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Sonic Wilderness: Wild Vinyl Records

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Fig. 1: Tom Heidlebaugh, The Laughing Bear, c. 1968.

Introduction

I have a few thousand vinyl records acquired since I was a teenager. Usually grouped by artist or genre, their significance for me has always evolved in relation to biography and musical preferences. As I also have an interest in extremely unconventional music, I wondered what these records might reveal if listened to at face value. Surely their strange lyrics and sound would offer unexpected insight into familiar subjects. At the very least these provocative songs would trigger the question, ‘How on earth did they imagine that?’, and so lead on to wilder kinds of research. Ignoring genre and musical quality, to listen to the collection as an index presented new associations. Evaluating recklessly eccentric music according to what it said about war, politics, murder, art, sex, plants, and airplane crashes, threw together entirely dissimilar records that grouped themselves around ideas. Even musical disasters had traction here for the disproportionate match of ambitious concepts with uneven musicality. This index was not meant in Roland Barthes’ sense of listening for signs of alarm or reassurance to protect one’s mental and physical boundaries. In terms of records, Barthes’ kind of indexical listening amounted to musical gatekeeping with exposure only to manageable sound. This other index welcomed unmanageable and musically inconsistent records for the odd intuitions they brought to old themes. The first attempts I made at this indexical approach were in art galleries and performance venues under the title of ‘bad music seminars’, spinning and discussing strange vinyl records on a wide

range of topics. Those improvised performances involved readings that could only scratch the surface of the music's content. To get deeper into it this book had to focus on a much smaller number of subjects where the three chapters have been limited to our relationship with the natural world, in particular our interconnectedness with animals, managed nature and plants. Titled after song lyrics, each chapter's sections follow paths opened up by strange music. A centrifugal flow of ideas spins out from the vinyl, braiding together an expanding range of cultural, historical, and political relations.

The cultural history behind these unusual records is taken as entwined with the material qualities of vinyl. They complicate each other to make the records' sonic engagement with the natural world unpredictable and sometimes baffling. We can hear musicians listening to, and participating in, what they regard as nature, drawing unexpected conclusions from their attempts to communicate what they find. In the process musicians become animal and plant, and reveal the allegorical complexities of flowers and gardens. Strange vinyl records provide unlikely evaluations of our presumptive attachments to nature. Some records reveal the insight, struggle, and comedy of relating to the non-human through effortful mimicry, analogy, or guardianship. Here, being human is always insufficient, always prompting temporary surrender to animal and plant worlds. Others concern our conflicted participation in the organized nature of gardens, farms, and parks where rights of access, degrees of management, and ownership of symbolic values can turn these venues into sites of protest and violent conflict. Listening to the off-centre convictions of these odd records brings alternative perspectives to Jacques Attali's claim that 'the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible' (Attali, 1985: 3). They show Attali's own listening as

circumscribed by class, colonialism, and musical idiom, while unmoved by everyday noise and non-human sounds.

The longevity of vinyl records is a success story after decades of experimentation with heavier, more brittle materials like shellac, that is derived from the lac beetle and so has the most exploitative connection to non-human species. The material connection of vinyl to nature is the result of millennia of sedimentary deposits of microorganisms and algae that created the oil from which records are manufactured. Most human activity exploits finite resources but vinyl's material ancestry should be scrutinized for the environmental impact of fossil fuel production and of the record manufacturing process itself. As its name suggests, polyvinyl chloride resin, or PVC, is the result of polymerising vinyl chloride monomer once it has been produced through the heat treatment of ethylene dichloride, itself made from chlorine and oil-extracted ethylene. Even if PVC is recyclable, this chain of engineering and chemistry leaves waste and pollution in its wake.

In spite of their environmental impact, durable and lightweight vinyl records stimulated a frenetic global musical exchange as jazz, rock, and funk traded with calypso, reggae, hi-life, salsa, and samba across diasporic and émigré routes to impact the way music was made in Europe and the Americas. The affordability of pressing and distributing vinyl records emboldened unknown musicians and provoked the formation of small independent recording studios and labels. From the 1950s the surge in vinyl releases generated new younger audiences who claimed representation from emerging music genres and as a result often became musicians themselves. Paradoxically, what Attali critically termed the expansion of capital speculation into exploitative and repetitive stockpiled songs also enabled the cultural inventiveness of young listeners whose acumen and enthusiasm continue to influence musical development.

Fig. 2: Mighty Spoiler, The Bed Bug, 1978.

Selected record covers are reproduced here as a reminder that listening is influenced and remembered through its promotional design. The term 'anamnesis' has been used to indicate the typically involuntary memory effect provoked by some acoustic events, particularly music (Augoyard and Torgue, 2005: 21). While music may trigger the more powerful memories, encountering record cover imagery causes many to experience intense recollections.

Where the first point of encounter with strange music is likely to be the record sleeve’s unusual imagery and typography, dues are owed to the visions of such inventive designers.

Sonic Wilderness accesses the critical value of obscure and marginal vinyl where other books on music usually resort to the most well-known anti-disciplinary record releases to explore complicated cultural histories. While much of the literature on weird and unlistenable records treats them as musical freak shows, *Sonic Wilderness* recognises their nonconformist acoustics as subversive cracks in normative popular music and invites their careful appraisal.

Becoming Animal: Monstrous Intoxications

Animal lives are so fascinatingly incommensurable with our that for many viewers no amount of wildlife spy camera footage is sufficient. Armchair naturalists caught up in David Attenborough's programs become animals through empathy. Titled 'I Am A Parrot', produced in 1918, one of the first picture discs is die-cut in the shape of the bird whose mimicry of human speech the record supposedly plays. This is an odd outcome for Thomas Edison's conviction that his devices would be used for recording legislative speech. If speaking was the aim for early recorded sound then an animal mimicking human speech has trespassed on recording technologies. Yet as few birds can be prompted to speak continuously at the moment the recording process starts, the sound is most likely a human mimicking a bird that is mimicking human speech.

Fig. 3: I Am A Parrot, Talking Book Corporation, 1912.

Records featured in the first section ‘Daddy have a face like a bison’ concern taking on non-human qualities and appearing as an animal to others. Such animal-like actions involve vocal mimicry, empathetic homages to creaturely otherness, and various mischievous becomings. In ‘Making love to a vampire with a monkey on my knee’ human behaviour has been discarded as we become monstrous, entirely at home with our animal identities. In the third section ‘Why do you have to eat me?’, records align with Isaac Bashevis Singer’s remark that for animals every day is Treblinka. Here are angry protests against

hunting and carnivorism, as well as songs of intense bonding with pets.

These records resist the boundaries of being human where those entail a Promethean entitlement to animals as if they were any other resource. They refuse control of other species' lives in a musical disaffirmation that acclaims the wild as a model for what resists incorporation. This shares insights with music about park and garden management discussed later in the book.

The title 'Becoming Animal' draws from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* in which they discredit mimicry of animals for stopping short of fully blended species. They favour the wilder, more monstrous forms of selfless pack outsiderness found with rats, wolves, and vampires. In their discourse, 'becoming-animal' refers to hybrid modes of being that involve place, weather, and mental states where everything is moving and changing as it temporarily incorporates, or binds with, other entities. Although at this point Deleuze and Guattari don't link music to shifting identities, some of these strange records bring alien sounds and vocalizations to beast narratives.

Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* is more interested in what she calls 'becoming with' than fictions of iconic double monsters, like Ahab and Moby Dick, that are exemplary for Deleuze and Guattari. Her irritation at 'becoming-animal' explodes at ageist and misogynistic characterizations of docile pet owners as sentimental and unexceptional where Deleuze and Guattari fail to see 'a competent and skillful animal webbed in the open with others' (Haraway, 2008: 29). The eccentric singers of this section are drawn to both conditions, to inhuman wildness and the prosaic domesticity of pets. They write mad songs about cats and crows, recognizing the uncompromising natures of both as well as the interdependency of our lives and theirs, as separate yet entwining worlds. In these songs imaginative mimicry and depiction involve stepping into an animal's milieu to conjure up their presence. These becomings-animal initiate all kinds of animal becomings.

Daddy have a face like a bison

The music in this section is empathetic towards creaturely behaviour, mimicking animal calls or slipping under their skin to stretch abilities. Humans negotiate animal worlds as intrigued partners in benign, temporary experiments in creatureliness that regard other species as fellow travellers of enviable resourcefulness and adaptability.

Fig. 4: Elizabeth Waldo, Rites Of The Pagan, 1960.

Waldo's 1960 LP *Rites of the Pagan* assembles musical motifs of animal spirits, temple sacrifices, and sun worship, underpinned by foreboding tempi. With massed pre-Columbian instruments and a virtuoso violin, Waldo's chameleon-like musical personality spreads an eerie sonic smorgasbord over this fantasy realm. Waldo had been touring Latin America in 1940 with Leopold Stokowski's All-American Youth Orchestra as cultural ambassadors wooing Brazil away from Germany in World War II. She saw her music reconciling western and indigenous cultures, a correction to the musical repertoire Stokowski imposed on South American listeners: 'I have devised my own "musical hieroglyphics" making it possible to blend these ancient sounds with the instruments of more modern times'

(Waldo). She was a latecomer to exotica, the 50s craze for fabricated tropical soundscapes that gave Pacific Theatre veterans innocuous simulacra of the countries they'd fought in and treated suburbanites to cocktail lounge adventures amongst synthetic sounds of wild animals and concocted rituals. With tracks like 'The Serpent and the Eagle', claiming musical analogues for 'the undulating movements of the Serpent' and the 'vicious cry of the Eagle', or 'Ritual Of The Human Sacrifice', where 'priests and spectators alike became frenzied', Waldo's fabrications used studio wizardry to romanticize lost civilizations for tract house escapism. Waldo had travelled in South America and lived in Mexico City. She felt her music responsibly evoked the richness and complexity of the pre-Columbian civilisations that fascinated her and wanted listeners to share her journey.

Besides providing escapist entertainment, Waldo responded to the need of owners of new stereo systems for an expanding library of musical subject matter to show off hi-fi capabilities and spirit the listener to remote locations. Marketed by RCA as 'living stereo' to suggest audio and lifestyle vibrancy, these bulky hi-fi units, that could resemble futurist consoles, were often designed as stylish living room furniture (Harris, 2015). The echoing spaciousness and high-contrast timbres of Waldo's musicological time-travel montages added to the ways this technology could enhance etiolated middle-class lives.

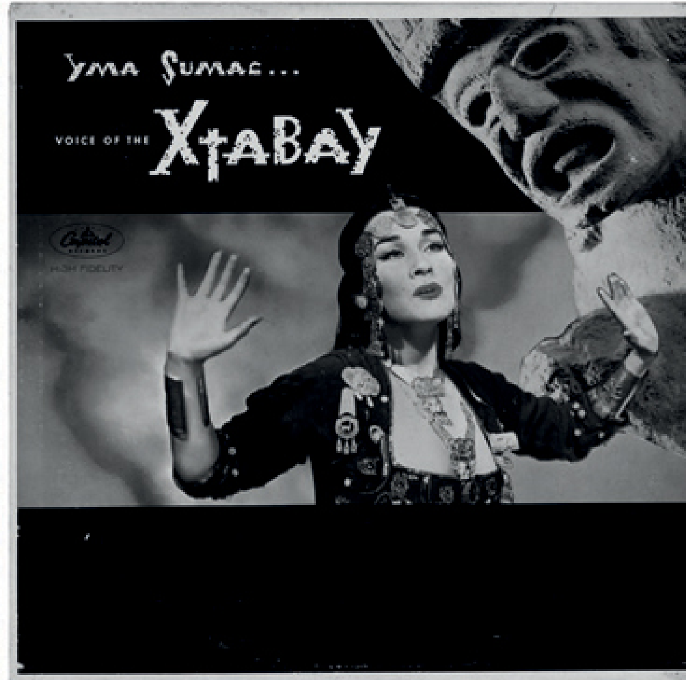

Fig. 5: Yma Sumac, The Voice of the Xtabay, 1950.

In the 1950s Waldo had performed on Yma Sumac's Andean evocations. With an instantly recognisable four-octave voice, Sumac sounds like she's from Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*, so long adrift in the tropical forest as to fail to distinguish her own language from the sounds of creatures around her. Appropriately on 'Chuncho (The Forest Creatures)' Sumac sings animal-like vocables instead of discernible words. Liner notes disregard Sumac's Lima roots to describe her growing up talking with mountain animals: 'Yma Sumac has wandered through the forests of the upper Amazon, listening to their waking life, and calling to their creatures in imitative cries.' Sumac's starring in *Secret of the Incas* exacerbated Peruvians' resentment of her misrepresentation of their musical traditions. Without the extravagant verbiage, the costumes, and fabricated biography there is little in the music to connect it with Inca or Peruvian heritage. The relation of these fantasies to pre-Columbian culture is not musical; it is rather literary and visual. However, David Toop argues that the music is exceptional enough to complicate accusations of exoticism: '*The Voice of the Xtabay* is so clearly odd, a kitsch eccentricity that nevertheless

endures through its originality, that the question of authenticity refuses to be heard' (Toop, 1999: 73).

In the 1950s an anodyne, internationalized calypso answered that same American need for remedial musical vitality, although the songs appreciated by Caribbean audiences were far more challenging lyrically and musically. In a collective anti-coloniality, that more innovative calypso made a virtue of incisive humour and piquant content. Its lyrical ingenuity dodged censorship to undermine ruling speech and comportment. Skilled satirists and linguists, calypsonians deterritorialized English, publicly performed the community's political demands, and activated public awareness. These are the qualifiers of a 'minor literature', as Deleuze and Guattari outline in their writing on Kafka: 'to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 27).

The subversive 'animal' here is the disrespectful calypsonian adopting creaturely qualities. Lord Melody's singing persona as man-beast embodies resistance to white colonial qualifiers of being human. He was resigned to his ugliness, explaining that 'It just come and it just stay like a cloud round you, and you don't have no choice but to accept it' (Rohlehr, 1990: 478). His gruff, urgent voice is thick with satirical expressiveness, as much rapped vernacular as it is singing. In 'The Beast' he mimics his children's voices before losing his temper: 'Everybody have a nice Daddy / I got a big ugly Daddy / … / Daddy is a beast / Daddy have a face like a bison / … / I nearly lose me self-respect / I hold me daughter by she neck / Daddy I beg you don't beat me / Is Mummy who say that you're ugly.' Elsewhere he sang 'The creature from the black lagoon is your father' and throughout his career suffered countless insults in verse from fellow calypsonians, as with the 'Cookey oh coa Cookey oh ko' chorus of Mighty Sparrow's 'Fowl Thief Melo' from 1961, which resorted to chicken impersonations to mock Melody's sexual appetite.

Fig. 6: Lord Melody, The Beast, 1958.

Calypso's subversion was sometimes masked by animal analogy to avoid suppression. In 1955 Sparrow recorded 'Race Track' about prostitution on Queens Park Savannah, Port of Spain's racecourse. Horse and jockey substitute for prostitute and client: 'Going to sleep up Chancellor / I make a short cut through the Savannah / The day I bounce up this English thoroughbred / She run five rounds and still go full speed ahead.' Mighty Spoiler's witty calypsos of absurdist transformations likewise depicted imaginative escapes from an authoritarian and implicitly racist upper class. He might have been channelling H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* when he wrote 'Cat Brain' that imagined a surgeon who 'for wickedness' switched a feline brain with his sister's. This eccentric song evokes centuries of irregular healthcare for poor West Indians, a stark contrast to wealthy islanders who have the option of travelling to North America for health treatment.

Spoiler's 'The Bed Bug' speculates on ideal creaturely reincarnation: 'Yes I heard when you die after burial / You have to come back as some insect or animal / Well if it so I don't want to be a monkey / Neither a goat, a sheep or donkey / Me brother

say he want to come back a hog / But not Spoiler, I want to be a bedbug.' He will return to bite only female royalty and professionals, effectively a veiled attack on the privileged. Spoiler hones his satire to a sharp point by having himself crowned 'King Bedbug the First' as if a black West Indian can only earn respect through death and reincarnation.

Derek Walcott's 1981 poem 'The Spoiler's Return' interweaves Trinidadian patois, and quotes from Spoiler, with satirical verse written in the manner of The Earl of Rochester. Spoiler's resurrection rather than reincarnation, 'ghost in brown gabardine, bones in a sack / … / I decompose, but I composing still', is an added irony (Walcott, 2006). Sent from Hell to judge Port of Spain, he sees that nothing has changed. The powerful still exploit the poor who continue to rationalize their own persecution: 'is human nature, Spoiler, is all, / it ain't big genocide, is just bohbohl' (Walcott, 2006). This 1950s surge in lyrical and musical invention was stimulated by growing Trinidadian confidence in self-governance within the independence movement led by Dr. Eric Williams's People's National Movement party. It was enabled industrially by global distribution of seven-inch vinyl records, often manufactured locally. The innovative American sound engineer Emory Cook recorded many calypso singers in this period and enabled Caribbean businesses to set up in-house record presses to respond directly to local demand, as with Melody's 'Creature From The Black Lagoon', released on Cook Records in 1957.

Indigenous music engages animal consciousness as a reminder of our proximate relations to other species that technology and urbanization have eroded. 'What is it like to be a bat? … To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human', proposes J.M. Coatzee's fictional author Elizabeth Costello (Coatzee, 2003: 77). Some pieces from *Songs of Love, Luck, Animals, & Magic: Music of the Yurok and Tolowa Indians* last for just moments. The delicate incantation of 'Pelican Song' repeats four throaty sounds for fifteen seconds, casting a spell to disrupt pelicans plunging into the smelt shoals that fishermen are netting. Liner notes explain: 'The words are marshotonglet taletsˆt ('crabapples pounded up'), techines

taletsˆt (‘blackberries pounded up’). When the pelican dives down to pick up a fish, this formula makes his wings go sour and he falls into the ocean’ (Heth, 1977). In these settings Donna Haraway’s ‘companion species’ is more a relationship of competing spirits than a partnership. These are songs that attempt to modify, rather than embody, animal behaviour. Haraway would see this as evidence of a sticky assemblage of coastal lives that entirely fell apart in the nineteenth century when West Coast sea communities were slaughtered or driven into the mountains by white settlers. Compositions like ‘Pelican Song’ and ‘Seagull Song’ are laments for an irrecoverable Tolowa way of life.

Fig. 7: Music of the Yurok and Tolowa Indians, 1977.

Vinyl records with their covers, sleeve notes, and inserts have offered listeners an alternative education, providing conduits into otherwise unimaginable lives. This music exploded established home confines, and Moe Asch’s Folkways Records, whose aim was to release all the world’s music and keep it forever in print, offered the most exciting detonation device. Asch imagined his records analogous to a daily newspaper, for

people to find out what was happening in the world. Since Asch wanted to explain these songs' origins and impact, each of their hundred annual releases was accompanied by a discursive specialist booklet.

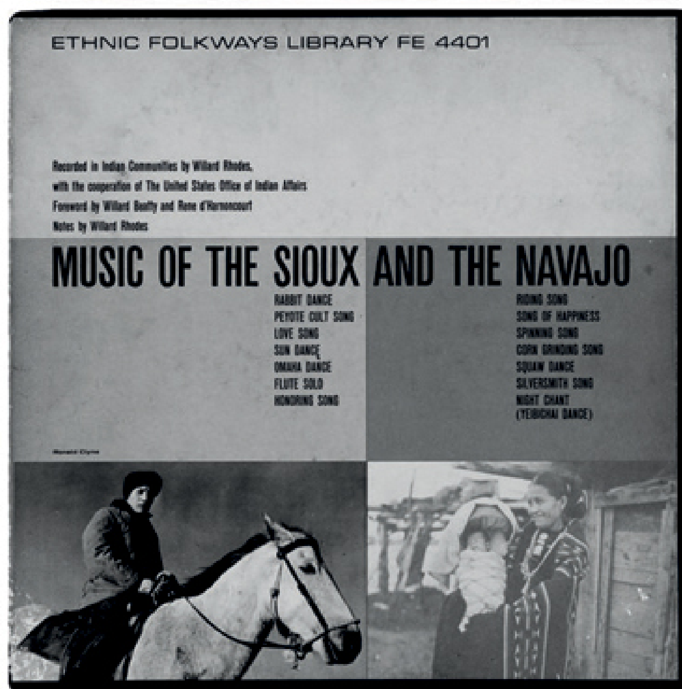

Fig. 8: Music of the Sioux and the Navajo, 1949.

With telling irony, Folkways *Music of the Sioux and the Navajo* was recorded and released in 1949 with the cooperation of the United States Office of Indian Affairs, the War Department division set up in 1824 to enforce the ideology of manifest destiny underlying white westward expansion. In what ways can we listen to these songs and hear the life beyond the betrayals and forced migrations? Rather than expecting sounds of wild otherness, it's more appropriate to recognize the everyday sociability of the Sioux 'Rabbit Dance', likely the first choreography permitting men and women to dance together. Although the dance steps supposedly resemble rabbit movements, animal mimicry is less the point than simple companionship and pleasure. This companionship is central to *Seneca Social Dance Music*, from 1980, where dances are named after animals, and mimicry lies in the choreography rather than