Surface Noise on the DeMarinis Effect (c) 1994 Douglas Kahn

From The Edison Effect - A Listener's Companion on Apollo Records ACD 039514

I don't know who first said it but the idea of invention was itself invented. It had been so thoroughly invented that, by the time of the early avant-garde, artists and writers such as Jarry, Roussel, Apollinaire, Duchamp had built parts of their art on complex parodic renderings of the culture of invention. Their main source was the science and technology of the 19th century whose eccentricity has often been more interesting than its legacy within the arts. This eccentricity was due largely to the fact that no boundaries had yet been erected against such things as spiritism and the everyday, thus: Edison's attempts to build a machine to communicate with the dead and Elisha Gray's musical bathtub. The artists were in their turn responsible for bringing such eccentricity into an intelligently poetic, critical and humorous context, a relationship between art and technology that has become increasingly pertinent with the ongoing saturation of media technologies at our end of the century. However, although ideas of artistic originality and inventiveness are often interchangeable, none of these artists could be called inventors. Paul DeMarinis is different; he is well versed in both artistic sensibilities and technological demands. His inventions reinvent invention yet once again.

If the repetition inherent in inventions reinventing invention sounds like a skipping phonograph needle, it is for good reason. DeMarinis too finds footing in 19th century technology, in his case with that most archaic modern means of reproduction--the phonograph. Archaic because the mechanical means and materials needed to make a phonograph had existed long before its invention. This technological oversight took on millennial proportions at the time, with people wondering especially how a recorded Word or two from Jesus would have transformed the present. Is it just a coincidence that the first word recorded by Edison was "Mary", or is this stretching things a bit too far? Nevertheless, you can hear Mary stretched out on a cylinder on this disc just as you can hear even more ancient sounds inadvertently inscribed into clay, perhaps while turning a pot. Word is that an archaeological dig is now taking place to search for the thunderous contents of Moses' tablets. This is one of the effects of DeMarinis going back to Edison's phonograph: it plays back all recorded time.

The phonograph earned Edison his "halo effect", i.e., he was thought to be in a state of grace unable to do wrong, a luminous countenance ironically not earned by his purported invention of the electric light. Edison's "Edison Effect", however, muted his halo as surely as it darkened his light bulbs. Although he had arrived at the phenomenal foundation of modern communications technologies such as sound amplification, radio, television and computers, he was unable to recognize it as such. DeMarinis's "Edison Effect", on the other hand, capitalizes on this big blunder by using the illegitimate offspring of contemporary media technologies made possible by the "Edison Effect" to haunt the past, playing phonography back through itself, replacing the stylus with a laser, stone with light.

What we hear here is phonography resuscitating itself in two directions, old and new technologies breathing life into each other's operations, and all this air exchanging explains some of the hiss heard on this CD: it is the atomized grit of phonographic surface noise floating in the air that has caused the wheezy asthmatic sheen of the synthesized voice. And those other noises? There is a pitted, scratchy sound resulting at the same time from a surface rut and a Geiger counter, both of which formed the background of the post-war vinyl generation before they grew up into that other counter culture. The radiation of sound from the speakers was matched by the background radiation of above-ground testing and brightly colored Fiesta Ware plates used for summer meals. A decade or so later the sun shined again with the signature sound of keyboard synthesizers like the Yamaha DX-7; Ron Kuivila calls it "that sun-drenched sound" for its superficial spectral sheen and for the Southern Californian sunscape that housed all the studio musicians who industrially piped the sound out into the air. When DeMarinis loops such sounds repeatedly through old and new audiophonic technologies and back again the noise becomes exaggerated and approaches an oxymoronic sound: the essence of mediation.

Invoking such sounds is necessary for understanding sound in general. They may seem marginal but they are the little difference that makes all the difference. Frying, scratching, scraping, clicking, buzzing, rasping, wheezing, hissing. What is Barthes' famous "grain of the voice" but a minutely meaty rasp produced by breath lasciviously raked across the laryngeal folds? Yet he insists that this is enough to distinguish greatness among singers. Adorno's Horspielstreifen, or hear-strip, the delicate buzz during a film of recorded silence whose purpose it is to subliminally confirm the presence of a reproduction underway, thereby establishing the minimum existence of some type of presence. Film music falls into this category as well. Although it may routinely provide the affective substance of human emotion and historical grandeur, if it gains too much attention it destroys the cinematic pact that sustains it; in this respect, it is music not-to-be-listened-to. Finally, the delectation of the underheard, whether they be small sounds or overtones, has been the stalwart tactic of experimental music in the second half of the century.

It is understandable that the post-vinyl generation would form complex sensibilities toward the insolences inherited from Edisonian wax and tin. Is it that vinyl's bump-and-grind erotics, its hill-and-dale peripatetic adventures have valorized the surface noise created by the phonographic storage in the dustbin of history by producing such miniature mimicry of human bodies? Or is this a plea for a sex life and a different travel agent?

When vinyl was king simple surface noise was noticeable as noise per se only after numerous repeated plays and thereby tolerated, if not relished, for reasons of love. Buying a used record with too much noise meant an inability to enter into a mutual maturation and poignant decay that comes with age. Vinyl was thus the most life-like mineral there was, sharing the same time frame as humans, aging naturally like plants, animals and domestic appliances. Compact discs, on the other hand, inhabit a truly alien archival time frame. You will have been dead, rotten and forgotten; the earth will be unrecognizable and perhaps uninhabitable, but even the crassest commercial drivel will survive, shimmering in the toxic sun, on compact disc. This is the new myth: Icarus flew close to the sun with his wax wings; the frying sound of surface noise heralded a plunge into the sea, not in defeat but as a means of case-hardening into a CD, locking in an unearthly material transcendence based upon its proximity to light. Time that will not die are not what memories are made of. Why in the world would you purchase such a thing?

With this recording and The Edison Effect in general, DeMarinis has given a good answer to Kuivila's imperative to find a position somewhere between the mindless sound of Cage and the soundless mind of Duchamp. It was the former who produced Varese-like glissand with test-tone records in Imaginary Landscape No. 1 and the latter who used the turntable for his roto-reliefs. DeMarinis has invented a track in-between and focused a laser on it.