

Chapter 1

Cultural Design: Towards an Anthropology of Soundscapes

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Abstract

In this essay I investigate the current status of sound as a category of anthropological analysis. While it is true that cultural research of music has been informed theoretically and methodologically by anthropology particularly and social sciences more generally, to what extent is anthropology (ethno)musicological? I argue that anthropologists should pay more critical attention to the hermeneutics of soundscapes, for such processes contribute significantly to sociocultural formations within a dynamic that I call term “cultural design.” Sound and its more organized subset of music exceed the category of performative events. Sound is an order of discourse through and with which people articulate other discursive modes such as language and body movement. Specifically, I investigate two ethnographic situations of consumerism located in the US to demonstrate how persons create powerful connections with spaces, in which sound and music are not the center of focal awareness.

Keywords: *soundscape, musicology, consumer culture, everyday life*

Two Settings

My wife and I pull up to Applebee’s restaurant located just off the interstate in the midst of dozens of other franchise outlets. 11:30 on a Wednesday morning in northwest Champaign, Illinois. A young man opens the door for us and leads us past a series of Elvis photos and prints, past the black and white prints of Sinatra, Amelia Earhart, John Wayne, past the 1989 NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Final Four banners from the University of Illinois “Illini” basketball team, past the Illini baseball bats and football helmets secured to the restaurant’s walls, and to our table. The dining tables are scattered in a horseshoe pattern around the lower level bar. It is difficult to sit down and not have a TV in some line of your view. ESPN (Entertainment Sports Programming Network) highlights from last night’s baseball and hockey games. Sound off. Most of the clientele (pre-business lunch crowd) were elderly women, a few men, in parties of three to four dressed in spring tennis apparel, visors, light pastel colors. They were ordering taco salads and some taking the plunge for the all-you-can-eat rib special. The music coming from the embedded ceiling speakers ranged from Shania Twain to “oldies” to “alternative rock” as our food arrived. I took notice and looked around to see if anyone else did.

Second scene: Located in a posh, affluent neighborhood of Dupont Circle in Washington D.C., we perused two bookstores, one used -- a small, local establishment and the second a retail franchise called Afterwords (restaurant and bookstore). We looked at each other with a smile, as suddenly we heard the voice of Cesária Évora, the recently deceased Cape Verdean diva. I asked the cash register employee the price of a book by Baudrillard, buttoned up my overcoat and we exited into the street where a brisk, chilly breeze was stirring. We took the Metro back to Vienna Station in Northern Virginia, where my mother’s SUV was parked.

I will leave these two ethnographic situations for the moment in order to sketch out a line of thought, which I hope provokes a reconsideration and reckoning of these banal places. These places, where sound is hardly the focal point of sensation or creation, are, in fact, meaningfully inscribed soundscapes.

This essay is not about music and music analysis. It is not really about musical topics – events, performance styles, genres, transnational music industries, aesthetics, or tastes. Instead, this essay is an attempt to reconsider the place of music and sound in the constitution of human culture, not just as a salient topic ripe for anthropological analysis and not just a potential analogy to sociocultural formations. My

approach builds upon the important theoretical contributions of Anthony Seeger's "musical anthropology" (1987) and Steven Feld's "sound structure as social structure" (1982; 1984a). For example, Seeger explains the distinction between "musical anthropology" and Merriam's "anthropology of music" (Merriam 1964) in the following manner: "an anthropology of music looks at the way music is part of culture and social life. By way of contrast a musical anthropology looks at the way musical performances create many aspects of culture and social life" (1987: xiii). Moreover, in his ethnography about popular music in Zimbabwe, Tom Turino argues that musical practice reveals the workings of society when he defines music making as a "particularly direct medium of value, identity and lifeways; [therefore, it] provides a useful window to the problem [of the accelerated neocolonial expansion of modernist-capitalist economics and ethics]" (2000:4; see also Turino 2008).

I go further and argue that the presence of sound and music also constitutes socially meaningful scenes, in which the general focal awareness is not on the sound *per se*. In this manner, music exceeds the categories of "topic" and "model" and moves into a more general one of "modality," i.e., a manner of ordering and patterning the world, rooted in human practices and social institutions (see Feld's discussion of "acoustemology" in Feld 2003). Over the past decade more scholars from a wide range of disciplines have turned attention to sound (see Feld 2012; Feld and Brenneis 2004 for reviews); however, the focus continues to be on "people who live in intensely rich aural environments" (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 261). Greater attention to music and sound in this manner as it occurs in everyday life can provide insight into the "cultural design" of social spaces and meanings. My use of "cultural design" is an attempt to join anthropology and social sciences with graphic design and semiotics.¹⁾

Anthropology and Ethnomusicology

It is true that the formation and development of the discipline of ethnomusicology owes a great deal to anthropology. The list of important anthropologists, who have made music a central point of their research and advanced more general theories of sound as a cultural product and later cultural process is extensive, e.g., Boas, Herskovits,

Richard Waterman, Alan Merriam, and Anthony Seeger. In essence, few scholars these days have any qualms in asserting that ethnomusicology is anthropological – BUT is anthropology ethnomusicological?

I believe that the techniques and theories of understanding, explaining and representing music should be reconsidered as partially constitutive of anthropology because music partially constitutes culture. This statement has multiple ramifications. Two of which include pedagogy and theory. It is significant, in my opinion, that "Introduction to Cultural Anthropology" courses rarely, if ever, include "music" as a key term on the syllabi. In this vein, Bruno Nettl asks, "what position does music have in anthropology at large, in those publications that present or deal with the field of anthropology as a whole, or with human culture at large, or for that matter holistically with individual cultures?" (1994:1) Music does not appear to be an organizing issue that informs social structure, informs identity formation processes, informs such seemingly far away domains as global economic flows and corporate marketing strategies. In terms of theory, I want to push for a closer reading or re-interpretation of one of Alan Merriam's pithy phrases: "music as culture" (1977) or even "music is culture, what musicians do is society" (1975). For me, what is behind this forceful rhetoric is a provocative logic, which potentially has significant repercussions for how humanists and social scientists understand humans' being-in-the-world and humans' (re) making-the-world.

Music is non-linguistic "humanly organized sound" (Blacking 1973),²⁾ which emphasizes a "poetic" register or "function." This poetic register highlights different practices than what language offers denoted by the terms melody, harmony and rhythm, for example. From this perspective, music is "a perfection of form" although these characteristics can be afforded to speech genres such as rhetoric and oral poetry. In such cases, one is often dependent on ethnomethodology to aid in making music/speech distinctions. In essence, music is a symbolic mode of discourse, i.e., it is a meaningful text and shapes ideology and status. Yet, anthropologists, who are not interested in musical topics, normally treat music as "special interest phenomena," epiphenomenal, or merely part of fruitful "thick description."

Why this is so is, of course, not simply because anthropologists have assumed that music is out of our/

their league. Many practitioners of musicology and ethnomusicology are very much complicit in this attitude that music criticism is only for the proper savant and the “true” practicing musician. Just as social and cultural anthropology continue the ongoing struggle to maintain a handle on the concept of “culture,” musicology and ethnomusicology have long debated the delineation of their respective fields, methodologies, theoretical perspectives, and general purpose.³⁾ Consequently, partially in the interest of disciplinary legitimation, musicologists have reified the notion of music as a topical interest accompanied by a certain set of analytical terminology. To discuss music then is to talk about musical performances and other practices as revealing units of a more general culture. This is what some have called the investigation of “musical traditions” and the host of complex processes by which such things are constituted.⁴⁾ Such foci are all well and good; however, one result of such ethnomusicological epistemologies has been that the quotidian presence of music, especially in its most “anti-performative” contexts (e.g. elevators, TV commercials, spaces of transportation, office spaces, grocery stores, etc.), has not emerged as a worthwhile point of critical reflection and intellectual production in either ethnomusicology or anthropology.⁵⁾ In short, despite such sonic presences, scholars of any stripe have been overwhelmingly reluctant to comment due to the lack of any “style,” genre or tradition.

Some scholars have tried to approach the ubiquity of sound and culturally meaningful by simply collecting data. Thick description in and of itself provokes a reorientation of thought. For example, during the early 90s Charles Keil, Susan Crafts, and Daniel Cavicchi produced an interesting document called *My Music* (1993). Part of “Music in Daily Life Project,” the book is a collection of stories told by everyday people in Buffalo, NY about their views and tastes concerning music. There are two dominant themes with regard to music’s role in society – indistinct ubiquity and mystical status of unexplainable genius. Below are two excerpts from interviews collected in *My Music*.

Q: . . . I understand the positive, festive, but what is it in the music that’s doing it for you? You say it’s festive, but why?

A: . . . I don’t know . . . I just think this is great. I think it’s unexplainable. Maybe the problem is that there could

be so many different reasons and since I don’t know the reason . . . I mean I could . . . for example, I could say: the relationship I have with my dad is positive and a close one and he listens to it and I have feelings toward him . . . positive feelings toward my family and my home. Or I could talk about the technical musical aspect and how the music is intentionally designed to evoke certain feelings. Or I could talk about my high school experiences playing the oboe . . . experiences walking through gothic cathedrals, spending the afternoons listening to Bach cantatas, and how architecture . . . and these singers in the front and the little chamber orchestra. And maybe it’s partially all of them. Or maybe it’s absolutely none of them. I don’t know and I never will know . . . It’s not a scientific experiment. And I’m glad, because I don’t want to know . . . I don’t want to know. I don’t care.

[interview about Gail’s love of Bach in Keil, Crafts, and Cavicchi 1993: 97-8]

Q: What does music mean to you?

A: Music is just part of life, like air. You live with it all the time, so it’s tough to judge what it means to you. . . I turn on the radio and it’s there in the morning; it’s there when I drive; it’s there when I go out . . . I put five or seven hundred miles on a week . . . and in the car, it [radio] can be on, it can be off, and if I’m thinking, or whatever, I don’t listen to the radio. Very rarely do I consciously listen to the radio.

[Neil’s philosophy on music and life in Keil, Crafts, and Cavicchi 1993: 109]

Despite many theoretical shortcomings, this study does succeed in demonstrating the various ways in which people use music to make meaning out of their lives and thus remake themselves. These connections exceed and often contradict those calculated by music recording industries and other music-oriented institutions in the form of commercial market categories.⁶⁾ The interviews show quite plainly that non-musicians are capable and sometimes invested in deconstructing musical meaning (even if it is in terms of utter banality). So concerned about demonstrating and explaining the complexities of human societies and human interaction, anthropologists tend to stay right in step

with the popular belief that music is either “magical” or cultural wallpaper. Anthropologists pride themselves on having cultural insight by “making the strange familiar and the familiar strange” and yet, for many, music remains a separate realm of human expression impenetrable to “non-experts.” Music is then a magical sphere of beauty and emotion – not ours to deconstruct, analyze, and represent.⁷ Again, musicologists and ethnomusicologists are complicit in this, as in the struggle to legitimate music-making as a complex social activity in all cultures, scholars such as John Blacking have reinforced the notion of music as a separate system of values deserving a certain kind of expertise. As Nettl states, that many non-musician anthropologists “are scared of dealing with music [is] an attitude foisted on the lay public by the academic music profession” (1994: 8).

Furthermore, anthropologists and other social scientists tend to approach music in its everyday presence as indeed too mundane for critical reflection. The hissing transistor radio wining on and on during the researcher’s travels in rural and urban México may receive a poetic mention by the author but rarely is it considered constitutive of the social space of bus life or the bus driver’s labor negotiations or the general sense of being in a place and thus affording a range of dispositions. The contradictory conceptualization of music that pits its utter necessity against its impossible comprehension perhaps is best demonstrated by Levi-Strauss in his extremely influential book on Bororó myth, *The Raw and the Cooked*, in which he writes:

Music raises a much more difficult problem, because we know nothing of the mental conditions in which musical creation takes place . . . But since music is a language with some meaning at least for the immense majority of mankind, although only a tiny minority of people are capable of formulating a meaning in it, and since it is the only language with the contradictory character of being at once intelligible and untranslatable, the musical creator of music is a being comparable to the gods and make music itself the supreme mystery of the science of man, a mystery that all the various disciplines come up against and which holds the key to their progress. [Levi-Strauss 1983: 18]

Music, Articulation, and Cultural Formation

People create and organize music as a way of being-in-the-world and remaking the world. This is an active process in performance and listening that utilizes perception as an ordering activity. Music is a complex semiotic system that is not just iconic, i.e., of resemblance, like onomatopoeia or “programme music” or samples, indexical, i.e., referential to places, time periods, etc., but also, symbolic, in the sense that music can link sound to non-referential objects such as emotions, feelings, and “groove” (Feld and Keil 1994). Music is symbolic, in the words of Langer, because it lets us “conceive its object. . . what it invites is not emotional response but insight [into] the content of art [which] is always real” (1953:223). Music is symbolic because we perceive particular relationships not *in* music per se but *through* musical signs (or sign-complexes).

Following Susanne Langer and other music scholars who understand the significance of music as beyond symptomatics (somatic responses) and semantics, I believe that music is not about individual expression of emotion or nostalgia or the abstract inner workings of the mind but rather, music is an articulate mode *through* which persons demonstrate certain knowledge about the world. Theories about music as a “significant form” have been traditionally written in terms of music performance or even concert or show situations, but what about in social scenes where music is not the major player in focal awareness. No one in the scene is a musician, no one is talking about music – it’s just playing in the “background.” Let’s revisit the ethnographic sites of Applebees and Afterwords.

Music, even in family restaurants and corporate bookstores is generative of culture (Sterne 1997; Pardue 2007). Designers and consumers match and compare their musical interpretations and establish recognition of certain normalizing discourses. What I am calling “normalizing discourse” is similar to what Judith and Alton Becker (1981) referred to as a level of “coherence” within the process of reckoning the present musico-social frame (see also Feld 1984b: 12-13). Such normalizing discourses contribute to a franchise environment such as Applebees that consists of pop culture and nostalgia. It is indeed curious that the decorative posters of “Gone with the Wind,” Warner Brothers cartoons, and Charlie Chaplin along with the street signs

printed “Hollywood → ” are articulated to the restaurant motto of a “neighborhood grill.” Moreover, the production of geography and customers’ sense of place is significantly bolstered by the ambient music. The category of “alternative rock” is in contemporary times part of a logical series in line with “oldies” and songs by Shania Twain and the Allman Brothers, as sonic references are provided in an age-inclusive manner moving from national level to regional and rural imaginations. No one stood up and objected to sounds such as guitar distortion, raspy, wavering (pitch) vocals of the “alt rock.” They’ve heard this before. Based on informal interviews and survey questionnaires, I discovered that customers expect certain sound-organizations to be part of their public restaurant franchise experience. With the volume fairly low, the music provides a foundation soundscape with which customers feel inclined to have conversations. The visual memorabilia along with the images provided by ESPN and other sports networks on the strategically placed televisions add to the commonly held idea of restaurant as “entertainment.” In this sense, the articulation of soundscapes contribute to the overall cultural design within a “family” restaurant setting, which is specifically connected to the corporate logo and motto of Applebees. These designating forces help objectify the otherwise abstract concept of “Applebees” and thus fortify persons’ identification of the corporation with a sense of place.⁸⁾

In Afterwords as well as the smaller bookstore in Washington D.C.’s Dupont Circle neighborhood, the presence of world beat⁹⁾ contributes to a different sort of socio-geographical production. Still one of consumerist comfort, the soundscape in these bookstores, in this case highlighting the music of Cesária Évora from Cape Verde, integrates with the categories of products. Absent are the strong references to the US regionality (unless such indices have been taken up into transnational markets, e.g. jazz and to some extent blues and hip-hop/“electrónica” genres) as consumption is geared to the international. Browsing from cookbooks to travel guides to literary theory I along with other shoppers occupy and partially create a space of social class based primarily on taste. Again, based on informal conversations and customer surveys, I conclude that Afterwords is a place which indexes a “cosmopolitan class,” a banal yet globally extensive class position, which is both local and translocal in nature. Persons who desire or simply occupy this social

position recognize and categorize the sounds of Cesária Évora along with those of the Afro-Cuban All Stars, Yousou N’dour, and Ladysmith Black Mambazo as familiar.¹⁰⁾

While the individual certainly exercises a variable level of specific, topical knowledge of the sounds and may articulate these sounds to a wide range of meanings, the general presence of the music in these places is far from arbitrary. Rather, the construction of such soundscapes is intended and often perceived as a particular effort towards sociality. The process, which I have termed “sociality” here, is an anthropological perspective of what graphic designers and advertisers often call the “vehicle of memory” (Rand 1998: 11). That is to say, the process by which persons recognize, connect, and identify with products and services is also an important process by which persons construct social groups in real or virtual spaces. In sum, then, both Applebees and Afterwords demonstrate everyday examples of the conjuncture of sound and marketplace, in which significant social spaces are partially created by sound.

The analytical sketch above serves as a working methodological template for the theoretical arguments made in this essay. An anthropology of soundscapes as part of a more general investigation into the cultural design¹¹⁾ of everyday life requires musical sensitivity and reflection and not necessarily musical terminology. In both ethnomusicology and musical anthropology, the articulation of sound to culture has warranted a process of reification, e.g., music and nationalism or an anthropology of ritual singing. In certain cases, especially those in which persons occupy and transform spaces for the primary purpose of music-making, it has been revealing analytically to objectify music and explain its discursive use vis-à-vis musical transcription and social context. However, much of sound’s presence in everyday life resists objectification, for the focus of human desire and attention is elsewhere. In such cases as the ones I outline above, sound analysis does not necessarily need to include rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic analysis *per se* but rather a lexicon which attempts to integrate levels of analysis. In this manner, anthropology can productively account for sound’s entanglement in the human construction of social environments, i.e., cultural design.

Critical assessment of sound involves analytical categories such as volume, sequence, contextual contingency, and timbre. In the two examples above, the cultural design

of consumerism is partially achieved through soundscapes, which emphasize relatively low volume amplifications and a balanced mix among instruments and vocals. There is a double backgrounding articulation in operation as the general volume is lowered and as a result, the distinctive registers of pitch, e.g., bass, high screams, guitar distortions, are flattened. General recognition and familiarity are maintained as persons negotiate their stay, whether it is in the more formally structured scene of restaurant “show business” (Applebees) or in the relatively open-ended time-space of Afterwords.

Conclusion

Awareness of and critical attention to this power (enabling and constraining) of music is important in cultural analysis. Ultimately, anthropology as the study of human social action and the processes of organization of such action must include sound critically. Whether persons technically perform music or not, all people perceive sound and organize it in particular ways (both shared and distinctive) as we navigate and are positioned intersubjectively from frame to frame. In reality, we as individuals enter/exit and click on/off a wide range of sociocultural scenes everyday.¹²⁾ As agents of various institutions of society, we are aware of the selection processes of what sounds to emphasize so that certain subject positions emerge or logically should emerge. Our affinities, disgust, or indifference (i.e., dispositions) are more often than not connected to certain soundscapes. Sound and its more organized subset of music are part of a more general design of cultural scenes. To ignore critically the little, blues-based ditty, which recurs throughout the a series of Coors beer commercials (“An Original Coors” on NBC television network during weekend and weekly prime-time sports events) as insignificant in the political economy of sports, alcohol, and US nationalism is similar to ignoring the typography and color composition in commercials of high profile investment firms or on the mid-town Manhattan billboards or within travel internet sites.

Whether it’s the operative epistemes of globalization (D.C. bookstores) or regional and national pop culture (Applebees), music is a significant player in this sort of articulation work. I have concentrated on situations of consumerism in contemporary spaces of capitalism because

these spaces are some of the most extensive and ubiquitous. Furthermore, critical reflection upon such spaces illuminates the complexities of the local-translocal nexus within cultural formations, which stands today as one of the greatest challenges in contemporary anthropological theory. In conclusion, it seems to me that it is precisely these everyday places, where current scrutiny in anthropology and cultural studies should be articulated to musical analysis, thus creating a better understanding and more complete representation of sociocultural phenomena.

Notes

- 1) It is significant to note that in European and European-based cultures the design arts such as architecture, fashion, interior and graphic design have been in many ways practices, which insist on the integration of aesthetics and sociality. And, for this reason, such fields and their practitioners have been marginalized as neither artists nor “social workers” under the persistent episteme of “art as autonomous” or “art for art’s sake” (see Meggs 1992: xiii).
- 2) Certainly, there is debate around this statement; yet, I would maintain that the act of human perception and organization of such perception makes controversial examples such as whale cries music not the whale cries themselves. I do not know the various whale categories of perception and intention for such acts.
- 3) For a more detailed account of such debates and attempts to define ethnomusicology, see Blum (1986); Hood (1971); Kunst (1960, 1969); McAllester (1971); Merriam (1969, 1975, 1977); and Seeger (1970, 1971, 1977).
- 4) See, for example, Stephen Blum’s article (Blum 1986: 10-11).
- 5) Some exceptions include the work of Jonathan Sterne (1997) and Anahid Kassabian (2001).
- 6) For a detailed critique of the Music in Daily Life Project see Gilbert B. Rodman’s article (1997). The most striking critique being that My Music reveals only individual employment of music in terms of what the authors term “idiocultures” (1993: 2). However, the study fails to show how individuals perform sociality through music or how music is a contributing force in the process of forging and maintaining social groups for a range of purposes (political, economic, religious, etc.).
- 7) Bruno Nettl makes the observation that this reticence in musical analysis by anthropologists is not the case with regard to visual arts, where there is a long-standing tradition of collection and scrutiny. “Non-musicians avoid talking about music for fear of criticism, a fear they don’t have to the same degree when talking about visual art of literature” (1994:11).
- 8) In his book *Designing Identity* (1998), Marc English chronicles various cases of how graphic design problems were articulated to corpo-

rate identity strategies in business. The symbolic specificities of the business or organizational logo-identity nexus are best encapsulated in his discussion of how the proliferation and familiarization of the fX cable company logo was achieved vis-à-vis objectification in the form of not only commercial merchandise but also (and more interestingly) advertisements with “fX” as a building block centerpiece of the photographic composition (1998: 26-31).

- 9) Again, I want to make it clear that the approach I take to explain the posh bookstore space, while it incorporates a working knowledge of “world beat,” is significantly different from the important literature written about “world beat” as musical topic connected to transnational music recording industries and the incessant issues of authenticity (“roots,” “old school,” “real,” etc.), ownership, and commodification. The work of Steven Feld (Feld & Keil, 1994: 238-246, 2000), George Lipsitz (1999), Timothy D. Taylor (1997), Thomas Turino (2000), Louise Meintjes (1990), Gage Averill (1996), and Roger Wallis and Krister Malm (1984, 1992) along with many others should be cited here.
- 10) See Turino (2000: 7-12) for a useful explanation how cosmopolitanism contributes to a pervasive sense of “natural common sense” in its force as a socializing agent, as multiple and adaptive in its formation, and as an ideological construction among elites.
- 11) I choose the word “design” also for its inherent gerundial connotations. The concept of “design” both as noun and verb allows for the term to index forces of constraint and creativity entangled in current interpretations of social agency and cultural meaning.
- 12) My approach here is similar to Lawrence Grossberg’s concept of “rock formation” as integrated into cultural formations. “Particular musical and lyrical practices – which will be articulated differently in different alliances – are always located in a complex set of relations, not only to other musical practices but also to images of performers and fans, structures of social and economic relations, aesthetic conventions, styles of language, movement, appearance and dance, ideological commitments, and sometimes media representations of the formations and alliances themselves” (1992: 132).

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