

Flutter Echo

By David Toop

Ecstatic Peace Library, 208 pp, 2019

Reviewed by Guy Davidson

IN MY TWENTIES, I WAS A FAN OF DAVID TOOP'S WORK IN THE BRITISH 'STYLE BIBLE' *THE Face*. His writing there in the 1980s and 1990s—acute, elegant, humorous—was generative for my understanding of a range of musical genres, particularly funk, soul, and disco, which then, as now, were at the centre of my music taste. A bit later, I read and loved the second edition of Toop's pioneering 1984 history of hip-hop (*Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop*, 1991), which further enhanced my appreciation of 'black music'. In these early encounters with Toop, I didn't register the fact that he was, as well as a writer, a seasoned musician and composer—an important figure in the avant-garde scene of British improvisational music, as well as a contributor to self-aware pop acts like The Flying Lizards and Frank Chickens. Though *Rap Attack's* author information mentions that Toop 'as a musician ... has recorded with Brian Eno, John Zorn, Prince Far I and many others', the first time Toop's musical career lodged in my mind was when I read Simon Reynolds' history of post-punk *Rip it Up and Start Again* in 2005. Reynolds briefly traced how Toop, along with other founding members of the London Musicians Collective of improvisers unexpectedly ended up creating the Flying Lizards' hit single 'Money'. I found Reynolds' book a riveting read, and it prompted me to purchase on CD albums by prominent postpunk acts PiL and Gang of Four—albums I'd bought on vinyl as a teenager, after reading praise of them in the *New Musical Express*, and had sold when I moved from New Zealand to Australia in 1986. But I didn't really reconnect with post-punk (if I'd ever actually been that connected with it). Something about the state of my aesthetic 'attunement', as the literary critic Rita Felski calls it, meant that I wasn't ready to expand (or re-expand) my musical tastes right then (Felski). Recently, though, for whatever reason, I've been engaging in a concerted project of reattunement—not getting back into post-punk so much, but exploring a range of genres I didn't in the past have much interest in or knowledge of, including jazz, ambient, exotica, and contemporary experimental music. An immersion in Toop's other books and in the music he's created as a solo artist and in collaboration with others has enabled and enriched this project of exploration.

What I mean to convey with these snippets of my own taste history is a sense not only of the multifacetedness of Toop's career but also of how deeply engaging he is as a writer on and maker of music. One couldn't ask for a better guide for the kind of exploration I've described. Toop's relation to music is characterised by openness. He resists the hierarchies, distinctions, and purisms that have dominated musical cultures of all kinds. Indeed, Toop's avant-garde aesthetic resists the distinction between music and sound, and many pages in *Flutter Echo* arrestingly describe the deconstructions of this distinction carried out in his practice as an improvisational musician. (None of this is to say that he's indiscriminating in his musical tastes, of course. Of what value would an indiscriminating guide be? Toop has his musical dislikes and blind spots, as we all do.)

Toop's openness is contagious. Whole new sonic worlds have emerged for me as, thanks to him, I've accessed recordings of gagaku, the ancient court music of Japan, or of AMM, the pathbreaking British free improvisation group. Guides like Toop are particularly welcome today, in which the Internet allows near-instant access to musics of all kinds. Platforms like Apple Music and Youtube have enabled my musical reattunement, but the Internet can also of course produce a bewildering sense of too-muchness. The digital 'ocean of sound' is just one of the many aspects of our auditory lives that Toop has discussed presciently and insightfully. His 1995 book of that title ends by asserting that 'Music—fluid, quick, cereal, outreaching, timebased, erotic and mathematical, immersive and intangible, rational and unconscious, ambient and solid—has anticipated the aether talk of the information ocean' (Toop, *Ocean of Sound* 278).

Flutter Echo began life as a commission from a Japanese small press, Toop tells us in a preface. His agreement to write a memoir was 'influenced by the thought that it would be published in Japanese. In that sense it would remain a semi-secret' (xx). Interest from Thurston Moore (also a musical collaborator of Toop's) and Eva Prinz of Ecstatic Peace Library in publishing a longer, English-language memoir followed. 'Grateful for their enthusiasm and encouragement I decided that shame was no big deal at my age', Toop writes (xx). But perhaps the issue of shame was always moot. As he notes, his writing has always been

personal, *unashamedly* grounded in my own experience if only because I present my ideas as emanations of my own practice, thinking, research and encounters, rather than coming from a neutral or distanced source. (xx; emphasis added)

Flutter Echo complements Toop's previous writing by continuing to make connections between analysis, art, and life—though it brings his personal

experience into closer view, of course. The memoir also resembles most of Toop's other books in its layered and fragmentary form. In the preface, Toop indicates that his formal choices are attempts to 'stay true to the cyclical, repercussive and imbricated nature of events' (xi). The recollection of a life is itself a kind of improvisation, he suggests. Like his other books, *Flutter Echo* employs what Simon Reynolds, in a profile of Toop, calls 'a musicated writing' of leitmotifs and samples that makes connections 'sideways' rather than in a linear fashion (Reynolds).

Because it's centrally about his own life and practice, though, *Flutter Echo* explores the tensions and overlaps between music and writing more explicitly than earlier work. Toop describes as 'one of the dilemmas' of his life 'the desire to document and analyse, the pull towards writing, then the strong urge to be part of the action, making and doing rather than reflecting and observing'. Though these 'contradictory impulses have been a source of conflict and unhappiness', he also recognises them 'as the engine that has driven me to map out the zone in which oppositional tactics can be fused together', so that now, at the time of writing, he feels 'able to close the gap between the divided selves of my being—writer and musician—and ... capable of discarding such categories' (136). Toward the beginning of the book, Toop writes about how various listening experiences have taught him that

hearing can take place without sounds being replaced by words. This is very difficult to achieve—a life-changing moment, in fact. To compound the problem for me as a writer there was the question of how to listen without replacing the sounds with words, but then to use words to describe the experience of listening without words. This is almost impossible—my life's work you could say. (15)

The foundational experience of this lifelong project provides the book's title. As a child in the early 1950s, Toop regularly walked with his mother to his grandparents' house in suburban North London, past prefabricated housing built 'for those bombed out of their houses by German planes and rockets' and via a narrow path bordered by concrete walls (12).

The narrowness of this path meant that the walls reflected echoes from our footsteps very rapidly, an effect described as flutter echo by acousticians. Like the fluttering of a moth's wings, sound bounces back and forth rapidly between the two parallel walls to create a 'zing', the illusion of a pitched note with a metallic quality.

The experience was multifaceted in its implications. It prompted a sense that sound was 'a phenomenon that could change according to physical laws'. And its personal and historical contexts awakened a realisation of 'the complex

relationship between sound, its causation, its environment and the active role of the listener', the 'active role' entailing

not just the realisation that listening is going on but the emotional connections to its circumstances, in this case family, the consequences of war, notions of home and the way in which something habitual—the walk from one destination to another—open[s] out into the unexpected.

'A lifetime later', Toop tells us, 'the same effect of flutter echo resonates within deep memory as a flutter of the heart' (13).

This Proustian account, in which sound rather than taste or smell helps form the self, sets in train the book's concern with the auditory dimensions of identity, a concern that is bound to 'resonate' with other readers. Toop writes,

Music can become embedded in a person's sense of their identity, even though identity is complex... By listening to music, many identities can be unearthed within this recognisable body called the self. (26)

Moreover, he continues, in making music,

I have always felt that I am birthing creatures. These musical materials—the sound and living silences—have their own lives. They begin to make decisions for themselves, finding their own forms.... In doing so they play a part in shaping the identity of the person who compelled them to approach. (26-7)

This effect can't be guaranteed of course. Not all musics connect with everyone, and the more unfamiliar the sounds, the less likely the connection. But sometimes some of us want to engage with the unfamiliar. A formative experience for Toop was his encounter with the 1961 Ornette Coleman Quartet album *This is Our Music*, which he bought as a teenager based on a passing, and he later realises, dismissive mention in the *Melody Maker* music paper. The record challenged his ideas about the nature of music 'at a moment in my life when I was asking for them to be challenged' (133). Deeply moved by music that alienated and confused others around him, Toop learned

from the record... that music can go beyond style and fashion to be a genuine expression of human feelings, their sufferings and the necessity of giving form to life's radiance and struggle, even when very few people understand it. (134)

Toop's minority tastes were fostered by experiences at art school (he eventually dropped out) and exposure to London's artistic undergrounds in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this period he began his ventures into musical improvisation (playing mainly flute and guitar), combining them with experiments in visual art, light shows, and writing. The pages describing these years deliver, with a combination of vividness and understatement, the thrilling nature of the period's artistic exploration—the sense of pushing forward toward the new, however gropingly and uncertainly, by a clearing away of the old. The book brings immediacy to the claim made more impersonally elsewhere that what used to be called 1960s postmodernism was really modernism all along. Toop writes of his attraction to the artistic experimentation of the time that

growing up in the inertia and conservatism of London's outer suburbs in the 1950s, I could only respond positively to that which was radically other, that which was reduced to fragments or rubble, the outer edges of emotion, or to celebrations of noise and chaos. (40)

Of the beginnings of his longstanding collaboration with the percussionist Paul Burwell, Toop writes that they

shared a desire to go beyond existing frameworks of the music, to think more deeply about sonic experience (particularly through anthropology) and to build instruments that could produce unprecedented sounds. (48)

This desire to go beyond, to venture into otherness, entails for Toop an openness to the music of 'non-Western' cultures and to the non-human sound worlds produced by animals, plants, inanimate nature. Intensive research in anthropology in the 1970s brought him to a sense of musical practice as potentially shamanistic, enabling contact with 'a more magical universe ... a life more attuned to the strangeness of natural phenomena and the outer limits of being human' (155). The depth of his commitments in this respect saw him travel into the Venezuelan jungle in 1979 with two friends to make field recordings of Yanomami shamanism. Toop's interest in shamanism does not evince a religious or mystical bent, at least not in any conventional sense. Rather, it links up with an interest in the transformative potential of music—a potential ultimately, if perhaps only tentatively and cryptically, political:

To read anthropology was to understand how cultural forms embody environmental, social, spiritual and political relations but to listen to music deeply over time, almost by entering into and becoming its structure, was a physical absorption into this lesson, an intimation of

how authoritarian and repressive aspects of society might be shifted, even transformed. (87)

It's an idea explored at greater length in Toop's *Into the Maelstrom*, the first of a projected two volumes on Western improvisational music in the postwar era (Toop, *Into the Maelstrom*). Yet Toop doesn't reserve the idea of a connection between music and political transformation for the avant-garde. For Toop, popular forms are equally likely to issue carry the 'potential for opening up the self, even changing society' (86); one of the musical touchstones that prompts these reflections is Sly and the Family Stone's 'Time'. Toop's deep engagement with African American popular musics began as a child when he used to play blues, R&B and jazz 45s brought back from America by an aunt. It was his knowledge of African American musical traditions which enabled him to move into a career as a writer in the 1980s. Exhausted by the economic precarity and interpersonal tensions of the avant-garde music scene, Toop changed his life when he landed the commission to write his hip-hop book, which maps the then-new genre's historical connections to jazz, soul, disco, and African oral folk cultures. Toop had already been involved in small-circulation music journalism, helping to found and write for the LMC-affiliated magazines *Musics* and *Collusions*. *Rap Attack* set him on a more mainstream path as a freelance music writer; he landed columns at *The Face* and later *The Wire*, and assignments for outlets such as *Vogue* and the *Sunday Times*. During this period, from the mid-1980s and the 1990s Toop interviewed a diverse host of musicians—including Kate Bush, Tupac Shakur, Aphex Twin, Lou Reed, Burt Bacharach, Don Cherry, Brian Wilson, Enya and Bros—giving him 'privileged insights into the motivations and histories of artists for whom I had either huge admiration or a sort of perverse curiosity' (143).

Though the change of circumstances offered by this shift in career was obviously welcome, and though it obviously offered much of value for Toop's thinking on music, he devotes comparatively little time to his work as a journalist; the focus remains on his art. Another moment of exhaustion in the late 1990s saw him leaving journalism, moving into academia and concentrating again on music making, this time taking up the compositional and sonic affordances of computers. Since the mid-1990s, Toop has been releasing solo and collaborative albums regularly—a bewitching, rewarding body of work that I've only begun to explore in my project of reattunement. *Flutter Echo* also bewitches and rewards. It's an eloquent and moving book that has much to tell us about the intertwinement of living and sound not only as regards its author, but as regards the experience of us all.

GUY DAVIDSON is an Associate Professor of English Literatures at the University of Wollongong. He is the author of *Categorically Famous: Literary Celebrity and Sexual Liberation in 1960s America* and *Queer Commodities: Contemporary US Fiction, Consumer Capitalism, and Gay and Lesbian Subcultures*.

Works Cited

- Felski, Rita. *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2020.
- Reynolds, Simon. 'Tales of Toopographic Oceans: An Intellectual Profile of David Toop, Director's Cut Version.' *ReynoldsRetro*. <<https://reynoldsretro.blogspot.com/2013/02/tales-of-toopographic-oceans.html>>.
- Toop, David. *Flutter Echo: Living Within Sound*. London: Ecstatic Peace Library, 2019.
- . *Into the Maelstrom: Music, Improvisation and the Dream of Freedom: Before 1970*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- . *Ocean of Sound: Ambient Sound and Radical Listening in the Age of Communication*. 2nd edition. London: Serpent's Tail, 2018.