Planet Voice: Strange Vocality in ‘World Music’ and Beyond

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Unfettered by lyrics – at least any you can understand – you luxuriate in sound. Perhaps your thoughts drift with the bright, timeless voices. Maybe, for a moment, you experience the mystery.
– Pam Lambert on the choir Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares

Modern Arab artists are taking traditional melodies, rhythms, instrumentation and singing styles and superimposing them over Western pop styles. The results are irresistible blends that do not require the listener to understand the lyrics or comprehend the subtleties of the singing. This is clearly music for celebration and, of course, dancing.
– Zein Al-Jundi and Jacob Edgar on the compilation Arabic Groove

History bypassed these women long ago; theirs is the life of eternal duties, ancient rhythms and primal emotions. [...] And so, when they sing, you feel they are singing truth. They don’t really have another reason to sing – they’ve had no show-biz careers and won’t get them now. So these songs are like field recordings, which are then layered and processed and yet somehow still sound authentic.
– Jesse Kornbluth on the CD Umalali: The Garifuna Women’s Project

Suyá learned other people’s songs, sang them, and in a sense became them. The Suyá might be Upper Xingu Indians at one time, their own ancestors at another, and an American anthropologist or a Brazilian peasant through their song and movements at yet other times.
– Anthony Seeger, in Why Suyá Sing

Introduction

The first three quotations presented here describe an attitude toward vocality within the world music marketing category, from its inception in 1987 to the present day, which nearly exhibits the proportions of genre. Utterances and their cultural milieux mesh to create a symbol of eternal truth that cosmopolitan city dwellers can appropriate as what Timothy Taylor calls
‘global informational capital’, whereby upward mobility and prestige accompany accoutrements of worldliness.\textsuperscript{6} This symbol connotes exoticism by encouraging the listener to bypass actual engagement with the experiences being sung forth en route to his or her revitalisation. The success of world music thus far indeed has rested upon such a tailor-made journey, with western producers reworking local and national recordings into music for the global metropolis. The fourth quotation, however, points to another way with which voices foreign to a particular community are reckoned by that community. The Suyá of the Brazilian Amazon learn their songs intimately, incorporating them into an expansive repertoire. For the Suyá, group singing performs group identity, and what is sung narrates an intriguing tale of Suyá experiences with ‘others’, providing a glimpse into the multiple perspectives they have encountered. In this way, otherness empowers Suyá to continue singing, allowing them to endure as a cohesive and distinct people.

The differences between these approaches are striking in their level of care and respect. But they share in common an appeal to vocality to mediate difference. Why would song, chant, or other stylised uses of the voice provide a solution in such cases? What happens to make this phenomenon present across sociocultural contexts and world-views?

This essay explores the notion of exceptional or ‘strange’ vocality, using world music as an epistemological starting point into ontological considerations that remain anchored by the particular histories told in myriad case studies. I argue that, while commercialisation via world music has included the fetishisation of vocals as a means to representationally control ‘others’ relatively new to western popular music, this impulse also has roots in cross-cultural appeals to ‘beyond’ as a way to manage disorientation induced by the foreign, by which I mean impending unknowns that may or may not be knowable in the long run. I also make the claim that musical vocality is particularly effective at doing this due to its residence at the nexus of music and utterance, to where it can poetically marry mood to the defiance of an expectation of coherent verbalisation.\textsuperscript{7} It is the creative basis for cultural practices worldwide – which arise as answers to foundational questions, aporias and complexities – that I attempt to account for in my examination of the musically mediated estrangement of vocality within world music and other contexts.

\textbf{Representations of Vocality in World Music}

The naturalisation of digital synthesisers and samplers in popular music during the late 1980s – particularly in electronic dance music (EDM) – encouraged the fetishistic insertions of exotica that have driven the sales of world music recordings. In his 1997 book \textit{Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology}, Paul Théberge notes that...
manufacturers of digital sound libraries jumped on the bandwagon of the world music phenomenon by featuring ‘ethnic sounds’ which allowed musicians in industrialised societies to ‘adopt the position of “musical flaneur” – a uniquely privileged position with respect to the music of other cultures’.8 Probably the most famous example of their success is the prevalence of a synthesised Japanese *shakuhachi* as sonic exotica in advertisements, pop music and films during the mid-to-late 1980s.9 Shortly thereafter, EDM tracks featured vocalists in this authenticating role, who became the feelingful yet anonymised points of contact between audiences and the male producer groups that they ‘fronted’ in appearance only.10 From mainstream dance outfits like C&C Music Factory (U.S.) to British underground ‘house’ and ‘trip hop’ producers, a rotating line-up of female, and often African American, guests provided the vocals.11 The sound of heightened emotional expression in these vocals appeared to do the work of ‘rescuing’ the listener from the post/modern condition sounded in the machine-mediated beats by effecting a simultaneous flight from and return to ‘earth’; her voice soared above the present, introducing new possibilities for the listener, while its bodily basis lent flesh-and-blood to the proceedings. This notion of authenticity as encompassing seemingly opposing desires for the transcendent and the organic was rampant among trip hop fans I interviewed, for example.12 Noting the similar role of female African American backup and duet singers in songs by white male British rock stars of that period, music critic Simon Reynolds describes these singers as symbols for ‘a return to quality of life over standard of living’;13 EDM differs in that the terms of this rescue usually has hinged upon the application of distorting effects to vocals and by the cut-and-paste positioning of vocals within a track.

Thus began a sustained practice of relegating minority and/or foreign status to an easily manipulated vocal signifier. It depicts *a cappella* performance and other methods of foregrounding vocals as threatening (the realm of ‘nature’), necessitating intervention by musical products of western modernity positioned as ‘cultural’, whether they be repetitive beats, sound signifiers for mechanisation, or production techniques employed to obfuscate vocal presence.14 Moreover, this practice formed an aesthetic with which world music has been associated for quite some time, promulgated especially by Real World Records and Western European ethno-techno outfits during the 1990s. To take an example that highlights this aesthetic’s dominance even on the touring circuit, Tibetan meditative singer and Real World artist Yungchen Lhamo has repeatedly confounded world music promoters and arts presenters with her decision to carry a show *a cappella* in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhist chant, without a backing group of instruments and stabilising beats to provide a reference point of ‘normalcy’.15

Formed by British rock star Peter Gabriel in 1989, Real World has featured Asian singers in an Orientalist fashion, backed by top-notch production
values via Real World Studios and a cadre of seasoned Euro-American producers that includes Canadian Michael Brook and France’s Hector Zazou. The sonic and visual brand identity that Gabriel established sets its artists against a canvas of imagined universality in an attempt to bridge the gap between musician and listener. The music draws from world beat, containing a repetitive groove that functions similarly to an EDM drum loop, often accompanied by Afro-beat bass and guitar lines. Album covers are linked by a trademark rainbow strip on the left edge as well as mysterious images of its artists that render them unidentifiable in many respects.

The Real World brand becomes especially apparent when comparing the audio tracks and album covers of musicians’ international recordings for the label with limited distribution traditional releases. For example, Uzbek singer Sevara Nazarkhan recorded two versions of the song ‘Soqinomai Bayot’, one for her self-produced album Gozal Dema and the other for her Real World debut album Yol Bolsin. Synth washes, harmony, repetitive percussion and digital effects were added to the version for Real World, providing a soothing sheen to the end result. Moreover, the vocals on Yol Bolsin exhibit less unmetered improvisation and ornamentation, and are often less audible in the mix, than the vocals on her national recordings, creating a sonic anonymity to match the visual anonymity of the album cover. Since then, Nazarkhan has divided her time recording Uzbek folk music for labels that release folk recordings (such as Calabash) and urbanised music for Real World. This practice of targeting audiences both ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’ has become standard for world music artists. For example, it is common for Senegalese musicians to release albums of homegrown mbalax in-country while reworking those albums for the global market, following the precedent of world music superstar Youssou N’Dour.

Regarding Yungchen Lhamo, *Billboard* album reviewer John Diliberto compares her debut album for Real World, Tibet Tibet – a reprise of an Australian release containing primarily *a cappella* Buddhist chants – with her follow-up album Coming Home as follows: ‘Her last album was a bit too straight, but this one puts her in a more contemporary framework and softens her music. This one will be in fairly heavy rotation’. Amazon.com reviewer Cristina Del Sesto describes the added instrumentation of Coming Home – produced, like Nazarkhan’s Yol Bolsin, by Hector Zazou – as evoking ‘the intangible spaciness [sic] of world-groove trance dance tracks’. In the end, Zazou’s insertion of Lhamo’s vocals within such soundscapes yielded critical acclaim and increased record sales for both Lhamo and Real World.

The sustainability of Lhamo’s career has come with a price, however. Her choice to incorporate cutting-edge western elements into her music arises from her experience as a world traveller since leaving Tibet in her early 20s and not as a capitulation to label pressures or industry standards. As she
I write new songs and Zazou takes care of the musical arrangements. In Tibet, it is hardly possible to know what is done in other countries or cultures on a musical level. But my exile gave me the chance to make enormous discoveries. I therefore believe it is possible to create modern arrangements of traditional songs.26

But Lhamo’s openness to new musical styles did not prevent a clash with Zazou’s neo-evolutionary perceptions of her music and culture. As he states in a 1998 Billboard article: ‘From what I understood, she was traumatized by working on her first album. [...] It was like dealing with a wild animal…’27

In turn, ‘ethno-techno’ groups – those creators of ‘world-groove trance dance tracks’ – produced some of the most lucrative world music of the 1990s by juxtaposing indigenous vocal samples with trance and techno beats. These groups sampled vocals from ethnographic recordings without permission, initially reaping the monetary benefits of being sole proprietors of their releases according to existing copyright laws.28 They often justified their actions according to a phantasy of ‘world harmony’ and mystical connection underwritten by the myopia of historic white colonial privilege. Probably the best known and most analysed of ethno-techno producers, French duo Deep Forest, reached the number one position on the Billboard World Music Charts in 1992 with the track ‘Sweet Lullaby’29, featuring the lullaby singing of a Baegu woman from the Solomon Island Malaita sampled from a field recording made by French ethnomusicologist Hugo Zemp in 1969.30 Two years later, the track ‘Return to Innocence’31 by German dance outfit Enigma topped the pop charts in Western Europe, Britain, New Zealand, South Africa and the U.S., and went on to achieve widespread fame not only in commercials but also as a theme for the 1996 World Olympics in Atlanta. This track features a singer named Kuo Ying-nan from the Amis aboriginal group of Taiwan, whose vocals were originally recorded by a Han-Chinese ethnomusicologist in 1978. Kuo Ying-nan found out about the use of his voice on ‘Return to Innocence’ only after a friend heard the song on the radio, and he and his wife proceeded to sue Enigma’s record companies for royalties.32 While the Kuos won their case, this was due primarily to the consonance between the ‘single author’ basis for the applicable intellectual property laws and the pronounced emphasis on individuality within the Amis creative process. Thus, despite ubiquitous airplay and the Kuos’ victory, singers sampled on ethno-techno tracks by and large saw precious little of the millions of dollars made by producer groups.33

‘Sweet Lullaby’ established ethno-techno as a staple soundtrack for television commercials advertising higher-end brands such as Neutrogena, Porsche, Sony and the Body Shop, revealing cosmopolitan residents of global metropoles as the intended audience for world music.34 It is telling, for
example, that the 1999 smash album *Play* by American techno producer Moby, which employs numerous samples of African American blues vocals from field recordings made by Alan Lomax in the early twentieth century, is the first album to have all of its tracks licensed for commercial use. As observed by Timothy Taylor, these soundtracks in the last twenty years have drawn heavily upon vocalisations, languages and dialects ‘non-sensical’ to much of their audience, conjuring ‘an exoticized elsewhere’ conflating luxury and spirituality. Moreover, markers of ‘modernity’ endemic to EDM genres such as digitally generated sounds and effects act as both anchor and launching pad for these vocals.

As important as vocality has been to the perseverance of world music as a marketing category, treatments of this topic by world music researchers have not yet appeared as the stated purpose of any one work. Nonetheless, many articles and book chapters foreground world music vocality with productive discussion, particularly regarding the monolithic representation of ‘other’ vocal practices within western mass media. In his 2000 article, ‘World Music in Television Ads’, Timothy Taylor discusses at length the ‘nonlanguage syllables’ sung in a ‘young’ timbre, high pitch and/or modal melody that are used in television advertising for Delta Airlines, Chrysler automobiles and Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines as ‘a kind of a metonym for “the world”, with listeners understanding that they are exchanging this for a more particular experience of real music from a certain people, place and culture, which would require a good deal of time, energy and work.’ In addition, the majority of musicians highlighted in Taylor’s 1997 book, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*, are famous as singers. Donna Buchanan and Timothy Rice have devoted a significant portion of their research on Bulgarian singing to the popularity of Bulgarian women’s choirs in the world music market, unpacking the discourse of ‘mystery’ surrounding the reception and promotion of these choirs in the west and the use of their sound in television and film. In her 2005 article, ‘Identity and Exoticism in Sevara Nazarkhan’s “Yol Bolsin”’, Tanya Merchant details how the marketing of Nazarkhan’s first album for an international audience (on the Real World label) involved renderings of her voice in liner notes and production aesthetics as indicative of the ‘ancient and exotic soul’ of the archetypal Central Asian/Middle Eastern woman; furthermore, she describes these renderings as ‘foreign, but not too foreign to European and American ears’, so as to entice the listener without making him leave his comfort zone. Like Buchanan, Merchant questions the differences ‘between the image[s] that singers build for themselves within national borders and [those] which they acquire when going beyond them’, which dovetails with Simon Frith’s concern over the dearth of information traditionally provided by world music labels regarding their role in the shaping of their final products. Lastly, Steven Feld and René Lysloff have decried the lack of recompense and negative stereotyping borne by the short-statured (‘pygmy’) peoples of Congo’s Ituri Forest as a result of excerptions of ‘a single untexted
vocalisation or falsetto yodel, often hunting cries rather than songs or musical pieces’ from documentary recordings and their subsequent insertion into wide-ranging North American and Western European commercial music contexts (such as Deep Forest’s ethno-techno, Madonna’s dance-inflected pop and Herbie Hancock’s mainstream jazz). Like the childlike vocality found in many commercials using world music, the musical appropriation of these cries provides what Feld calls ‘a sonic cartoon of the diminutive person, the simple, intuitively vocal and essentially nonlinguistic child’. He proceeds to ask, ‘Why, in the face of such a varied and complex corpus of musical practices [found on the documentary recordings], does global pygmy pop reproduce the most caricatured image of its origin?’ In another article, Feld articulates the refrain running through the vocal treatments I describe here as follows:

[L]ike other sites of discovery, this one provokes the same anxious question: is world music a form of artistic humiliation, the price primitives pay for attracting the attention of moderns, for gaining entry into their world of representation?38

In all of these cases, mysteries of identity and meaning shroud vocals. Time and location cannot be easily pinpointed, and coherence is subverted. Provided with a canvas upon which he or she can project hopes and fears (as attested to by the first three of this essay’s opening quotations), the intended listener’s sense of the possible expands. Such vocality evokes what Mariana Torgovnick calls the ‘primitivist discourse’ of modernity, where ‘others’ are positioned to accommodate whatever the present is thought to lack. As she puts it, ‘the primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist’s dummy – or so we like to think’.39 At this juncture, it should be emphasised that both world music and electronic dance music, curated by predominately white male musicians and producers, gained momentum precisely when home computer microprocessors and counter-hegemonic movements for civil rights and decolonisation begat a western public sphere more varied in race, gender and ethnicity by the close of the 1980s.40 I posit that, as digitalisation democratised music industries, its products were eventually used to symbolically control the closer proximity they engendered between social minorities and those later known as ‘bourgeois bohemians’.41 This essay pinpoints representational control of western popular music pluralisation via sound and image production; however, many others have addressed the control manifest in collaborations between western rock stars and non-western musicians at this time.42 Moreover, these processes gave shape to endist anxiety surrounding the millennial turn at hand. As Philip Bohlman puts it,

As a measure and marker of encounter […] world music has become
implicated in endism [...] Music expresses and mediates the fear of what lies ahead, and it may serve as a weapon to deflect or stay the impact of an unknown, undesired future.  

In a sense, world music seemed to constitute a reaction – an overreaction – to a new vocal plurality made all the more intimate by being sung.

At the same time, the marriage of singing and incoherence found in these episodes is nothing new. Importing the strange into the familiar via musical vocality has long accomplished important work of social cohesion and identity affirmation within confusedly changing circumstances. I will now place into conversation theorisations and ethnomusicological studies of voice in order to better understand why this would be the case.

The Question of ‘Voice’ and its Musical Implications

Numerous musical ethnographies focus on singing as a meaningful community act. Anthony Seeger’s *Why Suyá Sing* and Jane Sugarman’s *Engendering Song*, for example, examine the continual refiguring of identity in sung performance: for the Amazonian Suyá, public communal singing reconstitutes Suyá identity anew, whereas, for Sugarman’s Prespa Albanian collaborators, gender identities are affected and effected by singing at weddings. Seeger goes on to demonstrate and stress the need for ethnographies to relate song to other ways of using the voice (such as ‘everyday speech’ and ‘oratory’, for the Suyá). As he states,

The failure to recognize the interrelationship of verbal and musical genres and the importance of the ways they are used can result in a dry formalism which reifies the text, performance, or melody and does not begin to account for the richness and use of verbal art forms.

Like Seeger, Aaron Fox and Steven Feld examine song in the larger context of utterance. Fox examines the song-speech continuum as the primary location for identity construction within the rural, working-class community of Lockhart, TX in *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*:

At least in Texas working-class life, the preeminent semiotic technology of discursive mediation is the sounding, talking, singing, crying, narrating voice – the actual medium of mediation, the principal tool of expression, and the material sign both of the essential self and of all the social relations into which the self enters through voicing. Vocal practice is my principal empirical object in this study, subdivided into the overlapping analytic genres of song, talk, and verbal art.

In *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli*
Expression, Feld, in turn, recounts how vocal genres among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea communicate reflections upon loss and abandonment via bird call melodies, consonant with a Kaluli becoming a bird upon death. As Feld observes, 'The reduction to a state of loss becomes equivalent to the state of being a bird'. The 'melodic-texted-sung-weeping' performed by women (sa-yelab) conveys the immediacy of grief, while the 'songs' sung by men (gisalo) constitute more stylised performances of loss designed to move an audience to tears during large social occasions. In addition to melodic and rhythmic 'weeping' motifs, gisalo contain poetic language (or 'bird language') set apart from conversational talk in its communication of an appeal. Like 'the boy who became a Muni bird' (a Kaluli story) when his older sister ignored his pleas, a Kaluli turns to utterances more akin to song at the limit of his or her tolerance for loss.

Arising from their respective field research, Feld and Fox, along with Thomas Porcello and David Samuels, conceptualise a ‘vocal anthropology’ that recognises ‘the intertwining of language and music’ as a vital location for the production of ‘human social life’. In their ethnographic attempts to account for what they call ‘music’s language’ (‘the texted dimensions of songs and other sung poetic genres’) and ‘language’s musicality’ (‘its tonal, timbral, prosodic, and gradient dynamic qualities’), these authors honor affective differences and similarities between speech and song and pay heed to studies that tell of contrasting and integrating ways in which these modes of utterance are used socially.

As I will discuss in greater detail later, ‘music’s language’ includes not just the texts accompanying songs but their contexts: when, where and why songs are performed. While not all cultures conceptually single out ‘music’, sonic forms that westerners would place under this rubric – such as song – tend to be bracketed out from an everyday course of events (to invoke Emile Durkheim’s definition of the sacred) in rituals or ritualistic performances meant for taking stock of limitations as part of re-evaluating what it means to live meaningfully. Besides the bird-like vocalisations of the Kaluli recounted by Feld, for example, Fox notes that ‘Song stands in an explicitly critical and denaturalizing relationship to “ordinary” speech in rural Texas, as in many other societies’, and Seeger observes that the Suyá, the Kaluli and Pythagoras of ancient Greece all regard music as modeled after ‘the non-human order’.

Moving from song to speech, Fox addresses what might be called an inherent musicality to verbal communication that often resonates with the conversant as much as, if not more than, the content at hand. For example, what is generally known as ‘tone-of-voice’ in U.S. culture – the mood or character conveyed in talk, indicated by pitch, timbre, prosody, tempo and dynamics – manifests as what Fox, following the lexicon of linguists, calls the ‘direct discourse’ of Lockhart speakers, who receive how something is
said as *what* is said, no matter the extent to which they differ; in Fox’s words, ‘In such talk, “voice” is inseparable from the truth value of an utterance’.\(^{55}\)

Given the salience of the concept ‘music’ in western cultures, discussions of its affects, effects and potentialities have been thoroughly explored in western philosophy and musicology. Within these discussions, we find outlines of an epistemology that removes music from the domain of *meaning* (Fox’s ‘truth value’).\(^{56}\) For at least the past millennium of Western European history, music has been simultaneously embraced and denigrated for its ability to create both a feeling for and disruption of ‘the letter of the Law’, in line with the western metaphysical distinction between ‘form’ and ‘feeling’ and the privileging of ‘form’ as the locus of meaning. Moreover, vocality has been the demonstration of this ability *par excellence* in several contexts: in order to ensure that singing not overrun reason, Plato in the *Republic*, St. Augustine in the *Confessions* and Pope John XXII in 1324 all claimed that words render the voice sensical and so should anchor it at all times, while also recognising such benefits of music as moving Christians to embrace the Biblical ‘Word’ as part of their world.\(^{57}\) In the twentieth century, musicologist Charles Seeger took notice of the important fact that some portion of musical experience remains unaccounted for in verbal descriptions, what he called the ‘linguocentric predicament’.\(^{58}\) However, his solution was to approach this portion as a ‘language beyond language’ that could only be understood (and that understanding communicated) through musical performance, ‘reaffirm[ing] the poetic conceit of an ineffable musical experience inaccessible to language and hence beyond musicology’s critical reach’.\(^{59}\) This systemic divorcing of music from reality within western thought is often understood today in terms of what Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as ‘aesthetic consciousness’, the idea forwarded by early-nineteenth-century German Romantics that a universal life essence bypasses ‘commonalities of social life’ and self-knowledge accrued through experience to inspire the creation and judgment of art.\(^{60}\)

Adhering to this schema, western popular music scholars have championed music’s disruptive potential as a means of liberation from the strictures of social institutions (such as governmental and educational systems) and categorisations (such as race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality), and many of their discussions have revolved around singers and their contesting uses of the body in performance.\(^{61}\) Bodily surveillance as a distinguishing attribute of western societies followed the Industrial Revolution in Europe and North America, where machine-mediated activities and factory hours provided a mechanistic rendering of bodies that felt especially restrictive for workers transitioning from an agrarian-based economy. This trait persisted well into the twentieth century with accelerated technological advances.\(^{62}\) Hence, scholars’ attention to the emancipatory possibilities of music through voice and body appears to stem in large part from the desire to turn metaphysics on its head, privileging ‘feeling’ over ‘form’, or ‘body’ over ‘mind’. A
celebrated distillation of this idea is the essay titled ‘The Grain of the Voice’, where Roland Barthes draws upon colleague Julia Kristeva’s distinction between two realms of signification: the symbolic (referring to the denotative qualities of language, the production of discourse) and the semiotic (connotative qualities, the pre-conceptual realm of affect which she subsequently, and unsurprisingly, interprets as devoid of meaning). He locates vocal ‘grain’ in the semiotic realm, defining it as ‘the body in the voice as it sings’ and extolling it as a source of pleasure in both vocal production and reception. In treatments and applications of Barthes’s essay, vocal ‘grain’ is generally taken to mean sound quality, or timbre; for example, in an essay devoted to Karen Carpenter’s voice, musicologist Mitchell Morris describes vocal timbre in very similar terms to Barthes’s, as comprised of ‘habits of articulation in speech’ (such as accent), the language of the text sung and the particular physical make-up of the singer.

Discussions of vocal timbre in cultural studies of music, from ethnomusicology to popular music studies, are usually linked to questions about individual and group identities. Steven Feld and Mladen Dolar both describe the distinguishing of vocal timbres as perhaps the way in which newborns initially become aware of difference. Cornelia Fales expands on this point in her essay, ‘The Paradox of Timbre’, noting how people across cultures tend to identify timbre chiefly with a sound source, even though timbre also communicates the source’s proximity and the environment through which the sound has travelled; for example, ‘We say – I hear a cricket; not – I hear a sound that may indicate the presence of a cricket.’ Through the synthesising shorthand of metaphor, timbre and its source become one and the same: the characteristics of timbre are taken for those of its source. In like fashion, vocal timbre is often regarded as a reflection of a singer’s personality, or self, even though it indicates a heterophony of stylistic conventions, genetics and age as much as a gestalt of that singer’s formative experiences.

If we approach the timbre/source relationship as a root metaphor within the realm of vocality, a number of interesting issues emerge. For one, timbral change becomes a convincing way of re-formulating identity: American alternative rock singer/pianist Tori Amos, for instance, adopted and sustained a different vocal persona following an unsuccessful bid for stardom as a pop metal vocalist; this reflected a shift not simply in genre but toward the expression of personal experience. Even the mere attempt at imitation puts one in touch with embodied gestures of sonic production (as with human and animal vocality or the sounds of instruments), thus broadening the listener’s possibilities as a creator of sorts (for instance, ‘I’ll try singing along; it’s not beyond me’). The question then arises as to what identities are implied when vocal sounds are strange or exceptional to the listener, an attribute of world music directly linked to its marketability: if we can use timbre to locate sources, would it not be possible to use it to recover
or identify an obscure source? This is an especially pertinent concern in light of the discourse of mystery already surrounding timbre in many cases, since it is often described as something one simply ‘knows’—uneasily explained, taught, learned, or understood, much in the vein of cultural givens that go unquestioned. For example, Angela Rodel noticed the reluctance of voice teachers at Shiroka Luka Folk Music High School in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, to attempt to teach the timbre required to produce ‘the Bulgarian voice’:

When interviewing a singing instructor from Shiroka Luka about how they select new singers, whether the school would take a student who didn’t have the proper vocal timbre if she nevertheless proved to be musically gifted, she avoided the question, saying “there always are enough candidates who have the right voices”.  

But, before we can delve into vocality’s complications of meaning, it is necessary to explore the question of meaning in music, in order fully to account for vocality’s musical aspect and the special power of musical vocality. To do this, I turn to Roger Savage’s response to this question, which draws upon Martin Heidegger’s notion of Befindlichkeit and Paul Ricoeur’s notion of ‘limit experiences’.

According to John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, ‘Befindlichkeit’ translates as ‘the state in which one may be found’: one’s disposition, mood, manner of inhabiting the world. Heidegger argues that one is always already mooded, that to find oneself in the world is to find oneself mooded. Furthermore, this moodedness orients Understanding, the act of making sense through the synthesis of particulars; in other words, moodedness (‘Being-Affected’) is the condition of possibility for conceptual thinking and pre-predicative meaning, as people are in the first place only open to perceive meaning in that which matters to them. Furthermore, Heidegger stresses the temporality of mood, in that it is always experienced as a future orientation toward our eventual death (finitude), which constitutes the end of time; he also asserts that the radical passivity of ‘Being-Here’ (his term for being thrown into existence) attests to this finitude.

Heidegger’s notion that ‘Understanding always has its mood’ and vice-versa allows us to address the connection between music and affect explored in a variety of musical ethnographies without capitulating to a Romantic translation of feeling as ‘emotion’, or a semiotic translation of feeling as ‘bodily pleasure’. Within such metaphysical prejudices, feeling is either subjective or transcendent, placing it outside the realm of the ‘objective’ and, thus, outside the realm of meaning. To return to my earlier discussion of ‘tone-of-voice’, or what Feld et al. call ‘language’s musicality’, Befindlichkeit recovers meaning for the ever-present affective component of utterance, rather than inadvertently centring the conceptual by bracketing this component as a surplus of meaning, as Charles Seeger had done. But
what of the multiply-noted connection between affect and specifically musical experience? Roger Savage argues that music ‘means’ affectively, at the pre-predicative level, and that this phenomenon is contingent upon experiences of time accompanying experiences of musical events. He makes his case first by rehearsing, via Paul Ricoeur, St. Augustine’s observation of experiences of time as movement – as a passing – and of the present as always a movement between attention (the present of the present), memory (the present of the past) and expectation (the present of the future). Savage then suggests that human beings experience musical events in this way – where what one hears contains a retention of what was heard and an expectation of what will be heard simultaneously – rather than as a series of isolated “now” points’, like seconds ticking on a clock. When attention is radical (as in ‘undivided”), rather than cursory, one is more likely to experience a musical event in its wholeness, as a work of art affectively expressing a world via a unique and repeatable structuring. Thus, each musical event can mood us differently by modulating our experience of time.

If we consider music to mood us in the creation of its own time, music can be said, following Savage, to provide a type of poetic response to an acute awareness of the ‘non-being’ or ‘other’ of time, the sceptical argument that ‘time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain’. As a result, music is often turned to at the limit of one’s understanding (or, more radically, one’s existential finitude) in order to make meaning present. This experience is what Ricoeur refers to as ‘limit experience’, where ready-to-hand meaning becomes eclipsed by poiesis, the ancient Greek term for the act of transforming and continuing the world. M. Craig Barnes acknowledges the ‘creative possibility’ of limit experiences:

A limit experience is an experience that is beyond the limits of normal life. It’s the one you spend most of your life avoiding and dreading, like death and separation. Beyond the limits of those things, we think there’s nothing but emptiness, loss, and anomie. But as Ricoeur reminds us, there is more.

Ernst Bloch describes this limit as a ‘hollow space’, rendered meaningful by ‘cultural signs and works’ that are both narrative, as in (hi)stories, and non-narrative, in which category Ricoeur places music and lyric poetry. For example, reflective monologues in drama, such as the arias of western opera, halt the narrative sequence of events and speculate about the misery of humanity handed over to the erosion of time. These thoughts, placed in the mouth of Prometheus, Agamemnon, Oedipus or the tragic chorus – and closer to us, Hamlet – are inscribed in the long tradition of wisdom […] that, beyond the episodic, touches the fundamental. Lyric poetry gives a voice, which is also a song, to this fundamental element. It is not for the narrative art to deplore the
brevity of life, the conflict between love and death, the vastness of a universe that pays no attention to our lament.\textsuperscript{91}

Bloch, Ricoeur and Savage all assert that music's communication of an affect or mood is, in Bloch's words, 'a call to that which is missing' that happens prior to the conceptual objectification found in narrative.\textsuperscript{92}

To recap, musical experience as a 'limit experience' allows us temporarily to leave the time of our daily concerns and tasks (what Heidegger calls 'Within-Time-ness') for what Mircea Eliade calls \textit{in illo tempore} (sacred time) by mediating the finitudes of our understanding and consciousness.\textsuperscript{93} According to Bloch, accompanying our most profound experiences of music are both a longingful realisation of what is lacking and a sense of joy that comes with what is metaphorically made present,\textsuperscript{94} which is the meaning felt in Being-Affected in a particular way (in other words, feeling as this or that).\textsuperscript{95} Furthermore, this Being-Affected disposes us to certain understandings of the world, understandings that result in formulations that comprise the basis for action, such as intentions, cosmologies, discourses and policies.\textsuperscript{96} This explanation brings us to the anticipatory quality of music theorised by Jacques Attali in his book \textit{Noise: The Political Economy of Music}.\textsuperscript{97} If, as Heidegger suggests, mood is the condition for possibility of Being-in-the-world, and music, as Savage suggests, affects us through temporal radicalisation, then music's mooding can orient us to the world differently, to where things \textit{mean} differently, changing our 'cognition and volition', and eventually our actions, as a result.\textsuperscript{98}

\textbf{Strange Vocality and Limit Experiences: A Theory and Applications}

Because music-laden experiences are often limit experiences, vocality might be described as already exceptional when it is \textit{musical}. However, its human emanation, timbral flexibility and incorporation of the verbal add layers of possibility. In other words, musical vocality’s potential for ‘strangeness’ increases significantly for being \textit{vocal}.

First, I theorise that any utterance, spoken or sung, is experienced as the immediacy of conviction (the sense that something matters, indicative of \textit{Befindlichkeit}), transforming intention into action thanks to the feeling that 'I can'.\textsuperscript{99} As a result, voicing bespeaks a sense of self beyond personhood that serves as the pre-predicative starting point for making meaning \textit{present}.\textsuperscript{100} Therefore, we might locate the fundamental of utterances’ musicality (tone-of-voice) in the illocutionary force with which one designates herself as ‘the one who speaks’ (or sings).\textsuperscript{101}

Properly \textit{musical} vocality, in turn, takes on the quality of \textit{poiesis} not only in its ability to affect, or mood, us pre-conceptually, but also in its performativity. Singing and chanting go on to effect a \textit{play} of selfhood and
can thus be defined as a representation of (a presentation at least once removed from) doing intentionally. With this idea, I foreground Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theorisation of the art work as a ‘meaningful whole’ present in Savage’s notion of music’s affective communicability (recall Savage’s attribution of a musical event’s wholeness to the creation of its own time and mood).

In Gadamer’s articulation, it is through the self-forgetfulness of being fully present with a work that ‘the truth of our own world’ comes into clear focus, unobstructed by practical, goal-oriented action; the purposeless to-and-fro movement of play that constitutes ‘a universal ontological characteristic of nature’ requires a surrender of subjective consciousness to the subject matter of a work. Musical vocality, then, presents the possibility of heightening an observer’s awareness of the presentation of an ‘I’ in action, enabling him or her to know this experience more, thus initiating an augmentation of self-understanding. It is in its allowance for a ‘productive distanciation’ from utterance that we can consider musical vocality as a work of art (in other words, as poetic). We can place the differing vocal genres of the Kaluli (like sa-yεlab and gisalo), for example, under the analytical rubric of ‘music’ for this reason.

Finally, this play of selfhood attending musical vocality can happen verbally as well as sonically. As I noted earlier, gisalo sung by Kaluli men communicate an appeal not only through melodic and rhythmic ‘weeping’ motifs, but also through exceptional ‘bird language’. This harks back to the definition of ‘music’s language’ by Feld et al. as the ‘texted dimensions’ of sung genres. In recommending that cultural studies of voice keep a larger sense of ‘utterance’ within earshot while considering the specific types defined by a particular community, Anthony Seeger, Steven Feld and Aaron Fox make a salient point besides advocating cultural relativism. For, if we take as a given Heidegger’s notion that mood is the condition of possibility for Understanding and, hence, inseparable from it, then the musicality of any utterance, whether great or miniscule, would work hand-in-hand with an expectation of coherent verbalisation. This is the special nature of utterance that absolute music cannot account for: even for utterances without texts, the expectation holds. In a discussion of ‘hearing’ as always meaningful (‘What we “first” hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle.’), Heidegger points out that ‘Even in cases where speech is indistinct or in a foreign language, what we proximally hear is unintelligible words, and not a multiplicity of tone-data’.

His observation is supported by the fact that, in performances found in ritual contexts worldwide, care is indeed taken not only to produce timbre manipulations that ‘disrupt perceptual complacency’ but also to denaturalise words and phrases via vocables; poetic and archaic language; repetitive devices such as parallelism, alliteration and introductory or concluding formulae; uncoordinated polyphony; and ‘stress shift’. While the spectator hearing textual estrangement rarely doubts that there is meaning involved (for example, a signal for the type of song to be
performed), the mystery and awe it likely conjures opens up what the sound event *could* mean, thus charging ritual with significance beyond intelligibility that moves people from upheaval or stagnancy to vitality. We could construe such estrangement, taken alone, as a crucial link between music, with its affective ‘bite’, and speech acts, with their musicality of connotation. For instance, singing with untexted vocables – as in vocal improvisations (like Hasidic Jewish *nigunim*), solfège (a learning aid), or background chordal support (as used by U.S. *a cappella* show choirs) – might be placed somewhere between absolute music and textual estrangement, closer to the former than the latter.

In sum, I posit that song, chant and stylised vocals are especially powerful tools for mediating limit experiences because of their double function as music and as utterance. First of all, the very act of uttering, propelled by the caring of conviction underpinning its musicality, establishes a self in the world of sound and an ultimately human location for any utterance. Second, music establishes *affectively* that meaning permeates our world when coherence is just out-of-reach, partly by way of the distance *effected* in performance. Lastly, verbalisation that is incoherent from the listener’s perspective jars closed expectations open in order to forge new pathways out of paradigms no longer relevant to his or her current reality. Considering these elements together, we can better understand how exceptional musical vocality poetically represents limits of coherence as dissolvable, manifesting physically, emotionally and conceptually as transformations that run the gamut from mild to disruptive. In whatever manifestation, I assert that the experience of ‘others’ through such vocality renders the self, in both an individual and collective sense, a productive referent that expands in possible meanings. So it would appear, then, that chief among the identities implied when vocal sounds are *strange* or *exceptional*, to return to my question posed in the third section, is actually a growth of one’s own identity *as an agent of meaning*. This is the promise of transformation within strange vocality that lies beneath exploitative representations attending world music.

One example of vocality that exemplifies musical experience as a limit experience, and which has been discussed at length within ethnomusicological literature, is *lament*. Lament vocalising is usually undertaken by women, whose subordinate status relative to men in most cultures makes them prime candidates for engaging in such an exceptional behaviour as public grieving. At the same time, these individual performances of sorrow can refigure a community when they represent the sorrow of that community, or communicate primarily with oppressed groups via innuendo and lyrical ‘code’ undetected by the oppressors, thus granting lament social acceptance as a means for articulating experiences of hardship. Examples include the aforementioned *sa-yslab* performed by Kaluli women at funerary events as personal, immediate responses to death and loss; Bulgarian women’s singing in rural villages before WWII as a means
of coping with the difficulties of living within a patriarchal and patrilocal family structure;\textsuperscript{111} tales of abandonment, betrayal and physical abuse suffered by women at the hands of itinerant male lovers in the 'classic blues' sung by African American women during the 1920s,\textsuperscript{112} and 'stylized crying' in the funerals, weddings and, most recently, folkloric performances of Finnish Karelian refugees.\textsuperscript{113} In each case, the performance of lament creates a 'bridge between worlds'; these are usually the worlds of the living and the dead, but any experience of despair and imagined alleviations (such as the evocation of a treasured past or revenge fantasies) would qualify.\textsuperscript{114}

Another example of such vocality can be found within shamanic ritual. Amerindian shamans characteristically convince as healers (and, thus, heal) in their use of exceptional vocality via textual, timbral and temporal transformations. In the case of the Warao indigenous to Venezuela, the vocality used in the \textit{wisidatu}'s healing songs is alien to those who have not been initiated as shamans. Song content largely consists of 'curer's lexicon' – language limited to use in the spirit realm – which includes vocables (in this case, syllables which signal that helping spirits are speaking through the \textit{wisidatu}, like 'ho ho, hoi hoi, hi hi'), archaic words and esoteric grammatical structures.\textsuperscript{115} Changes in vocal timbre – termed 'voice masking' by Dale Olsen – accompany this content, with the \textit{wisidatu} employing a constricted and raspy sound, higher pitch and speech-like vocality to indicate the presence of the inflicting \textit{hebu} spirit.\textsuperscript{116} Finally, parallelisms in song grammar and sections – and in inter-song form, function and text – link performances of \textit{wisimo} while also providing patients and relatives with a buffer of familiarity.\textsuperscript{117} The combination of these elements solidify the authority of \textit{wisimo} as healers: exceptional vocality is not a requirement, as \textit{hebu} understand everyday language just as well. Charles Briggs explains:

\begin{quote}
The nature and power of \textit{wisidatu} curing is based on maintaining the distinctiveness of these two ways of constructing the performance rather than on their fusion. It is this gap – and the exclusion of non-specialists from production and reception of the phenotext [denotative meaning] – that enables \textit{wisimo} to generate social power through curing.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

Among the Garifuna of the Central American Caribbean coast, a group that formed on the Eastern Caribbean island of St. Vincent from the intermixture of West African and Island Carib descendents, shamans known as \textit{buyei} oversee the \textit{dügü} propitiation rite. This three-to-four-day ceremony is held to appease an ancestral spirit (\textit{gubida}) who feels strongly slighted by one of his or her kin. This neglectful family member subsequently suffers a physical affliction incurable by conventional methods, at which point the patient's family contacts a \textit{buyei}, who may prescribe the production of a \textit{dügü} after conferring with the afflicting \textit{gubida}. The climax of the \textit{dügü} is the \textit{mali} section, during which time the \textit{buyei} circumambulates the temple several
times with her rattle and three drummers in order to ‘draw down’ the *gubida* into the proceedings. According to acclaimed *buyei* John Mariano, the *mali* song repertoire – comprising the most sacred songs of the culture – includes the only Garifuna songs in an African language, Yoruba, which is unknown to most Garifuna. As Mariano described to me in an interview from 2007,

A-ha, the way how I look at it [...] we calling them. Like [sings], ‘Ee gaweh yayaa...eeyoo oo ee gaweh gabusangeh damusangeh’ [transliteration]. I don’t know what that mean [starts chuckling], but I know I’m calling my ancestors and speaking to them.

Thus, despite the opacity of the Yoruba language of the *mali*, most Garifuna intimately understand its status as an ancestral language tying their culture to the ancient past, and, therefore, its importance to bringing *gubida* into the ritual fold via bodily possession of their kin. In the cases of both the Warao *hebu nisayaha* (‘curing hebu sickness’) and the Garifuna *dügü*, spirits are made present through chanting and song unfamiliar to participants, performed or mediated by shamans. This vocality heals the disunity between cosmological and phenomenological orders that has materialised in a living body, the efficacy of which I attribute to verbal mystery and music widening the field of possible meanings, thus enabling a visceral experience of meaning.

Finally, vocal imitation of *known* sources in music presents another compelling, albeit less radical, example of limit experience, evoking the uncanny when the copy approaches the original closely enough. Whether a vocalist is performing a spot-on Céline Dion at karaoke, beat-boxing, or channelling a clarinet while scat-singing, imitation in such instances becomes sublime. Much of the vocalist’s power here seems to stem from this effect upon listeners, whose comprehension is jarred in the moment of hearing. As with the applications of textual estrangement noted earlier (such as repetitive devices), the ability of words to matter, when they are present, seems to decline sharply in these moments of near-exact imitation. Of course, impersonation happens in speech as well, the effectiveness of which has enabled lucrative careers in stand-up comedy! However, I suggest that verbal content contributes equally in these instances, which would explain why approximate imitations can entertain people almost as well as precise ones. On the other hand, impersonations near the ‘song’ end of the utterance spectrum require more exactitude and engender what one of my friends calls ‘a moment’: that experience of the uncanny that seems to highlight the dazzling alchemy of the imitator herself more than the imitated and certainly more than the verbal content of the imitation. This ability to literally *be* another entity in song, as far as the ear is concerned, greatly broadens one’s possibilities for being heard and, thus, conceived (by others and by one’s self), returning us to the metaphoricity of identity effected in strange vocality.
Recapitulation

How can an ontologically-based understanding of exceptional vocality expand our understanding of world music as a genre? World music vocals, as found on the Real World label and as sampled on ethno-techno hits, stand out against their sonic environment. While this environment assimilates some of the same exotic attributes as the vocals through the foregrounding of sound technologies, it also enframes, envelops and attenuates vocals with soothing, repetitive, even anesthetising effects for public consumption, even while showcasing their timbral and linguistic ‘difference’. By offering incoherent verbalisation as an escape, the genre upholds the western metaphysical notion that all meaning is objective meaning and, therefore, ‘meaningful’ singing must include recognisable words. Moreover, the postmodern 'loss of centre' that non-western vocality performs is simultaneously a celebration and a mourning, and the discreteness with which the vocals appear against their soundtracks starkly indicates this ambivalence. However, let us stop to consider the Suyá indigenous to Mato Grosso, Brazil, mentioned at the start of this essay. Suyá incorporate strangers’ songs –whether those of animals, enemy groups, or visiting anthropologists– into village life as a way for the community to stay flexible and vital in the face of often rapid and traumatic changes. Anthony Seeger writes that, by becoming others in song, Suyá brought the power of the outside world into their social reproduction and simultaneously established the changing growing self-ness of themselves as members of a community and re-established the form and existence of the community itself. Suyá and world music producers both appropriate foreignness vocally in order to produce the ‘power over that which is portrayed’ that Michael Taussig describes as the ‘magic of mimesis’. Despite differing in the extent to which and ways in which they honour this power, they harness it as a way of coping with perceived disempowerment. Throughout their existence, Suyá have regularly faced the challenges of raids by neighbouring indigenous groups, land expropriation by local ranchers, and the threat of spirit loss caused by witches. Vocality within the world music genre, in turn, voices and tempers the disequilibrium felt by cultural Euro-Americans of privilege during the late twentieth century due to both post-colonial identity politics and the advancement of microprocessor technology widening access to the public sphere. In both cases, the ‘magic of mimesis’ is vocally and musically rendered, augmented through embodiment felt to matter, thus revitalising entrenched metaphors of identity. Moreover, vocal timbre is crucial to this process, as a sonic manifestation of pre-understandings we acquire at birth. Given the tendency across cultures to equivocate timbre with whomever or whatever is imagined to produce it, a vocal timbral identity
can create for the listener an experience of a considerably shortened distance to the source, transforming fear of the unknown into the confidence of knowing.\textsuperscript{125}

Timothy Taylor has written of a growing merger between classical music and world music in the early twenty-first century, and, in fact, many parallels can be found between the embrace of operatic vocality and of world music vocality by western cosmopolitan audiences.\textsuperscript{126} In opera, Continental languages connoting ‘high art’ and the rigorous training required of singers render the sounds uttered from their mouths as fantast\textit{ic}. In this context, vocal wizardry manifest in ornamentation and the upper extremity of range, particularly during arias, provides an experience of ecstasy in its awe-inducing disjuncture with ordinary vocality.\textsuperscript{127} The exoticism of world music vocals encourages similar disjunctures, calling upon voices not only to provide a controlled earful of the ambiguities of the here and now that are especially upsetting to a rationalist world view, but also to perform that moment of ‘grasping together’, or synthesis, that enables Understanding: the creative act of making sense out of confusion. The roles of soundtrack and voice in EDM genres and in many of the most popular world music songs could be interpreted as metaphors for the recently assimilated and yet-to-be learned, respectively.

In sum, an ontological standpoint allows us to more easily discern how world music exists among established musical practices of vocally retending ‘difference’ as a way of reckoning with incoherence. Furthermore, it helps us to realise that ‘others’ are not as distant as epistemologies construct, that epistemologies are never total (to counter Fredric Jameson’s narrative of the postmodern sublime, for example) and that the ‘exotic’ is only ever a short-lived state.\textsuperscript{128}

**Final Thoughts**

This essay has provided a glimpse into traditions where voices create a passage to the temporarily or permanently inscrutable. The use of vocables and voice masking in a ritual context, for instance, is often meant to provide an experience of a spirit realm imagined to await us after death. Lament traditions give people the experience of agency and catharsis in the face of hardship. Vocal impersonation provides a way to experience what it is like to become another by taking on its/his/her timbre, resonance and mannerisms, and by witnessing audiences respond as if the singer were Elvis Presley himself (to take a famous example of impersonation from U.S. popular culture). Finally, world music vocality provides a leisure class with the experience of ‘other’ cultures without having to experience the unpleasantries of ‘culture shock’.

At this point, the question arises: What about faith? With faith, everything is
known that needs to be known. But faith rarely goes unshaken: life experiences can compel us to change our beliefs, and events stop making sense for one reason or another. The vocality I have been discussing arises in these gaps of faith; voids that appear in the face of death, illness, violence, rapid change, oppression, shock, awe and cultural, physical and emotional distance from others. It demonstrates that humanity is bound by a constant underlying faith that we can at the very least render our experiences as meaningful, that the voids that appear before us will never remain for long. So even as such vocals may sound loud, harsh, unsettling, or express dark and distressing emotions, they ultimately arrive from a place of hope, appearing in order to re-calibrate our compasses. I dare say it is inevitable, then, that world music tastemakers would eventually leave their exploratory, unpaved one-way roads of exoticism one by one, expanded enough by their relationships with musicians to expand their working notions of ‘modernity’ to include not only non-western performances but also non-western perspectives.

Notes

1 Profuse thanks to Radical Musicology’s anonymous referees and to Gina Fatone, Steven Friedson, Ellen Gray, Eleanor Lipat-Chesler, Brian Nowlin, Angela Rodel and Charles Sharp for their valuable critiques of this essay in its earlier stages. I am especially indebted to the students in my undergraduate course ‘From Whispers to Screams: Music, Voice, and Limits of Coherence’ for their engagement, insights, queries and concerns, and to Roger Savage’s seminars on aesthetics, hermeneutics and critical theory in the UCLA Department of Ethnomusicology.


3 Zein Al-Jundi and Jacob Edgar, Liner notes for Arabic Groove (CD, Putumayo World Music, PUT 189-2, 2001).


7 By ‘coherent verbalisation’, I mean any kind of utterance, whether spoken or sung, that the listener can readily comprehend. ‘Coherent’ here refers to the epistemological level of ready-to-hand meaning within a particular sociocultural milieu. It refers not only to the textuality of utterance but also to its musicality, including acceptable pitches, volume levels, timbres and articulations. In forwarding an argument regarding cross-cultural envoicements of confusion, I already assume the ontological level: that humans live in a world of ever-present meaning, by virtue of metaphoricity.


9 Théberge, Any Sound, 201-203. Peter Gabriel’s 1986 hit song ‘Sledgehammer’ is exemplary in this regard, opening with a solo shakuhachi sample tacked on to what is essentially a soul tune.


12 Frishkey, ‘Dialectics of “Trip Hop”’. To provide a synecdoche, one fan claimed that ‘the voice is the one thing that is organic, against the crazy stuff going on in the background […] it’s the one thing you can relate to as flesh and blood’; she also asserted, in the same interview, that trip hop vocals have an ‘otherworldly quality’ and ‘a metaphysical energy’ that can take you to ‘a more spiritual…place’ (Deborah Kim, Personal communication, 5 March 2000). I argued that such fan responses reveal a positioning of the female singer in trip hop as a liminal bridge between male musicians and the equipment they operate, heard in how these musicians and the singer herself render her vocals. Of course, this is not to deny or discount other interpretations of trip hop performances; I only wish to highlight an interpretive trend accompanying a particular constellation of genres.


17 Sevara Nazarkhan, ‘Soqinomai Bayot’, *Gozal Dema* (CD, self-released, 2004), Track 10. The cited recording is a re-release; the original recording probably took place in the late 1990s, but I have been unable to locate it to confirm. The entire album can be heard at [http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com](http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com).


21 Anoosh Jorjorian, Personal communication, 6 December 2009.


34 Feld, ‘Sweet Lullaby’, 156.
36 Taylor, ‘World Music in Television Ads’, 162-163, 172. In the U.S., these soundtracks had also begun airing in upscale outdoor malls in the early 2000s, such as The Grove in West Hollywood, CA, and The Shops at Legacy in North Dallas, TX.
37 Ibid. 181.
38 Idem, ‘Sweet Lullaby’, 166. Feld’s use of the terms ‘primitives’ and ‘moderns’, of course, references the constructed binary opposition he is critiquing; it is not meant to reflect a personal allegiance to the terms.
41 New York Times columnist David Brooks introduced this term to U.S. popular culture in 2000 with the publication of his book Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2000). The following definition from UrbanDictionary.com aptly, if somewhat exaggeratedly, sums up this group (an opinion based on personal experience): ‘Yuppies or dinks [dual income no kids] who live as if they weren’t, love to differentiate themselves by visiting foreign countries before the herd of ordinary tourists flock after them (Croatia a few years ago, now the Baltic states), eat alternative/fair trade/organic food such as “bio fair trade Miso soup.” They tend to live in mixed neighbourhoods to be near the poor, but they send their children to private schools to avoid too close a contact with the natives and they price all the poor out of the neighbourhoods they gentrify. […] They often vote for the Communists or the Greens but take the fullest advantage of the tax gifts offered by right-wing governments’ (Remy1789, ‘Bobo’, UrbanDictionary.com, 28 December 2004, http://www.urbandictionary.com/ (7 December 2009)).
42 Famous collaborations include Peter Gabriel and Senegalese singer Youssou N’Dour, Paul Simon and South African vocal ensemble Ladysmith Black Mambazo, and Kate Bush and the Bulgarian Kutev and Radio Ensemble Choirs collectively known as Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares. While star sponsorship of non-western acts brought them attention on an international scale for the first time, they were also categorised according to their ethnicity rather than their chosen musical styles and made scant profits compared to those of their curators. The attitudes of these curators reflect the postmodernist stance de rigueur in 1980s academic and cosmopolitan circles. Postmodernists advocate the recognition of multiple truths and the need for them to receive a hearing in the public domain, stressing the idea
that no one perspective should be represented as applicable to everyone; however, their work is often more devoted to critiquing the colonialist white male ‘centre’ than to understanding ‘peripheral’ truths on their own terms. See Frith, ‘Discourse of World Music’, 319; Taylor, Beyond Exoticism, 245-246; Idem, ‘Some Versions of Difference: Discourses of Hybridity in Transnational Musics’, in Tasha G. Oren and Patrice Petro (eds.), Global Currents: Media and Technology Now (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 219-244: 222, 224.


45 Seeger, Why Suyá Sing, 50-51.


48 Ibid. 33.

49 Ibid. 219-221.

50 Ibid. 34-35.


52 Feld et al., ‘Vocal Anthropology’, 323.

53 Ibid. 332.

54 Seeger, Why Suyá Sing, 62.

55 Fox, Real Country, 38.

56 Gilbert and Pearson, Discographies, 39.


59 Roger W.H. Savage, Hermeneutics and Music Criticism (New York: Routledge, 2010), 73.

60 Furthermore, it likely played a significant part in the appearance of deterministic social theories by the mid-twentieth century, which include: 1) Structural-functionalism, a largely British and North American school of thought naturalised by the 1950s that defines ‘culture’ as a synchronic social order made up of co-constitutive systems of kinship, religion, politics
and economics (Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 61-78); 2) Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘practice’ theory that emerged in the 1970s, which locates social order not just in external structures but in dispositions of thought, mood and bodily comportment that govern individual choice, which he defines as *habitus* (Ibid. 142-143); and 3) Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘discourse’, also introduced in the 1970s, whereby social order is largely influenced by prevailing accounts of events (Ibid. 144-145).


Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice’, 188. More generally, ‘grain’ refers to the enunciation of the body in any performance; besides his predominant reference to voice, Barthes also describes ‘grain’ as ‘the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs’.


As the work of metaphor, this is also the case with any sensory perception. For example, if one sees a cricket, one would say, ‘I see a cricket’, not ‘I see light wavelengths reflected off of a cricket’. I am grateful to Timothy Taylor for this observation.


Since the 1990s, discussions of vocal timbre in western popular music have often assumed the postmodern definition of ‘self’ as constructed via an assemblage of ‘subjectivities’ or ‘subject positions’. It is these fragments which the timbral presence of sound technologies – such as type of recording medium (indicated by record scratches and tape hiss, for example), amplification and distortion – are thought to bring to light, because of its revelation of the performed voice’s contingency. See, for example, Bennett Hogg, ‘Hearing Voices’, unpublished paper, International Association for the Society of Popular Music (IASPM) International 12th Biennial Conference: Practising Popular Music, McGill University, 2003; also Allison McCracken, “‘God’s Gift to Us Girls”: Crooning, Gender, and the Re-Creation of American Popular Song, 1928-1933’, *American Music* Vol. 17, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), 365-395; also Middleton, ‘Girls On Top’. This perspective is usually married to concerns with identity ‘ruptures’ created both externally (by the traumatically rapid changes in technologies and, hence, social conditions within western modernity) and internally (by the formation of an ‘I’ through a rupture with mother-identification, as stipulated in Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis).


Savage, *Hermeneutics and Music Criticism*.

Heidegger’s discussion of *Befindlichkeit* appears in Chapter 5 (‘Being-In As Such’) of *Being and Time [Sein und Zeit]*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962 [1927]), 131-80. I follow ethnomusicologist Steven Friedson in invoking Heidegger’s ontological orientation as a way to account for similarities in musical experiences and modes of understanding across cultures, specific cases of which I reference throughout this essay. Friedson describes this approach in his musical ethnography *Dancing Prophets: Musical Experience in Tumbuka Healing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 187-188: ‘In *Being and Time*, as Dreyfus [1991:34-35] points out, “[Heidegger] does not discuss what it means to be a human being in specific cultures or historical periods, but rather attempts by describing everyday life to lay out for us the general, cross-cultural, transhistorical structures of our self-interpreting way of being and how these structures account for all modes of intelligibility”. […] He *discerns a positive*
significance for ethnography...in an ontological investigation into the lived experience of other ways of being-in-the-world.' Italics added; Friedson is referring to Hubert L. Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division 1 (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991).

75 Heidegger, Being and Time, 172.

76 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 91. Relating Understanding to absolute music, Gadamer explains, 'Even in listening to absolute music we must “understand” it. And only when we understand it, when it is “clear” to us, does it exist as an artistic creation for us. Thus, although absolute music is a pure movement of form as such, a kind of auditory mathematics where there is no content with an objective meaning that we can discern, understanding it nevertheless involves entering into a relation with what is meaningful'.

77 Heidegger, Being and Time, 182.


79 Gilbert and Pearson, Discographies, 39-43.

80 Charles Seeger, ‘Speech, Music, and Speech about Music’.

81 Savage, Hermeneutics and Music Criticism, 103-123.


83 Savage, Hermeneutics and Music Criticism, 122.

84 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 111, 117-119, 121, 133-134. Art’s ‘transformation into structure’, as Gadamer calls it, describes the creative transformation of a world-view into ‘a meaningful whole which can be repeatedly presented as such and the significance of which can be understood’ (117). This ‘meaningful whole’ – or ‘correct presentation’ (Darstellung) – that characterises a work renders it representable and recognisable as a work despite the different players and spectators who bring it to presentation over ‘the changing course of ages and circumstances’ through which it lives (111, 121); their interpretations, never merely ‘free and arbitrary’, are bound by the exigencies of Darstellung and illuminate ‘the work’s own possibilities of being’ (118). Nor is the structure of a work the completely ‘free invention’ of genius, operating within a world unto herself: the artist stands with her presenters and spectators on a common ground of pre-understandings that allows her work to be communicable (133-134). A work’s communicability manifests as a dialogue between its interpretation and structure, and also between different interpretations which, taken together, accrete around the work as tradition (118-119). This conversation, for which the work provides the subject matter, encapsulates the playful ‘becoming and returning’ that comprises the experience of art.

85 Ricoeur, Time and Narrative Volume 1, 7-8.

86 Savage, Hermeneutics and Music Criticism, 118-123.


Paul Ricoeur theorised a metaphoricity basic to events of meaning, whereby ‘Being-As’ characterises the ‘Being-Here’ (Heidegger’s term) of human existence; see Ricoeur, ‘On the Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination and Feeling’, in Sheldon Sacks (ed.), On Metaphor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 141-157: 156-157. Applying Heidegger’s notion of Befindlichkeit, Ricoeur argues that ‘Being-As’ is also a ‘Feeling-As’, since ‘Being-Here’ is always a ‘Being-Affected’. As Ricoeur reiterates, and I emphasise in this essay, part and parcel of this metaphoricity are the new associations always being imagined, especially compelled by limit experiences.

Fox, Real Country, 36-37. Fox echoes this point in a statement from Chapter 1: ‘Entwined with ritual, the sacred, altered states of conscious [sic], and especially with feeling (as a quality of experience and a topic of discourse), art – and perhaps especially music – is in many ways the very engine of culture as a dynamic, hegemonic process’.


Heidegger, Being and Time, 175.


Ibid. 92-93. In this paper presented in 1988, Ricoeur locates ‘self’ within the realm of pragmatics, as the quotidian experience of intending and making do as agents of our own actions. He calls his audience to further consider ‘self’ as a metaphorical extension of ‘person’, the latter being part of a semantics of our propositions about actions. Arguing that the productive moment emerges in the tension between personhood and selfhood, Ricoeur claims it is necessary to consider simultaneously the semantics and pragmatics of ‘human being’, which involves identification as both one of many ‘objective persons’ within the practical field (‘He/She’) and also as a self-designating subject constituting a world (‘I-You’).


Gadamer, Truth and Method, 111, 121. See note 84 for further explanation.

Ibid. 128, 108, 103-104.


Feld et al., ‘Vocal Anthropology’, 323.

See note 7 for my working definition of this term.

Heidegger, Being and Time, 207.


110 Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*.
113 Tolbert, ‘The Voice of Lament’.
115 Briggs, ‘The Meaning of Nonsense’, 204-207. The use of curer’s lexicon is also common in the songs of the Amerindian Suyá and Diné (Navajo) groups (Seeger, *Why Suyá Sing*, 45-46; also Steven M. Friedson, personal communication, 5 January 2010).
117 Ibid. 204-207. Wisimo is the plural of wisidatu.
118 Ibid. 218.
120 John Mariano, Personal communication, 13 August 2007.
121 See my discussion of postmodernism in note 48.
122 Seeger, *Why Suyá Sing*, 140.
125 I should reiterate that a thorough understanding of sociocultural particularities is crucial for embracing these generalities with minimal reservations.
126 Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism*, 174-175.
127 The high-volume, high-pitched singing (and guitar-playing) found in the heavy metal genre channels such classically based virtuosity toward similar ends, allowing working-class white males in the U.S. to transcend the strictures of class and masculine gender performance. See Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).
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**Discography**


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