British punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*.

Sniffin' Glue

With its first issue appearing in London in July 1976, Mark Perry's fanzine *Sniffin' Glue* is considered a seminal publication in British punk music culture, and was referenced extensively by Laing.¹⁵ The fanzine's focus, as stated in the first issue, is 'punk rock,' and the act most prominently covered in that issue was the American band the Ramones. Throughout its one-year run, *Sniffin' Glue* was just as much concerned with reviewing live music as it was with reviewing records, and though it was brief and informal in tone, it plainly expresses a number of aesthetic stances relating to punk and prefigures the attitudes of lo-fi aesthetics.

As is typical for punk, however, Perry's chief preference and expectation was for intensity: heaviness,¹⁶ 'excit[e]ment and power'¹⁷ and 'ene[r]gy'.¹⁸

General accounts of intensity as well as their violent effects were given in

¹⁴ Stigliano 1981.

¹⁵ The entire run of *Sniffin' Glue*, together with an introduction by its founder Mark Perry, can be found in facsimile in Perry 2009. Where page numbers in this volume appear they do so as in original publication. All quotations therefore cited as in original publication.

¹⁶ Perry 1976a.

¹⁷ Perry 1976c.

¹⁸ Perry 1976b.

statements such as 'an aggressive rocker with one of those insistant repetitive ascending guitar riffs, that really burns into the brain cells.'¹⁹ Distorted guitar timbres were well received,²⁰ and a loud, distorted or low-pitched guitar riff was described as dirty: a 'sludgy 'eavy guitar riff.'²¹

Perry's negationist aesthetics manifested in a distaste for expensive, artificial and intellectualised music such as by 'the rock establishment,' which was positioned in contrast to being 'honest' and 'real':

Remember when [the Ramones] came over, everyone was saying how dumb they are. Well - to me - in 'Pinhead' the Ramones are saying "so what," they're showing how fuckin' honest they are... The Ramones - breaking down barriers that have been built by the, so-called, rock establishment. Get back to the fuckin' real rock sound - guitar, bass, drum, scream - with the Ramones. Dumb? Yeah, perhaps... but it's better than learning how to operate a bleedin' £1000 synthesizer.²²

Implying that their playing was of a similarly low standard, Perry said of The Damned, 'all that mucking around, all that honesty. The Damned have made a great album.'²³

Ensuing from the 'dumbness' of the Ramones was an appreciation of both simplicity,²⁴ and a toleration and enjoyment of messy textures, even as they resulted from 'incompetent' playing:

Crime... [are] very noisy and incompetent. It is a fuckin' great single though. Both sides sound like they're record[ed] in a warehouse, it's like a really horrible mess.²⁵

That a 'great single' was 'incompetent' and 'a really horrible mess' is a clear example of punk's profound inversion of conventional technocratic aesthetics.

Note, too, the inference of the recording context, which may have stemmed from

¹⁹ Perry 1976g.

²⁰ Perry 1976f.

²¹ Perry 1976e.

²² Perry 1977b. Ellipsis after 'perhaps' in the original.

²³ Perry 1977d.

²⁴ Perry 1977e.

²⁵ Perry 1977a.

reverb heard on the recording or an assumption of unprofessional circumstances that follow from the musicians' technique, or both. Recording context was also inferred when Perry discussed a single from 1965 by garage band the Spades:

Such an authentic garage sound you can smell the carbon monoxide... Roky's vocals are as nasal and sensational as ever; great harmonica, almost in the right key.²⁶

Here it is not just the recording context that is emphasised but also its 'authenticity' and connection with poor musicianship. 'Almost in the right key' hovers between sarcasm and sincerity, but the comment is not a criticism - the harmonica is judged by its relation to conventions such as key, even if inversely or negatively, and the same applies to the 'nasal and sensational' vocals ('nasal' vocals would be considered one of the major challenges of Daniel Johnston's recordings).

However, while Perry was clearly well disposed towards noisiness, messiness and incompetency and accordingly badly disposed towards expensive equipment, his aesthetic remains limited. He criticised a '£1000 synthesiser,' but did not go as far as praising a 'cheap guitar' of the sort that preoccupied lo-fi aesthetics a decade later. Praising the Jam, he wrote 'their equipment's good, the guitarists got a Rickenbaker.'²⁷ While recordings of live gigs were judged at lower standards of sound quality than studio recordings (since they less easy to control), Perry's comments on Dr Feelgood are telling:

It's pure unadulterated energy all the way with no let-up at any point... one thing I wasn't expected was the sound clarity of the album - it's superb... this is the way rock should be; clean, hard, uncompromising and great to annoy the neighbours with.²⁸

²⁶ Perry 1976d.

²⁷ Perry 1976h.

²⁸ Perry 1976i.

Perry is apparently not inclined to go as far as criticising 'superb' 'sound quality' along the same lines that he criticises 'learning how to operate a bleeding £1000 synthesizer,' and even though he recommends Dr Feelgood for annoying bad listeners ('the neighbours'), their material is still appealingly 'clean' - quite the opposite of the terms favoured in lo-fi aesthetics.

Maximumrocknroll

The first issue of *Maximumrocknroll* was published in July 1982, and over the next decade it became the leading North American punk fanzine. With many dozens of recordings reviewed every issue, its reflection and development of punk aesthetics was much deeper and more complex than that of *Sniffin' Glue*, and no less discerning. Starting five years later and in San Francisco, the musical landscape in which it situated itself was quite different. *Maximumrocknroll* reflected the increased role of home-recorded cassettes by reviewing many of them, even if it stopped short of giving them the topical focus that cassette culture did. Although *Maximumrocknroll* took in a lot of British punk and what it called '77-style punk,²⁹ much of the music it discussed had increased speed, distortion and overall intensity, or what the fanzine called 'thrash punk' - what would later be known as 'hardcore.' In fact, the preamble to the first issue's reviews section identified the seven different varieties of punk that would be covered: 'thrash punk,' '77 or "classical" punk,' 'garage punk,' "'Oi" or skinhead punk,' 'heavy metal punk,' 'punk pop' and 'post-punk.' Of these, garage punk is the closest to lo-fi aesthetics, defined as 'raunchy primitive rock with sneering vocals, often with humorous or just plain stupid themes; akin to 60's punk rock.'³⁰

While *Maximumrocknroll* was clearly accommodating to garage punk in light of its context and 'primitive' qualities, the category was rarely addressed in

²⁹ Bale 1982f.

³⁰ Bale 1982o.

isolation from the aesthetics of what was probably the fanzine's greatest enthusiasm - for intensities of speed and (loud, distorted) sound.³¹ One album within the garage punk genre was summarised as 'a raw garage punk album... the music is exceedingly primitive, with fuzzy two-chord guitar, nasty vocals, and a very fast tempo.'³² Guitar timbres were praised in such potentially negative or aggressive terms such as 'abrasive',³³ 'dirty',³⁴ 'grungy',³⁵ 'heavy',³⁶ 'fuzzy' and 'raunchy'.³⁷

The one term that encapsulated practically every positive characteristic of punk, and probably the most common descriptive term in *Maximumrocknroll*, is, as Frith notes about punk in general, 'raw.' For the fanzine, the term's significance is less attributable to any specific meaning or set of meanings than to the usefulness of its abstraction and flexibility, and its connotations of intensity and distortion complicate Frith's conflation of the 'raw' with the 'uncooked.' Used in the most offhand way, 'raw' could be applied to any aspect of music-making to confer connotations of intensity, power, roughness, simplicity and unmediated authenticity, but maybe its clearest role in *Maximumrocknroll* was in signalling something appealing, and appealing in a uniquely 'punk' manner.

Guitars themselves could be 'raw',³⁸ as could the 'assaults' they made.³⁹ An 'awesome thrash band' had 'a raw guitar that sounds like a pesty fly buzzing around your head.'⁴⁰ Chords could be 'fast, powerful chords of raw persistence',⁴¹ vocals could be raw,⁴² and lend a band a 'vocal rawness',⁴³ 'raw, harsh vocal

³¹ E.g.: Bale 1982bb, Yohannan 1982e, Yohannan 1982d, Pushead 1983c, Pushead 1983f.

³² Bale 1983k.

³³ Bale 1982g, Yohannan 1983h, Spinali 1983h.

³⁴ Bale 1982w, Yohannan 1982f.

³⁵ Jeff Bale 1982r, Bale 1983ee.

³⁶ Bale 1982j, Bale 1982e.

³⁷ See below.

³⁸ Bale 1982q, Yohannan 1983bb.

³⁹ Bale 1982dd.

⁴⁰ Bale 1983n.

⁴¹ Pushead 1983d.

⁴² Spinali 1983e.

⁴³ Yohannan 1983p.

cracks' or the 'rawest, severest throat growls.'⁴⁴ Raw could describe the speed of music ('raw, grating, high-speed velocity,⁴⁵ a 'full frontal assault of raw, rigorous rapidity'⁴⁶). Bands could be on 'raw form'⁴⁷, they could be 'rawer' versions of other bands,⁴⁸ they could be known for 'raw blasts'⁴⁹ and bands from multiple historical and stylistic backgrounds could all be equally raw.⁵⁰ A song could have 'raw power,⁵¹ 'raw cranking power'⁵² and 'raw, foot-tapping spunk'⁵³ or be 'as raw and basic as possible.'⁵⁴ A record itself could have 'loads of raw spirit',⁵⁵ could be 'raw and aggressive,⁵⁶ all of its tracks could be 'monstrously raw,⁵⁷ it could be 'an amazingly raw sensory assault'⁵⁸ or it could simply be 'this raw record.'⁵⁹ It could also describe the use of a musical genre: 'real fast, raw garage music,⁶⁰ 'extremely raw and intense thrash,⁶¹ 'raw, nasty garage thrash.'⁶²

This notable flexibility of 'rawness' is further illustrated when it does not preclude such qualities as catchiness ('pretty raw and catchy' is the final word on one EP⁶³), weirdness ('it's so raw and weird'⁶⁴) or intelligence ('intelligent raw noise with a militaristic beat'⁶⁵), or even being 'slower, distinct or melodic' ('the others are slower, more distinct or melodic, but still rough, raw, and tight'⁶⁶). The nebulous meaning of raw was refined and qualified by proximity to other terms,

⁴⁴ Pushead 1983g.

⁴⁵ Schwartz 1982a.

⁴⁶ Pushead 1983a.

⁴⁷ Bale 1983h.

⁴⁸ Yohannan 1983l.

⁴⁹ Yohannan 1983z.

⁵⁰ Yohannan 1983t.

⁵¹ Bale 1982a.

⁵² Pushead, 1983b.

⁵³ Bale 1983e.

⁵⁴ Yohannan 1983j.

⁵⁵ Bale 1983p.

⁵⁶ Yohannan 1983r.

⁵⁷ Bale 1982s.

⁵⁸ Bale 1983dd.

⁵⁹ Yohannan 1983i.

⁶⁰ Silva 1982b.

⁶¹ Bale 1983kk.

⁶² Bale 1983x.

⁶³ Yohannan 1983n.

⁶⁴ Yohannan 1983g.

⁶⁵ *Maximumrocknroll* 1982.

⁶⁶ Yohannan 1983m.

as in the above formulations 'nice raw,' 'raw, harsh,' 'rawest, severest,' 'raw, grating,' 'raw cranking,' 'raw, foot-tapping,' 'raw, uncontrollable,' 'raw and aggressive,' 'fast, raw,' 'raw and intense' and 'raw, nasty.' The prevailing negative term used by *Maximumrocknroll* was 'wimpy' - it can almost be taken as an opposite of 'raw.' Wimpiness was opposed to 'punk' and dirty guitars⁶⁷ and associated with pretentiousness⁶⁸, a 'pop sound'⁶⁹ and, as for *Sniffin' Glue*, synthesizers.⁷⁰

Given the considerable degree of flexibility and abstraction of the term 'raw,' its application to matters of phonography is multivalent and ambiguous at best. It is tempting to infer that when it was used to describe a 'sound' ('the sound here is tight and raw'⁷¹), 'production factors' ('the production factors are raw'⁷²) or 'the recording' ('the recording is raw enough'⁷³), it reflects a potentially approving recognition of recording imperfection or even phonographic imperfection, but one cannot go that far. Some uses support a kind of lo-fi aesthetics more clearly, however, as its usage alongside passages on sound quality and 'the garage' will show.

In the same way that Perry appreciated Dr. Feelgood as a band to annoy the neighbours with, and supporting Laing's theory of shock effects, *Maximumrocknroll* reviewers welcomed offensive music and conjured scenarios in which it would offend non-punk bad listeners with relish: 'this EP is guaranteed to offend anyone with a speck of decency, so buy two and send one to the moral puritan of your choice,'⁷⁴ and 'ultra-primitive thrash... this record is guaranteed to make musicologists puke, which increases its value substantially.'⁷⁵ And like

⁶⁷ Bale 1982k.

⁶⁸ Bale 1982m.

⁶⁹ Bale 1982d.

⁷⁰ Bale 1982c.

⁷¹ Yohannan 1983x.

⁷² Spinali 1983a.

⁷³ Bale 1983q.

⁷⁴ Bale 1982b.

⁷⁵ Bale 1982p.

Perry, *Maximumrocknroll* praised 'honesty,'⁷⁶ as well as being 'straightforward, unpretentious.'⁷⁷

Punk shared with lo-fi aesthetics an enthusiastic recognition of qualities like 'raw,' 'dirty' and 'raunchy' and the overall interest in the challenging listening experiences resulting from an inversion of conventional technocratic aesthetics. That punk's dominant interest lay in general sonic intensity, however, is a key difference.

***Maximumrocknroll*, Amateur Qualities and the Garage**

Like *Sniffin' Glue*, *Maximumrocknroll* often showed enthusiasm for 'amateurs' and the relative musical incompetency they represented, and like early lo-fi aesthetics it had a clear appreciation for the 'primitive.' It did not accept poor technique of every kind, however. Nor was poor musicianship given preference over the 'superb musicianship' that the fanzine regularly praised.⁷⁸

There are, however, several examples of *Maximumrocknroll* expressing direct appreciation for such amateur qualities, in obvious parallel with the reception of lo-fi and musics termed 'primitive':

With... the most amateur musicianship imaginable, I've got to recommend it.⁷⁹

The guitars and vocals are out of tune and the playing is sloppy. A must.⁸⁰

Incredibly out-of-tune guitars which are bound to annoy the feeble-minded.⁸¹

Good-humored, loose, and charmingly amateurish.⁸²

Buzzsaw guitars, a gradually accelerating tempo, and one of those goofy axe solos that only untutored musicians can

⁷⁶ Bale 1982x.

⁷⁷ Spinali 1983c.

⁷⁸ Spinali 1983f.

⁷⁹ Bale 1982n.

⁸⁰ Silva 1982a.

⁸¹ Bale 1982aa.

⁸² Spinali 1982a.

produce make the flip a stronger and more modern song.
Pretty cool record.⁸³

The flip is a trashy, amateur treat which makes this 45
worthwhile.⁸⁴

In one case, a positively presented 'amateurishness' coincided with 'primitive'
and the notably still rare term 'DIY':

The third D.I.Y. EP from Six Minute War, who've now
incorporated a drum-machine into their primitive, mid-tempo
material... a wistful amateurishness serves to lighten the
doom and gloom.⁸⁵

Amateur qualities were not the subject of uniform and unqualified praise,
however. Sometimes they were framed as acceptable only in light of greater
qualities inferred behind them,⁸⁶ but in other cases, amateurism failed to win out.
Here, it failed to excuse a lack of all-important intensity (indicating that intensity
trumped 'appealing amateurishness'):

If the guitars were turned up twice as loud and the vocals
were more raspy, the Normahl might have something going
here. This isn't the case, so the results are less than
satisfying. There is an appealing amateurishness evident
here, but it's not enough to overcome the above-mentioned
shortcomings.⁸⁷

Then there were cases in which amateurism was simply an undesirable quality:
'OK for a first effort, but all of these amateurish outfits were recorded a bit
prematurely';⁸⁸ 'the amateurish drumming puts a bit of a damper on the
proceedings.'⁸⁹ For *Maximumrocknroll* amateur qualities had to be present in 'just
the right amount' ('*Great* thrashed-out noise... with just the right amount of raunch
and sloppiness'),⁹⁰ and should not have interfered with the music's intensities

⁸³ Bale 1983i.

⁸⁴ Yohannan 1983o.

⁸⁵ Bale 1983w.

⁸⁶ Bale 1983d.

⁸⁷ Bale 1982gg.

⁸⁸ Bale 1983z.

⁸⁹ Bale 1983jj.

⁹⁰ Bale 1983aa.

(such as speed, as the 'amateurish drumming' above might hinder). Amateur shortcomings became positive when they were particularly pronounced, following the precedent set by the Shaggs: 'they've made one of those records that's so bad it's good. You know, the Shaggs syndrome... out-of-tune guitars, off-key harmonies, and imprecise instrumentation.'⁹¹ But there was a 'fine line' in place:

This Maryland punk band lies on the wrong side of the fine line between endearing primitivity and musical ineptitude. Still, the lyrics are strong and the vocals are great, so all these guys probably need is more time to practice.⁹²

Either a band fell into a category in which amateur qualities are acceptable ('the Shaggs syndrome') or they simply fell ineffectually between two aesthetic stools.

The one recurring category in which amateurism was not just more acceptable but implied and even an expected appeal was within the 'garage' of garage punk and rock. *Maximumrocknroll* made a clear association between amateur qualities and the narrative of the garage, often invoked by the adjective 'garagy.' As the fanzine's inaugural definition of 'garage punk' showed, this in turn came closely associated with other descriptive concepts such as 'raunchy,' and 'primitive.' While the garage did also connote certain forms of 1960s rock, such associations became less and less necessary to merit the category, which began to take on a role very much like that of lo-fi's conflation of amateur qualities and home-recording (note that the category took its name from a recording context): 'a very atypical 8-song 12" with a garage feel. It sounds more like a cassette of a band's first practice than the standard polished UK product,'⁹³ 'it's powerhouse thrash, unlike their previous amateurish garage material,'⁹⁴ 'Seize haven't come

⁹¹ Bale 1983b.

⁹² Bale 1982cc.

⁹³ Yohannan 1983q.

⁹⁴ Yohannan 1983v.

out of the garage yet. In the great tradition of slam, crash and slobber, this EP has a nasty edge and should be played at high volume.⁹⁵

Sometimes garage punk was characterised as 'awkward',⁹⁶ impaired or impeded, physically or intellectually: 'Minimal production and instrumentation set the tone for this garage release. It sounds like classic '77 material, dumb lyrics and all. Charming, in a retarded sort of way.'⁹⁷ And like folk and lo-fi, garage rock or punk came from 'hinterlands,' which could be associated with 'primitive' qualities⁹⁸ and 'a kind of basic honesty.'⁹⁹

As we saw in its definition, garage punk is regularly associated with 'raunch' and being 'raunchy:' ('this is a really superb punk LP with plenty of garagy raunch,¹⁰⁰ 'retarded, melodic, and real raunchy,¹⁰¹ 'it's a raunchy garage punk offering'¹⁰²). There are references to 'raunch rock'¹⁰³ and in one instance The Velvet Underground and the Legendary Stardust Cowboy are given as 'raunchy points of reference' for a 'psychedelic' record.¹⁰⁴ Though the word is thus well-suited to punk and amateur musicianship, the word 'raunchy' itself has a similar sound to both 'raw' and 'raucous' and surely carried a trace of those meanings in *Maximumrocknroll*.

***Maximumrocknroll* and Phonographic Imperfections**

Maximumrocknroll addressed phonographic imperfection on many occasions, with reviewers using a number of different terms - 'sound,' 'sound quality,'

⁹⁵ Schwartz 1982b.

⁹⁶ Bale 1983y.

⁹⁷ Yohannan 1983s.

⁹⁸ Bale 1983r.

⁹⁹ 'Sleazy garage punk from San Berdoo. This is the kind of band that seems to thrive in America's non-cosmopolitan hinterlands, and it has a kind of basic honesty that is often lacking in musical centers like LA, NYC and San Francisco... the lyrics have an untutored quality without sounding stupid. Pick it up' - Bale 1982x. Note here that once again, locations away from the biggest urban centres are associated with more authentic and more straightforward music (see Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6).

¹⁰⁰ Bale 1983c.

¹⁰¹ Yohannan 1983u.

¹⁰² Bale 1983s.

¹⁰³ Bale 1982z, Yohannan 1983w.

¹⁰⁴ Bale 1982l.

'production,' 'production values,' 'recording,' 'recording quality,' 'the mix' - which cannot be assumed to be functionally synonymous. Moreover, given punk's inversion of certain aesthetic judgments, a 'great sound,' rather than offering high fidelity as might be expected, could be 'garagey' and 'primitive,' thus by implication an amateurish and potentially low-fidelity one.¹⁰⁵

Even with these caveats, there are abundant examples of *Maximumrocknroll* praising high sound quality and criticising low sound quality. Often a release was mentioned in passing as 'well-recorded,'¹⁰⁶ or the sound quality was given as 'good'¹⁰⁷ or 'clean,'¹⁰⁸ but often the reviewers were more forthcoming about the specific benefits of good recording ('the LP has got the power of their live performances, combined with a clean, crisp recording quality'¹⁰⁹), good sound quality ('nice to have with the 12" sound quality'¹¹⁰) and, especially, good production ('the production is very powerful,'¹¹¹ 'well-produced with a really FULL sound,'¹¹² 'the second LP... is much hotter... the production is crisper,'¹¹³ 'this excellent production highlights their soccer chanting and twin-guitar powered songs,'¹¹⁴ '[the] excellent production works especially well on the thrashers by underlining some of their complex arrangements and superb musicianship'¹¹⁵). Given punk aesthetics' usual reputation for rough, basic and raw sounds, it is surprising to see such comments about high-quality phonography. But poor recording, sound quality and production could, like performance imperfection, endanger punk's most valuable hallmark: its sonic intensity.

¹⁰⁵ Bale 1982ee.

¹⁰⁶ Yohannan 1983k, Bale 1982ff, Spinali 1982b.

¹⁰⁷ Schwartz 1983a.

¹⁰⁸ Pushead 1983e.

¹⁰⁹ Yohannan 1983d. See also Bale 1983l.

¹¹⁰ Yohannan 1982b.

¹¹¹ Yohannan 1983c.

¹¹² Yohannan 1983f.

¹¹³ Bale 1983j.

¹¹⁴ Bale 1982t.

¹¹⁵ Bale 1983cc.

By the same token, *Maximumrocknroll* was regularly disappointed with poor recording ('idiotic and poorly recorded,'¹¹⁶ 'this sounds like a live recording because it's hard to pick out much detail... I'd like to see these characters get into a studio'¹¹⁷), poor sound quality ('the sound quality on this tape is pretty mediocre, so it's not the best opportunity to judge this band'¹¹⁸) and poor production ('mediocre material, a mundane instrumental attack, flat production, and generic Oi themes make this duller than an overused razor'¹¹⁹). Poor production was most at risk of undermining the guitars, and the problem of mixing them at too low a volume was brought up many times.¹²⁰ In one case, this problem was the result of 'garage-style production values' ('this EP suffer[s] from badly-mixed, garage-style production values, with the guitars pushed way into the back. Too bad.')121 The importance of keeping guitars high in the mix was detailed in one review: 'Their basic thrashing power is so weakened by the poorly mixed guitars that it's really hard to judge their potential power. It's always better to err on the side of an overly-loud guitar mix.'¹²²

There are, however, a number of exceptions to the fanzine's taste for good overall sound quality and distaste for its opposite. Good production could not save an unexciting record ('good production, but not real exciting')¹²³ and, conversely, as with *Maximumrocknroll's* attitude to amateurs, bad overall sound quality did not prevent other beneficial qualities from prevailing. There were compensations for poor recording in 'fun and energy,'¹²⁴ for poor production in 'inventive compositions'¹²⁵ and 'something about it,'¹²⁶ and for poor mixing in

¹¹⁶ Yohannan 1983ee.

¹¹⁷ Yohannan 1983y.

¹¹⁸ Yohannan 1983gg.

¹¹⁹ Bale 1983g.

¹²⁰ E.g. Bale 1982i, Bale, 1983ll.

¹²¹ Spinali 1983b.

¹²² Bale 1983x.

¹²³ Yohannan 1982c.

¹²⁴ Yohannan 1983e.

¹²⁵ Spinali 1983g.

¹²⁶ Schwartz 1983b.

'fast, tight, catchy... loud, and lyrically sound' songs.¹²⁷ Much like the beginnings of lo-fi aesthetics, then, recording imperfections became something to be tolerated for a greater aesthetic good rather than rejected outright.

There are also many examples of phonographic imperfections being received with direct enthusiasm. They presented one way to fulfil a punk record's need to be 'raw' and opposed to the commercial music industry. In one case, a record that was 'as raw and basic as possible' had 'a totally non-commercial sound'¹²⁸ and another had 'an extremely raw, unprofessional sound.'¹²⁹ And again, a 'nice sound' was not necessarily a high-fidelity sound, it might have been a 'nice sound, crude like live.'¹³⁰ Similarly, *Maximumrocknroll's* positive characterisations of productions as 'primitive' or 'gritty' almost certainly reflected an opposition to the technocracy of mainstream musical production: 'perceptive lyrics and primitive production add strength to these gruff thrash and punk ditties,'¹³¹ 'Honkas are a very raw punk band from Germany, and the production on this record only accentuates their primitivity,'¹³² 'the same drill press guitar is joined to gravelly singing and primitive production, a combination that's light years ahead,'¹³³ 'the gritty production accentuates the good music, so look for this.'¹³⁴ Conversely, *Maximumrocknroll* was often critical of excessively high-quality recording, sound quality and production, which could not be too 'clean': 'a clean (too clean?), distinct sound,'¹³⁵ 'inferior material and overly clean production results in yawns,'¹³⁶ 'maybe the overly clean production is to blame,

¹²⁷ Bale 1982y.

¹²⁸ Yohannan 1983j.

¹²⁹ Bale 1983gg.

¹³⁰ Farrell 1982.

¹³¹ Bale 1983ii.

¹³² Bale 1983m.

¹³³ Bale 1983v.

¹³⁴ Bale 1983ff.

¹³⁵ Yohannan 1983a.

¹³⁶ Bale 1983a.

but this EP could use some undisciplined spunk,¹³⁷ 'the guitar is too clean to scrape the wax out of your ears.'¹³⁸

Just as distasteful as 'clean' was 'slick, gutless,¹³⁹ and 'syrupy,¹⁴⁰ and a production might not have been 'dirty' enough: 'this new release lacks the dirty, manic feel of their classic debut album. Maybe it's the production,¹⁴¹ 'the production could be dirtier, but this is still super bad Bosstown pop.'¹⁴² 'Rawness,' too, was risked by high phonographic standards: 'A better recorded... follow-up... but loses speed and rawness in the process,¹⁴³ 'a well-produced yet raw rhythm-heavy band.'¹⁴⁴ In describing this danger, one reviewer gave a particularly clear and thorough account of the binaries relating to punk's phonographic aesthetics:

They either put their great 60's punk-influenced material aside in favor of R&B and more poppy stuff, or take the raw sneer out of it by settling for a wimpy production. 'Hexbreaker' suffers especially from the latter problem; great tunes like 'New Scene' and 'Screamin' Skull' are emasculated by a slick, squeaky clean sound.¹⁴⁵

Evidently a punk production, whether it erred on the side of conventional phonographic aesthetics or whether it inverted them, could not be 'wimpy' and lack power and intensity.

Though a continuity between amateur musicianship and 'primitive' or 'sloppy' recording abilities or equipment might be inferred, there is scant direct evidence for it. The garage, however, was just as much a site of low sound-quality standards as it was for amateur standards of musicianship, appealing or otherwise. The two were conflated and often considered appealing, making it, again, the closest point of overlap with lo-fi aesthetics. This could be expressed

¹³⁷ Bale 1983bb.

¹³⁸ Bale 1982u. Note the oxymoron here - the guitar must be dirty to clean one's ears.

¹³⁹ Bale 1983t.

¹⁴⁰ Yohannan 1983b.

¹⁴¹ Yohannan 1982f.

¹⁴² Bale 1983f.

¹⁴³ Yohannan 1982a.

¹⁴⁴ Yohannan 1983aa.

¹⁴⁵ Bale 1983hh.

by implication ('a sharp Danish band that specializes in raw, nasty garage thrash. The recording is ultra-primitive... in other words, a must'¹⁴⁶) or directly ('they've abandoned their earlier garage quality in favor of a more melodic, well-produced sound, but without completely sacrificing their appeal'¹⁴⁷). This provoked a positive response 'sometimes': 'a totally ferocious thrash attack, enhanced here by the poor sound quality. Sometimes that special garage quality is a plus, as with [this band];'¹⁴⁸ 'The other tunes don't rise to that standard despite some wonderfully garagey production values.'¹⁴⁹ And in some cases, a connection between the garage and the poor sound quality of, specifically, the tape was given. From reviews of cassettes: 'the tape quality is very garagy,'¹⁵⁰ 'it's garage tape time. That term applies to both the sound quality and the thematic humour. Social Revenge aren't real tight, but they're fun.'¹⁵¹

A clear statement on garage punk as the exceptional style in which an otherwise detrimental low sound quality becomes a 'benefit' occurred when a compilation featuring many styles was reviewed:

A Chicago-area compilation with lots of styles represented. There's plenty of thrash, some experimental stuff, and some punky pop. The sound quality isn't the best, which tends to hurt the impact of some of these groups, but garage outfits like Evil Eye benefit thereby.¹⁵²

In keeping with the development of lo-fi aesthetics in underground music during this period, statements that conflated amateurism, poor sound quality and home-recording contexts, and portray them in a positive light, became increasingly common in the later issues of *Maximumrocknroll*. Two reviews even prefigured twenty-first-century lo-fi aesthetics by positively associating lower standards of

¹⁴⁶ Bale 1983u.

¹⁴⁷ Bale 1982v.

¹⁴⁸ Yohannan 1983dd.

¹⁴⁹ Spinali 1983d.

¹⁵⁰ Pushead 1983a.

¹⁵¹ Yohannan 1983cc.

¹⁵² Yohannan 1983ff.

sound and production with the past. They both concern The Chesterfield Kings, a band that closely pastiched 60s garage rock and extended this process to phonographic sound and production: 'great 60's punk from the 80's. The "monaural" sound and snot-nosed vocals give this 45 an amazingly authentic feel, so much so that I'm actually reminiscing,¹⁵³ 'this album connects with me because of its authentic 60s punk feel, even down to the production.'¹⁵⁴

Despite the fact that during this period punk aesthetics appears to reflect both a conventionally technocratic aesthetics of phonography at some moments and inverted ones at other moments, it was not incoherent. Rather, punk was a discerning discourse that sought and advocated - from both sides, as necessary - precisely the right, most powerful balance between clarity and excessive disorder, even if it did celebrate the ways in which its Other - mainstream musical aesthetics and its bad-listener adherents - would judge punk's balance to have already fallen drastically and offensively into disorder. This celebration is found in its extremely oppositional and inverted aesthetic language, but even punk had its limits. Amateur qualities and phonographic imperfection were celebrated because they inverted mainstream musical aesthetics, especially in the designated stylistic contexts termed 'garage' and 'primitive,' but they could not endanger the primary aesthetic criterion of 'rawness.' While in other areas of underground music - namely lo-fi - the concept of 'rawness' signalled an unmediated realism at considerable aesthetic cost, for punk rawness could not and should not have been separated from the taste for power, speed and general intensity or have resembled the mildness associated with mainstream musical culture.

¹⁵³ Bale 1982h.

¹⁵⁴ Bale 1983o.

Cassette Culture and its Discourse

Although it counted punk genres among its many stylistic possibilities, cassette culture had quite a different aesthetic focus and rhetoric overall. 'Cassette culture' was a term widely used in fanzines during the 1980s and 1990s and was described in the *All Music Guide to Rock*,¹⁵⁵ but is nevertheless not a well-known subcategory of that era's independent music-making today. It refers to the large scale on which music of all kinds was being recorded onto compact cassettes worldwide by the 1980s, together with how the 'home tapers' who made them were becoming networked through the magazines and fanzines that reviewed the cassettes, the independent radio stations that played them, and the postal system that distributed them, and includes the idea that all of this made up a new, exciting, even Utopian cultural underground.

In practice, cassette culture discourse in US became dominated by a collection of solo, mostly male artists who were highly prolific, and by the styles of experimental music, electronic music and progressive rock favoured by such artists. Richie Unterberger's 1995 essay on cassette culture in the *All Music Guide to Rock* - notably separate from the same writer's essay on 'lo-fi' for the volume - is probably the most succinct and comprehensive introduction to the topic. 'Perhaps the purest expression of the DIY ethic,' he wrote, 'its impact upon the commercial scene has been almost nonexistent.'¹⁵⁶ One could not say the same for the category of lo-fi. Despite Unterberger's differentiation however, the making of home-recorded cassettes during this era is often retroactively subsumed into the category and aesthetics of lo-fi, which significantly reduces cassette culture's avowedly broad aesthetic milieu and misrepresents the way it typically avoided focusing aesthetically on matters of phonographic imperfection or the sorts of performance imperfection that typify the 'amateur.'

¹⁵⁵ Unterberger 1995b. Unterberger 1997.

¹⁵⁶ Unterberger 1995b, 952.

Although lo-fi and cassette culture often overlap and did originate close to each other - in many respects, undifferentiated from each other - in the underground music press of the 1980s, they became noticeably and increasingly distinct in aesthetics and by the 1990s had split into separate discourses, as the *All Music Guide to Rock* recognises. In 1992, cassette culture's now highly consolidated network no longer shared periodicals with the increasingly popular alternative and indie artists and bands. *Sound Choice* was a staunchly pro-cassette-culture magazine throughout its run, but its last issue appeared in 1992. By the end of 1991 its sibling publication *Option* had all but ceased coverage and reviewing of cassette culture, commensurate with their increased coverage of the growing alternative scene. Instead, cassette culture now had its own more underground publications such as *Gajoob* and *Electronic Cottage* and in 1992, its own book, *Cassette Mythos*, a reader on the subject.¹⁵⁷ In 2009, Don Campau founded a website, 'The Living Archive of Underground Music,' which interviews members of the 1980-90s cassette culture network and uploads their music as mp3.¹⁵⁸ The following year a documentary film was made about this network, *Grindstone Redux*, focusing on its industrial and experimental elements.¹⁵⁹

Being dedicated so assiduously to cassettes, publications dedicated to cassette culture ignored the vinyl and CD releases of prominent artists later associated with lo-fi, such as Jandek, Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening, Sebadoh, Pavement, Beck and Guided by Voices. But the separation of cassette culture and indie's category of lo-fi is further underlined by the lack of any mention in *Cassette Mythos* of Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening and K, despite the fact that by that point they were probably some of the most famous names associated with distributing homemade cassettes in independent music.¹⁶⁰ It is

¹⁵⁷ James ed. 1992.

¹⁵⁸ Campau ed. 2013.

¹⁵⁹ Szava-Kovats dir. 2010 (film.).

¹⁶⁰ However, a Johnston drawing and the K logo do appear as part of a collage on one page: James ed. 1992, 177.

likely that these artists were excluded for having moved onto vinyl and CD in the mid-1980s (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6).

Conversely, when the books that canonised alternative and indie music and its history were published in the mid-1990s, cassette culture's artists, aesthetics, narratives and rhetoric were (with the exception of *All Music's* entry) almost entirely absent, whereas many artists recognised during the 1980s were - in *Alt-Rock-a-Rama's* case, Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening, Hasil Adkins, Sebadoh and Half Japanese - and were now understood as key members of a category called 'lo-fi.' In fact, Mark Kemp's 'The Lo-Fi Top Ten' in 1996 (Kemp having been *Option's* new editor since 1992), noted that 'by the late eighties, the lo-fi aesthetic had been overrun by geeks who wore coke-bottle glasses and spent their non-social lives in the basement experimenting with tape loops on their four tracks.'¹⁶¹ Though terminology of a 'lo-fi aesthetic' is anachronistic and misapplied to such a milieu, this was almost certainly a reference to what preferred to call itself 'cassette culture.'

Such a retroactive application of the category of 'lo-fi' and its aesthetics can also be seen in Kathleen McConnell's essay on US independent music in the 1980s, 'The Handmade Tale: Cassette-Tapes, Authorship, and the Privatization of the Pacific Northwest Independent Music Scene.'¹⁶² She asserts that 'cassette-tape enthusiasts shared a general dislike for mainstream music [and] an indifference to sound quality' and locates these tastes in Graham Ingels cassette review column for *Op*, *Castanets*, finding that Ingels and other 'cassette-tape connoisseurs... celebrat[ed] the homemade and handmade sensibilities emblematic of the do-it-yourself musician.'¹⁶³ McConnell later associates this stance with 'related terms such as "DIY" or "low-fi."¹⁶⁴ Implying that a valuable,

¹⁶¹ Kemp 1996, 429.

¹⁶² McConnell 2006.

¹⁶³ McConnell 2006, 165, 169.

¹⁶⁴ McConnell 2006, 171.

revolutionary and Utopian authenticity had been lost with the closure of *Op* magazine in 1984, she then finds the *Sound Choice* reviewers that followed negative and 'disparaging' about 'cheap home recording technology.'¹⁶⁵

McConnell's findings come from a selective and reductive use of sources in *Op* and *Sound Choice*. Most notably, her observation that 'cassette-tape enthusiasts... shared an indifference to sound quality' is inaccurate. As with *Maximumrocknroll*, the celebratory 'logics' McConnell attributes to Ingels are not so unilateral or clear-cut in his column. As well as the few occasions McConnell notes on which he criticised overly 'clean' or 'polished' recordings, there are many others on which he praised, for example, 'excellent sound, well recorded.'¹⁶⁶ Similarly, statements such as 'for *Sound Choice* reviewers the novelty of home recording had diminished as had experiments with captured ambience'¹⁶⁷ and 'towards the end of its run... *Sound Choice* all but ceased reviews of home recorded cassette-tapes'¹⁶⁸ are incorrect. McConnell quotes three times from reviews in the same issue of *Sound Choice* that explained the homemade appeals of Daniel Johnston's cassettes in a review of unprecedented length and detail. If anything, a lo-fi aesthetics is much more evidently at work in *Sound Choice* than in *Op*, though the former had a much larger and more diverse pool of cassette reviewers, which gave rise to some of the negative opinions McConnell notes.¹⁶⁹

While McConnell is right to note the era's widespread fondness for amateurism as authenticity, she goes too far in projecting lo-fi aesthetics as they are understood today onto the cassette culture of the 1980s. If cassettes were indeed a 'lo-fi' medium (as we understand the term today) in the early 1980s, this

¹⁶⁵ McConnell 2006, 171.

¹⁶⁶ Ingels 1981c.

¹⁶⁷ McConnell 2006, 170.

¹⁶⁸ McConnell 2006, 171.

¹⁶⁹ Another study focusing on cassette culture is an undergraduate honours thesis by Ian Staub (2010), uploaded to Campau ed. 2013. Like McConnell, Staub too readily conflates lo-fi aesthetics with the cassette medium and cassette culture.

was rarely mentioned or admitted in the same discourse that most passionately championed 'doing (cassettes) yourself.' In fact, recording imperfections and their causes were repeatedly discouraged during this period by some of cassette culture's most prominent advocates.

Cassette Culture's Context, Development and Aesthetics

The cassette medium might seem rudimentary or 'lo-fi' by today's standards, or when the earliest forms of the technology were first introduced in the late 1960s,¹⁷⁰ but in the independent music discourse of the 1980s their salient feature was taken to be the creative opportunity they made so accessible. To this end, the high sound quality of the era's best cassettes was repeatedly emphasised by the music press and, naturally, by the tape manufacturers that regularly advertised in them. Cassette culture's aesthetic investment was not in a set of specific sonic characteristics (phonographic or otherwise) so much as the cassette itself - its possibilities for creativity and its democratic potential, both positioned in contrast to the mainstream music industry. Attention given to lo-fi effects on cassettes or the skills lacking in those that made them often risked undermining this narrative and preventing homemade cassettes from being taken seriously as an art form. If it was conceded that cassettes might have poor sound quality, it was usually only in relation to the argument that they could also sound good if the right kinds were used and in the proper ways, and that the quality was always improving. In the same way, for cassette culture discourse tape recorders were not 'cheap' or 'primitive' as lo-fi aesthetics routinely portrays them, but 'inexpensive' and 'affordable.'

Like lo-fi, cassette culture usually appears (among English-language sources at least) as a US-led phenomenon, and a UK discourse that reflected the prominence cassettes had in US independent-music discourse is not clearly

¹⁷⁰ Morton 2000, 163-164.

discernable in the country's leading popular music newspapers for most of the 1980s. For a short period between 1980 and 1981, however, *New Musical Express* ran a column on independent vinyl and cassettes similar to Ingels's *Castanets* in the US, with a changing authorship. Its title, alluding to home-recording and distribution, was named after a song by punk band the Clash, and the column's first instalment in August 1980 informed readers that its purpose was 'to keep you informed of developments among those independent labels without any affiliation to Rough Trade, or to other independent "majors." It's also intended to keep tabs on independent records which slip through the nets cast out by other areas of the paper.'¹⁷¹ It later announced that 'the independent cassette boom gathers momentum this week with news of seven more album/single releases.'¹⁷²

In October 1981, an entire instalment of *Garageland* was given over to 'the booming nationwide tape scene' due to 'the independent cassette explosion now seemingly reaching epidemic proportions'¹⁷³ - rhetoric that anticipates that of cassette culture in the US. Unlike *Castanets*, however, *Garageland* never featured more than a dozen cassettes at a time, and rarely reviewed or even described them. Instead, it resembled a listings board, announcing cassettes, the addresses and prices by which they might be obtained, and only sometimes associating the cassette with a genre. On a few occasions the cassettes were briefly appraised, and this included their sound quality. Gavin Martin described one cassette as 'poor sound quality and disjointed,' and wrote of another, 'its sound quality is good but it tends towards repetition.'¹⁷⁴ Paul du Noyer noted that on one cassette, 'recording quality is just a little better than terrible - [the artists] plead lack of equipment.'¹⁷⁵ These are the only mentions of phonographic

¹⁷¹ *New Musical Express* 1980.

¹⁷² Thrills 1980a.

¹⁷³ Thrills 1980b.

¹⁷⁴ Martin 1981.

¹⁷⁵ du Noyer 1981.

imperfection in the entire run of the column, and they reflect the negative attitudes toward it that were often voiced before lo-fi aesthetics took hold towards the end of the 1980s.

As it went on, Garageland was increasingly written in a cynical tone, which culminated when Paul Morley wrote what would be the column's final instalment. 'Bedroom tapes should be so exciting, but I doubt this is,' he joked, before concluding with 'Does anybody ever send off for those cassettes? This could be the last ever Garageland entry ever. We're having a meeting about it this week.'¹⁷⁶ The column did not return. Aside from the lack of enthusiasm among *NME*'s writers for Garageland, its failure might be attributed to its peripheral status within the paper (it never took up more than a third of a page, usually near the back of the issue) and the scantiness of its descriptions and evaluations, which probably did comparatively little to encourage readers to order the cassettes or musicians to send them to *NME*.

Ingels's Castanets column did include descriptions, and eventually became a major part of *Op* in which many dozens of reviews were published. Castanets began at his suggestion¹⁷⁷ in Summer 1981, in *Op*'s F issue, and lasted until Z in November 1984. Its opening justification was 'to introduce the reader to the wide and wonderful world of cassettes - the ultimate in decentralized production, manufacturing and distribution. Cassettes are EVERYWHERE - unlike records, they require a very minimal investment to produce and reproduce - and lots of people are making them'¹⁷⁸ - already, cassettes are being described as a 'wide and wonderful world' with a politically progressive system of production. The first Castanets entry reviewed only ten cassettes, but the amount grew steadily and other reviewers were brought into the column, sometimes writing their own sections. 88 cassettes were reviewed

¹⁷⁶ Morley 1981.

¹⁷⁷ Foster 1992.

¹⁷⁸ Ingels 1981a.

the final Castanets in *Op*'s Z issue. The term 'cassette culture' first appears as the column's subtitle between Winter 1981 and September 1982 and in July 1983, and though it does not consistently subtitle the column it is an early and probably influential use of the term. As Castanets developed, Ingels would affirm its purpose as a 'networking tool' rather than 'lengthy critical discourse.'¹⁷⁹

In the V issue, Ingels clarified his policy on identifying musical styles, reflecting the considerable volume of 'experimental' cassettes he was reviewing: 'Unless I call it rock, or something else constraining, you can assume that it's "experimental" or electronic or at least out of the ordinary.'¹⁸⁰ Later that year, *Op* received a letter from Arthur Bryson arguing that the magazine wasn't giving cassettes enough attention. He expressed what would become some of cassette culture's key themes: that cassettes should be taken seriously as finished musical works rather than be assumed have the status of demos, that cassettes are much less expensive than releasing a record - making them more 'democratic and universal,' that the self-indulgence ('lark') of amateurs presents a problem to reviewers, that cassettes are a quintessence of independent music-making, and that they should be the focus of those with progressive ('avant-garde') sensibilities.¹⁸¹

In 1984 *Op* held a Lost Music Network Conference, which was reported on in the magazine's penultimate issue. A section of the conference entitled 'Cassette Club' was summarised by *Op*'s editor John Foster:

Basically, there seemed to be a schism between those who saw cassettes as an artform in itself, with a whole different set of possibilities than a record, and those who thought they were just a generally low-fi, inexpensive way of getting music disseminated for those who couldn't afford to press up an LP... The new magazine [*Cassettera*]... shows that independent cassette people all over are realizing the need for networking, whether they're ultra-high fidelity chrome

¹⁷⁹ Ingels 1983e, 10. See also Ingels 1983b, 17.

¹⁸⁰ Ingels 1984c, 16.

¹⁸¹ Bryson 1984.

tapes for extended works or making tapes of their crank calls to cigar shops.¹⁸²

Like Bryson's letter, Foster recognises two ends of a spectrum of cassette recording and dissemination, one in which it is an 'artform' with 'possibilities' and another that considers the medium 'low-fi' but less expensive than vinyl. These two are not mutually exclusive, of course, but they do seem to map loosely onto the later binary by implication - the 'artform' would be using 'ultra-high fidelity chrome tapes,' while those simply 'making tapes of their crank calls' might be at the 'low-fi' end. Despite the separation however, both are included within the same discourse, particularly through their need to network through magazines and fanzines.

Op was succeeded by *Option* and *Sound Choice*, and the latter would become the most consistently and passionately pro-cassette magazine of the three. In its second issue, cassettes were reviewed in the main reviews section and at the same length as other media. The third issue (Fall 1985) made cassettes its theme - the cover featured *Sound Choice*'s signature Pierrot clown mascot throwing a record while holding a cassette, the headline reading 'Cassette Revolution - Breaking Records.' The issue ran a number of articles concerning cassettes - an essay in an academic tone finding in cassettes 'The New Orality,' a history of cassettes, a guide to getting one's cassettes played on the radio, a call by Robin James for contributions to a book on cassettes (which would become *Cassette Mythos*), a list of ideas 'to help inspire creative use of the cassette medium' and a practical guide to maintaining azimuth alignment of tape recorder heads.¹⁸³ In the main reviews section, cassettes were highlighted with a

¹⁸² Foster 1984a.

¹⁸³ *Sound Choice* 1985, 21-30.

star. *Sound Choice* would run further articles on the benefits of cassettes in 1989 and 1992.¹⁸⁴

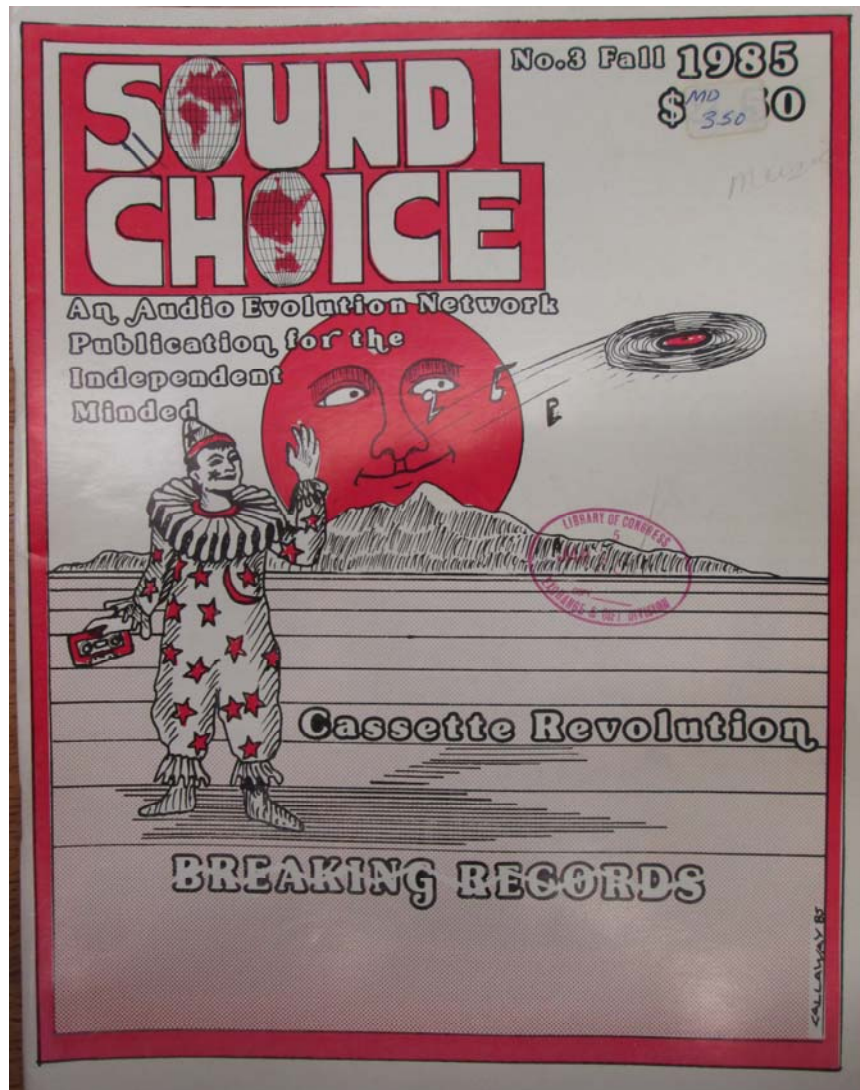


Figure 1 The cover of *Sound Choice* 3 (Fall 1985)

In May 1987 the *New York Times* published an article on 'the cassette underground' by their resident pop critic, Jon Pareles. It began:

A new underground of musicians is composing, performing and releasing its music on cassettes, trading and selling them in a loose network that extends across North America and from Australia to Yugoslavia. The artistic freedom, low cost, privacy and spontaneity of cassette recording have

¹⁸⁴ Trubee 1989; Ciaffardini 1992.

encouraged thousands of performers to bypass the music business and do it themselves.¹⁸⁵

The article's tone is more one of reportage than aesthetics or manifesto. Pareles interviews key figures such as Robin James, Scott Becker, Hal McGee, R Stevie Moore and notes *Option*, *Sound Choice* and Bill Berger's WFMU radio show 'Lo-fi.' Pareles observes that 'affordable recording technology, especially the advent of inexpensive multitrack recorders, has made it possible to turn a bedroom or a kitchen into a studio for less than \$1,000.' Most significantly, and in a clear contrast to the articles the *New York Times* ran on lo-fi in 1994, Pareles's 1281-word article on the cassette underground contains no reference (other than the name of Berger's radio show) to sound quality or other recording imperfections, positive or negative.

Robin James was Ingels's first assistant for *Castanets*, a frequent reviewer for *Sound Choice* and *Option*, a DJ for Olympia's college radio station KAOS and has been something of a figurehead for cassette culture. As well as writing about it in *Sound Choice*'s 'Cassette Revolution' issue, he also introduced his *Cassette Mythos* project to readers of *Option* in 1985 (where the piece appeared above the words 'cassette culture' in big lettering), *LCD* (the magazine of radio station WFMU) in 1986 and *Gajoob* in 1990.¹⁸⁶ For *LCD* he reflected at length on 'home audio arts':

There are numerous devices available for recording your musical expressions, ranging from simple portable open-miked mono decks to fancy multi-tracked dreamlabs. These devices are made more inexpensively and of higher quality every day. Home taping is a hobby that has become one of the most accessible creative outlets of all time. It is much more affordable than many other media, and gives the artist maximum creative means to realise his own amazing works... The reward for doing all this is for both the maker and the listener, but is more an artistic satisfaction than a financial victory.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Pareles 1987.

¹⁸⁶ James 1985b, James 1986a, James 1990.

¹⁸⁷ James 1986a.

James directs his encouragement of 'home audio arts' at the reader not as the works of someone else but as 'your musical expressions,' which become a third-person 'the artist' in the manner of an instruction manual. Becoming this artist is not just accessible but now comes with increasingly high sound quality. The reward is 'for both the maker and the listener' equally, and this exchange is not a financial relation but an 'artistic satisfaction.' It arrives by mail and in many different forms:

Every time that you go to your mailbox you could be picking up little packages. It could be something that will pop in a slot and totally blow you away. You could be so lucky. Lots of possibilities: Garage sessions of your kid-sister's rock band, or someone in a fancy home lab mixing incredible feats of science, or a pioneer of popular rock, soothing meditation or difficult industrial noise. There are tickets to many sonic environments.

The networking that ensues from postal relationships between artist and listener, as well as magazines and radio, then becomes a utopian vision of global communion.¹⁸⁸

Articles like these, with similar tones and narratives, were written in fanzines throughout the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s. In 1985, *Pollution Control Newsletter* ran one that matched James's extrapolation of a revolutionary utopian picture from the convenience and portability of cassettes. The authors conceded that the level of sound quality on cassettes was a drawback, but argued that it be improved as much as possible:

Unfortunately... you simply can't get a "big" clear sound from cassette recorders, primarily because of the size of the tape and speed of the machines... Solutions? Use as much direct-in recording of instruments as is possible to maintain your sound. Eliminate as much background noise as

¹⁸⁸ James 1986a.

possible. Don't overdrive your recorder, of course. Don't high speed dupe your radio promo copies.¹⁸⁹

Miekal And, in *Anti-Isolation*, noted that cassettes represented a particular opportunity for less commercial musical styles such as 'Industrial, post-punk, experimental, garage & audio art.'¹⁹⁰ Again, the author concedes that recording quality might be 'dubious' but dismisses this in three ways:

The quality of the recordings at first was dubious but home quality cassette recordings don't sound all that different from pre-digital record pressings. Then too, industrial & difficult music had little time to worry about audio fidelity with their chain-saws screaming & saxes squawking... A cassette... is a product which technology will easily improve upon in the upcoming years. Better housing, better tape, easier, quicker methods of reproduction & of course, fidelity will all be steadily upgraded.¹⁹¹

Key among these dismissals is the second, which echoes *Maximumrocknroll* and indeed many of the independent music discourse's cassette reviewers in casting low recording or sound quality as more acceptable in particular genre contexts. For *Maximumrocknroll* it was garage punk, for And it is 'industrial and difficult' music.

Gajob was one of many cassette-only fanzines that began during this period, and each issue would feature an extended apologia for cassette culture. By its fourth issue (Autumn 1989), it had developed a passionate progressivist rhetoric: beginning by writing 'Cassette Culture is many things to all the many different people who are involved in it,' the editor closed with, 'the future of recording is bright. The future of recording is independent. The future of recording is free. And the future of recording is yours to make of it what you will. Welcome to the future.'¹⁹² In its first issue, electronic music fanzine *Synthesis* introduced its

¹⁸⁹ Edwards & Stasik 1985. To 'high speed dupe' a cassette was to duplicate its sound onto another cassette at a speed faster than normal playback, a process which reduced sound quality.

¹⁹⁰ And [1985?], 12.

¹⁹¹ And [1985?], 13.

¹⁹² Baker 1989b.

Hometapers column with a pre-emptive defence of them. It began by separating the good music that home-tapers are capable of from the (lo-fi) 'primitive stuff' the reader might have been expecting:

These musicians usually write, perform, & produce their music within their own home, then record it on cassette - hence the name "hometapers". The term "hometapers" is *in no way* to be inferred by others as inferior musicians who are just doodling with instruments. Yes, there's primitive stuff out there, but *Synthesis* has also heard hometaper recordings that would make "professional" musicians jealous.¹⁹³

The discourse on cassette culture often encouraged as 'professional' a recording quality as possible, but it was under few illusions that commercial music-making itself was desirable. Yet rather than employing lo-fi's rhetoric of reducing or spurning technocratic values, it sought to compete with centralised industrial production with enhanced technology, greater authenticity and a weight of democracy. *Gajob* found making cassettes in spite of 'big record companies' to be not just artistic but 'honest... human... personal' and 'the only way anyone can make any sort of valid artistic work,' and this is a clear point of overlap with lo-fi rhetoric.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, *Binary Load Lifter* began its Tape Reviews section with:

INDIE TAPES! They're available by the bagful. We folks at BLL are delighted, because indie tapes are among the few sources of artistic expression untainted by market considerations. All have something to say, all can be heard by those who want to listen.¹⁹⁵

Decrying the 'pop-corn music' (probably a reference to Hot Butter's famous 1972 electronic pop instrumental) of the 'large music corporations,' avant-garde electronic music fanzine *Electrogenesis* observed that 'we now have the artillery to knock down [large music corporations' defences]. And that major weapon is the *cassette*... Cassette culture is (for the most part) a culture where the

¹⁹³ Marcewicz 1989. Emphasis in original.

¹⁹⁴ Baker 1989a.

¹⁹⁵ Rael 1986.

individual is encourage[d] to keep his freedom and his identity... his... true
*FREEDOM of EXPRESSION.*¹⁹⁶ Also focussing on electronic music, *Electronic Cottage* introduced itself in a similar way, proclaiming 'Art is more democratic than ever before - Art for all, not just for an elite few!'¹⁹⁷ In 1992, *Sound Choice's* editor wrote a piece entitled 'Cassettes are Evolution Tools,' calling cassettes 'a means of global theatre and multi-cultural communication cut free from the debilitating leg-irons of mass-media mega-monopolies and government regulation.'¹⁹⁸ Echoing *Synthesis*, Ciaffardini conceded that the field contains plenty of 'doodling... primitive' music - here calling it the work of 'low-fidelity... dabblers,' but dismisses them in favour of 'outstanding cassette culture composers' who can compete with the canons of avant-garde music.¹⁹⁹

However, the reviewing and evaluation of the independent cassette underworld's creations had been an increasingly contentious issue since the mid-1980s. In 1985 in *Sound Choice's* 'Cassette Revolution' issue, Steve Bell wrote an article on the purpose and ethics of reviewing independent music in light of its now-complex task of evaluation in a climate where all market concerns and stylistic limitations had been rejected. Bell reflected an attitude common at the time - for him, matters of poor fidelity, inappropriate mixing and other flaws of 'low-budget... execution' were separate from 'what the artist is trying to say' and 'musical chops' and should not have been held against independent musicians unless they detracted from the music or were unsuited to its style - just as how *Maximumrocknroll's* garage punk and *Anti-Isolation's* 'industrial and difficult music' were stylistic sites in which poor sound quality was appropriate. Bell found that 'a valid observation about much "commercial" music is that it has very little to say, but it says very little very effectively with production values so overwhelming

¹⁹⁶ Wiles [1987?].

¹⁹⁷ McGee 1990.

¹⁹⁸ Ciaffardini 1992.

¹⁹⁹ Ciaffardini 1992, 63.

that it almost convinces you there's something of real substance there,' and, echoing Charles Ives, concludes that 'there is something to be said for any artist who stretches the materials to the limit and beyond, even if the final product is a little rough.'²⁰⁰ Such suppositions became the basis for lo-fi aesthetics, yet in Bell's article lo-fi aesthetics is not universally applicable.

The article was timely, since amateurism and poor sound quality were becoming controversial in independent music discourse. By the mid-to-late 1980s, it was a milieu populated by musicians, writers and listeners of many different tastes and ages, and not all of them were ready to see imperfect cassettes encouraged *tout court*. When *Sound Choice* and *Option* entered print, their many different reviewers - lots of them, particularly in *Sound Choice*, writing merely because they had offered to - had not yet settled upon (to use McConnell's phrase) an 'aesthetic logic' of amateur cassettes *qua* amateur cassettes. Amateurism and poor sound quality were criticised across the pages of these publications as much as they were ignored, tolerated, accepted or praised. Soon a tension arose between those in favour of do-it-yourself media, come what may, and those who argued that independent musicians should be held to higher standards.

One reviewer in *Sound Choice*'s first issue was particularly harsh on unprofessional qualities:

The recording quality is only fair. It is soft as the playing, giving the performances no clarity or snap... The pressing could have been better. Too much surface noise... I'm willing to bet they are amateurs as opposed to pros. That is how they sound and, to my ears at least, even amateurs must sound professional.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Bell 1985, 80.

²⁰¹ Newman 1985.

CW Vrtacek, an experimental composer, reviewed cassettes for both *Option* and *Sound Choice* and often hinted at his dissatisfaction with underground cassettes in doing so:

Good sound, too, unlike so many homemade tapes.²⁰²

This cassette, I must say, is miles ahead of many I receive... the recording quality is marvellous for a home job, very clean and dynamic, and the cassette dub is really good. Straightforward packaging, rather than a fourth grader's attempt at "art," make this a really swell addition to the growing catalog of home tapes.²⁰³

In April 1987, one *Sound Choice* cassette review alluded to a 'backlash' against what, following *Maximumrocknroll's* and *Anti-Isolation's* use of the genre terms 'garage' and 'industrial,' can be inferred as amateurs with poor sound quality: 'even though there appears to be a backlash among Joe Art School types over what [fanzine] N[ew] M[usic] D[istribution] S[ervice], for instance, has called "low-fi garage industrial types," these bands persist at doing what they do.'²⁰⁴ In the same issue, Vrtacek wrote to Ciaffardini, criticising the latter's 'diatribe' against *Option* and long exchanges in the letters pages of previous issue, adding:

I am finding it increasingly difficult to align myself with the independent music scene in general. Amateurism is being elevated to style... Andy Warhol said everybody would be famous for 15 minutes in the future, and it sure looks like they're trying.²⁰⁵

Option saw a similar exchange in 1989, this time involving sound quality. By this point, a particular group of prolific home-tapers had been regularly appearing in the reviews sections of *Sound Choice* and *Option*, both as artists with new cassettes and as reviewers themselves - among them were Brad Bradberry, Don Campau, Michael Chocholak, Randy Greif, Dino DiMuro, Dan

²⁰² Vrtacek 1985a.

²⁰³ Vrtacek 1985b.

²⁰⁴ Hoffman 1987.

²⁰⁵ Vrtacek 1987.

Fioretti, Tom Furgas, Nathan Griffith, Bret Hart and Larry Polansky. As some of the most active and visible participants in cassette culture, they were aware of each other and were routinely exchanging their new releases across a small but now highly consolidated network of like-minded solo musicians. Bret Hart wrote in to complain that *Option* was becoming excessively commercial and had been 'distanc[ing] itself from the more difficult underground (most often cassette-only music).' He continued by protesting that *Option's* reviewers had been unduly judgemental about phonography:

Additionally, many of *Option's* cassette reviewers seem musically dysfunctional, able only to make statements regarding the "recording quality" or "fidelity" of a cassette, SEEMINGLY IGNORANT OF THE FACT THAT THESE ARTISTS WOULD BE MORE THAN HAPPY TO RECORD IN Martin Bisi's studio if they had the bucks... but they/we/I don't. We record on the inexpensive equipment which we can afford. Yeah! sure it sucks. Sure there's fidelity loss when we bounce tracks. But you know what? All by ourselves. Without the help of [*Rolling*] *Stone* and *Spin* (and increasingly, *Option*).²⁰⁶

Note the way Hart positions judgements of fidelity as those of the 'musically dysfunctional,' differentiating fidelity from the category of 'music.' And again, we see the implication that contexts that result in lesser sound quality can and (here) ought to be forgiven in favour of the cassette artist's creative opportunity, and this in order to be 'musically functional' (the equivalent of Bell's 'musical chops') in a context of 'difficult' music. Hart's letter indicates that, for one reviewer at least, cassette culture observed an etiquette of forgiving matters of sound quality unless they drastically interfered with the music, and reviews of the late 1980s largely corroborate this, especially in fanzines more dedicated to cassette culture. In the following issue, one of *Option's* cassette reviewers, Dino DiMuro, replied, giving a typical but revealing account of a cassette culture attitude to sound quality:

²⁰⁶ Hart 1989. Ellipsis in original.

I must respond to Bret Hart's insinuation that I and other reviewers are "musically dysfunctional" if we dare comment on a cassette's sound quality... In my view, part of an artist's responsibility is to get his/her stuff heard with a minimum of distraction - i.e. hiss, dropouts, overload, etc. Nowadays, even with lots of bouncing and overdubbing, decent-sounding cassettes just ain't that hard to make. Chrome or metal mastering tape, care in selecting recording levels, Dolby B&C - these are simple tricks even the homiest taper should know. If I receive a tape for review that barely registers on my LED's, or has an unbearable river of hiss coating the music, I get pissed and mention it. Conversely, the near-perfect Portastudio quality achieved by a Fact 22 or Rudy Schwartz Project deserves praise for showing what's possible for us all. And finally, sound quality never keeps the really good stuff from getting heard (hell, Daniel Johnston tapes sound like they're recorded on wax paper, and he appeared on MTV!). Sound quality isn't everything, but it's never irrelevant; not even for home-tapers.²⁰⁷

DiMuro's stance develops that of Bell four years earlier: Good sound quality isn't hard to achieve, very poor sound quality ('barely registers' or 'unbearable') should be mentioned, but 'the really good stuff' would shine through nevertheless - DiMuro's example of Daniel Johnston is characteristic of the latter's reception.

It wasn't long before someone else wrote in to complain about *Option* having an increasingly commercial outlook, and using cassettes to make the point, correctly noting that the cassette reviews section had 'slimmed down' and declaring that '*Option* has turned its cheek to the more eclectic and obscure veins of alternative music.'²⁰⁸ When Richie Unterberger left his position as one of *Option*'s founding editors in 1991 having grown disillusioned with the "'alternative" music scene,' he confessed the growing reluctance with cassettes that letter-writers had accused the magazine of.²⁰⁹ Unterberger's statement prompted a similar confession from a reader, who wrote in expressing a starkly unoptimistic picture of the state of cassette culture. One of his 'home-studio musician buddies was shocked when I told him that I dumped a whole drawer full of "home-taper"

²⁰⁷ DiMuro 1989.

²⁰⁸ Hurwitz 1989.

²⁰⁹ Unterberger 1991.

tapes in the trash... You see, there's an unspoken rule against criticizing fellow home tapers.' He then relates a narrative of cassette culture in decline, due to listeners getting 'tired of throwing their time and money away' if they 'get half as many tapes as I have.'²¹⁰ The issue of *Option* that letter appeared in was the last to carry a cassette review section, featuring only ten cassettes. For the previous two years, cassettes of international traditional music from larger, established labels like Global Village had made up an increasingly high proportion of it, with fewer and fewer home-tapers or home-recorded bands appearing. Cassettes were subsequently reviewed in the main section, but in numbers that dwindled still further with the rise of alternative and indie music and the CD.

The amateur cassette medium had already been rejected by the more popular magazine *Spin* as early as 1988 - Byron Coley's Underground column urged its readers not send further cassettes, concluding one entry with 'NEVER SEND ME ANOTHER CASSETTE EVER. Right now I've got enough goddamn cassettes that if I laid them all side by side they'd reach from here to your bedroom.'²¹¹ The following year Coley felt persuaded to look at cassettes in one entry, but didn't do so without expressing his displeasure and giving a tellingly contrasting view of cassette culture, 'THE FORMAT SUCKS... The things SUCK SUCK SUCK. The same can be said for many of the jokers unleashed on the public by the cassette "revolution."²¹² With cassette culture failing to find broad acceptance with alternative and indie music's growing audience, it became a underground, fanzine concern following *Sound Choice*'s final issue in 1992. To a significant degree, the difference between the 1980s category of 'independent music' and the 1990s category of 'indie' is that cassette culture and its often more experimental musics are largely absent from the latter.

²¹⁰ Laurel 1991.

²¹¹ Coley 1988c, 95.

²¹² Coley 1989d, 110.

Home-Recording Technology Advice Articles and Columns

The three magazines most influential within cassette culture, *Op*, *Option* and *Sound Choice*, as well as *Spin*, affirmed their support for it and catered to their readers' participation in it by running regular pieces on home-recording technology written by experts. While they do not necessarily reflect the actual practice of home-recording musicians, they are certainly a part of the atmosphere and ideals of cassette culture as represented by these magazine, and they are far from 'lo-fi' in their attitude to the subject.

In *Op*'s T issue (November 1983), studio engineer Craig O'Donnell wrote the first of a few pieces he would write for the magazine concerning advanced home-recording technology in a sporadic new 'technology section.'²¹³ It advocated Commodore's CBM64 computer, finding that the necessary equipment comes to \$507 and the Fostex X15 four-track cassette deck at \$400 - not extremely cheap. In the X issue of *Op*, O'Donnell dedicated a page to the benefits of the Fostex X15 and how to operate it.²¹⁴ He gives some advice on getting the best out of the device:

- 1) Use only CHROME Tape... Correct BIAS and EQ are extremely important to get good sounding results from a cassette...
- 2) RECORD CAREFULLY Jam as much signal on the tape as possible without overloading it...
- 3) CLEAN THE HEADS A LOT... and clean 'em every hour or so...
- 6) BUY A DECENT MICROPHONE... Radio Shack's Back-Electret Condenser mics at about 450 are perfectly good. An old battered Wollensak mic is not.

Pieces like these by music-technology experts such as O'Donnell would become regular occurrences and even columns in both *Sound Choice* and *Option* into the 1990s - O'Donnell himself went on to write a 'Music Tech' column for *Option*, where he would observe that 'cassettes have grown up from a cheap portable

²¹³ O'Donnell 1983, 45.

²¹⁴ O'Donnell 1984, 31.

noise box to a very good sounding medium which we use to create master tapes and quality EPs and albums.²¹⁵ He occasionally makes minor concessions to a less discerning approach to sound quality,²¹⁶ but the advice and recommendations of these music-technology experts to amateurs, along with what they consider inexpensive, are usually relative to their own high sonic and technological standards. A \$400 Fostex 4-track might have been one of the least expensive of its type available, but it was far from the 'cheap' '\$39' Sanyo recorder so often noted as used for Daniel Johnston's recordings. And in sharp contrast to punk and lo-fi aesthetics, *Sound Choice's* 'Audio Answer Man' Bruce Black wrote his inaugural column entry on cleaning recording equipment: as the standfirst put it, 'our Audio Answer Man tells you how to safely take the dirt out of your tape recorder so you can eliminate the kind of dirty recordings you may be making every time you punch a record button.'²¹⁷ Black himself noted that 'dirty heads can give you bad high frequency response in both record and playback,' that 'a good rule of thumb is to clean [your tape recorder] before and after every session,' and that 'a build up of magnetism on a [tape recorder] head can degrade high frequency response.'²¹⁸ In another column entry, Black discusses the dangers of bouncing or 'ping-ponging': 'you lose sounds you want to keep and gain sounds you would rather avoid... Noise is the biggest bug-a-boo in the recording process.'²¹⁹

Similarly, one entry in *Spin's* music technology column State of the Art in 1986 was dedicated to cassettes, adopting cassette culture narratives ('cassettes are truly revolutionary tools: portable, inexpensive, easy to duplicate, simple to mail - music for the people, whenever and wherever they want it') and

²¹⁵ O'Donnell 1986, 13

²¹⁶ 'You couldn't accuse me of being an AUDIOPHILE considering the kind of noise I call music. Audiophiles are folks who'll spend at least \$1500 per stereo component... Right now, though, we're still looking at "What does the best job cheap?"' - O'Donnell 1985, 12.

²¹⁷ Black 1987, 11.

²¹⁸ Black 1987, 12.

²¹⁹ Black 1989, 27.

recommending high-quality chrome tapes above all, noting that 'most cheap or low-quality cassette tapes, blank or prerecorded, are very noisy or have lots of hiss.'²²⁰ *Option* began a new home-recording technology advice column by Robert Thomure in 1989 under the title 'Home Studio,' and its opening paragraph, again, reflected typical cassette culture narratives, including the rejection of 'commercial studios.'²²¹ Despite this position, however, the name and goal of this column represents a slight but significant departure that cassette culture often makes from lo-fi's narratives. The home tapers of cassette culture made the most of the medium by using a 'home studio' complete with, potentially, multitrack tape recorder, monitor speakers, effects of many kinds, synthesisers, drum machines, MIDI and even computers. Lo-fi artists, famously, use 'cheap' equipment and record in their bedrooms or garages, sometimes in kitchens, sheds or living rooms. The discourse on the 'home studio' is quite unlike that of lo-fi.

Cassette Culture Reviews

A clear majority of cassette reviews in *Op*, *Option* and *Sound Choice* make no reference, positive or negative, to either amateurism or sound quality. Where such references do appear, they are most common in the early years of *Option* and *Sound Choice*, when, as discussed above, there was a broad range of reviewers with differing opinions on how cassettes should be reviewed. It can be inferred that most cassettes had, for reviewers, some level of amateurism or poor sound quality that - especially as time passed - could be expected and was less and less worth mentioning.

Over time, cassette culture formed something like a canon of its most prominent, highly active and celebrated figures (they may have been the 'geeks' Kemp was referring to in *Alt-Rock-a-Rama*). Their reception is extensive but

²²⁰ Baker & Rasen 1986, 70.

²²¹ Thomure 1989, 27.

nevertheless has too little to do with lo-fi aesthetics (even negatively) for them to be examined individually - where relevant to the study in hand, reviews of their recordings appear alongside those of less well-known artists. Many of them appeared in *Cassette Mythos*, in *Grindstone Redux* and on Don Campau's website. They include Campau, Michael Chocholak, Ken Clinger, Dan Fioretti, Tom Furgas, Minoy, Dino DiMuro and others. Chief among them is R Stevie Moore, who released cassettes and vinyl of his home recordings as early as 1976. He is routinely referred to with such expressions as 'the... father of the home-recording underground,'²²² 'the doyen of cassette culture'²²³ and 'the man who can safely be credited with bringing home recording to the forefront'²²⁴ and he is well-known today, due in some part to his recent association with Ariel Pink (see Chapter 7). Reviews of Moore's recordings usually do not strongly reflect lo-fi aesthetics; one *Op* review, however, noted that the record had 'plenty of aberration sound' and that that was 'kinda neat.'²²⁵ Another significant figure was Eugene Chadbourne, who released many dozens of cassettes during this period and whose prominence rivalled even Jandek's and Daniel Johnston's by the mid-to-late 80s. A highly skilled avant-garde guitarist, Chadbourne was just as famous for his live gigs as for his recordings, many of which were made at these gigs.

Ingels's *Castanets* column was, as he admitted, terse and descriptive rather than 'critical discourse.' If it was not particularly forthcoming with an aesthetics of amateurism or low fidelity, it was for this reason, but also because the novelty of receiving homemade cassettes at all regularly outshone it. Furthermore, Ingels's attention to amateurism, naivety and child-like qualities is a reflection of the primitivist tastes (as discussed in the last chapter) of Olympia's independent music community - who admired the Shaggs, Half Japanese,

²²² Pareles 1987.

²²³ Fioretti 1987c.

²²⁴ O'Connor 1996, 64.

²²⁵ Newman 1984.

Jandek and Beat Happening - and cannot be construed as inherently linked to the cassette medium or even home-recording contexts.

A comment such as 'Sounds like the Shaggs trying to attempt the Slits jungle rhythms or like the Raincoats would've if instead of getting quieter they'da got more raucous. The dark primitive forces of Amazonia raise their heads'²²⁶ was more within this primitivist aesthetic than an aesthetic of the cassette medium as such. Elsewhere, Castanets noted a 'neo-primitive duo' with a 'modern tribal romp'²²⁷ and criticised 'modern tribal warbling' as 'anarchic as hell and too self-indulgent.'²²⁸ Similarly, some cassettes were 'most of all fun... reminiscent of The Shaggs... minimal production'²²⁹ or 'thirty minutes of adolescent sincerity.'²³⁰ So when Castanets went further into lo-fi aesthetics and described an Olympia band as 'amateur, raw, and nakedly naive,'²³¹ or a 'low-budget operation' that 'sounds non-multitracked' and has 'primitive influences'²³² it might have been typical of the time and even an early example of lo-fi aesthetics (these sorts of descriptions were common for Jandek and Daniel Johnston), but it is not necessarily a lo-fi aesthetics of cassettes specifically, since familiarity with this aesthetic probably originated with other *Op* reviews, of vinyl. One comment - 'this fellow is definitely on his own private tangent, singing (not too well, unfortunately) so sincerely to a private gallery of his own demons. Accompanied by strumming, etc'²³³ - seems strongly influenced (perhaps the cassette too) by the reception of Jandek in the same magazine, as discussed in the following chapter.

²²⁶ Ingels 1982e.

²²⁷ Ingels 1984b.

²²⁸ Ingels 1982g.

²²⁹ Grey 1981.

²³⁰ Ingels 1982h.

²³¹ Ingels 1982i.

²³² James 1984e.

²³³ Ingels 1983j.

Most of Castanets' references to sound quality were little more than simple descriptive statements. Phrases such as 'well recorded'²³⁴ or 'well produced'²³⁵ often appeared, likewise 'the sound quality on these tapes is very good'²³⁶ or 'high marks for good tape and production.'²³⁷ Sometimes sound²³⁸ or production²³⁹ was 'excellent' or 'terrific.'²⁴⁰ Their reverse - neutral, unqualified descriptions of poor sound quality - are not common; the column saw the term 'lo-fi' only once, neutrally and by Robin James.²⁴¹ References to poor sound quality do not amount to clear criticism when it comes to live recordings, especially, which can be 'sometimes murky and impenetrable,'²⁴² have 'bootleg sound quality'²⁴³ or be 'poorly recorded, live.'²⁴⁴ Conversely, the noting of good sound quality might have been similarly prompted in the context of the cassette's status as 'homemade'²⁴⁵ or a 'rock demo.'²⁴⁶

Indeed, just like other reviewers in punk and independent discourse, Castanets tolerated or forgave imperfect sound quality in the context of garage punk and experimental music: 'I just wish the sound quality was better - but I guess that comes with the turf, like shouted obscenities and murky musicianship,'²⁴⁷ 'bizarre distorted recordings of sound sculptures. Something seems to be seriously damaged in the duplicating device... Let's call it special effects.'²⁴⁸ Ingels identified one cassette as having a 'garage-band quality, but with lots of energy and spirit,'²⁴⁹ and found unclear sound unsuited to one

²³⁴ Ingels 1981c.

²³⁵ Kirk & Ingels 1984.

²³⁶ Ingels1983f.

²³⁷ Ingels 1982d.

²³⁸ Ingels 1981c.

²³⁹ James 1984b.

²⁴⁰ Ingels 1983k.

²⁴¹ James 1984d.

²⁴² Ingels 1982b.

²⁴³ Ingels 1982c.

²⁴⁴ Ingels 1984d.

²⁴⁵ James & Kirk 1984.

²⁴⁶ Ingels 1983c.

²⁴⁷ Ingels 1983g.

²⁴⁸ James 1984f.

²⁴⁹ Ingels 1981b.

particular genre: 'the Bruces... sound... muffled, on their cassette. I just like to be able to hear my hardcore (or hard rock) clearly.'²⁵⁰

As this shows, Ingels was often careful to frame his judgements as subjective, especially when it came to matters of amateurism, experimentation or sound quality. This allowed him to pass judgement without invalidating musicians' work, which was against *Op's* ethos. A cassette could be 'too self-indulgent for me'²⁵¹ or 'too squeaky clean for my tastes.'²⁵² Sometimes 'amateurish' factors were noted but excused: 'amateurish, but not short on good ideas,'²⁵³ 'amateurish, but well-suited for today's portable gadgetry - a bit like listening to an old roommate strumming a guitar and singing.'²⁵⁴ In one instance, a request to forgive poor sound quality (in accord with Bell, Hart and others) was made by the musicians themselves: 'the Fabulous Innuendos sent in a live tape. Their motto is "we're better than we sound."²⁵⁵ In this particular case, the band were probably pointing out the appeals of attending their live shows, but there is still the general supposition that 'the music' might be better than the imperfections of its amateur status or sound quality is allowing it to be.

Like *Maximumrocknroll* and other independent music discourses of the time, Castanets often adopted an inverted aesthetic logic: 'lyrics so stupid they're riveting,'²⁵⁶ one cassette was 'dedicated to the many pleasures of low tech.'²⁵⁷ And like the others, there was a distaste for commercialism and professionalism behind this: 'without sounding "commercial," it shows promise,'²⁵⁸ 'Side B is

²⁵⁰ Ingels 1984a.

²⁵¹ Ingels 1983d.

²⁵² Ingels 1983h.

²⁵³ Ingels 1982f.

²⁵⁴ Ingels 1981d.

²⁵⁵ Ingels 1982a.

²⁵⁶ Ingels 1983j.

²⁵⁷ James 1984c.

²⁵⁸ Ingels 1983a.

unprofessional in the best sense of the word... the tape is extremely overmodulated.¹²⁵⁹

Cassette culture fanzines such as *Electronic Cottage* and *Gajoob* made little response to matters of amateurism and poor sound quality, positive or negative - such matters were probably both too commonplace to command attention and were moreover considered irrelevant or improper to critique. By its sixth issue in 1990, however, *Gajoob* was appending a brief assessment of sound quality to most reviews, rating it on a scale of terms - 'poor,' 'fair,' 'good,' 'very good,' 'excellent' and 'flawless' (note how much more weighted the positive end of the spectrum is - nonetheless, the lower end was used slightly more often). This was in keeping with cassette culture discourse's policy of addressing sound quality as it needed to be, but separately from the evaluation of other, 'musical' concerns.

Sound Choice and *Option*, from their first issues in 1985 up until 1992, present a much richer picture of the reception of amateurism, sound quality and varying degrees of lo-fi aesthetics. For lots of its writers, especially earlier on, reviewing homemade recordings was novel, and their reviews were far more explicit on the subject than *Castanets* was. As the independent music discourse's often communitarian perspective would suggest, many of the reviews had the tone of a sympathetic ear lending advice, especially when it came to sound quality. Furthermore, the term 'lo-fi' itself, primarily denoting phonographic imperfection rather than the category it would become, was a lot more common than earlier in the decade. By the late 1980s, however, when a particular group of cassette reviewers had become established (many of them home-tapers themselves), any attention to sound quality became much less common.

Like *Castanets*, sound quality was mostly little more than noted: 'good quality recording on chrome tape,¹²⁶⁰ 'it's a super clean recording,¹²⁶¹ 'crude

²⁵⁹ Board 1984.

sound,²⁶² 'the sound on this tape is OK - the mix is a bit muddy, and the stereo imaging is weird,²⁶³ 'this cassette has a lot of tape hiss,²⁶⁴ 'recording quality is excellent.²⁶⁵ But often recordings were praised for sounding, specifically, professional: 'clean, professional recording,²⁶⁶ 'professional production, packaging and execution,²⁶⁷ 'damn, the production here is CLEAN, I mean I've heard major label releases that sounded messier than this²⁶⁸ and 'it's this sort of professional package that moves cassette out of the "next best thing" category.²⁶⁹ As we have already seen with Vrtacek's comments that 'even amateurs must sound professional,²⁷⁰ such standards were occasionally expected. There are plenty of examples of rejections of poor recording, often framed as spoiling otherwise decent music:

Sung-spoken vocals, annoying plosive 'p's in the mic. Mercifully short. Schlafengarten is capable of better, I know.²⁷¹

Cleaned up and better recorded - not surprisingly these are very lo-fi - they might have been hits.²⁷²

I only wish the recording level was higher as that would eliminate the slight tape hiss that mars this otherwise flawless work.²⁷³

The sound quality is very good; what a shame it's ruined by being transcribed to this tape with a recording level just high enough to reveal distortion.²⁷⁴

²⁶⁰ Greif 1985.

²⁶¹ Crane 1986.

²⁶² Furgas 1986a.

²⁶³ Blomquist 1985a.

²⁶⁴ Lainhart 1985.

²⁶⁵ Becker 1986a.

²⁶⁶ Furgas 1987.

²⁶⁷ Morris 1985b.

²⁶⁸ Sale 1989.

²⁶⁹ Soden 1985.

²⁷⁰ Newman 1985.

²⁷¹ Furgas 1986b.

²⁷² Thompson 1987.

²⁷³ Lewis 1988.

²⁷⁴ Sale 1990.

One review criticises poor recording explicitly in the context of cassette culture narratives: 'Much of this tape is very poorly recorded, which seems inexcusable with all the adequate, inexpensive recording equipment in this day and age.'²⁷⁵ Also framed as spoiling an otherwise good release were poor production,²⁷⁶ poor sound quality,²⁷⁷ 'low fidelity',²⁷⁸ and poor mixing and lack of editing.²⁷⁹ Sometimes undesirably low sound quality was linked with amateurism, as with the aforementioned 'amateurs must sound professional' statement.²⁸⁰

On a number of occasions reviewers were kinder to poorer sound quality by reporting that the music or some aspect of it remained intact or that the whole was otherwise worthwhile:

It's a real shame the fidelity is so limited, because Bret does have some good ideas, and more than a little technique to help realize them, but even with the lo-fi recordings here and there, the ideas come through.²⁸¹

The production could have been better, yet some potential manages to show through.²⁸²

An 'uh' in fidelity. But one overcomes such a problem with simple production, as with [this band].²⁸³

The sound quality is muffled at times, but other than that this 11 song tape gets highest ratings.²⁸⁴

The slant is on political activism, and though the sound quality sucks, there's no masking the raw sincerity of the performers.²⁸⁵

Although a little rough on the production side of things, this tape is a gem.²⁸⁶

A bit lo-fi, but worth a listen.²⁸⁷

²⁷⁵ Borneman 1986.

²⁷⁶ Hamel 1989.

²⁷⁷ Blomquist 1985b, Singer 1985b, Hinton 1987b.

²⁷⁸ Thompson 1986.

²⁷⁹ Ottinger 1985.

²⁸⁰ Newman 1985.

²⁸¹ Sale 1987.

²⁸² Kiviat 1985.

²⁸³ Schoenfeld 1986.

²⁸⁴ Morris 1985c.

²⁸⁵ DiMuro 1986a.

²⁸⁶ Curley 1989, 30.

²⁸⁷ Furgas 1985.

In many cases, context influences the evaluation of amateurism and sound quality. Sometimes, again, amateurism and lamentably poor recording technique are qualified or conflated by means of the 'garage':

This is mostly a tape of a bunch of people fooling around, presumably in their garage. There was apparently no attempt to do anything here but turn on a tape machine and record whatever happened. Nothing did.²⁸⁸

A better production quality would help this tape a bit, as it sounds like it was recorded live in the garage.²⁸⁹

Whatever there was to compel someone to preserve this band's music is very much lost in this exceptionally poor quality recording. This is garage band... music.²⁹⁰

Like the garage, the live recording was expected to have - and was often accordingly forgiven for - a poorer sound quality than other recordings. Assessing this and its potential hindrance of 'the music' was important in reviewing them, and several kinds of lo-fi effects were detailed in the process:

One warning: this is taken from a live recording and the sound is rather lo-fi.²⁹¹

This live recording left me luke-warm due to the poor sound quality. Also, many of the lyrics that I could pick out the muddy mix... seemed insincere and trendy.²⁹²

This sounds like it was recorded in a basement on a blaster but it was recorded live... The muddy sound quality and indecipherable vocals made this hard to sit through... there are some good ideas buried in the wall of noise.²⁹³

This tape is a live recording... The recording quality is not great, but certainly not detrimental to the music, and understandable in that it is a low budget (and laudable) release of live concerts.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁸ Mental 1987.

²⁸⁹ Greif 1986.

²⁹⁰ Knowles 1987.

²⁹¹ Suzuki 1985.

²⁹² Blomquist 1985b.

²⁹³ Blomquist 1985c.

²⁹⁴ Polansky 1987.

Side two's live performances suffer in audio quality (with several annoying dropouts) but excel in musicianship.²⁹⁵

The "live" quality is apologized for on the inner sleeve, but aside from room acoustics and a slight feeling of "removal" from the players, the overall sound more than adequately conveys the atmosphere of the group.²⁹⁶

Again drawing on context, a common, more sympathetic but often not entirely positive theme concerning the problem of the amateur context was that of recordings being favourable by homemade standards or the standards of other homemade cassettes:

Good sound, too, unlike so many homemade tapes.²⁹⁷

Some excellent toonz / playing, great sound for a home tape.²⁹⁸

The recording quality is marvellous for a home job, very clean and dynamic, and the cassette dub is really good.²⁹⁹

Music guaranteed to give other home tapers hardware envy.³⁰⁰

Excellent production. This appears to have been done in a small studio and while it may be an "amateur" production it's anything but amateurish.³⁰¹

One review alluded to the poor sound quality of other recordings and notes the right balance between good recording and rawness to have been found: 'this cassette is well produced, managing to keep a raw edge without sounding like it was recorded in a phone booth.'³⁰²

A more positive version of the good-for-homemade-standards theme can be found in the feeling some reviewers expressed that the amateur recording

²⁹⁵ DiMuro 1987c.

²⁹⁶ DiMuro 1987d.

²⁹⁷ Vrtacek 1985a.

²⁹⁸ Fioretti 1987a.

²⁹⁹ Vrtacek 1985b.

³⁰⁰ DiMuro 1986b.

³⁰¹ Morris 1986.

³⁰² Board 1985d.

context was fun or even cathartic, sometimes with the suggestion that this would resonate with the listener too:

Overall, these tapes represent what the indie cassette scene is all about - creative experimentation with a strong feeling that the whole thing was fun to do.³⁰³

Uneven and indulgent, but probably cathartic... at least for [the artist].³⁰⁴

Recorded live, but sounds pretty good, in spite of slightly muddy acoustics here and there. That's just a minor quibble; these guys are having a blast, and so will you.³⁰⁵

This is amateur hour, make no mistake; but [this band] believe in it, it's fun, and it might just work for you too.³⁰⁶

Approaching lo-fi aesthetics, one reviewer explored the 'do-it-yourself' context of a particularly poor amateur recording in detail, but nevertheless enjoyed it due to a degree of 'awfulness' s/he saw as wilful:

Sooner or later there had to be a dark side to the record-it-at-home, do-it-yourself ethic this magazine promulgates. Sooner or later people with absolutely no talent at all were going to start making tapes of zero quality. And here it is. This came to me on the cheapest "K-Mart Special" [tape]... Probably recorded on a cheap walkmate style recorder. It's awful - wonderfully awful, and these folks know it. I can't stop laughing when I listen to it.³⁰⁷

In a similar way, reviewers would often reflect the inverse aesthetics also recognisable in *Op* and *Maximumrocknroll*. In fact, it was relatively common to emphasise this in much the same way as *Maximumrocknroll* did: 'Four-tracker in the kitchen... The music suggested: The Shaggs... [this] allusion refers to the incompetent musicianship... I like this cassette a lot.'³⁰⁸ The first issue of *Sound Choice* contained a section in which Mykel Board reviewed recordings but, in a manifestation of independent music's pluralistic and anti-conventional philosophy,

³⁰³ Morris 1985a.

³⁰⁴ Dickson 1985. Ellipsis in original.

³⁰⁵ Furgas 1986c.

³⁰⁶ DiMuro 1989b.

³⁰⁷ Blomquist 1985c.

³⁰⁸ Wechter 1986.

reportedly would withhold value judgement on them - the title was 'Amazing! 36 Recordings Mykel Board Doesn't Make Value Judgements On.' Board began: 'note: I have attempted to leave value judgements out of these reviews. Your taste may be different from mine. I'll just describe the music, you make the judgements.'³⁰⁹ Revealingly, however, he then calls the eighth recording (an LP), 'raw and amateur in the best sense of the words.'³¹⁰ This suggests that, in one case at least and as we saw with characterisations of Zappa in the last chapter, beneath a purported ideology of open-minded, pluralistic fairness to unconventional and amateur musics outside of mainstream taste lay not equality of attention and judgement but actually strong and negatory preference for that which mainstream technocratic taste itself was imagined to have already constructed as 'amateur.' Along the same lines, reviewers' descriptions of what they presume normative ears (bad listeners) would think to be insults are quite specifically 'compliments:'

Creepy low-fi minimalist garage experimental pop (that's a compliment).³¹¹

A sound track to a low budget late Fifties sci-fi movie comes to mind when listening to the first, second and fourth pieces of music on this cassette, but this is a compliment rather than an insult.³¹²

Rowdy, raucous blues-rock that could easily have been recorded in '68, and that's a compliment.³¹³

The same inverse aesthetic operated on 'fidelity',³¹⁴ and saw poor recording values associated with anti-commercialism, leaving 'just talent',³¹⁵ 'low-tech quality' conflated with child-like qualities and anti-commercialism³¹⁶ and even, perhaps, poor sound quality understood as archaic: 'imagine the Beatles circa

³⁰⁹ Board 1985a.

³¹⁰ Board 1985b.

³¹¹ Becker 1985.

³¹² Crist 1987.

³¹³ DiMuro 1988.

³¹⁴ Schoenfeld 1985.

³¹⁵ James 1989a.

³¹⁶ Cascone 1985.

"Tomorrow Never Knows," strip away half their musical ability, and force them to record 90 minutes of original music in a 1962 two-track studio, the result might be something akin to what [this band] sounds like.' The reviewer then notes that 'though good sound quality is optional, a sharper creative focus and *especially* tighter editing would make this group a contender, not just a curiosity.'³¹⁷

Here we see the increasingly common suggestion that poor sound quality might be as much as a creative decision on the part of the home-taper (made by Dino DiMuro, whose reviews would often reflect lo-fi aesthetics in the late 1980s, as we will see). In one review, a particular performance imperfection became a 'production decision' and was singled out as positive:

On the second chorus, the lead singer... messes up and you can hear him say "Oh no, let's do it again," but the tune is cookin' so hard they just can't stop it. That moment of imperfection survives. It is the kind of production decision you've got to love.³¹⁸

A review of a cassette by Bean Church found the poor recording quality so salient and extreme ('VERY quiet and distant, as if it were recorded through a towel') that it promoted attentive listening and changed how the more traditionally musical elements of the recording were perceived. The reviewer thus entertained the idea that it was not a mistake but rather formed 'more of a commentary on music than actual music' - anticipating the internal struggles and element of faith that became part of Daniel Johnston's reception and, indeed, the framing of 'the music' by archaic media in the 2000s.³¹⁹ While lo-fi effects were not quite 'actual music,' they were increasingly becoming a relevant aspect of the listening experience in the mid-1980s.

Other reviews made clear and positive associations between home-recording and honesty, with lesser sound quality implied:

³¹⁷ DiMuro 1987a.

³¹⁸ La Sorda 1985.

³¹⁹ Willging 1985.

Not fancy studio stuff, it came from a dark night, honest and complete.³²⁰

This is the eighth instalment of an ongoing compilation series of home-tapers... for me the total picture that's emerged is one that is warmly affirming of the direct, intimate and honest qualities of home-taping and in all its various textures, context and attitudes. You can come away appreciating the obviously high quality material, but also, curiously enough, the qualities in the more "homey" efforts.³²¹

The latter reviewer expresses a dichotomy that would become more common within cassette culture, that high-quality recordings and 'homey' recordings each had their own differentiable appeals, with the latter a site of lo-fi aesthetics.

In fact, all these positive and complex appreciations of amateurism and imperfect recordings, now based specifically in a home-recording context, reflect the beginnings of a lo-fi aesthetics. This is most clearly emphasised by two cassette reviews in particular. The first appeared as early as Fall 1985, in *Sound Choice*:

Sounding like Lou Reed as an adolescent, both in actual sound and style but ultimately winning with his own incomparable brand of 'junior high meanness,' Kogan is a natural, if raw, talent... Recorded on equipment ranging from a cassette 4-track to a dictaphone it makes up in personality, charm and honesty what it occasionally lacks in fidelity... An affinity for the blues is running through most of Kogan's music.³²²

Several lo-fi aesthetic themes are recognisable - (childhood and) adolescence, rawness, narratives of rudimentary equipment, charm and honesty instead of fidelity, even the blues, and the reference to Lou Reed prefigures the establishment of lo-fi's canon. Already this review strongly prefigures the reception of Jandek, Johnston and Beat Happening, which at the time was only

³²⁰ James 1985a.

³²¹ Hodowanec 1985.

³²² Hubby 1985.

nascent. But a lo-fi aesthetics is further apparent when the editor, Ciaffardini, adds his own comments underneath:

Reminds me of the rough-hewn [sic] naivety of Jonathan Richman in the old days... Kogan's personal lyrics are of a people watcher growing up with angst and frustration... his forget-the-polish, do-it-yourself spirit turns the whole thing into a very inspiring cassette... that proves that a man with the most minimal recording equipment and low-tech voice and musical chops can rise head and shoulders above more naturally gifted colleagues through the power of his sincerity and passion voiced through music cut straight from the soul.³²³

Ciaffardini would go on to write about Jandek and Daniel Johnston in very similar ways, as Chapter 4 will show.

In 1987, the year Johnston started to reach a national audience due to a Ciaffardini review, prominent home-taper and *Option* cassette reviewer Dino DiMuro (who would defend Johnston in the letter mentioned above) gave a full account of appeals recognisable as lo-fi aesthetics:

Call me a weirdo, but I have a thing for lo-fi home recorded rock 'n' roll, and we've got a big batch right here. Naked electric guitar (probably direct-in), Mattel drum machine, and woodwinds that sound like toys (or is it the other way round?) crank out mini-rock classics without titles into a tape recorder incapable of retaining a shred of high-frequency sound. Smartass out-of-tune vocals pontificate about stuff you can't understand (and really, who cares?) This is what "outsiders" think they're going to hear when you mention "independent music"... and frankly, why should we have it any other way?³²⁴

DiMuro's 'outsiders' are not just outside of independent music, but, more importantly, outside of cassette culture - a discourse that, as we have seen, knew very well that homemade amateur recordings were not necessarily 'lo-fi' and 'naked,' do not necessarily feature 'toys' and are not necessarily recorded on 'a tape recorder incapable of retaining a shred of high-frequency sound.'

³²³ Ciaffardini 1985.

³²⁴ DiMuro 1987b. Ellipsis in original.

His observation was apt, because by the late 1980s cassette culture - and along with it its repertoire of well-recorded, experimental and electronic music on cassette - had begun to separate from an independent music discourse that was increasingly focused on more commercially successful rock and folk: in other words, 'alternative' or 'indie' music. By the 1990s it was cassette culture that was the outsider, even though 1980s home-cassette-recording artists such as Beat Happening, Daniel Johnston and Sebadoh had entered the new canons of indie rock. For 1990s alternative and indie music discourses, of which lo-fi was a subcategory, home-recorded cassettes were necessarily expected to have precisely the qualities DiMuro observes as an outsider's false assumptions about 'independent music.' Those assumptions and the construction of 'lo-fi' they enable are still widely held today.

Chapter 4. Diamonds in the Dirt: Jandek and Daniel Johnston

The prominence of Jandek and Daniel Johnston in American independent music discourse during the late 1980s is aptly expressed on a two-page spread featuring them side by side, written by Bill Berger (host of the 'Lo-fi' radio show on WFMU) for the Fall 1988 issue of WFMU's magazine *LCD*.¹ Entitled 'The Alternative Music / Hip Underground Glossary and Index of Key Figures,' the piece presents a fond but tongue-in-cheek list of terms associated with the subculture. Only four of the twenty-one entries specify musicians - others refer to styles ('Hardcore Punk,' 'The Downtown NYC Improv Sound'), roles ('College Radio DJ,' 'Bouncers,' 'Rock Critics') or institutions ('CBGB's,' 'The Ritz,' 'Bleeker Bob's'). The entry for Led Zeppelin is ironic ('let's face it, the band we all really like'), and the entry for Golden Palominos is simply critique ('brazen [adult-oriented rock] that passes for alternative underground music'). Jandek's entry mixes this irreverence with a graver tone:

The most frightening coupling of prolificacy and talentlessness. Succeeds to an extent because everyone is afraid to admit in front of anyone else that he really really sucks.

Johnston's entry follows immediately, and the irreverent tone breaks completely as Berger gives a very typical account of Johnston's appeal:

The ultimate performer for our times, no kidding. Should be to the '90s what Bob Dylan was to the '60s. But in contrast to Dylan, is 100 percent pure, as he can't help but write from his heart.

¹ Berger 1988.

Jandek and Daniel Johnston seem to have entered precisely the right aesthetic and ideological climate within independent music discourse to have become such prominent and now cult figures. Resonating powerfully with its pre-established interests in primitivism, amateurism and anti-commercialism, recordings by both were passionately advocated at the earliest opportunity - for Jandek, the summer of 1982 in *Op* magazine, for Johnston, the autumn of 1985 in *The Austin Chronicle* - and then championed by influential musicians, critics and DJs throughout the subsequent decade.

The reception of Jandek and Johnston form a bridge between 1980s primitivism and the lo-fi indie rock of the 1990s. At first, they were celebrated figures in a primitivist milieu that both encouraged home-recording and approaches to music-making constructed as highly unprofessional, but that was only just beginning to accept recording imperfections as part of an aesthetic experience. By the end of their first decade, however, 'lo-fi' had become a major movement within indie music and both musicians had been connected with the figurehead of alternative rock, Kurt Cobain. While Johnston had become a canonical figure within indie culture by the mid-1990s, Jandek remained underground, with magazines such as *Spin* and *Option* ceasing to cover his music as they grew alongside the alternative rock scene in the early 1990s. The reception of Jandek and Johnston during this period can be regarded as a crucial step in the acceptance, development and spread of lo-fi aesthetics. At the least, both musicians introduced the notion that lo-fi was not just acceptable but the special context of some extraordinary and brilliant musicians.

This chapter examines how each artist was introduced and aestheticised during the first decade of their careers, noting the many parallels in their reception. Key among them is the significant role played by constructions of both

musicians' creative and cultural context. Jandek was considered to lie somewhere between a 'hopeless amateur'² and 'America's most consistently overlooked musical genius,'³ and was portrayed as the quintessential independent-music primitive, occupying a shadowy, gothic realm at an extreme distance from the contemporary cultural mainstream he was positioned against. Johnston was a hyper-authentic, childlike hero battling mental illness and the preconceptions of a cynical musical culture with only his portable cassette recorder, toy instruments and 'quavering'⁴ voice.

Both musicians were regularly considered to be pitted against 'bad listeners': listeners who, usually because they were too inculcated with commercial music-technocratic aesthetics, heard only mistakes or, as one of the few negative reviews of Johnston put it, 'poor recording, poor musicianship.'⁵ In contrast, Jandek's and Johnston's advocates were 'good listeners' - they were able to accomplish the challenging task of listening past the lo-fi effects, shrugging them off as indexes of an unflinching realism, in order to locate the inner 'genius' of the music - a task that mainstream culture was unable to perform. The recordings of Jandek and Johnston thus suggested metaphors along the lines of 'buried treasure,' not only because they were culturally obscure, but because they were *obscured*, quite specifically situated underneath obscuring layers of cultural and sonic 'dirt,' both in being deep in the musical 'underground' and in being submerged in 'muddy' recording quality.⁶ One Jandek reviewer noted that 'the listener comes away... dirtied,' and that 'Jandek's records are exquisite jewels of art.'⁷ Interviewed for the first book on Johnston, Ron English

² Foster 1982.

³ Coley 1987c.

⁴ Cohen (1992a) 2011, 113.

⁵ Tucker 1987.

⁶ Hinton 1987a, Cohen 1995b.

⁷ *Lowlife* [1988-1989?].

suggested that he was 'the perfect treasure for the Indie Connoisseur, a rare diamond in the dirt.'⁸ Jandek and Johnston were diamonds, and the context surrounding them - sonically and culturally - was 'dirt.'

Jandek

Jandek is not particularly well known today, even in indie culture. Where he is known, it is often as one of popular music's most notorious enigmas. Although he was regularly thought to be anonymous, Jandek's name was given to *Op* writers and announced as Sterling Smith in the magazine's first review of his debut album *Ready for the House* in 1982, and it intermittently reappears in a number of prominent sources over the subsequent years. Until 2014, however, this name was not confirmed by Corwood Industries, the Houston-based record label that has released Jandek's albums exclusively and anonymously since 1978's *Ready for the House* (which was released under the name 'the Units'), nor has the label volunteered any further details of the artist's biography.

The assumptions made about Jandek and his context in light of this lack of biography will be revealing. Previous studies on Jandek have centred on this problem with little attention to music or musical aesthetics, using his special case to provide unique insight into the power of biography,⁹ fandom under such special circumstances¹⁰ and cinematic representations of marginality (in the 2002 documentary film about Jandek, *Jandek on Corwood*.)¹¹ But as these scholars and other commentators often note, it seems unlikely that this biographical mystery would have been so enticing without the relative strangeness of the music.

⁸ Ron English, quoted in Yazdani 1999, 103.

⁹ Bozelka 2003.

¹⁰ Ciechanowski 2006.

¹¹ LeBlanc 2009.

It was hardly unusual for musicians to be reviewed in magazines such as *Op* without much background information given or available, and it wasn't until Richie Unterberger's 1986 article in *Option* that a sense of mystery around Jandek gained critical momentum.¹² Rather, it was the 'primitive' and home-made qualities that appealed to Phil Milstein in Jandek's first review in 1982.

Throughout the 1980s Jandek released albums at a rate of approximately two a year, and they were reviewed assiduously in *Op*, *Sound Choice*, *Option*, *Forced Exposure* and a number of fanzines, and he was discussed in *Spin* by Byron Coley several times. In 1993, Kurt Cobain referred to Jandek in passing during a *Spin* feature on Nirvana: picking a Jandek record out of his collection, Cobain is quoted as saying, 'he's not pretentious... but only pretentious people like his music.'¹³

However, though the critical reception of Jandek certainly did not cease in the mid-1990s, it declined as *Sound Choice* closed, *Option* moved towards a wider audience, and much fanzine discourse migrated onto the Internet. Indeed, the major source for those interested in Jandek since the 1990s has been a website run by Seth Tissue and its accompanying mailing list.¹⁴ Because by the mid-1990s Jandek was no longer a cause for aesthetic evangelism but a long-term underground cult figure, this study only takes in sources from the long first decade of Jandek reception.¹⁵

This chapter does, however, take in key sources such as Unterberger's *Unknown Legends of Rock 'n' Roll* (1999), Katy Vine's 1999 article in *Texas Monthly*, in which Jandek is apparently tracked down by a journalist operating

¹² Unterberger 1986c.

¹³ Kurt Cobain, Steinke 1993, 49.

¹⁴ Tissue 2013.

¹⁵ In January 2014 (as this thesis was nearing completion), *Wire* published an extended print interview with Jandek across two issues, revealing certain biographical fragments and personal philosophies ideas, though nothing that significantly affects the discursive aestheticisation of his early work under discussion here - Keenan 2014a, Keenan 2014b.

largely outside of popular music discourse,¹⁶ and Chusid's chapter on Jandek in *Songs in the Key of Z* (which also contains a chapter on Daniel Johnston).¹⁷

Some quotes from the documentary *Jandek on Corwood*, which mostly features interviews with critics involved in Jandek's reception, are also used. Jandek does not appear in the prominent UK-based music publications of the sort that covered Daniel Johnston during this period (*Melody Maker*, *Sounds*, *NME*), nor were entries written for him or his albums in the books canonising alternative and indie music of the 1990s.

This is probably partly due to the lack of biography and accessibility, but the prevailing reason is surely the music, which is notably removed from what has been understood by the term 'indie' since the 1990s. Jandek's music features many of the instrumental elements associated with American folk and rock - acoustic and electric guitar, a drum set, harmonica - performed solo or with accompanying musicians (similarly without biographies), but it rarely keeps to those genres' conventions of tuning or timing, nor are the melodies of the primary voice (assumed to be Jandek's or Sterling Smith's) comparable to a conventional folk or rock singer. The lyrics, taken by themselves, are reminiscent of blues, folk and modernist American poetry, often suggesting extremes of emotion and sometimes violence but rarely clear narratives. Overall, Jandek's music can perhaps be most usefully described as a mixture of free jazz and traditional acoustic or electric folk, blues and rock. Besides the tuning, its lo-fi effects include performance imperfections of rhythm, tuning and vocal delivery (which are more prevalent than phonographic imperfections), performance noises, imperfect microphone technique and room acoustic, sometimes with considerable reverb. Distortion and slightly muffled higher frequencies are the most common

¹⁶ Vine 1999.

¹⁷ Chusid 2000, 56-66.

phonographic imperfections in the albums released during the 1980s. As some commentators note (see below), the final track on *Ready for the House*, 'European Jewel (Incomplete),' appears to end as the tape runs out.

Daniel Johnston

The most comprehensive biographies of Daniel Johnston can be found in Tarssa Yazdani's book *Hi, How Are You: The Definitive Daniel Johnston Handbook* (1999) and the documentary film *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* (2005).¹⁸ Born in 1961 and having grown up in West Virginia, Johnston first came to the attention of independent music culture when he moved to Austin, Texas in 1984. Over the previous few years he had been recording his songs, accompanied by piano, chord organ or guitar, onto cassette albums at various places of residence using a portable cassette recorder usually referred to as a 'Sanyo.'¹⁹ In Austin, Johnston gave these cassettes, apparently most often the one entitled *Hi, How Are You*, to members of the local rock community. Soon he began to play live and appeared in spotlights on Austin by *Rolling Stone*, MTV and *Spin*.²⁰ In October 1985, local weekly newspaper *The Austin Chronicle* ran an article on Johnston by its editor Louis Black which described him as a 'star on the scene.'²¹ What might be Johnston's first prominent review, of *Hi, How Are You*, appeared in the same paper the following December.²²

When his mental illness - episodes of mania and psychosis - worsened, Johnston left Austin for West Virginia, just as national music magazines such as *Sound Choice* and *Spin* were beginning to take notice of the artist in his own

¹⁸ Yazdani 1999, Feuerzeig dir. 2005 (film.).

¹⁹ Black 1989, Bent 1989.

²⁰ Pond 1985, 77; MTV 1986 (film.), Corcoran 1986, 67.

²¹ Black (1985) 2011, 48.

²² Dorsett (1985) 2011.

right. Homestead, an independent record label that had released well-known indie-rock bands Salem 66, Dinosaur Jr. and Sonic Youth, released two of Johnston's most famous home-recorded cassettes, *Hi, How Are You* and *Yip/Jump Music* on vinyl LP in 1988. By this point, narratives of Johnston's illness and periods in psychiatric institutions were routinely brought up in writing on him. It was claimed that he was wrongfully committed by his parents, and Homestead ran a 'Free Daniel Johnston' campaign.²³ In 1989, another article by Louis Black, this time in *Spin*, gave a full account of Johnston's situation, which seems to have encouraged other writers to handle his case with greater sensitivity.²⁴

Johnston also recorded an album with Jad Fair of Half Japanese, *Jad Fair and Daniel Johnston*, released in 1989, and entered a studio to record an album with prominent independent producer Kramer, *1990*, released on Kramer's Shimmy Disc label in 1990. Following a performance for a 3000-strong crowd at Austin's South by Southwest music festival that year, Johnston again recorded with Kramer for Shimmy Disc, resulting in 1992's *Artistic Vice*. Kurt Cobain praised Johnston in the same *Spin* article he mentioned Jandek in,²⁵ and for a period in 1992 Cobain wore a t-shirt with the *Hi, How Are You* cover on it, most visibly as he accepted the MTV award for Best New Artist on September 9. This started a bidding war that led to Johnston being signed to Atlantic records, for whom he recorded *Fun*, released in 1994. The same year, K (Kathy) McCarty released *Dead Dog's Eyeball*, an album of covers of Johnston's songs: McCarty had been a friend of Johnston's and an early recipient of his *Hi, How Are You* tape, and as the lead singer of the band Glass Eye she had asked him to open for them in his Austin debut.

²³ Neo 1989.

²⁴ Black 1989.

²⁵ Steinke 1993, 49.

This chapter will draw on reviews and articles about Johnston across a range of music periodicals and newspapers, as well a passage on him in an ethnography of Austin's music scene by Barry Shank, published in 1994.²⁶ With the exception of the Unterberger, Yazdani and Chusid²⁷ books, and again, because Johnston no longer needed aesthetic introduction or apology, this chapter's study concludes with *Fun, Dead Dog's Eyeball* and Johnston's entries in the canonising books of the mid-1990s.

Like Jandek, Johnston's music was more aligned with blues and folk than that of previous 'primitive' artists was (Johnston was also compared to Robert Johnson), but unlike Jandek, Johnston's music was considered catchy, melodic, and 'pop.' Like Jandek, Johnston's recorded songs are characterised by performance imperfection in rhythm, tuning and vocal timbre, but the effect is less extreme - Johnston's are melodic songs, sometimes interspersed with recordings of conversation or more experimental interludes. The lyrics present subjects and narratives clearly, most often romantic love or self-portraits, and often rhyme. The essence of Johnston's music is usually considered to be these pop songs, and his avowed biggest influence has always been The Beatles, to whom he is often compared.²⁸

Lo-fi effects of many kinds are considerably more noticeable and more abundant on Johnston's early cassette albums²⁹ than they are among recordings of other lo-fi artists of the 1980s and 1990s. Having used a portable cassette recorder with a built-in condenser microphone, noise can clearly be heard in

²⁶ Shank 1994, 153-160.

²⁷ Chusid 2000, 67-78.

²⁸ Black (1985), 2011.

²⁹ Johnston 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1984, 1985, 1988. The 1981-1983a recordings were rereleased in a CD and LP box set: Johnston 2010.

quieter moments, as can mechanism operation, autonomously³⁰ and by Johnston, the latter at the beginnings and endings of the pieces³¹ or when a retake has been made.³² Phonographic imperfections, most commonly dropouts and muffled high frequencies, will vary in degree from cassette to cassette as they are recorded, played, digitised and cleaned in different ways and on different machines, but a significantly low-pass-filtered sound is common, as low as approximately 12 kHz (the human ear hears up to 20 kHz). Sometimes Johnston bounces his tracks not between different tracks in a multi-track tape-recorder as is typically done, but between two separate portable tape recorders - the resulting added reproductive imperfection includes not just noise, distortion and high-frequency loss but room acoustic.³³ Imperfections in instrumental technique are common,³⁴ performance noises such as coughing and sniffing³⁵ and page-turning³⁶ can be heard, and room acoustic and other evidence of the recording setting even extends to nocturnal crickets.³⁷

Discourse on Johnston almost always refers to him on a first-name basis, even outside Austin. While this practice is not unusual in popular music discourse, the extent of this convention in Johnston's case is, and he was not presented as an artist referred to by his first name, unlike, for example, Cher or Beck. Johnston can even be found referred to by his first name in the UK and in

³⁰ The motor of Johnston's tape recorder is clearly audible throughout, e.g. 1983c, 'Running Water.'

³¹ Repeated pressing of the 'play' and 'stop' or 'pause' buttons can be heard on Johnston 1981, 'Never Relaxed.'

³² The latter such as in Johnston 1981, 'Never Relaxed,' ca. 2:17.

³³ E.g. Johnston 1983c, 'No More Pushing Joe Around.'

³⁴ In 'Story of an Artist,' for example, Johnston can be heard playing the wrong chord (since the same sequence or variation does not appear anywhere else in the song) - 1982a, ca. 0:50.

³⁵ Johnston 1981, 'Grievances,' at the opening. This can be regarded as a clearing of the throat in preparation for a performance, and thus, to some extent, a part of the performance itself.

³⁶ Johnston 1981, 'A Little Story,' ca. 2:38.

³⁷ During one song Johnston can be heard moving away from the tape recorder (since reverb increases) to improvise on the harmonica. As this dies down, crickets can clearly be heard - 1982b, 'The Goldfish and the Frog,' from ca. 1:43.

Shank's monograph for a university press. The convention, which also applied to a lesser extent to Beat Happening (see the Chapter 5) probably reflects the perception of Johnston as childlike, and of his recordings as intimate and personal in nature.

'Glorious Low-Fi Tribalism': Primitivism and Distance from Technocratic Culture

When Jandek and Johnston were first written about, there was little sense of a category of 'lo-fi' in which they might have been included and understood. Rather, they were understood in the contexts of primitivism, independent music-recording and the anti-technocratic aesthetics in which these intersected. This primitivism would earn them inclusion in Chusid's *Songs in the Key of Z*, making them two of the most famous 'outsider musicians' by the 2000s (from which position they would inform the presentation and reception of Willis Earl Beal in 2012 - see Chapter 8). In the 1980s, Jandek and Johnston were frequently compared to and situated in the context of other 'primitive' artists that had come before them, namely Wild Man Fischer, the Shaggs, Hasil Adkins, Jonathan Richman, the Legendary Stardust Cowboy and Half Japanese. Jandek's first *Op* review in 1982 (as 'the Units') makes the connection clear:

The Units are completely enveloped in their own musical world. It shows in Smith's thin, strained voice, in his unusual guitar style, and in his oblique, personal lyrics. This enraptured quality is one of the strongest points of the album, and one The Units share with great primitives like 1/2 Japanese, The Shaggs, and the Legendary Stardust Cowboy.³⁸

³⁸ Milstein 1982.

In the first piece on Johnston in the national independent music press, a feature in *Sound Choice* in April 1987, it is noted that his home state of West Virginia 'spawned another reclusive twisted musical genius, Hasil Adkins,' and that Jonathan Richman had told Johnston that the latter reminded him of himself.³⁹ Another early article placed him 'in the same universe as Jandek and the Fair Bros., [i.e. Half Japanese].'⁴⁰

Jandek and Johnston were accordingly subject to much of the same kinds of primitivist aestheticisation as their apparent peers, regarding extremes of distance from technocracy in their amateurishness and other socio-cultural outsider status: childlikeness, mental illness and intellectual disability. Jandek and Johnston added to this aesthetic their 'primitive,' rudimentary equipment, and commanded such attention because this lent their 'twisted' aesthetic 'universe' a greater degree of unmediated realism than their forebears, as well as a more sonically demonstrated degree of distance from technocracy.

'Primitive' and 'primitivism' are themselves common terms in the reception of Jandek and Johnston. Jandek was often considered to have surpassed his primitive forebears - offering a 'truly unique primitivism,'⁴¹ appearing as 'a primitivist without any of the coyness/cuteness of Jonathan Richman or Beat Happening,'⁴² or 'not suffer[ing] from the calculated artsiness of primitive art rockers like Nick Cave.'⁴³ In more material terms, Jandek worked with a 'primitive reel-to-reel'⁴⁴ or in a 'primitively stark studio.'⁴⁵ Yet the more metaphorical associations ensuing from the use of the term 'primitive' as rudimentary were frequently made, and follow Lester Bangs's prehistoric take on primitivism.

³⁹ Anderson 1987, 25.

⁴⁰ Coley 1988b, 32.

⁴¹ Unterberger 1990.

⁴² Jackson 1989a.

⁴³ Jackson 1988b.

⁴⁴ Trubee & Rasen 1985.

⁴⁵ Coley 1987c, 30.

Jandek's music had a 'cave-dweller primitivism,'⁴⁶ 'pre-Neanderthal tubbing'⁴⁷ and 'tribal-hunch mysticism.'⁴⁸ One description revealingly combines the term 'lo-fi' with 'tribalism' - 'glorious low-fi tribalism' - all three terms here helping to describe and qualify each other.⁴⁹ Writers on Johnston frequently used 'primitive' to describe his recordings and equipment:⁵⁰ he used 'primitive keyboards,' *Yip/Jump Music* was 'extremely primitively recorded.'⁵¹ But they also demonstrated primitivism of a more general or cultural sort: Johnston hailed from 'backwoods America,'⁵² the term carrying at least a hint of 'backwards.'

Following the Godz, the Shaggs and Half Japanese, amateurism's performance imperfection was now closely associated with primitivism. As well as Milstein's assessment of 'overwhelming amateuriness,' Jandek was painted as a 'hopeless amateur,'⁵³ 'seemingly without any formal chordal knowledge,'⁵⁴ and a 'genius/amateur/fool wrapped together.'⁵⁵ One critic reported that many people found Johnston 'too naive. Too amateurish.'⁵⁶ By 1994, Johnston's recording equipment came within the ambit of amateurism, a quality with which 'indie rock' was noticeably fond: 'Johnston has never advanced beyond a high, thin wail and fitful chopsticks on guitars, piano, and tape recorder. It's okay with indie rock, which is wary of skill, warm to "authenticity", "integrity," and *naïfs* like Johnston in general.'⁵⁷ A 'tape recorder' thus became another musical instrument on which inability ('fitful chopsticks') can be demonstrated for the ends of 'authenticity' and 'integrity.'

⁴⁶ Chusid 2000, 57.

⁴⁷ Johnson 1988.

⁴⁸ Coley 1987c, 30.

⁴⁹ SP 1984.

⁵⁰ McRobbie 1990; Shank 1994, 154; Cohen 1995a, 70.

⁵¹ Dougan 1995, 431.

⁵² Bent 1988.

⁵³ Foster 1982.

⁵⁴ DeAngelis 1983.

⁵⁵ Johnson 1985a.

⁵⁶ True 1995.

⁵⁷ Schone 1994.

As this source hints by calling him a *naïf*, child-like qualities were a source of fascination in Johnston's reception.⁵⁸ Not only did Johnston use 'toy' musical instruments⁵⁹ or those of a 'child' or a 'kid',⁶⁰ but his voice, subjectivity and creativity were child-like. Johnston was a 'nervous, childlike vocalist',⁶¹ who sang in a 'boyishly vulnerable tremble'.⁶² He had a 'childlike demeanour'⁶³ and a 'childlike imagination'.⁶⁴ Child-like behaviour was expressed in his music-making: 'on first hearing, Daniel communicates on a far simpler, even childlike, level',⁶⁵ '[his songs] tell a story about a boy trying to reconcile his impossible romantic yearning and his huge artistic gift with his wretched place in the world',⁶⁶ he 'can only vent his pain like a frightened child'.⁶⁷ Some writers went further than simply characterising Johnston as young by assuming that he is 'obviously not mature'⁶⁸ and even by assuming him to be younger than he really was: 'Extremely lo-fidelity pop masterpiece by the obviously teenaged Daniel Johnston'.⁶⁹ Other writers noted the irony of a child-like adult. One found that 'Johnston is a 210-pound, 33-year-old kid'.⁷⁰ Yazdani's detailed account observed the antagonism of co-existing child-like and adult elements, calling him, in a description that parallels his reduced technocracy, a 'fun-loving kid trapped in a body that doesn't obey'.⁷¹

⁵⁸ Such fascination was not wholly positive but was rarely negative. Unterberger, however, called his music 'cloying kiddie rock' - Unterberger 1998, 156-157.

⁵⁹ E.g. Johnston's chord organ: Anderson 1985, 25; Neo 1989; Blackstock 1989; Jackson 1989b. Johnston's guitar is also considered practically a toy, especially when it's given as a 'Roy Rogers guitar,' a particular make of child-size toy guitar, e.g. Anderson 1987, 25; Bent 1990.

⁶⁰ Bent 1989, Ciaffardini 1987; Chusid 2000, 68.

⁶¹ Blackstock 1989.

⁶² Robbins 1987b.

⁶³ Cohen 1995a, 70.

⁶⁴ McLeese 1994, 33.

⁶⁵ True 1992b.

⁶⁶ Walters (1994) 2011, 140-141.

⁶⁷ Schone 1994.

⁶⁸ Black (1985) 2011, 47.

⁶⁹ Fioretti 1987b.

⁷⁰ McLeese 1994, 33.

⁷¹ Yazdani 1999, 33-34, 75.

Even Jandek was considered childlike. He 'Sometimes... sounds like the 13-year-old who's just gotten his first electric for his Bar Mitzvah,'⁷² his music was 'colorfully abstract, in the same fashion as your four-year-old daughter's artwork... innocent and simplistic,'⁷³ but less innocently, it also had 'that frighteningly childlike mixture of longing and barely-concealed rage.'⁷⁴ Jandek was described as a 'boy,'⁷⁵ even a 'whimpering lost boy,'⁷⁶ and, with connotations of lower social class, a 'trailer park teen.'⁷⁷ It might, for commentators, also be due to similar poverty, laziness or other impairments that Jandek could still be using the 'guitar he was given as a child.'⁷⁸ Childlike qualities cannot be considered a profound trend in Jandek's reception however, and he is just as likely to be perceived as adult, even old - 'ol' Mr. Jandek,' for example.⁷⁹

Other, more general accounts of regression or distance from technocratic culture are evident, however. The subtitle of Chusid's chapter on Jandek is 'The Ultimate Disconnect,' and in it Jandek was portrayed as quintessentially removed from conventional music and everyday life. He was described as an 'alien' who may have been retrieved by a 'mothership.'⁸⁰ Other writers have called his music 'Martian-bluesy' and 'an alien's translation of side two of Neil Young's *On the Beach*.'⁸¹ He was also removed from civilisation in being a 'one-person tribe'⁸² and imagined to be (as the Lomaxes hoped folksingers such as Lead Belly would be) 'oblivious to the radio, or... he doesn't care.'⁸³ Coley observed: 'Jandek's voice and playing exude such a strong sense of "otherness," that I have a

⁷² Unterberger 1998, 157

⁷³ Jackson 1989a.

⁷⁴ Anderson 1991.

⁷⁵ Huntsberger 1982.

⁷⁶ *Lowlife* [1986?].

⁷⁷ Chusid 2000, 59.

⁷⁸ Huntsberger 1982.

⁷⁹ *College Music Journal* 1991.

⁸⁰ Chusid 2000, 64, 61.

⁸¹ Jackson 1989a.

⁸² SP 1984.

⁸³ Unterberger 1986c, 22.

tendency to think of him as being alone whether there's evidence of others' presence on his records or not'⁸⁴ Jandek 'lives his life separate from the music world. And seemingly lives his life separate from the world period... he refuses to play the game... he's the man from another time.'⁸⁵

But while he did refer to Jandek as an 'alien,' Chusid also characterised him as 'an authentic human satellite, orbiting in a chilly weightless dimension thousands of miles from earth.'⁸⁶ It was not only his extreme distance from the conventions of civilisation that makes Jandek so alluringly exotic, but the fact that this distance has been traversed by an 'authentic human,' and furthermore that this great distance was collapsed in the intimacy and realism of the recording medium. Few sources better express this simultaneously maintained and collapsed distance better than a review in the *College Music Journal*: 'Jandek lives next door to someone far away.' It is 'someplace where 'music' is an expression of emotion and not a packaged entertainment; made for self, rather than for an audience.'⁸⁷

'Frail, Imperfect, Pathetic': Recording Imperfections

Though phonographic imperfection was hardly the most noticeably unusual dimension of Jandek's recordings, or even the prevailing feature (as it would be for some 2000s artists) of Johnston's, both artists prominently brought phonographic and other recording imperfections within the anti-technocratic aesthetics of they were seen to embody. They were a clear characteristic of the recordings that writers regularly addressed but argued should be tolerated for the purposes of finding the deeper appeal. Recording imperfections should not have

⁸⁴ Coley 1987c, 30.

⁸⁵ Callahan 1990.

⁸⁶ Chusid 2000, 58.

⁸⁷ Black 1987.

been judged negatively, especially not in ignorance of deeper appeals such as truth and cultural purity. In the same way that Zappa's recurring interest in the 'bizarre' was portrayed as objective and scholarly, however, this narrative of overcoming lo-fi effects for a greater good rationalised a growing interest in lo-fi effects in themselves and as evidence of the challengingly primitive and the authentic. Described with particular regularity and fascination, they were becoming a part of the aesthetic as indexes of lesser technocracy and of realism - the whole and genuine article - and even as an appropriate or, very occasionally, beneficial accompaniment to the music.

The prevailing imperfection in Jandek's music was considered to be its 'tuneless'⁸⁸ quality, referring to its lack of melody but also to the absence of conventional tuning in the voice and, what was more unusual, the guitar. Jandek's guitar was overwhelmingly considered 'out of tune,'⁸⁹ and 'untuned'⁹⁰ rather than alternatively tuned. It was thus a regression from musical norms, a form of impairment congruent with the reduction in sound quality - like the cracking folk voice and styrofoam cup of Chapter 2, Jandek's tuning was in effect an early, analogical form of 'lo-fi,' enacted within the bounds of a familiar instrument rather than the recording equipment the term typically implies.

The 'biggest constant' in Jandek's music was 'his untuned guitar,'⁹¹ it was 'that trademark out-of-tune guitar.'⁹² One reviewer even imagined that it had 'never been tuned.'⁹³ Vine described Jandek's guitar as 'horribly out of tune, yet he strums away as if nothing is wrong,'⁹⁴ while *Op* declared 'may he never tune

⁸⁸ Foster 1982, Mills 1992.

⁸⁹ Parsons 1985.

⁹⁰ SP 1984, Unterberger 1986a, Unterberger 1988.

⁹¹ Unterberger 1986c, 22.

⁹² Unterberger 1985.

⁹³ Huntsberger 1982.

⁹⁴ Vine 1999.

his guitar.⁹⁵ More usually, however, a sense of whether Jandek's lack of tuning is to be considered appealing or detrimental usually remained ambiguous. In many cases, this was due to the philosophy of magazines like *Op* and *Sound Choice* not to make value judgement unduly, especially when it came to technocratically disadvantaged music-making. Whether Jandek's lack of tuning was a choice or the result of a lack of traditional musicianship (and which of these was the case could not be established), it was to be respected - or more than that, found fascinating as part of a primitivist realism.

Even if tuning was the salient imperfection, the sound quality of Jandek's recordings was regularly addressed, and increasingly as 'lo-fi' specifically. Writers on Jandek refer to 'the muddy, distorted sound quality,'⁹⁶ 'the most low-fi production values currently available on vinyl,'⁹⁷ and, conflating it with cheapness, 'bargain-basement production values.'⁹⁸ Philip Milstein's first review of Jandek in 1982, though such an early source, provides a detailed and sympathetic account of lo-fi aesthetics. Opening his review by announcing that 'Sterling Smith has created an album that is homemade in every way, and it is a joy to listen to,' Milstein noted errors in the operation of the microphone and tape recorder as part of an 'overwhelming amateurism' and a 'rough-edged crudity' that were 'endearing' and carried 'a sweet beauty' respectively:

Another endearing characteristic of *Ready for the House* is its overwhelming amateurism. The rough-edged crudity of each touch seems almost deliberate, but it carries a sweet beauty that a more polished production would probably have softened. The p's pop, the s's hiss, and after every song there's an odd and abrupt slamming sound, perhaps that of the tape recorder being shut off. The last song on the record, the electric one, is billed on the sleeve as "incomplete" and

⁹⁵ SP 1984.

⁹⁶ Hinton 1987a.

⁹⁷ Unterberger 1990.

⁹⁸ Morris 1989.

indeed it is: the record ends in the middle of the song, as if Smith ran out of tape at just that spot when recording.⁹⁹

In the same vein as Milstein in 1985, John Trubee and Edward Rasen's *Spin* article on Jandek observed that 'occasionally, he hits the microphone or knocks it over his guitar, imbuing the song with a charming, homemade quality.'¹⁰⁰ That doings so is 'charming' and 'homemade' probably implies that Trubee considered it 'primitive,' accidental or clumsy rather than the destructive rock-'n'-roll gesture it could have been.

In his feature on Jandek, Unterberger noted issues of recording quality and performance noises consecutively, as part of the same description:

The recording quality on every record is uniformly raunchy, and almost always over or undermodulated. Often one can hear him awkwardly bumping into his mike, the chair squeaking underneath him, his foot thudding on the floor as a number awkwardly falters to a close.¹⁰¹

One reviewer conflated recording quality and such non-phonographic imperfections more succinctly, referring to the record as 'even more... glitch-filled and low-fi than usual.'¹⁰² Yet some glitches were more acceptable than others.

Bill Callahan (who would later form the band Smog) concluded a review of Jandek's *On the Way* in his fanzine *Disaster* by correcting a bad listener:

I read a review of this in some fanzine that complained that you could hear the sound of Jandek's stool squeaking throughout this records. I can't let this issue go to bed without correcting that fanzine. The sound is of fingers moving up frets.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Milstein 1982.

¹⁰⁰ Trubee & Rasen 1985.

¹⁰¹ Unterberger 1986c, 22.

¹⁰² Anderson 1991.

¹⁰³ Callahan 1990.

Callahan substitutes a less acceptable performance noise for one more acceptable - more traditional and more instrumental. He defends Jandek against those who think he makes mistakes by pointing them out as indexes of quality and authenticity.

As well as 'primitive,' one of the terms that in the 1980s suggested the meanings 'lo-fi' would go on to carry since the 1990s (and be used in the OED's definition of 'lo-fi') was 'minimal.' Jandek's music was 'usually very minimal,'¹⁰⁴ was 'minimalist driftage.'¹⁰⁵ Johnston's was, as well as 'minimal'¹⁰⁶ and 'minimalist,'¹⁰⁷ 'sparse'¹⁰⁸ and 'stark.'¹⁰⁹ One usage indicates that 'minimalist' was a multivalent term suggesting an untechnocratic retention of performance noise just as much as its usual denoting of decreased use of more traditionally musical forces: 'the sound of Johnston turning the page completes the minimalist ambience of the tune.'¹¹⁰ By stricter definitions of the term, the turning of a page would not be, in itself, a 'minimalist' gesture - here it appears to carry connotations like those of 'humble' and even of amateurism and unprofessionalism, as if it were an early term for what would become 'lo-fi.'

While performance imperfections are abundant in Johnston's recordings, phonographic imperfections were just as striking, and more so than on Jandek's recordings - certainly well below the standards encouraged in cassette culture discourse and almost unprecedented for so prominent an artist - and though it was Johnston's singing of songs which writers insisted should command the most attention, responses to his earlier home-recorded cassettes seldom fail to mention this aspect. His rise to prominence occurs in clear parallel with that of

¹⁰⁴ *Lowlife* [1986?].

¹⁰⁵ Chusid 1986, 63.

¹⁰⁶ McRobbie 1990, Bagato 1991.

¹⁰⁷ Bent 1988, Weisbard 1995b, 200.

¹⁰⁸ *Buttrag* [1989?]a, McGrall [1989-1990?]a.

¹⁰⁹ Ciaffardini 1987, Everett True 1992b, True 1995.

¹¹⁰ Fioretti 1989.

the term 'lo-fi':¹¹¹ in 1987 one of Johnston's first national reviews called *Hi, How Are You* a 'lo-fidelity pop masterpiece,' and in 1996, Johnston's entry in Kemp's 'Lo-Fi Top Ten' began 'this practitioner of the lo-fi aesthetic.'¹¹² The term usually referred to 'recordings,'¹¹³ particularly in the common, increasingly tautological formulation 'lo-fi home-recordings.'¹¹⁴ Similarly, in a later text, his songs were 'lo-fidelity, bedroom-with-tape-recorder affairs.'¹¹⁵ The term 'no-fi,' implying a particularly extreme degree of lo-fi effects, was also used.¹¹⁶

Johnston's 'pop songs' themselves are 'lo-fi,'¹¹⁷ 'lo-fi' is an adverb specifying a recording technique¹¹⁸ and an 'aesthetic,' one which Johnston had 'scrapped' in order to record *Fun*.¹¹⁹ A *Rolling Stone* reviewer in 1992 suggested that the lo-fi production caused the artist to identify the album as a demo tape: 'The production is so low-fi that... Johnston announces, "This is a demo... we hope you like it... send us some money"' - notably, this review nonetheless ended with the words 'this is the real thing,' implying not just that the demo was the true form of the album (even just in spirit) but asserting it as representing a deeper authenticity.¹²⁰

One statement that encapsulates Johnston's role in a transition to lo-fi aesthetics appeared as the conclusion of a *Hi, How Are You* review in 1989: 'lovers of low-fi, unhinged music (stand up and be counted) will find this indispensable.'¹²¹ The term 'low-fi' still uses the refinement 'unhinged,' which

¹¹¹ Note that national-scale writing on Jandek starts five years earlier than on Johnston, and peaks at around 1986-7, when use of the term 'lo-fi' was still less common than it would be a few years later.

¹¹² Kemp 1996, 429.

¹¹³ E.g. *Spin* 1995.

¹¹⁴ Black 1989, 40; McLeese 1994, 33.

¹¹⁵ Lewis 1995.

¹¹⁶ Chusid 2000, 70.

¹¹⁷ *Buttrag* [1989?]a.

¹¹⁸ 'Recorded lo-fi on a cheap Sanyo tape recorder...' - Bent 1989.

¹¹⁹ Schone 1994.

¹²⁰ Robbins 1992, 42.

¹²¹ Neo 1989.

recalls the primitivism attributed to Half Japanese, Hasil Adkins or The Legendary Stardust Cowboy, but the implication that there might be a 'low-fi... music,' and that its adherents should now stand up and be counted, anticipates the 1990s categorisation of 'lo-fi.'

In general, the term 'lo-fi' and its variants are increasingly used as descriptive short-hands in the second half of the 1980s - more detailed descriptions do not use it. In Johnston's first review (1985), sound quality and recording context are separable but humorously juxtaposed: 'it sounds like it was recorded in somebody's living room on a ghetto blaster. (It was).'¹²² A resoundingly positive review on the following page conceded that 'yeah... all his musical masterpieces have been recorded on machines a secretary might use for dictation.'¹²³ Phonographic imperfection is implied by its opposite in a similar comment: '*Hi, How Are You* is the first of Daniel's celebrated series of "homemade" tapes to make it on to vinyl. We're not talking hi-fi here - the entire LP sounds like it could have been recorded on someone's answering machine'¹²⁴ - unlike cassette culture discourse, the writer takes an association between a 'home-made' cassette and low fidelity for granted.

This association is cemented with Johnston's reception, in which 'homemade' is a common term, usually as part of the phrase 'homemade cassettes'¹²⁵ (shortened to 'home cassette[s]'¹²⁶) or 'homemade recordings.'¹²⁷ By 1993, Johnston's early cassettes were being advertised by Stress records with the heading 'Lo-Fi Homemade Cassettes.'¹²⁸ Alternately, Johnston's 'lo-fi

¹²² Dorsett (1985) 2011.

¹²³ Ciaffardini 1987.

¹²⁴ Bent 1988.

¹²⁵ Kemp 1996, 429; Weisbard 1995b, 200.

¹²⁶ Ashby 1989.

¹²⁷ Dougan 1990b.

¹²⁸ *Stress Records* 1993.

recordings' were 'homegrown'¹²⁹ and his 'home tapes' had a 'homespun, innocent, raw feeling'¹³⁰ and a 'lo-fi downhome-ness' - the colloquial American phrase 'down-home' implying not only, in this case, the home but a simple, unpretentious and wholesome lifestyle or philosophy of the sort associated with the rural South.¹³¹ Other rooms within homes were also specified or implied in order to convey low production values: the kitchen,¹³² bedroom,¹³³ garage¹³⁴ or 'my room.'¹³⁵

One review made a point of addressing and disarming a potential prejudice towards 'homemade cassettes' by insisting that assumptions about their unmusicality should be discarded:

I've no idea what a pre-conceived ideas you might have about Daniel Johnston, probably the same ones you'd have about anyone that puts their music out via homemade cassettes; that they must be untalented, unmusical and pretty much f***ed-up. While the latter isn't exactly conspicuous by its absence, you better forget everything else, because these are songs of intensity and passion with some of the prettiest melodies you'll ever hear. Granted, the primitive recording doesn't make for easy listening, but if that's all you want from music, you better stick with the new House Of Lump or next lump of House.¹³⁶

Here, 'talent' and 'music' turn out to mean 'intensity,' 'passion' and 'the prettiest melodies you'll ever hear.' Both a listener's assumptions about 'homemade cassettes' and the challenge of 'the primitive recording' together risk obscuring its discovery. If the listener is not willing to put these aspects aside, they are left with less challenging music, framed as a poor second best.

¹²⁹ Black 1989, 39.

¹³⁰ Yves Beauvais, quoted in McLeese 1994, 34.

¹³¹ Bent 1990.

¹³² Ciaffardini 1992, 63.

¹³³ Lewis 1995.

¹³⁴ Bent 1988.

¹³⁵ 'Amateurish in-my-room cassettes' - Robbins 1992, 42.

¹³⁶ McRobbie 1990. 'House of Lump' is a pun on The House of Love, a leading UK indie rock band of the late 80s.

With such attention to 'homemade cassettes,' one might expect Johnston to have played a greater role in cassette culture discourse, but this is not the case. Johnston embodies the growing divergence of 'lo-fi,' which derived from an aesthetics of amateur primitivism, from cassette culture, which regularly claimed to rival professional musical technocracy. Johnston was further removed from cassette culture when two of his cassette albums were released on vinyl by a prominent indie label (this was the point when, for example, *Option* magazine started to review Johnston). Cassette culture fanzine *Gajoob*, which rarely used the term 'lo-fi' and instead gave a brief assessment of sound quality alongside each review, described the sound of Johnston's *Don't Be Scared* as 'poor to fair.'¹³⁷ 'Lo-fi' as a term and indeed 'homemade cassettes' constructed as lo-fi were only useful outside of cassette culture, where they served as descriptive and aesthetic negotiations with listeners uninvolved in cassette culture's more progressive rhetoric.

Further illustrating the differentiation of cassette culture and lo-fi is the fascination commentators had with the crudeness and cheapness of Jandek's and Johnston's instruments and equipment. In most cases this involved the simple application of the adjective 'cheap' to instruments, tape recorders and tape stock itself. Jandek, for example, is imagined to be using a 'cheap amp... an old cheap microphone'¹³⁸ and a 'cheap tape player.'¹³⁹ With cheapness, as with the 'primitive,' traditional musical instruments, electrical musical equipment and recording equipment all fell within the same category. Cheapness was regularly underlined by appending prices or brand names: Jandek might have been using a 'Sears guitar,'¹⁴⁰ Johnston used a 'Sears chord organ'¹⁴¹ and a 'Roy Rogers

¹³⁷ *Gajoob* 1990.

¹³⁸ Huntsberger 1982.

¹³⁹ Unterberger 1986c, 22.

¹⁴⁰ Huntsberger 1982.

guitar.¹⁴² His 'homegrown cassettes' were 'recorded on a \$59 Sanyo ghetto-blaster on the cheapest tape available,¹⁴³ is specified elsewhere as 'Radio Shack tape stock.'¹⁴⁴ Alternately, his guitars were simply 'off-brand.'¹⁴⁵ Johnston could make music using multiple instruments with differently low prices: 'Give him a ten dollar kid's chord organ or a five dollar guitar and he'll be able to play you pop, R&B, blues, tin pan alley, new wave, do-wop.'¹⁴⁶ The 'cheapest sound imaginable' was found in Johnston's culmination of 'toys,' 'plastic,' 'randomness' and 'TV garbage.'¹⁴⁷ He even 'plunks a cheap acoustic guitar like a Jandek groupie.'¹⁴⁸

It was typically argued that Johnston the musical artist was differentiable from and should not be reduced to his impairments and impediments, be they cheap resources, technical deficiencies and other lo-fi effects, or his mental illness. This narrative emerged particularly clearly in the mid-1990s with the reception of McCarty's album of covers *Dead Dog's Eyeball*. On this album many of Johnston's most famous songs were fully orchestrated and professionally recorded, which was considered not just an improvement on their original home-recorded context but a demonstration that Johnston's songs transcended their lo-fi context.¹⁴⁹ McCarty was explicit about her aim to separate Johnston's songs from their impoverished and impeded context - as she was quoted in *Option*:

What I really wanted to do is show people who consider Daniel a real bizarre, poke-fun-at-it thing that they're

¹⁴¹ Azerrad 1994c.

¹⁴² Anderson 1987, 25; Bent 1990. This refers to a particular make of child-size toy guitar sold under the name of a Hollywood cowboy actor.

¹⁴³ Black 1989, 39.

¹⁴⁴ Yazdani 1999.

¹⁴⁵ Chusid 2000, 68.

¹⁴⁶ Ciaffardini 1987.

¹⁴⁷ Weisbard 1995b, 200.

¹⁴⁸ Neo 1989.

¹⁴⁹ The same could not be said for much of the lo-fi music of the 2000s, when lo-fi effects were considered, for example, 'the most important instrument' on an Ariel Pink recording - see Chapter 7.

missing the point... his music doesn't have to be presented in such a way that his personal eccentricity is the focal point.¹⁵⁰

This was certainly how reviewers saw it - the album provided them with a chance to note the shortcomings of the original recordings without betraying Johnston. Indeed, the final credit went to him - '*Dead Dog's Eyeball* proves decisively that Johnston really is a deeply talented songwriter,' found one reviewer¹⁵¹ - even when it came to the arrangements, which Johnston had 'blueprinted.'¹⁵²

Some writers, however, found the lo-fi context of Jandek and Johnston less detachable from a wider aesthetics of their music, or even found it appropriate or mildly appealing in itself: 'somehow the US DIY network has allowed Johnston perfect space. His incredible, fragile, desperate persona creeps out through these low-fi songs,¹⁵³ 'the minimal presentation works just fine.'¹⁵⁴ For Ciaffardini, the 'messiness' and imperfections of Jandek's *Foreign Keys* were a 'beautiful' part of a frail, material and human reality:

It might sound like a mess, like a lost cause, but it's real, so real... the imperfections, the clumsiness... the music is beautiful, flesh and blood real, frail, imperfect, pathetic even, but human; music that you rarely hear but is always all around.¹⁵⁵

Ciaffardini saw Johnston in a similar way - 'the lo-fi recordings are an exact fit' for a singer/songwriter who channelled the blues of Robert Johnson.¹⁵⁶ Or as Chusid put it in a revealingly contradictory way: 'forget the occasional signal dropouts and incessant tape hiss - that's part of the charm.'¹⁵⁷ He leaves it ambiguous as to whether listeners are actually supposed to 'forget' the lo-fi effects - ignore

¹⁵⁰ Kathy McCarty, quoted in Cohen 1995b.

¹⁵¹ Azerrad 1994c.

¹⁵² Cohen 1995b.

¹⁵³ Sinker 1989.

¹⁵⁴ McRobbie 1990.

¹⁵⁵ Ciaffardini 1986. Both ellipses in original.

¹⁵⁶ Ciaffardini 1987.

¹⁵⁷ Chusid 2000, 71.

them, filter them out - or whether they should take them in and find them part of the 'charm.' This statement succinctly expresses the contradictions of listening and lo-fi effects in the reception of Jandek's and (especially) Johnston's recordings - contradictions that, in many cases we will later examine, formed a rhetoric of struggle. Their music was portrayed as transcending its imperfect surface, but this act of transcendence - perceived only by the 'good,' discerning listener - reinstated and relied on the powerful pathos of the surface itself and the distance it connoted.

'So Real it Hurts': Personal Reality, Nakedness and Expressiveness

Yet the collapse of this distance provided much of Jandek and Johnston's authenticity and power. The ostensibly unmediated and authentic nature of their recordings was considered a precious virtue. Lo-fi effects - the 'warts' in the expression 'warts and all' - underscored a reduction of technocratic mediation, and a consequent rhetoric of 'personal' directness and 'reality' was conflated with the expression of challengingly painful emotion: as one sentence in the *Allmusic Guide to Rock* put it, 'Johnston's music is unflinchingly direct, almost embarrassingly and painfully honest.'¹⁵⁸ Terms such as 'honest,' 'naked,' 'true' and 'real' were common, as was a sense of 'revealing' what was 'personal,' 'private' and 'intimate.' It was this realism - the 'photoreal,' unflinching, documentary quality of tape - with which Jandek and Johnston outdid their 'primitive' forbears, evaporating the playful humour surrounding acts like The Shaggs and Half Japanese and commanding the utmost seriousness and attention (as the Berger quote that opened this chapter showed). Authenticating

¹⁵⁸ Dougan 1995.

narratives of Jandek and Johnston's home-recording context as the quintessential site of independent music further emphasised this. To all intents and purposes, all cultural frames surrounding 'the primitive' vanished, bringing listeners into precious, close and intense 'first-person' contact with the artist himself.

Few sources express this aesthetic more comprehensively and more influentially than Ciaffardini's review of several Johnston cassettes in the Winter Solstice 1987 issue of *Sound Choice*. At a little over thirteen-hundred words long, Ciaffardini's text is far longer than the reviews surrounding it, contains no paragraph breaks, and no detail on the specific cassettes under review. Instead it is a seemingly off-the-cuff and deeply passionate apology for Johnston himself that becomes an attack on multiple targets - ignorant, superficial or callous listeners (bad listeners), Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, music-industry 'assholes' and America itself. The review appeared alongside two others of Johnston's music, neither nearly as long, one positive and one roundly negative, the latter stating:

Don't know if this guy is serious or not, but either way, I'd hate to see the audience that goes for this one. Poor recording, poor musicianship and nerdy vocals, all wrapped up in morbid superficial lyrics. Playing solo, or so it seems, with a frequently out-of-tune guitar, Johnston's scratchy wheedling voices instantly abrades the nerves and patience... it drowns in wimpy ambience and flopsweat. If I could find anything redeeming to say, I would. I can't. I'll pass.¹⁵⁹

Following this, Ciaffardini's opening words are 'how can good people say such bad things about Daniel?' These are probably the earliest reviews of Johnston in a national publication, and two years later, while advertising back issues, *Sound*

¹⁵⁹ Tucker 1987.

Choice itself would claim that Ciaffardini's text had 'echoed 'round the world.'¹⁶⁰

Ciaffardini's unusually and strikingly emphatic statement on Johnston likely had considerable impact on independent music discourse, promoting not just Johnston but a certain aesthetic of him that can be encountered everywhere in his subsequent reception.

Although his review had much to say on Johnston as an heir to folk and blues traditions, on the shameful way people won't listen properly (the text includes five entreaties to 'listen') and on the destructive effect of exploiting Johnston, its primary theme was Johnston's honesty and reality:

Daniel Johnston [is] the most gut-wrenchingly honest singer/songwriter of the decade. No one else even comes close. Hemingway said that writing was like sitting at the typewriter and bleeding. Daniel's songs however, tear open his gut and crack open his head for everyone to stare into. Hardened, cynical people will miss it completely and it is a crying shame... When Daniel sings about graveyards - oh why don't these people listen! - it is not trendy ghoulishness, it is because the woman who Daniel loved went off and married a gravedigger, for real. The story is in the six tapes, five years of his teetering life, for all to scrutinize... Yeah, and all his musical masterpieces have been recorded on machines a secretary might use for dictation. And the musicianship is simple, perfectly simple, can't these people hear? And the lo-fi recordings are an exact fit. There has never been a singer, except maybe those old-time, all but extinct blues singers, whose style is more suited to such a simple set up. Turn it up, way up. Daniel's voice is there, every bit of it. You hear more emotion and raw nerve than you will hear from a million dollars worth of studio equipment, a million dollars more... Daniel Johnston is the missing link that Bob Dylan, mister tell-the-truth-the-way-it-is-Mr. Jones never gave us. Daniel gives us the truth about HIMSELF... we can't really laugh at Daniel. His plight is too close to home, it is no campy joke... Daniel offers something Springsteen doesn't: stark first person, all-American personal reality. Springsteen offers images and dreams for America. Daniel gives us something more real: his soul, his fears, and his naked, raw, clumsy love... The story, the actual voice of his mom, is there among the tapes... if you're an asshole, don't even bother coming

¹⁶⁰ *Sound Choice* 1989.

around because we know what you're up to. We know that you eat guys like Daniel for breakfast, wrap them up in wet contract blankets and dump them into the mainstream river going down slow... be warned Assholes, stay away from Daniel or else.¹⁶¹

Johnston's songs are so intimately honest that even their mediation through his own singing and playing of instruments disappears, let alone that of technological and music-industrial frames: we (and we is 'everyone') can go to the extreme of peering through a 'tear' in 'his gut' and a 'crack' in 'his head.' Johnston's truth, his 'stark first person, all-American personal reality,' exceeds that of Dylan and Springsteen, because 'Daniel gives us the truth about HIMSELF' and because 'Daniel gives us something more real: his soul, his fears, and his naked, raw, clumsy love,' respectively. Similarly, Johnston's story is not 'trendy', rather, it is 'for real,' and anyone doubting this can consult the 'tapes,' where 'Daniel's voice is there, every bit of it,' even 'the actual voice of his mom,' who often challenged Johnston about the worth of his music-making hobbies. In Mrs. Johnston's voice, a lo-fi effect - an intervening environment noise - literally equates to a bad listener, where the association is usually at more of a remove.

It is unsurprising then, that Ciaffardini makes the leap to fidelity, with 'the lo-fi recordings [being] an exact fit,' recalling for him both 'those old-time, all but extinct blues singers' and, negatively, the comparative folly of 'a million dollars worth of studio equipment, a million dollars more.' He recognises a deeper truth, that Johnston's music is honest, simple and traditional in ways that those who cannot listen properly and those 'assholes' would not even be able to appreciate. He claims the higher ground, the high road - note the highly territorial language of 'be warned Assholes, stay away from Daniel or else.'¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Ciaffardini 1987.

¹⁶² See also Ciaffardini 1992, 63.

Twelve years later, Yazdani's introduction to Johnston elaborated on this theme of the vanished 'distinction' intervening between art and life, the sort that confounds mainstream listeners and can even be 'a dangerous thing.' As in Ciaffardini's review, she drew the cultural battle lines between 'those who know' (good listeners) and those who would have Johnston abandon the reality that makes him so valuable and 'fake it.'¹⁶³ Johnston embodied a hyper-authenticity - he was positioned as the ultimate in Moore's first-person authenticity. Recognising this authenticity rather than mistakenly hearing only 'poor recording, poor musicianship' was a major source of cultural capital Hibbett observes at work in indie rock.

A *Melody Maker* review by Mark Sinker takes a similar position to Ciaffardini and Yazdani. A rare expression of Moore's second-person authenticity, it used a particularly pronounced form of the more poetic language typical of the British newspaper, also finding Johnston's position 'dangerous':

Think of the bedsit solace that some consumers turn to singers for, from Al Stewart down to Morrissey. It's a master/slave relationship that a critic can hardly approve of. When we give ourselves over "totally" to the intensity of sound, it's a ploy - we remain in control. S/M is an adult's game, for us.

Johnston sings for the slaves, opening up a picture of the achingly vulnerable pleasure of submersion. The dangers. The Anorak fan-wimpsters played this for (nervous) laughs, and the hatred they engendered showed that the thrill of the threat of no-self was getting through. Johnston is there for real, deconstructing the allure.¹⁶⁴

Again, Johnston is present, is 'there,' and the medium of his being so is his take on 'bedsit solace' whose mode of 'consumption' is 'giv[ing] ourselves over "totally" to the intensity of sound,' the pains and pleasures of which are likened to S&M.

¹⁶³ Yazdani 1999, 1-3.

¹⁶⁴ Sinker 1989.

But this 'consumption' by bad listeners, 'Anorak fan-wimpsters,' is undermined through Johnston's deconstruction of 'the allure,' a 'threat of no-self' that brings on nervous laughter and hatred. Although written in a very different style, Sinker's account of Johnston's creative platform and his relation to uncomprehending listeners is remarkably similar to Ciaffardini's.

Many other sources describe Johnston's music as having a painful or threatening effect on the listener, the implication being that that is desirable (as in Sinker's S&M), and derive this from the 'reality' of the recordings. A passage in *Hi, How Are You*, for example, is described as 'so real it hurts.'¹⁶⁵ With its connotations of soreness, this is very much the meaning 'raw' has in the reception of Jandek and Johnston (as opposed to in punk rock and *Maximumrocknroll*, where it more often connotes intensity and general positivity). For those writing about Johnston's music, it had 'raw nerve,' raw described his 'clumsy love,'¹⁶⁶ 'naked honesty,'¹⁶⁷ and is even used on less abstract concepts: Johnston's 'pop songs,'¹⁶⁸ and 'piano backing.'¹⁶⁹ 'Raw' appeared in emphatic statements of description: 'These are definitely raw recordings. About as raw as they get,'¹⁷⁰ or 'Daniel Johnston songs are brutally raw.'¹⁷¹ Jandek's recordings were 'live, raw and naked,'¹⁷² or presented a 'sixties garage-band psychedelia trip in its most raw, sincere form.'¹⁷³

Yazdani's descriptions of Johnston's early cassettes closely associated the 'intimacy' of Johnston, more pressing than the 'bad' 'sound,' with the unflinching recording medium:

¹⁶⁵ Bent 1989.

¹⁶⁶ Ciaffardini 1987.

¹⁶⁷ *Buttrag* [1989?]a.

¹⁶⁸ Armstong 1995.

¹⁶⁹ Bagato 1991.

¹⁷⁰ *Gajoob* 1990.

¹⁷¹ True 1995.

¹⁷² Johnson 1985a.

¹⁷³ Ciaffardini 1986.

The sound is horrifying low-fi and amateurish, a one-take, bumbling, desperate bid to get these creations out of his head and onto the record of human experience. But while the sound is bad, the most shocking thing about the tapes is their intense intimacy. The songs themselves are personal, full of shared secrets, but Daniel's early recorded performances reveal every follicle and pore. They are portraits done too close to flatter, cringingly personal matters revealed, recorded, and later given away to strangers in such an innocent, careless manner.¹⁷⁴

Later, Yazdani quotes Texan singer/songwriter Wammo on Johnston:

For Wammo, Daniel's appeal was always "the complete lack of bullshit. He just completely peels off his skin, every compulsion, every need, fear, it's right there, the heartbreak with a little dash of humor and a twist of irony and bitterness."¹⁷⁵

Here it is the intervention of 'bullshit' that disappears to reveal the innards of the body in Johnston's case.

The materiality of the body and its organs, especially the internal ones, are what listeners are brought into direct contact with in many accounts of honesty and reality - note the word 'visceral' and its common coupling with 'reality,' implying both internal tissue and a deep, basic sensory experience. For Ciaffardini it was Hemingway's 'bleeding,' the cracked head (the brain) and the gut, for Yazdani it was 'every follicle and pore,' and Wammo goes further, seeing Johnston peel off his skin. There is also a sense of 'raw' which can imply both uncooked meat and a damaged and sensitive area of skin, even a wound. Writing about the record on which Jad Fair and Daniel Johnston collaborated, one reviewer put it 'Jad Fair and Daniel Johnston are the only two people who can get away with something like this (go away Jonathan Richman) because they're

¹⁷⁴ Yazdani 1999, 8.

¹⁷⁵ Wammo [William David Walker], quoted in Yazdani 1999, 67-68.

practically bleeding it, trying as hard as they can, it's totally real.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, when Johnston abandoned the medium of his early cassettes, Chusid found him 'bloodless.'¹⁷⁷ In another review (we have already seen) with the same passionate register, this one written nearly two years earlier about a Jandek record, Ciaffardini associated 'imperfections,' 'clumsiness,' 'frail[ty]' and being pathetic with both beauty and a 'flesh and blood' reality.¹⁷⁸ Byron Coley explored themes of the visceral with one of the more lurid descriptive passages on Jandek: 'this one sounds like a man who has climbed inside his corpse to serenade his withered vital organs.'¹⁷⁹ This simile offers the reverse of exposing innards to the world, a solipsistic venturing even further within the self, beyond even physical possibility and thus paradoxical.

The internal organ most often referred to is, unsurprisingly, the heart, the exposure of which represents emotional expression. Jandek 'lets the air out of his heart'¹⁸⁰ and 'emotions lay stripped like a palpitating heart in the noon-day sun.'¹⁸¹ Johnston was 'a songwriter and performer whose most public voice speaks the yearnings, dreams, and experience of a terrible private heart,'¹⁸² and 'he can't help but write from his heart.'¹⁸³ And whereas 'most people go through life collecting layers of emotional armor,' 'Johnston's heart is wide open.'¹⁸⁴ Drawing a still more explicit parallel with catharsis, Johnston 'exorcis[ed] his demons and nurs[ed] his broken heart.'¹⁸⁵ Also implying the reduced arbitration of accompanying musical technologies, Johnston made music 'with a child's toy

¹⁷⁶ *Buttrag* [1989?]a.

¹⁷⁷ Chusid 2000, 76.

¹⁷⁸ Ciaffardini 1986. Compare with Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, Preface, xxiv: 'human blood circulates through [poetry's] veins.'

¹⁷⁹ Coley 1987c, 30.

¹⁸⁰ Coley 1990a, 81.

¹⁸¹ *Buttrag* [1988?]d.

¹⁸² Black (1985) 2011, 47.

¹⁸³ Berger 1988.

¹⁸⁴ Cohen (1992a) 2011, 113.

¹⁸⁵ Chusid 2000, 69.

organ, an acoustic guitar and occasional harmonic as the sole accompaniment to a heart full of hurt and a voice choking on its own emotion.¹⁸⁶ Often it was the hearts of listeners that were affected: with the palpable sense of music writers avoiding a cliché, Johnston's music was 'heart-wrenching,'¹⁸⁷ 'heart-rendering,'¹⁸⁸ 'heart-aching'¹⁸⁹ (not, apparently, 'heart-breaking,' nor is Jandek), but also 'not for the faint hearted'¹⁹⁰ and 'just waiting to destroy your heart.'¹⁹¹ With a phrase that could implicate both Jandek and his listeners, his 'inspiration' was given as 'heart-splitting.'¹⁹²

The heart was a leading metaphor in another one of the more passionate texts on Johnston, the introduction to Yazdani's book written by Johnston's sometime producer (Mark) Kramer, and again, it leads to notions of truth, honesty, openness and physicality, as well as highly critical observations of bad listeners the mainstream music industry, which produces 'garbage' and is, naturally, 'heartless.' Its climax - 'Daniel gives himself wholly to you, and all you need do to receive him, is LISTEN. Meet DANIEL JOHNSTON, the most honest artist I have ever known' - recalls Jesus Christ and representations of his Sacred Heart.¹⁹³

Slightly more often, Jandek and Johnston were rendered less vivisected than simply 'naked.' Jandek's recording method was 'live, raw, and naked,'¹⁹⁴ and 'as naked and lonely as a man and a guitar can be'¹⁹⁵ (the first track on his debut and probably most famous album is called 'Naked in the Afternoon'). With Johnston, the term was more often an assessment of authentic value: his 'self-

¹⁸⁶ Bent 1989.

¹⁸⁷ Bent.

¹⁸⁸ *Buttrag* [1989?]a.

¹⁸⁹ Bent 1989.

¹⁹⁰ Patrick 1990.

¹⁹¹ McRobbie 1990.

¹⁹² Hankin 1984.

¹⁹³ Kramer 1999, vii-viii.

¹⁹⁴ Johnson 1985a.

¹⁹⁵ Coley 1990b.

penned material sport[s] a raw, naked honesty... covers... are run through with complete conviction and care'¹⁹⁶ and 'it's ironic that someone with a gift for this kind of naked, honest expression has been repeatedly institutionalized by his relatives.'¹⁹⁷ Johnston's 'desperate love tunes' were 'sung in an almost impossibly naked high quaver,'¹⁹⁸ his singing had a 'naked emotionalism.'¹⁹⁹ One source used the term as part of a broader point about Johnston's creativity:

1990 is very much a standard Johnston recording, meaning that it's simplistic, open, frightening, hilarious, and kind of all over the place. Since he seems to lack a self-edit button, Johnston's so upfront with his feelings it's unusual to hear someone so nakedly emotional about, well, everything.²⁰⁰

A 'self-edit' button is precisely what would remove recording imperfections, but it would also compromise Johnston's reality and authenticity.

Given that Jandek was so notoriously reclusive, it is interesting that he was so often described as precisely the opposite in his emotional expression. Whether aware of the almost-irony in such a statement or not, one reviewer expressed it: 'it's hard to name one single performer who reveals as much of himself each time out as Sterling/Jandek.'²⁰¹ One of the most popular words used to describe Jandek, especially early on, was 'personal.' Prefiguring Ciaffardini's observation of Johnston's 'first person, all-American personal reality,' Jandek was considered by *Op* alone to write 'oblique, personal lyrics,'²⁰² 'personal songs,'²⁰³ music that is 'spooky, personal, honest,'²⁰⁴ and '[a record] so deeply personal as to be profound.'²⁰⁵ In later years, Jandek was described as having 'a brand of

¹⁹⁶ *Buttrag* [1989?]a.

¹⁹⁷ Ashby 1989.

¹⁹⁸ Weisbard 1995, 200.

¹⁹⁹ Walters (1994) 2011, 140.

²⁰⁰ Dougan 1990b.

²⁰¹ Cosloy 1989.

²⁰² Milstein 1982.

²⁰³ Foster 1982.

²⁰⁴ Johnson 1984.

²⁰⁵ Huntsberger 1982.

personal expression that's so gushing and unforced it's hard not to turn your head away'²⁰⁶ and singing his 'dark deeply personal lyrics so close to the microphone.'²⁰⁷ 'Jandek's genius is very personal,' asserted a fanzine in 1990.²⁰⁸ Given all this, it is unsurprising that Ciechanowski found that 'Jandek fans very much perceive their relationship with Corwood to be "personal"' and that therefore, as in Ciaffardini's Johnston review, 'they express themselves territorially, discounting other's relationships and communications with Corwood, describing other Jandek fans with very undesirable traits, and enhancing their own relationship with Corwood.'²⁰⁹

But this is not to say that personal communion with Jandek was a warm or comfortable affair. For many writers, it left them feeling guilty of voyeurism:

Like the sound of someone talking to themselves alone in a darkened room, you are almost embarrassed by the nakedness of their confessions but you can't keep from listening.²¹⁰

Incredibly private, anguished in a strangely unemotive sort of way, Jandek writes musical postcards you're embarrassed to be caught reading.²¹¹

Every Jandek record is a letter as personal as it is anonymous. Listening to a new one I get the feeling I should not be listening at all. It is as if someone found a stack of tapes, someone never meant to be duplicated much less heard by others, and released them without permission... Merely listening is an invasion. To study, analyze, ponder over these private soundtracks is quite immoral, and the listener comes away thusly dirtied. For those who just will not turn away from the aftermath of the fatal accident, for those who just can't find it in themselves to say no to the unknown, Jandek is your folk music.²¹²

²⁰⁶ Cosloy 1987b.

²⁰⁷ Vine 1990.

²⁰⁸ Callahan 1990.

²⁰⁹ Ciechanowski 2006, 21.

²¹⁰ Parsons 1985.

²¹¹ Cosloy 1989.

²¹² *Lowlife* [1988-1989?].

The window opened up onto Jandek's 'personal reality' was not a tragic or heroic move towards truth like it usually was for Johnston, but something accidental or witnessed accidentally, private messages the listener has stumbled upon that were meant for someone else. But Johnston's music occasionally reflected the same concerns:

This man wails the blues on the same level as Robert Johnston, Hank Williams and Billie Holliday. And his music is just as stark, just as compelling, though even more voyeuristic.²¹³

To those who actually listened to the tapes they were given, Daniel had achieved a certain cult respect based on the quality of his songcraft, if not his recording techniques, and the almost voyeuristic, embarrassingly personal subject matter and the shaky, sincere performance of his songs.²¹⁴

For Jandek, 'bare' was a similar but more complex word than 'naked.' A phrase such as 'sparse guitar/muted drum arrangements that bare souls like a plucked chicken'²¹⁵ implies both nakedness and self-expression. In the latter vein, Jandek 'bares his soul with every LP.'²¹⁶ Within the space of two small paragraphs, Unterberger imagined Jandek's recording context as 'a bare, dusty room in Texas' and noted 'even if these records were wholly ignored, one has the feeling that... Jandek would be compelled to bare his psyche on vinyl nonetheless.'²¹⁷ The word 'barely' seems to suggest an ontological threshold status that echoes the cultural position attributed to Jandek himself: his vocals are 'barely coherent'²¹⁸ and 'barely audible.'²¹⁹ Fittingly, in one article by Coley that took Jandek's obscurity as its overriding theme, the word was used three times. Jandek's music was 'filled with a very different kinds of blues - mostly

²¹³ True 1992b.

²¹⁴ Yazdani 1999, 8.

²¹⁵ *Buttrag* [1988?]d.

²¹⁶ *Lowlife* [1986?].

²¹⁷ Unterberger 1986c. 22.

²¹⁸ SP 1984.

²¹⁹ Unterberger 1987.

acoustic, almost-whispered, barely structured, quietly scrabbling.' Coley closed by setting a scene:

It's a dark night, there's a wet road and you've been in an accident. As you bob on the edge of consciousness, a faint, barely graspable song of longing floats through your head. And it's beautiful. So beautiful and so rich and so deep you can barely fucking stand it. Then it's gone. That's what Jandek's like.²²⁰

Jandek's fringe status, his lying on the threshold of perception, had already been emphasised at the beginning of Coley's article in cultural terms, as we will see later.

That Jandek's music was thought to be deeply self-expressive has already been made quite clear. And despite the absence of any biographical information about Jandek, statements on this topic often became assumptions of fact rather than remaining as metaphors, which heightened both the sense of realism and its gothic exoticism. Jandek was primitive until proven otherwise - the idea that his emotion, even his dark realism, might have been a performance rather than a challenging truth was hardly entertained. Without any possible mediation through biography or two-way communication with a music press, and with a degree of wishful projection, Jandek's gothicism gained Moore's first-person authenticity by default - it collapsed what might have been a third-person authenticity into the first person. Jandek's music was assumed to be 'explosively cathartic'²²¹ and 'as painful for the artist to record as it is for the listener to decipher.'²²² Ideas about self-expression were extrapolated into narratives of the artist's process and even his physical setting:

²²⁰ Coley 1990b.

²²¹ Coley 1989b, 89.

²²² Mills 1992.

Just the man (or woman, eunuch, who knows?) and his acoustic guitar and a bit of echo together for a fragile collection of frail, melancholy brittle glimpses into the inner thoughts and emotions of the 80's most mysterious enigma.²²³

Recorded at home or in a primitively stark studio, his recordings often consist of unaccompanied acoustic guitar and voice that come from somewhere deep within a troubled soul.²²⁴

(And, bringing together a number of themes surrounding personal expressiveness and the experience of it:)

Like John Lee Hooker stomping out his demons on the floorboards, like Syd Barrett whining about his private, hallucinatory anguish, Jandek expresses his pain and yearning in a rambling fashion that's so personal as to be almost painful. This unique style has, on occasion, proved transfixing, like a peek at a particularly intense therapy session.²²⁵

Note the references to 'home or... a primitively stark studio' and 'floorboards' in these two quotes. The medium of recording was considered able not just to offer a 'peek' at the most personal expression of Jandek, but to bring a listener into the entire room they were expressed in - or rather, its acoustics.

Jandek and the 'Sense of Room'

This room, of which writers of course ultimately knew nothing except those acoustics, was a continuing source of fascination, and its presence and reality seems to have been heavily suggested by the recordings. In an interview with the college radio station WHRB included with the *Jandek on Corwood* DVD, Coley notes their 'sense of room,' continuing:

Coley: The three-dimensional space is very important to the sound of the early records.

²²³ *Buttrag* [1988?]c.

²²⁴ Coley 1987c, 30.

²²⁵ Anderson 1991.

Interviewer: Extremely.

Coley: It has that... paranoid compression to it that makes it feel a little bit claustrophobic.

Interviewer: [Fans can take offence at humorous descriptions of Jandek because they] feel very personal about this artist because, I think, his whole nebulous self is very personal, it's in the bedroom or in the living room or in some room in his house recording this very soul-searching music.

Coley: But when someone presents themselves also as a blank... it's filled in with the projections of the listener.²²⁶

The 'projections' of the listener onto the physical setting were highly active.

Callahan wrote of Jandek's 'dusty house,'²²⁷ but the setting was invariably inferred to be a 'room,' even 'that room.'²²⁸ Writers placed him 'alone in a darkened room,'²²⁹ 'locked timelessly in a single room'²³⁰ and speculated: 'I don't think they've let him out of that room yet.'²³¹ The room's contents and its occupants were conjured in high detail twice. The first time was in *Op*:

It is a sweltering afternoon in Texas. In a tiny bedroom, all windows curtained against the sun, sits a man, or a boy. He is plain, blond-haired, looks like an extra from a B Sci-Fi thriller. He holds a Sears guitar he was given as a child. The guitar has never been tuned - it may only have five strings. It is connected to a cheap amp. He plucks the strings, sometimes together, sometimes singly, and sings into an old cheap microphone. With a Dylan-like inflection, he pours the lyrics from his soul while plucking the guitar... The recording is made on an old Wollensak reel-to-reel with broken meters and no volume knob. He records 12 songs and presses them into a record... it is so deeply personal as to be profound. Like Samuel Beckett's Malloy, Jandek has allowed the world into his most private and sacred universe, come what may.²³²

²²⁶ Coley, interviewed on WHRB, Freidrichs dir. 2003 (DVD): Special Features, Audio, Harvard Interviews, Byron Coley interview, 17:37.

²²⁷ Callahan 1990.

²²⁸ Johnson 1985b.

²²⁹ Parsons 1985.

²³⁰ Johnson 1985a.

²³¹ Johnson 1985b.

²³² Huntsberger 1982.

Offering a comprehensive picture of the home-recording scenario, this 'tiny bedroom' becomes a 'private and sacred universe,' and, like Johnston's cracked head, the world is let into it through the medium and dissemination of recordings.²³³ Unterberger took the same approach, beginning his feature with a series of assumptions about the music's original context and how it gave rise to lo-fi effects such as performance imperfections:

The scene (probably): a bare, dusty room in Texas. A man sits hunched over a microphone, guitar in hand, gushing forth unresolvable [sic] demons from the darkest recesses of his soul. No time for second takes, no time to correct the mistakes or mix over the rough edges. A cheap tape player records every moan and pluck of the strings for posterity.

No, these aren't the legendary Robert Johnson sessions of the mid-thirties. This is happening right now in the midst of the technocratic eighties. But our man is oblivious to what's on the radio, or doesn't care, continuing to record his primitive ramblings at a furious pace.²³⁴

Note that Jandek's personal self-expression and its physical setting is given as urgently real and present - it is 'happening right now,' even in the 'technocratic eighties.' Expanding representations of Jandek's setting into visual media, much of the footage in the film *Jandek on Corwood* constructed gothic imaginings of what Jandek's residence might be like:

²³³ Contrast the fond reference to an 'old Wollensak' in the passage with the comment from O'Donnell 1983 ('Home Technology Report') quoted in Chapter 3 where 'an old battered Wollensak mic is not [perfectly good for recording].' Here is a clear difference between cassette culture aesthetics and lo-fi aesthetics. Wollensak was a brand of audio equipment much more common in previous decades, so connotes not just lesser sound quality but archaism in both cases.

²³⁴ Unterberger 1986c, 22.





Figure 1 Stills from *Jandek on Corwood*. Without access to Sterling Smith's actual life, the makers of the documentary film reflected impressions of the gothic setting of Jandek recordings with exterior and interior shots of a dilapidated house. Note the archaic decor and reel-to-reel tape recorder.

Such projections of Jandek's space have much to do with the covers of Jandek's records, many of which feature photographs taken in sparsely furnished and often darkened interiors. But in one case, when reviewing *Foreign Keys*, the setting was imagined as a 'warehouse [sic] of the mind and soul,' and becomes a full-blown narrative of a socio-politically downtrodden, Jefferson-Airplane-like

band.²³⁵ It is significant that *Foreign Keys* is a record on which considerable reverb can be heard. As well as the album covers, the audible proxemics of Jandek's recordings play an important role in the aesthetics of the music and its realism especially, as the above imaginations of its setting illustrate. It is not just the outer extent of 'three-dimensional' spaces that are heard but the intimate proximity too, indexed by Jandek's singing too close to the microphone (usually considered a recording imperfection)²³⁶ and thus creating a parallel with the 'personal' nature of his music - 'dark deeply personal lyrics so close to the microphone' as Vine described it.²³⁷

Mental Illness and 'Demons'

As the 'peek at a particularly intense therapy session' quote above shows, these assumptive characterisations of context extended to intimations of mental illness or intellectual disability. Writers did not go so far as to make a diagnosis, but Coley and Vine reported the rumour that "'he's a manic-depressive who does the records as therapy under his doctor's supervision."²³⁸ In his interview for the documentary film *Jandek on Corwood*, editor of *Op John Foster* established a sense of distance again, remembering, 'I had the feeling that he was mentally ill... he really just doesn't know how to reach someone. I don't think that he purposely puts up a wall. I think he's scared of people.'²³⁹ The song 'Mother's Day Card' on *Telegraph Melts* suggested to writers that Jandek appeared as a potentially psychopathic killer: 'he sounds like he's on the verge of taking an axe to Mom,'²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Ciaffardini 1986.

²³⁶ Huber & Runstein 2005, 170-171.

²³⁷ Vine 1990.

²³⁸ Coley 1990b, Vine 1990.

²³⁹ John Foster, in Freidrichs dir 2003, 38:20 (film.).

²⁴⁰ Unterberger 1986b.

and "'Mother's Day Card" (from Norman Bates, maybe).²⁴¹ In other cases, he is simply referred to as 'demented,'²⁴² 'warped'²⁴³ and 'deranged.'²⁴⁴ Chusid imagines Corwood as 'a large multinational, run by a CEO with a retarded son who made home recordings' whose 'doting papa press[ed *Ready For the House*] without commercial intent, as a simple gesture of paternal devotion.'²⁴⁵ (In his 2014 *Wire* interview, Sterling Smith was asked whether he had heard any of the 'rumours' about him, to which Smith replied, 'Yeah, yeah... I started reading all this shit... If they think I'm crazy that's their problem.')²⁴⁶

After 1987 and certainly after 1989, writers knew that Johnston had experienced psychosis, and to whatever extent this informed opinions in relation to the music, there was apparently little doubt that his music was expressive and intensely emotional for both artist and listener. This was represented by the recurring trope of Johnston's 'demons' (which as we have seen, was also term used to describe Jandek's process). This trope and its relation to catharsis probably originated in a lyric from the song 'Sorry Entertainer' from *Yip/Jump Music*, '*Drove those demons / Out of my head / With an organ and a pencil full of lead,*' and from references to the Devil and Satan on, for example 1990. It proved a useful way of alluding to Johnston's illness without having to exchange romantic narratives of expressive struggle for clinical detachment, and in a way that might have been said to have come with Johnston's blessing:

Daniel Johnston is scared, but not so much of the audience
as of his own demons.²⁴⁷

²⁴¹ *College Music Journal* 1986.

²⁴² Johnson 1985a; Unterberger 1988; Unterberger 1998, 157.

²⁴³ Johnson 1985a.

²⁴⁴ Chusid 2000, 60.

²⁴⁵ Chusid 2000, 59.

²⁴⁶ Sterling Smith, quoted in Keenan 2014a.

²⁴⁷ Anderson 1987, 25.

You only have to wait for the third song - the autobiographical 'Sorry Entertainer' [some lyrics] before those familiar demons loneliness and despair make themselves felt.²⁴⁸

No mere eccentric, Daniel has long been plagued by psychosis and beset with demons. He's been in and out of mental institutions since the mid-1980s... [and now consumes] copious quantities of mood-controlling chemicals.²⁴⁹

One source from the mid-1990s used the demons trope while making the claim that Johnston's music can be separated from its creative context of mental illness:

Johnston's mental problems often lead people to believe, mistakenly, that his talent is the mark of the primitive. In fact, on a purely musical level, his gift is a wholly natural one, divorced from the demons that occupy his mind and his lyrics.²⁵⁰

This statement is made in clear parallel with the idea - associable with *Dead Dog's Eyeball*, the focus of an insert in this article - that Johnston's songs were and even should be separable (here, 'divorced') from their impoverished or otherwise impeded context, namely 'poor recording, poor musicianship' and mental illness. By implication then, it raises the suggestion that Johnston's 'demons' were not merely psychiatrically understood but might also be considered 'lo-fi' in nature, as the gremlins that plague and impede Johnston's musical performances and the quality of his recordings, threatening to obscure his creativity and so put otherwise sympathetic listeners off.

²⁴⁸ Bent 1989.

²⁴⁹ Chusid 2000, 68.

²⁵⁰ Cohen 1995a, 69.

Swimming Upstream: The Struggle Against Impairments and Impediments

Johnston's relationship with his 'demons' and his mental illness was regularly portrayed as one of desperate struggle: 'Daniel has constantly fought against the inner demons which have threatened to devour him, to send him tumbling down the dark well of despair for eternity,'²⁵¹ 'Daniel Johnston fights a daily battle with chronic mental illness,'²⁵² 'a tortured, troubled but incredibly gifted and prolific legend of the US underground, Daniel Johnston has spent a lifetime balancing the unpredictable demands of mental illness with a recording career.'²⁵³

Johnston's 'demons' are just one of the more common characterisations of a whole host of impediments and impairments that both he and Jandek were considered to struggle against, which furnished their recordings with inner antagonisms. These impairments and impediments, and the nature of this struggle, can be seen as a narrative of lo-fi aesthetics - it is the struggle of art against artifice, authenticity against faking it, communication against madness, expressiveness against commercial and professional requirements, childlikeness against adult awareness and resignation, genius against a superficial culture, musical transcendence against technological immanence. As well as a grand creative struggle on the highest cultural levels, it was a physical, material struggle embodied within the phonography itself as signal against noise.

Writers often insisted that listening to Jandek and Johnston required separating these forces of good (signal) and evil (noise), transcending the latter and joining the former, which entailed a challenging listening experience that was 'not for the faint hearted' (listening was as challenging as the artist is

²⁵¹ True 1992b.

²⁵² Dougan 1995, 431.

²⁵³ Strong 1999b.

'challenged.')

Yet without witnessing both elements engaged in struggle, locked in their combative inter-relation, the side of good loses its risk, its power, fascination and meaning. It is not just Jandek and Johnston whose heroism would vanish in this case, but that of the listeners too. Although listeners were implicitly called upon to deplore the various demons against which Johnston struggles (mental illness, 'poor recording, poor musicianship,' 'assholes' and so on), their constant presence as a trope of reception emphasises how Jandek and Johnston and their adherents would be only half as powerful without having to battle them.

The source that gives one the clearest accounts of Johnston's struggle - the overall effect of the inner antagonisms of his music - and in terms specifically of sound quality, is a review by Robin James from summer 1989 in *Sound Choice*. Given its commitment to cassettes, *Sound Choice* was one of only a few publications (*Gajooob* was another) to review cassette albums of Johnston's that had not been released on vinyl, and in this case it was *Respect*. To quote the review in full:

Some later works from the master of crude recording and passionate songcraft, it's even more introspective and depressing than the first tapes; his clear angelic and hurtful voice buried in lo-fi hiss singing long ballads and searching, preaching, whining, not as fun as the earlier cassette-album releases, but it has the essential range of stuff (some happy puppy music but mostly sad songs).²⁵⁴

The review falls into several antagonistic binaries, the most dramatic of which is 'his clear angelic and hurtful voice buried in lo-fi hiss.' The reviewer was no doubt aware that the 'angelic' Johnston was pitted against 'demons,' and so a parallel is drawn between 'demons' (or 'not-angels') and 'lo-fi hiss.' Note too that Johnston's

²⁵⁴ James 1989b.

voice is 'clear,' when as the reviewer himself conveys, the same could not be said for his recordings.

One of the fullest aesthetic accounts of Johnston's struggle, combining his cathartic music-making process and his biography, was written by Everett True, reviewing *Artistic Vice* in 1992. Johnston's is:

The story of one man's triumphant struggle against overwhelming odds to reclaim love in a cruel, cruel world. Over the last decade, in song and in real life, Daniel has constantly fought against the inner demons which have threatened to devour him, to send him tumbling down the dark well of despair for eternity. With only his tape recorder and a tinny piano and guitar for company, he would attempt to exorcise these demons: first on home-released cassettes and then later, as his fame grew, on record and CD. And, along the way, he's been responsible for some of the most affecting, singularly poignant music ever. No exaggeration. This man wails the blues on the same level as Robert Johnson, Hank Williams and Billie Holliday. And his music is just as stark, just as compelling, though even more voyeuristic. Although on first hearing, Daniel communicates on a far simpler, even childlike, level.... Try hearing ["Tell Me Now" or "Honey I Sure Miss You"] and then telling people love doesn't exist.... "*Artistic Vice*" is the most affecting album that will be released all year. Sometimes, it makes me cry.²⁵⁵

This struggle, one that brings together 'song' and 'real life,' is one of emoting, and it applies to Johnston and his listener True alike. The outcome of Johnston's struggle is inconclusive, his engagement in it is an 'attempt' only, and the weapons in the struggle are dangerously meagre: 'only his tape recorder and a tinny piano and guitar.' 'Love' is discovered in the context of this struggle and not prior to it; before hearing *Artistic Vice*, listeners might be arguing that 'love doesn't exist.' The overall result is 'affecting', reaching even the threshold of physically manifest emotion - it makes the reviewer cry.

²⁵⁵ True 1992b.

As we saw in the Yazdani quote about the 'fun-loving kid trapped in a body that doesn't obey,' Johnston's struggle also stemmed from his 'boy[ishness]' and his impaired, impoverished context, his 'wretched place in the world.'²⁵⁶ The struggle was one of 'determination,'²⁵⁷ 'persistence'²⁵⁸ and even 'compulsion.'²⁵⁹ He was 'tortured,'²⁶⁰ a 'tortured angel,'²⁶¹ you might root for him 'like you would root for an overwhelming underdog in a boxing ring' (boxers are a recurring trope in Johnston's music and visual art, particularly in the title and on the cover of *Retired Boxer*).²⁶² Mixing the positivity of victory with the pathos of defeat using a series of slashes, one writer cast him as a soldier of the home-recording medium, a 'DIY tape hero/veteran/loser/casualty.'²⁶³

Again, this struggle was embodied sonically in the lo-fi effects undermining the recordings. One reviewer found that 'the whirrings of the cassette recorder' are 'often louder than' the already weak 'atonal cheap guitar and electric air organ.'²⁶⁴ Another found that 'on the live tracks from 1990, you could hear the shemps snickering as [Johnston] sang about damnation.'²⁶⁵ A 'shemp' is an imposter, a stand-in actor named after the body double of one of the original Three Stooges, Shemp Howard, and here they are bad listeners appearing as demons or gremlins equivalent to the phonographic imperfections that beset and impede Johnston's recordings. Johnston's struggle against mental illness, too, was considered 'reflected' in the music: he 'has battled mental illness for years...

²⁵⁶ Walters (1994) 2011, 140-141.

²⁵⁷ Ashby 1989.

²⁵⁸ Neo 1989.

²⁵⁹ Patrick 1989.

²⁶⁰ True 1992a.

²⁶¹ Lewis 1995.

²⁶² Anderson 1987, 25.

²⁶³ Patrick 1989.

²⁶⁴ True 1995.

²⁶⁵ Schone 1994.

Johnston's songs reflect inner battles as accurately as those of any other rock eccentric.²⁶⁶

By far the most comprehensive and eloquent account of the audibility of Johnston's struggle can be found in a section of a chapter in Barry Shank's *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (1994). Although the book falls within the field of anthropology, Shank presents a detailed account of listening to Johnston's 'Walking the Cow' (from *Hi, How Are You*) that focuses on the physicality of his playing:

At first all I could hear was this beat. There was this sound, like someone hitting an empty cardboard box with both hands... That was all I heard the first time I listened to the song. And it made me angry. How was I supposed to listen to the song when, in addition to all the other problems, it was buried by this undisciplined, unregulated throbbing?

I tried to filter out the hollow beating, to listen to the tones, the words, the voice, the song. What I heard was a Magnus chord organ - that plastic toy... They simply were not musical instruments. But something was forcing music from this chord organ. The plastic reedy tones, completely lacking depth or resonance, were being squeezed out of their box by a manic intention. When I listened even more closely, it was that intention I heard. I heard him mash the buttons, furiously... I heard fingers reaching for buttons on a chord organ, smashing them down into their holes, against the resistant plastic substance below... I think that what confused me was the contrast between the intensity, the physical ferocity, of the performer and the collapsed, empty and almost unimportant tones that were produced. That contrast was so intriguing that I wanted to listen to the song a third time.

And this time I heard his voice. That same contrast between the physically pulsing, nonconscious intention and the resulting restricted, quavering tone was in his voice. It was a strangled voice that only hinted at the idea of a melody, but it hinted at melody that was simple, intuitive and yes, beautiful... Finally, on this third listen, I got it. I understood that this recording only worked when the listener reached out, in an extreme effort of the imagination, to identify what had to be there. And something had to be there in order to justify the risks this singer was taking. He was too easy to ridicule: a poor singer, incompetently

²⁶⁶ Kemp 1992.

playing very simple songs on a toy instrument. But it was the force of his desire to push beyond the structural impossibility of this body producing a singing voice and this chord organ producing music, and the strength of all these wild intentions working together within the barest precision and organization of an almost rhythm, that produced the most pure and genuine display of imaginary sincerity I had ever heard.²⁶⁷

Here Johnston's struggle is against the physical limitations that initially seem to 'bury' his song, particularly the plastic of the chord organ (the word 'plastic' is often used as a disparaging term for inauthentic pop music), but it also manifests in his voice. It is the 'nonconscious intention' to struggle which brings value and importance to the recording, instilling a faith: 'something had to be there in order to justify the risks this singer was taking.' The process that Shank relates, of identifying the battle lines of the struggle and thus of locating Johnston himself - the diamond discovered 'buried' in the dirt - carries an enormous reward, and Shank is probably not alone in deriving an aesthetic of Johnston this way. Shank uses his account of Johnston's music as part of a persuasive theory of his function within Austin's music scene that draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis - Johnston's struggle is one of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, with the shortfall between the two constituting 'romanticism.'²⁶⁸

One Jandek review expressed a faith similar to Shank's, but went beyond the latter's attention to traditional instrumentation and related it directly to issues of sound quality. Here, like the Bean Church cassette review in the last chapter, the poor sound quality stimulated attentive listening: 'the muddy, distorted sound quality draws the listener into Jandek's very strange world and MAKES him/her try to understand. *Telegraph Melts* is unique, challenging, and worthwhile

²⁶⁷ Shank 1994, 155-156.

²⁶⁸ Shank 1994, 157-160.

listening.²⁶⁹ 'Challenging' struggles against instrumentation and poor sound quality seem to compel not just questions of what is going on beyond the surface, deep within the music, and why, but a faith that whatever is going on down there must be valuable. When this value is located, the listening process has been 'worthwhile.'

Jandek's music usually resonated with the aesthetics of struggle in quite a different way than Johnston's did. Much of Jandek's power seems to lie in his being someone who had failed, who had lost the struggle (sonically, musically, socially, culturally) and who remained distant and disconnected - Ciaffardini recognised that Jandek sounded like a 'lost cause'.²⁷⁰ This does not void the aesthetics of struggle but reinstates its pathos. Normally there are particular metaphors that express this, but even direct reports of listening express a quality of impediments bringing Jandek ever closer to defeat, positively or negatively: 'with all the racket of the smashing drums and chordless electric guitar work it is even harder to understand the vocals.'²⁷¹

As this simile exemplifies, Jandek and Johnston's impairments and impediments were often framed as physical, mental and intellectual disabilities. As well as being the project of a 'retarded son' as Chusid speculated, Jandek's music had an internal antagonism - a 'peculiar tug of war between avant garde spasm and down-home blues,²⁷² and it was backed by 'drums so off-beat as to suggest palsy.'²⁷³ Listening to one Jandek record was like 'watching a guy in a wheelchair push his way up a very steep hill.'²⁷⁴ Some of Johnston's applause in Austin was 'sarcastic, like cheering for the biggest spaz on the B-team when he

²⁶⁹ Hinton 1987a.

²⁷⁰ Ciaffardini 1986. Both ellipses in original.

²⁷¹ Hankin 1984.

²⁷² Singer 1985.

²⁷³ Morris 1989.

²⁷⁴ Cosloy 1988b.

finally scores a basket,²⁷⁵ and in his 1987 review, Ciaffardini despaired that 'America will kill Daniel if we let it, just like how the momma dog will kill the sickly runt of the litter before it infects the others.'²⁷⁶ What was at stake for listeners in this struggle can be illuminated by disability theorist Tom Shakespeare, who notes that 'disabled people enable able-bodied people to feel good about themselves: by demeaning disabled people, non-disabled people can feel both powerful, and generous,' and that prejudice against them arises because they are 'evidence of the constraining body' defeated in a number of struggles: 'people with impairment can represent the victory of body over mind; of nature over culture; of death over life.'²⁷⁷

The Struggling Voice

As we saw in James's review of *Respect* ('his clear angelic and hurtful voice buried in lo-fi hiss singing') the voice was a common icon of this struggle, teetering on the threshold, constantly threatened by its own frailty and with being 'buried' or 'obscured' by lo-fi effects and bad listeners. In the first years of his career, when he performed live and before the 'demons' were established, Johnston's struggle against impairments and impediments was against his nerves and the chatter of his audience, both of which acted upon his 'quavering' voice:

Without fanfare or introduction, a slight, obviously nervous singer holding an acoustic guitar steps up to the mike and starts playing and singing. His playing is awkward, his singing shaky... at first the talk seems to continue unabated, this singer swimming against a hard upstream current, a voice packed with passions and innocence near-quavering.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Corcoran 1986, 67.

²⁷⁶ Ciaffardini 1987.

²⁷⁷ Shakespeare 1994, 287-288, 292, 296.

²⁷⁸ Black (1985) 2011, 45.

One member of the audience reveals themselves as a bad listener, which, along with Johnston's shaking, further obscures and jeopardises his voice:

Sweaty and jittery, he begins to sing in a shaky voice, his guitar playing awkward and tentative. A girl standing by the bar stops talking to her friend and looks baffled. "Who is this retard they've got playing?" Many people were embarrassed but some began to pull for him, like you would root for an overwhelming underdog in a boxing ring.²⁷⁹

In Austin, Johnston told people that he had made *Hi, How Are You* while he was undergoing a 'nervous breakdown.' As well as performance nerves, an early source on Johnston identified his 'frayed-nerves acoustic songs,' and that he 'performs songs he wrote while suffering a nervous breakdown.'²⁸⁰

Probably the most common descriptive term applied to Johnston's music was given to his voice: 'quavering.' He sang in a 'high quaver,'²⁸¹ and his voice even had, contradictorily, a 'quavering power.'²⁸² It was considered 'nerdy',²⁸³ 'whining'²⁸⁴ and 'whiny... [and] nasal,'²⁸⁵ but it held most fascination when it was at risk ('fragile'²⁸⁶), especially of being cut off, literally at its air supply: his was a 'voice choking on its own emotion.'²⁸⁷ Elsewhere, 'he almost cracks and it shows; this is extremely harrowing,'²⁸⁸ and, folding in the theme of visceral reality: 'when his voice cracks, you feel it in your guts'²⁸⁹ - note that to 'crack' or 'break (down)' is to go mad or let emotions get the better of one, but the breaking voice also signifies the end of childhood. Summing up the association of Johnston's voice with his general creative position, one writer put it thus: 'Haunted by a mind as

²⁷⁹ Anderson 1987, 25.

²⁸⁰ Pond 1985.

²⁸¹ Weisbard 1995b, 200.

²⁸² Cohen (1992a) 2011, 113.

²⁸³ Tucker 1987, Cohen 1995b.

²⁸⁴ James 1989b.

²⁸⁵ 'Enthal 1986, 34.

²⁸⁶ Ashby 1989.

²⁸⁷ Bent 1989.

²⁸⁸ Patrick 1990.

²⁸⁹ Ashby 1989.

vulnerable as his tremulous voice, Johnston pours his troubled soul into guileless but well-constructed songs,²⁹⁰ exemplifying how Johnston's voice could stand almost as a synecdoche for his music and biography.

If Johnston's voice was a 'quaver,' Jandek's was still less charming - a 'moan.'²⁹¹ Again, a 'moan' is a noise made by someone injured, weakened, trapped or otherwise defeated. Like the 'out-of-tune guitar', Jandek's moaning was his 'trademark.'²⁹² It was also frequently 'anguished,'²⁹³ 'warbly' or 'warbling,'²⁹⁴ 'drifty, sometimes eerie,'²⁹⁵ and situated (as we saw with the word 'barely') on the threshold of perception: 'barely coherent,'²⁹⁶ 'whining, half-awake,'²⁹⁷ 'whispery'²⁹⁸ and 'wispy, barely audible.'²⁹⁹ In one case the voice is singled out, described as curiously lacking in motivation or struggle and this apparently prompts an urgent question about reality: 'THAT voice. Monotone, breaking up, not happy or excited, not in tune, not concerned, just THERE. Who the fuck is this guy anyway?'³⁰⁰

The Struggle and Death

A moan is also a noise a zombie makes - Jandek was in one case described as having a 'cadaverous voice.'³⁰¹ If he had lost a struggle, one of the main consequences of this is was that he had (metaphorically) died. Shakespeare has

²⁹⁰ Robbins 1992, 41-42.

²⁹¹ Stigliano 1983; GK 1984; Unterberger 1986c, 22; Hinton 1987; Unterberger 1988; Morris 1989.

²⁹² Unterberger 1986.

²⁹³ Unterberger 1986c, 22; Unterberger 1988.

²⁹⁴ Ingels 1983i, Johnson 1985a.

²⁹⁵ DeAngelis 1983.

²⁹⁶ SP 1984.

²⁹⁷ Singer 1985.

²⁹⁸ Foster 1982.

²⁹⁹ Unterberger 1987.

³⁰⁰ Johnson 1985a.

³⁰¹ Chusid 2000, 62.

observed the close association between disabled people and death.³⁰² Jandek's was 'ghost town music'³⁰³ - naturally, it was 'haunting'³⁰⁴ and 'spooky'³⁰⁵ - and it was not just minimal but 'skeletal.'³⁰⁶ It implied a 'dark, suicidal void,'³⁰⁷ and as one writer put it, 'if you want to know how someone can continually top himself, tune in before it's too late.'³⁰⁸ His acoustic guitar was like a 'death bed Neil Young,'³⁰⁹ and we have already seen that one of his records 'sounds like a man who has climbed inside his corpse to serenade his withered vital organs.'³¹⁰ If Jandek was 'downstairs moaning,' it might have been because he was in the grave, or in Hell.³¹¹

This gothic, near- or post-death atmosphere was a favourite area of Chusid's. In an interview with the radio station WHRB, he noted the lack of 'variation' he heard in *Ready for the House* ('it meandered, nowhere') and remembered, 'it was really like hearing a posthumous recording, a recording that was made by someone after they had died.'³¹² In *Songs in the Key of Z*, Chusid called Jandek's strumming 'zombielike' and then, searching for an analogy that will do justice to his music, painted a vivid picture:

Imagine a microphone cabled down to a month-old tomb, capturing the sound of maggots nibbling on a decaying corpse and the agonized howls of a departed soul desperate to escape tortuous decomposition and eternal boredom.

*That's Burt Bacharach compared to Jandek.*³¹³

³⁰² Shakespeare 1994, 298.

³⁰³ Johnson 1984.

³⁰⁴ SP 1984, Unterberger 1987.

³⁰⁵ Johnson 1984; Unterberger 1985; Unterberger 1998, 157

³⁰⁶ *College Music Journal* 1986, *Buttrag* [1988?]d.

³⁰⁷ GK 1984.

³⁰⁸ *Buttrag* [1988?]d.

³⁰⁹ Unterberger 1998, 157.

³¹⁰ Coley 1987c, 30.

³¹¹ *College Music Journal* 1991.

³¹² Irwin Chusid, interviewed on WHRB, 2003, on Freidrichs dir. 2003 (DVD): Special Features, Audio, Harvard Interviews, Irwin Chusid interview, 1:50.

³¹³ Chusid 2000, 57. Emphasis in original.

Here is a supremely gothic struggle that goes on even after the struggle to live is over, a final and eternal struggle, indeed, a deeper struggle - deep underground following burial, the ultimate impediment and obscurity. If Johnston's position had certain dangers involved he was typically cast as ultimately victorious, but Jandek seemed to have already succumbed to most of them.³¹⁴

Johnston, however, does appear as a ghost on a few occasions. At his first performance, Johnston sang 'a song haunted by itself.'³¹⁵ The film *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* opens with footage of a younger Johnston filming himself in front of a mirror, saying 'Hello, I am the ghost of Daniel Johnston,' and ends with the musician at his contemporary age, dressed as Casper the Friendly Ghost. 'Casper the Friendly Ghost' is one of Johnston's most famous songs and the cartoon character is often presented as a role-model or metaphor for Johnston, regularly by Johnston himself. And these characteristics, again, are involved with the context of recording. Yazdani's book ended with the phrase 'a buried longing, a Daniel Johnston recording,'³¹⁶ and *Yip/Jump Music* (a cassette with Casper the Friendly Ghost pictured on its cover) is described as 'a big collection of lo-fi pop songs (densely shrouded ones, but the pop hooks, disturbing as it could be)³¹⁷ - lo-fi effects are suggested as a death-shroud covering everything but pop's essence, its 'hooks.'

Johnston's recordings are particularly found to be deathly in relation to their covering and re-orchestration on *Dead Dog's Eyeball*. In these instances, the originals were 'skeletal'³¹⁸ but McCarty 'flesh[es] them out'³¹⁹ - indeed, 'songs that were once skeletal, lo-fidelity, bedroom-with-tape-recorder affairs become full

³¹⁴ A similar aesthetic would appear in the 2000s as hauntology - see Chapter 7.

³¹⁵ Black (1985) 2011, 45.

³¹⁶ Yazdani 1999, 104.

³¹⁷ *Buttrag* [1989?]a.

³¹⁸ Yazdani 1999, 67-68.

³¹⁹ Azerrad 1994c, True 1995.

blooded.³²⁰ McCarty 'channels Johnston's... spirit'³²¹ but one reviewer found them 'not entirely true to the spirit of the originals.'³²² As True writes in his review of *Dead Dog's Eyeball*, Casper the Friendly Ghost could be restored to life: 'You know that scene in *Casper* where the friendless, frustrated, so-lonely ghost turns into a real boy for just a few minutes? Hollywood got it wrong, as always. That boy should have been Daniel.'³²³

The Struggle and Listening

It was not just Jandek and Johnston who were considered to struggle - as Shank related, listeners struggled alongside them. Readers were implored to make the effort to listen beyond the superficial level that commercial music and most listeners - bad listeners - were held to operate on. From *Sound Choice*:

He's really good, if ya listen. I mean, if ya! Superficially, he has none o' the significant trappings o' modern muzick. You know what I mean. Listen to yr power-hit station, MTV, whatever. It's the same digital drums and synth... Well, you have to *listen* to Daniel Johnston to appreciate, say, his story about "Casper the Ghost," "King Kong," and more, both rendered here in excruciatingly honest detail... Just get this LP. And LISTEN!!!³²⁴

Melody Maker recommended of *Jad Fair and Daniel Johnston* that readers 'listen to it from beginning to end, and over and over,'³²⁵ and Kramer concluded his introduction to Yazdani's book with 'all you need do to receive him, is LISTEN.'³²⁶ But listening wasn't going to be easy: *Artistic Vice* was described as 'uneasy listening,'³²⁷ and a reviewer of *Yip/Jump Music* found that it '[isn't] a pleasure to

³²⁰ Lewis 1995.

³²¹ Cohen 1995b.

³²² Jenkins 1995.

³²³ True 1995.

³²⁴ Fioretti 1990.

³²⁵ Patrick 1989.

³²⁶ Kramer 1999, viii.

³²⁷ Robbins 1992, 42.

listen to. But those who make the effort to see past the obvious defects will find that there's more to Johnston's work than just lousy music.³²⁸ Like a bitter medicine, listening carefully even had an improving quality on the listener: 'listen carefully and you could become a better person... Granted, the primitive recording doesn't make for easy listening.'³²⁹

Listening to Jandek required a similar act of perseverance with, for example, 'mumbling,' akin to digging through layers of dirt - as Unterberger wrote, 'he still mumbles a lot but comes up with some surprisingly biting and lucid lyrical gems'³³⁰ and 'the odd striking lyric... that makes the mumbling worth sifting through.'³³¹

Bad listeners - those who failed to listen properly or treat Jandek's and Johnston's music in the proper ways - were often alluded to, a group that both the musicians, the writers and the fans had to struggle with. This was a particular theme in Ciaffardini's long review:

Why don't these people listen! ... Can't these people hear?... Daniel is telling us all that about himself, if we'd just listen!... Now it is time to listen to Daniel Johnston... people can't even hear [Johnston's simplicity]. They are so busy listening for something in particular that when something unique comes along they don't hear it at all... So they hear a whiny voice, an out-of-tune string, a nervousness, a cheap recording.³³²

Bad listeners heard imperfections - lo-fi effects - while good listeners heard genius and (as we saw at the beginning of this chapter) 'the most gut-wrenchingly honest singer/songwriter of the decade.'

The same applied to Jandek's bad listeners: 'uninitiated listeners may think that Jandek sounds like a drug-warped hippie moaning surreal poetry while

³²⁸ Blackstock 1989.

³²⁹ McRobbie 1990.

³³⁰ Unterberger 1985.

³³¹ Unterberger 1986a.

³³² Ciaffardini 1987.

playing an obnoxiously out-of-tune guitar;³³³ 'some will say the guitar is out of tune, adepts will recognize the importance of the alternative tuning. Some will say the singer sounds insane, others will recognize the wisdom.'³³⁴ Jandek and Johnston's lo-fi qualities were the constructions of bad listeners, and were analogous, like the audible Mrs. Johnston and 'shemps snickering,' to lo-fi effects themselves. Aesthetically and culturally superior listeners would transcend them to locate a deeper, more worthy appeal. Again, however, the bad listeners had to be alluded to just as much as the lo-fi effects were in order for this transcendence to occur and become meaningful.

'Outcreating the Moneyfolks': The Cultural Struggle

Bad listeners were invariably listeners too inculcated with the norms of commercial technocratic culture. Jandek's and Johnston's distance from and opposition to this milieu was part of their struggle, and in Jandek's case was congruent with his perceived location at the outermost extreme of underground music-making - like his voice, at the threshold of being heard at all. If Jandek was 'obscured,' 'buried' or 'earthy as dirt,'³³⁵ this was because he was so much a fixture of this 'underground.' One writer described the people who reviewed Jandek records as 'obscuro-hipsters' and his 'low profile' as 'ancient-civilization diggings - low!'³³⁶ Coley's 'Underground' column for *Spin* featured Jandek twice. Prior to his aforementioned imagining of Jandek's music as 'barely coherent', a piece for *Spin* introducing him as one of the '10 most interesting musicians of the last 5 years' opened:

³³³ Trubee & Rasen 1985.

³³⁴ Ciaffardini 1989a.

³³⁵ Ciaffardini 1989a.

³³⁶ Mills 1992.

Even pinetops realize that beneath the surface of truly *popular* cultures there's a whole subterranean level - a kind of basement filled with not-so-popular culture. Inside of this obscurantist world, the stuff that's covered in *People* magazine doesn't really exist (except as something to divert your attention while standing on [sic] line at the supermarket)... It's a swell place. And beneath *it* is yet another, even darker level - sort of a sewer, where what passes for pop culture consists of deeply personal, intensely private expression of general non-belonging and emotional otherness. And I suppose you could argue that this stuff isn't pop culture at all, but that'd be opening a big can of semantic worms we don't have the space to deal with here, so you'll have to take my word for it. Inside of this contextual cess, the stuff *is*.

Artistic endeavors in this shadowy plane encompass all the popular media (film, writing, painting...) and the undisputed king of the musical realm is a Texan known simply as Jandek.³³⁷

Coley twice emphasises dirt with 'sewer' (recall Schafer's lo-fi 'sound sewer') and 'cess' (his 'can of worms' even prefigure Chusid's 'maggots.'). The image is like that of a camera starting at the tops of the pines and panning down through layers of culture until it reaches the subterranean darkness of Jandek's domain, his kingdom. The assumption that this area constitutes 'deeply personal, intensely private expression of general non-belonging and emotional otherness,' rather than simply high quantities of uninspiring amateur efforts, is significant - Coley's continuum of the underground narrows rather than widens as it approaches the bottom, going from public to private rather than from an elite to the grassroots creativity of a populace. And like many other sources we have seen, Coley feels the need to emphasise the weird fact of its reality: 'the stuff *is*.'

Jandek was often positioned as a quintessence of underground or independent music-making. He was 'the ultimate *auteur* of the indie scene,'³³⁸ he had a 'pure inspiration that is unmatched in the independent recording scene,'³³⁹

³³⁷ Coley 1990b.

³³⁸ Richie Unterberger, review of *Telegraph Melts* (Corwood LP), by Jandek, *Option* 12 [9] (July/August 1986), 65.

³³⁹ *Lowlife* [1986?].

and 'his spare, spooky sincerity makes all the gloom-doom and moody southern pop that bombards the indie scene seem awfully silly and lightweight.'³⁴⁰ He was 'the final folk artist... Jandek's records are exquisite jewels of art'³⁴¹ and moreover:

Lots of "underground" musicians aspire to total authenticity and inspiration in their product and claim total disdain of commercial considerations, but few are as uncompromising as Jandek. And whether you love or hate him, you've got to respect that.³⁴²

Jandek 'single-handedly debunked some of the sacred rules of record-making and music-making in general... the fact that he refuses to play the game only serves to accentuate how hollow "the game" is.'³⁴³ One Jandek reviewer reflected that:

By definition, the most alternative thing one can do is something that very few people can actually appreciate — the more alternative it is, the more completely it deviates from the norm. Thus a completely alternative record would be one which no one ever listened to... there are records with an ideological base that approaches this concept of an 'absolute alternative,' which are produced for and of themselves, devoid of any interest in accessibility on even the most marginal levels.³⁴⁴

It is significant that these statements appear later in the 1980s, when independent and alternative music culture was on the rise, rather than in earlier *Op* reviews. As well as the challenge of uncommercial music, Jandek's extreme of 'do-it-yourself' creativity allowed him to wear the crown of the 'authentic' 'underground' and the 'absolute alternative.'

Glen Thrasher, the editor of the fanzine *Lowlife*, was particularly interested in Jandek's authenticity, and often used it to attack the commercial music

³⁴⁰ Unterberger 1985.

³⁴¹ *Lowlife* [1988-1989?].

³⁴² Unterberger 1986c, 23.

³⁴³ Callahan 1990.

³⁴⁴ *College Music Journal* 1987.

industry. For him, not only did Jandek represent 'the real Texas punk,'³⁴⁵ but 'the *real* folk revival of the 80s.'³⁴⁶ In one review, Thrasher reflected on recent Jandek articles in *Spin* and *Option*, and continued in a very similar vein to Ciaffardini on Johnston:

What is next: *Creem*? *Rolling Stone*?! *People*!!?! Those creeps would turn Jandek into Tiny Tim. It is the same thing they tried to do with the Legendary Stardust Cowboy and other "eccentric" obscurities. After the joke gets old the media tosses the genius to the side and moves to the next amusing filler story. But Jandek... is unwilling to let the dogs into the front yard... Jandek's music is such an uncorrupt vision, such pure expression that it is impossible to imagine it as the facade before a gimmick.³⁴⁷

Again, first-person authenticity by default - the level of faith Thrasher places in the reclusive musician's integrity is striking. Elsewhere, Thrasher simply expressed these sentiments as 'Jandek could never sell out.'³⁴⁸ Johnston was also described as beyond commercial compromise - Chusid called him 'incapable' of selling out,³⁴⁹ and one writer even inferred this from the particular 'sounds': 'with his quavering voice, childlike imagination and singsong melodicism, he sounds incapable of artifice.'³⁵⁰ Interviewed for *Option*, Louis Black stands Johnston in contrast to 'American culture':

You can't come up with an idea so abrupt and obscene that American culture can't homogenize it, make it its own in some period of time. But Daniel can't be tainted. Daniel doesn't know how to sell out and be a normal person, and that's his saving grace. What is pure about Daniel is still pure.³⁵¹

³⁴⁵ *Lowlife* [1985-1986?].

³⁴⁶ *Lowlife* [1989-1990?].

³⁴⁷ *Lowlife* [1986-1987?].

³⁴⁸ *Lowlife* [1985-1986?].

³⁴⁹ Chusid 2000, 76.

³⁵⁰ McLeese 1994, 33.

³⁵¹ Louis Black, quoted in Cohen 1995a, 69.

Note that Black draws an inverse relation between commercial success and fringe creativity: selling out is equated with being 'a normal person.'

This unprofessional quality seen in Jandek and Johnston was continually emphasised in ways that supported their opposition to fame and the commercial music industry. Jandek 'displays the need for a career analyst,³⁵² his is 'an unprofitable venture³⁵³ and 'that frighteningly childlike mixture of longing and barely-concealed rage that will never, outside of a few *Option* readers and morbidly minded souls, make Jandek famous.³⁵⁴ One writer even detects 'a deliberate avoidance of industry-biz growth.³⁵⁵ With Johnston, we 'shouldn't expect expert musicianship or professionalism³⁵⁶ and together with Jad Fair, the two are 'as unprofessional in their pursuit of a purist idea as a garage of nerdy kids.³⁵⁷

Jandek's first review, by Milstein, which took home-made aesthetics as its theme, positioned him squarely against the commercial music industry, ending with the heavily politicised assertion that 'any one of us could have made this record... Bring the means of production to "the people," and they will out-create the moneyfolks almost every time.³⁵⁸ If Jandek's struggle was active, it was against these 'moneyfolks.' Coley put it in Manichean terms: 'As the soul of individualism is being destroyed by the forces of evil, Jandek's flame is an especially bright beacon in the dark.'³⁵⁹

We have already seen that Johnston was often positioned against such industry 'moneyfolks', even when they had 'a million dollars worth of studio

³⁵² Morris 1989.

³⁵³ Trubee & Rasen 1985.

³⁵⁴ Anderson 1991.

³⁵⁵ Mills 1992.

³⁵⁶ Waltzer 1989.

³⁵⁷ Dean 1989.

³⁵⁸ Milstein 1982.

³⁵⁹ Coley 1987a.

equipment, a million dollars more.' Other writers only underlined this point - one reviewer contrasted Johnston with adult-contemporary music designed to 'anaesthetize the ol' nerves' - remember that 'nerves' were often given as a salient aspect of Johnston's voice and its struggle.³⁶⁰ Another concluded: 'In a culture where self-conscious attempts to mimic the openness of a free mind often pass for originality, this is the real thing.'³⁶¹

Jandek and Johnston provided a valuable opportunity to enshrine most deeply the narratives upon which independent music discourse was most passionately founded: authenticity and anti-commercialism. The antagonism of the latter was of particular importance - Jandek and Johnston embodied everything that independent music discourse believed its opposite number, the mainstream, technocratic music industry, would have rejected: the amateurish, the primitive, the challengingly, viscerally real. This antagonism was personified within their recordings as the authentic body of the musician impaired and impeded by lo-fi effects. These earthly trappings were both indexes of the challengingly real and obstacles that the good listener would surmount. But the diamonds needed the dirt as the backdrop against which they could shine brightest, and lo-fi effects were not ignored - they became a fixation for discourse due to their role as the defeating misperceptions of bad listeners and the heroic wounds incurred by good, anti-commercial listeners. Lo-fi effects had entered the frame and become part of a positive musical experience. So although Jandek's and Johnston's fiercest advocates might not have agreed, the reception of their recordings signalled the arrival of lo-fi aesthetics.

³⁶⁰ Fioretti 1990.

³⁶¹ Robbins 1992, 42.

Chapter 5. 'Peachfuzz': Beat Happening, K and the Authentic Performance of Naivety

Active between 1984 and 1992, Beat Happening became one of the earliest of the bands in the lo-fi canon, appearing in this capacity in Spencer's *DIY* and Kemp's 'Lo-Fi Top Ten.' In 1994 they were described as one of 'the early lo-fi bands'¹ and in 1997 the band's singer and the founder of its record label K, Calvin Johnson was termed a 'lo-fi icon.'² Yet at the height of Beat Happening's career - the late 80s and early 90s, simultaneous with Jandek and Johnston - the band were rarely written about as makers of poor recordings and the term 'lo-fi' seldom appears in their reception. Like Johnston, Beat Happening would fit easily into canonical lo-fi aesthetics because of their independent recording context, musicianship that was considered to be amateurish, and, particularly, the childlike qualities and themes they conveyed in their lyrics and in the visual style surrounding the band and K. Beginning in 1982, K (alternately called K Cassettes and K records) would become the label most famously associated with indie pop and its influence can be seen in an indie aesthetics that persists to this day. The association, taken for granted by Emily Dolan,³ of lo-fi effects with indie pop and indie folk contexts can be traced back to the label and Beat Happening, its most well-known band.

With Beat Happening and K, a category of 'lo-fi' came to mean more than poor sound quality - in fact, their sound quality was rarely and hardly poor at all. It became a quasi-*naïf* countercultural, anti-technocratic stance based in notions of primitive creativity, and in this case, one that could be contrived and performed with little loss of authenticity. Many commentators appreciated that this stance

¹ Lips 1994, 76.

² Tindall 1997.

³ Dolan 2010.

was a 'concept'⁴ rather than genuine naivety, but irrespective of intention, Beat Happening were considered heroic representatives of naive, kitsch and archaic authenticities. 'Amateurish' performance imperfections played a crucial role in this, even if phonographic imperfections did not. By the 1990s, however, this did not make them any less 'lo-fi' - far from it. The term had come to represent amateurism and naivety itself, and the reception of Beat Happening had done much to establish its meaning.

Background and Recordings

The history of Beat Happening and K is chronicled in detail by Michael Azerrad in a dedicated chapter of his 2001 book *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991*, in a documentary feature film from 2006, *The Shield Around The K*, and, most comprehensively, in a 2012 book on the subject by Mark Baumgarten, *Love Rock Revolution: K Records and the Rise of Independent Music*.⁵ Beat Happening and K were founded in Olympia, Washington in the 1980s and had close connections to *Op* magazine and KAOS, the Evergreen State College radio station where much of *Op*'s staff was based. Calvin Johnson hosted a show on KAOS in the late 1970s that played punk rock especially, and often wrote for *Op*.⁶ That year, K put out its first release, a cassette - *Survival of the Coolest* by Supreme Cool Beings.

The label would soon adopt an explicitly anti-corporate and potentially *naïf* stance through its motto 'the K revolution is exploding the teenage underground into passionate revolt against the corporate ogre.'⁷ In 1983 Johnson founded

⁴ Wheeler [1989?].

⁵ Azerrad 2001, 454-492; Dominic dir. 2006 (film.); Baumgarten 2012.

⁶ Having performed and been recorded with his band of the time The Cool Rays, Johnson even appeared on the cover of *Op*'s J issue in March 1982.

⁷ *Option* 1992b, K records website.

Beat Happening with Supreme Cool Beings' drummer, Heather Lewis, and the band soon acquired their permanent guitarist, Bret Lunsford. After two cassettes (*Beat Happening* and *Three Tea Breakfast*) and a single in 1984, the band released their debut vinyl LP *Beat Happening* in 1985. It was well received, and the band began to tour America and Europe, releasing further albums *Jamboree* (1988), *Black Candy* (1989), *Dreamy* (1991) and *You Turn Me On* (1992). After this, the band's activities ceased, with Johnson moving on to further musical projects such as The Halo Benders and Dub Narcotic Sound System. K, however, has been active since it was established, at first releasing artists from the Pacific Northwest and then from all over the world, and is now well known as an archetypical indie record label.

Azerrad correctly notes that 'the K bands and Beat Happening in particular got identified with "lo-fi," but that 'ironically, only Beat Happening's first album actually had low audio fidelity; the term referred to wobbly performances as much as sonic imperfections... but at any rate, the indie underground had once again turned a liability into a virtue - "lo-fi" signified authenticity.'⁸ Baumgarten echoes this, observing in reference to the second album *Jamboree* that 'the band's wobbly amateur musicianship might have maintained the music's lo-fi reputation, but the actual fidelity of the new recordings was far from low. The music sounded full, deep and crisp.'⁹

Beat Happening's earliest recordings show the greatest degree of imperfections, phonographic and otherwise, and are gathered together with the self-titled debut vinyl LP on an expanded version of *Beat Happening* released in 1996 (and reissued on CD in 2000).¹⁰ This includes *Three Tea Breakfast*, which was recorded on portable cassette recorders - consequently, tape hiss, recorder

⁸ Azerrad 2001, 481.

⁹ Baumgarten 2012, 124.

¹⁰ Beat Happening 2000.

mechanisms and phonographic distortion can be heard throughout. The band do not use a conventional drum kit and improvise on individual drums and various unidentifiable objects. Background voices and spontaneous laughter, probably from an audience, can be heard in 'The Fall.' Guitars and percussion are noticeably below conventional standards of tuning and timing. Other 1984 cassette recordings have similar characteristics: 'Christmas,' released on the 1984 K compilation *Let's Together*, shows the band falling out of rhythm (as they sometimes do) and ends with the recorder's motor clearly audible. Many of the tracks on Beat Happening's self-titled debut were produced by Greg Sage, a professional, and though on these performance imperfections are still apparent and the band can be heard counting themselves in (a performance noise), the recording quality could not be described as poor. Others, such as 'Fourteen' and 'What's Important' have lower recording quality or are live recordings ('Bad Seeds'). On the CD reissue, dropouts can clearly be heard at the opening of 'Our Secret.'

On *Jamboree* and subsequent albums, even the live recordings have a good sound quality, though the band's inconsistency of timing and tuning persists. The band's most common performance imperfection is the tuning of Johnson's voice, which can be approximately a quartertone sharp (as on the expanded *Beat Happening's* 'Our Secret') or flat (as on *Jamboree's* 'Indian Summer'). This aspect was the one most commonly referred to by writers - Johnson's singing was described as 'offkey vocals,'¹¹ 'disarmingly flat (but winning),'¹² 'unbelievably out of tune,'¹³ 'sometimes off-key'¹⁴ and 'ear-bendingly

¹¹ Lumb 1986.

¹² Becker 1986b.

¹³ Neo 1998.

¹⁴ Dave [1987?].

off-pitch,¹⁵ and 'barely mak[ing] it to the assigned notes.'¹⁶ Johnson's voice is also unusually deep and resonant, which is often referred to - for example, as a 'deep, deep baritone.'¹⁷ One salient aspect of the band that resonated with lo-fi aesthetics was their lack of a bassist, often alluded to or discussed with the band, which significantly contributed to the recurring theme of minimalism in the band's reception.

Though it only mentions Beat Happening in passing, Emily Dolan's article '...This Little Ukulele Tells the Truth': Indie Pop and Kitsch Authenticity' is highly relevant to the band and its reception.¹⁸ In the first paragraph, she notes 'indie's love of lo-fi sound,' exemplified in how indie-pop singer/songwriter Stephin Merritt's 'fragile ukulele modestly eschews high production values in favour of nothing other than the truth.'¹⁹ Dolan persuasively argues that indie pop is a subcategory of indie music deriving its authenticity from kitsch, even if, as she notes, such a conclusion appears contradictory. Kitsch arises from 'a kind of aesthetic distance. It crops up when old forms that were once steeped with meaning are reused out of their primary context.'²⁰ Therefore:

Indie pop highlights this idea of temporal and aesthetic disjunction by sounding wistfully outdated, thus preserving the memory of some distant and imaginary past. The characteristic lo-fi sound of so many indie groups is created through the use of simplistic forms, odd instruments, old electronics and amateur performances, and cultivates an aesthetic of memory. The childlike sounds of Beat Happening (e.g. 'Our Secret') or Jonathan Richman serve, in part, to conjure images of an imagined childhood... This aesthetic distance is not cynical but nostalgic, it is not an absence of emotion, but its intensification.²¹

¹⁵ Kim 1993b.

¹⁶ Watrous 1988.

¹⁷ Christe 1993.

¹⁸ Dolan 2010.

¹⁹ Dolan 2010, 457.

²⁰ Dolan 2010, 463.

²¹ Dolan 2010, 464.

Such an 'aesthetic distance,' of course, is the same as I noted in Chapter 1, and Dolan goes on to explain the role of such a 'characteristic lo-fi sound.'

Although her account of lo-fi aesthetics is detailed and convincing, her article does not go as far as defining or historicising the term 'lo-fi' itself. Rather, her usage follows that of the mid-90s, in which sound quality is often so mildly poor that it is barely detectable as such, but there are a range of other forms of low production values implied, such as amateurish musicianship or cheap equipment. The musical examples she gives throughout the article do not approach the worse sound quality of lo-fi indie pop artists such as Daniel Johnston and Ariel Pink. Dolan does not examine Johnston's music, though it has been a key influence on indie pop, and as a clear example of both authenticity and kitsch it would enrich but complicate her argument - Johnston's music was rarely received in an atmosphere of light-heartedness or 'nonchalance.' The findings below concerning Beat Happening, however, support Dolan's conclusions. She also argues in several ways for an association with kitsch, which 'arises from a kind of aesthetic time travel,'²² as a form of authenticity much like Moore's third-person authenticity. Beat Happening used kitsch in precisely this way - authentically evoking a world of naivety where first-person realism was less sustainable.

The Reception of Beat Happening and K

The typical press response to the band made reference to their perceived amateurism, child-like qualities, minimalism and relationships to other artists and genres (especially pop, folk and punk). All of this was characterised as straightforwardly pleasurable ('charming,' 'sweet') and authentic:

²² Dolan 2010, 463.

Also from Washington (but this time from Olympia) come the totally unassuming, homegrown BH on K... Minimalist folk music with a pure, unpolished pop quality. Their simple melodies and off-key vocals have a peculiar warming effect especially in these days of high-tech wizardry.²³

This is my kind of minimalism. Charming, simple pop songs executed with a minimum of gloss and a large dollop of heart. The less-than-basic chord progressions and four-square drumming are reminiscent of such stripped-down music as that of the Fall. It's all strummed guitars (no bass) and boxy-sounding drums, topped off with innocent melodies.²⁴

Listen to Beat Happening... and be convinced that maybe you can still enjoy (pre) adolescent basement pop.²⁵

Minimal drumming, gnarling guitars, naive singing... This is a fun record, full of cool pop songs, great rockin songs, and good ole guitar noise stuff.²⁶

This influential Olympia, Wash. trio is in the simple (but not innocent) and sweet-natured (though not insipid) tradition of the Modern Lovers and Half Japanese; its do-it-yourself tunes combine the irresistible hummability of bubblegum with the stripped-down dirges of punk.²⁷

Like other lo-fi artists, Beat Happening were regularly seen as reminiscent of Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers, Half Japanese, the Shaggs and, most of all, The Velvet Underground. K itself is often described in similar terms to Beat Happening, as 'the messy living room of the Pacific Northwest music scene,'²⁸ 'Downhome records and cassettes by musicians and non-musicians. A different kind of punk / a different kind of pop'²⁹ and a 'home of peachfuzz folk-punk'³⁰ ('peachfuzz' refers to the velvet on the surface of a peach as well as early adolescent facial hair, and also suggests the 'fuzz' timbres of early 1960s rock).

²³ Lumb 1986.

²⁴ Becker 1986b.

²⁵ Oldfield 1988.

²⁶ John [1988?].

²⁷ Jenkins 1992b.

²⁸ Hewitt 1990.

²⁹ *Sound Choice* 1985b.

³⁰ James 1985c.

Beat Happening was described as 'the apotheosis of [K]'s celebration of innocence, childhood, kitty cats and candy.'³¹

Beat Happening's reception plainly reflects many of the themes of lo-fi aesthetics, though notably omitting accounts of phonographic imperfection. Although a review of the lower-fidelity *Three Tea Breakfast* read, 'forget about tape quality (Dolby? Wuzzat? At least clean your tape heads first). But the spirit is good,'³² subsequent discussions of phonographic imperfection are rare, which the improved quality of the recordings accounts for. Consistent with Azerrad's comments on the band's relationship to 'lo-fi,' the term is only applied to Beat Happening in the 90s, when the category had been consolidated. That it does not refer to recording quality directly is significant, and reflects the broad meanings of the term at the time: Beat Happening have a 'raw, minimalistic, lo-fi righteousness' (1996)³³ and they 'always did make [their] most powerful impact through understatement, whether singing lo-fi, unadorned songs about feeding cabbage to rabbits or just playing casually onstage' (1993).³⁴

In keeping with their relatively good sound quality, Beat Happening's equipment is rarely described as cheap (though their early *Beat Happening* cassette was described as 'fun and low budget stuff'³⁵ and Azerrad writes about how 'their cheapo equipment would often break or go out of tune.'³⁶) But like Jandek and Johnston the category of the 'primitive' helps to position Beat Happening in relation to similar, more canonical artists. The band are 'Lee Hazelwood vs. Jonathan Richman. That's how I see it (choose your favourite

³¹ Arnold 1995.

³² Lam 1986.

³³ Kemp 1996, 429.

³⁴ Kim 1993b.

³⁵ James 1984a.

³⁶ Azerrad 2001, 467.

primitive)³⁷ and 'fans of new-primitive back-to-basics rock 'n' roll are not going to want to miss out on [*Jamboree*].³⁸ They are also 'primitive popsters'³⁹ and their songs are 'primitive in construction.'⁴⁰ Simon Reynolds saw the band as exemplifying a category of 'regressive rock' with their 'teen psychosis zombiebeat'⁴¹ and wrote that 'Beat Happening try to return to something ancient and primordial.'⁴²

'They Strip Away the Layers of Rock and Roll Illusion': Minimalism

Within a primitivist aesthetics, minimalism and childlike qualities were most commonly discussed. The band's minimal textures were often invoked in passing: 'yes it's a bit sparse... imagine a stripped down skeletal version of the Wipers,'⁴³ and 'less is more for Beat Happening, the minimalist cult band from Olympia, Wash.'⁴⁴ They were 'extremely minimal. Each instrument stands on its own, without effects, horns, strings, etc.,'⁴⁵ the band 'might have taken a vow to carry minimalism to absurd lengths'⁴⁶ and they sounded 'like a minimalized Shaggs.'⁴⁷ In many cases, minimalism is given as a leading appeal of the music:

They sing about crushes, new boys in town, listlessly reiterate all the iconography over the most rudimentary rock patterns and it works. The very best of indie-thrashers, they abstain from taking it any further, as if some essential truth would thereby be lost.⁴⁸

³⁷ Jackson 1988a.

³⁸ Booth 1989.

³⁹ Lo 1988.

⁴⁰ Spielmann [1990?].

⁴¹ Reynolds 1989.

⁴² Reynolds 1988.

⁴³ Johnson 1986.

⁴⁴ Jenkins 1992c.

⁴⁵ Board 1985c.

⁴⁶ Lam 1986.

⁴⁷ Stirling 1988, 10.

⁴⁸ Coley 1987b.

Minimalism is the primary topic in at least two texts. David Stubbs reviewed *Black Candy* for *Melody Maker*:

Beat Happening are a fanatic's rock group, honed down austere to three absolutely basic elements - guitar, drone, rhythm - and three absolutely basic chords... "Black Candy" reminds us how inessential most elaboration in rock is, how much of it is there simply for its own sake. Beat Happening show just how much you can do with a stick and a few strings.⁴⁹

Stubbs then identifies the lack of bass as of particular interest, finding that it creates a 'lack of stasis' that 'preserve[s] that five-second moment of relish and anticipation like a frozen memory of childhood.' One feature article on the band associated their minimalism with an untechnocratic apathy towards 'rock and roll illusion,' conflating that with childlike qualities:

Beat Happening work... with a handful of elemental forms which are the foundations of rock and roll and popular songs - a few riffs, melody lines, and rhythm patterns. In reality, every band works with a very small number of forms... but usually they are gussied up with electronic tricks and enhancements. What sets Beat Happening apart is that they refuse to pretend these basic building blocks are more than they are... They're like the kid who pointed out the emperor's nakedness - they strip away the layers of rock and roll illusion.⁵⁰

Relating to minimalism but as applicable to song-writing as it is to instrumentation were notions of 'simplicity:' 'the greatness of *Beat Happening* is that there is a total simplicity to it,⁵¹ 'beauty, simplicity and perfection... everything fits together beautifully and there's not a wasted sound.'⁵²

⁴⁹ Stubbs 1989.

⁵⁰ Spielmann [1990?].

⁵¹ *True Reality Rock Report* 1988.

⁵² Ellen McGrall [1989-1990?]b.

'Punk Rock from a Child's Point of View:' Childlike Qualities

Beat Happening's minimalism was considered a childlike attribute, but characterisations of the band and their music as childlike or, less often, adolescent, were an obvious response to the imagery surrounding the band and their *naif* lyrics, exemplified in these extracts from the expanded *Beat Happening*:

*We were looking at your rabbits
We were feeding them some cabbage
You were telling me that you have a black and white cat
We took a walk, we start to hop, jump rope, play
hopscotch*⁵³

*They keep us apart from the other kids
They try to keep us from each other
We're no good is what they say
But we just see this world in a different way*⁵⁴

*Oh honey pot I can tell by your eyes
You're as wild as I am shy
So take me by the hand and lead into that land
Where everything is honey and sweet and sugar pie*⁵⁵

Using a minimalist visual style that matched both the childlike and amateurish qualities of the music, the cover of this album featured a *naif* line-drawing by Johnson of a cat flying in a rocket, and *Jamboree* and *Black Candy* also featured child-like line-drawings on their covers. K's logo is a hand-drawn letter K within a shield, and advertisements for K releases and live events in the underground music press would feature similar imagery (in chronological order): more line-drawings of the cat⁵⁶ and line-drawings of a zombie,⁵⁷ the surface of an ocean,⁵⁸ an aeroplane,⁵⁹ a baseball bat⁶⁰ and a guitar.⁶¹ One advertisement simply gave

⁵³ Beat Happening (1983) 2000, 'Fourteen.'

⁵⁴ Beat Happening (1984) 2000, 'Bad Seeds.'

⁵⁵ Beat Happening (1984) 2000, 'Honeypot.'

⁵⁶ K Records [1987?]c, K Records 1985b.

⁵⁷ K Records 1985a.

⁵⁸ K Records 1987b.

⁵⁹ K Records [1987?]d.

⁶⁰ K & Homestead Records 1988.

⁶¹ K Records 1991.

the logo and address of K along with the slogan, all in lower case, 'ice cream and bicycles, uncompromisingly so.'⁶²

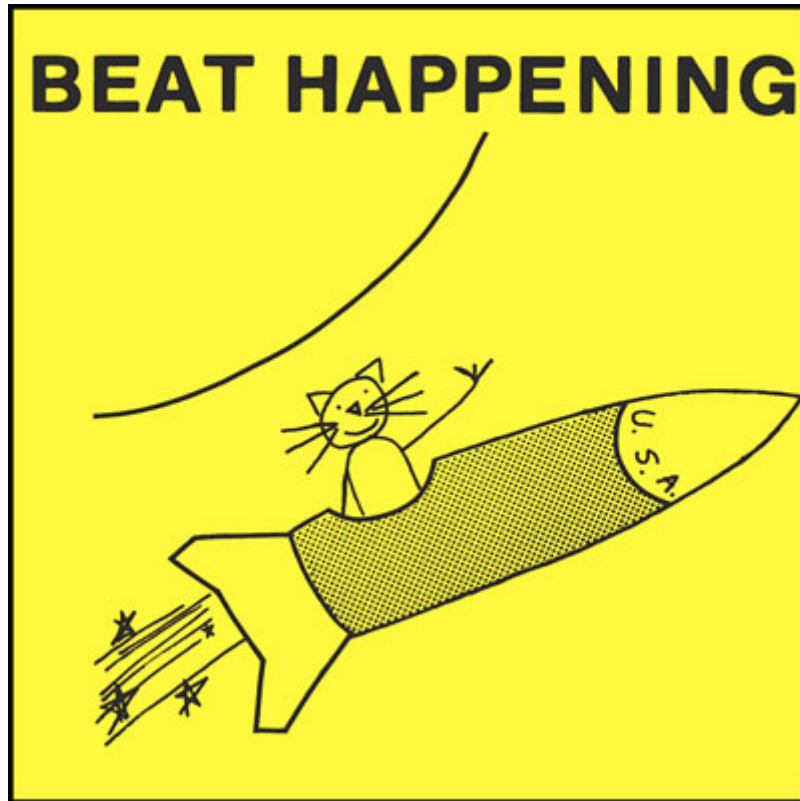


Figure 1 The cover of the *Beat Happening* LP (1985)

⁶² K Records 1987a.

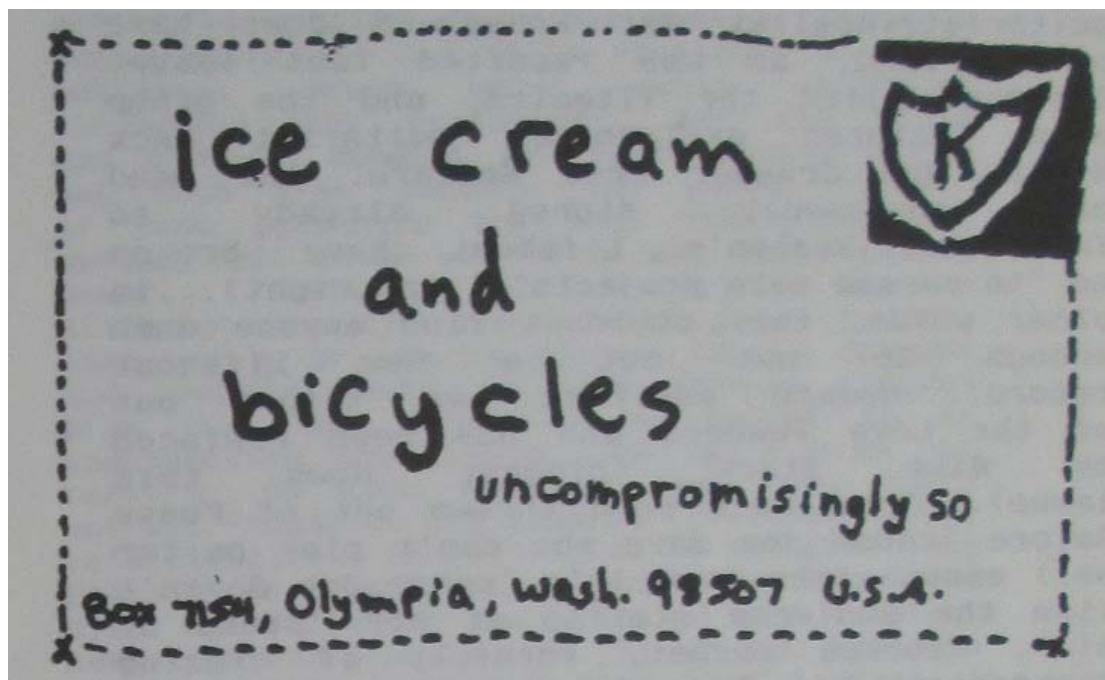


Figure 2 K advertisement in Conflict 43 (January / February 1987).

This childlike atmosphere was almost always commented upon, and was often expressed as a struggle between childhood and adulthood. Beat Happening 'carelessly doodles over rock's vocabulary with crayons fired by a blissful incompetence and a refusal to grow up,'⁶³ they 'play punk rock from a child's point of view - a 28-year-old child who has had his share of hard knocks but still managed to retain a sense of wonder'⁶⁴ and the song 'Jamboree' has a 'playground vocal.'⁶⁵ Even Johnson's live performance seems to have been modelled on the movements of children - one reviewer of a live show notes that 'Johnson danced with the gawky, uncontrived delight of a kindergartner.'⁶⁶ David Ciaffardini explored the childlike themes at length:

This is a charmer. Sing-around-the-campfire rock 'n' roll.
The Velvet Underground living out their second childhood...
Candy instead of drugs. Playhouses instead of shooting

⁶³ Mico 1988.

⁶⁴ Kugelberg 1992.

⁶⁵ Oldfield 1988.

⁶⁶ Jenkins 1992c.

galleries. Hugs and kisses instead of whips and chains...
Hummable, catchy tunes, suitable for skipping rope to.⁶⁷

As with Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening's childlike qualities were often understood in contradictory and ironic terms, and the band's lyrics frequently mix childhood concerns with eroticism. One reviewer called them '12-year-olds stuffed into 20 something bodies';⁶⁸ for another, their 'tuneful bits of dismembered music sound sweet, and are imbued with darker, more ominous intent.'⁶⁹ *Black Candy* prompted one writer into a discussion of child abuse.⁷⁰ This is an aesthetics of children struggling with maturity and the adult world not unlike the perceived struggles of Jandek and Johnston, with this dissonance and excess represented by the impairments and impediments of lo-fi effects.

'Fluency Means Less Feeling': Amateurism and 'Shambling' Bands

Amateurism was perhaps the most consistent topic of Beat Happening's reception, and sometimes provided the rationale for a negative review.⁷¹ In one, the inverse relationship between amateurism and 'the malignant adult world of pop' and its 'formal gloss' was expressed sarcastically by a reviewer unhappy with the band's standard of singing.⁷² But amateurism was the central focus of a favourable 1986 review of *Beat Happening* by Reynolds, who linked it to the recording process and performance noises (though not, notably, an imperfect phonographic process):

Beat Happening use incompetence as a springboard to glory. They don't have a proper drum set, often appear to be hitting *things* that come to hand, and so have [a] shuffling, faltering beat... And the way they've been

⁶⁷ Ciaffardini 1989b.

⁶⁸ Woodlief 1993.

⁶⁹ Dougan 1990a.

⁷⁰ Wheeler [1989?].

⁷¹ Taylor 1988, Gilbert 1989.

⁷² Mico 1988.

recorded captures the sounds of the music being *made* - the creak of the strings and plectrum, the rustle of percussion.

Voices are creased, sometimes they fail... This sort of thing is important because when you can *hear* the group struggling with instruments they've yet to master, when you can hear the *concentration*, you know they care. Fluency means less feeling, because it's the result of rehearsal... Their magic comes out of the friction between the limits of their ability and the scope of their ambition... Maybe Beat Happening will get skilled, lose that special tension that arises when the urgency is confined within close musical quarters. Right now, they're... enchanting, unearthly.⁷³

This account is strongly redolent of Half Japanese's, Jandek's and Daniel Johnston's reception. Like Shank on Johnston, Reynolds emphasises the audibility of Beat Happening's struggle with the impairments and impediments of their amateurism and their instruments, finding in this 'friction' or 'special tension' a 'magic.' This tension finds its parallel in the band's contradictory child-like qualities, their being too 'big' and thus 'stuffed into' the physical medium of their bodies as much as that of their meagre musicianship and *naïf* lyrics. One American reviewer quoted Frith to make a similar argument:

Beat Happening have, to go academic and quote Simon Frith, that "gap between expressive aspirations and musical aspirations and musical abilities" that makes them wonderful, but there is no danger of that gap narrowing... and that is what keeps them perfect.⁷⁴

Reynolds's review is also one of a few that noted the resonance of Beat Happening's music with 50s and 60s pop and rock.⁷⁵ Together with the amateur aspect, this was a significant dimension of Beat Happening's reception in the UK, where they were likened to a group of British bands known in the late 1980s as 'shambling bands' - Reynolds finds that "'shambling" is a useful means of entry to

⁷³ Reynolds 1986b.

⁷⁴ Cohen [1989?]. I have not been able to find the origin of this quotation.

⁷⁵ See also Coley 1989a and a discussion with Johnson in which he characterises his music as 'classic rock like Chuck Berry, James Brown and Bo Diddley' and the pop of the Brill Building (Greer 1993).

what Beat Happening are all about' and concludes that 'our own shamblers have yet to produce anything this strange, this moving.'⁷⁶ Earlier in the same year, 1986, Reynolds had written a feature, 'Younger Than Yesterday,' on a recent trend of 60s revivalism and childlike qualities in UK indie bands, finding that 'an idea of innocence and childhood possesses and pervades the indie scene.'⁷⁷ Like Fonarow and Bannister, it explained lo-fi aesthetics and childlike qualities, or 'the indie style,' as opposing - much like the opposition of Roszak's 'counterculture' to technocracy - mainstream rock and contemporary technology, or 'our entertainment culture':

The indie style is an elaborate, stylized way of indicating authenticity. The sixties and childishness both represent a simpler, happier, more genuine time. The sixties are seen as *rock's* childhood, a moment of innocence before bloated middle age... A time when the idea of youth was young...

Independent music is forced to set its back to the future, [to] enter a wilful, defiant exile. The Smiths are famed for their Luddite tendencies, but this spirit pervades the scene - the fanzines that sing the delights of mono record players and flexis (against the CD), the hostility to video, the revival of DIY ethos. To oppose the passivity our entertainment culture induces requires making a virtue of lo-tech and lo-fi. Otherwise the modern premium on perfection dispossesses us of our right to make things, to make a culture. The indie scene is struggling to protect 'innocence' in the face of a sophisticated culture.⁷⁸

Though the context and use of the term 'lo-fi' here is highly appropriate - and early, in 1986 - it is rare to find the term in the UK music press during Beat Happening's career, especially in such a multifaceted form. Reynolds's feature does not use the term 'shambling,' but following its reprinting in a compendium of the critic's writings (*Bring the Noise: 20 Years of Writing About Hip Rock and Hip Hop*), he draws the equivalence by noting 'I was ambivalent about the shambling

⁷⁶ Reynolds 1986b.

⁷⁷ Reynolds (1986a) 2007, 15.

⁷⁸ Reynolds (1986a) 2007, 17.

bands' scrawny music.'⁷⁹ In an article Reynolds wrote in 2006, he explains that the bands he was discussing in 1986 were later termed 'C86,' but that the terms used at the time were 'shambling bands' and "'cutie", a nod to the child-like imagery favoured by the groups.⁸⁰

'Shambling' is a fitting description for the rhythmic laxity attributed to amateurs, and in the UK Beat Happening were positioned in the context of such bands.⁸¹ Although Reynolds had used the term 'lo-fi' in 'Younger Than Yesterday,' the recordings made by the shambling bands were, like Beat Happening, predominantly noted for their performance imperfections and child-like themes rather than recording quality, which was more often professionally engineered. However, following Beat Happening's tours in the UK, the band maintained a relationship with their UK counterparts, with K releasing music by shambling bands such as The Pastels and The Vaselines.

'More To Do With an Ethic than a Sound': Folk-Punk Authenticity

Like other lo-fi artists, Beat Happening are regularly praised for their authenticity in terms such as 'honest,' 'pure,' 'sincere,' 'true,' and 'real.' In *Jamboree* they had made 'one of the most nakedly honest albums in recent memory with just a drum kit, guitar and microphone.'⁸² Sometimes this was simply a first-person authenticity. One reviewer explained that it was the real life context of the band that made them valuable: 'Calvin, Heather and Brett take on situations and ideas, not 'cause they think it's funny or strange to feel the way they do - BH truly live in the world they sing about... it's the truest sense of abandon anyone's created in

⁷⁹ Reynolds (1986a) 2007, 199.

⁸⁰ Reynolds 2006c.

⁸¹ Mico 1988.

⁸² Booth 1989.

way too long.¹⁸³ For another, it was a lack of self-awareness that made them sincere: 'Beat Happening is a phenomenon that defines the whole idea of rock as a populist art, and what makes it ring so much more true is the fact that they don't try at all to be aware of such an accomplishment which drapes them in gallons of sincerity.'¹⁸⁴ Glen Thrasher, who repeatedly advocated Jandek's music in similar terms, found *Jamboree* 'simple and basic and real,' a statement that seems to equate all three terms.¹⁸⁵ In some cases the connection is made between sincerity and the band's childlike qualities: 'Beat Happening *do* sometimes sound like 14-year-olds when they demand honesty and truth.'¹⁸⁶ In the same way, Beat Happening are frequently characterised as 'innocent,'¹⁸⁷ having 'pseudo-innocence'¹⁸⁸ or pursuing or being 'obsessed with innocence.'¹⁸⁹

The band's aura of authenticity, simplicity and innocence was sometimes implied or given as the result their social and geographical position within provincial America. We have already seen that like Daniel Johnston, K was described as 'downhome.' One reviewer concluded that 'Beat Happening work on the periphery because they *live* on the periphery, outside the recognised centres for mainstream chart resistance.'¹⁹⁰ Another drew on concepts associated with excursions to the American countryside: 'this little honey will make your drabest cabin-fever dinner feel like a picnic in Friend-o gulch.'¹⁹¹ Johnson was described as a 'dopey bumpkin bopping about the sleepy woods in absurd thriftshop costume of the village idiot.'¹⁹² The fullest manifestation of this trope comes in a

⁸³ Cosloy 1988a.

⁸⁴ *Buttrag* [1988?]a, 3.

⁸⁵ *Lowlife* [1988?].

⁸⁶ Oldfield 1988.

⁸⁷ Becker 1986b, Cohen [1989?], Woodlief 1993.

⁸⁸ McNally 1988.

⁸⁹ Oldfield 1988.

⁹⁰ Mico 1988.

⁹¹ Coley 1989a, 81.

⁹² Stirling 1988.

review of *Jamboree* reminiscent of the nationalist ideologies of folk music from the early twentieth century:

As Calvin Johnson has said, Beat Happening play punk rock, and although they may lack the heartfelt passion of Agnostic Front, they do indeed possess the heartfelt love of the heartland and all with good hearts at that. You see, it's rather difficult to describe in any way, but Calvin, Heather, and Bret are the virtual epitome of a certain type of American. The tolerant, loving, honest, fair (did I say loving?), and simple folk that composes the model American.⁹³

In an aesthetic atmosphere such as this, it is unsurprising that a band using drums and electric guitar in the rock tradition are nevertheless so often described as 'folk.' Applied to Beat Happening, the term carries connotations broader than those typical of the musical genre itself, of 'folk art' and 'the folk.' This difference is further emphasised by various qualifications of the term - they are described as 'folk-punk'⁹⁴ and, using realist rhetoric once again, K is explained as 'a mostly cassette label brilliantly documenting contemporary folk music (i.e. not people that sound like Joan Baez, playing today, but a real people music for people by people).'⁹⁵

While Beat Happening were linked to garage rock with similar qualifications (they 'reinvent sixties garage punk [but are]... eerily inept' and 'purged garage punk of its misogynist indolence and reanimated it with proto-feminist tenderness'⁹⁶ or 'replace the sociopath, rebel snarl with vulnerable boys,'⁹⁷) it is the definitions of punk itself that the band most often challenge for writers. Johnson would often assert in interviews that, for example, 'punk rock... [is] music that's accessible to anyone as far as the making of it and the listening

⁹³ *Buttrag* [1988?]b.

⁹⁴ Ingels 1984f.

⁹⁵ *Buttrag* [1988?]a.

⁹⁶ Reynolds 1988.

⁹⁷ Oldfield 1988.

to it'⁹⁸ and by the early 90s the idea that punk was more of a 'DIY ethic' (as in Spencer's *DIY*) than a particular rock sound had taken root. This distinction is explored in an *Option* article from 1993 that interviews Johnson and other related artists⁹⁹ and in an article featuring some of the same artists (including K artists) in *Spin*, which asserted that 'in 1992, punk has more to do with an ethic than a sound.'¹⁰⁰

Like Jandek and Daniel Johnston, this extended notion of punk is punk's high road, ever-more authentic: 'if you're punk enough to like something so unpunk, unafraid to find yourself singing, "you're just a sleepy head," while waiting in line at the store, then you've got the stuff to handle Beat Happening.'¹⁰¹ Writing in 2001, Azerrad concludes that 'as it turned out, Beat Happening and K were a major force in widening the idea of a punk rocker from a mohawked guy in a motorcycle jacket to a nerdy girl in a cardigan.'¹⁰² And like other lo-fi artists, Beat Happening were often regarded as a quintessence of rock (as punk was): 'all rock is here, the arrogance, hunger and repetition, distilled to its purest essence.'¹⁰³

Beat Happening as 'Adorable Pop Concoction'

The genre most commonly affiliated with Beat Happening and K, however, is perhaps 'pop.' Given that independent music had long been opposed to the commercial popular music industry, this might seem unusual, but the reappropriation of the term reflected perceptions of sweetness, simplicity and themes of romantic love in the music rather than mass-market appeals. This is

⁹⁸ Calvin Johnson, quoted in Mueller 1987, 30.

⁹⁹ Kim 1993a.

¹⁰⁰ O'Hara 1992.

¹⁰¹ Boddy 1992.

¹⁰² Azerrad 2001, 455.

¹⁰³ Reynolds 1988.

where Beat Happening most resemble Dolan's account of kitsch in indie pop, and as she argues, (what I call) lo-fi effects, their imperfections and their connotations of popular origin provide a means of framing such music as suitable for indie audiences normally opposed to commercial pop, thus authenticating it: 'The lo-fi sound not only acts as a self-critique, but as a self-justification - it declares through its production that it is unpretentious. Through this critical lo-fi sound world, indie is free to indulge in unabashedly tuneful melodies, sentimentality, over-used clichés and other elements that we would usually discuss as traditional markers of mainstream music.'¹⁰⁴ Lo-fi effects 'cook' mainstream commercial pop for an anti-technocratic aesthetics, or, rather, 'raw' it.

As pop, Beat Happening's music is 'sweet and catchy,'¹⁰⁵ 'sweet edgy pop perfection,'¹⁰⁶ but it is 'a fractured, precious kind of popsmithery,'¹⁰⁷ a 'spare, minimalist adorable pop concoction'¹⁰⁸ with its 'pop tunes stripped down to their bare essence.'¹⁰⁹ It is 'pop music played with no pretensions.'¹¹⁰ Calling them 'indie picnic-pop,' one feature article asserts in its opening paragraph that 'the boundaries of pop aren't relevant any longer,'¹¹¹ and as one review succinctly put it, 'who said Pop is a bad word?'¹¹² That Beat Happening's pop was not mass-market commercial pop was emphasised through the perennial lo-fi theme of unprofessionalism: it was 'unpolished'¹¹³ and even amounted to a satire on professional pop-music making:

Crude guitar and drums back the songs, and in their unprofessionalism, the group comments on the crassness

¹⁰⁴ Dolan 2010, 465.

¹⁰⁵ *Vicious Hippies from Panda Hell* 1989.

¹⁰⁶ Cohen [1989?].

¹⁰⁷ Dougan 1990a.

¹⁰⁸ Robbins 1997a.

¹⁰⁹ Lo 1991.

¹¹⁰ Dave [1987?].

¹¹¹ Oldfield 1988.

¹¹² McGonigal [1987?].

¹¹³ Dave [1987?].

of professional pop-music making, though still bowing to pop's melodic and rhythmic power.¹¹⁴

Pop did not compromise Beat Happening's authenticity - the band are a clear example of Moore's observation that 'in the late 1980s... "authenticity" became allied to constructions of "innocence," and an unreserved embrace of the 'pop' to which it was so antithetical twenty years earlier.'¹¹⁵

Beat Happening as a Concept

Although, as we have seen, many writers praised Beat Happening for the first-person authenticity of their context and intention, the band were significant for beginning to introduce the idea, particularly by the early 1990s, that lo-fi characteristics might be, to some degree, deceptive or even contrived. Unlike The Shaggs, Jandek or Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening and K were not typically considered genuinely naive but were seen - especially as time passed - to operate deliberately, according to a particular concept and series of tropes relating to childhood, adolescence and naivety. As well as the plainly and consistently *naif* style of their music and lyrics, Beat Happening (clearly in their twenties) and K were active presences in the international independent music scene and maintained this style in the imagery and text surrounding their frequent activities. They could not be taken as authentic *naifs* along the same lines as other lo-fi artists who were largely removed from the day-to-day life of the indie music community.

Beat Happening's lack of first-person naivety only rarely led to negative reactions, however. More often it was brought up either to correct misconceptions, or writers would mirror the band's and K's style - playing along,

¹¹⁴ Watrous 1988.

¹¹⁵ Moore 2002, 214.

so to speak, with the game. Like the New Lost City Ramblers before them, channelling the undeniably commercial popular musics of decades earlier, Beat Happening gained a third-person authenticity as a 'concept' paying tribute to pop as an archaic innocence.

'Playing rock music that causes people to use words like naïve, amateur, and pathetic takes a lot of balls and a certain brilliance if you're going to pull it off' asserted one reviewer.¹¹⁶ Two articles argued at length that the band's naivety was deceptive and required considerable skill:

The members of Beat Happening play like they draw. Big, clunky stick figures with smiling faces and jagged edges, deceptively simple and incredibly clever. It only looks like anyone can do it. But the truth is and always has been that minimalism is tough stuff to pull off.¹¹⁷

Similarly:

Saying that Beat Happening can't play or sing properly is a bit like looking at a late Picasso painting and saying, "I could have done that." Sure, most people could learn easily enough the rudiments of rock and roll - but it's highly unlikely they could exploit them with the subtlety that Beat Happening does, and it's even more unlikely that they would succeed in turning them into the perfect songs that this band regularly produces. While these songs are in some ways primitive in construction and execution, they're also breathtakingly original, and often highly sophisticated.¹¹⁸

Many sources go further, finding contrivance in Beat Happening's music. The band sing 'corny, ironic love songs,' have an 'artful irony,'¹¹⁹ a 'cultivated charm and primitivism'¹²⁰ and an 'intentional incompetence.'¹²¹ One reviewer adopted the tone of addressing an elephant in the room: 'Okay let's face it - these people are grown-ups and this is a concept, no matter how genuine and kid-like

¹¹⁶ *Buttrag* [1988?]b.

¹¹⁷ Fertig 1989.

¹¹⁸ Spielmann [1990?].

¹¹⁹ Mills 1991.

¹²⁰ Jackson 1988a.

¹²¹ Watrous 1988.

they are (in real life, even).¹²² Looking back in 1995, the *Spin Alternative Record Guide* found that:

Ostensibly, none of its members can play their instruments; instead, they seesaw lightly between two chords and a simple, tinny backbeat. This musical incompetence is, however, if not exactly feigned, somewhat assumed for conceptual purposes: Beat Happening records actually abound with sharp tunes, great lyrics and masses of personality.¹²³

Some sources, however, maintain a tension or ambiguity regarding Beat Happening's naivety, seeing in them 'a delicate poise between pastiche and underlying seriousness... that's delicious, almost camp'¹²⁴ or, as Ira Robbins does in the 1997 *Trouser Press Guide*, recalling that 'the influential and delightful Beat Happening demonstrated that punk's rebel spirit could be expressed just as well by defying rock's conventions as by defying society's. Hence the contrived (or sincere, you had to guess) anti-star innocence and cuteness.'¹²⁵ Though ambiguous in its authenticity, Beat Happening's contrived *naif* style nevertheless made for an ideal, ever more radical opposition to musical norms, outdoing even typical punk, and this explains why the band were not rejected because of it.

The writing style adopted by many writers on Beat Happening and K shows that this stance was intuitively understood - such writers were performing naivety as much as Beat Happening were (and so were fans, in their dress and behaviour).¹²⁶ This is evident from the beginning, when *Castanets* columnist Graham Ingels - a member of Olympia's independent music community alongside the band - abandoned his usually straight tone in reviewing their earliest releases

¹²² Wheeler [1989?].

¹²³ Arnold 1995.

¹²⁴ Reynolds 1988.

¹²⁵ Robbins 1997a.

¹²⁶ Azerrad 2001, 468.

and those of K. K were 'that outlaw cassette company'¹²⁷ and the review of the band's self-titled cassette clearly mirrored the simple, even naive, gently ironic and anti-rock-star stance noted by Robbins:

Beat Happening are Olympia's peachfuzz underground. This group is easily one of the best possible reasons to go out on a Saturday night. They're for real and that's what counts. Calvin owns this town. Heather is a painter. Bret can sure play basketball. Their cassette is a must.¹²⁸

Interviews with Beat Happening would often be light-hearted in tone, with members of the band responding coyly or curtly. One four-page interview was neatly written out by hand with a visual style very similar to that of K, probably requiring considerably more effort than entering it into the word processor used elsewhere in the magazine would have done.¹²⁹ Much of this followed the example of the band. Beat Happening anticipated the convention of referring to Daniel Johnston by his first name when they only gave their first names on the back of their releases, and writers nearly always followed suit. Johnson would often write for fanzines such as *Option* and *Puncture*, and regularly in a *naif* style, with short sentences and no contractions.¹³⁰

Nine years after Ingels's review, a review in *Spin* carried a similar tone, but connected it with the band's opposition to commercial rock and, again, the deceptively contradictory nature of their style, thus summing up the band's aesthetic and its meaning:

Beat Happening's Calvin, Heather, and Bret are the sort who don't look funny on a bike, are more content at a Tastee-Freez than a rock arena, and who, in all their shiny innocence, are a threat to the authority of rock 'n' roll... For nearly a decade, the... trio... have met at school yards and water fountains to create disarmingly unadorned,

¹²⁷ Ingels 1983l.

¹²⁸ Ingels 1984e.

¹²⁹ Mueller 1987.

¹³⁰ C. Johnson 1988.

ingeniously inane songs, slyly renouncing the corporate ogre at every turn, while throwing a dance party along the way. Sure, many cringe upon first listen to the band's jangly, clunky bluntness, but others hail its innocence as knowledge, its simplicity as manifold, its less as more.¹³¹

Beat Happening and their fans were authenticated by the music's minimalism, child-like qualities and amateurism - all of which tropes paralleled and reinforced one another as facets of a single anti-technocratic 'concept.' Moreover, like Jandek and Daniel Johnston, the locus of Beat Happening's aesthetics and authenticity extended beyond an inner 'music itself' and into its recording, distribution and discursive production. Yet where this made Jandek and Johnston challengingly 'real,' 'raw' and 'naked,' characteristics that were understood through poor sound quality, it made Beat Happening authentic as representatives of a performative stance, an attitude and even a lifestyle. Beat Happening's extension of lo-fi aesthetics took a different direction from Jandek's and Johnston's - they were not more real and serious than their forebears, but more down-to-earth and inviting. Rather than positioning lo-fi as the absorbing struggle the distant genius as pitiable amateur, Beat Happening offered it as a light-hearted, innocent style to be adopted, personable as well as personal. Though they carried the same connotations of distance and regression from technocracy and reflected a primitivist aesthetics of childhood innocence and folk culture, theirs was not a challenging realism but an attractive account of naivety.

With Beat Happening's reception came the beginnings of the idea that lo-fi was not just a dramatic, realist collapse of cultural distance, revealing jeopardised outsiders, but a stance, even to deliberate artistic effect, through which a communal understanding of aestheticised anti-technocratic values could be practiced. This would be seen more often in the reception of subsequent lo-fi

¹³¹ Boddy 1992.

artists. More generally, Beat Happening were one of the first acts for whom 'lo-fi' would mean a lot more than merely poor sound quality. In them it had come to represent a whole range of anti-technocratic distances, amateurisms and unprofessionalisms, sonic and non-sonic, of which low fidelity itself was only one minor component. In this more general form, lo-fi became not only the quintessence of 'indie' music-making, but often synonymous with it.

Chapter 6. 'The Slacker Generation': 'Lo-Fi Rockers' and Lo-Fi as a Movement in the early 1990s

On the 28th of August 1994, lo-fi aesthetics received the biggest, most direct coverage it had ever had. The *New York Times* headline could not have described it more explicitly or succinctly: 'Lo-Fi Rockers Opt For Raw Over Slick.'¹ It was the year that Beck and Guided By Voices had become popular new acts in the growing subculture of indie rock, and with Beck as its main focus, the article went on to discuss and interview Pavement, Sebadoh and Guided By Voices, and mentioned Beat Happening, The Grifters and recent lo-fi approaches by The Beastie Boys, The Breeders and Sonic Youth. Along with other indie and alternative rock acts, these bands had already received a significant amount of attention from similarly prominent discursive platforms that previous lo-fi artists had not enjoyed.

Much of this coverage can be attributed to the success of the band Nirvana's album *Nevermind* in 1991- the album had sold over three million copies in its first year² - and along with Douglas Copeland's novel *Generation X* and Richard Linklater's film *Slacker* (both released that same year), the culture of America's youth, usually referred to as 'alternative,' became an international talking-point. Mainstream music discourse thus quickly expanded to cover this territory, but by the time 'Lo-Fi Rockers' was published for its general audience, the validity and appeal of lo-fi effects and lo-fi aesthetics within indie rock itself was no longer in question.

Rock band Pavement's substantially lo-fi singles and EPs had been received with much enthusiasm in the underground music press and *Rolling*

¹ Diehl 1994.

² Winson 1992.

Stone between 1989 and 1992, and that year *The Boston Globe* suggested that they might be 'the next Nirvana.'³ 1992 was the year rock trio Sebadoh first appeared in *The New York Times*, and, like Pavement, remained one of the most prominent indie rock acts throughout the 1990s. Guided By Voices, a band who had started with studio recordings many years earlier, received widespread critical acclaim with phonographically imperfect albums, first in the underground in 1993 and in the mainstream music press in 1994 with the release of *Bee Thousand*. That year, 23-year-old Beck Hansen's single 'Loser' reached number ten in the US's Billboard Hot 100 chart. Though not particularly imperfect as a recording, it had been recorded at home, and together with the more lo-fi album *Mellow Gold* it saw him widely hailed as a Dylan for what was now being called 'the slacker generation.'⁴

As a consequence of all this, the concept of a movement within indie rock termed 'lo-fi,' comprised of the above bands and many others, coalesced between 1992 and 1994. While for the *New York Times* piece 'lo-fi' was the basic conflation of the opportunities afforded by lower-tech or home-based recording with lower sound quality, in the indie rock discourse the concept was more complex, connoting a range of phonographic and non-phonographic imperfections and representing the quintessence of independent music-making in the new climate of unwelcome media and commercial attention caused by *Nevermind*. In such a context, 'lo-fi' meant a lot more than 'low fidelity' - the term was often interchangeable with 'DIY' and 'underground,' and almost always implied 'sloppy' or 'loose' musicianship alongside phonographic shortcomings. The term's denotation of 'low fidelity' now remained in many cases only as an etymological vestige - it had ceased to be an adjective and became a noun

³ Sullivan 1992.

⁴ *Melody Maker* 1994b.

referring, both explicitly and by assumption, to a number of traits of which 'low fidelity' was only a minor component.

Lo-fi was now a creative stance, as it had been for Beat Happening. But rather than a performance of primitivist naivety, lo-fi in the early 1990s was considered a highly knowing attitude from which the landscape of popular music past and present was explored and critiqued with an artistic distance considered related to but more sophisticated than the ubiquitous, commercially successful grunge of Nirvana. As a result, lo-fi shed many of the connotations of primitivist realism it had acquired during the 1980s, becoming not just the quintessence of independent, grassroots music-making, but the expression of a self-conscious, lackadaisical, nonchalant and even post-modern 'slacker generation.' It did not lose its authenticity, however. Lo-fi became indie rock's aesthetic and ideological 'high road' - a cultural and aesthetic position adopted by some of its most enthusiastically received artists.

But as well as establishing a category identifiable and audible as lo-fi, the 1992-1995 era set up a number of aesthetic assumptions about the imperfect nature of home-recording that would long persist in (and sometimes beyond) indie rock discourse for years to come. These were not the claims of cassette culture, of course, which by 1990s had been almost forgotten, ignored or never encountered by participants in indie rock's discourse. DIY, home-recording and lo-fi (with its mild connotations of 'low fidelity') were considered practically the same thing, but this conflation also carried assumptions of performance imperfection, the genres of rock primarily and pop and folk secondarily, and a certain attitude of nonchalance and experimentation (the endless musical possibilities of the cassette culture and its medium this was not). Furthermore, the formation of this category of lo-fi-as-home-recording could be extended back

in time to canonise previous artists. Thus in the early 1990s the music of Beat Happening and Daniel Johnston was first called 'lo-fi' in general, and thus in 1996 Kemp's 'Lo-Fi Top Ten' appeared, extending lo-fi retroactively back to Half Japanese, The Velvet Underground and Hasil Adkins and omitting (and disapproving of in the aside about 'geeks') cassette culture and its figures such as R Stevie Moore and Eugene Chadbourne. This sense of lo-fi as a category and a canon became dominant.

Chiefly focusing on the most prominent artists Pavement, Sebadoh, Guided By Voices and Beck, this chapter looks at the rise and reception of the indie-rock category of lo-fi, starting from Pavement's first single in 1989 and ending with the more hi-fi albums the four acts produced in or after 1994. As well as usually appearing together in discussions of lo-fi as a musical category, these four artists were often mentioned alongside one another - Sebadoh would support Pavement live⁵ and the two were sometimes compared.⁶ Sebadoh and Beck were invited by *Melody Maker* to interview each other.⁷ Guided By Voices were seen to be in the same 'field' as Pavement⁸ and were described as 'The fab four as impersonated by... members of Pavement, Sebadoh and Cheap Trick.'⁹ Other significant artists often aligned with 1990s lo-fi such as Ween, the Grifters, Silver Jews, Liz Phair, Smog, Superchunk, Portastatic and Royal Trux have been largely omitted owing either to the comparative paucity of their reception or to its lesser relevance to lo-fi aesthetics.

⁵ Sullivan 1992.

⁶ Aaron 1994b.

⁷ True 1994.

⁸ O'Connell 1994a.

⁹ Rubin 1994b.

Pavement

Before Pavement (founded in Stockton, California in 1989) became established within indie rock discourse between 1992 and 1994, lo-fi and amateur artists like Half Japanese, Daniel Johnston and (to some extent) Beat Happening could generally be constructed as outsiders - innocent of the conventions of commercial pop music. While Beat Happening had begun to introduce the idea that lo-fi and amateur musicianship might come from a concept rather than a pure folk authenticity (as we saw in the last chapter), Pavement came to embody the idea of lo-fi as a deliberate creative strategy.

This was not entirely clear from the start, however. Pavement's early releases *Slay Tracks (1933-1969)* (1989), *Demolition Plot J-7* (1990) and *Perfect Sound Forever* (1991) arrived in an atmosphere of anonymity, obscurity and mystery not unlike that which had surrounded Jandek, one which the band would later confirm as deliberate in the major chronicle of Pavement's history written shortly after the band broke up, Bob Jovanovic's *Perfect Sound Forever: The Story of Pavement* (2004).¹⁰ The band's founders Stephen Malkmus and Scott Kannberg only gave their names as S.M. and Spiral Stairs respectively until their debut album, *Slanted and Enchanted*, and a further EP, *Watery Domestic*, appeared in 1992. These early recordings, especially *Demolition Plot J-7*, have significant phonographic imperfections, and while it is not clear that this was entirely planned, the phonographic distortion blends with considerable levels of distortion and noise that were.

On the opening of *Slay Tracks*, 'You're Killing Me,' Malkmus and Kannberg 'figured we'd use static as the third instrument,'¹¹ and indeed, white noise can be heard, its volume slowly being adjusted. That Pavement would call their third

¹⁰ Jovanovic 2004, 67.

¹¹ Malkmus, quoted in Jovanovic 2004, 65.

release *Perfect Sound Forever* in reference to the slogan of a 1982 Sony campaign advertising CDs is an irony signalling that the band were aware of their lower-fidelity technological and aesthetic position, and given the indie rock context, listeners could infer that they were opposed to Sony (in fact, one early release was described as 'defiantly anti-CD').¹² At least one reviewer would affirm this title as accurate, despite or because of the irony, in keeping with punk and lo-fi's inverse aesthetics.¹³ The *Trouser Press Guide* saw Pavement's imperfections as deliberate, explicit and influential, describing them as 'the first band to explicitly equate the medium with the message, thereby precipitating the lo-fi revolution that agitated the indie world in the early '90s.'¹⁴

'Forklift' from *Demolition Plot J-7* is arguably Pavement's most lo-fi recording. It begins with the sound of a typewriter alongside the mechanical noise of the device recording it, the signal inconsistent. When the song starts, the guitars and vocals are thin and trebly and are shortly masked by a synthesiser riff. The voice is also obscured, much more obviously, in the same EP's 'Perfect Depth,' while 'Recorder Grot (Rally)' sounds like a malfunctioning synthesiser circuit - one reviewer wrote "'Recorder Grot" sounds just like that, like it was recorded on a prototype steam-driven tape recorder.'¹⁵ Again, both these titles might be taken to refer to the recording quality itself, ironically or otherwise. Another title that refers to the process of recording is 'Drive By Fader' on *Perfect Sound Forever*, a twenty-eight-second-long track featuring a highly distorted synthesiser played with imprecise timing. Much of what is 'lo-fi' about Pavement's early releases appears to come from distortion, filtering, use of noise and non-optimal mixing that masks tracks rather than phonographic imperfections per se.

¹² Erlewine 1995c.

¹³ Kemp 1991.

¹⁴ Sprague 1997c.

¹⁵ Stubbs 1993.

Slanted and Enchanted was a less extreme version of this, with thick, distorted guitar textures, while their next album, *Crooked Rain Crooked Rain* (1994) had a generally cleaner and clearer sound, even on the guitars. As well as their noise-laden textures, Pavement were noted for the large number and short length (usually under three minutes) of their tracks, as indeed were Sebadoh and Guided By Voices.

Pavement's early lo-fi releases up to and including *Slanted and Enchanted* were received with much enthusiasm: during their rise they were referred to as 'the most fawned-over group in indie land,'¹⁶ and as the band that had 'given lo-fi a hi-profile.'¹⁷ They were particularly popular with *Melody Maker*, whose staff voted *Slanted and Enchanted* the second best album of 1992,¹⁸ and whose readers voted them the band they'd most like to see more of in the magazine the same year.¹⁹ Pavement continue to be one of the most respected indie rock bands of the 1990s, and were described in the second edition of the *All Music Guide to Rock* as 'along with Sebadoh... the leaders of the lo-fi movement that dominated US indie-rock in the early '90s.'²⁰

Sebadoh

Sebadoh was founded in Massachusetts by Lou Barlow and Eric Gaffney while the former was still the bassist for prominent indie rock band Dinosaur Jr. Cassettes of home-recordings *Weed Forestin'* and *The Freed Man*, among the band's most lo-fi material, were released in 1987 and 1988 respectively, and then over the next two years were released on vinyl by Homestead (the label that had

¹⁶ Sprague 1992.

¹⁷ Kemp 1996, 430.

¹⁸ *Melody Maker* 1992c.

¹⁹ *Melody Maker* 1993/1994.

²⁰ Erlewine 1997a.

released Daniel Johnston's cassette *Hi, How Are You?* in 1988). When Barlow was fired from Dinosaur Jr in 1989 he focused on Sebadoh, adding drummer and bassist Jason Lowenstein. With all three members writing songs but Barlow appearing as the figurehead, the band released *Sebadoh III* with Homestead, *Rockin' the Forest* and *Sebadoh vs. Helmet* for the UK label 20/20 in 1992 (these were combined and edited for the 1992 US release *Smash Your Head on the Punk Rock*), and *Bubble and Scrape* in 1993. Following Eric Gaffney's departure and replacement, Sebadoh recorded the higher-fidelity *Bakesale* in 1994 to wide acclaim. Barlow released further recordings with varying degrees of lo-fi effects with John Davis as The Folk Implosion and, mostly solo, as Sentradoh, with 1995's *Lou Barlow and his Sentradoh* compiling various home recordings.

Along with Pavement and Guided By Voices (but widely known two years earlier than the latter), Sebadoh is one of the names most associated with lo-fi as a subcategory of 1990s indie rock. Before the millennium, Sebadoh were described as 'the band who for many define the very words "lo" and "fi,"'²¹ 'pioneers of the "low-fi" movement,'²² 'lords of lo-fi'²³ and 'the quintessential lo-fi band of the 1990s.'²⁴ Even before the 'mid-fi'²⁵ *Bakesale*, the fidelity of their recordings varied widely. *The Freed Man* and *Weed Forestin'* have the hiss, distortion and room acoustic sometimes heard on four-track home-recordings throughout, and mostly use improvised percussion instead of a conventional drum kit. The opening tracks on *Sebadoh III* and *Rockin' the Forest*, however, could not be described as lo-fi, even by the broadest definitions. The remainder of this era's tracks occupy a spectrum between the two. Of those where lo-fi effects are most obvious, *Sebadoh III*'s 'Perverted World' has noise, improvised

²¹ True 1994.

²² Boyd 1996.

²³ Courtney 1999.

²⁴ Erlewine 1997b.

²⁵ Tignor 1995.

percussion and slightly overmodulated vocals, while the same album's 'Rock Star' has distorted and out-of-time percussion and clearly audible room acoustic. Sebadoh's musical style varies widely within an indie rock locus, including what might be described as folk,²⁶ folk-rock,²⁷ punk (often approaching hardcore),²⁸ death metal,²⁹ grunge³⁰ and experimental improvisation.³¹ The band were notorious for their prolificacy, releasing albums full of song sketches that, like Pavement and Guided By Voices, were typically under three minutes long, but this aspect is a particularly salient trend in Sebadoh's reception.

Guided By Voices

During the 1990s, Guided By Voices would be called 'the perfect distillation of the basement tape aesthetic,'³² 'critical darlings of the lo-fi underground'³³ and 'the discovery of the indie-ground in '93-94.'³⁴ The band were unusual in indie rock in that its members were nearly in their forties when they began receiving widespread attention, which was for their seventh album, *Bee Thousand*. Guided By Voices was founded in Dayton, Ohio in 1983 and has had many members, with Robert Pollard as its leader and main singer and songwriter. Their earliest albums were professionally recorded, but as they continued the recordings were increasingly lo-fi, recorded in band member's basements. The band eventually came to the attention of local indie label Scat, who released their album *Vampire on Titus* in 1993. *Bee Thousand* was released the following year on Matador, the label that had released Pavement's *Slanted and Enchanted* two years earlier. In

²⁶ Sebadoh 1989, 'Solid Brown.'

²⁷ Sebadoh 1992c, 'Mean Distance.'

²⁸ Sebadoh 1993a, 'Sister.'

²⁹ Sebadoh 1992b, 'Cry Sis.'

³⁰ Sebadoh 1992b, 'Gimme Indie Rock.'

³¹ Sebadoh 1992c, 'Cecilia Chime in Melee;' Sebadoh, 1989, 'McKinley's Lament.'

³² Rubin 1994b.

³³ Kemp 429.

³⁴ Marks 1995.

2006, a book on *Bee Thousand* by Marc Woodworth appeared, and as well as offering a history of the album complete with extended statements from the band members involved, it amounts to perhaps the most detailed and extensive exploration of lo-fi aesthetics to have been published to date.³⁵ Another book, *Guided By Voices: A Brief History*, offers a detailed narrative with many quotes from Pollard but little on aesthetics.³⁶

Vampire on Titus, *Bee Thousand*, the EP *Fast Japanese Spin Cycle* and to a lesser extent the 1995 album *Alien Lanes* are some of the most lo-fi recordings to have received widespread acclaim in this era, and were recorded on a mixture of four-tracks and other portable cassette recorders. Room acoustic is common, and tape hiss, modulation noise and electrical interference can typically be heard at the openings of the tracks, before the full band are playing, and are particularly noticeable on *Bee Thousand's* 'Hot Freaks' for example. An edit in that album's 'Tractor Rape Chain' joins an electric hook to an acoustic introduction, and is slightly out of rhythm in doing so. Crickets can be heard at the end of 'You're Not An Airplane,' and two sniffs from a performer can be heard on 'Awful Bliss' at 0:37. Other lo-fi effects are discussed or explained in Woodworth's book on *Bee Thousand*: guitars drop out of the mix on 'Hardcore UFO's' (this can be heard between 1:23 and 1:26)³⁷ and on the same track, a partial signal dropout is given as a consequence of a tape player having 'eaten' the tape (this can be heard between 0:53 and 1:00).³⁸

It is probable that Guided By Voice's use of more 'lo-fi' practices played a significant role in their eventual success, especially as it followed the precedent of Pavement, whose reception bears many similarities - both were considered

³⁵ Woodworth 2006.

³⁶ Greer 2005.

³⁷ Woodworth 2006, 149-150.

³⁸ Woodworth 2006, 137-138.

intriguing bands working outside the biggest cities, their 'pop' material reminiscent of older rock bands and partially obscured by noise and distortion. The influence of British invasion groups is particularly audible on *Bee Thousand* and Pollard can be heard effecting a British accent, especially on 'Echos Myron.' While rarely reaching 'hi-fi,' the sound quality of Guided By Voice's recordings improved markedly from their 1996 album *Under the Bushes Under the Stars*, though like Sebadoh, the sound quality of their recordings varies between tracks.

Beck

Beck is probably the most well-known of any of the acts to be commonly associated with lo-fi, following his sudden rise to number 10 in the Billboard Hot 100 in 1994 with the single 'Loser.' It was recorded spontaneously two years earlier and was frequently played on college radio before Geffen, the label that had released Nirvana's *Nevermind*, released the single in 1994. That year, Beck's debut album *Mellow Gold* appeared, also on Geffen - it sold just under a million copies³⁹ - as well as two less noted albums on independent labels, *One Foot in the Grave* (on K) and *Stereopathic Soulmanure*. During this period, Beck was almost always alluded to as the voice of the 'slacker generation,' a designation he often rejected.⁴⁰ The biography *Beck: Beautiful Monstrosity* contains a small degree of critical commentary, and is notable for its extensive use of press sources from throughout the 1990s.⁴¹

Sonically, 'Loser' is lo-fi only in the broadest sense. It is acoustic, simple and was recorded in a kitchen, but noise and distortion are not noticeable. There are a number of lo-fi effects on *Mellow Gold* (the album 'Loser' appears on),

³⁹ Weisbard 1996.

⁴⁰ Wild 1994, 80.

⁴¹ Palacios 2000.

however, some of which was recorded on a four-track. 'Pay No Mind' opens with voices sped up as on a portable cassette recorder, 'Fuckin' With My Head' has a distorted section with the highest frequencies filtered out, 'Soul Suckin' Jerk' features detuned guitars, 'Steal My Body Home' ends with a rhythmically loose passage involving improvised percussion and kazoo, and room acoustic can be heard on the drum track in 'Beercan.' 'Truckdrivin' Neighbors Downstairs (Yellow Sweet)' opens with an eighteen-second clip of a fight occurring in the apartment below Beck's, an environment noise inadvertently recorded on the four-track.⁴² *One Foot in the Grave* and *Stereopathic Soulmanure* are moderately lo-fi throughout, with tape hiss and slight performance imperfection, sometimes in an acoustic slide-guitar blues style - but albums after 1996's *Odelay* are professionally produced.

Lo-Fi Aesthetics in the 1990s: Effects, Ideology and Authenticity

The mid 1990s saw a clear, widespread appreciation of and even preference for recordings considered imperfect in relation to earlier commercial norms. While much of the reception of lo-fi music in the 1980s had characterised it as appealing in spite of its flaws, now the flaws were indexes of value and authenticity: as one reviewer wrote of Pavement, 'sure, they're flawed; the best always is.'⁴³

Guided By Voices' music was described as 'a raw kind of garagey rock'⁴⁴ and seeming 'to have been recorded with two cans connected by a string,'⁴⁵ but

⁴² Palacios 2000, 87.

⁴³ O'Connell 1994b.

⁴⁴ Sale 1990.

⁴⁵ Rubin 1994a.

for one reviewer, lo-fi production not only underscored the strength of *Bee Thousand's* songs, it made the whole album sound 'like a favorite bootleg':

Recorded on a four-track machine, BT sounds like a favorite bootleg or a beloved old LP whose worn grooves now reveal only a blurry jumble. Amp hum, sniffing musicians and creaking chairs all inhabit the mix, but the homespun production only underlines the strength of these songs - lo-fi or not, there's no denying an astonishing rush of guitar-pop glory like "Tractor Rape Chain"⁴⁶

A series of factors made Guided By Voices' *Fast Japanese Spin Cycle* inimitably 'warm and human': 'The ambience of tape hiss, cheap guitars and out-of-tune pianos sounds warm and human, an effect that many home-recording musicians have attempted but have rarely achieved.'⁴⁷ Beck resonated with the common lo-fi trope of 'dirt,' making the 'highest, purest, most sacred art... out of feeling icky and foolish.'⁴⁸

Sebadoh were regularly characterised as, for example, makers of 'distorted, low-fidelity recordings' or sounding 'like a group of friends who have put together basement tapes.'⁴⁹ The band's 'god-awful recording techniques' were 'bold' and 'add to the spirit of what Sebadoh is about.'⁵⁰ But as with Jandek and Daniel Johnston, Sebadoh's music was considered notable for its emotional intensity, expressed through words and phrases such as 'embarrassingly personal',⁵¹ 'so personal it makes you wince',⁵² 'deeply, heartbreakingly sincere',⁵³ or 'naked, profane and profound.'⁵⁴ Sebadoh were 'champions of the private moment'⁵⁵ whose songs were 'as moving' and 'as emotionally stark as

⁴⁶ Azerrad 1994b.

⁴⁷ Meyer 1994b.

⁴⁸ Aaron 1994c.

⁴⁹ Pareles 1992a.

⁵⁰ Chandler 1993.

⁵¹ *Vicious Hippies from Panda Hell* [1990?].

⁵² Kemp 1996, 429.

⁵³ True 1992d.

⁵⁴ Joy 1992.

⁵⁵ Powers 1996.

soul music ever gets,⁵⁶ and, using a term often associated with poor sound quality, 'simple, poignant expressions of the human condition drawn from the murkiest recesses of [Barlow's] psyche.'⁵⁷

And as before, this aspect was enhanced by the lo-fi qualities and intimate recording setting: the solo songs on *Lou Barlow and his Sentridoh* are 'low-fi masterpieces' and the 'low-fi quality of the recordings (made on a four-track in Lou's front room) enhances the claustrophobic atmosphere.'⁵⁸ This aspect of Sebadoh's music was expressed most succinctly - and with a note of voyeurism - by Sally Margaret Joy in the preamble to an interview with the band: 'lo-fi music is private music. The kind of music you want to hear just because it was never meant for you to hear.'⁵⁹ While such statements match those made about the recordings of Jandek and Johnston, in the mid-1980s there was hardly such a category as 'lo-fi music' with which to make these generalisations.

The previous year, Joy had reviewed *Rockin' The Forest for Melody Maker*, beginning by echoing the ironic 'perfection' noted in the review of *Perfect Sound Forever* quoted above: 'You know what's so perfect about Sebadoh? They realise that perfect doesn't have to mean smooth, shiny, verse-chorus middle eights and top name producers twiddling millions of knobs.'⁶⁰ Joy then connects this with the benefits of spontaneous recording for the purposes of capturing genuine inspiration and emotion:

[Sebadoh] know that perfect means capturing a song the exact moment that inspiration hits. [The resulting] records [are] littered with spontaneous and unique touches that would have been removed by a "proper" band - little touches that would have been completely irrecoverable had they tried to record the songs again.

⁵⁶ True 1993a.

⁵⁷ Bonner 1993.

⁵⁸ Bonner 1994.

⁵⁹ Joy 1993.

⁶⁰ Joy 1992.

Sebadoh's recording process is thus 'as precious and awesome an achievement as capturing a ghost on film.' Noting that 'each [song is] a treasure... sketchy, scratchy, fine-lined,' Joy summarises her running theme of the benefits of spontaneity by associating it directly with lo-fi, and uses it to criticise bad listeners:

"Lo-fi", "home-recording", "four-track demo", are ugly, scrappy words for wonderful, beautiful things. But then, people still believe that bigger and brighter is better. Why, for God's sake? It's so simple. When you're angry, the first words you blurt out are always the most cutting, and the ones you save up til later, useless. It's the same when you record a song. And Sebadoh understands this, better than anyone.

Reviewers in the 1990s were no less enthusiastic about the culturally and ideologically oppositional implications of lo-fi as writers in the 1980s were.

Pavement were often considered to represent an independent stance in their poor sound quality. The band seemed 'content to shrug off major-label overtures, remaining committed to the indie aesthetic both in sound and spirit'⁶¹ and they 'proved how indie rock, or any art, can justify its dilly dallying by simply celebrating its insignificance.'⁶² The 'deepest values' of Pavement's subculture were described as 'fan devotion and anti-mass-consumerism'⁶³ and 'any idealistic indie fan who cringes now that his or her music has been swallowed by greedy, multi-national, monstrous corporations, can always look back fondly to *Slanted and Enchanted*.'⁶⁴ Pavement's 'identity is rooted in an oppositional sensibility... [that] embrac[es] low budgets,' thus 'Malkmus and Kannberg strategize ways to avoid entering the rock-star realm.'⁶⁵ Implicit in all such statements is that the

⁶¹ Greer 1992b.

⁶² Aaron 1994a.

⁶³ Rubin 1994b.

⁶⁴ *Tulsa World* 1995.

⁶⁵ Fine 1994.

resulting sound is lo-fi. Everett True made this clear during a review of *The Grifters*: 'Pavement were merely the revenge of those who never had more than tuppence to scrape together to visit recording studios, who wallow in the strange, distorted shapes their music consequently throws up, freed - if only by circumstances - from the restraints of chart complacency.'⁶⁶

This stance could be considered innocent, honest and unpretentious or a knowing performance. While Pavement were usually characterised as the latter, they were described as a band who 'just want to hang out and make a few records'⁶⁷ and similarly, the 'success' of Sebadoh, 'lies within [their] resolute ordinariness. They're just three guys who come on stage and play - they aren't about glamour, or pretence, or re-inventing themselves; they're just supremely, triumphantly honest.'⁶⁸

Guided By Voices, especially, were considered innocent, unpretentious and uncaring towards the commercial music industry along the same lines as Jandek, Johnston and Beat Happening, and a major cause of that was seen to be their age and their geographical isolation in Dayton, Ohio. With a clear, even classic primitivist aesthetics, reviewer Bill Meyer wrote:

Imagine the thrill an anthropologist would feel stumbling upon a tribe that had no previous contact with civilization. I suppose that's how the folks at Scat records felt when they first heard GBV. GBV has released a half dozen albums of far-reaching, self-recorded guitar rock since 1986 to absolutely no acclaim, perhaps because the records were barely distributed outside the city limits of Dayton, Ohio... GBV is that rarity, a band that sounds unself-consciously original... In a day of bloated, boring, over-polished discs, it is a joy to find one that is too short at 67 minutes.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ True 1993c.

⁶⁷ Arundel 1993.

⁶⁸ Bonner 1993.

⁶⁹ Meyer 1994a.

Though it is telling that the author made the generalisation, it is not quite true that the band had received 'absolutely no acclaim' - Byron Coley had mentioned their (non-lo-fi) album *Sandbox* in his Underground column for *Spin* as early as January 1989. He began by reflecting on the lack of individualism in alternative college radio playlists and his desire for a band that 'don't even want to' get signed to a prominent indie label, that is, 'music played for the sheer fuck of playing.' Guided By Voices were such a band: 'One combo that doesn't seem wrapped up in the circle-jerking of the alternative record pseudo-industry is Dayton's Guided By Voices... commendable stuff from a band who might actually not give a shit what you think.'⁷⁰ Everett True expressed similar sentiments to Meyer, portraying Guided By Voices as a rarity along the lines of Meyer's uncontacted tribe:

It's tempting to think of GBV as the last of America's great lost underground bands... they're so natural! They move awkwardly and exuberantly onstage, as only a band whose main contact with the outside musical world has been to record seven albums on a garage four-track... Catch them now kids, in the raw, before they're spoiled.⁷¹

Like Johnston, Guided By Voices were described as virtually incapable of inauthenticity, due to their spontaneity and lack of 'cleverness':

GBV's sound is completely organic: they're not trying to be zany or clever like so many other "experimental" bands, they don't want a big career out of this. All they do is record songs because that's all they understand how to do...GBV still haven't lost that freshness that comes from being in a band for the first time.⁷²

It is unsurprising, then, that the band were portrayed as working class, in opposition to 'alternative glamour': 'The group... does not exude alternative glamour. They look like guys who might come over and look at your carburettor if

⁷⁰ Coley 1989a, 80.

⁷¹ True 1993d.

⁷² Kestle 1994.

you pulled into an Ohio gas station.⁷³ One reviewer encapsulated the sense of innocence projected - patronisingly - onto the band by closing with 'bless their goddamn cotton socks.'⁷⁴ Evoking the transcendental realism of Charles Ives, another used the band to reflect that 'reality is not Vaseline-gelled lenses on movie stars; reality is a deja vu of mistakes intermittently revealing a universal truth.'⁷⁵

Although Woodworth is broadly in agreement with such accounts of Guided By Voices' authenticity, he is keen to counteract characterisation of the band as primitives.⁷⁶ Finding it to be actually the result of a deliberate artistic stance, he concludes that:

Guided By Voices were never primitives... *Bee Thousand's* strength is not the result of a sloppy, lucky amateurism but of a hard-earned artistic self-confidence, on that made the band unafraid to experiment, to be imperfect, and to be willing to express themselves in ways they couldn't have earlier in their career.⁷⁷

Even if it was largely clear that Pavement were a band with 'hard-earned artistic self-confidence,' this did not undermine their authenticity, which, as we have seen, was underscored by their perceived sonic commitment to independent music-making. Yet like Guided By Voices and other lo-fi artists (The Shaggs in New Hampshire, Jandek and Johnston in Texas, Beat Happening in Washington), Pavement's origins in Stockton, California, away from larger cities, was much discussed. The band came from 'Nowheresville (Stockton, California)... in the middle of nowhere,⁷⁸ from 'out of nowhere (or somebody's

⁷³ Ross 1993.

⁷⁴ McConnell 1994.

⁷⁵ Fort 1994.

⁷⁶ Woodworth 2006, 64-66.

⁷⁷ Woodworth 2006, 66-67.

⁷⁸ Davis 1992.

basement in California)⁷⁹ and 'from kind of out of nowhere (Stockton, CA to be precise) Pavement burst from some isolated cocoon.'⁸⁰ Stockton is discussed with the band at length as a curiosity in at least two interviews.⁸¹

In many cases, Beck's very 'inauthenticity' - his musical and professional connection to contemporary pop culture and his mixing of folk with hip hop - became a kind of authenticity due to its helplessness. Put another way, what might have been a second- or third-person authenticity otherwise typical of folk or punk became a first-person authenticity because Beck embodied his context, even if it had been brought about or compromised by commercial modernity. This was expressed most clearly in the *All Music Guide to Rock*: 'with all of his rootless eclecticism, Beck is distinctly a product of the '90s; all of his influences were processed through television and records, not real life experiences. But that trashy, disposable quality is what makes his music unique.'⁸² As the voice of the slacker generation, he was regularly perceived as a something of a victim, degraded by pop culture and modern life (a 'loser'), who nonetheless managed the scrape together something beautiful from its 'litter' and 'detritus.' David Bennun's review of *Mellow Gold* begins:

It's so easy to drift in a country this size, stumbling around the litter-strewn streets or staying home and meandering through the detritus of your own psyche. And there's treasure to be found in garbage.

The good old US of A made Beck what he is today... A reflection of society? What society? Just fragments. Snippets. A trip through the mind of another poor loser. Genius loser with a record contract and a fine, fascinating mind, mind.⁸³

⁷⁹ Jodi S [1990?].

⁸⁰ *Buttrag* [1989?]b.

⁸¹ Arundel 1994, Fine 1994.

⁸² Erlewine 1995a.

⁸³ Bennun 1994.

He follows this with an image of Beck's recording equipment as built from such garbage itself and subsequently 'salvaged':

Mellow Gold is recorded on equipment built from ring-pulls, with breakbeats and acoustic guitars and songs that never knew the rules, feverishly salvaged from four-track by hi-tech, hi-paid studio scientists who probably dubbed tap[e] hiss over the result to make it sound more authentic. (Whatever the f*** that is.) Who cares?

That Beck's 'hi-tech, hi-paid' major-label associates might have added tape hiss to his music only makes the artist more amusingly or depressingly characteristic of modern life, and that no-one might care reflects the attitude of the slacker. Similarly, Beck is 'like a telephone pole erupting into song in the voice of a thousand stapled flyers, effortlessly drifting between the semiotic detritus of a generation's worth of subcultures'⁸⁴ and though the garbage-like low production values match a slacker's stance and 'speaks of lowered expectations' there is 'a sense of empowerment derived from that cheap high technology.'⁸⁵

Lo-Fi as a DIY Movement

By at least 1994, lo-fi had become the name of a movement, one not limited to 'low fidelity' or imperfect recordings but synonymous with the milieu of DIY music-making. *The New York Times* had used the term 'low-fi' in a headline over a year before its 'Lo-Fi Rockers' article, in a piece on Ween. The only explanation given of the term in the headline is in a brief description of their music as:

Low-budget, do-it-yourself songs crammed onto albums and overflowing onto private cassettes... all four albums were made with primitive two track and four-track cassette recorders. As a result, Ween's music sounds casual and

⁸⁴ Weisbard 1995a.

⁸⁵ Azerrad 1994a.

unadorned: instruments tend toward low fidelity, and voices pop up at various speeds, exaggeratedly low or chirpy.⁸⁶

Here the author draws a direct causal association ('as a result') between the 'primitive' cassette recorders and low fidelity, a term which is applied, oddly, to instruments. This reflects a shift in the use of the term 'lo-fi' away from matters of sonic fidelity exclusively. Such a broader definition is confirmed in 'Lo-Fi Rockers,' whose explanation of lo-fi was discussed in Chapter 1,⁸⁷ where lo-fi is just as much a domain of 'cheap and available' instruments as it is of phonography. The playing of pots and pans and 'a guitarist who had barely played the instrument' are also implied as examples of lo-fi.

In indie rock discourse, however, there was a particularly clear understanding that 'lo-fi' was a category that extended beyond low fidelity. This conception coalesces sporadically through allusions made in reviews and interviews, but one of the earliest sources to address lo-fi as a category of indie music-making in itself is a short passage in *Melody Maker's* 'Review of 1993' feature. It noted that "'lo-fi" music started the year on a groundswell of Maker reader approval, when Pavement were voted the band they'd most like to see more of in the paper' and that '1993 saw albums from all manner of 'lo-fi low-life.'⁸⁸ This passage twice implies that lo-fi is the 'US' or 'American underground,' characterised by 'enthusiasm and imagination,' adding that 'lo-fi, of course, [is] a music where the emphasis is on invention over virtuosity. (Any lower-fi, and you might as well be beating rocks against each other.)' A connection between 'lo-fi' and low-fidelity, or even the process of recording, is never made. The piece's overall implication is that lo-fi is an avant-garde underground situated mostly in America, and the subtext is its differentiation from less inventive, more

⁸⁶ Pareles 1993a.

⁸⁷ Diehl 1994. See also Chun 1995.

⁸⁸ *Melody Maker* 1993/1994.

'overground' alternative rock such as grunge. Lo-fi rejects not hi-fi recording but 'virtuosity' - technocracy - and accordingly, lo-fi's extreme is not a supremely poor recording but the ultimate in musical primitivism, 'beating rocks against each other.' A review by True earlier in the year made a similar statement on lo-fi as an avant-garde underground, referring to 'the types of band who are unafraid to mess around with sounds and textures, who utilise low-fi recordings as some sort of an art forum, who bring out noises in big aching guitar splatters.'⁸⁹

In the 'Review of 1994,' *Melody Maker* provided a similar section on lo-fi, this time aligning it with Generation X and slackers, as many others were then doing, and focusing largely on Sebadoh and Beck. Lo-fi was defined as 'the homespun, four-track amateur mess-thetic of bands like Guided By Voices, Grifters, Silver Jews *et al.*'⁹⁰ The author subsequently asserts that it is 'a stylish dead-end' because 'like everything else, it *is* retro-eclectic record collection rock - so many of these bands have day jobs in "used vinyl" stores.' Here it is taken for granted that lo-fi is a music that resonates heavily with older rock bands and styles (this was certainly the perception of Guided By Voices and Beck), with the possible suggestion that its inspiration comes from the worn-down ('used') vinyl that surrounds the lo-fi musicians. Thus for *Melody Maker*, lo-fi was not merely a phonographic or DIY phenomenon, it was inherently underground and avant-garde, or inherently concerned with archaic musics.

Other definitions of lo-fi or descriptions of it as a movement can be found in reference to particular bands. As we have seen, Pavement 'precipitated the lo-fi revolution that agitated the indie world in the early '90s.'⁹¹ Barlow 'led the lo-fi

⁸⁹ True 1993b.

⁹⁰ *Melody Maker* 1994a.

⁹¹ Sprague 1997c.

avant-garde, reinterpreting rock and folk clichés from the privacy of his living room⁹² and even 'invented' it:

Sebadoh III essentially invented lo-fi, the soft rock of punk. Both styles sound best in the bedroom, aiming for a more intimate, humanly true expression than heavy amplification makes [im]possible. Lo-fi seduces not with intricately crafted arrangements... but through artfully presented imperfection. Barlow's ultra-nerd persona coupled with Sebadoh's tattered scraps of music allow him to articulate weakness as a source of fellow feeling - his faults prove his honesty. He gets away with lines like "connections I've made never follow through and sooner or later disappoint you"... or "I wanna hold you close but I can't lift my arms up"... because he surrounds them with such "personal" sounds.⁹³

Here lo-fi is given as an intimate and sensitive sphere whose sonic imperfections attest to its emotional sincerity.

For a writer on *Guided By Voices*, 'crude production values' are 'known as lo-fi in marketingspeak,'⁹⁴ a more cynical assessment alluding to the fashion for and financial success of lo-fi at the time. They also cause one reviewer to reflect on lo-fi as a movement and its association with Generation X:

Haphazardly recorded, full of as much snap and crackle as pop, the low-fi output of bands such as Pavement, Grifters, and Sebadoh seems to indicate that they think a studio is merely the name for a small apartment. Although such willful dissonance is probably just a reaction against the sterility of modern, big-budget production, one expert or other is always trying to explain the sloppiness as being typical of some whippersnapper phenomenon called Generation Eggs, whatever that is.⁹⁵

Lo-fi's association with four-track tape recorders in particular is revealed in Kemp's 'Lo-Fi Top Ten,' which notes that 'although Pavement's music is not actually recorded on a four-track, their singles and EPs were marked by a Velvety

⁹² Tignor 1995.

⁹³ Powers 1996.

⁹⁴ Marks 1995.

⁹⁵ Rubin 1994a.

use of fuzz and distortion.⁹⁶ The association is also made in the subtitle to Brad Lips' feature for *Option* on lo-fi in November 1994, 'We'll take the Lo Road: 'On the 4-track trail.' This piece, already examined in Chapter 1, is perhaps the most comprehensive investigation of lo-fi as a new subcategory of indie rock. Its title ironically hints that lo-fi might be a 'high road' within indie rock, differentiating it from 'alternative' rock (a theme I will explore in more detail later in this chapter), and this is borne out in the article:

More and more indie bands are shunning the studio polish needed to fit into "alternative" radio formats, and while still marginalized, their homemade sounds are finding welcome outlets like never before... Recording at home takes indie rock's do-it-yourself aesthetic to its extreme. It's one thing to avoid the industry glitz associated with major label contracts, but artists who record at home on four-track are also free from the time-equals-money pressure of using a big studio.⁹⁷

Like 'Lo-Fi Rockers,' lo-fi is rarely given as a more particular category than musicians recording roughly and especially at home, although it is noted that 'the urge for self-expression, and the realization that one can accomplish it privately, makes bedroom recording a profoundly personal experience'⁹⁸ and that in the case of one album, 'between-song chatter and a moody, almost lethargic groove' represented 'quintessential lo-fi art.'⁹⁹ In the context of this era, the article is also notable for critiquing the category and authenticity of lo-fi. It quotes musicians Barlow, Calvin Johnson and Mac McCaughan¹⁰⁰ as they reject the idea that lo-fi is a suitable stylistic grouping, and agrees with Dave Berman (of Silver Jews) that 'there's a "romance of distance" inherent in the pleasure of lo-fi recordings' that 'conjures up mental pictures... that are as idealized as... [what] Def Leppard aim

⁹⁶ Kemp 1996, 430.

⁹⁷ Lips 1994.

⁹⁸ Lips 1994, 78.

⁹⁹ Lips 1994, 77.

¹⁰⁰ Lips 1994, 76.

for via glossy metal' and that 'the sound of tape hiss and the click of the "record" buttons... adds its own conventions' not unlike those of 'slick studio effects.'¹⁰¹

Though lo-fi had become a noun by this time, it was still frequently used in passing as an adjective, but now carrying the connotations of the noun. As a result, it was common to see it used outside of matters of sonic fidelity (a trend that Spencer would later take further, referring to skiffle and the making of zines as 'lo-fi culture'): 'lo-fi jamming,'¹⁰² a Pavement album being 'genius... in that oblique, lo-fi, existential, wacky sort of way.'¹⁰³ Beck displayed a 'warped, lo-fi honesty.'¹⁰⁴ Though these usages could be considered metaphorical and do not exclude the meaning of 'lo-fi' as low fidelity, they do show that the term now extended comfortably beyond it, and into instrumental technique, personality and honesty - such usages are rare a decade earlier.

'The Aural Equivalent of an Unmade Bed': Slackers and Slack Music

Richard Linklater's 1991 film *Slacker* was shot in Austin, Texas, and features various people - mostly in their twenties, eponymous by implication - engaged in a number of eccentric and often fatuous activities and exchanges. As two characters walk past the Austin record store where Daniel Johnston's cassettes were first sold, his song 'Big Business Monkey,' from *Hi, How Are You?* can be clearly heard emanating from within. The film also features Kathy McCarty in an extended role as the Anarchist's Daughter. It is fitting, then, that lo-fi in the 1990s would be closely associated with the generational stereotype Linklater's film helped to establish: 'slackers.'

¹⁰¹ Lips 1994, 78-79.

¹⁰² *Melody Maker* 1994a.

¹⁰³ True 1993e.

¹⁰⁴ True 1994.

Often taken as synonymous or near-synonymous with the stereotype 'Generation X' and the recently established category of 'twentysomethings,' discussion of slackers continued in the mainstream US media throughout the early 1990s and even saw the publication of an *Official Slacker Handbook*.¹⁰⁵ The debate reached the UK, where Simon Reynolds wrote a feature on it for *The Guardian*. He noted that 'all last year, the US media fretted over the twentysomething generation, accusing it of being directionless, apathetic, apolitical and lacking identity' and that Nirvana's *Nevermind* and *Slacker* represented the twentysomething generation's 'own version of their predicament.'¹⁰⁶ Reynolds defines the slacker as 'a beatnik who doesn't actually go anywhere or a hippy without facile, world-changing idealism' and describes them as 'passive, unmotivated and weak-willed.' Laziness became the most identifiable characteristic of the slacker and its running joke. Introducing an article in which Barlow and Beck interviewed each other (with the pun 'Slackerjack' in its title), Everett True wrote, 'I was going to write you the definitive overview of slacker culture but, uh... I couldn't be bothered.'¹⁰⁷

In May 1993, a feature on 'slacker bands' (which makes no mention of 'lo-fi' or phonographic imperfection) appeared in *The Chicago Tribune* entitled 'What's Going On? Absolutely Nothing, Which is Just How The Slacker Bands Like It.' Its author Greg Kot defined slackers thus: 'smart and invariably white, from middle-class or more privileged backgrounds, slackers cultivate their apathy and revel in the ordinariness of the everyday.' In slacker society, 'poverty, or something like it, is accepted and expected. Too much ambition or success simply isn't cool.' The slacker bands are 'bands like Dinosaur Jr., Pavement, Mercury Rev and Sebadoh' and they 'give the impression they don't care about

¹⁰⁵ Dunn 1994.

¹⁰⁶ Reynolds 1992.

¹⁰⁷ True 1994, 13. Ellipsis in original.

anything,' exercising a 'studied lethargy.' Sebadoh's records were 'the aural equivalent of an unmade bed' and the music 'meanders... as if testing the audience's patience.' Pavement 'avoid earnestness, guitar solos, virtuosity and technical proficiency' and 'even on CD, the tracks sound defective, as though they were being played with a dust-clogged stylus.'¹⁰⁸

The term 'slacker' frequently appeared in writing on Pavement, Sebadoh and Beck. Everett True portrayed Stephen Malkmus as being 'misunderstood as the leader of a bunch of slackers, chancers and malcontents'¹⁰⁹ and during an interview Malkmus voiced 'the most poetic evocation of slackerdom I've heard yet.'¹¹⁰ Pavement are 'slackers, i.e. stay-at-home-beatniks who bliss out on the bizarreness of everyday life'¹¹¹ and they have 'a deep slacker vibe [which] makes for some downright lazy releases.'¹¹² One review of *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain* used a personified 'Slacker Prince' as a running theme, and Malkmus 'awkwardly wears [his] tacky crown.'¹¹³ Sebadoh are 'the slacker worms who turned in 1992,'¹¹⁴ Lowenstein notes that he forgot to apply to vote 'with a residual note of Slacker pride'¹¹⁵ and '*nobody* expresses slacker angst more eloquently or persuasively' than Barlow.'¹¹⁶ Guided By Voices could not be regarded as slackers because of their age, although one writer nevertheless notes, 'recorded on a four-track, this album worked on the same artistic coup against overblown production values that made *Slacker* such a landmark in the history of film.'¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸ Kot 1993.

¹⁰⁹ True 1992e.

¹¹⁰ Bennun 1992, 37.

¹¹¹ *Melody Maker* 1992b.

¹¹² Sprague 1997c.

¹¹³ Aaron 1994a.

¹¹⁴ *Melody Maker* 1992a.

¹¹⁵ Stubbs 1992.

¹¹⁶ *Melody Maker* 1994b.

¹¹⁷ Fort 1994.

Ween's cassettes, too, 'unveil the soul of young suburban slackers: flippant, horny, aimless, ironic.'¹¹⁸

Beck was widely considered the archetypal slacker musician, and features on him from 1993-4 rarely failed to mention the designation. In November 1993, *Billboard* quoted the MD of Seattle's alternative rock radio station KNDD as saying that Beck's single 'Loser' was 'the ultimate slacker anthem.'¹¹⁹ The *Washington Post* reported that the LA press had been quick to label the attitude of the single as 'slacker.'¹²⁰ When the first *New York Times* piece on Beck appeared in March 1994, the headline ran 'A Dylan in Slacker's Clothing?' and it described a 'determinedly sloppy' and 'half-hearted' live set as 'pure slacker attitude.' 'The sentiment of "Loser,"' it continued, 'reflects the twentysomething trade-mark, a mixture of self-mockery and sardonic defiance.'¹²¹ His early singles featured 'stream-of-consciousness slacker poetry'¹²² and 'tied him to the slacker generation.'¹²³

Reynolds described a slacker aesthetic in his *Guardian* article: 'Slacker days are whiled away trawling the detritus of decades of pop culture. The result is the slacker aesthetic, a weird mix of kitsch and mysticism... In slackerdom, "everyone worships at their own jerry-built altar"¹²⁴ Though two years earlier, Reynolds's account is highly reminiscent of *Mellow Gold's* reviews, particularly Bennun's *Melody Maker* review, which mentioned 'stumbling around the litter-strewn streets' and imagined the album as 'recorded on equipment built from ring-pulls.' Beck's four-track, we infer, 'built from ring-pulls' is the 'jerry-built altar'

¹¹⁸ Pareles 1993a.

¹¹⁹ Rosen 1993.

¹²⁰ Jenkins 1994.

¹²¹ Pareles 1994/

¹²² Sprague 1997a.

¹²³ *Melody Maker* 1994b.

¹²⁴ Reynolds 1992.

at which he worships, making (as we have seen), the 'highest, purest, most sacred art... out of feeling icky and foolish.'¹²⁵

Naturally, the characteristics of the slacker have their musical and sonic analogues. Though the term 'slack' is sometimes used to describe the music (Sebadoh's 'sloppy slackness, their total lack of interactive dynamism, is down to them wanting to catch the transient beauty of the moment'¹²⁶) the near-synonym 'loose' is more common, and suggests musicianship particularly, operating in a similar way as the term 'shambling' had done in the UK nearly a decade earlier. Descriptions of Pavement's 'overall vibe' as a 'loose, ramshackle, grooving drive alternately frayed with world-weariness and bedazzled with wonderment'¹²⁷ or 'cluttered, oblique, self-conscious, noisy'¹²⁸ evoke slackers and musical qualities simultaneously. Similarly, the band play 'slapdash drums' and 'guitars so loose and confident they're almost smiling at you'¹²⁹ and produce a 'totally unruly mess of rock-inspired muck.'¹³⁰ These were rarely negative descriptions.

Sebadoh's songs are 'enjoyably loose'¹³¹ and 'find a virtue in looseness.'¹³² One negative review of *Sebadoh vs Helmet* imitates slacker language by interspersing the first two paragraphs with 'like': the release was 'originally supposed to accompany *Rockin' The Forest*... on its commercial travels, but, like, didn't quite manage to get it together.' The album sounds 'as if it was knocked together in five minutes' and 'messy, lazy, occasionally stunning and frequently irritating' but 'the most important thing to remember is that Sebadoh (obviously) don't give a flying fandango about pleasing Mr and Ms

¹²⁵ Aaron 1994c.

¹²⁶ Roberts 1993.

¹²⁷ *Melody Maker* 1992b.

¹²⁸ *New York Times* 1992.

¹²⁹ Davis 1992.

¹³⁰ *Buttrag* [1989?]b.

¹³¹ Pedersen 1996.

¹³² Watson 1994.

Indieguitar and The Correct Use of Pop.¹³³ Two texts on Guided By Voices echo the 'detritus' and 'jerry-built altar' of Beck within the scope of their reception as 'unconscious' outsiders:

The tunes were assembled from parts, and at times the whole proceedings were all working individually and were perilously close to falling apart. For once, a lack of calculation seemed fresh, not dumb, and the band's very foreignness made it seem as if it had come full blown from an eccentric imagination, not from an orthodox environment.¹³⁴

Instruments clatter, scratch, wheeze and almost fall to bits. Everything is hung together with a single thread of outrageous gall. Oh, and great dollops of pure, unconscious, gentle genius.¹³⁵

Live reviews reflected an understanding of 'slack' aesthetics no less than record reviews did. Pavement, Sebadoh, Beck and to a lesser extent Guided By Voices were well-known for their lackadaisical live shows, which often involved lengthy pauses between songs and band members voicing bathetic statements. One Pavement show 'set a new standard of lackadaisical cool on the underground rock scene... most of the time... Pavement acted as if it just didn't care... Pavement take nothing seriously.'¹³⁶ Even the appearance of these bands is taken as a sign of their lackadaisical cool - Sebadoh look like 'a standard-issue collegiate rock band: hair falling over band members' eyes, clothing unkempt, casual and slightly befuddled between songs.'¹³⁷ A writer in the *New York Times* notes that 'selling out used to be defined as compromising artistic integrity for financial gain or mass appeal; nowadays, with anti-image becoming alternative rock's new image, it can simply mean combing your hair or tuning your guitar

¹³³ Williams 1992.

¹³⁴ Watrous 1994.

¹³⁵ O'Connell 1994a.

¹³⁶ Schoemer 1992.

¹³⁷ Pareles 1992b.

before a concert.¹³⁸ Although 'low fidelity' is the preserve of recordings, 'lo-fi' can become a live performance style in this way, and the 'slacker bands' are one example of how lo-fi aesthetics translated to a live performance context.

Lo-fi slackness was not a primitive lack of technocracy, but a passive refusal of it that matched the band's perceived passive acceptance of lo-fi effects. Where for other artists, lo-fi effects were the signs of struggle to express themselves, especially in the face of modernity, the slackers simply let garbage and mess (sonic and cultural) pile up, tinkering with it at the most. Laziness could be a more empowering - and more amusing - stance than inability. Rather than the dramatic, exotic struggle of primitives and *naifs*, slackerdom put lo-fi artists on the ontological and cultural threshold because it put them on the threshold of (in)action and, indeed, (un)employment as musicians who produce coherent records, songs, lyrics and performances. But in many ways, it was also a boredom with technocracy, and was less passive when considered as a strategy of defiance.

'Give the Finger to the Rock 'n' Roll Singer': 'Intentionally Lo-Fi,' Self-Consciousness and Lo-Fi Versus Grunge

Just as Beat Happening's naivety was sometimes considered deceptive or a 'concept,' the lackadaisical cool of lo-fi's slackers was routinely identified as an affectation pointed at the commercial rock mainstream, especially in Pavement's case. This made the resulting lo-fi effects part of 'the music.' One live review of the band suggested that, much like the phonographic imperfections of this period, the flaws of a live performance were 'part of the song':

¹³⁸ Strauss 1994.

They haven't got a clue what they're doing, of course. Don't know, don't care... The relaxed tilt of their tunes, all slurred ease and gun-slinging cool, is deceptive, because what drives them is a ferocious... post-modernist tension. Pavement have savvy and swagger but behave, bless 'em, like this thing is a mystery to them yet. So they amble on, cough, tune up, joke among themselves... You know Pavement go in for fake intros and endings of a kind that make them the bane of every radio jock's life - and not necessarily just the one per tune, either... All that gentle sonic shuffling and dicking around is *part* of the song, remember?... No fuss, maximum (throwaway) finesse.¹³⁹

Here, non-phonographic performance imperfections become part of the musical material ('the song') in much the same way as phonographic imperfections would by the next decade. Elsewhere the band are described as deliberately lo-fi:

'loose, lateral, perhaps self-consciously dippy,'¹⁴⁰ and 'loose and intentionally lo-fi.'¹⁴¹ Pavement 'prefers its songs to sound as if they just fell together'¹⁴² and 'their deceptive flippancy has made them the doyens of the DIY brigade.'¹⁴³

Sebadoh are 'wilfully low-fi,'¹⁴⁴ 'bloody-mindedly lo-fi' and, in another usage that extends the term beyond phonography, play in a 'deceptively lo-fi, lackadaisical manner.'¹⁴⁵ Guided By Voices 'thrive on wilful imperfection.'¹⁴⁶

If these bands were intentionally lo-fi it was because they are trying to project a lackadaisical cool, or because they were self-conscious, knowing, even, as the above review of Pavement suggested, 'post-modernist' as a result. Such characterisations of lo-fi were particularly common in the more intellectualised music criticism of the UK where, as we have seen, the category of lo-fi was implied as 'avant-garde' in 1993 and 'retro-eclectic' in 1994. Beck's *Mellow Gold*

¹³⁹ O'Connell 1994b.

¹⁴⁰ *Melody Maker* 1992c.

¹⁴¹ Anderson 1989.

¹⁴² Pareles 1993b.

¹⁴³ *Buttrag* [1989?]b.

¹⁴⁴ Cohen 1992b.

¹⁴⁵ Stubbs 1992.

¹⁴⁶ Stephens 1996.

was seen as 'weighed down with... self-consciously postmodern baggage'¹⁴⁷ and Sebadoh sought 'amalgams of candor, self-consciousness, irony, melody and noise.'¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Pavement were frequently described as 'arty',¹⁴⁹ 'avant'¹⁵⁰ and 'pretentious... artily fine.'¹⁵¹

Sebadoh and Pavement were well known for songs that referenced themselves and, in particular, the indie rock culture they inhabited. Sebadoh released the EP *Gimme Indie Rock* in 1991, whose title track satirised the subculture, particularly grunge, with lyrics like:

*Rock and Roll genius, ride the middle of the road
Milk that sound, blow your load
Shoot it further than you ever said it go
Four stars in the Rolling Stone...*

*It's gone big
Come on indie rock
Just give me indie rock...*

*Time to amaze
With the indie sludge
Grunge!¹⁵²*

Barlow did much the same on his side projects. The title track on the 1993 Sentradoh EP *Losercore* asserted in its first verse: '*Nevermind... it gives no soul.*'¹⁵³ (A song on The Folk Implosion's EP *Electric Idiot* even referenced lo-fi and was called 'Lo-Fi Suicide': '*Buried in a hissy thunder... Call it my lo-fi suicide.*'¹⁵⁴) The album *Sebadoh Vs Helmet* was named in opposition to grunge - Helmet were a commercial grunge band heavily promoted at the time. In an interview Barlow described Helmet's music as 'loud, grey and everywhere in

¹⁴⁷ Sprague 1997a.

¹⁴⁸ Pareles 1992b.

¹⁴⁹ Jenkins 1992a.

¹⁵⁰ Marks 1992.

¹⁵¹ *Buttrag* [1989?]b.

¹⁵² Sebadoh 1991b, 'Gimme Indie Rock.'

¹⁵³ Sentradoh 1993, 'Losercore.'

¹⁵⁴ The Folk Implosion 1994, 'Lo-Fi Suicide.'

America right now' and 'overloaded testosterone boy music.'¹⁵⁵ Identifying as a 'loser' (the title *Losercore*, as well as Sentriddoh album called *Losers*) - as Beck would do - was considered a response to macho and commercially ambitious factions within alternative and indie rock.

Malkmus described Pavement's music as 'conscious of the absurdity of being a band'¹⁵⁶ and their album *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain* was called 'a pointedly self-referential album that often seems to address nothing other than itself.'¹⁵⁷ Its song 'Range Life' attacks indie rock bands The Smashing Pumpkins and The Stone Temple Pilots,¹⁵⁸ while the single 'Cut Your Hair' sarcastically addresses the scene in general.¹⁵⁹ Beck's 'Pay No Mind' featured a strongly anti-commercial lyric, making another possible reference to *Nevermind*:

*Give the finger to the rock 'n' roll singer
As he's dancing upon your paycheck
The sales climb high through the garbage-pail sky
Like a giant dildo crushing the sun*

*That's why
I pay no mind¹⁶⁰*

Unsurprisingly, then, Sebadoh and Pavement were regularly understood to be positioning themselves against the more successful strands of alternative and indie rock as symbolised by grunge. It must be noted that grunge, whose name derives from a kind of dirt, is not the antithesis of lo-fi to the same extent as 1980s pop and rock was, but rather a much milder version of it. Simon Reynolds aptly described lo-fi as 'grunge with even grungier production values.'¹⁶¹ Both have their origins in US independent music, and it was well known that Nirvana's

¹⁵⁵ Stubbs 1992.

¹⁵⁶ Arundel 1993.

¹⁵⁷ Sprague 1997c.

¹⁵⁸ Pavement 1994, 'Range Life.'

¹⁵⁹ Pavement 1994, 'Cut Your Hair.'

¹⁶⁰ Beck 1994a, 'Pay No Mind.'

¹⁶¹ Reynolds 1995.

lead singer Kurt Cobain was fond of The Shaggs, Daniel Johnston and K. Grunge is far from 'slick,' and the 'loose' aesthetics of the slacker bands readily applies to grunge and its fashions. Rather, the opposition between 1990s lo-fi and grunge is one of (in)authenticity: a faction within indie rock represented by, for example, Pavement and Sebadoh, regarded grunge as aesthetically and commercially compromised. Indie bands like Nirvana had come to resemble the very 'rock stars' that indie traditionally opposed. Lo-fi, then, in its differentiation from grunge (taking 'the lo / high road'), became ever more authentic, an opportunity for the accumulation of the cultural capital that Hibbett notes as a characteristic of indie rock.¹⁶² It was not just the independent labels and grass-roots production that made lo-fi the more authentic site for indie rock - the difference could be heard in recording imperfections. 'We'll Take the Lo Road' expresses this sentiment, and the deliberate intention to illustrate it, most succinctly:

The current proliferation of indie-rock bands that intentionally scruff up their sound might be viewed as another way of redrawing the audience lines now that "alternative" has been reduced to a buzzword for the marketing of youth rebellion. If Dinosaur Jr. is on the *Wayne's World II* soundtrack, then the "truly" alienated seek more obscure, more difficult music to identify with.¹⁶³

Half Japanese, Jandek and Daniel Johnston were 'more obscure, more difficult' due to their primitive intensity, but in the 1990s, lo-fi was 'more obscure, more difficult' in a languorousness perceived as anti-technocratic and in its intellectual dimension.

Pavement were championed as 'the real spiritual heirs to the Nirvana throne and not the corporate pretender',¹⁶⁴ 'the next Nirvana (but without the

¹⁶² Hibbett 2005.

¹⁶³ Lips 1994, 76.

¹⁶⁴ *New Musical Express* 1992.

'tainted' major label push)¹⁶⁵ and 'the bookish Nirvana.'¹⁶⁶ One writer called Pavement 'one of the few saving graces in an American music scene dominated by shaggy grunge... they have stood out against a new hard rock conformism like a solitary beacon of wit and wonder.'¹⁶⁷ Barlow was described as someone who 'loves indie rock, but is afraid of what it's turning into'¹⁶⁸ and 'Gimme Indie Rock' was recognised as a 'bitter attack on the way grunge has degenerated into aural Budweiser.'¹⁶⁹ Perhaps most explicit about lo-fi's opposition to grunge was a feature on lo-fi in the British magazine the *Wire*, which began by criticising recent grunge bands before asserting that 'the emergence of lo-fi groups can partly be attributed to a conscious reaction against Grunge (its sense of machismo, and major label adoption).'¹⁷⁰

'Fucking Up' the 'Creamy': Lo-Fi as Obfuscation

Because of their opposition to the commercialisation of popular music, then, the 1990s lo-fi bands impeded themselves - as an *Option* article put it, Pavement 'strategize ways to avoid entering the rock-star realm.'¹⁷¹ Another review alluded to 'the band's famous obscuring tricks.'¹⁷² As we have seen, they had deliberately introduced electrical noise into their first 7" *Slay Tracks*, which masked the vocal and instrumental tracks. Like the music of Jandek and Daniel Johnston, that of the 1990s lo-fi artists were not just culturally or aesthetically obscure, they were sonically 'obscured.' A more general and more applicable term might be *obfuscation*. The lo-fi artists' music and particular elements within it were

¹⁶⁵ Sullivan 1992.

¹⁶⁶ Weisbard 1995c.

¹⁶⁷ *Melody Maker* 1992b.

¹⁶⁸ Joy 1992.

¹⁶⁹ *Melody Maker* 1992a.

¹⁷⁰ Jakubowski 1994a, 31-32.

¹⁷¹ Fine 1994.

¹⁷² Aaron 1993.

obfuscated by lo-fi effects such as tape hiss, phonographic distortion, mixing that masks tracks, and performance imperfections, as well as electrical effects such as filtering and distortion and, indeed, the use of cryptic language in lyrics and titles. This established the more challenging listening environment that lo-fi aesthetics favours, but unlike the reception of lo-fi artists during the 1980s, writers during the 1990s were more explicit in their awareness of obfuscatory processes. The language of obfuscation also shows that while lo-fi effects were sometimes considered 'part of the song,' they were still regarded as differentiable from more traditional musical elements, and were often described as working against them.

Pavement's songs were 'recorded through a thin wall of static'¹⁷³ and 'frequently obscured under layers of annoying hum.'¹⁷⁴ 'You're Killing Me' 'almost suffocates in a gas chamber of tape hiss and vocal effects strangulation.'¹⁷⁵ One writer noted 'that shambling quality which almost obscured *Slay Tracks*' as 'Pavement's signature - that, and a fuzzy-needle surface buzz that's warmed the hearts of low-fi aficionados.'¹⁷⁶

In most cases, it was either melodic 'pop' that was obfuscated - lo-fi here playing the same role in making pop acceptable to indie audiences that it had for Beat Happening and the indie pop artists Dolan discusses - or references to other, particularly bygone musics, or both. The most common metaphor was that of the music being 'buried' or 'hidden.' Pavement had 'pop melodies buried beneath rumbling tape machines and distorted guitars,'¹⁷⁷ they 'include among the noise a moving melodic song,'¹⁷⁸ and Malkmus was described as 'a covert

¹⁷³ Greer 1992a.

¹⁷⁴ True 1993c.

¹⁷⁵ Stubbs 1993.

¹⁷⁶ Sprague 1992.

¹⁷⁷ Strauss 1994.

¹⁷⁸ Davis 1992.

bubblegum buff who hides his sweets under a blanket of feedback.¹⁷⁹ But Pavement obfuscated pop in other ways too. They were 'seriously warped pop eccentrics'¹⁸⁰ who made 'skewed pop.'¹⁸¹ Their 'strange brilliance churned through the grinder' was parenthetically given as 'mutilated pop to the highest degree,'¹⁸² they created a 'fog of confusion' and 'there were some poppy sounds there too among all the confusion.'¹⁸³ Their debut album *Slanted and Enchanted* was 'littered with so much on-tape debris that when these glorious pop songs emerge from apparently nowhere, Pavement's mystery world takes over.'¹⁸⁴ Sebadoh, whose music suggested pop to a much lesser degree, was nevertheless described as 'twisting love-song clichés into clever negations.'¹⁸⁵

Guided By Voices had a 'hazy, intimate pop melancholy,'¹⁸⁶ and the band 'sloppily records immaculate melodies capable of breaking your heart, because they're so insistently catchy and so fleetingly brief,'¹⁸⁷ the short length of their songs serving to obfuscate the music. Woodworth's book on *Bee Thousand* illuminates the band's obfuscating strategies in a section written by Guided By Voices' lead songwriter Robert Pollard:

If I thought a song was too creamy or poppy, then I would fuck it up. We'd put a drone through it or drench it in feedback. Or add a track of somebody snoring. Especially in the early days, Guided By Voices was about creating confusion for the listener... [the song] "Tractor Rape Chain" is an example of taking a pretty melody and giving it a really strange lyric that doesn't jibe... I like the way an image can confuse the listener.¹⁸⁸

¹⁷⁹ Sprague 1997c.

¹⁸⁰ Anderson 1989.

¹⁸¹ S [1990?].

¹⁸² *Buttrag* [1989?]b.

¹⁸³ True 1992c.

¹⁸⁴ Lamacq 1992.

¹⁸⁵ Aaron 1994b.

¹⁸⁶ Ross 1993.

¹⁸⁷ Rubin 1994b.

¹⁸⁸ Robert Pollard, quoted in Woodworth 2006, 32. The song with snoring in it is 'Ex Supermodel' on *Alien Lanes*.

Tobin Sprout, who often operated the four-track in *Bee Thousand*, also recalls that the band would find 'ways to make a song less "creamy," like throwing in some really nasty guitars... You didn't want it to get too soft.'¹⁸⁹ Elsewhere, another band member, Don Thrasher, described the band's 'tendency to cut the pop with weirdness' and 'those... elements that complicate the pop sensibility.'¹⁹⁰ Drawing on these statements about obfuscation, Woodworth shows how they were applied to *Bee Thousand's* lyrics.¹⁹¹ Many lo-fi acts of the 1990s were considered notorious for their surreal, non-sequitur, obfuscating lyrics and titles. One line in particular from 'Loser' was a favourite of writers on Beck: 'my time is a piece of wax falling on a termite who's choking on splinters.'¹⁹² Thus lo-fi finds something of a parallel in a lyrical technique whose meanings are as indistinct as poorly recorded music. Sometimes both occurred at once, however: Pavement 'buried the vocals under guitar noise, challenging listeners to decipher' their lyrics.¹⁹³

Though all obfuscation is a form of distancing, sometimes the technique of obfuscation was understood as distance itself - Pavement's vocals are 'distant, telephone-like'¹⁹⁴ while the piano in Guided By Voices' 'You're Not An Airplane' 'sounds like it was recorded with the microphone 'propped against a chair two blocks away.'¹⁹⁵ One writer used a metaphor that would become a lot more common in the 2000s, that of the radio: '*Slanted & Enchanted* is like listening to a college radio station you can barely tune in - melodies are interrupted by shards of white noise.'¹⁹⁶ The way these musicians released so many short songs of

¹⁸⁹ Tobin Sprout, quoted in Woodworth 2006, 150.

¹⁹⁰ Don Thrasher, quoted in Woodworth 2006, 61.

¹⁹¹ Woodworth 2006, 90-97.

¹⁹² Beck 1993 (disc.), quoted in Jenkins 1994.

¹⁹³ Pareles 1992c.

¹⁹⁴ S [1990?].

¹⁹⁵ McConnell 1994.

¹⁹⁶ Erlewine 1995b.

inconsistent quality can also be considered a form of obfuscation, the good songs obscured by less appealing ones in the same way that pop melodies can be buried in hiss. This was especially true of Sebadoh and Barlow's other projects. Reviewers wrote that 'there are treasures there, hidden in the cack'¹⁹⁷ and that the band 'hide jewels next to Beelzebub-rising cacophony.'¹⁹⁸ As with Jandek and Johnston, the metaphor of 'buried treasure' or 'gems' is common - also a fitting metaphor for the challenge the music presents in acquiring its greater cultural capital. Of the 'litter-strewn streets' and 'detritus of your psyche' that provides the backdrop to Beck's music, one reviewer wrote, 'there's treasure to be found in the garbage.'¹⁹⁹ *Bee Thousand* 'sounds like a dusty basement stacked with warped and wonky treasure.'²⁰⁰ One review of *Alien Lanes* uses the word 'buried' in a way that might equally apply to tape hiss and the proliferation of songs, and even goes on to effectively explain the workings of cultural capital the way Hibbett does: 'A handful of pop gems are buried in the project, which is also laced with glitches, half-baked ideas and nonsensical noodling. In a world where good taste is giving way to wretched excess, GBV seems to be daring the listener to tell the difference.'²⁰¹

While the music itself was sonically and lyrically obfuscated, it was also obfuscated through its cultural obscurity (again, like Jandek and Johnston). Listeners had to 'dig a little harder to find'²⁰² Pavement's records - another writer relates having discovered them 'hidden among rack upon rack of American indie drivel.'²⁰³ Guided By Voices themselves had a long history of being obscure. They 'labored in obscurity for a decade before suddenly emerging as a

¹⁹⁷ Roberts 1993.

¹⁹⁸ Arundel 1992.

¹⁹⁹ Bennun 1994.

²⁰⁰ Dalton 1994.

²⁰¹ McLennan 1995.

²⁰² Greer 1992b.

²⁰³ True 1992c.

noteworthy presence on the indie-rock circuit,²⁰⁴ and had a 'sub-basement obscurity.'²⁰⁵ One writer even suggested that Pavement fans' fondness for obscurity aided Guided By Voices: 'it's likely that, when the same scenesters who championed Pavement discovered GBV... they grew even more enthusiastic when learning of the band's long-running obscurity.'²⁰⁶

Pavement, Guided By Voices and Beck were especially considered to have adopted and obfuscated backward-looking or archaic musical idioms. Pavement were regularly framed as a band with 'influences' - for example: 'faint echoes of the Velvet Underground, the Fall, Sonic Youth, and Swell Maps, among others, can be detected in the Pavement swirl.'²⁰⁷ Their influences 'are mashed and stretched so thoroughly it's hard to pick out any one in particular;²⁰⁸ Pavement 'just absorb everything and disassemble it and force it back together like a warped jigsaw puzzle.'²⁰⁹ This fragmentation and destruction of popular music's past was portrayed as apocalyptic at least twice: 'apocalyptic shards of the past filtered through the superfinest of sifters, melted down into one helluva pure nugget,²¹⁰ and, in a revealing description the brings together cultural analogy with musical and sonic characteristics: '*Westing* is like a bombed-out landscape of pop history, and Pavement stroll through it without tears, kicking aside the occasional bottle and talking loud over the roar of demolition cranes, noting that it may be ugly, but it's still good fun.'²¹¹

Where Sebadoh and Beck adopted and obfuscated the music of the past, it was usually folk. Barlow's project was one of 'reinterpreting folk and rock

²⁰⁴ Ross 1993.

²⁰⁵ Sprague 1997b. See also Coley on Jandek (1990b).

²⁰⁶ Marks 1995.

²⁰⁷ Greer 1992b.

²⁰⁸ Greer 1992a.

²⁰⁹ S [1990?].

²¹⁰ *Buttrag* [1989?]b.

²¹¹ Berger 1993.

clichés from the privacy of his living room.²¹² Beck - whose 'works' were 'hidden under lo-fi murmurings'²¹³ - plays folk and blues with a 'lobotomised twang'²¹⁴ and 'skewered folk.'²¹⁵ Guided By Voices evoked a number of different moments in pop's past - 'beneath all the fuzz, krunk, and recorder grot, GBV hides absolutely shattering melodies that call to mind a thousand reference points.'²¹⁶ Theirs was, as if to coin a genre, 'a sort of Intelligent Retro'²¹⁷ - something for the more discerning listener. The *Wire* feature on lo-fi saw the same approach reflected by a number of lo-fi acts: 'like scavengers, bands such as Grifters, Pavement and Guided By Voices scrape up the remaining dregs of rock music's past glories... only to warp them through genuinely unique sensibilities: the zero attention span chop-and-change pop collages of Guided By Voices; Pavement's fetish for 70s Krautrock; Grifter's lackadaisical attitude.'²¹⁸

Lo-fi in the 1990s was not just a widely understood musical category - indie rock recorded at home - but one carrying complex definitions and ideological roles that rarely limited it to low fidelity. As well as the general association of low fidelity with amateurism made by lo-fi aesthetics, lo-fi was closely connected with the lackadaisical personality and aesthetics of the 'slacker.' Yet it was also the more sophisticated, more authentic and more challenging region of indie rock, pitted against the aesthetic and commercial compromise of 'alternative rock' and grunge particularly. This resulted in self-consciousness and the pursuit of greater cultural capital along 'the lo road,' through obfuscation and an exploration of rock's past. The latter would come to

²¹² Tignor 1995.

²¹³ Palacios 2000, 71.

²¹⁴ Weisbard 1995a.

²¹⁵ Palacios 2000, 86.

²¹⁶ Rubin 1994a.

²¹⁷ Jakubowski 1994b.

²¹⁸ Jakubowski 1994a, 31.

dominate lo-fi aesthetics after the millennium when the very media that had made a 'lo-fi revolution' possible in the 1980s and 1990s itself became archaic.

Chapter 7. 'Swamps of Noise, Ghosts of Pop Songs': Lo-Fi Effects, Archaism and Historicising Distance in the 2000s

Following lo-fi's establishment as a category within indie rock in the mid 1990s, lo-fi aesthetics became a recurring feature of indie discourse applicable to rock, pop, folk, experimental music and, to a limited degree, electronic music. The need to refer to poor sound quality, amateurism and other imperfections remained, but spread across such a broad stylistic area, the term began to lose some of the specific non-phonographic connotations it had acquired in the 1990s - the slacker generation, looseness, self-consciousness and so on - and though it retained its canon, 'lo-fi' was largely reduced to an adjective denoting poor sound quality, with strong connotations of home-recording as its cause. Moreover, after 1995 lo-fi no longer needed any aesthetic apologia, many of the most prominent lo-fi artists of the 1990s were now no longer considered lo-fi, and while lo-fi effects were present to a minor degree throughout indie music, few prominent new artists presented them so manifestly as to warrant particular comment - until the debut CD of Ariel Pink in 2004, *The Doldrums*.

This album marks a new phase of lo-fi aesthetics. Six years later, Pink had become a leading figure in indie music and many new lo-fi artists had received widespread attention. In the intervening period, the discourse reflected two main qualities in Pink's music and that of other new lo-fi artists: the greatly increased frequency and intensity of lo-fi effects, particularly distortion and lack of higher frequencies - which made lo-fi aesthetics more focused on the phonographic than ever before - and that music's pastiche of now-archaic styles from before the 1990s. These qualities led to a new aestheticisation of lo-fi as a nostalgia that combined cultural and technological pasts.

Lo-fi aesthetics had frequently incorporated archaism prior to the 2000s, of course. As we saw in Chapter 2, the music of the post-war North American folk revival, whether recorded in the field, reissued or newly composed by musicians such as the New Lost City Ramblers (and their 'oldtime recording for oldtime music'), was seen as valuably archaic in ways that were sometimes combined with qualities of roughness and imperfection, certainly in technique. As we saw in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, Jandek, Daniel Johnston, Beat Happening, Pavement, Beck and Guided By Voices were frequently heard as evoking 1960s rock, pop and folk. In the 2000s, however, this dimension of lo-fi aesthetics came to the fore, now enhanced by the increasingly archaic nature of analogue technology itself. As we will see, writers repeatedly drew on other forms of archaic media besides tape, such as Super-8, VHS and analogue photography, in describing recordings.

As archaism came to the fore, other dimensions of lo-fi aesthetics receded. Where qualities such as simplicity and realism had been privileged in the 1980s, lo-fi aesthetics was now more usually a locus of psychedelia, an often spiritualised emotionality and the sublime, with lo-fi effects so intense that the music 'underneath' them was considered almost beyond perception. The rhetoric of authenticity similarly waned, less sustainable in a context of pastiche, as did that of home-recording's democratic potential and anti-commercialism. Just as Beat Happening had drawn on 'pop,' part of the new music's appeal lay in its formerly commercial and even kitsch status, and the anti-commercial foundation of independent and indie music discourse was no longer an argument that needed to be made (the assumption that home-recordings would be imperfect recordings and vice versa was largely still active, however). Primitivism was still an element of lo-fi aesthetics, but its replacement as a form of distance from technocracy with cultural and technological archaism reflected new political

awareness among participants in indie discourse. It should also be noted that by 2010 the forms of indie discourse had changed quite dramatically. With *Option* and *Melody Maker* both defunct by 2000, *Spin*, the UK print magazine *Wire* and the website *Pitchfork* became the leading publications, while smaller websites and blogs took on a role much like the one played by fanzines in previous years, now sometimes offering the music itself as mp3, video or streaming audio.

This post-millennial form of lo-fi aesthetics was part of a much broader trend of revivalism in popular culture, noted in, for example, Simon Reynolds's book *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*.¹ It was also the subject, as early as 2001, of a chapter in Timothy Taylor's *Strange Sounds* concerning the recent revival of 1950s-60s space-age pop and analogue synthesisers, in the form of record collecting, reissues and new bands such as Stereolab. The chapter's title is 'Technostalgia,' a concept that would be taken up by Trevor Pinch and David Reinecke in relation to vintage performance equipment.² Taylor notes 'a new ambivalence and anxiety over today's digital technology... these resurrections mark a disillusionment with technology, for they are often manifest as a kind of nostalgia for past visions of the future, a future that never arrived.'³

Taylor's discussion of the use of archaic kitsch and its pursuit of a 'golden age' bears many similarities to lo-fi's redeployment in the later 2000s of commercial pop, television and film music. His observation that the fans of space-age pop had chosen 'the music their parents reviled in the 1950s and 1960s' is similarly applicable to other generations. Lo-fi artists of Ariel Pink's generation pastiched the very 1980s commercial pop that 'primitive' and 'minimal' artists were then held up in opposition to. In turn, the 1980s interest in 60s pop and rock

¹ Reynolds 2011b.

² Pinch & Reinecke 2009.

³ Taylor 2001, 96.

and figures such as Hasil Adkins directly contravened the antipathy to rock in that era's folk revival, which saw John Cohen collecting much older songs a mere 200 miles away from Adkins recording his rock 'n' roll. And again, the interest of Harry Smith and early 1960s 'oldtime' bands such as Cohen's New York City Ramblers in commercial bluegrass of the Depression ran counter to the goals of that era's folksong collectors, such as the Lomaxes, to find music uninfluenced by popular trends. All this emphasises the wildly relative nature of anti-commercial authenticity and archaic aesthetics, and the repeatedly (re)constructed nature of its golden ages.

'Age-Old': Freak Folk and Will Oldham

Before 1980s kitsch archaism became prominent, indie discourse was focused on a new folk archaism. During the mid 2000s, indie underwent a folk turn, elements of which were variously labelled 'free folk,' 'freak folk'⁴ and 'the New Weird America.'⁵ While the music's most prominent aspects were its return to folk instrumentation but with a more experimental perspective than the 1960s revival, lo-fi aesthetics played a background role. 'Many of the youngsters of free-folk,' wrote one journalist, 'live in rural areas, use bare recording techniques and grow beards.'⁶ 'The New Weird America,' discussed by David Keenan in *The Wire* in August 2003 in reference to a range of new musicians, was also a reference to Marcus's book on Dylan's Basement Tapes, *The Old Weird America*. Keenan called these musicians 'luddite refuseniks' whose recordings are 'more... rough-ass archival snapshots or documents of work in progress that 'finished' commercial product.' One group, the Song of Earth-Flesh on Bone, even 'utilised

⁴ DeWitt, Turner & Caloudas 2004; Bemis 2004.

⁵ David Keenan 2004, 32.

⁶ DeWitt, Turner & Caloudas 2004.

an old Dansette, wired cymbals, contact mics and the crackle of cheap amplification to activate a low level drone that sounded like an orchestra of cranked 78s whose grooves had worn right through.⁷

One prominent artist broadly within this milieu was Will Oldham, who had been releasing home recordings in a folk-country style under various monikers (such as Bonnie 'Prince' Billy and names including the word 'palace') since 1992, which were regularly noted for their lo-fi characteristics. Oldham shared the Drag City label with lo-fi artists such as Pavement, Silver Jews and Smog, but unlike the slacker groups, his was considered a predominantly archaic style - *Spin* compared him to Sebadoh but noted 'age-old Appalachian idioms';⁸ *Melody Maker* called his style 'slo-fi country'.⁹ As one of The Palace Brothers, Oldham had been briefly discussed in *Option's* 1994 article on lo-fi, 'We'll Take the Lo Road':

In the Palace Brothers' stripped-down approximations of Appalachian folk, the group achieves that special air of intimacy through the fragile voice of Will Oldham. He lets his voice break awkwardly, but always proceeds through his songs with unflinching calm. Many listeners turn away, but those who remain will have absorbed the vulnerability at the heart of the music. Perhaps this implied challenge thrown down by home-recording is the point of the lo-fi aesthetic.¹⁰

As we saw in Chapter 2 and again in Chapter 4, the cracking folk voice is closely tied to lo-fi aesthetics, and in the above quote as in the late 1950s, it puts off bad listeners. Oldham's cracking voice was associated with the lo-fi production many times - Louise Gray described his music as 'under-production, thrifty instrumentation and cracked voices,'¹¹ and 'distinctly lo-fi recorded sound, and a cracked voice and guitar that cuts through standard Country music's

⁷ Keenan 2003, 34.

⁸ Ross 1994.

⁹ Chick 1999.

¹⁰ Lips 1994, 79.

¹¹ Gray 1997.

claustrophobics,¹² while another reviewer wrote, 'this is Southern Gothic filtered through a thick haze of sadness... it works, Will Oldham's voice rising out of the mix and cracking emotively.'¹³ *Spin* called the Palace Brothers' debut album itself 'defiantly cracked,' the work of 'soot-covered country warblers.'¹⁴ In some cases, the weakening of Oldham's voice was associated with advanced age - much as more phonographic lo-fi effects now suggested frailty and the past. It 'whimpers and whines like a centegenarian;¹⁵ he was 'often mistaken for an old man due to his cracking vocals.'¹⁶ His voice was also compared with the inclusion of environmental noise and room acoustic in the recordings, which were found to be equally important:

Some critics have suggested that Oldham's voice is the most important contribution to Palace, but this underestimates his songwriting gifts and the brazenness of the group's sound machine... Palace revels in weird background - telephone noise, thunder, birds, horror whelps, and spacey blips. Room tone has never been so enthralling.¹⁷

Similarly, 'the studio mise en scène' of the Palace Brothers recordings 'takes in chairs scraping, voices cracking, whistling in the background, making you feel you're eavesdropping on a family playing in a remote shack.'¹⁸ Such was the appeal of these lo-fi effects that one reviewer protested when they were removed in 2003. 'It's not "lo-fi,"' he complained - 'it was precisely the 'cracks' in the grain... which made it sound part of US tradition - rather than quotation or fabrication... all the blemishes and barnacles that made previous... music singular haven't been allowed into the songclub tonight.' 'The "x" factor is absent: the scar, scare, scree

¹² Gray 1998. See also Ross 1994.

¹³ Ridge 1994.

¹⁴ Marks 1994.

¹⁵ Phares 1995.

¹⁶ Bush 1997.

¹⁷ Hainley 1995.

¹⁸ Walmsley 2009, 43.

of Oldham's unique voice / sound' and as a result, the album in question is 'suspiciously note perfect and embalmed sounding... over-mastered... perfect to the point of intolerable.'¹⁹ By 2003, lo-fi effects were not just acceptable but had become musical elements in themselves, playing an aesthetic role comparable to and as important as a voice, and such an understanding would be increasingly affirmed in the remainder of the decade.

The reception of Oldham's recordings also provides an early example of what would become one of the major themes in the lo-fi aesthetics of the 2000s, that of archaic music, especially framed by lo-fi effects, being ghostly. In Oldham's case, these were ghosts of Marcus's 'old, weird America.' The album *Black/Rich Music* was 'a record produced in quarantine, a seclusion penetrated by folk memory,'²⁰ and a 1999 feature on Oldham entitled 'Haunted Palace' began, 'for Will Oldham, the past is another country inhabited by the ghost presences of his weird blues,'²¹ elaborating: '[Oldham's] songs are lo-fi, desolate affairs, mostly roughly recorded after a style that makes inadvertent virtues of mistakes as blatant as voices miscuing their entrances and exits.'²²

'The Sound of Fading Memories': Hauntology

This theme of ghostliness also developed away from folk music in the 2000s, in the growing field of indie experimental and electronic music, and eventually gave rise to a new category, 'hauntology,' towards the decade's end. In the mid-1990s however, new electronic music falling under categories such as 'techno,'

¹⁹ Penman 2003.

²⁰ Gray 1998.

²¹ Gray 1999, 42.

²² Gray 1999, 43.

'ambient,' 'intelligent dance music' and 'electronica' was usually considered anything but lo-fi or archaic.²³

The British duo Boards of Canada rose to prominence in this context, making ambient hip hop with analogue synthesiser melodies in a style derived from 1970s and 1980s television music, featuring lo-fi effects stemming from tape technology and samples often from, again, 1970s television, especially of children's voices. A childhood theme was clearly being explored, as their 1998 album was called *Music Has the Right to Children* and featured a group of adults and children on its cover. By the late 2000s Boards of Canada would be considered a key act in nostalgic lo-fi aesthetics, but during the 1990s lo-fi and archaic qualities were rarely identified in their recordings. Instead the duo were perceived as exploring hip hop, electronic timbres and, predominantly, ahistorical themes of childhood - especially bygone childhood - in much the same way that Beat Happening had been.²⁴ Theirs was a 'futuristic Toys'R'Us soundscape,²⁵ and 'the music of innocent eyes,' where 'melodies creep and explore like adored but unruly children, full of wide-eyed astonishment and naïveté... a persuasive reminder to grown-ups that it's alright to lead simple lives, free from adornment.'²⁶

As time passed, however, the lo-fi effects became part of an aesthetics of (tech)nostalgia, and Boards of Canada's reception exemplifies this. Noting that the duo 'cast their own slanted enchantment' (a reference to Pavement's debut album *Slanted and Enchanted*), one reviewer heard 'poignant mood mirages evocative enough to induce disconcertingly vivid childhood flashbacks,' 'Kodak

²³ Cooper 1997.

²⁴ For a review that sees Boards of Canada's debut album *Music Has the Right to Children* as a sensual, abstract electronic album, thus differing strikingly from more recent accounts, see Owen 1998.

²⁵ Virdi 1998.

²⁶ Cooper 2000.

memories' and 'infantile archaeologies.'²⁷ Another noted the 'cover art's soft-focus memory frames, all in the warm colours of Super 8 film,' adding that 'each track's attention to detail summons waves of introspection that develop into full blown immersive nostalgia.'²⁸ By the time *Music Has the Right to Children* was reissued in 2004, the year Ariel Pink saw widespread coverage, lo-fi effects were being closely linked with nostalgia:

I remember [educational documentary] tapes with narration and incidental music accompanying filmstrips, tapes that were always damaged from age and overuse on poorly maintained equipment. The warbly pitch and warped voices mirrored the anxiety that came with the "carefree" days of being a kid and living subjugated to others [sic]. Boards of Canada tapped into the collective unconscious of those who grew up in the English-speaking West and were talented enough to transcribe the soundtrack.²⁹

When *Retromania* was published in 2011, Reynolds's hearing of Boards of Canada followed from some more general observations about archaic media:

Our cultural memories are shaped not just by the production qualities of an era (black and white, mono, certain kinds of drum sound or recording ambience, etc.) but by the subtle properties of the recording media themselves (photographic or film stock that screams seventies or eighties, for instance). These properties include the medium's specific rate of decay. BoC's artificially faded and discoloured textures stir up the kinds of feelings you get from watching old home movies that are speckled with blotches of colour, or from leafing through a family photo album full of snapshots that are turning an autumnal yellow. It's like you're witnessing the fading of your own memories.³⁰

This aesthetic can also be seen in the reception during the 1990s of new works in experimental composition that explored lo-fi effects such as analogue noise. This was the context of Stan Link's essay 'The Work of Reproduction in the Mechanical Aging of Art: Listening to Noise,' concerning the uses of noise -

²⁷ Eshun 2002.

²⁸ Borthwick 2001.

²⁹ Richardson 2004.

³⁰ Reynolds 2011b.

'signal interference, impurity, degradation, static' - created as recordings are reproduced.³¹ Link notes the historicity of recording noise, observing 'the nostalgic surface of retro filtering,' and the way that 'noise serves as a chronometric marker,' which 'tends toward the quality of memory... noise renders everything in past tense.'³² Works that were similarly built upon the manipulation of phonographic noise and other phonographic imperfections by William Basinski and Leyland Kirby as *The Caretaker* were well received in indie discourse around the turn of the millennium.

William Basinski's *The Disintegration Loops* is the American composer's most famous work, created inadvertently while digitising tape loops he had composed decades earlier, now fragile with age. As the tapes looped, the heads incrementally scraped the oxide off them, causing more and more signal dropout until nothing but silence remained. The entire work could be said to be based on a lo-fi effect; as one might put it, the 'fi' becomes progressively 'lo'-er over the varying length of each digitised track. *The Disintegration Loops* were not received as a merely sonic phenomenon but as metaphors for loss and decay over the passage of time. 'Basinski was witnessing... the sound of fading memories,' wrote Keenan for *The Wire*. 'When it was over, all his work had literally turned to dust... *The Disintegration Loops* is sound as matter being seized by time, the remorseless logic of its destruction counterpointing the staggering decay of memory.' Nor was the irony of the digital context lost on Keenan: 'Basinski's base materials become all the more affecting in the CD's digitised freeze-framing of their ineluctable decay and eventual extinction.'³³ *Pitchfork* reached the same aesthetic conclusion, hearing the 'inevitable decay of all things, from memory to physical matter, made manifest in music... as the tape winds on over the

³¹ Link 2001.

³² Link 2001, 37, 39.

³³ Keenan 2002.

capstans, fragments are lost or dulled, and the music becomes a ghost of itself.³⁴

Subsequent compositions by Basinski explored similar processes and were similarly received.³⁵

Previously known for manipulating samples of pop music as V/Vm, Kirby began releasing Caretaker recordings in 1999, a project based on the haunted hotel narrative of the film *The Shining*, with the suggestive title *Selected Memories from the Haunted Ballroom* (1999). As *The Caretaker*, Kirby re-recorded 78s of pre-war popular musics, adding reverb and distortion to their already audibly poor (by 1999 standards) fidelity. The metaphor was immediately obvious to a *Wire* reviewer:

The Haunted Ballroom images... a dancefloor... long abandoned, gathering dust, and audibly aching with memories... where ghostly, elegiac voices, strings, brass, piano and organ drift and merge and disappear in a foggy haze that lingers in the corners and recesses of the now-deserted ballroom. The album's abiding atmosphere is one of loss, of unmoored memories the dreadful spectre of passing time.³⁶

Reviews of later Caretaker releases (2006, 2008) and a *Wire* feature on Kirby in 2009 reasserted this metaphor.³⁷

Following the arrival of Ariel Pink's *The Doldrums* in 2004 and a series of electronic music recordings on a label called Ghost Box, a discourse developed around this ghostliness metaphor for archaic music and its phonography as ghostly, giving it the name 'hauntology.' This term was borrowed from Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, where it draws attention to the unstable and paradoxical ontologies of history.³⁸ In popular music discourse, discussion of hauntology was

³⁴ Tangari 2004.

³⁵ See, e.g., Marley 2005.

³⁶ Howell 1999.

³⁷ Dale 2006c, Hatherley 2008, Fisher 2009,

³⁸ Derrida (1994) 2006, 9, 63, 202.

lead by Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher on blogs³⁹ and in *Wire* magazine from early 2006. Here the concept was somewhat removed from Derrida's usage, connoting a UK-based style that pastiched UK electronic music from the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁰ The music of Ghost Box artists such as Belbury Poly, The Focus Group and The Advisory Circle was archaic in this way, but rarely phonographically imperfect. In an article on the topic for *Wire*, 'Haunted Audio,' Reynolds wrote that "'ghost" is the meme of the moment,' and thus examined the Ghost Box, Truck Records and Mordant Music labels.⁴¹ Making references to the Caretaker and Boards of Canada (*Music Has the Right to Children* 'with its unique palette of detuned synths that sound like washed-out Super-8 films look and its unparallel capacity to trigger reveries of equally faded childhood memories')⁴² as part of the trend, Reynolds observed that recording itself has a 'spookiness' since it allows listeners to 'keep company with absent presences, the immortal but dead voices of the phonographic pantheon, from Caruso to Cobain.'⁴³ Thus for Reynolds, since phonography was inherently hauntological, lo-fi effects were somewhat secondary to archaic musical recordings themselves, with the former only heightening the latter.⁴⁴

For other writers, however, lo-fi effects played a more significant aesthetic role in hauntology. In the same year as 'Haunted Audio,' the debut album of Burial, which incorporated vinyl noise and elements of 1990s rave music, was

³⁹ K-Punk 2005, Reynolds 2006a.

⁴⁰ For a summary of hauntology, see Zuberi 2007.

⁴¹ Reynolds 2006d, 26, 28.

⁴² Reynolds 2006d, 30.

⁴³ Reynolds 2006d. For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, its history, technologies and role in the music industry, see Stanyek & Piekut 2010. Stanyek and Piekut note that 'Deadness speaks to the distended temporalities and spacialities of all performance, much the way all ontologies are really hauntologies, spurred into being through the portended traces of too many histories to name and too many futures to subsume in a stable, locatable present' (20).

⁴⁴ See also Reynolds 2011b, 311-361.

also considered hauntological in representing the 'decay of the new'⁴⁵ and being 'shrouded in mourning for times past.'⁴⁶ A *Wire* feature on Burial by Mark Fisher, re-introducing the term and numbering Ariel Pink among the relevant musicians, asserted that 'Burial makes the most convincing case that our zeitgeist is essentially hauntological' and that 'the drizzly crackle that has become one of his sonic signatures is part of [a] veiling process' that reduces his music 'to a tantalising tissue of traces.'⁴⁷ A month later, Fisher further explored the role of vinyl noise when reviewing a new recording of Gavin Bryars's *The Sinking of the Titanic* recorded with Alter Ego and Philip Jeck. Bryars's composition intends to evoke the sinking over time of the eponymous ship, and Jeck used vinyl noise in depicting this. For Fisher, experience of Jeck's crackle was a crisis of perception not unlike the experience of the sublime:

Crackle suggests auditory fog: a miasma in which threatening objects loom, barely perceived. As we listen, we come to distrust our own hearing, begin to lose confidence in our ability to distinguish what is actually there from audio hallucinations.

Again referencing a "'hauntological" moment in 00s music,' Fisher wrote:

The spectres heard here are often those of analogue recording technologies, and in the use of vinyl surface noise by Jeck, Burial and The Caretaker, or the sound of tape dissolving on William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops*, it's as if we are hearing the analogue mode of technological memory digitally exhumed and elegised at the same time...
 Jeck and Alter Ego... make mediumistic contact between an age of ubiquitous digital recording and monitoring technologies, and the era of black and white photography, primitive film and telegraphy. The wonderful act of recovery makes us keenly aware of the ways in which recording devices of all kinds both preserve the past and veil it from us.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Barker 2006.

⁴⁶ Stubbs 2008.

⁴⁷ Fisher 2007.

⁴⁸ Fisher 2008.

This passage neatly summarises the phonographic aesthetics and assumptions of the 'hauntological moment,' particularly the association, common by the late 2000s, of various outmoded analogue media (sonic and visual) with each other in contradistinction to the digital media of the present. With the analogue decay of hauntology, time itself became the 'bad listener,' causing recordings not to be reproduced properly, to become imperfect, and establishing a historicising distance. Where in the 1980s and 1990s it was contemporary technocratic culture that militated against lo-fi artists' communication, by the 2000s it was a material weakness of technology itself and the inexorable entropic logic of technocratic history that put lo-fi musicking on the threshold.

'Distant AM Radio Signals': Ariel Pink

Resonating further with this ghost theme, Ariel Pink released *The Doldrums* under the name Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti in 2004, on a label managed by Animal Collective, a prominent indie band often associated with free folk. Born Ariel Rosenberg in 1978 and based in Los Angeles, Pink had started recording on a Yamaha MT8X 8-track in the late 1990s, self-releasing various albums on computer-burnt CDs.⁴⁹ Although the Yamaha MT8X was one of the most advanced multi-track recorders to use compact cassette, Pink's music was some of the most phonographically imperfect to be widely heard since Daniel Johnston's, and frequently exceeded Johnston in this regard. Pink's recordings prior to 2004 suggest dirty, magnetised tape heads, non-optimal mixing of levels and heavy use of bouncing. Moreover, his technical abilities were not of a conventionally professional standard - his tracks regularly contained mismatched

⁴⁹ Reflecting lo-fi aesthetics' long-standing interest in the brand and model of the recording equipment (recall the Uher tape recorder Zappa specified on the packaging to *An Evening With Wild Man Fischer*), Pink noted his Yamaha MT8X on the packaging of *The Doldrums*.

edits and he approximated percussion using beatbox-like techniques of the mouth. His music was widely considered to refer to the pop and rock of the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and his falsetto delivery further added to his recordings' unusual qualities. Other recordings Pink had made prior to 2004 followed *The Doldrums*, and were released on CD as *Worn Copy* (2005), *House Arrest* (2006), *Lover Boy* (2006), *Scared Famous* (2007) and *Underground* (2007).

Initial reception of Pink viewed him as an eccentric outsider musician along the lines of Chusid's model; indeed, a track by Pink appeared on a CD of self-recorded musicians curated by Chusid in 2004, including musicians featured in *Songs in the Key of Z*.⁵⁰ 'I've been trying for weeks now to figure out if Ariel Pink is a genius, an idiot, an idiot savant, or some combination of the three,' wrote *Pitchfork's* review of *The Doldrums*, referring to Pink as a 'Hollywood hillbilly.'⁵¹ With lo-fi effects the most salient topic in his reception, Pink was compared to Guided By Voices,⁵² Beck,⁵³ Jandek,⁵⁴ Daniel Johnston ('are you actually adopting Daniel Johnston's career model?' wondered one reviewer)⁵⁵ and imagined appropriate for a 'K cassette.'⁵⁶ Despite the sophistication of Pink's 8-track cassette recorder, it was, in typical lo-fi narrative, referred to as 'a battered four-track recorder.'⁵⁷

The assumption that home-recording entails 'lo-fi' phonographic imperfection is common in Pink's reception, even if Pink was an extreme example - 'there's hi-fi, there's lo-fi, and with Ariel Pink, a recluse in the hills of Los Angeles, there's no-fi. Recorded on a Yamaha MMT8 cassette [sic], the sound is

⁵⁰ Various artists 2004 (disc.).

⁵¹ Sylvester 2004. See also Weingarten 2005, Sinagra 2006b.

⁵² *Spin* 2004.

⁵³ Moerder 2006.

⁵⁴ Powell 2007.

⁵⁵ Gaerig 2008.

⁵⁶ Masters 2006.

⁵⁷ Mulvey 2005.

smear across the tracks and comes out of your speakers like mush;⁵⁸ similarly, Pink has a 'smeary home-studio sound.'⁵⁹ This even involved opposition to digital media - as Reynolds put it, 'Ariel Pink is the antidote to the iPod.'⁶⁰ One writer said, 'resistant to all things digital, Pink shrouds the music in a muted fuzz not heard since the heyday of home-taping, beneath which his tantalising melodies are half-submerged,'⁶¹ another perceived 'Pink's abandonment of sophisticated audio technology... in preference to ProTools [software] wizardry.'⁶² In *Retromania*, Reynolds noted the 'association cassettes have with the eighties,' and then gave an aesthetic account of the cassette medium that differs markedly from the cassette culture rhetoric of that decade, which, as we saw in Chapter 3, emphasised the ever-increasing sound quality and progressiveness of the medium:

Cassettes could be considered a hauntological format because, like the scratches and surface noise on vinyl, the hiss of tape noise reminds you constantly that this is a recording. But cassettes are also a ghost medium in the sense that as far as mainstream culture is concerned, they are dead, an embarrassing relic.⁶³

Reynolds's equation of vinyl noise and tape noise is telling - forms of media that were once considered almost opposed are conflated in their contradistinction to contemporary digital media.

Given the name 'Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti' and, by 2006, the new discursive category of hauntology, it is unsurprising to see metaphors of ghosts and haunting in his reception - 'ghostly songs that sound piped from the

⁵⁸ Cohen 2004.

⁵⁹ Jenkins 2005.

⁶⁰ Reynolds 2006b.

⁶¹ Gilbey 2006.

⁶² Ingram 2005.

⁶³ Reynolds 2011b, 350.

afterlife,⁶⁴ 'the tunes haunt,'⁶⁵ and, combining occult spirituality with archaic home decor, Pink was 'a bedroom hermit from suburban L.A. who conjures up ghosts by burning a roll of avocado-green shag carpet unvacuumed for 30 years.'⁶⁶ By far the most popular metaphor for Pink's music in the mid-2000s, however, was that it evoked 1970s AM radio both in content (or 'signal') - the archaic pop style - and in form (or the 'channel,' with its imperfections) - a filtered, noisy sound, together with switching between stations. So common was this metaphor that its recurrence drew comment: 'many have noted how Pink's lo-fi sheen resembled 1970s radio, where hooky hits were transmitted through AM fog;'⁶⁷ 'the same metaphor has occurred to virtually every writer - the Ariel Pink sound as some variation on a broken or badly tuned radio.'⁶⁸

The trope of Ariel Pink as AM radio is one of the more notable examples of the 2000s tendency to metaphorically substitute the phonographic imperfections of magnetic tape with those of other potentially superseded or already archaic media, especially analogue forms. Not only was FM radio ubiquitous by 2004, but digital radio was beginning to spread.⁶⁹ 'The first time I put on his album *The Doldrums*' wrote one journalist, 'I thought something had gone seriously wrong with my sound system. Worse than low-fi, the production sounds like some distant AM radio signals that are drifting in and out of focus, vying for bandwidth... There are... haunting pop themes and strangely garbled, gurgly voiced lyrics themed on dream states and childhood memories.'⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Gross 2008.

⁶⁵ Gross 2006.

⁶⁶ Macdonald 2005.

⁶⁷ Masters 2006.

⁶⁸ Ingram 2005.

⁶⁹ Austen 2001, Manly 2005.

⁷⁰ Takiff 2004. Similarly, Joseph 2005.

Pink had an 'AM radio fetish,'⁷¹ and with a first name often mispronounced as 'aerial,' he was 'a human aerial... making eight-track pop that snags '80s AM radio fragments from the ether of collective memory,'⁷² a 'translator / decoder of 1970s American AM radio'⁷³ and 'a demented, depressed DJ on some far-out college station.'⁷⁴ For Reynolds his 'sound conjures the bygone wondrousness of pop music when you first encounter it as a child - most likely through a tinny transistor,'⁷⁵ or 'recreates the scene of a child falling in love with pop for the first time: ear cupped to an imperfectly-tuned transistor, plugged into an otherworldly beyond.'⁷⁶ Reviewers often went further than simply AM radio, evoking 'the radio three doors down, songs mangled and distorted by distance and mishearing,'⁷⁷ 'a transistor shower radio,'⁷⁸ a 'detuned, hallucinatory radio,'⁷⁹ and even '1980s pop stars Hall & Oates or the Human League broadcast through a cardboard tube.'⁸⁰ Pink's music seems to have embodied the aesthetics of a communication engulfed in and distanced by noise. The impairment of Pink's signal provided a key point of information, transforming his music from an otherwise slick pop into something laden with historicised meaning and pathos. Having been employed to such an extent on Pink's music, the radio metaphor was seldom applied to other lo-fi artists of the 2000s, although perceptions of the music as transformed by an archaic technological frame or otherwise distanced by lo-fi effects would remain.

⁷¹ Gaerig 2008.

⁷² Sinagra 2006b.

⁷³ Dale 2006b.

⁷⁴ Mitter 2006.

⁷⁵ Reynolds 2005b, 32.

⁷⁶ Reynolds 2006b.

⁷⁷ Gross 2006.

⁷⁸ Brinton 2006.

⁷⁹ Underwood 2005.

⁸⁰ Rabin 2006.

'The Memory of a Memory:' Hypnagogic Pop and Chillwave

By the end of the 2000s, Pink had become one of the most prominent musicians in indie discourse, and was considered a key influence - usually the 'godfather'⁸¹ - on a new wave of (usually solo) musicians to have emerged with phonographically imperfect recordings in archaic styles, most often that of 1980s pop. In the intervening period, new lo-fi artists associated with Pink (aesthetically, personally, geographically and in sharing the Paw Tracks or Human Ear label with him) had received attention for new albums, including Tickle Feather, John Maus, Nite Jewel, Gary War, Julia Holter, Geneva Jacuzzi, Maria Minerva and How To Dress Well. By September 2009, *Pitchfork* was referring to 'an international cohort of rising artists [that] successfully translated this culture of watery VCR transfers and Fisher-Price cassette rips into 1980s-inspired psychedelic music.'⁸² Eventually two new genre categories, often confused with each other or seen to overlap, came to describe various elements within this trend, 'hypnagogic pop' and 'chillwave' - both terms coined within weeks of each other in the summer of 2009.

Taking the name of the state between wakefulness and sleep, hypnagogic pop was the subject of a *Wire* feature by David Keenan, appearing in the magazine's August 2009 issue and taking in recent music by James Ferraro, Spencer Clark (who together formed the Skaters), Ducktails, Dolphins into the Future, Poca haunted, Zola Jesus, Emeralds, and the Shdwply record label.⁸³ The Skaters had already been noted over a year earlier as 'the single most influential group in the whole cassette / CD-R underground' with their 'subliminally affecting primitive tape hypnotics,' and these were the terms on which Keenan examined

⁸¹ Reynolds 2011 a, Bevan 2012, 83.

⁸² Hogan 2009.

⁸³ Keenan 2009b. Keenan had already used the word 'hypnagogic' two months earlier to describe the Skaters and the Shdwply label: 2009a.

them and the other acts.⁸⁴ He began the article by emphasising the music's status at the threshold of conscious perception:

Hypnagogic pop is pop music refracted through the memory of a memory. It draws its power from the 1980s pop culture in which many of the genre's players were born, and which is only now being factored into underground music as a spectral influence. Hypnagogic realms are the ones between waking and sleeping, liminal zones where mis-hearings and hallucinations feed into the formation of dreams. James Ferraro, one of the music's most powerful conceptualists, has described his [solo recordings as] Lamborghini Crystal... as approximating the headspace of the moment just before you go to sleep as a child, while somewhere in the distance the sounds of pop and disco come muffled through the wall and infiltrate your subconscious.⁸⁵

Frequently emphasising the 'psychedelic' nature of the music - 'hypnagogic pop is 1980s-inspired psychedelia'⁸⁶ - Keenan also noted the nostalgic mode in which a range of 'outmoded media' frames modulate and obfuscate the music and appear in its artwork and videos too:

Hypnagogic pop fetishises the outmoded media of its infancy, releasing albums on cassette, celebrating the video era and obsessing over the reality-scrambling potential of photocopied art. Many of the main players' recordings come with crude black and white Xeroxed artwork, paralleling the inchoate feel of the music while taking on the appearance of the smoky depths of a crystal ball. In Hypnagogic pop, tape hiss and background atmospherics are often amplified, as in the music of Ferraro and Ariel Pink, thus highlighting the aspect of deliberately degraded or misheard pop. In keeping with its genesis, it often sounds like an echo, an after-image, with the players using modern time-travelling tools - drone, improvisation, FX-saturated tape.⁸⁷

Keenan's article offered one of the most comprehensive statements on the relationship between archaic pop and lo-fi aesthetics of the late 2000s, and the terms 'hypnagogic pop,' 'hypnagogic' and 'hypnagogia' immediately caught on

⁸⁴ Keenan 2008.

⁸⁵ Keenan 2009b, 26.

⁸⁶ Keenan 2009b, 29.

⁸⁷ Keenan 2009b, 26.

with music writers, bloggers, record labels and musicians themselves.⁸⁸ The *Wire* featured a number of follow-up pieces incorporating new artists such as Matrix Metals, Rangers, LA Vampires, Psychic Reality and Hype Williams into the category.⁸⁹ A recording by LA Vampires and Matrix Metals was described as having 'that hypnagogic distance, heard through the sonic walls of third, fourth or fifth generation copying and sampling'⁹⁰ and Pink's *House Arrest* was retroactively termed 'a classic hypnagogic pop record.'⁹¹ The online music shop Boomkat adopted the term,⁹² even selling a collection of mp3s under the name 'Hypnagogic Heat Haze.'⁹³ The article was not uncontroversial, soon earning the description 'that infamous *Wire* article on hypnagogic pop,'⁹⁴ and nor was the music: as one blogger wrote, 'I'm sure some tracks were just some hipster recording himself hoovering.'⁹⁵ Having described Pink's music as 'sublime noise-pop' in 2006, Reynolds referred to hypnagogic pop's process as 'the subliming of kitsch' in a 2010 review of Dolphins into the Future, echoing descriptions of Beck's *Mellow Gold*.⁹⁶ Given the recurring portrayal of hypnagogic pop as spiritual and on the threshold of comprehension, yet focused on commercial pop idioms, this was an apt description.

Another genre category to have emerged in 2009 as a response to new lo-fi artists perceived to have adopted 1980s idioms was 'chillwave.' This term originated on a widely-read blog satirising indie culture, Hipster Runoff.⁹⁷ Although the blog frequently implied a strongly ironic tone, the coinage, though tongue-in-cheek, was not absurd. The blog's pseudonymous author Carles,

⁸⁸ Pocahaunted and LA Vampires member Amanda Brown quoted in Cornwell 2010.

⁸⁹ Herrington 2010, Walmsley 2010, Keenan 2011.

⁹⁰ Davies 2011.

⁹¹ *Altered Zones* 2011a.

⁹² *Boomkat* 2009b.

⁹³ *Boomkat* 2009a.

⁹⁴ Krow 2009.

⁹⁵ Steve 2010.

⁹⁶ Reynolds 2010b.

⁹⁷ Carles 2009a.

noting similarities in recent recordings by Neon Indian, Memory Cassette and Washed Out, decided there should be name for the 'genre,' before describing the music's characteristics as involving archaic media:

[I] Feel like I might call it "chill wave" music in the future.
 Feels like "chill wave" is dominated by "thick/chill synths" ...
 Feel like chillwave is supposed to sound like something that
 was playing in the background of "an old VHS cassette that
 u found in ur attic from the late 80s/early 90s."

Connoting relaxation as well as the perennial association of synths with coldness, the use of the term 'chill' recalls the slackers of the 1990s. In September 2009, Carles wrote 'you might have heard of the recent genrefication of the "chillwave movement," which was basically a non-collective effort by producers around the world who created mp3s that were lofi, chill, electro jams.'⁹⁸ In October, Carles noted the rural origin of the musicians, asserting that 'a key element in the chillwave era was that the members of your band/project were required to be unknown/from an obscure place,' and that these bands consist of 'Jim Nobody from Nowhereville USA' (as we saw in Chapter 6, the terms 'nowhere' and 'Nowheresville' had been applied to Guided By Voices and Pavement respectively).⁹⁹

Motivated by the popularity and novelty of Washed Out, Neon Indian and another musician who came to be associated with the category, Toro Y Moi, chillwave and its aesthetic claims spread throughout popular music discourse, even appearing frequently in national newspapers, described as 'bleary, blissed-out, slow-motion meta-funk on a budget'¹⁰⁰ and the work of 'those low-fi electropop newbies who deal in hazy, stoned, warped retro grooves.'¹⁰¹ Despite the differing contexts of their origins, the different musicians thus labelled, and

⁹⁸ Carles 2009b.

⁹⁹ Carles 2009c.

¹⁰⁰ Lester 2009.

¹⁰¹ Carroll 2009. See also Ratliff 2009.

the degree of lo-fi effects in those recordings originally described as hypnagogic pop usually being considerably higher than in those described as chillwave, the terms 'hypnagogic pop' and 'chillwave' (and another term, 'glo-fi')¹⁰² were frequently considered alternative names for the same category:¹⁰³ music considered 'lo-fi,' recorded by a new generation of musicians in their twenties, and associated with the music and media of the 1980s and 1990s.

'Fed Through Murky Analogue Systems': The Music Framed by Archaic Media

The most common aesthetic account of this new lo-fi category was that it was framed, obfuscated, modulated or otherwise distanced by lo-fi effects. This response was asserted more often and more emphatically than similar responses were in the 1980s, and often resembled responses to Pavement in the early 1990s, although with a stronger sense that this process and the media associated with it were, respectively, historicising and historicised. The reception still assumes a hierarchy of layers, with lo-fi effects generated by the recording medium remaining external to 'the music,' but lo-fi effects were (as we will see shortly) a defining characteristic of a musician's work and process and not separable from an aesthetics of 'the music.'

Much as in the 1980s and 1990s, the metaphor of the music being (almost) obscured by lo-fi effects was popular. Tickle Feather's 'lo-fi pop songs full of naive melodies and childish vocals' were 'buried beneath claustrophobic effects and home-wired psychedelia that keeps the meanings of her confession hovering just out of reach.'¹⁰⁴ Pink 'sheathes your suspicions and suspends your

¹⁰² Plagenhoef 2009, *Pitchfork* 2009, Brady 2009, Reynolds 2010a, 2011a.

¹⁰³ E.g. Sande 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Spicer 2009b.

doubts in the sleepy glow of his muddied productions.¹⁰⁵ The 'music' of the Skaters was 'shadowed' in being 'fed through murky analogue systems,¹⁰⁶ its 'surface,' was 'dappled with a constant abrasion and turgid distortion... from the handheld cassette recorders that capture their music,' and was a 'veil that slightly obscures that which exists just beyond its static-laden surface [sic].'¹⁰⁷

Pink's 'tantalising melodies' are 'half-submerged,¹⁰⁸ and Gary War's is a 'submerged funk.'¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the idea that the music was submerged in or covered by, specifically, water - the metaphor that formed the basis of Bryars's *The Sinking of the Titanic* - occurred frequently, often as much a response to reverb as to lo-fi effects. Pink's 'splendors' are 'underwater,¹¹⁰ his music is 'a wireless heard from the bottom of a swimming pool,¹¹¹ an 'aquatic sob,' and 'the wet blanket that Pink wraps around his music, borne of the "limitations" of autodidactic song writing and technology, coats his songs with a membrane of uneasy mystery that suggests something secret being brought to light.'¹¹² James Ferraro's Lamborghini Crystal recordings were 'so water-damaged and lo-fi, they make Ariel Pink sound like Kate Bush;¹¹³ on another Ferraro record, 'in the... swamps of noise, ghosts of popsongs, movie soundtracks, TV ads, and other fleeting ephemera stew and rumble.'¹¹⁴ Maria Minerva's 'aesthetic is aqueous, intimate and intentionally murky, her songs sound like an after-after-hours DJ set at a disco that happens to be inside a seldom-cleaned aquarium.'¹¹⁵ One of Spencer Clark's solo recordings 'feels like Clark tied his sounds to a rock and

¹⁰⁵ Dale 2006b.

¹⁰⁶ Dale 2005.

¹⁰⁷ Haynes 2005.

¹⁰⁸ Gilbey 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Richardson 2009.

¹¹⁰ *Philadelphia Daily News* 2006.

¹¹¹ Reynolds 2005b.

¹¹² Dale 2006a.

¹¹³ Dale 2008.

¹¹⁴ Masters 2011.

¹¹⁵ Zoladz 2012.

tossed them in the ocean, and we're only getting glimpses through ripples on the surface.¹¹⁶

Sometimes the obscuring medium is gaseous, vaporous or mirage-like: Ferraro creates a 'dense sonic haze';¹¹⁷ Pink deploys a 'low-fi smoke screen';¹¹⁸ John Maus's vocals are 'smeared and fogged.'¹¹⁹ These qualities were often linked with altered mental states, particularly 'bleary' and 'woozy': Rangers 'filters early Talk Talk basslines, half-speed blisscore reveries and pulsating synthscapes through a bleary fug of tape distortion.'¹²⁰ Pink's sound was 'expertly unfocused, suggesting a physical world that's always blurring out of reach.'¹²¹ Reynolds theorised that the indistinct qualities of Pink's music reflected the hearing capabilities of a child (note the use of the term 'threshold'):

There's a threshold beyond which you learn to listen 'properly'. Prior to this, the young ear doesn't really differentiate between strands of sounds... On one level, this is obviously an enrichment; on another, you lost that rapturous swirliness of pop hitting the virgin ear as a blur of exciting sound. Perhaps psychedelia, with its effects and saturated timbres, is partly an attempt to recover that blissed indistinction.¹²²

The notion that the heavy modulation of the music by lo-fi effects was psychedelic or hallucinatory was widely held. On Pink's *House Arrest*, 'the woozy flow of the eight-track imbues the music with the hallucinatory, unstable brilliance of a psychedelic flashback.'¹²³ On Ferraro's albums *Clear* and *Discovery*, 'as more and more blissful layers of distortion are piled on [top of 'a Casio rhythm

¹¹⁶ Masters 2013a.

¹¹⁷ Masters 2009.

¹¹⁸ Macdonald 2005.

¹¹⁹ Fisher 2011b.

¹²⁰ Stannard 2011.

¹²¹ Dolan 2005.

¹²² Reynolds 2005b, 32. Broadly speaking, the relevant psychological literature corroborates Reynolds's conception of infant listening as less differentiated, though not the inherently pleasurable or psychedelic effects thereof - see Trehub & Trainor 1993, Chandrasekaran & Kraus 2010.

¹²³ Mitter 2006.

with cheesy handclap and bassline, like incidental music from some forgotten daytime TV soap circa 1985]... the throwaway is transformed into the sublime. It's proof positive of Ferraro's status as a key stylist of the new psychedelia.¹²⁴

While descriptions - often highly exaggerated - of the recording media actually used are common ('dense layers of fudgy guitar melancholia engulfed by acres of tape dust,¹²⁵ Tickle Feather's recordings featured 'mountains of artlessness and hiss'¹²⁶), descriptive language frequently passed into other forms of media. As we have already seen, the phonographic imperfections of tape and vinyl were associated with each other and with other, even visual analogue media too. Super-8mm film stock was a frequent point of comparison. As well as sounding like 1970s AM radio, Pink 'sounds like super-8 film looks: scratchy, dusty, strangely otherworldly,¹²⁷ and *The Doldrums* plays like a Super-8 home movie from the 1970s in almost every respect, right down to the blurry, oversaturated hues, the painfully low-fi quality, the shaky half-formed recollections, the scratch-covered film, and the strangely poignant images of nothing in particular.¹²⁸ John Maus's songs 'sound like half-remembered dreams of pop's dead languages. Like an old, over-exposed Super-8 film, his music is uncannily evocative precisely because it is so indistinct and scuffed.¹²⁹

The range of media referenced is broad. Pink's recordings were likened to a 'weather-beaten jukebox channelling snatches of hits out of the past'¹³⁰ and were imagined as 'recorded through a wall with an old mobile phone.'¹³¹ Ferraro's recordings were (in the space of a single review) like 'VHS tapes,' 'glitchy video

¹²⁴ Spicer 2009a.

¹²⁵ Neyland 2011.

¹²⁶ Love 2008.

¹²⁷ Carew, 2006.

¹²⁸ Dayal 2005.

¹²⁹ Hampson 2008.

¹³⁰ Wilson 2006.

¹³¹ Fregon 2006.

games' and a 'photocopy,'¹³² Hype Williams's 'textures [were] bleary and blotchy, like they have been borrowed from videotape and obsolete video-console sound cards,'¹³³ a compilation of lo-fi artists was 'like watching an early 80s MTV music special with your nose rammed right up against a garish, ghosting 24" screen,'¹³⁴ and Toro Y Moi's tracks were 'spontaneously snapped photos of a hazy afternoon.'¹³⁵

Writers often heard the music as a communication from the past whose garbled nature emphasised its temporal distance, often to melancholic effect. With its 'instant patina of age,'¹³⁶ Pink's music 'harks back to some lost pop Arcadia,'¹³⁷ and, again using the theme of water, is 'soaked in melancholy, the idea being that the greatest moments, in life and pop, are gone.'¹³⁸ It 'sounds like it was recorded at home in the early-'80s, by a Hall & Oates devotee and then the tapes were left out in the elements for 20 years.'¹³⁹ Gary War's debut album 'sounds like it was recorded 30 odd years ago,'¹⁴⁰ a Hype Williams album 'sounds like a beat tape left to crackle for a decade in somebody's garage.'¹⁴¹ Often the recordings had the quality of memory itself. Pink's 'elaborately constructed, half-remembered melodies and densely layered instrumentations are not so much improvised as already extant snippets, passionately recalled and quickly abandoned,' he has a 'radio-antenna memory'¹⁴² and *House Arrest* is 'a glorious mess of sounds stitched at home from the surrounding memories of shelved

¹³² Masters 2011.

¹³³ Fisher 2011a.

¹³⁴ Bliss 2007.

¹³⁵ Armstrong 2009.

¹³⁶ *Philadelphia Daily News* 2006.

¹³⁷ Mitter 2006.

¹³⁸ Gilbey 2006.

¹³⁹ Carew 2006.

¹⁴⁰ Richardson 2009.

¹⁴¹ Thompson 2011.

¹⁴² Sinagra 2006b.

vinyl, decaying beneath curled-up posters on the wall.¹⁴³ A reviewer of Matrix Metal's album *Flamingo Breeze* concluded that the album was 'like a memory so vivid it almost feels real.'¹⁴⁴

These tropes - obscuring, water, haziness, bleariness, blurriness, psychedelia, analogue media, the past, memory, and, as we saw above, ghosts - are seldom expressed in isolation. They are intimately connected in passages that freely mix metaphors.¹⁴⁵

'The Most Important Instrument': Lo-Fi Effects as a Defining Aesthetic Element

The intensity with which phonographic imperfections were described reflects an understanding that the transformative effects of lo-fi were a crucial, even defining, aesthetic element of the music. Irrespective of a musician's intention, and even though, as we have seen, reviewers typically observed a distinction internal to the recordings between 'the music' and the lo-fi effects, it was widely understood that the lo-fi effects were a major part of the music's appeal and *raison d'être*.

Listeners were not urged merely to tolerate lo-fi effects as they were in the 1980s, nor were lo-fi effects indexes of an anti-commercial, oblique or lackadaisical cool as they were in the 1990s. By the late 2000s, lo-fi effects were regularly presented as one of the most interesting and powerful tools used by the musicians in question.

We have already seen that lo-fi effects were considered an important artistic contribution to the recordings of Pavement (Chapter 6) and Oldham, but

¹⁴³ Bryan 2006.

¹⁴⁴ Masters 2010.

¹⁴⁵ E.g. Griffey 2005, Takiff 2004, Bliss 2008, Keenan 2010a.

the salience of Pink's lo-fi effects was immediately evident in one of *The Doldrums's* first reviews:

The defining characteristic of *The Doldrums* is the fidelity of the recording, which is very low - ambience shrouds the actual songs and becomes the most prominent player... The intentional low fidelity... overshadows the songwriting, which may or may not be to Ariel Pink's advantage. It creates a hauntingly beautiful aural tableau, an environment of sameness that pushes the actual songs to the periphery.¹⁴⁶

Five years later, *Pitchfork* called Pink's, 'music whose imperfections actually *are* its selling point: without them, it would sound like the sweatless work of studio hacks.'¹⁴⁷ As Reynolds put it in *Retromania*, together with his construction of the cassette as archaic and lo-fi, 'tape, with its lo-fidelity warmth and hiss and its frailty in the face of time, is integral to Ariel Pink's musical means of production.'¹⁴⁸ One reviewer of an early release by How To Dress Well (the moniker of Tom Krell) described in detail the way moments of distortion worked to the music's advantage, echoing the way writers had portrayed Jandek and Daniel Johnston as engaged in struggle:

The melodies are frequently obscured by the damaged production. At points, when his piercing wail shoots into the red and things begin to distort quickly and sharply, it can be difficult to resist the instinctual urge to slip your headphones off. But according to Krell, the rougher portions of the recordings are deliberate. And because there's no obvious need for Krell's haunting delivery to be obstructed-- he really does have a wonderful voice-- for some listeners, the application of this much distortion might feel like an arty nuisance.

But the more you listen, that tension is part of what makes the music special. Listening through the noise for the joyous, romantic moments makes *Can't See My Own Face* that much more intimate. Krell's voice alone confronts the harsher textures in a strangely victorious kind of way. And the more you find yourself anticipating something gorgeous

¹⁴⁶ Proven 2004.

¹⁴⁷ Powell 2009.

¹⁴⁸ Reynolds 2011b, 348.

just below the surface or just around the bend, the more you start to hear.¹⁴⁹

Lo-fi effects were considered to be in the domain of the artist's creative agency, a tool that s/he could put to use. Toro Y Moi 'utilized a fair amount of tape hiss,¹⁵⁰ Pink 'mixes gauzy layers of melody, reverb, tape hiss and wry rock history reference,¹⁵¹ on one of Ferraro's albums, 'muddy fidelity is put to uncommonly creative use, as rigid power pop guitar riffage and sparkling 1980s digital bell tones are swamped by 21st century lo-fi gloop.¹⁵² In collaboration with Zola Jesus (Nika Roza Danilova),

[LA Vampires (Amanda Brown)] Works in tone scientist style, making creative use of every aspect of the recording process, emphasising the fidelity itself - syrupy, deep, just slightly out of focus - as an expressive component of the sound. The lo-fi aesthetic works as hallucinogenic sleight of hand, illuminating Brown's murky sonic environments with waves of microtone thick rhythms while blurring into Danilova's decadent vocal style to create a form of high pop drama that has an epic, primitive quality.¹⁵³

Lo-fi effects and the technology from which they originate even become 'instruments': Pink's 'songs are so lost in a lo-fi eight-track fug that magnetic tape is the most important instrument,¹⁵⁴ Tickle Feather's debut album 'is the kind of record where hiss, feedback, and even the abstract concept of cheapness and obfuscation are more or less instruments as well, coloring and shaping what we hear, burying certain motifs while embellishing others.¹⁵⁵

That lo-fi effects would be so frequently discussed in such a way shows how phonographic imperfection was particularly reified as a creative and aesthetic category, probably more so than ever before in discourse on recording

¹⁴⁹ Kelly 2010.

¹⁵⁰ Colly 2010.

¹⁵¹ Masters 2006.

¹⁵² Moliné 2011.

¹⁵³ Keenan 2010b.

¹⁵⁴ Carew 2006.

¹⁵⁵ Love 2008.

imperfections. We might say that in the late 2000s, 'lo-fi' was at its most 'aesthetic.' This stems from the extent and intensity of the lo-fi effects in the music, which could not be missed or ignored. But the discourse surrounding this music - and no doubt the musicians too - were deeply conscious of the archaic nature of its technological frame, the frailty of which imperilled the signal it carried. The prevalence of digital media by the mid-2000s had thrown the imperfections of a range of analogue media into sharp relief, a perception reflected in the exaggerated quality and quantity of the lo-fi effects and the frequently hyperbolic nature in which they were discussed, reaching the register of the sublime. Now, more detached from necessity and inevitability, lo-fi effects could be the focus of a more disinterested aesthetics, but one that was also highly historicising, closely connected with nostalgia, decay and the passage of time.

Chapter 8. 'Allegedly Lo-Fi': Willis Earl Beal, Outsider Status and the Curation of Lo-Fi

By 2012, the figure of the lo-fi outsider musician had become well established in popular music discourse and culture, with documentary films appearing on Wesley Willis (2003), Jandek (2003) and Daniel Johnston (2005), the latter becoming particularly successful.¹ Chusid's *Songs in the Key of Z* had been released in 2000, assembling a canon of outsider artists including Willis, Jandek and Johnston, and the category was summarised in Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor's *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (2007): outsider musicians 'couldn't fake it if they tried,' and are 'by definition authentic... artists with no conventional training in music... who buck the odds and make music despite their handicaps, which range from mental instability to tone-deafness.'² In an indie culture that had ceded some ground to industry models of success since the 1980s, and had forfeited much of its first-person authenticity in the third-person-authentic archaism of hypnagogic pop and chillwave, the outsider artist and their challengingly impaired context remained a considerable source of authenticity and cultural capital.

This was the milieu into which Willis Earl Beal arrived, and it was as a lo-fi outsider - to which was added the stylistic and technological archaism whose popularity in indie culture was now well established - that Beal was received by popular music discourse and indeed presented by his record label, XL Recordings, in early 2012. Beal had recorded the tracks that comprised his debut album *Acousmatic Sorcery* himself, and it was given a comparatively small and peripheral release in 2011 by *Found*, one of the first magazines to have

¹ Bitton dir. 2003, Freidrichs dir. 2003, Feuerzeig dir 2005.

² Taylor & Barker 2007, 333.

interviewed Beal. Shortly afterwards, however, Beal signed to XL, who in April 2012 reissued *Acousmatic Sorcery* in new packaging and with fewer tracks, the culmination of a media campaign that had started in January. During this period Beal was subject to wide coverage, from blogs to national newspapers, and began performing and touring extensively.

Beal's presentation and reception during this period represents the persistence of the lo-fi aesthetic narratives and authentications that were employed in the 1980s and that can trace their roots to those of the folk revivals, particularly surrounding the musician Lead Belly. They were adapted to a new technological atmosphere: while John and Alan Lomax had sought African American folk singers who had been uninfluenced by the radio,³ Beal was stood in contradistinction to the internet. He was associated with older, more personal technologies - not just his tape recorder, but through his unusual offer to sing to fans over the telephone and send them drawings in the post. As it had been for Lead Belly and, for example, Daniel Johnston, the figure and biography of Beal were subject to at least as much aesthetic attention as was his music.

Yet in several cases Beal's narratives of authenticity were challenged, as the whole notion of an outsider artist with an intriguing backstory and archaic musical idioms was considered too good to be true, and even perceived as 'constructed.'⁴ Though this pattern is only to be seen in a minority of sources, it is by no means insignificant, representing a negative reaction to an excess in lo-fi outsider aestheticisation and a questioning of its premises. Even Beal himself - who as a fan of Charles Bukowski and Tom Waits portrayed the outsider with a degree of self-consciousness - noted the interventions of XL, undermined or

³ Filene 2000.

⁴ Caramanica 2012.

rejected ideas of his cultural outsider status, and claimed 'already my story has been embellished, and I didn't do it'.⁵

Willis Earl Beal's 'Backstory'

As Beal himself recognised, then, a key aesthetic role in his reception is played by what was routinely called his 'backstory.' Nearly all of the pieces on him in popular and indie music discourse relate a number of elements from it, even in the very smallest texts. Such is its prevalence and the perceived influence on the way he was received that many of them address and even challenge the notion of Beal's backstory itself. It has been described (in a headline) as 'one hell of a backstory,'⁶ 'a compelling backstory that might even be true,'⁷ and 'a media-friendly backstory'⁸. A reviewer of one of Beal's live shows wrote, 'the lead up to Beal's debut album, *Acousmatic Sorcery*, has put the emphasis squarely on his backstory, a romantic tale of beatific solitude that could practically have come ripped from the pages of [Bukowski].'⁹ A critic for the *New York Times* noted that 'when you watch Mr. Beal... you are watching a back story as much as a performance, especially because the back story is so much louder.'¹⁰

The fascination with Beal's biography, particularly those aspects considered to have pathos or perceived as unusual, makes assembling a definitive account of it a complex task. It is often exaggerated and involves several elements of a sensitive nature, such as Beal's homelessness, poverty, inability to stay in employment, health problems, and romantic frustrations, all of which contributed to an aestheticisation of Beal himself that is inextricable from

⁵ Kupillas 2012.

⁶ Usinger 2012.

⁷ Lester 2012a.

⁸ Hyden 2012.

⁹ Trapunski 2012b.

¹⁰ Caramanica 2012.

that of his music. The following account is constructed from a range of sources, of which the *GQ* interview is the most comprehensive, quoting Beal himself at length.¹¹

In his first interview, for *Found Magazine*, Beal gave his age as twenty-five, making his birth year 1983 or 1984.¹² An African American, he grew up in Chicago, moving to Albuquerque, New Mexico at 24. Beal was homeless for his 'first two months' in the city.¹³ It was during the Albuquerque period (August 2007- June 2010) that he started to record music, accumulating his equipment at little or no financial cost. Beal then moved back to Chicago, where he lived with his grandmother.

In both Albuquerque and later in Chicago, Beal would promote himself and his music using hand-drawn and photocopied flyers which, along with CD-Rs of his music, he would 'leave all around the hipster places and the coffee shops.'¹⁴ These typically contained the offer 'write to me and I will make you a drawing' along with an address, and 'call me and I will sing you a song,' along with a phone-number. One flyer introduced Beal, included a character description and a drawing of himself, and invited 'a nice pretty girl' to call him. In Albuquerque, this flyer reached the attention of Davy Rothbart, editor of *Found*, a magazine devoted to paper scraps and other ephemera with handwriting on them or that otherwise hint at a story. The flyer was put on the cover of *Found's* December 2009 issue, in which Beal was interviewed.

In the summer of 2011, *Found* released a 200-copy edition of a box set called *The Willis Earl Beal Special Collection*, including poetry and artwork by Beal and a version of *Acousmatic Sorcery* consisting of 17 tracks. In July 2011,

¹¹ Greene 2012.

¹² Willis Earl Beal, quoted in Rothbart 2009, 51.

¹³ Willis Earl Beal, quoted in Rothbart 2009, 50.

¹⁴ Greene 2012.

Beal appeared on the cover of *The Chicago Reader's B Side* section, with a feature article on and interview with him inside.¹⁵ This was followed by a few small, enthusiastic pieces appearing online in the wake of the *Found* and *Chicago Reader* coverage. During the autumn of 2011, Beal fronted a traditional blues rock band called The Ghostones, playing live in Chicago a few times and recording and releasing an EP, *Close to Me*, at the end of October.

In the middle of December 2011, Beal signed a four-album contract with XL Recordings to appear as the inaugural artist on their new imprint Hot Charity. Shortly afterwards, a website reproducing the design and purpose of Beal's flyers (including his phone number) appeared¹⁶ and videos of him and his music were uploaded to YouTube and posted on websites including *Pitchfork*.¹⁷ On January 5, Hot Charity's Twitter account announced, 'Willis has received so many calls that his Skype account went sideways. We're working quickly to resume this!'¹⁸ – implying what Beal and other sources would later confirm,¹⁹ that the label had assumed control of his offer to sing to fans on the phone. Several pieces introducing Beal to listeners then appeared during the following month in other prominent indie music magazines, including *Dummy*, *The Guardian Online* and *Spin*. On February 7, *Pitchfork* published a longer piece on Beal that included an interview, calling him 'an eclectic lo-fi artist struggling to find a space between outsider and insider.'²⁰

For a few days in March several blogs and online magazines reported on and embedded a video interview that had been made because Beal had progressed to the 'bootcamp' round of television talent show *The X Factor*. Later

¹⁵ Galil 2011.

¹⁶ *willisearlbeal.com* 2012a.

¹⁷ Fitzmaurice 2012.

¹⁸ @HotCharity, 2012.

¹⁹ Minsker 2012.

²⁰ Minsker 2012.

that month, an extensive interview with Beal appeared on GQ magazine's website, and was significant for allowing Beal to relate his backstory himself and at length.²¹ It also was the first in 2012 to paint a more complicated picture of Beal, one where he answers his telephone irritably, reveals his familiarity with indie music and culture and the significance and history of 'outsider' music, hints at the artistic contributions of XL and implies doubts about his relationship with the label.

Acousmatic Sorcery was released on April 2 and was widely reviewed in popular music magazines. As of late February, Beal was now touring extensively, having only performed live a handful of times before signing to XL. He sang 'Evening's Kiss' and 'Swing on Low' on the television programme *Later With Jools Holland* on the night of April 17. Beal's tour ended in September 2012, and by October, his website had been redesigned, now omitting his telephone number, address and offers.²² In September 2013, XL released his new album *Nobody Knows*, which was professionally recorded with a backing band (its reception did not prove relevant to this study).

Willis Earl Beal's Recordings

Both versions of *Acousmatic Sorcery* are assembled from recordings Beal made himself in the late 2000s. As with other lo-fi artists, a significant proportion of what makes him 'lo-fi' is attributable to technique and instrumentation rather than phonography. His voice has a clear, conventional vibrato, is largely in tune, and is typically reminiscent of twentieth-century blues, gospel and soul, though some tracks feature rapping ('Ghost Robot'), spoken word (the unnamed second part of 'Angel Chorus,' called 'The Masquerade' on *Found's* edition) or rhythmic speech

²¹ Greene 2012.

²² willisearlbeal.com 2012b.

somewhere between the two ('Swing on Low'). Beal's tuned accompanying instruments are acoustic and electric guitars, a toy synthesiser, a nepenenoyka (an Eastern European lap harp for children he found in a flea market²³) whistling and untexted voice. He often uses only two guitar strings (e.g. 'Evening's Kiss'), while the perfect-fourth spacings between all the pitches in the chords of 'Away My Silent Lover' suggest that he was merely positioning a finger straight across the fretboard in various positions rather than forming chords. Beal often inadvertently dampens the guitar strings (e.g. at the start of 'Sambo Joe from the Rainbow') and misses pitches or plays potentially unintended ones. Strumming the electric guitar, Beal's harmonies are unspecific or difficult to discern (e.g. 'Take Me Away,' 'Ghost Robot'). His percussion instruments are hollow metallic or ceramic objects (several articles suggest that these are 'a collection of pots and pans'²⁴). Beal's lyrics, reminiscent of Beat poetry, most frequently explore themes of frustration, boredom and disillusionment.

Beal and his instruments tend to be closely miked, without effects, and his recordings have a dry acoustic. With no more than four distinct parts sounding at once, and from the simultaneity of two recordings of his voice in certain tracks (e.g. 'The Masquerade'), it can be inferred that the recording process involved multi-tracking and overdubbing on a recorder with at least four tracks. The phonographic imperfections of *Acousmatic Sorcery* are considerable but do not reach the same degree as those of the recordings of Ariel Pink (before 2010) or James Ferraro (before 2011). The highest and lowest frequencies are missing, but the tape hiss is relatively low and difficult to notice during Beal's playing or singing. The operation of Beal's tape recorder is usually audible at the beginnings and ends of the songs when he presses record and stop, which starts or stops

²³ Greene 2012.

²⁴ Galil 2011.

the hiss and can make the frequency profile waver slightly, and there are occasional dropouts, as in 'Evening's Kiss' at 3:06. The prevailing lo-fi effect is the tape-saturation and resulting distortion of Beal's sounds, most often heard when Beal is playing or singing at high volumes.

In all this, Beal's lo-fi effects most closely resemble those of acts popular in the 80s such as Hasil Adkins, early Beat Happening and Daniel Johnston, rather than the more intense, 'psychedelic' or ghostly effects of the 2000s. This will have played a significant role not just in sonically verifying Beal as a lo-fi outsider in comparison with the term's established canon, but in reviving that era's discursive focus on realism and authenticity.

'For Aesthetic Effect': Curating Willis Earl Beal

The back cover of XL Recordings' release of *Acousmatic Sorcery* features the text: 'Disclaimer: this record was recorded on bad equipment. I like it that way.'²⁵ Whether or not this was put there at the unprompted request of Beal himself, it certainly reflects the image of Beal promoted by XL of an artist who is unapologetically and assertively 'lo-fi' in the expanded sense of the term - anti-technocratic, unmediated, imperfect and, moreover, archaic. In the same ways and for similar reasons that, as Filene points out,²⁶ John and Alan Lomax curated Lead Belly, XL curated Beal's recordings and image in an apparent attempt to enhance this effect beyond the point of artificiality. Beal himself said of XL, 'they just, you know, *suggest* that this course of action would be better and such-and-such. So I agree, out of initial ignorance, you know.'²⁷ What follows is not an attempt to challenge Beal's and XL's authenticity. Rather, in their omissions and

²⁵ Beal 2012, back cover.

²⁶ Filene 2000, 47-75.

²⁷ Greene 2012.

augmentations of elements in Beal's recordings, packaging and live performance, XL's curation of Beal hints at where the label felt the artist's selling points lay.

XL removed 6 tracks from the version of *Acousmatic Sorcery* that had been released through *Found* magazine, and changed the order of the remainder. In the *GQ* interview, Beal explained:

The one that was released by *Found Magazine*, I had selected the order of the tracks. And I considered it to be the best, out of the four years of versions that I did. I personally like the one I selected, because it's just more my style. It doesn't hit people with the dissonance right away. It comes in slow, and builds, and then comes back down. But the one they're going to release – I suppose it's sort of the best for the situation. All things go with the flow, I suppose.²⁸

The first release of *Acousmatic Sorcery*, through *Found* magazine, begins with the fading in of the consonant, less distorted guitars of 'Angel Chorus,' followed by the gently surreal 'Sambo Joe from the Rainbow.' On XL, *Acousmatic Sorcery* begins with Beal's more dissonant and distorted tracks – the childlike instrumental played on the eponymous 'Nepenenoyka' lap harp, followed by the electric blues of 'Take Me Away,' which had been assigned to track seven on the previous edition. Unlike Beal himself, then, XL encouraged an image of the artist as 'dissonant,' rough, primitive and an outsider by positioning the more challenging elements foremost, heightening his difference.

In a similar way, XL's version of *Acousmatic Sorcery* has a slightly different cover to *Found*'s. Both featured the same picture, hand-drawn by Beal himself, but on XL's version the name and title appear in Beal's handwriting rather than the word-processor typeface of *Found*'s. This makes Beal's work appear more personal and hand-made, even if it adjusts what had been produced under more restricted circumstances. In fact, XL derived an entire visual style

²⁸ Greene 2012.

from Beal's handwriting and artwork, reproducing elements of his flyers on everything from YouTube videos, CD packaging, T-shirts, gig flyers and websites. They even appear to have made Beal's handwriting into its own typeface, which is used in the more peripheral text on the album's packaging.



Figure 1 The cover of *Found's* version of *Acousmatic Sorcery*



Figure 2 The cover of XL's version of *Acousmatic Sorcery*, featuring Beal's handwriting

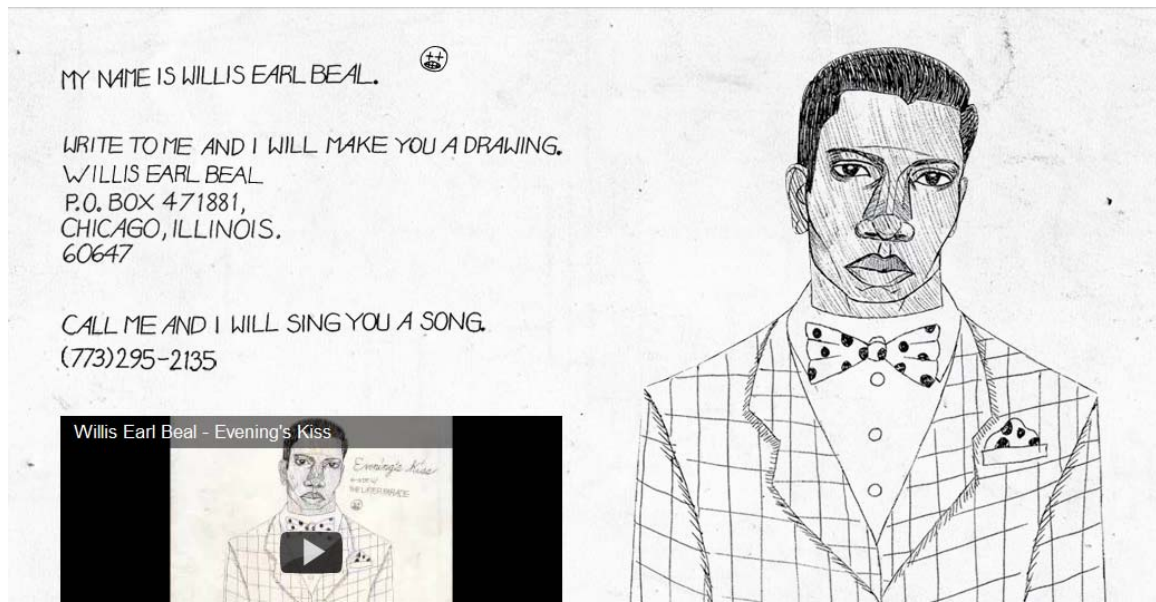


Figure 3 willisearlbeal.com as it appeared on January 15, 2012, featuring a self-portrait from one of his flyers, his handwriting and a background of crumpled white paper.

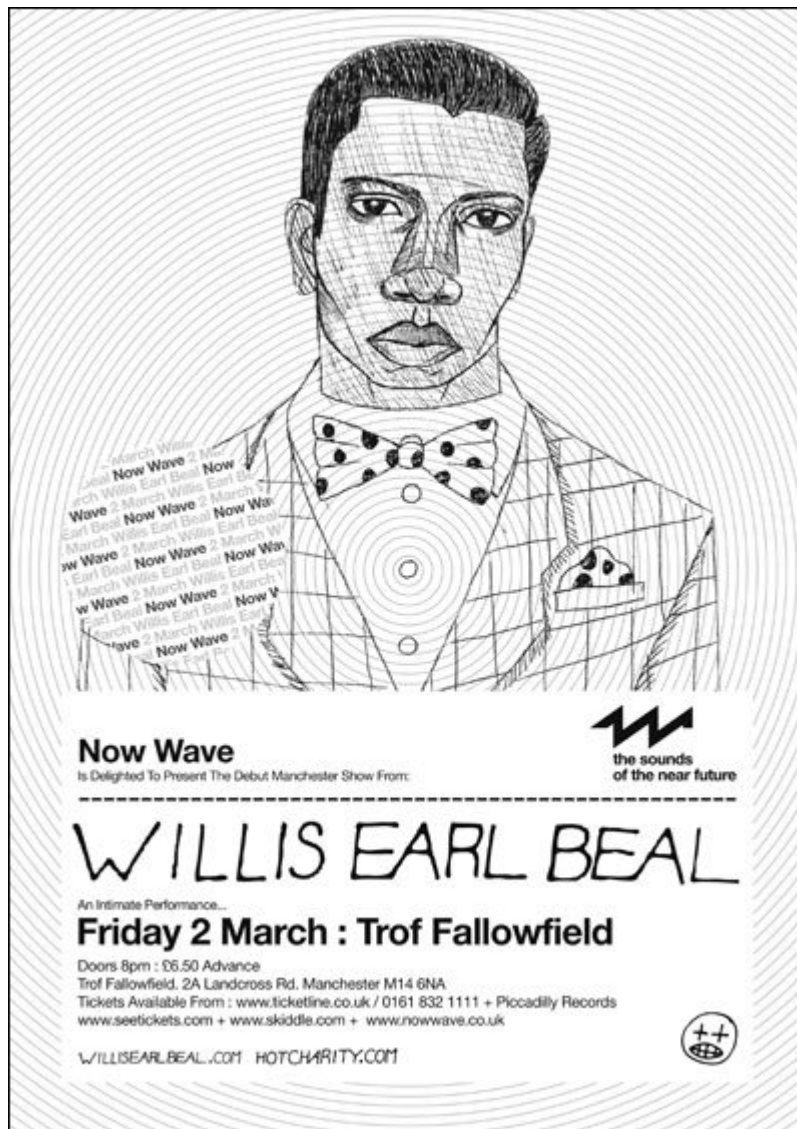


Figure 4 The poster for a Willis Earl Beal gig in Manchester, UK, with a similar style

XL also sought to maintain Beal's personal contact with fans through telephone and post, putting his offer from the flyers - 'write to me and I will make you a drawing... call me and I will sing you a song' - on his website, apparently giving him a new phone number and connecting him to Skype in order to do so. By the end of March 2012, this personal connection was becoming difficult to sustain, with Beal answering the phone irritably, having experienced callers who

remained silent,²⁹ and on April 2, the magazine *Creative Review* blogged that they'd been sent 'a photo of a drawing' rather than a new one.³⁰ By October, these offers had been rescinded on the website.

Perhaps the most readily apparent example of XL's curation of Beal was in his live performances, which represented both a performance of archaic authenticity that blurred first-person and third-person authenticities and a removal of its rougher aspects. Performing live in 2012, Beal was dressed like a mid-twentieth-century working-class rhythm and blues fan.³¹ Throughout the sets, Beal sang into a microphone or played guitar, alone on stage except for a large reel-to-reel tape machine - an Akai GX-4000D, first produced in 1978 - which was used to provide the accompaniment to his singing, being connected to the venue's speaker system and manipulated by Beal himself. Although Beal sang many of the songs from *Acousmatic Sorcery*, the accompaniment on the tape was different from what he had recorded for that album: without lo-fi effects and incorporating synthesiser.

²⁹ Greene 2012.

³⁰ Williams 2012.

³¹ Not an outfit he wore in performance during 2011, as can be seen in Harley 2011, STATS 2011.



Figure 1: Beal performs with the Akai GX-4000D at The Drake, Toronto, April 30th 2012

Having not used the GX-4000D live or for recording purposes before joining XL Recordings, Beal explained the setup in his interview with *GQ*:

I went into the studio and recreated some of the stuff that's on *Acousmatic Sorcery*. I put a little synthesiser in there so it sounds more bombastic. And then they put it on a cassette tape. And then they had a little reel-to-reel machine for aesthetic effect. They hooked it up over the PA system, and then I sing to the reel-to-reel machine.³²

On another occasion, Beal described the machine as 'cool to look at.'³³ Not only had XL brought Beal into the studio to recreate his songs on better equipment, but they had suggested precisely the opposite of this – namely the continuation of an archaic and home-recording context – by introducing the Akai GX-4000D into his live performance. The 'aesthetic effect' of the Akai GX-4000D connected him with twentieth-century home-recording artists such as Jandek and Hasil Adkins, augmented the archaic character already present in the blues resonances of

³² Willis Earl Beal, quoted in Greene 2012. Beal may have made a mistake here – reel-to-reel tape machines do not play cassettes. Beal repeats this story in part in Nardwuar 2012 (film.).

³³ O'Meara 2012.

Beal's music - reel to reel machines with a similar appearance famously belonged to the Lomaxes - and portrayed him as a throwback, untainted by the contemporary world and its technology. Yet rather than the (continuation of) lesser sound quality it might be taken to represent, the archaic tape-player appears at the very moment that his sound improves.

In respect to clothing, particularly, XL's presentation of Beal bears a striking resemblance to the Lomaxes' presentation of the African-American folk singer Lead Belly, who in the 1930s appeared in live performance wearing 'convict clothes' at the Lomaxes' suggestion.³⁴ As Cantwell put it, Lead Belly was 'dressed in convict or sharecropper clothes for concerts, for a magazine photographer, and for a movie newsreel, "for exhibition purposes."³⁵ 'Exoticising the singer only added to his authenticity,' observes Filene. In addition, the Lomaxes' 'publicity campaign depicted him as a savage, untamed animal and focused endlessly on his convict past.'³⁶ The Lomaxes 'promot[ed] [Lead Belly] as an outsider'³⁷ - he was introduced to reporters as 'a "natural," who had no idea of money, law, or ethics and who was possessed of virtually no restraint.'³⁸ Filene notes 'the romanticized (and racialized) life story that had been constructed for him, the primitive emotiveness attributed to his music, the notion that he somehow existed out of time, or at least before the time in which artifice and superficiality had permeated popular culture,' and that:

Root musicians are expected to be premodern, unrestrainedly emotive, and noncommercial. Singers who too closely resemble the [folk] revival's middle-class audience are rejected by those audiences as "inauthentic" ...the most popular folk figures... are those who have passed a series of tests of their "Otherness." ...[The

³⁴ Filene 2000.

³⁵ Cantwell 1996, 73.

³⁶ Filene 2000, 60, 59.

³⁷ Filene 2000, 68,

³⁸ John Lomax, quoted in Filene 2000, 60.

Lomaxes] realized that if they wanted Lead Belly to achieve mainstream popularity his very incompatibility with mainstream society was his greatest asset.³⁹

Nearly eight decades later, Beal, too, would be understood and authenticated on precisely these terms, in a discourse that heightened and selected for his difference, just as the Lomaxes had.

Beal the (Social, Cultural, Musical, Temporal and Technological) 'Outsider'

Beal the outsider was a narrative and an image that resonated well with popular music discourse (almost too well, as discussed below). He could be regarded as an outsider in many different areas of his life and his music to date, with both these domains supporting each other. The term 'outsider' itself appeared regularly. At first, it was typically a reference to Beal's obscurity but it soon came to represent his musical project, and was often used simply in adjectival form as a quick designation. Synonymous expressions included 'underground',⁴⁰ 'idiosyncratic',⁴¹ 'eccentric',⁴² or variations on 'not your average'.⁴³ One reviewer used the term 'outsider' to describe Beal's music specifically: 'crudely recorded, with mostly home-made instruments, it has a real outsider feel'.⁴⁴ Often it forms an element in a narrative of an outsider struggling and succeeding: Beal was 'an outsider bursting into the inside' and 'a breath of fresh air to the music industry, about the story of the boy who had nothing'.⁴⁵ The first sentences of one review read:

³⁹ Filene 2000, 75, 63, 65.

⁴⁰ Harley 2011.

⁴¹ Hogan 2012.

⁴² Mills 2012, Robinson 2012, Stewart 2012.

⁴³ Mills 2012; Hodge 2012; O'Meara 2012, title.

⁴⁴ Barden 2012.

⁴⁵ Mills 2012.

The term outsider music supposes that its creator is a lone wolf that chafes at the thought of musical conformity or lyrical conventions, or any traditional trappings associated with the commercial music industry. Chicago singer-songwriter Willis Earl Beal may fall under the umbrella of outsider musician, but the story of how he got signed to XL's Hot Charity indie imprint shows a man that desires to be heard by as many people as possible.⁴⁶

Beal was even described as a marginal musician in more extremes terms, as 'below-underground',⁴⁷ 'under-underground'⁴⁸ and 'outsider-outsider.'⁴⁹

Articles often addressed the history and usage of the categorisations 'outsider' and 'outsider art.' Using Beal's words to support the designation, *Pitchfork* wrote:

Sorcery's scattershot approach and rudimentary instrumentals, along with Beal's "Call me" backstory, had people pegging him as an "outsider artist" alongside Daniel Johnston and Jandek. And, as a fan of both men, Beal likes that distinction. "I'm glad I'm an outsider artist," he says. "I can do whatever I want to and people don't know what to expect".⁵⁰

One writer noted that 'Beal's backers have essentially styled him as an accidental genius, a homeless savant "outsider" in the mould of Daniel Johnston, Jandek and Wesley Willis,⁵¹ another found him 'the heir to outsider artists such as Daniel Johnston and Wesley Willis.'⁵² Indeed, sometimes Beal's association with outsider music became explicitly canonical:

Beal's affecting, unvarnished home demos—often just him abusing an out-of-tune guitar while singing in a guttural holler—put the influential tastemakers who encountered them

⁴⁶ Lemmon 2012.

⁴⁷ Galil 2011.

⁴⁸ Cliff 2012.

⁴⁹ Kupillas 2012.

⁵⁰ Minsker 2012.

⁵¹ Trapunski 2012b.

⁵² Stewart 2012.

in mind of Daniel Johnston, Tom Waits, Wild Man Fischer: the great pantheon of outsider artists.⁵³

As Lead Belly's background of homicide and imprisonment and Johnston's and Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer's backgrounds of mental illness had done, Beal's backstory played a major role in making him a social outsider. Paul Lester wrote for *The Guardian* that 'Beal's backstory is apparently one of a virtual tramp, living rough and scrabbling around for instruments in flea markets – a story that's proved useful in positioning him as a hard-living latterday bluesman.'⁵⁴ This both alludes to and is indicative of the selective way in which Beal's backstory was told, where particular examples of social outsider status - homelessness, poverty and (in many places elsewhere) loneliness - are used to represent Beal. His period of homelessness received considerable attention, appearing in approximately a third of sources.

Far more popular, however, was the narrative of Beal's self-promotion through flyers and the offer made on them to sing over the phone, which appears in the clear majority of pieces on him. It was presented both as an element in Beal's history and as a current opportunity - many writers entreat their readers to give Beal a call, and some report on what happened when they did. Posting flyers rather than meeting people in more conventional ways indicates an outsider to social norms, but it also differentiates Beal from the music industry's insiders:

Will Lady Gaga make you a drawing? Probably not, unless your name is Justin Bieber. Will Justin Bieber serenade you by Skype? Probably not, unless you are Lady Gaga. You should know about the soulful and unusual Willis Earl Beal, an untouched singer-songwriter from Chicago who will do things that the famously fan-friendly stars will not. Yes, apparently he'll sing you a song if you call him.⁵⁵

⁵³ Greene 2012.

⁵⁴ Lester 2012b.

⁵⁵ Wheeler 2012.

Beal, 'untouched,' is positioned heroically against an insular impersonal elite of commercial pop.

Beal was often characterised as an outsider because of the archaism of his music, which positioned him outside modernity. As one writer summarised it (echoing Filene), Beal's 'music exists outside of time.'⁵⁶ Paul Lester portrayed Beal, along with the singer Cold Specks, as (as the headline put it) a 'New New Old Thing,' with the subtitle, 'Alan Lomax would be proud, but the authentic, bluesy, harsh sounds of two new young songwriters are also providing modern twists on old classics.'⁵⁷ On another occasion, Lester wrote 'is this really a new artist or some lost field recording?' noting Beal's 'power to make you wonder whether he's just peddling dubiously acquired material from John Lomax's private stash;⁵⁸ another writer found that 'if you didn't know better, you'd think you'd come across an undocumented Alan Lomax field recording, which may be partly the point.'⁵⁹ In *Liberator*, a magazine on black culture, Brian Kupillas associates Beal with a bygone golden age of blues and folk at length. For example:

Beal has been shrouded in myth and legacy because his tale is so intriguing. Not to say that his story is untrue, but when told who he is, and where he's come from, he registers in a part of the brain meant for long-ago and far away heroes of folk-lore.⁶⁰

Kupillas recognises a difference between Beal's idiom and that of early twentieth-century blues, but hears an association nevertheless. Closely associating archaism, outsider status, poverty and authenticity and echoing Barry Hansen (in Chapter 2), Kupillas then sees similarity and authenticity lying in struggle, 'desperation': 'Blues music... has always been a desperate man's expression,

⁵⁶ Black 2012.

⁵⁷ Lester 2012b.

⁵⁸ Lester 2012a.

⁵⁹ Carroll 2012.

⁶⁰ Kupillas 2012.

and outsiders are known to be desperate. One only needs to read a Beal flier to know that. It's the desperation that makes these artists authentic and real to us as listeners.'

One notable way in which Beal was represented as an outsider to the contemporary era was in a distance and opposition between Beal and the internet. Beal stated several times in interviews that he had no enthusiasm for the internet and social networking, and his being 'outside' the internet became a key theme in many articles. The second sentence in an early blogpost on Beal stated plainly, by way of introduction, 'Willis Earl Beal, 27, is a musician without a Myspace and hard to find online.'⁶¹ 'Don't expect to find him tweeting any time soon,' wrote one journalist, 'he has derided the Internet as soul destroying.'⁶² A consequence of Beal's shunning of the internet was that he used hand-made flyers. The press release published by XL Recordings, written by the same journalist who had written the *Chicago Reader* piece, begins 'Willis Earl Beal isn't an easy person to find. He isn't on Facebook and never had a MySpace page. No Twitter account, nothing on SoundCloud, not a single BandCamp page with his name attached to it. All I had to guide me was a curious flyer I found.' Mike Diver begins his review by positioning Beal outside of modernity, a component of which is 'social media':

A young man with an old soul, Willis Earl Beal has little place in 2012. He isn't one for travelling without moving. Social media exchanges are an alien concept; his stories are born from first-hand encounters spread across the United States.⁶³

As an authentic outsider 'in 2012,' Beal does not just reject the pop mainstream musically, but also the normative modes of technological promotion

⁶¹ Metea 2011.

⁶² O'Meara 2012.

⁶³ Diver 2012.

and distribution offered by internet, with its ubiquitous discourse. Rejecting the internet would be a serious impairment to any musician's career in 2012, but Beal's music was special and determined enough to reach listeners anyway. His position outside the internet is underscored by the necessity of reaching him through more traditional modes of communication, of course - telephones and the postal service, cast in the digital age as comparatively more personal, intimate, 'firsthand' - first-person - methods which parallel the artist's adoption of magnetic tape, soul and blues.

Despite the fascination with Beal as an outsider, there is ample evidence to suggest that Beal was not the uninfluenced ('untouched') cultural outsider he was often understood to be. As the above *Pitchfork* quote showed, Beal was familiar with musicians often associated with the trope of the outsider, expressing his admiration for Tom Waits and Jandek, the poet Charles Bukowski (whose work he read out before each live performance) and awareness of Daniel Johnston and BJ Snowden (who Chusid had dedicated a chapter to in *Songs in the Key of Z*).⁶⁴ Both versions of *Acousmatic Sorcery* came with a booklet of drawings and text by Beal, entitled *Principles of a Protagonist*, which includes a striking number of references to musicians and artists. Figures from counterculture and indie culture such as Tom Waits, David Lynch, Bob Dylan, Zooey Deschanel, Vincent Gallo, John Lurie, Charles Bukowski and Harry Dean Stanton appear, and there are even specific references to indie films and classical music.⁶⁵ Beal's art and writing reveal his extensive fluency in and relation to indie culture, allowing him to adopt the categories 'outsider' and 'avant-garde' (as he would label drawings he made more quickly)⁶⁶ self-consciously, as a strategy for understanding and representing the distance from ('mainstream')

⁶⁴ Greene 2012.

⁶⁵ Beal 2012, 3, 15, 14.

⁶⁶ Greene 2012.

technocracy he must have perceived in himself. Unsurprisingly, then, when asked in *Found* about posting the flyers, Beal said 'Did I have a sense of irony about it? Yes. I'm aware of its eccentric aspects. But it was also a sincere and very honest effort to reach out and find a nice, pretty girl.'⁶⁷ Similarly, he tells Lester that 'I only make avant-garde music because that's all I can do right now.'⁶⁸

Nor was Beal a social outsider, having connected with like-minded fans of indie culture in Albuquerque and Chicago.⁶⁹ One source claims that Beal even acted in an independent film.⁷⁰ Only a few sources mention Beal's playing in the band the Ghostones, and even then, only in passing. The preference was for Beal as an individual, it being more in keeping with his image as an 'outsider.'

Beal's (Financial, Technocratic) Poverty

One of the key elements in Beal's outsider status was his poverty, a general state seen to manifest in terms of finances and in technology and musical ability: a technocratic poverty. His financial disadvantages at the time of recording *Acousmatic Sorcery* are regularly alluded to, bundled together with his homelessness and menial jobs. In fact, the importance of Beal's homelessness to the discourse around him might explain the relative lack of otherwise typical characterisations of his music as 'home-recorded,' 'home-made,' 'bedroom' or 'garage.' Descriptions of Beal's equipment are otherwise typical of lo-fi discourse since the 1980s, however, in being regularly qualified as technically and financially impoverished. His tape recorder is 'cheap' and, despite having four-track capabilities, is described as a 'karaoke machine.'⁷¹ His microphone is

⁶⁷ Beal, quoted in Rothbart 2009, 49.

⁶⁸ Lester 2012b.

⁶⁹ Greene 2012.

⁷⁰ Kupillas 2012.

⁷¹ Diver 2012.

variously a '\$20 microphone,'⁷² a '25 dollar microphone'⁷³ and a '\$40 Radio Shack microphone.'⁷⁴ In reference to Beal's struggle to distribute his music: 'Problem is, that would've cost him \$100, and Beal is essentially unemployed—in early June he quit a job at FedEx, which paid \$130 a week, after less than two months.'⁷⁵

The greater importance of Beal's poverty for the discourse around him seems to lie, as it did in Daniel Johnston's reception, in a struggle to be creative and expressive in such impoverished circumstances. Like Johnston, Beal's struggle is represented both sonically and in the activities of self-promotion in his backstory that see him stretching or breaking social etiquette in his confidence, just as he records his lo-fi music in spite of conventional taste. In the *Chicago Reader* article, Galil reproduced this narrative succinctly and in terms that are strikingly comparable to David Ciaffardini's extended descriptions of Johnston in 1987 (see Chapter 4).⁷⁶

Beal can put together a hell of a tune from spare parts, and the rough edges in his recordings—off-the-beat drumming, accidentally overdriven vocals, out-of-tune guitar chords—just make him sound more earnest. He so badly wants to express himself that he'll push right up against his limitations—and sometimes ignore them entirely.⁷⁷

Discourse on Beal's Music

All these narratives of Beal were reflected in descriptions of his music. One of epithets applied to it most frequently (especially to his vocals), more common even than 'outsider,' is 'soulful' and 'soul.' This term denotes a particular singing style as well as evoking a long tradition of African-American music, notions of

⁷² Hyden 2012.

⁷³ Metea 2011. Unlike the others, this quotation comes from Beal himself.

⁷⁴ Galil 2011.

⁷⁵ Galil 2011.

⁷⁶ Ciaffardini 1987.

⁷⁷ Galil 2011.

expressivity and intimacy, and even a religious idea, and encapsulates the emotional intensity many commentators felt lay in his music. 'Lo-fi' and 'low-fi' are similarly frequent, as are typical lo-fi aesthetic narratives (for example, 'the sound is far too personal to be described so simply, an effect which is heightened by the hiss of white noise and the pitch-waver of damaged cassette tape').⁷⁸ Often 'lo-fi' appears in extreme terms: 'there's lo-fi, and then there's this album',⁷⁹ or as one headline announced, 'No-Fi Outsider Brings Ramshackle Blues Into Your Earholes.'⁸⁰ It is indicative of the increased acceptance of lo-fi, and especially the wide understanding of it as an index of authenticity, that few commentators characterised it as undesirable.⁸¹

Although the political atmosphere of the early 2010s discouraged invocations of the 'primitive,' it does appear nevertheless - typically with somewhat fewer racial connotations ('he adopts a primitive form of rap')⁸² though in one case it recalls Barry Hansens' early 60s commentary on blues records (see Chapter 2): 'a life on the margins like the primitive blues singer Willis Earl Beal.'⁸³ One reviewer describes *Acousmatic Sorcery* as 'a crazy clutter of styles from backwoods America'⁸⁴ - the same place Daniel Johnston was seen as coming from.

As with Jandek, Johnston and Sebadoh, Beal's recordings were heard as musically emotionally 'raw.'⁸⁵ In one case, some of Beal's 'home-recorded songs... were so naked and raw they sounded as though they were ripped

⁷⁸ STATS 2011.

⁷⁹ Gardner 2012.

⁸⁰ Hopper 2012.

⁸¹ Excepting Hann 2012.

⁸² Barden 2012.

⁸³ Hodgkinson 2012.

⁸⁴ Gillespie 2012.

⁸⁵ Even 'undercooked' - Petrusich 2012.

screaming from the centre of his being.⁸⁶ Another writer on the emotionality of Beal's recordings brings together many different metaphors - archaism, outsider status - common to the discourse:

[Beal's] music... is perfect at being itself. It seems to have its own little backwards timeline, its own pocket of existence. Rough-cut, distant, gentle, it speaks to you as though it were a friend on the end of a phone line; it may not sound crystal clear but it speaks directly to you, in a voice that trembles with honesty.⁸⁷

Note the connection made between Beal's recordings and his offer to sing over the phone, the former aptly reflecting the poor sound quality yet implied intimacy and authentic (first-)personal connection of a telephone line. As another writer observes, 'part of the beauty of this Chicagoan's extraordinary avant-blues songs is that they sound like they were recorded down phone lines.'⁸⁸ Such descriptions neatly conflate the sonic character of Beal's music with his position as a outsider who forges a direct and archaic personal connection with the listener.

Challenging Beal's Image

As a result of Beal's outsider image and backstory, his authenticity was frequently emphasised. He was called 'nothing but real,'⁸⁹ his was a 'talent of undoubted authenticity,'⁹⁰ and one headline even began 'Bullshit-free Willis Earl Beal' (continuing 'has one of hell of a backstory').⁹¹ Significantly, one source fond of 'Beal's nostalgic aura' conflated his authenticity with his archaism while hinting at his outsider status, asserting that 'like all authentic art [Beal's] music exists

⁸⁶ O'Meara 2012.

⁸⁷ Cliff 2012.

⁸⁸ Hoby 2012.

⁸⁹ Shane 2012.

⁹⁰ Davidson 2012.

⁹¹ Usinger 2012.

outside of time.⁹² Sometimes Beal's music simply 'sounds' authentic: *Acousmatic Sorcery* was 'one of the most thrillingly uncompromising and authentic-sounding records of the year.'⁹³

The emergence of Beal's *X-Factor* bootcamp video was seen by some as undermining this authenticity. Responses were sarcastic: 'obviously, this is XL's secret success recipe: mining the early rounds of singing competition shows,⁹⁴ and 'and to think, Beal could've been right up there with the likes of Kelly Clarkson and Clay Aiken.'⁹⁵ One post in particular found Beal's outsider image absurd and disingenuous as a result:

His bootcamp tape shows a more media-savvy side to the allegedly lo-fi guy who shuns email, drums with his hands and records on a piece of coal – and whose hand-drawn YouTube 'videos' still promise viewers a song if you call him up (not anymore, bitches: we tried – and his answerphone is as full as his future is full of media weirdos like us, desperate for some sort of oddball RL Burnside experience and refresher course in bluesy authenticity).

However, the swampy Delta associations and favoured press image of a young Beal riding around evocatively in a dustbowl in a dirty shirt are not really sticking quite as well as his pr machine would've hoped to the flat-topped, Rayban-sporting, Threadless-t-shirted Chicago urbanite and yes, X Factor wannabe.

If you want to make your own mind up about the Emperor's New Blues, try to catch him in London this week.⁹⁶

Here, Beal's *X-Factor* appearance is the pretext for peeling away his and his commercial partners' claims to cultural value and validity entirely. His lo-fi equipment becomes a ridiculous caricature ('a piece of coal'), his promise to sing songs over the phone is no longer honoured, and even his 'blues' is a charade.

⁹² Black 2012.

⁹³ Usinger 2012.

⁹⁴ Battan 2012.

⁹⁵ Coplan 2012.

⁹⁶ *Juke* 2012.

Instead of 'bluesy authenticity' there is only the 'PR machine' surrounding a 'Chicago urbanite.'

Yet the *X Factor* appearance was one element of a broader pattern in which the authenticating image of Beal was challenged. Another element that raised questions was the 'outsider' epithet: some noted that it was Beal who was calling himself an outsider, one source called him a 'so-called "outsider artist"'⁹⁷ and some rejected that categorisation entirely. Using ironic oxymorons in describing Beal's music, Lester called it 'scrupulously untutored' and 'strategically unvarnished.'⁹⁸ Introducing Beal as 'part soul singer, part outsider-art curiosity,' the *New York Times*'s article on Beal observed in its opening sentence that that 'the constructedness of Mr. Beal's world, whether by design or happenstance, is extremely tough to ignore.'⁹⁹

Often it was the perceived weight of enthusiasm for his authentic image and backstory that triggered a commentator's suspicions, along the lines of earlier criticisms of bad listeners - now however, the bad listeners were not unready but too ready to accept a challenging, primitive realism. Steven Hyden's review begins by calling Beal 'a singer-songwriter with a media-friendly backstory that's something of a Rorschach test,' and continues:

Beal has left himself open to all the old, tiresome authenticity questions: Sure, he's a weirdo, but is he weird enough? Is *Acousmatic Sorcery* his coming-out party, or a sign that Beal as an underground phenomenon is over? Is it possible to hear these songs through the din of so much chatter deriving from his press packet?¹⁰⁰

Hyden noted the 'curated' nature of Beal's presentation, doubting that he 'fits comfortably with the image the media (with the artist's assistance, admittedly) has

⁹⁷ *Twenty Four Bit* 2012.

⁹⁸ Lester 2012a.

⁹⁹ Caramanica 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Hyden 2012.

created for [him]. At least that's the impression given by the heavily curated version of Beal's music presented on *Acousmatic*.¹⁰¹ Hyden rejects Beal's outsider image: 'Beal might self-identify as an "outsider artist," but he's actually a fairly conventional budding star.'¹⁰¹

Occasionally, without questioning Beal's validity directly, the topic of authenticity was rejected as irrelevant or tiresome. For example, Richard Trapunski wrote: 'often lost in the tired authenticity discussion... is the fact, *all art is performative*. The critical criteria shouldn't concern whether it's authentic, but whether it's effective. And Beal's live show was definitely effective.'¹⁰² Along similar lines, Amanda Petrusich wrote a detailed appraisal of the ironies and performativity of Beal's image. She began, 'The Willis Earl Beal myth... feels like it was dreamed up by some particularly wily P.R. firm.' Later: 'when he starts hollering, "My lawd!" at the end of "Take Me Away," it feels disingenuous if not fully preposterous – a little joke, maybe, about what we expect from him (frenzy, rage, "soul").' Towards the end, Petrusich finds that Beal is 'a peculiar player, sure, but ultimately his categorisation (both self- and outwardly imposed) as "other" feels more socio-cultural than musical.'¹⁰³

In his two pieces for the Toronto magazine *Now*, Trapunski also explored the potential inauthenticity of Beal. He began a feature on the artist by calling his 'bio' 'the kind... that sounds too good to be true,' featuring 'the kind of mythology bands pay PR firms big money to construct, but by all accounts the story checks out.' Like Greene's *GQ* article and Kupillas's *Liberator* article - in which Beal says 'already my story has been embellished, and I didn't do it'¹⁰⁴ - Trapunski used quotes from Beal himself that undermine or resist the lo-fi image:

¹⁰¹ Hyden 2012.

¹⁰² Trapunski 2012b.

¹⁰³ Petrusich 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Kupillas 2012.

"Now that it's actually out, I feel like they've done a hell of a job marketing [*Acousmatic Sorcery*] and getting it out there, and there are people really embracing the lo-fi sound," [Beal] says. "But I never wanted to be a lo-fi musician or a lo-fi singer or a lo-fi anything. I was just doing it that way because I was poor and couldn't afford to do it any other way."

Beal later asserts: 'You know what? I'm no more an outsider musician than Britney Spears.'¹⁰⁵ In his review of Beal's live show, Trapunski noted that 'the assumption seems to be that Willis Earl Beal has earned his legitimacy by creating a minor masterpiece away from the corrupting hand of industry bullshit.' Of the image of Beal onstage, he observes, 'and if that seems a bit *too* perfect, that's because it kind of was.'¹⁰⁶

The reception of Willis Earl Beal demonstrates that by early 2012, lo-fi aesthetics and the outsider-to-technocracy narratives often accompanying it had become so well established in the imagination of popular music discourse that the singer could be widely embraced on its terms. Unlike when Beal's models Jandek and Johnston were discussed in the 1980s, few commentators heard - or admitted to hearing - Beal as lacking in value due to his outsider status. It was obvious how Beal the outsider was to be interpreted: a dramatic change from the pop music industry's status quo, archaic, personal, authentic. His recordings bore this out sonically, stylistically and technically, as did his backstory, especially when presented in a certain way. XL had curated Beal so as to better correspond to this interpretation. Yet for many commentators this aesthetic image of Beal was too obvious or too mediated, and in the process of questioning Beal's image, the entire notion of such authenticity - already at least eighty years old, as Lead Belly's reception indicates - was cast in doubt. In Beal's reception lo-fi aesthetics

¹⁰⁵ Trapunski 2012a.

¹⁰⁶ Trapunski 2012b.

had come closest to a universal mode of appreciation than it had ever been - but in doing so it had, for some, crossed into excess.

Conclusion: 'Next Door to Someone Far Away'

In Chapter 1, I noted that low fidelity was not the natural consequence of recording popular music as an amateur at home, but a particular, more exclusive aesthetic construction, 'lo-fi.' I defined this lo-fi aesthetics as '*a positive appreciation of what are perceived and/or considered normatively interpreted as imperfections in a recording, with particular emphasis on imperfections in the recording technology itself*' and saw it as an inverse relation to the technocratic values perceived in industrial-commercial pop. This anti-technocratic aesthetics did not transcend a dichotomy of hi-fi and lo-fi - lo-fi had generally been regarded negatively before the early 1980s - but shifted the privileged term. Nor did it transcend technocracy itself. Rather, the music which lo-fi aesthetics favoured was at a distance from typical technocratic values, its technocracy impaired or impeded, putting it on technocracy's lowermost threshold. Lo-fi, then, was not a lack of technocratic mediation, but a mediation by signifiers of relative distance from technocracy, or lo-fi effects.

Chapter 2 charted some precursors to lo-fi aesthetics' employment of anti-technocratic rhetoric in earlier aesthetic traditions of distance from modern technocracy: the Romanticism, realism, primitivism and archaism surrounding nineteenth-century literature and music, and present in twentieth-century folk revivals, countercultural rock and independent music. But while technical imperfections could index authenticity or be explained as benefits, an appreciation for phonographic imperfections was rare. In the 1980s, even after punk rock, the anti-technocratic atmosphere with which lo-fi is usually associated was far from clear, as we saw in Chapter 3. Punk favoured 'rawness' and a disrespect for technocratic convention, but performance imperfections and phonographic imperfections ran the risk of compromising the all-important

intensity of the music. Cassette culture presented itself as a new, democratic, diverse and even avant-garde technocracy, both discouraging participants in its discourse from regarding cassette production as inferior and educating them as to how to improve recordings. Yet lo-fi aesthetics was finding acceptance, particularly in certain contexts where imperfections were expected, tolerated and even appreciated, such as live recordings and the 'garage.'

As we saw in Chapter 4, lo-fi aesthetics in the 1980s becomes particularly clear in the reception of two significant artists in independent music - Jandek and Daniel Johnston. These two highly praised artists were considered the quintessence of non-technocratic authenticity, and were positioned as struggling against impairments and impediments - lo-fi effects and culture at large - that the good listener would overcome. While received on similar terms of authenticity, Beat Happening, in Chapter 5, were regarded as less dramatic, with their appeal based in childlike qualities, minimalism and kitsch. Their reception also saw the idea that lo-fi could be more than a first-person authenticity, becoming a concept or performance.

In the 1990s (Chapter 6) lo-fi emerged as a category within indie music-making and was celebrated extensively, frequently as the expression of a new 'slacker' generation. The primitivism of the 1980s was largely exchanged for a knowing refusal of commercialism, and bands exchanged impairments for obfuscations and lackadaisical cool, slacking off from technocracy. By the late 2000s (Chapter 7), lo-fi aesthetics had changed in character. Less concerned with the anti-commercial resonance of lo-fi, it now focused on archaism in media and musical idiom. More intense - often sublime - and considered more aesthetically important than ever, this media's phonographic imperfections framed and problematised the music, suggesting metaphors of historicising

obfuscation - ghostliness, memory and decay. In 2012, lo-fi aesthetics and the figure of the outsider to musical technocracy had become familiar enough that an album of imperfect recordings by Willis Earl Beal was released on a major indie label and widely praised (Chapter 8). However, this label had intervened in the presentation of Beal's image, curating him. So complete was Beal's lo-fi presentation, in fact, that certain elements in the discourse on him began to question his authenticity, calling him 'allegedly lo-fi.'

The resurgence of lo-fi aesthetics that began with Ariel Pink's *The Doldrums*¹ and in many ways culminated in Willis Earl Beal's *Acousmatic Sorcery* has in the past few years diminished into a fortunate historical end-point for this thesis. Many of the most prominent lo-fi artists are no longer considered such: Pink released a more conventionally professional album, *Before Today*, in 2010; Beal released the studio-recorded *Nobody Knows* in 2013; and since late 2011 James Ferraro, now one of the most well-known figures in his discourse, has made digital recordings that are typically received as satirical explorations of modernity¹ - *Mellow Gold*-like capitulations to digital-age garbage and detritus that abandon analogue's particular phonographic imperfections. One of the labels most associated with hypnagogic pop, Olde English Spelling Bee, and one of the websites most active in promoting archaic lo-fi, *Altered Zones*, both became defunct in 2011.² Throughout this discourse, interest in hauntology, hypnagogic pop and chillwave has started giving way to an interest in hi-tech productions and representations of the internet age. On websites such as *DIS*, *Dummy* and *Electronic Beats*,³ a new fascination with technocracy and the strangely primitive, sometimes post-human subjects it produces, has supplanted the archaism of the 2000s.

¹ See e.g. Soderberg 2011.

² *Altered Zones* 2011b.

³ *DIS Magazine* 2014, *Dummy* 2014, *Electronic Beats* 2014.

Certainly, technological advances continue to undermine lo-fi's conflation of amateur musicians, home-recording and a certain late-twentieth-century class of (analogue) lo-fi effects. In 2014, the typical underground-music dilettante uses digital samples and software, and uploads her/his music to streaming platforms like Bandcamp or SoundCloud. As we began to see in the suspicion levelled at the too-good-to-be-true Willis Earl Beal, the technocultural contexts in which lo-fi aesthetics makes sense and matters, and the narratives that underpin them, are less and less sustainable and - what is perhaps worse - less a source of cultural capital in a milieu where everyone understands that raw sounds are better.

This thesis hopes to have made clear a particular span of lo-fi aesthetics that stretches backwards from what prompted this research, the twenty-first-century interest in analogue lo-fi effects, to when phonographic imperfections began to fall within the early 1980s interest in primitivism, and beyond to the rhetorics of punk and folk revivals. But lo-fi aesthetics' interest in recording imperfection is potentially just one strand in a much broader, long-standing aesthetic movement based in Romanticism and its negative reactions to industrialised culture, one that continues today. Primitivism appears to be a major theme in twentieth- and twenty-first century popular music aesthetics, and in this thesis I hope to have suggested it as the broader context lying behind the child-like qualities, amateurism and anti-commercial realism that previous studies had noted in indie and lo-fi. In turn, lo-fi is just one manifestation of a tradition of primitivist aesthetics touched upon in Chapter 2, expressed in the proto-punk criticism of Lester Bangs, in 1960s counterculture and folk, and in the pre-war reception of jazz and folk. Further understanding and critique - particularly in terms of race and class - of this milieu will be needed as scholarship of countercultural and indie popular musics proceeds.

One study of indie history and aesthetics to have carefully considered the role of identity is Bannister's *White Boys, White Noise*. As well as race, Bannister gives an account of indie's gender expression and exclusion. However, a better understanding of gender in lo-fi, and, especially, the reception of female lo-fi artists would be of prime importance in future studies involving the subject. Alongside Bannister, Grajeda suggests that lo-fi represented a 'feminisation of rock' and that 'lo-fi itself has been gendered feminine.'⁴ There is some evidence to support this,⁵ but such a gendering becomes more complex where lo-fi is considered a heroic, challenging struggle - in other words, a masculine capacity. It is hardly a feminisation of rock when, for example, a reviewer writes, 'oh yeah, you're probably too much of a fag to dare but you can buy a box of 25 Jandek records from Corwood for a measly \$50.'⁶ But what is the place of women and femininity in lo-fi? How does the significance of domestic space - the bedroom, particularly - influence the reception of female artists? Are female artists distanced, positioned on the threshold, do they struggle, and if so how? Is there an overlap between the impairments and impediments of lo-fi aesthetics and patriarchal conceptions of femininity as a regression from masculinity? In particular, a fanzine discourse on Liz Phair's unofficial *Girlysound* cassettes should be located in order to answer such questions. This and further evidence of the relationship between women and lo-fi almost certainly exists in the feminist punk or 'riot grrrrl' discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, which lies beyond the canonically understood locus of lo-fi.

Indeed, further research on lo-fi must entail venturing beyond its canon and beyond discursive use of the term 'lo-fi' itself. As a preliminary investigation into lo-fi itself, this study pursued a compromise between, on the one hand,

⁴ Grajeda 2002, 364.

⁵ E.g. as we saw in Chapter 6, lo-fi characterised as 'the soft rock of punk' - Powers 1996.

⁶ Johnson 1985b.

phonographic imperfection and synonyms of 'lo-fi,' and on the other, the category of lo-fi that emerged in the 1990s. A wider search would incorporate more of cassette culture, punk, noise and glitch. In particular, the geography of lo-fi aesthetics outside the lo-fi canon ought to be better understood. We have seen that lo-fi almost always equates to 'backwoods' rurality, with distances from technocracy equating to physical distances from urban centres. This distance became international in some cases of artists whose small reception in the US was left out of this study, such as Cleaners from Venus (from the UK) and Chris Knox and his band Tall Dwarves (from New Zealand).⁷ But what explains the fact that lo-fi was a primarily US-led phenomenon? And what, if any, lo-fi aesthetics developed in other parts of the more economically developed world that had started to use home-recording technology? Did recording imperfections signify value in ways unique to continental Europe, Ireland, East Asia and Australia, and if so how?⁸ Moreover, were or are cassettes considered 'lo-fi' in places like Africa, India and South America?

Further study might also seek to address music-making beyond lo-fi's construction of amateurs in relation to and as distant from technocracy. This thesis has uncovered ample evidence for lo-fi aesthetics, but what of lo-fi poetics? How did or do recording musicians see themselves in relation to technocratic norms, how do they situate and understand any lack of technique or technology that they perceive in themselves, and how do they draw on or reject lo-fi narratives in the process? Is lo-fi experienced as a liberation or an expectation? Such research might take a more sociological or ethnomusicological approach, and in the same way the discipline of anthropology rejected its earlier

⁷ See Bradberry 1988; Unterberger 1998, 303-308 on Martin Newell and Cleaners from Venus. See McKessar 1989; Unterberger 1998, 309-311 and 314-319 on Chris Knox, Tall Dwarves and their label Flying Nun.

⁸ Bannister 2006b is particularly detailed on indie and even lo-fi aesthetics in New Zealand during the 1980s.

primitivist assumptions, it would not view amateur music-making merely within the context of an inferiority to certain technocratic norms. It might begin with Ruth Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians* and Mark Katz's highly informative recent essay on the role of technology, 'The Amateur in the Age of Mechanical Music.'⁹

As far as those hidden musicians are concerned, this study has not offered a celebration or vindication of lo-fi aesthetics, but the genealogy of a particular aesthetic construction that represents at best a flawed, narrow realist dogma and rhetoric of authenticity, and at worst a quasi-colonialist fetishising of certain forms of disempowerment in musicians which itself further disempowers those musicians. In such a context, venturing a lo-fi aesthetics of my own to any significant degree - for example, a musical analysis of how, with popular music discourse put to one side, 'imperfections' in a particular track generate a special appeal - would have been unsustainable and undesirable. To investigate musical texts themselves on lo-fi's relational terms of imperfection would not have been far off the primitivism of presenting African art as appealingly crude; yet without assuming those relations, lo-fi itself would no longer have been under analysis. In its stead, however, a rich discourse has been presented, illuminating perspectives within popular music aesthetics and culture that are deeply embedded enough to span several generations.

In it, we see that lo-fi aesthetics was not simply the desire for a lack of mediation that it is often claimed to be, but a fascination with traversing social, cultural, historical and, above all, technocratic distances, such that those distances were a constant source of fascination. Lo-fi is a garbled communication from a distant and eccentric land, all the more exciting for having come so close to home through the apparent realism of its recording context ('Jandek lives next

⁹ Katz 2012.

door to someone far away').¹⁰ In some cases, these communications came from raw, primitive wild men (Lead Belly, blues artists, Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer, Captain Beefheart, Hasil Adkins, Jandek, Daniel Johnston, Willis Earl Beal). In other cases they came from less socio-culturally dramatic losers just fighting their corner against modern technocratic alienation in their own shambolic way (The Velvet Underground, Beat Happening, Pavement, Sebadoh, Guided By Voices, Beck). And in other cases they offered dwindling, pathos-laden voices from the past (Roscoe Halcomb and the musicians on *Mountain Music of Kentucky*, Will Oldham, The Caretaker, William Basinski, Ariel Pink). Yet most musicians were considered to have something of all three types.

The creativity of these musicians and the music they produced was frequently described as impeded and impaired. The voices of folk singers, Daniel Johnston and Will Oldham were coarse and, particularly, cracked - even considered to be in a kind of jeopardy. Hasil Adkins' rural speech was reproduced using a styrofoam cup as an oral obstruction. Jandek was described as if he was disabled or mentally ill, and Daniel Johnston's mind was portrayed as beset by demons, and his art by bad listeners. Hiss and distortion obfuscated the music of the Velvet Underground, Pavement, Ariel Pink and the musicians of hypnagogic pop. Lo-fi recordings of all kinds were covered in and even constructed from technocracy's waste material - dirt, dust, garbage, kitsch - that was made sacred or sublime by the artists' impaired and impeded creativity.

All of these musicians - and their listeners - struggled heroically against the norms and logics of technocracy, be that the staid, overly slick production perceived in commercial pop, or the inexorable forward arrow of cultural modernity, taste, and even material entropy itself. Daniel Johnston, represented

¹⁰ Art Black, review of *Telegraph Melts* (Corwood LP), by Jandek, *Away From the Pulsebeat*, Winter 1987, quoted on *Guide to Jandek* website (<http://tissue.net/jandek/discog.html>, accessed July 26, 2013).

as a boxer, struggled against his demons and bad listeners. Johnston and Beat Happening struggled to be children in grown-up bodies, and against the amateurism that hampered their expression. Pavement, Sebadoh and Beck struggled against the commodifications of grunge and alternative rock. The music at the centre of sublime degrees of lo-fi effects in the 2000s struggled to exist and be remembered against a crumbling medium. Willis Earl Beal struggled through his challenging backstory to be heard, and was pitted against the technocracy of internet. This struggle, sometimes a marginal, minimal victory, sometimes a defeat, sometimes a stalemate, put lo-fi artists and their music on a sonic, ontological and cultural threshold.

Locating this threshold - finding meaning triumphantly intact at the very edge of chaos, disorder, madness, lethargy, entropy - was the uncommon privilege of the good listener and became a source of considerable cultural capital, even within the milieu of indie. For those who could persevere through the imperfections, routinely understood as imperfections, lo-fi represented the ultimate in authenticity and a quintessence of popular musical expression. What powerful aesthetic institutions were perceived to disdain as low quality - sonically, technologically, technically, culturally - was given the highest value.

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