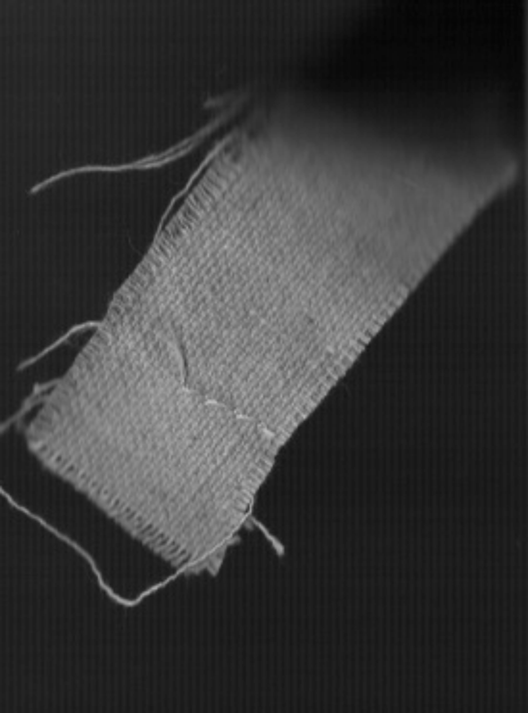

RECORDS RUIN THE LANDSCAPE

DAVID GRUBBS

John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording

Preface

What does it mean to come to know a period through its recordings? What does it mean to know a period through the recorded artifacts of composers and musicians who largely disdained recordings?

An early impulse to write this book came from observing how listeners' understandings of experimental and avant-garde music from the 1960s change on the basis of access to sound recordings. Simply put, what circulates in recorded form at a given time helps to delineate a historical landscape of musical activity. But for many practitioners of experimental music from the 1960s, sound recordings register as an odd, counterintuitive object of study. I encountered this firsthand when discussing the project with a number of musicians, composers, and producers who came of age in the 1960s, most of whom remain of the opinion that audio recordings are at best curiously incomplete representations of their efforts.

I was born in the late 1960s, and I often gravitate toward music created in that decade. Fundamental to my interest in music from this period is the challenge of understanding that part of the past that lies just beyond memory's reach. My fascination with the recent but experientially inaccessible past found its first and most enduring subject in the popular music of the 1960s. From an early age, I felt that I knew the pop music of this time through an itinerary of its landmark albums and singles, and through arranging these recordings on an increasingly detailed time line. If your passion centers on pop music from the 1960s, it becomes second nature to know by date particular albums or songs or events in the careers of the Beatles or the Rolling Stones or Bob Dylan or James Brown. It begins with the release dates of iconic recordings: *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in the summer of 1967, *Blonde on Blonde* in the summer of 1966, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" and "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" in the

summer of 1965. Or the first stirrings of the Velvet Underground, or the deaths of John Coltrane, Brian Jones, Albert Ayler, and Jimi Hendrix.

My own strongest, most formative experiences with culture had to do with objects set adrift, obscure recordings randomly encountered. A primary appeal of records had to do with transcending age and geography. As a teenager in Louisville, Kentucky, in the early 1980s—and with few opportunities to see live music that I truly cared about—I immersed myself in fanzines and punk and post-punk records pressed on tiny, often one-off labels. When you're a high school fanzine editor, it's extraordinary what simply shows up in your mailbox: anarchist literature, Situationist-inspired altered comics, micro-sized literary magazines, fussily handwritten broadsheets, and obsessive reportage of one local punk scene after another, to the point where all of these dispatches could come to seem the stuff of fiction, were you not holding a *record*—the potentially enlightening, potentially misleading record—in your pulse-quickened hands.

The objectness of the record was crucial. Chief among reasons for this is, as the British post-punk group the Fall put it, "repetition, repetition, repetition." I needed those multiple listens, those toe- and footholds. I needed repeated listens to decide whether Public Image Ltd's "Death Disco" single—an unsettling listening experience for an adolescent—was supposed to be played at 45 or at 33⅓ rpm. I eventually recognized that "Death Disco" was intended to be played at 45 rpm, but John Lydon's brays and howls were that much more inexplicable and that much more animal, and the already-dominant bass that much more satisfying, when the song was dragged down to 33⅓. Public Image Ltd's single was not the only one for which I was uncertain about the ostensibly correct playing speed. I needed repetition, repetition, repetition to make sense of various instructive examples of what at first blush passed as formless, unvectored noise but which eventually resolved itself into something with memorable, recognizable details—with aural breadcrumbs and semisecure grips suggesting musical form. If particular records created first impressions of randomness, of scatterings—mystifying randomness of intent, mystifying randomness of execution, mystifying purpose in opting to send this recording out into the world, and ultimate mystification that it found its way to my mailbox—then subsequent spins, whether at the intended speed or not, helped to clear the fog and to make apparent abstruse musical patterns.

A hypothetical practitioner of one of the kinds of 1960s experimental music that I'm addressing in this book might say that my mistake was to press forward, through repetitions, endeavoring to accrue meanings. Why not leave things well enough? This individual might argue that the first listen, disorienting or not, is the experience that will always be the richest, and the most true to the spirit of the work. As the improvising guitarist Derek Bailey mused, "If you could only play a record *once*, imagine the intensity you'd have to bring into the listening."[1]

Beyond repeated listening, a second attraction for me to the record was its compound, multidisciplinary character. It was never only about music. The record presented itself as a medium for sound, but also as a medium for text, art, design, and a general confrontation with the world. At the time its relative cheapness to produce—as well as the existence of an engaged community of peers ready and willing to buy the thing—made the record an expressive medium with bracing democratic potential. Most of the self-produced records that began to arrive in my mailbox in the early 1980s indeed were exceptionally multidisciplinary, by which I mean that the artist who wrote and performed the music was also likely to be the artist who started and ran the record label, wrote the press release, designed the record's artwork, perhaps folded or glued the cover, stuck the cover in a plastic sleeve, addressed the envelope, purchased and licked the stamps, and stood in line at the post office. The handwriting on the cardboard mailer announced itself as part of the selfsame artistic project that included the music.

My experiences are not uncommon among people of my generation, for whom recordings—primarily in their material form as singles, LPs, cassettes, and compact discs—have served as a widely available means of time travel as well as an introduction to geography and the found object. That's why it has always intrigued me to encounter the more extreme negative period attitudes toward recording among creators of experimental and avant-garde music in the 1960s. It is an attitude that is so different from my own, and from that of so many curious, sympathetic, hungry listeners for whom seeking out new musical experiences or broadening their cultural knowledge through recorded sound has been one of the most powerful through lines in their lives.

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As much as I was introduced to diverse and far-flung musics through records, these same records steered me toward living in larger cities, and in turn toward live performance. Suddenly, the need to transcend place through recordings—as I had felt growing up in Kentucky—did not seem as crucial.

When I moved to Chicago in 1990, a number of concerts of free jazz and improvised music spun me around and thoroughly engaged my imagination. This string of stellar live performances vividly impressed upon me the reasons so many musicians judge recordings insufficient to the task of representing their practice, and I came to understand better why an earlier generation of avant-garde musicians placed such a premium on live performance.

Like many others, I was first attracted to free jazz and improvised music through some of the most abstract, otherworldly recordings of Sun Ra and his Arkestra. I could make very little sense of them on first encounter. With albums such as *Nothing Is* and *It's After the End of the World*, repeated listens often had the quality of hearing this music for the first time.[2] Cacophonous group interjections appeared as unique events. As with my first encounters with records of idiosyncratic post-punk, I found the music of Sun Ra from this period difficult to revisit mentally. I simply had to listen again. One major difference between the two styles was that music that is largely improvised brings with it an implicit demand, per Derek Bailey, that you attend to a first listening with maximum focus—just as the musicians themselves are hearing the music for the first time while playing it. By contrast, much post-punk owes its counterintuitive quality to rough musicianship, raw editing and overdubbing, and accidents of an especially in-the-studio nature.

Spending time at concerts of improvised music, I was excited by music that appeared to flow through its players. I understood these sounds as oscillating between the noncomposed and that which is composed in real time through wordless negotiation. I loved what this music, in performance, did to my experience of time. It swore to never repeat. The real-time aspect of improvised music—where the length or scale of the piece isn't known in advance—proved to be an invigorating counterpoint to listening to recordings of improvisations.

Much of what had seemed inexplicable about improvised music on record—especially combinations of musicians in which each player exhibits a high degree of autonomy, and where certain types of sonic concatenations owe largely to chance and unforeseen collisions—gradually melted away as I became more familiar with the processes by which this music was often created. There were long-standing groups and musical partnerships, such as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), founded in 1965, and there were fleeting first-time and perhaps last-time encounters between musicians, as was often the case when improvisers from out of town performed with Chicago's steadily expanding pool of players. There were performances that bore the marks of high musicianship and years of dedication, and there were sometimes equally thrilling seat-of-the-pants, scrappy, smoke-pouring-out-of-ears (brains locking gears, failing) performances by much younger players who seemed just as surprised as anyone else by the unplanned musical outcomes. There were intriguing hybrid encounters when vastly more seasoned, more confident, and more versatile musicians shared the stage with bold, occasionally terrified neophytes—meetings that were all the more compelling by virtue of awkward musical seams and joints and odd matches displayed front and center. There were performances that used experimental systems of notation or agreed-upon verbal road maps, and there were performances in which you could imagine that the players shunned both advance planning and Monday-morning quarterbacking. There were performances with both feet unmistakably in a jazz lineage; there were performances for which the operative context was the mode of improvised music pioneered more recently by players such as the British musicians Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, and Paul Lytton; and there were performances where these overlapping traditions of improvisation were extended, subverted, and caught unawares by younger musicians equally conversant in experimental rock and electronic music.

I am certain that my taking to improvised music in performance in the early 1990s was in part a reaction to purchasing a CD player and beginning to acclimate myself to living with music in digital form. The fact of becoming more cognizant of music measured in clock time made live performances of improvised music increasingly appealing. When listening at home I suddenly had the experience of knowing the exact duration of a piece of music. Previously I would have rounded off a given duration in

my head, if I even thought to quantify the length of a piece. A pop song lasted three minutes; an early rock and roll song said what it needed to say in two minutes; and an album side ran between fifteen and twenty-five minutes. That was all there was to it: the basic units of recorded-music measurement.

The digital display of time on a CD player was an entirely new experience. In retrospect, it's not as distressing as the omnipresent timeline in software such as iTunes, through which you can tell from the most cursory and innocent of glimpses how much is water under the bridge and how much is yet to come. With the CD player's time display, actual effort (pushing a button) was required to view both the time elapsed and the time remaining in a piece of music. Even stranger was the previously unimaginable seventy-four-minute slice of uninterrupted sound.

One of the initial consequences of the CD player was a propensity to have music playing in the background, always. The CD player was only fractionally as demanding of one's attention as the increasingly needy-seeming turntable. Once you cleared the creepy hurdle of getting used to "digital black"—recorded silences on CD being an altogether different creature than vinyl LPs' louder, more textured silences—the reward was a greater dynamic range, the upshot of which is that it became possible to listen to more radically quiet music. One could listen to recordings of works by Morton Feldman and not have the troubling suspicion that there were sounds buried in an LP's grooves that the needle failed to uncover, faint attacks obscured by a brush fire of surface noise. But as listening became a more rationalized experience through the digital time display and a more ambient experience through the longer, uninterrupted playthroughs of quieter, more abstract music, concerts began to make stronger claims on my imagination. I was ready for music in which my experience of time was more subjective and more immersive, and in which I found myself confronted with an imperative to listen deeply.

I recall the shock that I experienced upon first hearing Morton Feldman's music in performance. At the time I had been familiar with his music through recordings. Feldman's death in 1987 was followed by a tremendous quantity of commercially released recordings of his music, such that by the beginning of the present century more than forty full-length CDs of Feldman's work were in print. Digital audio—all of those CDs with their broad dynamic ranges and running times upwards of seventy

minutes—unquestionably played a role in expanding Morton Feldman's listenership.[3] In spite of caveats appended to recordings of his work such as "A lower volume setting will produce a more realistic sound level," I had not experienced Feldman's uniquely hushed music as being radically quiet.[4] That is, until I heard Steffen Schleiermacher play one of Feldman's late piano pieces at DePaul University at the close of a program dedicated to the music of Stefan Wolpe and his students. I was seated in the second row, and yet I had the sensation that the individual tones from the piano were doing their damnedest to travel all that way, and arriving in a state of collapse from the nearly insurmountable distance from the back of the stage. The previous works in the concert had me leaning back in my seat. The Feldman piano piece had me pitched forward, straining to listen, suddenly aware of the exact physical distance between performer and listener; aware of the space of the performance, both sonically and visually; aware of the concentration exercised by individual listeners around me; and awake to the possibilities of music with profoundly quiet dynamics.[5] Much as I had appreciated recordings of Morton Feldman's work, this was an encounter with his music that could only have occurred in the space of the live performance, and in the presence of the performer. The experience stuck with me.

Persuasive arguments can be made that the current availability of an unprecedented amount of recorded music has contributed to a leveling of musical hierarchies. Records were my entrée into multiple musics in Chicago—free improvisation, jazz, country, blues, contemporary composition, electronic music, dub reggae, Javanese gamelan. But even as I was schooling myself in these forms through recordings, the thing that did more to level the hierarchies of genre than filing my LPs in one genre-free alphabetical sequence was to meet, usually through the social space of the performance venue, individuals hailing from diverse musical backgrounds. This proved to be an unanticipated but truly excellent fact of the metropolis. There was value, certainly, in coming to my own conclusion that the pleasure taken in listening to (to use the examples that we'll find in chapter 1, "Henry Flynt on the Air") avant-garde music, country, and blues can't be objectively compared. The fact of meeting skilled jazz players who loved and respected unschooled, ungainly experimental rock, or experimental rock folks who had begun to grapple with contemporary composition, or DJs and record store clerks with an encyclopedic knowledge

of most forms, or classical folks who had a passion for soul and hip-hop (I might be inventing this) was the single thing that most fundamentally altered my relationship to music. I learned that there was no reason for musical life to be lived like a record store, with discrete sections for rock and pop, jazz, blues, soul, hip-hop, oldies, and classical, and the maximum possible separation between the classical and the pop sections.

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But . . . ah, the conversations that we have in record stores. Had.

I recall a conversation with a visual-artist friend in the A-Musik store in Cologne, Germany, probably in 1997 or 1998. I was always a bit jealous that this friend, a painter, seemed to have all the time in the world to listen to music. Musicians don't have that luxury; how can you listen to other people's music when you're trying to create your own? (I suppose that musicians have all the time in the world to look at images.) On previous outings with him to record stores, I was amazed at how quickly he could amass a foot-high stack of vinyl. Cheap albums, expensive albums, legitimate finds, dross. Big-band jazz, funk, industrial music, solo steel-string guitar music. Stuff to lug back to the studio to listen to while working. The main thing that I remember is the rapidity with which he'd suddenly return clutching an armful of albums.

At the time of this conversation, A-Musik was a tiny, meticulously curated basement shop that specialized in the multiple strands of electronic music gathered at the intersection of pop, dance, and experimental musics. It was where remix culture and contemporary composition saw eye to eye—or at least didn't mind sitting shoulder to shoulder. I knew people who frequented A-Musik who were conservatory-trained composers, as well as self-taught musicians who had followed an increasingly familiar trajectory from growing up playing in bands to seeking more ad hoc modes of creating music. A-Musik also had its share of patrons from a third category of music producers—individuals making real strides in the field of electronic music who were loath to identify themselves as musicians, in much the same spirit with which Brian Eno listed his occupation on a British passport application as "non-musician." It wasn't uncommon to see a glazed-over musician emerge from the studio abutting the shop

(actually an apartment with a spare room), seeking human contact and a respite from hours spent scrutinizing and manipulating waveforms on a computer screen. A number of the albums and singles for sale in A-Musik were recorded on the other side of the wall behind the shop's front counter. Homegrown, truly.

Like many record stores, this particular basement iteration of A-Musik was a social space where knowledge was shared through recommending, listening, and discussing. In 1998, when the team of artist Cosima von Bonin and writer Christoph Gurk were asked to program music from Cologne for the Steirischer Herbst festival in Graz, Austria, in lieu of concerts they proposed to curate a series of record stores that in turn would organize their own events and performances. Bonin and Gurk argued that the social space of the record store was fundamental to musical culture in their city, and that people in Graz would learn more about music from Cologne by being able to spend time in a handful of Cologne's more interesting record shops. This simple idea was the basis for the project "4 Plattenläden für Graz" ("Four Record Stores for Graz"). Steirischer Herbst rented commercial space in downtown Graz for a month, and every week a different record store from Cologne representing a different type of music moved its stock and its staff to Graz. One week A-Musik brought abstract electronic music to town—along with the opportunity to observe, browse, query, play, listen, agree, disagree, and play the devil's advocate.

On that afternoon in A-Musik, the painter friend with all the time in the world asked me where he should begin with recordings of John Cage's prepared-piano music. I suggested a recording of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–48), together with the Wergo anthology *Works for Piano and Prepared Piano, Volume I (1943–1952)*.[6] My rationale was that it would be best to pair *Sonatas and Interludes*, the multiple-movement summation of Cage's writing for prepared piano, with a compilation of earlier, more brief attempts at composing for this instrument of his devising. The friend held one CD in each hand and compared them, looking back and forth as if trying to decide which disc was physically heavier. Finally he returned both CDs to the rack and came back with the second volume of the *Works for Piano and Prepared Piano*.

"I always start with volume two."

As we were leaving the store, he offered an observation that I've since

pondered. "If there were anything for which I'd sell my soul," said the person leaving the record store with many pounds of vinyl LPs, "it would be to never have to listen to the same album twice."

I'm glad that he didn't sell his soul. It turned out to be unnecessary. Just one brief decade after this conversation, anyone with an Internet connection would never have to listen to the same recording twice. And yet, his willingness to contemplate an eternal deal speaks to a fundamental, widespread ambivalence about recorded sound that is expressed by many individuals and in many forms in this book. Repetition has always been experimental musicians' most fundamental objection to recordings: they are not true to the nature of performance because you can listen again and again. What would it mean to not listen to the same recording twice? What's the lure of encountering music in recorded form, apart from the possibility of repeated listening? With the record enthusiast who doesn't want to listen to the same record twice we have the opportunity to describe the encounter with music in recorded form while bracketing the experience of repetition.

The recording brings with it a broad array of benefits—hence the trip to the record store, the conversation that's structured around particular artists and their recordings, and the exchange of cash for an armful of albums. The recording allows my friend in the example to bring music into his home, and to start and to interrupt it at any time that he wishes, and at nearly any volume that he desires. He can listen to the spare, restrained sonorities of Morton Feldman at the proper volume for Metallica, and he can listen to Metallica at Feldman volume.

The album is stamped with a date—the date or dates of its recording. The album is stamped with a second date—the date of its release. The recording helps to construct a chronology. It participates in multiple chronologies having to do with a given musician's sequence of compositions and sequence of recordings—of songs, of albums. It also participates in chronologies having to do with a particular genre of music, or of a particular producer or record label, or coming from a particular country, region, city, or neighborhood, or a particular decade, year, month, or day.[7]

The recording allows the listener to experience the representation of a musical performance separated from the time and space of its originating event. The recording allows the listener to experience the representation of a musical performance separate from the physical presence of a performer,

who heretofore had the possibility, at least in theory, of looking the audience member directly in the eye. The audience member has become the listener, no longer a participant, communicant, or even viewer, except in viewing—perhaps studying—the sanctioned images that accompany the recording. In the late 1960s, at the time that the improvising bass player Gavin Bryars was in the process of becoming the composer Gavin Bryars, he felt the need to absent himself from the space of performance. He explained, "The creator is there making the music and is identified with the music and the music with the person. It's like standing a painter next to his picture so that every time you see the painting you see the painter as well."[8]

The recording allows the listener a quality of individual, isolated concentration that is lacking in the shared space of performance. Conversely, the recording allows the listener to be as distracted, as not-present as circumstances or temperaments dictate. The experience can be as focused or as diffuse as the listener desires. I never cease to marvel at the breadth of the spectrum that describes acquaintances' listening practices when it comes to recorded sound. For some, a recording played at home is a distant hue of audio ambience experienced intermittently from two rooms or two floors away, and for others it's akin to attending a mastering session in a commercial facility, listening with the kind of intensity that you bring to the final audition before a recording is approved and sent to the pressing plant. For some, speakers go where speakers fit: one all the way down here on the lowest level of a bookshelf, partially blocked by a stack of magazines, and one practically touching the ceiling; for others, the listener is meant to sit equidistant from two speakers that are equidistant from one another—the listener occupying the third point of an isosceles triangle.

The recording allows the listener to experience something other than a representation of an integral musical performance. The recording itself is likely to be a representation (a copy) of a representation (a composite) of a musical performance. As a composite, it can consist of fragments of takes edited together horizontally; it can consist of fragments edited together vertically through overdubbing; it can, and is likely to, consist of some combination of fragments pieced together both horizontally and vertically. As a composite, it can consist of superimposed recordings of the same sonic event from multiple sound perspectives; this can be as simple as a pair of stereo microphones deployed to create a stereo image that more or less recognizably represents the space in which the musical performance

occurred, or it can be as complex as a large array of microphones—a variety of different microphones, each selected on the basis of its precise task—aimed at each individual sound source. As a composite, it can include all variety of postproduction; this can be as basic as the perhaps apocryphal tale of a recording engineer's pencil employed in a London studio on May 18, 1964, at the behest of producer Mickie Most to give the analog tape a quick, infinitesimally small tug to momentarily raise and correct the pitch of a flat note in the vocal performance in what was otherwise a keeper of a take of the Animals' version of "The House of the Rising Sun," or it can be as advanced (now, via the bend in space by which complex algorithmic functions are accomplished with simple keystroke commands) as digitally altering the pitch, duration, and placement of sound samples, or of reshaping waveforms through a graphical interface by which they are merely "redrawn." The engineer's pencil has become virtual, a pencil-function.

The recording allows the listener to experience the presentation of a musical or artistic persona, beginning with the artist's name—pseudonymous, collective, or occasionally bestowed at birth—and including the images packaged together with the recording. The recording plays its particular role in the construction of the artist's biography. Is this single album or track the entirety of this artist's recorded legacy? Is it one of dozens or hundreds or even thousands of commercial recordings on which this artist can be heard? Was it the breakthrough or the career-ender, a respectable step forward or an ominous repetition or regression? What percentage of the discography does it constitute? Did the artist double as producer, laboring on both sides of the console? What was the artist's relationship to the record label on which this appeared? Did the bulk of the artist's releases appear on this label, or was this an incongruous one-off? Is this recording a release that was authorized by the artist? Apart from bootlegs, think of Howlin' Wolf's Cadet Concept LP *The Howlin' Wolf Album* (1969), whose cover consists exclusively of the following text, in stark, generic-product black on white:

> This is Howlin' Wolf's new album.
> He doesn't like it.
> He didn't like his electric guitar at first either.[9]

Perhaps the recording deliberately withholds. It can be crafted to reveal precious little about the artist or the context of its production—and there are countless examples of recordings that are that much more meaningful or affecting on the basis of what they ultimately obscure. Perhaps information about the recording artist is simply not available. The ease of access to information through the Internet has altered the experience of listening to recordings for which historical context was previously more difficult to acquire. This cuts both ways, and historical context can become a casualty of online listening, especially owing to incomplete and often mistaken information attached to audio files circulating on the web. But the web also makes information that much more available regarding obscure recordings that previously were cloaked in an aura of tantalizingly incomplete details. This has been the case with recordings of experimental music, in which an earlier release might have been the sole circulating recording of the work of a particular individual, but now that artist is represented by a lifetime's worth of audio recordings that are easily accessed online.

The recording allows all of these things to happen, even if you sold your soul and never had to listen to the same record twice.

In *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording*, my purpose is to consider the distance between experimental music in the 1960s and the ways in which this music is experienced at present through the medium of sound recording. I offer the preceding details of my experience as a listener to stress the role that recordings played in my coming to various musics—and also to stress the limitations in attending to certain kinds of musical practice primarily through recordings.