



# RESONANCES

## NOISE AND CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Edited by Michael Goddard  
Benjamin Halligan and  
Nicola Spelman

# Resonances



# Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music

EDITED BY

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# Introduction

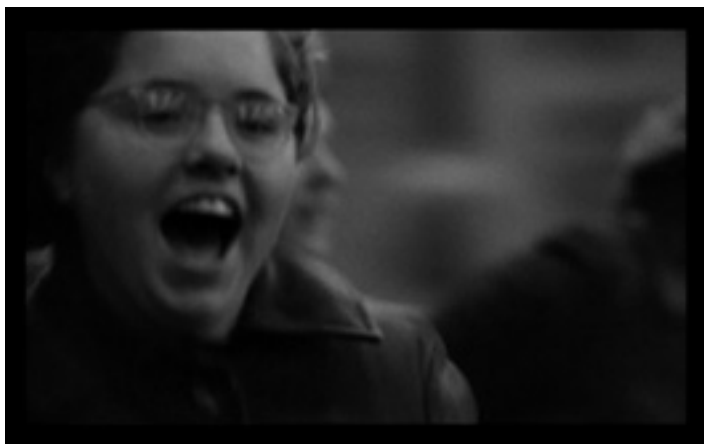
*Michael Goddard, Benjamin Halligan and  
Nicola Spelman*

Contemporary histories of popular Western musics may be more usefully read as a series of debates concerning what, sonically and experientially, actually constitutes music in the commonly understood way, and what then constitutes, or can be termed as, and typically dismissed as, non-music. Such debates are class-ridden, evidence racial prejudices and profiling, continually undermine traditional musicological assumptions, radically problematize the commercial framings of music, mark all pivotal shifts in music across at least one hundred years, relentlessly advance the ‘death of the author’, are called upon to define time, place and national identity, and outmanoeuvre demarcations of high art and low culture. Answers provided have formed the methodological foundations of the conservatoire as well as journalistic and academic approaches to music, and now pull in their wake a judicial apparatus of ownership, censorship and reparations.

Technologies have been calibrated to answers provided too: reproductions of sound that invariably brag about ‘noise reduction’. Noise, to music, is typically byproduct, accident, the unwanted, the unpleasant. And yet noise is inevitable and imminent to music: that inexorable presence that mixers and sound engineers do their best to exorcize, that gig-goers reflexively block out, plugging fingers in ears, when it takes the form of feedback. The exception that proves the rule in terms of contemporary music is folk: ‘natural’ sounds and pre-modern instruments (and, often, affectations) as a respite from the noise of the real or urban world and the noise of the musics that the real or urban world taints – a kind of bucolic, aristocratic asceticism, and one that implicitly casts noise as detrimental to musical, and human, interactions.

Noise, however, cannot just be confined to the idea of music performed or reproduced. In recent times, the watershed moment in the above process could be said to be a case of noise meeting noise: Beatlemania as both the





*Exit, pursued by fans; stills from A Hard Day's Night (Richard Lester, 1964).*

sounds of the Fab Four in the mid-1960s (complete with crescendos of yelling-singing, 'naïve' drumming, the hardness of the sound of the guitar) and the sounds of their screaming audiences.

The cacophony that resulted baffled cultural commentators and alarmed moral guardians: respectively – where was the experience of the music that spoke to so many, when it was drowned out by the sounds of hysteria? and where were the old proprieties of the calm or passive enjoyment of popular culture? The questions raised here are directly articulated by noise theorist-activist Mattin, writing in 2009 in respect to the power relations that are established and nurtured by live music, this 'prime site of the spectacle'

[...] where production and consumption are enacted at the level of experience. What is passivity? What is activity? Is the distinction that clear? What would it require to emancipate oneself from the situation and the roles that we accept when we enter such a space? How are social spaces produced in a given situation? What are the accepted conventions? Can we challenge them? Can we change them? Can we dare together by abandoning old conventions? (Mattin, 2011, n.p. ['Prologue to Unconstituted Praxis'])

The progressive cultural nature of the phenomenon of Beatlemania is still in advance of current thinking, and still represents a sonic-aesthetic assault on conceptions of art. To whisper or cough or sneeze in a classical concert or during a performance of a play, or have your mobile phone inopportunely ring or buzz or bleep, is taken as a form of disrespect to a collective established on – to employ Gerard Manley Hopkins's description – 'elected silence'. As Halligan has argued elsewhere (2009), the 'elected' is merely imposed, prompted by faltering notions of worthy art forms for institutions that have been, *pace* neoliberal business practices, 'hollowed out'. When the art movements of the twentieth century have attempted to break with the meek compliance of establishment art, and the institutions that form parasitical relationships to the practices and production of art, they have almost always initially sought to do away with the very rigidity of modes of acceptance or experience of that art. Such modes exist in dress and behavioural codes and, more insidiously, in a respect to be evidenced in apparent concentration and silence. The bodily paralysis that is required – not to cough or sneeze, to decline from talk, indeed not to slouch or sleep – is akin to Wilhelm Reich's notion of 'body armour': an unnatural, self-imposed immobilization of muscles, resulting in a repression of emotions and of thought. To 'twist and shout', in this context, represents a breaking of the armour, and a freeing of emotions, and allowing for communication between the music and the self. The enemy of music of progressive worth, then, is not a measure of noise, but of the acceptance of silence.

From these perspectives, it is clear why noise remains a pejorative term in two chief senses. First, noise as a negative aesthetic judgement, centred on that thing which is other than the authentic, organic creation of music. And, secondly, noise as the unwanted element for studio technicians, the evidence of the failings of technology, of dust on the tapehead, of the deterioration of reproductions, as denoting the technological limitations of yesteryear (and so in need of ‘cleaning’ for remastered reissues of albums). One could go further: noise is what generates complaints, and has become the basis for legislation (noise abatement, noise pollution); it has been claimed as one of the ills of contemporary urban existence, blamed for a variety of physical and mental disorders, and even applied for the purposes of torture. Philosophically, noise seems to stand for a lack of aesthetic grace, to be against enjoyment or pleasure, to alienate or distract rather than enrapture; it penetrates the body rather than transports the listener ‘out of the body’. Enthusiasts of noise (particularly of the Second Summer of Love of 1989) tend to be termed ‘survivors’ now rather than seasoned connoisseurs. And yet the drones of psychedelia, the racket of garage rock and punk, the thudding of rave, the feedback of shoegaze and post-rock, the bombast of thrash and metal, the clatter of jungle and the stuttering of electronica, together with notable examples of avant-garde noise art, have all been inducted into the history of music, and recognized as key moments in its evolution. Postmodern theorizing about music lauds the DJ, the mixer or remixer, the very inauthenticity of sampling: the art ‘after’ the artist has vacated the artefact.

It is no exaggeration to say that it is the very opposite of melody and harmony – noise (dissonance, feedback, atmospherics and ambience, hiss and distortion), and the application and exploration of noise in and through music – that has overwhelmingly determined popular musics since at least the late 1960s. Indeed, as musicianship, musical virtuosity and prowess have faded from view, the sense of the indivisible totality of the noise of certain styles (most notably punk and post-punk, techno and rave) has become the primary point of reference. We tend to ask what it sounds like as much as, or rather than, who plays what, and when, and how. The enveloping experience of music determines popular music cultures, particularly those given over to gatherings, and to dance (or movement in general), rather than an appreciation of the sound of the bow, or plectrum, on the string. Sound is mixed for such environments, graded to fill and meet space and the potential for echo, to mingle with rather than exclude the sound of the masses rather than, or as much as to, showcase musicianship.

Noise, as the ‘other’ of music, has always been a concern of avant-garde artists and those who seek to operate on the margins of music, or outside its boundaries. A number of case studies can be found in this volume, from *Metal Machine Music* to ‘noise rock’, from turntablism to noise protest, that detail such experiments and interventions. In privileging noise in this

manner – and inviting our contributors to consider music via noise – we hope, in the first instance, to assemble an overview of the noise foundations of contemporary popular music. We look to Mattin’s foundational question: ‘Can we use Noise as a form of praxis going beyond established audience/performer relationships?’ (Mattin, 2011, n.p. [‘Noise & Capitalism: Exhibition as Concert’]).<sup>1</sup> In the second instance, we seek to establish an expanded sense of sonic aesthetics, conducting close analyses of noise music texts to enable a more developed understanding of their technological, compositional and performance practices. Specifically, this involves an investigation of experimental and alternative modes of sonic composition: purposeful disorganization/indeterminacy, spontaneous noise, improvised noise, the roles of space and silence, of durational extremes, and the ways in which particular sound synthesis and signal processing techniques are appropriated and employed by noise artists in novel and unforeseen ways. Thirdly, we are able to encounter and, we hope, to an extent ‘recover’ those still *déclassé* forms of contemporary music which renounce artistic-subjective expression and the elevation of the individual – typically by replacing the human with the computer. In this regard, we look to instances where indeterminacy and improvisation are determined and motivated by noise. We examine how noise elements may be installed to purposefully subvert conventional composer-directed modes of composition and performance, and how noise scores raise pertinent questions in relation to issues of musical notation and interpretation.

But our shared remit is not ultimately a matter of formulating new meanings, coining new terms, or expanding the lexicon of critical writing. It became apparent, in editing these chapters, that noise *per se* refuses fixed identities – an ontological equivocation often couched in semiotic terms. The debate is then forced open, and becomes radically ambiguous – not in the sense of a mystification, or the failing to provide an answer, but in the sense of indeterminateness. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *Teorema*, which sought to address the revolutionary events of 1968 at the time of 1968 through the dramatization of the implosion of a bourgeois family, terminates at such a moment: the narrative is obscure, its stories unresolved, and the protagonist, in uncertain, volcanic surroundings, screams. Pasolini commented:

So there are new problems, and these will have to be solved by the members of the bourgeoisie themselves, not the workers or the opposition. We dissident bourgeois cannot solve these problems, and neither can the ‘natural’ bourgeois. That is why [*Teorema*] remains ‘suspended’; it ends up with a cry, and the very irrationality of this cry conveys the absence of an answer.

(quoted in Stack, 1969, 157–8)

*Teorema...* and *Porcile* [1969] are free, experimental films. They propose no outcome nor solutions. They are ‘poems in the form of a desperate cry’. (quoted in Moravia, Betti, Thovazzi *et al.*, 1989, 129)

The presence of noise seems to offer the potential to radically problematize or suspend the traditional machinations of finding meaning, or making meaning, in popular music, and in the social sphere. In convening an international conference to probe this idea further, we adopted as a name a fragment of speech found in an early track from the post-rock group Mogwai.<sup>2</sup> ‘Yes! I Am a Long Way from Home’ (from 1997’s *Young Team*) opens with a spoken description of the experience of the band live, delivered haltingly, and with some confusion. The music is described, counter-intuitively or as seemingly arising from non-native English, as ‘bigger than words and wider than pictures’. Noise, we maintained, offered the potential to transcend correct adjectives too, so as to feel a way towards an expanded understanding of the sonic: to be louder than song, quicker than harmony, nearer than mixing, harder than sound.

Such an expanded understanding has remained difficult to locate in academic disciplines related to music. Traditional musicology, as applied to much classical music, has historically tended toward a near-exclusive consideration of melody and harmony. At the same time, popular music studies, especially as practised in academe, has been overly reliant upon its given foundation of lyrical poetry, allied with ‘Eng Lit’, as the artistic-subjective expression of the singer-songwriter, and the concomitant glorification of the individual (failings which are especially apparent in ‘Dylanology’). And, while research emanating from the fields of popular and critical musicology has gone some way to redressing the balance, there still remains a general disparity with respect to the degree of detailed analysis ascribed to each musical parameter, as investigations of harmonic, melodic and rhythmic aspects still typically feature above more cursory explorations of sonic elements. So forms of music which privilege noise and rely upon high levels of sound manipulation continue to remain, to a significant extent, an unmapped territory in terms of contemporary musics.

By 2010, at the time of this conference, noise appeared to be a declining paradigm. Certainly there had been some key and relatively recent publications such as Douglas Kahn’s *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (2001), or Paul Hegarty’s *Noise/Music: A History* (2007), both following in the wake of Jacques Attali’s seminal *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985). And, at this point, many of the pioneering groups associated with noise-based popular musics discussed in this volume had met with wider acceptance and belated acclaim (the experience of seeing the reformed My Bloody Valentine had also prompted the convening of the conference), or stubbornly persisted, as with The Telescopes, in their sonic experimentation. And yet in other respects noise seemed to be increasingly



*Final moments of Teorema (Theorem, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1968).*

disavowed in the smooth era of virtual communications and digital media. Typically noise was treated as if it were a strictly analogue phenomenon, to be consigned to the trash heap of history along with discarded vinyl records and phonographs, cassette tapes, video cassettes and floppy discs. Part of this rejection of noise was not just a passive abandonment but an active rejection of its transgressive assumptions and claims. So, although Simon Reynolds entitled a retrospective collection of his journalism *Bring the Noise* (2007; the title was also a nod to Public Enemy), the volume constituted a spirited attack on noise, both as a paradigm and in the practice of noise music as a pseudo-transgression that no longer offends anyone. Such sentiments were echoed in Steven Goodman's *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (2010), which argues against the radicality of 'white noise' musics in favour of the bass-heavy dread of dub and dubstep, as well as in Ray Brassier's article 'Genre is Obsolete' (2009), that may as well have been entitled noise (music) is obsolete, were it not for a few exceptions made to the generic conformity of noise musics, and indeed Brassier's own collaboration with Mattin. A more promising sign was the then recently published *Noise and Capitalism* collection (Mattin and Iles, 2009), which situated noise practices politically beyond both the clichéd gestures of transgression and their equally clichéd critique, and in a profound relation with capitalism as both its co-opted product and immanent critique.

Since that time there has been a veritable flood of noise-related publications, falling into several distinct categories. One of these areas of research has been in relation to digital culture, and more specifically the phenomena of 'glitch' and the methodology of media archaeology. In terms of the former, the work of Rosa Menkman as glitch artist, curator and writer is a case in point, and one that has been taken up in a number of contexts.<sup>3</sup> Several recent books such as *Noise Channels: Glitch and Error in Digital Cultures* (Krapp, 2011) and *Error: Glitch, Noise and Jam in New Media Cultures* (Nunes, 2012) pursue these connections between noise and the digital via the concepts of glitch and error, showing that noise is hardly only an artefact of earlier, less perfect technologies and modes of communication. Indeed noise can be seen, in general, as a key concept of media archaeology, facilitating its non-linear histories of media, technologies and inventive practices. Other work on noise such as our own sister volume to *Resonances*, *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise* (2012), along with Hillel Schwartz's mammoth opus *Making Noise – From Babel to the Big Band and Beyond* (2011) and Greg Hainge's *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (2013) situate noise in cultural and philosophical contexts, showing how questions of noise go well beyond sonic phenomena to enter such fields as information theory, urban space, audiovisual practices and literature, to name but a few.

This expansion of noise ‘studies’ into multiple fields, while a timely riposte to its delimitation as a purely sonic and/or analogue phenomenon, does risk, however, a loss of focus on, or dispersal of the relation between, noise and music. The current volume aims to address this in the context of this expanded field of noise research, zeroing in on the specific relationships between a range of contemporary musics (post-classical, improvisatory, psychedelic, [post-]punk, industrial and noise music proper) and their respective deployments of noise, in order to extend some of the earlier work on noise and musics as well as to answer some of the critics who would seem to be arguing for the abandonment of noise as a useful paradigm for engaging with these musics.

Noise remains a lacuna in the vast majority of accounts of contemporary popular music, and in a critical exploration of noise lies the possibility of a new narrative – one that is wide-ranging (a continuum across numerous genres of music), connects the popular to the underground and avant-garde, posits the studio as a musical instrument, problematizes standards and assumptions about music and consumption/spectatorship, and prompts new critical and theoretical paradigms and approaches from those seeking to write about music. This edited collection addresses and traverses this untold story. It seeks to identify and analyse types of noise and noise-music, to understand noise as both applied and designed, and accidental and courted, to propose and test new theoretical frameworks for the discussion of noise, to highlight the way in which noise redefines and reshapes the relationship between the performer and audience, or artefact and appreciator, and to posit noise as an essential category in and for the writing about music.





PART ONE

Noise, Rock and  
Psychedelia



## CHAPTER ONE

# ‘Kick Out the Jams’: Creative Anarchy and Noise in 1960s Rock

*Sheila Whiteley*

Unity is princely violence, is tyrannical rule. Discord is popular violence, is freedom.<sup>1</sup> (Panizza, quoted in Jelavich, 1985, 62)

It is not insignificant that Panizza’s play ‘The Council of Love’ (1893) was revived in 1969 when a stage adaptation by Jean Bréjous was produced at the Théâtre de Paris. His challenge to the taboos surrounding religion and sex and his theory that genuine freedom is possible only at times of chaos and upheaval would appear apposite not only to the student revolution in Paris (May 1968)<sup>2</sup> but also to the extremes of noise that characterized certain genres of popular music associated with the 1960s counterculture. As I wrote in *The Space Between the Notes*:

Initially there appears to be an underlying tension between the political activism of the student New Left and the ‘Fuck the System’ bohemianism of the hippies and the yippies. At a deeper level, however, both extremes were united in their attack on the traditional institutions that reproduce dominant cultural-ideological relations – the family, education, media, marriage and the sexual division of labour. There was a shared emphasis on the freedom to question and experiment, a commitment to personal action, and an intensive examination of the self. (Whiteley, 1992, 82)

As Roszak wrote at the time, ‘Beat-hip bohemianism may be too withdrawn from social action to suit New Left Radicalism; but the withdrawal is a direction the activist can readily understand’ (Roszak, 1970, 66). It would

seem, then, that an acceptance of chaos and uncertainty can be interpreted as a prelude to rebirth, the ego temporarily destroyed before moving on to a changed form of consciousness. As Attali tellingly observed, noise contains prophetic powers. 'It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible' (Attali, 1985, 11).

It is also relevant that the distinction between music for living by and music for leisure was of fundamental importance to the counterculture, highlighting the ways in which music and socio-cultural politics could fuse into a collective experience. As such, the impact of noise (inharmonious sound, distortion, dissonance, and the connotations surrounding discord itself) can be interpreted as underpinning a revolutionary agenda suggestive of a state of creative anarchy,<sup>3</sup> which is arguably distinct from the more soft-focus connotations of 'All You Need is Love' and the pacifist agenda implicit in such slogans as 'Make Love Not War'.<sup>4</sup> If, however, Roszak is correct in identifying 'beat-hip bohemianism as an effort to work out the personality and total life style that follow from New Left social criticism' (Roszak, 1970, 66), then a movement towards a communality based on love could appear a logical development. Discord and the darker extremes of 'noise' associated with performers such as Jimi Hendrix and the MC5 would thus come into focus as the first stage in the counter-cultural agenda of establishing a relevant and alternative lifestyle. As Jeff Nuttall observed, two of the aims of the Underground were to 'release forces into the prevailing culture that would dislocate society, untie its stabilizing knots of morality, punctuality, servility and property; and [to] expand the range of human consciousness outside the continuing and ultimately soul-destroying boundaries of the political utilitarian frame of reference' (Nuttall, 1970, 249). As the cartoon, Gandalf's Garden explained, 'Your minds are occupied territory! Take Over! Mind revolution is all happening!' (*International Times*, 1969, 24). With these thoughts in mind, my investigation explores three examples of the way in which noise was harnessed as a metaphor for musical resistance and disruption which challenged the politics of war, social and racial inequality and a culture in crisis.

## The politics of noise

As the saying goes, 'whenever a man's work is plugged into his times, it cannot help being political' (Hicks, 2000, 209) and Hendrix's performance of 'The Star Spangled Banner' at the 1969 Woodstock Festival provides a specific insight into the way in which his music became 'a symbol of solidarity and an inspiration for action' (Frith, 2000, 103) for those 'seeking to transform our deepest sense of the self, the environment' (Roszak, 1970, 156). As Bob Hicks wrote in his 1970 memorial dedication, 'at the time,

his most obvious merit was strength, an awesome primeval power of the psyche more than capable of knowing, understanding, manipulating ... the torrent of infuriated fire careening through his equipment' (Hicks, 2000, 208). Charles Shaar Murray is in full agreement: 'When he used the onomatopoeic power of his guitar to evoke the sounds of urban riots and jungle fire fights as he did in 'Machine Gun' and 'The Star Spangled Banner' – he used every atom of that knowledge' (Shaar Murray, 1989, 23).

Hendrix was certainly aware of the problems confronting black servicemen in Vietnam: they represented 2 per cent of the officers and were assigned 28 per cent of the combat missions (Shaar Murray, 1989, 23). He was also aware of racial inequality on the home front and had dedicated 'Machine Gun' 'to all the soldiers that are fightin' in Chicago, Milwaukee and New York ... oh yes, and all the soldiers fightin' in Vietnam'<sup>5</sup> (Hendrix, quoted in Shaar Murray, 1989, 22). For example, 4 April 1968 had seen the death of civil rights activist Martin Luther King and there was a growing awareness that a political system that perpetuated inequality and racial injustice was untenable; that the war against Vietnam was itself symptomatic of wider social and moral issues. The timing of Hendrix's performance of 'The Star Spangled Banner' – considered by many to be the most complex and powerful work of American art to deal with the Vietnam War – at a festival dedicated to 'three days of peace with music' is thus significant. As Bob Hicks comments, 'It was a chillingly contemporary work, a vision of cultural crisis, of structural breakdown and chaos, screeching to an almost unbearable tension which must, somehow, burst' (Hicks, 1996, 209).

For Americans, 'The Star Spangled Banner' is the most familiar of all songs, one which speaks of 'the land of the free', 'the home of the brave' – sentiments that are intended to inspire a nation at war. By 1820 the melody had been used as a setting for about 50 American poems, almost all of a patriotic nature, including one by Francis Scott Key in which the phrase 'By the light of the star-spangled flag of our nation' appears. The melody thus brings with it strong associations with the patriotism associated with a nation at war,<sup>6</sup> and although those at Woodstock may have been unaware of its history, 'the ironies were murderous: a black man with a white guitar; a massive, almost white audience wallowing in a paddy field of its own making; the clear, pure, trumpet-like sounds of the familiar melody struggling to pierce through clouds of tear-gas, the explosions of cluster-bombs, the screams of the dying, the crackle of flames, the heavy palls of smoke stinking with human grease, the hovering chatter of helicopters ...' (Shaar Murray, 1989, 24)<sup>7</sup> evoked by Hendrix's performance. The straight melody finally comes through on 'gave proof through the night', and the anthem ends to the sounds of feedback and a final ear-shattering grind as the guitar strings are treated to a crude bottle-neck slide against the mike stand. As Shaar Murray writes:

There is no precedent in rock and roll, soul music or the blues for what Hendrix did to his national anthem that muddy Monday morning ... The sustain and feedback obtained by running his massive Marshall amplifiers at maximum volume to turn the bass growl of a 'dive-bomb' into higher and higher overtones gradually overwhelm[ing] the fundamental pitch of the original note ... (Shaar Murray, 1989, 194)

as the percussive distortion and crackling feedback aurally attack the original three-four meter of the neatly balanced phrases. 'Defiant and courageous in its ambition, deadly serious in its intent and passionately inspired in its execution ... it was a compelling musical allegory of a nation bloodily tearing itself apart' (Hicks, 1996, 195).

While there was, at the time, no comparable attack on the British National Anthem, it is nevertheless evident that the subversive use of noise as a political statement was recognized by the Beatles as evidenced in George Martin's musical arrangement of 'A Day in the Life', the final track on their 1967 album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. By 1967 their international status was unquestionable. The release of *Revolver* in August 1966 had, as Russell Reising writes, transformed rock and roll, inventing musical expressions, 'trends and motifs that would chart the path not only of the Beatles and a cultural epoch, but of the subsequent history of rock and roll as well' (Reising, 2002, 11). It included a string octet ('Eleanor Rigby'), the first Beatles' song adapted from a literary source ('Tomorrow Never Knows'/Timothy Leary's *Psychedelic Experience*), the first recorded use of reverse tape effects and ambient background sounds ('Tomorrow Never Knows', 'Yellow Submarine'). As such, it is no great surprise to note that the Beatles had been invited to perform at the June 1967 Monterey International Pop Festival, the first to headline rock and popular music. Having stopped touring, and currently working on the studio-based *Sgt. Pepper's* album, they had declined the invitation, but nevertheless contributed to the official festival programme by sending an original illustration in coloured pencil, felt marker and ink, with the header 'Peace to Monterey', signing it 'sincerely, John, Paul, George and Harold' – a possible reference to the current British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson.<sup>8</sup>

While there is little to suggest that the Beatles were directly involved in political protest, 1967 saw the release of two songs where the use of noise ('A Day in the Life'), and an extended bricolage of ambient background sounds and snippets of songs ('All You Need Is Love') challenged the complacency surrounding 'swinging London'. They also aligned them with the peace movement and the philosophy of love that characterized hippy philosophy, as suggested by Lennon's lyrics to 'Tomorrow Never Knows', the final track on the Beatles' 1966 album, *Revolver*: 'Love is all and love is everyone/it is knowing, it is knowing'. His vision of what might be – the importance of peace, love and understanding – also informed his thoughts

about the power of music as a force for change as evidenced in 'All You Need is Love', which he composed as a 'singalong' for the international television programme, 'Our World', broadcast by satellite to 26 countries on 25 June 1967. The most distinctive feature of the song – apart from its simplistic repetition and frequent meter changes – comes in the extended coda, where such extramusical sounds as cowboy-style 'whoops', Baroque-style trumpet fragments, snatches of a big band version of 'In the Mood', 'Greensleeves' and a faint echo of the refrain of 'She Loves You' suggested to some that 'All You Need is Love' may itself be a parody of the so-called 'Love' generation (O'Grady, 1983, 142). Lennon, however, regarded it as a political song and, as such, the introduction, with its brass band version of the 'Marseillaise', provides a relevant context<sup>9</sup> in its associations with the French Revolution, the International Revolutionary Movement of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Paris Commune, and anarchic leftist revolutionaries. Lennon's subsequent single, the blues-based 'Revolution' (B-side to 'Hey Jude') released in 1968, nevertheless makes what appears to be a more passive statement ('But when you talk about destruction,/Don't you know that you can count me out') and his much-publicized quest for peace in Vietnam continued with 'The Ballad of John and Yoko' and 'Give Peace A Chance', both released in 1969.

The musical distinction between contemplative, peaceful protest and the ear-shattering cacophony that accompanies apocalyptic chaos can be characterized by the polarization of consonance/dissonance. While the former provides a context for participation (in, for example, peace rally anthems), the latter overtly challenges and confronts. At its most extreme in the Coda to 'A Day In the Life', 'the spiralling ascent of sound' challenged 'the warm combination of acoustic guitar and piano' (Hannan, 2008, 60) that introduces the song, the complacency inherent in contemporary society ('A crowd of people stood and stared ...', 'A crowd of people turned away', Lennon's first and second verses) and the 'muzzy' effect on McCartney's vocal in the middle section of the song, which 'sounded as if he had just woken up from a deep sleep and hadn't yet got his bearings' (Hannan, 2008, 60). A climbing crescendo achieved by recording a small symphony orchestra four times on a separate four-track tape was used twice, following the line 'I'd love to turn you on' which ends both the first and final verses, while the final sustained piano chord (which involved two grand pianos, an upright piano, a Wurlitzer electric piano, a blond-wood spinet and a harmonium with a 43-second sustain) was created by a series of staggered overdubs of the chords, so allowing for cross-fading between them, while effecting an ever-changing timbre as the tonal emphasis seems to shift from the tonic to the third and then to the fifth and finally to the octave as the harmonics of the various overdubs interact and amplification is applied.<sup>10</sup>

The dramatic effect of the indeterminate textures of the ascending orchestral clusters is contextually anarchic in its intrusion into the



passacaglia-like counter melody of the first two verses, albeit that Lennon's lyrical vocal 'features an unusually expressive use of non-harmonic tones, notably the leaps to dissonant notes in the latter part of the first and fourth bars ('I read the news to-day/oh- boy/a-bout a luck-y man who/made the grade') (O'Grady, 1983, 138), so hinting at an underlying disillusionment. McCartney's second section is more frantic in its delivery, coming to an abrupt conclusion at the words 'Somebody spoke and I went into a dream', the vocal line becoming obscured by the progressively louder orchestral unisons on the root of each chord, before a two-bar unison brass motif plunges the key down a minor third for the return of the first section. This time, the bass leads to the intense orchestral build-up before the shifting timbres of the final sustained piano chord and its 30-second decay lead finally into 'a noisy 15kHz tone leading to a two second piece of gibberish which was cut into the run-out groove of the LP' (O'Grady, 1983, 61), so casting doubt as to whether the song's powerful imagery and disruptive musical aesthetics would inspire listeners to wake up and question (as suggested by the ringing alarm clock that heralds McCartney's middle section and the crowing cock in 'Good Morning, Good Morning')<sup>11</sup> or whether it would be interpreted as yet another example of the Beatles' love of the 'slicks and tricks of production' (Goldstein, 1967, 173).<sup>12</sup>

While the use of tone clusters suggests a certain comparison with Penderecki and his 'Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima',<sup>13</sup> the Beatles' commercial obligations meant that they had to avoid overt political comments and, as such, what they did say about the UK's attitude towards the war in Vietnam was rather confusing and their lyrics move between the merits of political and personal change, without identifying any specific ideological solution. In contrast, Mick Jagger (Rolling Stones) was at the July 1968 Vietnam Solidarity Campaign demonstration at the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square, but his solution was to fall back on his rock credentials ('What can a poor boy do/cept play for a rock 'n' roll band'; 'Street Fighting Man') and move towards a more Svengali-like image with 'Sympathy for the Devil', which related, to an extent, to the counterculture's stand against the established church and its support for what was seen as the West's exploitation of Third World countries and the USA's militant intervention in Vietnam. It is also evident from the introductory 'Please allow me to introduce myself' that the song also draws on Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967), a story about the devil's personal appearance in Moscow and his anarchic pranks, which was given to Jagger by Marianne Faithfull.

While all branches of the counterculture were united in their stand against the war in Vietnam, popular music played a largely symbolic role in challenging the political status quo. As Shaar Murray comments: 'The Beatles were lovably cheeky to authority'<sup>14</sup>, albeit that 'the FBI considered

John Lennon and Yoko Ono a sufficient threat to US security to maintain surveillance on them ... The Rolling Stones slouched and sneered at [authority] ... Hendrix simply acted as if it wasn't there' (Shaar Murray, 1989, 18), and despite being courted by the Black Panther Party he consistently withheld any public endorsement of their activities. In contrast, the MC5's association with the White Panther Party and the often revolutionary rhetoric that accompanied the band throughout its career was sufficient for the Federal State Authorities to recognize them as a politically subversive threat. Yet, as Charles Shaar Murray asks, 'Were the MC5 a radical activist band or a band caught in a moment when their electric playing and act synergise with the time?' (Shaar Murray, 1972)

By 1968 the MC5 had become Detroit's leading underground band, performing at revolutionary rallies against a political backdrop of racial inequality and suppression, most notably the 1967 riots when confrontations with the US national guard and US army troops resulted in 43 deaths and over seven thousand arrests. The band's second single, 'Looking at You' was supposedly recorded in downtown Detroit 'sometime circa the 1967 riots', feeding the myth that 'the band were a group of "rock and roll guerrillas" who both fomented and embodied disorder with their rousing performances' (Waksman, 1998, 47) and feedback-laden sound. Further violence against protesters at the 1968 Democratic National Convention was highlighted by the MC5's revolutionary rallying cry, 'Kick Out the Jams, Motherfuckers', and a recording contract with the Elektra label.<sup>15</sup> Recorded live at Detroit's Grande Ballroom and released in 1969, *Kick Out the Jams* initially attracted an adverse review by Lester Bangs (*Rolling Stone*, 5 April 1969), which drew attention to its pretentiousness – the band's 'scrapyard vistas of clichés and ugly sounds' – and its Introduction by band manager John Sinclair, 'Minister of Information' for the White Panthers (Bangs, 1991, 226). While Bangs later withdrew his contempt for the album, claiming it to be one of his favourites, and the band itself a 'righteous minstrel ... rife with lamentations and criticisms of the existing order' (Bangs, 1991, 226), his identification of Sinclair is interesting. As a devotee of Beat culture and avant-garde jazz, and a founder of Trans-Love Energies, he recognized the potential of rock, and in particular the MC5, to influence social change and attract a growing youth counterculture to 'tune in, turn on, and drop out'. As Waksman observes, 'The stated goal was to turn the momentary synesthetic pleasure of musical experience into the basis for cultural revolution' (Waksman, 1998, 48).

Not least, the Trans-Love Collective delighted in taunting police and other symbols of authority with anti-establishment street theatre, often tongue-in-cheek writing in its underground press (*Creem*, for example, grew out of John Sinclair's White Panther Party and provided Lester Bangs with 'space for the farthest reaches of invective, scorn, fantasy, rage and glee' [Marcus, 1991, xii]), and inflammatory rhetoric at MC5 concerts.

With racial tensions high in Detroit, Sinclair's revolutionary invective and increasing focus on the high-profile potential inherent in the MC5's performances attracted increasing conflict with the authorities. Amplified music, for example, had been banned from city parks and Sinclair decided to hold an MC5 concert in defiance of the laws and was given permission to hold a series of concerts on the outskirts of the city, which were framed as multi-media events and punctuated by his radical speeches: 'Brothers and sisters, I want to see your hands up there! I want everybody to kick up some noise! I want to see some revolution out there!'<sup>16</sup> As rock journalist Dave Marsh wrote about his experiences with the band: '[S]o powerfully did the MC5's music unite its listeners leaving those 1968 and 1969 shows, one literally felt that anything, even that implausible set of White Panther slogans, could come to pass. In that sense, the MC5, with their bacchanalian orgy of high energy sound, was a truer reflection of the positive spirit of the counter-culture than the laid-back Apollonians of Haight-Ashbury ever could have been' (Marsh, 1970).

The creation of the White Panther Party as the political wing of Trans-Love Energies on 1 November 1968 has been interpreted as a meeting of minds inside and outside the band in its call for total freedom. For Rob Tyner (vocals), the challenge was to safeguard the band's freedom of speech, and Wayne Kramer (guitarist) subsequently defended the band's revolutionary ideals: 'We not only talked about revolution, we believed it. The part about destroying the government and taking over and shooting it out with the pigs and all that – that didn't work. But the other part about the concept of possibilities, the revolution of ideas – that has changed the world' (quoted in DeRogatis, 2002). While the White Panther Party's call for a programme of 'rock and roll, dope and fucking in the streets' is reflected in the MC5's sexually explicit performances, its close identification with the Black Panther Party's armed self-defence strategy provided Sinclair with both radical credentials and credibility for the TLE as both a vanguard revolutionary organization and an arm of the Youth International Party. Its agenda for national visibility rested on the MC5, thus drawing attention to the significance of music in expressing a countercultural agenda of youth in revolt and hence, Sinclair's aim that the band should achieve national popular acceptance.<sup>17</sup> As Waksman writes, '[T]he energy that the Five generated was seemingly meant to break down the barriers between audience and performer and to radicalize the band's audience by awakening their deadened senses and compelling them to throw off the (mostly sexual) constraints imposed by the culture at large' (Waksman, 1998, 49).

The MC5's live album thus provides an insight into the construction of popular music as a force for political/cultural change while raising questions as to whether the band's revolutionary profile and militant posturing were distinct from Sinclair's inclusion of the White Panthers' core philosophies as liner notes on the album: 'The MC5 is the revolution ... the music will

make you strong ... and there is no way it can be stopped now. Kick out the jams motherfuckers.' The title track, which opens with two power chords, segues into feedback over Dennis Thompson's pulsating drums. Its rousing hook and aggressive use of electric amplification is heightened by Kramer's guitar solo, where repetitive high-pitched sounds finally swerve into the final chorus 'Kickout the jaaaaams/I done kicked 'em out' against cries of 'MOTHERFUCKERS'. It is, however, 'Rocket Reducer No. 62 (Rama Lama Fa Fa Fa)', the closing song on side one of their album, that best conveys the live sound and inflated masculine dynamic of the MC5. 'I've gotta keep it up 'cause I'm a natural man' sets the tone and connotations of the song, which melds a one-chord blues vamp with maximum amplification, while Tyner's electric guitar hammers out 'the main musical figure over a wave of feedback generated by fellow guitarist Fred "Sonic" Smith'. In particular, the climactic finale to the song embodies cock-rock's<sup>18</sup> potency as 'the two guitarists take off on an orgasmic solo flight, pursuing each other on their respective fretboards while the rest of the band lays silent. A full minute of rapid distorted runs is capped by a final bluesy bend, and when the rest of the band rejoins for a final crash of the chords, the "rocket" is "reduced" to a state of detumescence, signified by the ensuing silence as both the song and the album's side come to an end' (Waksman, 1998, 63). The heat of the musical moment is summed up in Pam Brent's account of one of the MC5's shows for the first issue of *Creem*:

The roaring vibrations and now-language combine to put the audience in an indescribable and frenzied mood. The voice of the Five resounds all that is the youth of today. An aura of all our sought-after goals: love, peace, freedom, and f-king in the streets – they are echos [*sic*], an incarnation of our will. We receive them with appropriate joy and rapture. (Brent, 1969)

While the anti-authoritarian title of the album and the title track hint at revolution – 'Let me be who I am and let me kick out the jams' – Kramer subsequently explained that the band's catchphrase was initially directed at bands (most specifically British bands) who the MC5 thought were not putting sufficient energy into their performances ... Kick out the jams meant 'get off the stage. Stop jamming'. He also commented that the band's commitment to 'revolutionary' politics was concerned with 'loving awareness' as opposed to the 'defensive awareness' implicit in manager Sinclair's politics. 'We knew it wasn't right, we knew it wasn't gonna change things ... In our stage show, in the things we say on stage, we wish to project this openness, this loving awareness, this sensitivity towards a higher level of communication' (Shaar Murray, 1972), so raising the question as to whether the ideological differences between Sinclair's machine-gun rhetoric and the band's 'armed love' stance was a matter of

sonic anarchy rather than revolutionary zeal. Not least songs such as 'Come Together' suggests more a musical enactment of orgasm and a celebration of noise rather than radical activism, albeit that sexual freedom was high on the counterculture's agenda. Characterized by excess volume and an unchanging harmonic structure (a repetitive single note followed by two power chords, which repeat through the song), the line 'together in the darkness' and Tyner's muttered 'it's getting closer ... God it's so close now' create a palpable sexual undertow. Reinforced by the orgasmic connotations of the rising crescendo of the power chords and Tyner's concluding 'togetherness', the track 'ends with a progression of chords that ascends and then lunges back downward while becoming increasingly out of tune, the blur of the drums and the whirr of the feedback further contributing to the heightened disorder that immediately precedes the song's finish' (Waksman, 1998, 65–6). Little doubt, then, that the song is about physical pleasure, so fulfilling Sinclair's conceptualization of the politics of affect and its relationship to rock'n'roll's significance in achieving the White Panthers' goal of sexual freedom – 'fucking in the streets'.

As Shaar Murray comments, 'The band had that indefinable magic and music was the weapon for change not allied to guns ... They are the masters of kinetic excitement, they know how to open a song at maximum power and then build from there and that is what makes them a better show than many a band whose technical ability may be infinitely higher' (Shaar Murray, 1972). His identification of 'show' and its relation to 'showmanship' is interesting. The MC5 were famous for the shock effect of their high-decibel performances and their provocative stage image where they would often appear with unloaded rifles, with 'Motor City is Burning' suggesting a supportive reference to the 1967 Detroit riots and the role of the Black Panther snipers. Yet, as Kramer subsequently observed, 'The image of the gun was a mistake. The idea that we would use armed resistance was archaic' (Shaar Murray, 1972), and in retrospect it would seem that the MC5 were, as Matt Bartkowiak suggests, a band whose aggressive stance was largely created by an interweaving of self-generated propaganda, dominant media frames, and an unapologetic desire to become a popular rock band. The exploitation of noise as an anarchic and revolutionary tool can then be interpreted as a means of 'packaging subversion into usable forms for audiences who seek escape and social location in the subversion and criticism of dominant forces through the language of revolution' (Bartkowiak, 2009, 96). Above all, the MC5 celebrate subversion through their manipulation of electronic noise, and as Jacques Attali writes in his musicological tract *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), sound, noise and music are all fundamental to the concept of social order.

With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion. In noise can be read the

codes of life, the relations among men. Clamour, Melody, Dissonance, Harmony [...] noise is the source of purpose and power, of the dream – Music. [...] [i]t is a means of power and a form of entertainment. (Attali, 1985, 6)

## Contextualizing noise

Although the deployment of noise had been a feature of popular music since the advent of rock'n'roll, the extremes of sound generated by Marshall amps, feedback, distortion and overload allied to an often aggressive performance style provided a new and subversive interplay between sound as physical force and sound as a symbolic medium. While it is recognized that such associations quickly become conventionalized – the connotations of noise, for example, set certain limits or defining parameters to meaning while, at the same time, being open to a performative exhibitionism which defuses its more radical implications – more precise social meanings are oriented both through context and historical location. As Simon Frith observes, 'rock can't just be consumed, but must be responded to like any other form of art – its tensions and contradiction engaged and reinterpreted into the listeners' experience' (Frith, 2000, 103).

The association of noise as both a cultural referent and a musical expression of chaos and uncertainty can thus be understood as a framework which both disrupts and destroys the internal consistency of established codes of music (the formalistic structure of 'The Star Spangled Banner', the radical disjunction of sound in the coda to 'A Day in the Life', the MC5's high-decibel impact on John Lee Hooker's urban blues 'Motor City is Burning') through an imposition of sound combinations, mental associations and imagery which conjure up moods and images of cultural, social and political crisis, so making 'music into a symbol of solidarity and an inspiration for action' (Frith, 2000, 103) while explaining how its radical connotations could be co-opted for their revolutionary potential.<sup>19</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

# Recasting Noise: The Lives and Times of *Metal Machine Music*

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Since its 1975 release, Lou Reed's double album *Metal Machine Music: The Amine  $\beta$  Ring* has undergone a number of transformations and re-communications that negate its identity as a single cultural object, while allowing its constituent materials new contexts from which to function as tangible sources of intertextual meaning. The rearrangement of popular music texts often involves changing the channel through which such works are mediated: original recordings are frequently recast as performances which are subsequently refashioned as DVD 'live' recordings, and the process stands as a testament to the fluidity of popular music texts in general. Often such acts are theorized and illustrated as a part of debates concerning the advent of digital technologies and their various concomitant effects. However, *Metal Machine Music* constitutes a less typical case in point in that, following its twenty-fifth anniversary reissue, the work underwent a regression of sorts: moving from recorded composition to score/arrangement (by Ulrich Krieger and Luca Venitucci in 2002) to performance (at the Berlin Opera House, Haus der Berliner Festspiele, in 2002) and finally to an improvised performance exploring the compositional techniques utilized in the construction of the original work (by the Metal Machine Trio in 2008). A CD/DVD release of the 2002 live performance (Zeitkratzer featuring Lou Reed, 2007) contributed a further element to this spate of refashioning, and contains a pre-concert interview in which Reed outlines aspects of compositional intent and the circumstances surrounding its recent modification. Suffice it to say, each of the aforementioned acts elicits a new response from listeners; a further