Soundtrack to Paradise: Sonic Branding in the South Pacific

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In this presentation, we explore the sonic branding of a geographic and conceptual space. Hawaii, and what the branding of Hawaii has deemed her lilting and undulating call, lure us to the ultimate retro-escape. We investigate details in the legendary history of Hawaii’s sonic branding, unpacking the Hawaiian presence via a media analysis of our growing archive of Hawaiiana and drawing upon recent developments in internet marketing and marketing thought generally, including sonic branding (Barnet 2001; Hirsch and Schneider 2001) and retrosapes (Brown and Sherry 2003). Our journey invokes our own experience of sonic branding, offers some related sonic examples from other realms, and provokes broader reflections of the intersection of music, branding, and consumer culture.

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SESSION SUMMARY

“The Sounds of Consumption: Listening to the Musical Landscape

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“For twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible. Our science has always desired to monitor, measure, abstract, and castrate meaning, forgetting that life is full of noise and that death alone is silent: work noise, noise of man, and noise of beast. Noise bought, sold, or prohibited. Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise.”-Jaques Attali in Noise: The Political Economy of Music

The economic, social, and political dynamics of our Western society are both presaged by and encapsulated in the relations of sound production and consumption, including music, warning noises, signaling devices, and mass media. Sound is involved in the making of contemporary social reality—our world is thoroughly driven, shaped and constrained by sonic considerations. Yet despite its widely acknowledged significance in the world of consumption, music is relatively under researched within the consumer behavior literature. Whereas studies have focused on music in marketing communication (Scott 1990), including advertising (e.g., Basu, Goldberg and Gorn 1997; Blair and Kellertis 1993; Gorn 1982), music consumption (e.g., Hogg and Banister 2000; Olsen and Gould 1999; Wallace 1997), musical preferences (Holbrook and Schindler 1989) or background music (Bruner 1990; Milliman 1986), few have studied sound in its historical, cultural and consumption context.

This session advanced the study of music within consumption by considering the symbiotic relationship between the cultural frameworks that orient how people interact with commodities and the political economy of the audible. We argue that for an appropriate understanding of consumer behavior, researchers must listen to the sound by which it is represented. The music-fueled presentations explored the complex relationship between consumption, culture and sound.

The co-chairs helped the audience to frame, question and debate issues such as: What types of sound are prevalent in consumer culture? What is the role of historical and political narratives in these sounds, and in contemporary consumption? How does technology change sonic consumption? How can sonic consumption studies contribute to consumer research and our understanding of consumer cultures? The researchers presented perspectives on music consumption focused on different ethnographical contexts, including retro-music, club music, and traditional folk music.

First, Alan Bradshaw, Pierre McDonagh and David Marshall explored the experiences of musicians in dealing with marketing and their beliefs of what music should be. Noting how musicians are typically engaged in negotiating between artistic intention and commercial pragmatics, these scholars conclude that the musicians still intend for music to maintain an antithetical dimension. Second, Jonathan Schroeder and Janet Borgerson illuminated and analyzed an iconic example of sonic branding. The Hawaiian music genre invokes the nostalgic nirvana of a time when jet travel was glamorous, tiki culture was the rage, and a Polynesian paradise still seemed attainable. Music assists in this case study of sonic branding, providing an exoticized cultural history and the soundtrack for retro atmospheres behind the burgeoning tiki renaissance, including repackaged exotic lounge music and supporting surf culture’s prominent place in “cool” and “extreme” market aesthetics. Finally, former label owner, music producer and consumer researcher Markus Giesler explored a *posthumanist* perspective on technological forms of music production and consumption, examining what they signal for our posthuman future as a whole. DJ “prosumers” (simultaneous producers and consumers) ideological and consumption related social discourse and practices were analyzed combining a sonic and an ethnographic research method. Giesler’s findings reveal that the musical interplay between human and technology may open up new forms of self-realization and hyper-embodiment.

Together, these papers presented new perspectives on how music intersects with consumer behavior. Each paper engages with the way critical theory has influenced how music has been studied, and draws connections between music and broader cultural issues (cf. Murray and Ozanne 1991). The proposed session is of particular relevance to consumer researchers interested in the socio-cultural dimensions of consumer behavior. This session will help these researchers to consider the value of a sonic perspective in their own work on consumer behavior. We believe that the presentations are, in themselves, studies that merit further attention and that may inspire an increased interest in the consumption of music—or at the very least expose the audience to new ideas and sounds.

References


“Theorizing the Relationship between Music and Marketing: The Musician’s Perspective”
Alan Bradshaw, University of Exeter
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David Marshall, University of Edinburgh

From Pope Gregory XIII’s call for ‘revising, purging, correcting and reforming’ (De Nora, 2003) church music in the sixteenth century to calls for censoring Eminem today, the history of western music is marked by concerns over its potential dangers and uses for society (North and Hargreaves, 2003). For Attali (1985) music carries significant powers, it is capable of causing people to forget, to believe and ultimately to silence people—in short he took music to be a ‘battleground to knowledge’ (pp20). For Adorno & Horkheimer (1998), music held the promise of antithesis to a reified world however due to the forces of the industry music was becoming subsumed and re-routed in accordance with the logic of capitalism until it deceptively aided that very process of reification. As musicians are typically imbued with the spirit of bohemia with its inherent anti-materialism (Becker, 1991; Frith and Horne, 1987; Kubacki and Croft, 2004; Robinson et al., 1991), can we consider musicians to be hostile to marketing and if so does music exist as an anti-marketing discourse within the consumer society? Or could it be that the culture industry has established itself as a monopoly whereby musicians no longer act antithetically?

This study considers these questions by conducting a series of interviews with professional musicians from a cross-section of the musical world. We investigate their experiences in dealing with marketers and their beliefs of what music should be. Noting how musicians are typically engaged in negotiating between artistic intention and commercial pragmatics, we conclude that the musicians still intend for music to maintain an antithetical dimension. We theorize that such data does not suggest a study of co-optation but rather we explore Frith & Horn’s (1987) contention that the conflict lends itself towards one of how ‘truth’ and ‘subjectivity’ and ‘uniqueness’ are registered in normal market relationships. This contention goes beyond Scott’s (1994) claim that music’s use in marketing contexts ought to be regarded as meaningful and language-like to suggest that music is also ideological. We conclude by suggesting that this results in a far more complex relationship between music and marketing than was previously understood.

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“Soundtrack to Paradise:
Sonic Branding in the South Pacific”
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Hawaii, as an iconic sound, a repertoire of songs, a musical identity, and an auditory brand asset, provides a performative example of what has been called “sonic branding.” The case of Hawaii shows how place branding, sonic branding, and iconic branding intersect. The marketing of Hawaiian popular music through radio shows and record albums aided in Hawaii’s transformation from a “primitive” paradise into the 50th state. What became known worldwide as Hawaiian music provides a soothing soundtrack for South Pacific holidays, backyard luau parties, or ironic late night lounging. The marriage of stereo technology and so-called authentic music was a potent force in the acoustic branding of Hawaiian paradise. By capturing the tropical sounds of Hawaii on the latest hi-fi advanced recording equipment, the recording industry offered up Hawaiian music as part of the latest achievement of modern technology, promoting paradise as a sound as well as a place to visit (Schroeder and Borgerson 1999).

Many tourist-marketing campaigns not only relied upon a visual representation of Hawaii, but also defined a Hawaiian sound (e.g., Costa 1998; Desmond 1999; Sturma 1999; Urry 2001). The iconic Hula girl and her musical accompaniment have for decades formed the foundation of a strongly appealing and attractive Hawaiian identity, helping make Hawaii instantly recognizable the world over (e.g., Buck 1993; Kirsten 2000; Tauck 2003). This aural image, specifically designed for consumption, has been reflected in and transmitted through familiar easy listening music—created mostly by white mainland songwriters with little or no connection to the islands. Moreover, airlines, travel agencies, the Kodak Film Company, and the U.S. government’s support of the Hawaii Calls radio show worked to develop her brand recognition; hi-fi stereo and photographic information technology helped frame Hawaii’s image of carefree paradise.

The process of branding Hawaii turned Hawaii into a sign that could be associated with other signs—music and sound. This sonic resource helps give an “authentic” cultural history to the brand by drawing upon cultural, historical, mythical, and stereotypical resources about Hawaii, Otherness, paradise, and US expansion (see Schroeder and Borgerson, 1999). Hawaii, and what the branding of Hawaii has deemed her lilted and undulating call, lure us to the ultimate retro-escape. Hawaiian music calls forth an earlier era, and invokes a complex legacy of culture and history, tourist management and nostalgic hype. The Hawaiian music genre captures the retro, the paradise and the escape of Hawaii’s marketed image—perhaps vibrating through strings of a steel guitar, a ukulele, or coconut shell bongos on famous favorites “Little Brown Gal” or “Lovely Hula Hands” on literally thousands of “Hawaiian” albums. We investigated details in the legendary history of Hawaii’s sonic branding, unpacking the Hawaiian presence via a media analysis of our growing archive of Hawaiianana and drawing upon recent developments in internet marketing and marketing thought generally, including sonic branding (Barnet 2001; Hirsch and Schneider 2001) and retroscapes (Brown and Sherry 2003). Our journey invoked our own experience of sonic branding, offers some related
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“Music as Posthumanist Prophecy: Listening to the Sonic Cyborgs”
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Combining cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun’s (1999) critique of well-established humanistic theories of music styles and culture with my own experience as a label owner and music producer, this paper explores a posthumanist perspective on technological forms of music production and consumption, examining what they signal for our posthuman future as a whole. The palpable desire to “become a machine” evoked by the German band Kraftwerk or experimental jazz legend Sun Ra’s and American funk band Parliament’s claims to be “from outer space” indicate a movement towards trying to become a sonic cyborg (Giesler and Venkatesh 2004). A posthumanist understanding (both methodologically and substantively) of sonic consumption will significantly enlarge our understanding of the relationship between music, consumption and technology. The aim of this study then is to shed light on the posthuman properties of sonic consumption. DJ prosumers (they are simultaneously consumers and producers) ideological and consumption related social discourse and practices were analyzed combining sonic and ethnographic analysis. Three sound recordings were produced by and three long interviews were conducted with three DJs during an experimental studio session. The recordings and interviews were analyzed in tandem focusing particularly on the human-technology interactions involved in the musical production and consumption process.

Following social theorist Jaques Attali (1985), “today, no theorizing accomplished through language or mathematics can suffice any longer; it is incapable of accounting for what is essential in time—the qualitative and the fluid, threats and violence. In the face of the growing ambiguity of the signs being used and exchanged, the most established concepts are crumbling and every theory is wavering. The available representations of culture fail to
express what awaits us” (p. 4). In order to speak to new realities of consumption, it is necessary to explore and develop radically new theoretical forms (e.g., Giesler and Venkatesh 2004; Sherry and Kozinets 2000; Lincoln and Denzin 1994; Brown 1995). Music, the organization of noise, is one such form. Music might herald prophecy, not simply reflect consumer culture, but a harbinger of change, an anticipatory abstraction of the shape of things to come. According to previous historical, cultural and political theorizations, technology is seen as having a negative influence on the production and consumption of music (e.g. Taylor 2001; Jameson 1977). Ever since the advent of sound generated by machines rather than traditional instruments, there have been dire predictions about the fate of the Audience and the death of the Song (e.g., Adorno 1949; Benjamin 1969).

My findings reveal that the musical interplay between human and technology opens up new forms of self-realization and hyper-embodiment. The way that musical technology like the sampler complicates musical history by raiding and redesigning the past to construct the present makes the consumption of music shift away from any idea of history or heritage. While sampling and pitching are key practices for sonic cyborgs, the moral foundation for them is located in an explicitly posthuman dialectic within which DJs “construct music” as a remix of their own sonic reality of consumption. Findings also shed light on the cultural codes of the DJ subculture, with implications for the broader range of music consumers. While DJs serve as cultural producers of the present, observations of perspective in action reveal a world of future fantasy, play, inner desire, escape and utopia that translates the noise of new conditions into a sound system of relationships. I argue that a key to understanding our posthuman future are the sonic cyborg musicians and DJs of the present who interact with musical instruments and technological equipment such as keyboards, sequencers or turntables to give a sonic form the technocultural transformations taking place as machines become increasingly prevalent in everyday life.

References