

# ‘The Most Annoying Noise of All Time’

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**T**ECHNOLOGY IS OFTEN UNDERSTOOD AS A PROCESS OF IMPROVING OR PERFECTING things, as summed up in books such as Robert Friedel’s *A Culture of Improvement* and Greg Milner’s *Perfecting Sound Forever*. Milner’s work—an account of sound recording technology—takes its title from a line used in early-1980s promotions for the compact disc and offers a reminder that developers of sound recording and production tools have generally sought to hide unwanted noise in their drive for perfection. Many artists interested in sound, by contrast, have been just as interested in exploring the noise that surrounds such processes, amplifying the glitches, distortions and mechanical chaos that form the cacophonous flipside to the quest for perfect high fidelity. This practice has gone by many names; one of my favourites is ‘broken music’, as used by the Czech performance artist Milan Knižák in the 1970s. Broken music can be understood as an aesthetic or experimental process that brings the hidden out into the open, showing or even unstitching the stitches. It deliberately undoes perfection through a set of compositional processes that emphasise fracture, fragmentation and malfunction and view these not as problems but as creative possibilities.

In thinking about the histories and traditions of broken music, I want to consider, on the one hand, those associated with the art world and what often gets named in that world as experimental or avantgarde and, on the other, the histories and traditions associated with popular and vernacular music. These also have their

experimental aspects and it is important that we remember that the world of popular and vernacular culture is one of experimentation even as it is one of commercialism and commodification. There's a lot, too, that crosses between these worlds and that blurs the boundaries. As an example of this, I want to connect some of the dots between the worlds of John Cage and a branch of hip hop occasionally referred to as 'noise hop'. While I'm interested in the Cage of 4'33", here I use his tape composition *Williams Mix* (1951-1953) as a connecting point between the experimental art music world of the 1950s and the 'alternative' hip hop world of the 2010s, as *Williams Mix* becomes 'Williams Mix', a track on the second album by the Los Angeles-based group clipping.<sup>1</sup>

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In the 1920s, the Hungarian artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy wrote about the 'potentialities of the phonograph'. He pointed out that, while the phonograph had been designed to initially record and later play back sound, it could also be used as a creative instrument that would allow a composer to directly realise their musical ideas without the need for additional musicians or orchestra. By writing into or manipulating the grooves of the record, new compositions could be imagined. In the early 1950s, John Cage showed how pre-recorded tape could be cut up and recombined to form new compositions with *Williams Mix*, a piece he laboured on for many months with fellow musicians Earle Brown and David Tudor. The finished piece was designed to be played on eight tape machines simultaneously, with Cage's score indicating how and where the tapes should be placed to create the new piece in a manner the composer likened to the use of fabric in a dressmaker's pattern. The idea was that different sound sources (recordings) could be used in future performances of the piece provided they were chopped and combined using the same score/pattern. *Williams Mix* was performed in New York in 1958 to a mixed reaction by its audience. In 2012, Tom Erbe, a specialist in computer music, decided to recreate Cage's seldom-performed piece by designing software that could perform *Williams Mix* according to Cage's instructions but using a new bank of sound recordings made by Erbe and several collaborators (see Erbe). As a companion piece to his own recordings, Erbe worked with the hip hop (or noise hop) group clipping. to mix the sounds of their second 2014 album *CLPPNG* according to the score of *Williams Mix*.

One of the notable aspects of this new appearance of Cage's composition on a hip hop album is that it highlighted an ongoing tension between the worlds of art and vernacular musics. As attested to by many commentators, Cage identified with an old-fashioned notion of high art even as he sought to challenge it. While he may

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<sup>1</sup> The group's name is usually stylised as 'clipping.' (with a lowercase 'c' and a full stop after the name) and I retain that format in this text.

have deliberately wound up the formal traditions of the classical concert through works such as *4'33"* and *Williams Mix* (the 1958 performance of which was recorded for the album *The 25-Year Retrospective Concert*, providing a permanent document of the mixed audience reaction to the piece), Cage often sought to distance himself from popular music, making several critical comments about jazz in particular. This antipathy has been chronicled in an influential article by George E. Lewis, in which the author makes a distinction between 'Eurological' and 'Afrological' lineages of improvised music from the mid-twentieth century on. Lewis's interest is in improvisation rather than recorded music, but it is equally instructive to map the reuse of recorded music as imagined or realised by Moholy-Nagy, Cage, Jamaican dub reggae DJs and hip hop turntablists onto Eurological and Afrological histories and practices. Such a process would need to take account of seeming 'crossover' artists such as Christian Marclay, DJ Spooky, DJ/rupture and clipping.

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For a popular music scholar with a foot in the world of experimental sound art, it can be interesting (or frustrating) to note how histories of 'broken music' that take a cue from Knížák neglect the importance of hip hop turntablism, dub reggae, Jamaican sound system culture and many more global vernacular practices that rely on reconfiguring previously recorded sound. I would want to connect such practices to other ways in which popular musicians have misused technology for creative purposes. There are rock music techniques that have foregrounded heavily amplified and distorted electric guitar music in ways that are significantly informed by Afrological experimentation. There is also noise music, a genre of rock-adjacent music that arguably retains something of an experimental, avantgarde or conceptual aspect to it and would seem, depending whose histories one is reading, to connect to Eurological traditions more than Afrological ones.

Listening to examples ranging from Jimi Hendrix and Blue Cheer in the 1960s to Merzbow in the 1980s or Wolf Eyes in the 2000s, we can imagine a set of processes by which noise has become part and parcel of everyday music culture. These days, we probably don't think twice about hearing some deliberate distortion on a piece of popular music, and this tells us how quickly we can become used to the creative misuse of music technology. We are accustomed to hearing glitch aesthetics in rock, electronic dance music and even folk music. Perhaps it has something to do with the cleanness of digital sound that invites musicians to add some dirt or to add the sound of recording technologies of the past. What engineers would have wished to silence in the past now becomes a desired sonic presence, whether as a form of nostalgia for earlier periods of recording history or just as a pleasing textural addition to the sound design, an added layer to make the music somehow

more tangible. As Kim Cascone writes, with ‘post-digital’ forms of computer music in mind:

it is from the ‘failure’ of digital technology that this new work has emerged: glitches, bugs, application errors, system crashes, clipping, aliasing, distortion, quantization noise, and even the noise floor of computer sound cards are the raw materials composers seek to incorporate into their music ... While technological failure is often controlled and suppressed ... most audio tools can zoom in on the errors, allowing composers to make them the focus of their work. (548)

Broken music also reconfigures what we hear *as* music, with what was once considered unwanted sound becoming desirable and pleasing sound for some listeners. Like the distorted guitar, the dub version or the scratched record, glitch works as a counter to technological determinism and also as a creative sonic aesthetic with the potential to cross over into the mainstream.

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clipping. came to prominence in 2013 with the release of their album *midcity*. Combining the rapped narratives of Daveed Diggs with the harsh noise-based samples and beats of Jonathan Snipes and William Hutson, clipping.’s music showed influences from gangsta rap, noise music and experimental sound art. Anticipating the use of ‘Williams Mix’ on their second album, *midcity* contained a nod to minimalist composer Steve Reich; a later album would include an eighteen-minute track ‘Piano Burning’, based on a concept by composer Annea Lockwood. Underlining the conceptual aspect of their work, Hutson has said, ‘Things are almost never “random”. We don’t jam or improvise at all. Everything is carefully considered, and agonized over’ (quoted in Sadler).

The group have attributed their name to a sound production process whereby an audio signal is clipped, leading to a distorted sound—a process mentioned by Cascone in his list of glitch aesthetics. The idea of the clip also works as a neat allusion to the sample, a crucial building block of hip hop music. *CLPPNG*, the title of the group’s second album, is a ‘clipped’ word, while the group’s name is also visually clipped in its appearance on the album packaging, becoming a series of vertical lines and curves. Furthermore, Diggs’s lines are delivered in a ‘clipped’ manner which estranges language and impedes sense-making at times; the many interviews in which Diggs has explained the meaning or context to his lyrics testify to a need to unpack some condensed verbal objects (see ‘clipping.—Work Work’; ‘Silk Screens: clipping.—“bout.that”’). Among the conceptual frameworks used by clipping. are a reliance on found sounds or the creation of sound samples from unusual objects, along with Diggs’s decision to write lyrics in the second person,

an attempt to avoid the tendency in hip hop reception to equate the 'I' of the lyric with the person who wrote and rapped it. Although they don't explicitly use George Lewis's terminology, clipping. seem keen to cite both the Afrological and Eurological traditions when discussing their influences (see, for example, 'Silk Screens: clipping.—"bout.that"").

When *CLPPNG* was released in 2014 many reviews of the album presented the track 'Get Up' as a test case for deciding whether listeners would like the record or not. The track uses a repeated sound of an alarm clock buzzer as the only accompaniment to Digg's rapping and is described in one interview with the band as 'the most annoying noise of all time' (Sadler). As Hutson explains, the annoyance of the sound is as much contextual as anything: 'Alarm clocks aren't distorted, don't feedback, but everybody hates the sound of them because of what they mean' (quoted in Sadler). 'Get Up' attracted praise for its conceptual clarity and innovations from some commentators; William Hannan, for example, noted that it is 'based on one of the most annoying sounds ever known to the human race ... But once Diggs is on the mic this loathed sound becomes the only logical choice for the composition'. Others were more critical, one finding the 'headiness' of the group's concepts too removed from what makes hip hop exciting (Jayasuriya). It would be interesting to interrogate this suspicion of 'headiness', high concept and what another reviewer (Kearse) calls the overly 'academic' aspect of clipping.'s music in terms of what it might tell us about the extent to which Afrological musical forms such as hip hop are 'allowed' to explore areas previously fenced off for Eurological art forms. Here, though, I merely wish to consider the recontextualization of everyday sounds (such as alarm clocks) in light of what they might tell us about sound's appropriacy. Tracks like 'Get Up' remind us that sound heard as noise, or perhaps sound not conventionally heard at all—not *listened to*—becomes foregrounded, beheld, urgent, or pleasurable. There's a John Cage version of that, just as there's a Clara Rockmore version, a Sister Rosetta Tharpe version, an Albert Ayler version, a Milan Křižák version, a Jimi Hendrix version, a Björk version, a clipping. version and so on.

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*CLPPNG* is also interesting in the way it foregrounds the materiality of recording and playback technologies. The vinyl version of the album differs from its digital counterparts (CD, streaming and downloadable versions), as summarised by the record database Discogs:

The LP version does not include the songs 'Intro' and 'Ends' found on the CD/digital version ... but does include a slightly longer version of the track 'Body and Blood'. The vinyl version also includes a bonus feature of 100 locked groove audio samples on side D, which are

exclusive to the vinyl version of this release (all untitled, titles were revealed by clipping. in 2016.) The vinyl version of 'Williams Mix' is different to the digital version of the track and C5 is also a hidden track (later titled 'Run Out' by clipping. in 2016), which ends with a locked groove. ('clipping.—CLPPNG')

The materiality of record playback is highlighted on 'Dominoes', a track that features on all formats of the album (it precedes 'Williams Mix' on side C of the vinyl version). As Hutson revealed in an article paying tribute to hip hop pioneer DJ Screw, 'each individual drum sound that made up the beat for "Dominoes" was the sound of a record slowing to a full stop' (Hutson). These sampled turntable slowdowns can be heard throughout the track, with a particularly notable example at the end, where it may sound to a listener of the record like their turntable has indeed stopped working. The sequencing of 'Williams Mix' after 'Dominoes' adds to the conceptual mischief as the listener is presented with a seemingly random selection of tiny clips of the album they have just listened to, a recombination of something already recombined. 'Williams Mix' makes an interesting companion piece to Cage's more famous *4'33"* in that it provides a kind of constructed randomness rather than the framed, but otherwise 'natural' randomness, of the 'silent' piece.

There is a particular kind of silence familiar to the player of vinyl records: the silence at the end of the music. It is different for the vinyl listener than it is for the listener to digital playback devices due to the sound made by the needle as it travels from the last track to the centre of the record. Depending on the type of turntable one has, this may be followed by the sound of the needle lifting off the record automatically or, if it is a machine in which the arm must be lifted by hand, then the sound of the runoff vinyl will continue until the user lifts the arm or turns off the sound (the former would be the recommended procedure). This is a framed silence like that found in *4'33"* because, while still made up of sounds, they are sounds made noticeable through the cessation of other activity. Of course, the 'silence' of the record listening experience contains the sound of the runout groove *plus* the ambient sounds that make up any performance of *4'33"*, but the locked groove is likely to be perceived as louder and probably more urgent: more demanding of a response from the listener.

'Run Out', track C5 as identified in the Discogs text above, plays with the demands made by the runout groove by turning its sound into a sampled beat over which Diggs raps. This continues for the duration of Diggs's brief narrative before continuing into the actual run out groove of the record as Diggs's voice fades out. This sound then continues into a locked groove, where it plays over and over until the needle lifts off automatically or (as with my deck) the listener decides to lift the needle off. While any runout sound could theoretically be heard as a

sampleable loop—and this seems to be clipping.'s point, much as the infinity of potential musical sounds was something Cage wished to communicate—track C5 of *CLPPNG* makes the point in a forceful and surprisingly catchy manner. The potential of this beat has been recognised by YouTube users who, in seeming defiance of the 'vinyl only' aspect of 'Run Out', have digitised the track and uploaded it to share it with other users of the platform. In doing so, they create versions that are unique to each uploader: one version (smooch-a-ghost) runs for two minutes exactly and adds some user-generated noises at the end; another (Hår) keeps the locked groove running to extend the track to 4'50". Following from link to link, getting embroiled in the chance-based, aleatory world of YouTube rabbit holes, we get to see and hear how the experience of a piece like 'Run Out', like 4'33" and *Williams Mix* (and 'Williams Mix'), are carried on from user to user and hearer to hearer.

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Between John Cage's tape clippings and clipping.'s conceptual play with noise, found sounds and hip hop tropes, there emerge many potential reflections on the role of sound in making sense of our surroundings. One story—perhaps an oversimplified one—would be a strictly chronological narrative of sonic experimentation, influence and establishment of lineage. Others, arguably more interesting, might put chronology to one side and focus on shared goals, analogous discoveries, mutually illuminating questions. It would be well worth pursuing whether (and how) Lewis's dialectic of Afrological and Eurological practices connect to the worlds of phonography and music technology more broadly and to ask how hip hop might be thought of as conceptual sound art rather than the sound of the street or some putative 'reality' (see, for example, work by Eshun, Schulze, Dwinell and Mackintosh). Similarly, commentary that voices suspicion about hip hop getting 'heady' should be interrogated for what kinds of biases it might be harbouring. The focus on everyday day sound that much of John Cage's work supposedly encouraged needs to be one that takes place in the world of vernacular culture, part of what Yuriko Saito has called 'everyday aesthetics'.

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