This Thursday at MIT, Dave Tompkins will be giving a talk based around his book, *How To Wreck A Nice Beach: The Vocoder From World War II To Hip-Hop*. I've not given the book a full treatment on the blog, but I've been recommending it to anyone I talk to about music or technology or writing. It's really one of my favorites of the last couple years.

Like some of the obscure, amazing devices & recordings & stories Dave seeks out and recombines in his inimitable way, I had heard for years about the "vocoder book"; and I was more than pleased when it finally arrived — and delivered on a decade's (or, really, lifetime's) work putting together some rather odd-fitting puzzle pieces. I'll let Dave mix it up for you (via the teaser for his talk on Thurs) —

> Invented by Bell Labs in 1928 to reduce bandwidth over the Trans Atlantic Cable, the vocoder would end up guiding phone conversations from eavesdroppers during World War II. By the Vietnam War, the "spectral decomposer" had been re-freaked as a robotic voice for musicians. How To Wreck A Nice Beach is about hearing things, from a misunderstood technology which in itself often spoke under conditions of anonymity. This is a terminal beach-slap of the history of electronic voices: from Nazi research labs to Stalin gulags, from World's Fairs to Hiroshima, from Churchill and JFK to Kubrick and Kinski, The O.C. and Ramzette, artificial larynges and Auto-Tune. Vocoder compression technology is now a cell phone standard— we communicate via flawed digital replicas of ourselves every day. Imperfect to be real, we revel in signal corruption.

Dave's writing is deeply by textured by hip-hop, and so much else. I wish everyone could pursue their own muses and speak in such tongues and find their voice as he has. I argued as much in a review I wrote of the book *Sonic Warfare* a couple years back. Indeed, I took the opportunity to recommend that more academics read and teach books like Dave's (or at least Dave's book — not sure what else is like it) — and that we also challenge ourselves and our students to write with less care for convention and more attention to voice and narrative. I guess I'm just a hopeless humanist / postmodernist or something (but both of those things sound kinda wack to me too). More likely, as with Dave (I venture), I might lay the blame at hip-hop's altar, where cultivating and appreciating distinctive voices are time-honored forms of worship and devotion.

Anywayyy, ironically, the prose in my review seems pretty strait-jacketed itself, despite what I critique and what I endorse. Maybe I'm just not able to do it. Or maybe there are unhelpful institutional pressures making us all write like computers, and not very funky ones. Either way, all one can do is try to relearn the machinery.

I'm going to post my review below for those who'd like to read it. It's been "published" for a while, but that hardly makes it public in any significant way. I'm happy to report that I managed — or attempted anyway — to bring Dave's book into conversation with Steve Goodman's (*aka Kode9's*) *Sonic Warfares*, another recent text that made a strong impression on me. The two books' subject matter overlaps to a striking degree, but the writing is very different. Even so, while I may not be as big a fan of Steve's prose, I do like his book is profound and provocative, issuing important challenges to scholars of music and sound and really to anyone who fancies themselves a listening agent.

But if you're in town, go see Dave talk this Thursday at 5pm in room 1E14-633 at MIT. For my part, much as I love the vocoder stuff, I sorta wish he was talking about his current project — a really promising "natural history of Miami bass" that takes the phrase sustained decay and runs absolutely wild. I heard a preview at EMP which predictably knocked off socks, even without working AV.

One more thing: I understand the piece below as one of a trio of reviews where I take the opportunity to critique the disciplines and institutional elitism that seem to produce writing about music which, in my mind, too often falls to rise to the occasion. (I'm saying: if you're gonna dance about architecture, you better be a damn good dancer.) Some of these reviews are more supportive, some more critical. I do, for the most part, attempt to be generous as a reviewer. At any rate, I've been wanting to share them, together, for a while. So look out for the other two to follow soon.


Tompkins’s book is a study of the *Vocoder*. The vocoder, which, for those who aren’t aware, is *Vocoder*—perhaps the only crypto-technology to serve the Pentagon and the roller rink (20). A vocal encryption process that enjoyed a second life as a musical effect, the vocoder attained a sort of audible ubiquity in the dance-pop of the 1970s and 80s, appearing on hundreds of records and spanning such disparate genres as progressive rock and electro-funk.

Appropriately, in rendering this amazing story, the author himself becomes a cryptologist. Because Tompkins is not an academic and not beholden to its disciplines, he hardly writes like one. But despite publishing regularly in such outlets as the *Wire*, *Vibe*, and the *Voice*, he doesn’t exactly write like a journalist, either. He writes like Dave Tompkins.

Tompkins manages something that few music writers do: to rise to the occasion, to meet what Charles Seeger called “the musicological juncture” head-on, to make words make sense about sound—or, when such a task seems utterly impossible, to sing along in noise and nonsense. The book’s *Vocoder* title embodies this fundamental problem as well as Tompkins’s task. How apt that the phrase, a machine-mangled version of *Vocoder* to receive speech, also happens to describe what happened, as coordinated via trans-Atlantic vocoder duets between Roosevelt and Churchill, at Normandy or Iwo Jima. This is one of dozens of landmine-like puns that Tompkins finds scattered across IBM technicians’ notebooks, in wartime cables, and on obscure electro-funk jams. Is it only a coincidence that one of early hip-hop’s best hip-hop writer ever born, blurs similarly lauded hip-hop historian Jeff Chang, only half-joking, on the back of the book. Tompkins describes writing the book as something that he felt he *needed* to hip-hop, and he has clearly absorbed and made his own the hip-hop’s love of language, of orneriness and slippiage, of sudden twists, personified things and dehumanized folk. In some cases, it’s not clear that anyone but Tompkins will understand how certain non-sequiturs actually follow. Plenty of readers will be frustrated by passages that defy comprehension. I recommend granting him some poetic license and going happily, dizzyly along for the ride.

Or take, for example, though no single passage can stand for the sprawling range of his style, the following description of Peter Frampton performing his talk-box anthem, *Do You Feel Like I Do,* in the concert immortalized as *Frampton Comes Alive* (1976):

> Imagine ice cubes and Doritos cracking up inside your head. Replace that with Madison Square Garden losing its voice. Replace larynx with guitar. Listen to teeth. Calculous conduction. Frampton opens mouth, drool catches light and there it is, a word, or at least the shape of one. *Do You Feel Like I Do.* (131)

Without sacrificing the sort of economy on display here, Tompkins seems to squeeze into the book every bit of signification he can, enlisting chapter titles, subheadings, captions, epigraphs, and all manner of marginalia along the way. The creative use of oblique epigraphs in particular illustrates how Tompkins approaches his craft and burdens the reader. They are figurative, funny, and sometimes fictional. (On page 281, for instance, he offers a *doom* record by the band *Mobb Deep*.)

Research and reading are interpretive endeavors, and Tompkins’s kitchen-sink style, where jokes and personal anecdotes sit alongside archival documents and vinyl plates, serves to remind readers that, as with vocoded vocals, it helps to know what goes in to understand what is coming out. In this sense, it is fitting that the author interweaves stories of his youth, and of myriad odd encounters with the vocoder and other talking machines, into the narrative. Indeed, the idiosyncratic inflections that give the book its distinct shape and tone seem, to this reader, among the text’s most important (and hopefully influential) features. Tompkins interweaves the personal, the popular, and the geopolitical, as if all are of equal importance. Tompkins does an admirable job of cross-fading all the crosstalk about this machine and how it affected so many people’s lives, including his own. After a while one starts to suspect that the vocoder was invented so that Tompkins could write this book.
While the vocoder never recedes from earshot, Tompkins's investigation takes the reader to many unexpected places. Among other things, readers receive: 1) an overarching and alternative narrative of early hip-hop that centers on New York, Los Angeles, and the seemingly peripheral but fascinating site of North Carolina, where Tompkins grew up and where we learn a lot about rapâ€™s early circulation and reception; 2) a secret history of late twentieth century robot-erupted pop culture, connecting Neil Young and Herbie Hancock, Georgio Moroder and Laurie Anderson, Detroit techno and Disneyâ€™s Dumbo; 3) some truly astounding and unexpected musical genealogies and circulations of material culture, like how a vocoder-ed imitation of a record executive saying â€œrefreshâ€œ became the most scathing syllable of all time (250-5), or how ELOâ€™s machine ended up in the hands of Man Parrish, â€œthe gayest vocoder expert to make a hip-hop ode to the Bronx.â€œ (212). The book also includes what must have felt like an obligatory afterward on Auto-Tune (302-3), the popular software plug-in often mistaken for the vocoder but actually a distant cousin, which itself emerged from Cold War science to help people sing like machines.

It is easy to be glib about crooning cymborgs, but Tompkins offers a more nuanced portraitureâ€œ a gallery, actuallyâ€œ of how humans dance with technology, of the deep drive so many of us feel to transform, with a little mechanical help, our voices, our realities, and our selves. â€œTalking to fans is as much a part of growing up as interrogating ants with a magnifying glassâ€œ (268). In the end, the book is less about machines than human characters: Alan Turing and Afrika Bambaataa, Homer Dudley and Michael Jonzun, and Tompkins, his late brother, and his childhood friend, Nate. One of the most interesting and touching parts of the text is the penultimate chapter, a profile of vocoder devotee and pioneer Rammellzee, the sui generis hip-hop iconoclast who passed away earlier this year. It reads as a fitting coda to everything.

Although he synthesizes an impressive amount of odd informationâ€œ much of it encyclopedic and hiterto uncompiledâ€œ Tompkins burdens readers additionally by taking a great deal of knowledge (or perhaps just Google-ability) for granted, allowing him at times to say what he wants, rather than, perhaps, what he should. This represents another way that the authorâ€™s work pushes back at its source. (Thereâ€™s no glossary, either.) But donâ€™t get your cables twisted: despite few genuflections to standard scholarly procedure, there is a great deal of evidence throughout that Tompkins has done his share of research, especially when it comes to combing archives and interviewing everyone from retired World War II-era scientists to classic rock icons to hip-hop freaks. (To their credit, the hip-hop guys he talks toâ€œBambaataa, Grandmaster DXT, Rammellzeeâ€œare all convincingly unsurprised to learn about the vocoderâ€™s crypto-military provenance.) This book was a decade in the making, but it reads more like a lifeâ€™s work.

Finally, and this is not to be underappreciated: the book itself, published by Stop Smiling Books, is a beautiful thing. Elegantly laid out and lavishly illustrated, with photographs and drawings appearing on nearly every page, the book is best appreciated as a chunky hardcover, despite that it might be funâ€œwhenever the e-text arrivesâ€œto hear it read by a robot.

In Sonic Warfare Steve Goodman, a lecturer in Music Culture at the University of East London, calls the vocoder â€œthe destiny of harmonyâ€œ and the harmonious orderâ€œ itâ€™s lingering biases toward musical form, semiotics, and phenomenologyâ€œ is not via recourse to sound, seeking to flatten longstanding hierarchies between pitch content, rhythm, timbre and the like, but through a focus on frequency and an exploration of what he calls â€œsoundâ€œ and â€œunsoundâ€œ, as well as â€œin the fieldâ€œ in a bit of poetic licenseâ€œthe â€œactualized nexus of frequencies within audible bandwidthsâ€œ. It may come as little surprise that many of the weapons surveyed in Sonic Warfare target this synaesthetic threshold of the heard and the felt. The way that sound and unsound can physically affect bodies means that, for Goodman, they operate at the level of affect, a â€œsubsignifyingâ€œ realm. He is primarily concerned, then, not with â€œsoundâ€œ as text but rather as â€œsoundâ€œ as forceâ€œ (10). For those in music or sound studies who might bristle at an approach so concerned with what is â€œin the fieldâ€œ rather than words, Goodmanâ€™s book, which mounts an implicit critique of contemporary music writing, Goodmanâ€™s bookâ€œ includes direct salvos at music studies itself. The project builds on Goodmanâ€™s synthesis of sound, music, and technologyâ€œ a project that challenges the limits of what we might hear in sounds and how it figures in the sensorium.

Ultimately, he contends, a â€œcategorialâ€œ ontology of vibrational forceâ€œ could productively â€œsoundscapizeâ€œ recent presences and recent processes, across musical form, semiotics, and phenomenologyâ€œ. While naming names, Goodman professes no love for popular music studiesâ€œâ€œa dismissal of consumerism and interminable excuses for mediocrityâ€œ (17). (He also includes some snarky asidesâ€œtroll bait for popular music scholars.) For instance, when he remarks that this is not a book about â€œwhite noiseâ€œ or â€œguitarsâ€œ, while acknowledging recent work on the use of music to produce pain or torture (e.g., Cloonan and Johnson 2002; Cusick 2006; Cusick and McShane 2006), Goodman proposes some radical ways of approaching how we theorize the transmission of culture, and the power of popular music. Sonic Warfare is an exceptionally paranoid, consistently provocative text, all the more so because of how it takes explicit aim at prevailing frames of musical inquiry.

Unlike Tompkinsâ€™s book, which mounts an implicit critique of contemporary music writing, Goodmanâ€™s bookâ€œ includes direct salvos at music studies itself. The project builds on Goodmanâ€™s synthesis of sound, music, and technologyâ€œ a project that challenges the limits of what we might hear in sounds and how it figures in the sensorium.

Barbed critiques notwithstanding, Goodman is writing from soundâ€™s corner. While his academic training and affinities produced under an increasingly global regime of â€œmilitary urbanismâ€œ and the looming threat of preemptive capitalism foreclosing possible futures. On the way, Goodman proposes some radical ways of approaching how we theorize sound, the transmission of culture, and the power of popular music. Sonic Warfare is an exceptionally paranoid, consistently provocative text, all the more so because of how it takes explicit aim at prevailing frames of musical inquiry.
Opening with the 2005 sound bombing of the Gaza strip, Goodman’s narrative would appear to be firmly situated in a certain politics, but the author also takes pains to theorize at a more micropolitical level. He seeks to understand and explicate how sound produces affectualized fear in individuals as well as populations, whether in Palestine or elsewhere. Like the sound of an actual incoming shell, sound bombs and other sonic weapons possess power to trigger fear, the same dread of an unwanted, possible future, the same dread (xvi). Considering military-urbanismâ€”that â€“vital spectrum domainâ€“and how certain technologies exploit sonic forcesâ€™ inherent potential. For Goodman, the sonic is â€“particularly attunedâ€”for examining fear in one strand of the ecology of fear, or one key dimension of the affective status quo at a historical juncture in which the â€“eutralization of the minuiae of urban experienceâ€”turns war into an â€“eological conditionâ€”that â€“constitutes the most mundane aspects of everyday existence through psychosocial terror and sensory overloadâ€”(33). As an â€“effective tonality,â€”modulated by vibrational force, fear enters the realm of sonic warfare. Thus, even while writing against a â€“countsensoryâ€™ perspective and continually returning to soundâ€™s crucial â€“visceralityâ€”(220), Goodman finds it useful that, within the affective sensorium, â€“future is often understood as generally having a privileged role in the production and modulation of fearâ€”(65).

Given the permeation of everyday urban lifeâ€”not simply in warzones of the Global South but in city soundscapes of the so-called developed world as wellâ€”by what Goodman terms the â€“evelopmental complex,â€”sonic warfare extends beyond obvious weapons such as sound bombs and nausea-inducing crowd-control devices to forms of (preemptive) sonic branding, including â€“predatory earwormsâ€”and holosonics (186), or precisely targeted â€“exempts of sound that might implant a commercial jingle into a moving body. With regard to the latter phenomena, Goodman dabbles in speculative fiction, imagining a future intertwined with contemporary capitalism, in which a â€“syndrome weaponized with audio advertisements for products that donâ€™t yet necessarily exist, subconsciously building brand loyalty. Mirroring the unreliable and often occultist information about sonic weapons under developmentâ€™s ever-islanding from issuing government reports or press accounts, or circulating among conspiracy theory enthusiastsâ€”Goodman is refreshingly candid about the ways that dystopic projections can seep into thinking about such matters: â€“For sure, a certain amount of paranoia accompanies frequencies of 188) The deployment of the Mosquito, a device used at malls and other quasi-public, commercial spaces that emits a tone so high it repels teenagers while remaining inaudible to adults, suggests to Goodman that (pun intended), â€“the future of sonic warfare is auralâ€”(183).

If this all sounds rather dire, Goodman develops another side to the story of contemporary sonic dominance. Countergo to the â€“evelopmentalâ€™s horrific depiction of sound and unisonâ€™s another set of experiments in vibrational force and affect modulation: sound systems, patterned on the Jamaican model but today dispersed globally, serves as â€“alget and engineering and the exorcism of dreadâ€”(5). Goodman’s overarching concern with ecologies of fear, it is a convenient bit of resonance that a complex notion of dread is already emically embedded in reggae discourse. Goodman hears and feels the forcefulâ€™and often subsonicâ€™projections of sound systems, whether playing dub reggae or funk carioca, as meeting a certain â€“afs that desire for the â€“evelopment of sound systemsâ€”(27) or, in other words, â€“afear activated deliberately to be transcuded and enjoyed in a popular musical contextâ€”(29). This is an innovative and suggestive reading of practices that have already been examined in great detail in the reggae literature (e.g., Bilby 1995; Stolzoff 2000; Henriques 2003; Veal 2007).

He pursues the idea of an alternative and recuperative practice of sonic dominance, and inflects it with a Black Atlantic (if not Jamaican) accent, by examining what he calls â€“adub virology,â€”a model of â€“ffective mobilizationâ€”(later glossed as a â€“alget move the body in danceâ€”(157)â€“rather than the â€“modulation of preemptive capital,â€”the use of sound and unsound to manipulate mood and incite novelty and creativity (155). Goodman argues, without offering much detail about the techniques in question, that â€“future virologies of the Black Atlanticâ€”constitute a wealth of techniques for affective mobilization in dance,â€“but that, in turn, â€“viscous sonic capital hijacks these techniques â€“for modulationâ€”(162). The â€“core focusâ€™ of an audio virology is, therefore, the â€“decreasing gap between mobilization and modulationâ€”(162).

In chapters 24-27 Goodman carefully sketches out what is entailed by an â€“audio virologyâ€”and such an approach is better suited than memes for understanding how power relations influence and structure the production of culture. Given the intense uptake around memes in the Web 2.0 era, Goodman’s intervention here is useful. If memes carries an intrinsically cognitivist bias with its focus on information, in contrast, an audio virology â€“entials a nexus that synthesizes the flows of information, matter, and energy into a virulent rhythmical consistencyâ€”(138). Such an â€“semblageâ€”according to Goodman (nodding again to Deleuzian philosophy), goes beyond memes in recognizing that â€“apoters are always â€“ebdedded in an ecology,â€”a material environment. Memes themselves â€“are material processes patterned by â€“ons of networked neuronsâ€”beyond transmission of networks Goodman suggests we think of â€“ective vectors and â€“ffective contagions,â€”and though he notes that we already have the fairly neutral but useful concept of infection available to us, a model of â€”infection appeals to him as a way to â€”amaticize the concern with power that he accuses memes of lacking (130). Viruses, or virological models, are also important to Goodman because they pose â€”treats to cybemetic control societâ€”(179), the looming threat of capitalist affect modulation.

If there is a clear politics in this book, the most specific it ever gets is anti-capitalist, but the best way to characterize it might be more broadly, anti-colonialist. Goodman’s perspective is informed by the anti- and postcolonial discourses running throughout his book, and especially his engagement with the work of Spinoza through Deleuze to Massumi and connecting the dots between Bachelard, Lefebvre, Bergson, and Whitehead, Goodman claims to be less concerned with bringing theory to bear on sound than in the reverse. Instead, sound
As the asymmetry in this joint review suggests, these books also differ insofar as one, written from within and directed toward the academy, is working at the level of an overarching argument which can be summarized, debated, and re-deployed in future research, whereas the other resists any sort of boiling down or segmentation. Tompkinsâ€™ book is an irreducible thing, not least because of its often untranslatable idiom, and I like that about it. I do not mean to privilege one or the other, but rather note some of the more conspicuous differences. Tompkinsâ€™ efforts recall more than any other recent work Shepherd and Wicke’s ambitious Music and Cultural Theory (1997), another text that could have resonated more strongly in musicological circles.

It remains to be seen whether Sonic Warfare will speak to musicologists and the increasingly transdisciplinary enterprise of sound studies. If I express some pessimism here about its potential uptake, that has more to do with the textâ€™s unorthodox and challenging dimensions. While brimming with ideas and sharp provocations, the book sometimes seems designed to stymie comprehension. Although Goodman rarely takes anything akin to Tompkinsâ€™ lights of fancy, his prose can be disorienting and at times nearly impenetrable. (At least thereâ€™s a glossary for help.) Although each chapter, most of them quite short, could no doubt be read as an autonomous singularity, â€œas the author recommendsâ€ (xvii), there are several chapter-spanning sections of the book sustaining arguments that, a la carte, might go unappreciated. (Chapters 15-20, for instance, elaborate on the philosophical core of â€œrhythmanalysis.â€) His use of non-chronological but pregnant dates to mark each chapter, although interesting conceptually, also proves problematic. Many of the dates go entirely without explication, so they can seem arbitrary or orthogonal to the discussion. As much as I appreciate and would like to see greater formal experimentation in music and sound studies, too often the organization of Sonic Warfare comes to feel like a conceit of sorts, an afterthought, or an evasion of hard, connective writing.

Taken together, these books should help to retune (or is that detune?) the study of music and sound. They force us to ask hard questions of ourselves: What is our subject? What is our lexicon? How do we make sense of our audible past and future research, whereas the other resists any sort of boiling down or segmentation. Tompkinsâ€™ book is an irreducible thing, not least because of its often untranslatable idiom, and I like that about it. I do not mean to privilege one or the other, but rather note some of the more conspicuous differences. Tompkinsâ€™ efforts recall more than any other recent work Shepherd and Wicke’s ambitious Music and Cultural Theory (1997), another text that could have resonated more strongly in musicological circles.

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3 Comments

- poirier | May 22nd, 2012 at 12:53 pm
  just got the book!
  will read it over the summer

- wayneandwax.com | May 23rd, 2012 at 8:58 am
  [...] up on the last post/review, I’m running the next in the triad I described there: a series of book reviews written over
  [...]
recently published, hardly a year old! (That’s not bad for [..]