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MUSCLE MEMORY: THE INIMITABLE FEEL OF THE RECORD

Tullis Rennie

Abstract

Muscle Memory is a new record I have made in collaboration with pianist Matthew Bourne (playing Memorymoog), and trumpeter Graham South. Comprising two composed sound pieces, it was released on vinyl in 2017. The pieces are structured around recordings made in the houses of each collaborator, documenting the act of listening to records. The compositions include conversation between composer and collaborators, samples of music from records heard/discussed, improvised instrumental sections, and electronically manipulated materials. *Muscle Memory* has since been presented to a number of audiences attending 'living-room' listening sessions - held in small, intimate and domestic spaces across the UK. Participative listening of this type is understood through Simon Frith and Christopher Small as an inclusive, collaborative, compositional action. The tactility (Mike D'Errico) and 'objectness' (David Grubbs) of records is also of importance. This text is a document of that listening experience.

Biography

Tullis Rennie is a composer, improvising trombonist, electronic musician, and field recordist. His work encompasses sound installation, community-engaged participative projects, multi-channel concert works, video, mixed media and live/improvised performances. He is co-founder of Walls On Walls with visual artist Laurie Nouchka, and founder member of the Insectotròpics audio-visual collective, based in Barcelona. He recently began the multi-modal label with Claudia Molitor. His work has been presented at concerts and festivals across 15 countries, alongside national broadcasts on BBC Radio 3 and ResonanceFM. Previous writings have been published in *Organised Sound* and *Leonardo Music Journal*. He features on recent recordings released by the Luminous label, ZeroWave and Ephi Records. www.tullisrennie.com

Listen.

Muscle Memory.

Another record. An invitation to listen.

An invitation to listen as an event, an experience,
simultaneously individual and shared.

To consider yourself, the listener, as collaborator.

To consider music and identity in combination, forming a cultural narrative
simultaneously individual and shared.

Recordings (following Simon Frith): heard as autobiographical accounts, as collective documentation.

Music (after Christopher Small): a performance in which we are all implicated, whether by playing, buying,
downloading, dancing, composing, listening.

Simon Frith: 'music, like identity, is both performance and story, [it] describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social.'¹

'Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives'²

Christopher Small: 'to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing'³

Touch.

The tactility of recorded formats – CDs, vinyl.

The ways in which format affects our listening...

by always starting at the beginning. No option to shuffle. No algorithmically determined channel-hopping.

Likely, listening to a whole side.

Touching sound (as Mike D'Errico).

¹ Simon Frith, 'Music and Identity', in Hall, S. and Gay, P. du (ed.) *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), p. 109.

² Simon Frith, 'Music and Identity', p.124

³ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998) p. 9.

Prior to reaching the turntable: choosing a record, fingers rifling through the sleeves of your collection – a catalogue of potential. Old stories, new ways to hear familiar sounds, moments to recreate, and create anew (as David Grubbs).

This plastic, that I think I love... that I obsess over, trawl shops and the internet for. It's romantic, nostalgic, analogue, tactile, multi-sensory, ritualistic.

Mike D'Errico: 'The "inimitable feel" of vinyl comes through not only in the performance practice of the DJ, but also in the hands of the record collectors who value the dusty, aged quality of vinyl just as a book collector values the original printing in a text. In physically manipulating the deep wax grooves on the surface of a record, the DJ may sense he or she is "touching sound" and being allowed immediate access to the musical source and social context embedded within the object.'⁴

David Grubbs: '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 repetition, repetition, repetition to make sense of various instructive examples of what at first blush passes as formless, unvectored noise but which eventually resolved itself into something with memorable, recognisable details - with aural breadcrumbs and semi-secure grips suggesting musical form.'⁵

'Beyond repeated listening, a second attraction for me to the record was its compound, multi-disciplinary 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.'⁶

1959.

We are listening to *So What*, from the studio album *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis. We start at the beginning, slowly lowering the needle. Crackle. Crackle.

⁴ Mike D'Errico, 'Technologies of Play in Hip-Hop and Electronic Dance Music Production and Performance' in Samantha Bennett and Eliot Bates (eds.) *Critical Approaches to the Production of Music and Sound*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 139.

⁵ David Grubbs, *Records Ruin The Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording*, (London: Duke University Press, 2014), p. x.

⁶ David Grubbs, *Records Ruin The Landscape*, p. xi.

Bill Evans sets the scene: a beautiful, introspective choice of piano chords. Bass player Paul Chambers winds his way around them, before setting off on a slow slouch – one of the most famous riffs in jazz.

Buh-duh-du-du-de duh... baaah Bah.

With the release of the recording, this string of events would quickly become a famous album opening. Through repetition, Evans's extemporised introduction became 'fixed' in the minds of those individual listeners. For me, this recording catalogues, archives, perhaps 'samples' all sorts of data: a fleeting moment in Columbia's 30th Street Studio; the pianist, his sequence of notes; the particular instrument (pianists don't get to choose); the high street shop in a small market town where I bought the CD, a time and place that I first pressed play... The record has sold over 4 million copies. How many memories are etched into that one groove?

While the opening notes of *So What* may not have been the same 'formless unvectored noise' of the experimental and post-punk records of which David Grubbs reminisces, Evans's 'musical breadcrumbs' did indeed lay a trail which would lead a sell-out crowd to Carnegie Hall two years after the release of *Kind Of Blue*. By this point, Miles - a furious innovator - was inevitably bored of playing out his hit, and insisted on getting it out of the way first, and at breakneck speed.

Bill Evans: 'there is a very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result ... you will hear something close to pure spontaneity in these performances'⁷

1961.

So What, from the album *Miles Davis At Carnegie Hall*.

Bill Evans's introduction heard anew in concert - transcribed by Gil Evans for his reed and brass orchestra. This orchestration perhaps further reinforcing meaning for individual listeners, already so familiar with that sequence of notes - through the popularity of the record and the repeated listenings afforded by the recorded format. Equally, this listening adds new layers to the individual and collective memory banks. Those familiar chords, never before heard as such - that voicing, that instrumentation. A familiar opening, repeated anew.

Carnegie Hall: a one-off performance, a unique event, but 'fixed' forever through the act of recording - even the late entry of screaming brass chords, failing to swiftly follow Paul Chambers's lightning-quick bass-line lead-in. Davis's impatience means this piece is no longer a slouch, but now a straight-ahead dash.

⁷ Bill Evans in Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue* [CD]. (Columbia Records, 1959).

Simon Waters: 'Muscle Memory begins to answer questions about how one work can comment on and analyse or critique another through its own agency as music. It also demonstrates how a work can marshal autobiography and ethnography to illuminate the human capacity to manipulate and be manipulated by musical activity. It explicitly engages multiple modes of listening and points of view: documentary 'field' recordist; participant observer; soundscape composer; 'amateur' musicologist and music lover; DJ and remix artist; spectromorphological composer—and allows the listener to explore different modes of listening through these multiple and nested points of view such that this becomes the primary formal concern. The listening home (the point of view) is contingent and transitory as we move through the scant twelve and a half minutes of the piece, so the listener is constantly becoming re-involved with, and made conscious of, the act of listening.'⁸

2014.

A recorded conversation with Graham, in the front room of his Manchester red-brick.

> Tullis: in terms of Miles... I remember you, buying...

Graham: ...I've got Someday My Prince Will Come now, which is... oh, that's a great one

> you bought that in Reveal in Derby

yeah, I did

> and then we played it at my parents' house...

I bought On The Corner as well, I think

> yeah...and I bought Jaga Jazzist, because I'd seen them at the Big Chill

[suddenly animated] 'cos that's got the... the orchestrated start to So What...and then there's like 'ba-duh ba-duh ba-de ba-du-duh... WHEE-DAH'

>Yeah! They absolutely... yeah, they come in really fast, and they're definitely not ready for it in the band...in the orchestral bit...

...but it's a shame not to play it!

> Yeah...let's listen to that.

⁸ Simon Waters, 'Tullis Rennie's Muscle Memory: Listening to the Act of Listening', *Contemporary Music Review* 34(1) (2015), pp.22–32.



<https://muscle-memory.co.uk/>