

The Meaning of  
Indeterminacy: Noise  
Music as Performance



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The Meaning of Indeterminacy:  
Noise Music as Performance  
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*In aesthetic terms, the category of 'sound' is often split in two: 'noise', which is chaotic, unfamiliar, and offensive; and 'music', which is harmonious, resonant, and divine. These opposing concepts are brought together in the phenomenon of Noise Music, but how do practitioners make sense of this apparent discordance? Analyses that treat recorded media as primary texts declare Noise Music to be a failure, as a genre without progress. These paint Noise as a polluted form in an antagonistic relationship with traditional music.*

*But while critiques often point to indeterminate structure as indicative of the aesthetic project's limitations, we claim that indeterminacy itself becomes central to meaningful expression when the social context of Noise is considered.*

*Through observational and interview data, we consider the contexts, audiences, and producers of contemporary American Noise Music. Synthesizing the performance theories of Hennion and Alexander, we demonstrate how indeterminacy situated in structured interaction allows for meaning-making and sustains a musical form based in claims to inclusion, access, and creative freedom. We show how interaction, not discourse, characterizes the central performance that constructs the meaning of Noise.*

Noise Music is characterized by abrasive frequencies and profuse volume. Few would disagree that the genre can be harsh, discordant, unlistenable. In aesthetic terms, "noise" is sound which is chaotic, unfamiliar, and offensive, yet such sounds – discarded or avoided in traditional genres – becomes the very content of a musical form with the phenomenon of Noise Music (commonly shortened to the proper noun 'Noise'). This is a curious artistic development, and most analysts approach the subject as a question of aesthetics. But arguments focusing solely on the aesthetics of Noise artifacts cannot explain the music's meaningfulness to its artists and audiences. Scholarly analyses of Noise consider recordings without context and idealize these media objects as primary texts. Such analyses disregard the performances where the dominant meanings of the genre are created, resulting in pessimism about the potential and success of Noise Music as music.

In our search for meaning, we challenge musicological

accounts on one side as too literal, and on the other, the production of culture approach which treats music as overly institutional. By situating Noise Music in the realm of performance, our argument reconciles a methodological disjuncture in cultural sociology between Alexander's "cultural pragmatics" and Hennion's ethnomethodology. We show how interaction, not discourse, characterizes the central performance that constructs the meaning of Noise. Noise is indeterminate in construction, yet reliably indeterminate, making it a particularly useful case study for questions of meaning-making. We reveal how practitioners, themselves critical of the commoditization of their genre and the possibility of progress within it, nevertheless experience Noise as engaging, meaningful, and empowering. We argue that indeterminacy, rather than an obstacle to meaning-making, serves as the very symbol of openness, creativity, and community in Noise. Reassessing Noise as essentially live performance reveals the ways that the genre's perpetually indeterminate sonic content engenders fluid spaces of interaction and interpretation. Here, the circulation of media objects does not define the genre; rather, such objects are circulated through the interactive space of live performance, and become but one of many symbolic-material exchanges which realize this social space. Attention to interaction - with others, with sounds, with spaces - and its centrality in the genre allows for an understanding of the meaning of Noise Music.

## Literature

What does it mean when noise is made the content of musical form, and why do individuals make this aesthetic selection? Noise Music presents a "symbolic inversion" (Babcock, 1978) of traditional musical language by being chaotic and inharmonic. To be distinguished from "high" traditions of noise in sound art, such as Brutism and Fluxus, by Noise Music we refer to the popular music genre emerging in the late 1970s with an infusion of visual and performance artists into musical practice (Licht, 2007). With a longer tradition in Europe and Japan, American Noise Music has grown popular only in the last decade, with an explosion of audience and artist populations, recording labels and distributors, criticism,

and festivals (Masters, 2008). This popularity can be linked to the intermediary influence of innovations in Rock, Metal, and Industrial dance music, as carried by mainstream artists like Sonic Youth, Nine Inch Nails, and Radiohead.

American Noise Music, the focus of this study, is primarily recognized by excessive volume (both as loudness and in content), copious levels of distortion, alien timbres, extreme frequencies, and sudden changes. Technology is a constant collaborator for the Noise Musician (Van Nort, 2006). From the earliest stochastic experiments of John Cage, there has been a particular fascination with the sound of rapidly-changing technology (Kahn, 2001). In Noise, sound-making instruments include sequencers, synthesizers, oscillators, effects pedals, and contact microphones, as well as software, handmade electronics, and found objects. In live performances generally, musicians meddle vigorously for five to fifteen minutes, bent at a right angle over folding tables heavy with a daisy-chain of electronics or modified instruments, looking up only to indicate the end of the set. Departures from this norm include more openly actionist and expressionistic movement and / or duos and small groups of musicians, but the lone musician is the most common form of performance. Though the genre is difficult to centralize and, as we will discuss below, notably lacking in a canon, a brief list of artists widely referenced include Bastard Noise, Emil Beaulieu, Prurient, Richard Ramirez, and Wolf Eyes.

Critics claim that Noise is a failure of meaningful communication (Hegarty, 2001, 2007) and false consciousness serving consumption (Smith, 2001, 2005). Such perspectives indicate anxiety about the recorded oeuvre's progressive merit, and reflect a modernist perspective conventionally concerned only with the differences between artworks and ignoring discursive continuities (Mukerji, 1978: 349). Privileging works of art over the practical work of art, modernist aestheticism conflates notions of "innovation" as a product and "improvisation" as a process, and reifies production as the "creative" act over "constantly emerging process" (Ingold and Hallam, 2007: 2, 9, 15). Purely aesthetic critiques cannot conceive the practical implications of Noise as a meaningful negotiation in sound in performance

(McCormick, 2009: 7), nor can they appreciate music's ability to enable cooperation and collective action (DeNora, 2003: 135).

Music sociology, though "eclectic" (Dowd, 2005: 123), requires equal understanding of sonic objects and lived experience in the total phenomenon of "musicking" (Small, 1998). Responding to essentialist claims about aesthetic experience, the dominant "art worlds" approach to the sociology of art offers an intensely institutional description of the production of artworks, artists, and reception (cf. Becker, 1982; Negus, 1999; Peterson and Anand, 2004; Lena and Peterson, 2008). Such an approach "makes good sociological sense of the pre-conditions of autonomy" (Prior, 2008: 311), particularly in studies of vanguard forms, where the forward drive of modern art often entails myths of "genius" as measures of success (Barthes, 1978; Heinich, 1997; Witkin, 1997; Born, 2009). But in emphasizing production, this dominant orientation over-corrects and ignores the very symbolic stuff of art (some adjustments of focus have been made to these positions, most notably Becker et al., 2006). Paraphrasing Prior (2008), the sonic material of music means Noise is Noise (and not Punk, Rap, or Rock), by virtue of its content, and not merely for its cachet as "a backdrop to, or weapon for, the purposeful action of the acquisitive human actor" (2008: 314). Production approaches alone remain unable to explain the meanings of musical content when there is a culture from which actors act and receive the world, as well as meaningful objects (McDonnell, 2010). Such an approach would recognize Noise Music as an "avant-garde" cum "scene-based" niche organized by a "creative circle" (Lena, 2012).

Cultural sociology helps us understand musical practice and its meanings through the analysis of performance. Our performance orientation reflects Douglas's understanding of genre, not as institutionalized rules but rather as "a context of expectation, 'an internalized probability system'" (2007:17, citing Kermode, 1979, citing Meyer, 1967). Attention to performance entails the combination of two modes: with the critical-dramaturgical mode of 'structural hermeneutics' (Alexander and Smith, 2001; Alexander, 2004), sociologists are able to understand performance as structured by encoded cultural meanings which delimit the range of interpretative

possibilities by audiences, of ideas, actions, and material. Such detailed accounts of social phenomena seek to illuminate shared meaning structures and liminal spaces as social performances offer constructions of the world with various degrees of success. Yet despite its vivid description of social life, applications thus far of this approach lack a practice-oriented method that would allow for grounded analysis unmediated through discourse. Thus we introduce to Alexander's "cultural pragmatics" the approach to performance developed by Hennion (2001, 2004, 2007). Inspired by a legacy of American pragmatism traced through ethnomethodology, actor-network theory (ANT), and ecological psychology, this approach considers performance with equal attention to objects and environments as narratological 'actants' (Latour, 2005) which exercise dynamic influence through perceptual 'affordances' (DeNora, 2000; Clarke, 2005). This approach respects the influence of objects, settings, and non-human actors to account for emergent action through the indeterminacy of practice.

Attention to the ways that aesthetic taste operates within genre shows that musical sound is always subject to what Alexander (2004: 530) has termed the "background representations" of performance. Backgrounds are an immutable presence in artistic performance, historically-grounded in each subsequent performance (Kramer, 2003), and in Noise such representations are vital to a reconstruction that makes meaning in relation to other genres (Auslander, 2008). Speaking purely sonically, Noise develops a meaningful "gesture" by minimizing the subject position found in more traditional song forms (Sangild, 2004). Listening is rarely as intense and decisive an engagement as the ANT perspective on "emergence" would suggest. Thus a performance theory of music must respect the culture structures from which audiences emerge. If we only consider the "perplexed mode" of the listener by which all meaning appears in the moment (Hennion 2007: 104), we miss an opportunity to expand the limits of performance and audience to find meaning in the background of musical performance. Without a theory of meaning-making, Hennion's ethnomethodology alone cannot provide a coherent sense of a social realm constituted by an autonomous culture (Alexander, 1990). A synthesis of

the approaches of Alexander and Hennion allows sociological access to the salient meanings of creative activity without overlooking the situated experiences emergent in these moments.

Focused on listening, Hennion (2008) cuts a pragmatic middle-way to music not as a static object, but “an actual phenomenon” made by people in a temporal space (Hennion, 2001: 2). Thus, in the performance, “the object matters a great deal – but an object seen now through the ‘feedbacks’ and reactions it enables” (Hennion, 2008: 5). Guided by “taste”, music as a bonding material serves individuals who “try their best to work with available materials” (DeNora, 2000: 95; *italics original*). Indeterminacy in Noise ensures all participants are always listening, as the “ears remain open” (Hegarty, 2001), constantly engaged on the most immediate, perceptual level. Given today’s superabundance of materials offering meaningful sounds across a wealth of mediation, the listener has much to tussle with. Noise Musicians are invested, empathic individuals with little ‘intellectual distance’ in their practice: such “great amateurs” serve a didactic role, offering “a range of social techniques that make us able to produce and continuously to adjust a creative relationship with objects, with others, with ourselves, and with our bodies” (Hennion, 2004: 142). Hennion’s view allows us to see performance as the nexus of interaction with objects and settings, while Alexander’s view reminds us to think of such performances as an encounter between background and immediate representations.

Alexander’s approach emphasizes the structures of meaning, while Hennion’s approach emphasizes the indeterminacy of interaction. By reading practices against a structured and meaningful background, a synthesis of these approaches allows for an analysis of the delimited space of interaction and an appreciation of the ways that meanings are built of both cultural structures and indeterminate interactions as the interplay of concepts and perceptions (Nonken, 2008: 287). Lacking a formal musical structure, indeterminacy is central to the construction of Noise. This refers to not just stochastic sonic forms, but also indeterminate interactivity in performance. Performance is usually defined in its essence



as human expression (Demers, 2010), and such definitions rely on clear boundaries between performer and spectator. In Noise, however, indeterminacy is celebrated as spectation invariably gives way to participation and interaction, and in fact requires an interactive listener (Collis, 2008: 38). From the view of information theory in social performance, noise is an excess of signification, presenting the greatest range of creative materials to be drawn from (LaBelle, 2006); art made of noise forgoes “conclusive meaning” and instead offers “non-objective communication of emotional significance” through excesses of sensation in “a lush, phantasmagorical clamor developed on the basis of inclusion” (Nechtavall, 2011: 33,35). This should be distinguished from Cascone’s (2000) characterization of “glitch” music as electronic music employing subtle, operational interruptions in counterpoint. Where aesthetic preference or “taste” is a critical negation in dialectic (Wolff, 1982: 16; Hennion, 2001), one’s selection of Noise over other aesthetic forms is deeply meaningful as a performance of inclusion, access, and freedom.

In summary: taken alone, Alexander’s approach would attend primarily to the genre’s artifacts: recorded music, published interviews with artists, and supplemental visual materials. Such analysis would likely result in claims about symbolic conflict, where Noise is structured as an inversion of traditional musics a la “purity” and “pollution” (Douglas, 2002). Indeed, as an “extreme” music (Kahn-Harris, 2006), Noise challenges the simple assumption that popular music “is, above all, fun” (Grossberg, 1984: 233): irony and self-reflexivity are explicitly indulged, as artists promote themselves using terms like “scum”, “ugly”, and “terror”, on record labels like Misanthropic Agenda, Nihilist, and No Fun Productions (curators of the three-day ‘No Fun Fest’). But such an analysis would not explain why artists and audiences find this compelling, except to point to a tension with or rejection of dominant musical forms which is not found in our data. In fact, though Noise artists and audiences may pay more attention to production quality than to discursive content, they, too, love Madonna. Hennion’s approach, with its symmetrical valuation of practice, reveals the meaningful indeterminacy of interaction, where messiness and serendipity affect the creativity at the heart of Noise. The

emergent properties of technological sound present liminal spaces within the performance as do the direct interactions between artists and audiences. By adding Hennion's feel for pragmatic action to Alexander's focus on dramaturgical performances, we see that Noise Music is about participation, not pollution.

## Method

This research is based on a combined ten years of participant-observation in Noise scenes primarily on the west and east coasts of the United States and on semi-structured interviews with thirteen Noise musicians conducted by the first author between November 2008 and April 2009. Ethnographic work by the authors included attending performances in a variety of venues from basements to concert halls, listening to hundreds of Noise recordings, informal conversations, and reading supplemental material in liner notes, magazines, books, internet publications, and message boards. Interviews consisted of a theoretically-driven sample of two-hour, semi-structured interviews conducted in-person or by telephone. Respondents were selected for visibility in the genre, as well as to incorporate diversity of age, gender, and geographic location in the United States. Given the small sample size ( $n=13$ ), this recruitment includes a desired over-representation of women ( $n=3$ ) who comprise a small but important minority of performers (Rodgers, 2010). Data on ethnicity and economic status was not collected, nor inferred. Of 18 total musicians contacted for interview, 16 responded positively, three responded but could not accommodate the research period, and two failed to respond. Pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity.

Despite the multitude of sub-genres in Noise and lack of consensus on the boundaries of the genre, all individuals involved self-identify within the general categorization of "Noise Musician." American Noise is a relatively young genre comprised of two generations of artists, both represented in our sample, one cohort active from the mid-late 1980s and 1990s (artists generally ranging from 35 to 45 years in age), and the second in the early 2000s (artists now between the ages of 18 and 35). Consolidating technical roles

with performance, Noise musicians often represent the entire “production team” (Hennion, 1989). As we will show below, unlike other genres, Noise does not generate conventional “fans” as secondary consumers. Noise musicians comprise the core consumers of their cohort, acting as label operators, publicists, organizers, and critics for the genre.

Interviews were coded in two steps by each author. Codes were first generated by emergent themes based on the interview data. Next, codes were reassessed according to codes generated in participant-observation. Finally, the authors collaboratively selected the most salient themes and the implications for explanation. These themes reflect the defining features indeterminacy as the central good which Noise Music as a form provides. In the analysis below, we demonstrate how the indeterminacy of noise provides creative material that is accessed in collaboration with instrumental technology. We show how meaning-making is dislodged from recording and localized in live interactive performance. Finally, we argue that the indeterminacy found in the practices of Noise Music relate cultural structures to the potential of noise as creative material.

### Indeterminacy as creative material

For practitioners, Noise Music is the indeterminate reverse of an over-determined culture. Making Noise means freedom to create in Alexander’s liminal space, free from constraints of tradition and the “right way” to create. The demotion of instrumentality means sound becomes a direct conduit of interaction. Dee explains, “Noise is your first resource as far as sound making. You know, some people are like ‘I can’t make something because I don’t have a piano.’ But you can always find noise [...] noise is everywhere, so your ideas can be endless.” Artists shared their excitement in discovering this creative space by trying out new sounds for themselves (Hennion, 2008), as Vic recalls an exuberant sense of possibility, “Hey! I can do this. Hey! I can pull this off. Hey!” The freedom of Noise preserves multiple routes of access, and accessibility means more open participation. Though expensive digital synthesizers are popular for their sound-making range, they are hardly required of a

performer; similarly, the internet provides an open forum where mediation is neither standardized nor regulated. Jamie estimates, "There's probably like a thousand girls in America trying to be Britney Spears, but like only one of them gets a record deal. But in Noise, how many bands are trying to be Wolf Eyes? Well guess what? They all have like 5,000 spray-painted CDs put out."

This egalitarianism is further reflected in Noise musicians' rejection of virtuosic instrumentation and stylistic progress. We have seen audiences at Noise concerts respectfully ignore classically-trained instrumentalists attempting to cross genres, then crowd with rapt attention around a performer screaming into a dislodged guitar pickup. Sitting for hours with an instrument and learning its nuances seems wasteful when one is more concerned about sound than its source. Billy summarizes the practical demands of traditional, virtuosic instrumentation as an empty pursuit, and explains her turn to Noise: "Here I am slaving over this thing that I'm not really getting satisfaction out of, so why am I doing that? So I just go back to [...] exploring these sounds and seeing what happens." Mastery can lead to stagnation, as Pat explains, "there are a lot of people on the other end of the spectrum, who have so much knowledge that they've exhausted the instrument;" conversely, Noise privileges sound over traditional skill to create a "more open-minded zone." While artists often point to technical frustrations as spurring their interest in making Noise, we observe an abundance of traditionally skilled musicians in the Noise community, many with "day jobs" in more traditional genres. It is clear that a lack of formal skill is rarely the inspiration for making Noise. The majority of our interview respondents reported some higher education in the arts or humanities (n=9 of 13) and many have advanced formal musical training (n=7 of 13), though most claim to deactivate this technical knowledge in practice, as Nick suggests, "I can intellectualize everything to death if I want to." Rather than seeking coherence of interaction, Noise invites emergent nonmusical content, with performances often surrounded by impromptu visual art and other creative activities: in observation we have noted the use of video projections, interpretive dance, painting, and spoken-word confrontations. Arriving to Noise from years

of classical training, Alex compares Noise shows to more traditional concerts, "Noise shows are so loud and volume is really important. [...] And they're just fun. Less stuffy, a more crazy time... kind of mayhem."

We have seen audiences reject virtuosity as pompous, condescending, and "wanky" (self-involved), where pre-occupation on stage with traditional concerns symbolizes an unwillingness to interact with other participants, in the moment. Lacking a formal structure for comparison, Noise appears non-competitive; as Jamie says, "there is no prize in noise. And that's probably one of the things that keeps it good, the keeps it real: because it is amateur, sort of, like by nature it has to remain amateur." Lee suggests that this no-rules attitude holds even when individuals contemplate Noise as a composition, "I can dislike their choice starting that way, but I can't go, no, that's wrong." The sound affords a multiple but finite set of interpretations, which are measured in real-time as feedback from all participants and the background meanings they share. We see no perfectly blank listener who is truly "perplexed" (Hennion, 2007: 104). Authentic self-expression opposes objective skill, as Jesse explains, "I hear a tuba and I'm like, 'oh yeah, a guy fucking playing the tuba.' You know? Drums: if someone's playing sick drums, like [in a flat tone] 'wow' - you know - 'that guy's a sick drummer.' I don't know if it provokes emotion beyond 'holy shit, this guy is talented.'" So how does Noise come to sound as it does? Rejecting instrumental virtuosity, Noise Musicians approach technologies through the sounds they make, effectively rerouting the processes of instrumentation.

### Technology as collaborator

In their selection of unconventional instruments as sonic mediators, Noise Musicians claim a more intimate relationship with sound, in part through their rejection of traditional virtuosity, and in part through their use of different instruments and methods. By utilizing unconventional instrumentation and unconventional methods, Noise Musicians produce acousmatic sound, or sound which cannot be attributed to an absolute source (Schaeffer, 2006). Even in performance, where musicians are generally situated on level

with the audience, allowing audience members to pull close and study the equipment in use, a sound's origin can be hard to deduce from the complex that each artist assembles. When Lee drags a piezo microphone across a dented tin panel, the staccato flutter we hear cannot easily be located in the circuit of effects pedals and oscillators cluttering his table. As Terry exclaims with the passion of a preacher, "I want sound to become an entity on its own, and I'm trying to make music where the listener would never know how it's made; [...] so overwhelming and great, that you don't even care about how it's made." A positive consideration of technological mediations (Hennion, 2002: 83-85) recognizes that the kinetic connection between a player and their musical instrument means that the instrument does not "disappear" in use as if a tool, but "remains opaque" as "feedback mechanisms preclude a wholly preconceived performance" (Evens, 2005: 82). The excessive sounds of Noise draws attention to the collaborative relationship as an extensive engagement between the artist and the device or devices - qua instruments - provoking the listener to consider the "depth" of the (sonic) material (Alexander, 2008). This is evident in the extensive set-up prior to a performance, and in the extensive editing work of recording. As Lee illustrates, "Out of 20 minutes of a recording session, I may keep as little as 5 seconds. Anybody can make 'kkkkrrkkkrskssk'; anybody can make, you know, 'shhrrkshiiiiii' [...] It's the sounds that don't sound ordinary, which is a little more sheet metal and - there's a little piece of feedback - before I turn a knob on a filter and cut it."

In pursuit of new sounds, self-limiting is a common resource for Noise artists (Rodgers, 2010). Billy will "take out certain effects pedals which I consider to be like my 'crutch' pedals where I really know the pedal, or I really like the sound of the pedal - and I'll just take it out of my line and that forces me to do something... new." We observe widespread dismissal of any "Johnny noise-pedal" who seems to rely too much on out-of-the-box technology which lacks customization and feels "bought" or "put-on". Not limited to recordings and rehearsals, artists extend their creative experience by extending their rejection of the "crutch pedal" into live performance. Clearly, while technology and the new opportunities it allows are central to the genre, we cannot

understand the meanings of Noise through exclusive focus on the oscillators and other instruments we see onstage or the practice room. We must consider contexts of practice.

### Against recording

Making music is always listening to music, and where Noise Musicians reject the “impossible” sounds of the album produced in a multi-track recording studio as inauthentic, the immediate experience of live sound is the foundational reference of Noise. Noise recordings appear equally on CD, CDr, and vinyl formats, and the otherwise-antiquated medium of cassette tapes has remained a regular artifact of the genre to this day. CDs and cassettes in particular are passed between artists and audience members and slipped into pockets as a token or a calling card. However, these objects are not central to the genre in the way that performance is; artists and audiences devalue recorded media because of the possibilities for obfuscation - as did each of our interviewees, though all had released more than a dozen recordings by the time of our interviews. These recordings were made peripheral by comparison to the core of live performance by our respondents, who also minimized the role of recorded media by other artists. This is not surprising: in general, we observe no Noise musicians or fans who do not attend performances regularly, often whenever possible, but we do observe many who do not regularly listen to Noise recordings, and our interviewees support this finding. Several respondents could not name the last album heard in its entirety; for Taylor and others it isn't odd to go four or five years without buying a record. Alex considers a list of “essential” albums found on a message board and shrugs it off, “I have never heard of some of this stuff.” This is a rather remarkable feature of a musical genre, commonly defined by canonization a la the Rock “album” (Gracyk, 1999). Even Taylor, an artist also known as a prolific recording engineer within the genre, argues one needs just “four or five [albums] and you have plenty of material to use for whatever purpose you listen to that for;” and even still he puzzles about how people might actually listen to them: “I'm sure people do, but I can't imagine anyone sitting there and intently listening to one of those CDs.” Noise is not primarily situated in recorded

media; rather, musicians display their meanings on the civil and literal stage of performance (Alexander, 2004: 529), and hope for resonance.

Reinforcing artists' skepticism about formal "progress," Noise recordings are said to offer neither the interactive experience of live performance nor the continuity and development seen in other genres. Recorded Noise is simply too distant from human experience, as Jamie recalls from an early experience with the "classic" Noise compilation *The Japanese-American Noise Treaty*, "I had to stop listening to it because it was too weird and I couldn't integrate it into my social reality, it was too confusing." She adds, "I guess I didn't have a place for that in my life." Daniel suggests there's something like a hardship implied in the standard album, "Putting out a CD or a record, you're asking a person to sit on their ass and listen for an hour or so. That's a lot to ask." Of course, in terms of time, effort, and cost a night of performance is almost always much more demanding – standing for hours on the hard concrete of a musty basement or warehouse in a remote neighborhood, nursing a warm beer – but the interaction of this performance is irreducible. The centrality of situated interaction points to a need that Dee says isn't satisfied by solitary listening, "I personally gain more understanding from a piece of art or music when I can put it in context with its origins. I think it's a very human thing to want to identify with the creator... Finally seeing how it was done live really brought the recordings home for me." That is, more than the creative logic, the technologies of sound production, or the recorded artifacts of the scene, performance becomes the locus of Noise Music as a substrate of interaction.

### Live noise

The live performance of Noise Music affords an essential social context which cannot be found in recordings alone. Live performance, as a physical situatedness, affirms the agency of the audience as active listeners rather than passively hearing subjects (Nonken, 2008). Because indeterminacy, as the sacred center of self-expression within the genre, is so closely tied to technology as collaborator, and because of the uneasy dependence of participants on technology, the immediate



encounter of a live setting becomes increasingly important for the “authentication” of performance (Auslander, 1999: 79). We have seen the centrality of live performance in our fieldwork, and in our interviews all artists argued straightforwardly that live performance is vital to Noise Music. Even when one cannot attribute exact causation to instruments, seeing sound emerge from a labor of good faith can make all the difference.

Noise performances are central to meaning-making and provide multiple, overlapping interactive contexts that go beyond the formal stage of traditional venues for performance. There is no clear delineation here between “frontstage” and “backstage,” (Goffman, 1959), and both performance and interaction are diffused across varied contexts. Concerts are often quite long, with audiences prepared to spend upwards of four hours at a venue, but performances are quite short; ten to twelve minute sets are most common, often bounded by extended periods when “nothing” happens as the musician sets up (and later breaks down) their instruments; chats with audience members, often about particular instruments and machines; drinks a last beer and disappears outside to smoke. During the performance, most audience members appear raptly engaged; a short burst of applause follows the performance, and other activities resume overlaid with a din of conversation. This complex of activities occurs around the fluid and nominally-identified “stage,” which participants recognize as inseparable from the performance. This is Hennion’s revision to “taste”, where aesthetic preferences make a critical assessment in relation to spaces, events, and interactions therein.

Observations and interviews confirm that, in Noise Music, interaction rather than spectatorship is key to such performances. Noise is interactive in form and content, and it is this interaction that is central to any understanding of meaning in Noise. In most – almost all – performances, audience members are musicians themselves. Jamie explains the social practice of Noise involves acknowledging participants’ synchronic role as the always-listening performer-consumer, “I think it really is the most democratic music in that sense, because, I mean, when you go to a Noise show, there are very few fans – like extremely few fans – and

the fans are usually closet musicians.” Dee is even clearer: “One thing I learned about noise is you’re not listening to noise unless you’re making it.”

Given this high degree of interaction, Jamie argues further that intimacy with the audience, and the community this breeds, is key to the genre’s success, “The performance that’s important for you to do for your dozen or 20 friends is really important for everyone involved, like in your basement, but that’s not necessarily going to translate to like a bigger environment... [the Noise community] was always a very small community, and it was a community of like, “lifers” you know, who you’ve seen at shows for the last five years and would be at shows for the next five years.”

Intimacy allows for dissolution of symbolic and spatial boundaries: Taylor prefers to “play in a small dive where the audience is a couple of feet away from you and you’re completely obscured from anybody who’s [not] right in front; as long as it’s a situation where you just sort of ignore the divide between artist and audience.” This ideal is professed by musicians in many other genres, but it is one that is more straightforward in a community where most audience members are preparing to follow the performer onstage, either tonight or the next night. We have attended many events where all present were either performers or promoters, and have observed that most do not see such small audiences as any form of failure.

Just as Noise musicians manage the threat of impersonal technology with self-sabotage, they create authentic, intimate, here-and-now “liveness” (Auslander, 1999) with strategies that avoid repetition and predictability. And as the use of technology tends towards indeterminacy rather than the exact repetition it could afford, performance is tweaked to derail one’s tendency toward formal stasis. Describing the longest tour she had taken, Billy tells us: “Toward the end, I started to really change a lot of what I was doing. And that was just because I didn’t want to repeat myself, and yeah, I’m curious: what would happen if I’d gone for another week? Would I have really changed the sound? I can really fine-tune things at my house, change this around, take a break. But

you can't do that in a live situation. But what I do is start to change what maybe my idea is, and start to manipulate the sound live."

In *Noise*, as an aesthetic project, there is no single measure of a successful performance (Alexander, 2004: 529-530, 551). Rather, success is a quality defined by local interaction. As Woody Allen suggests, eighty percent is simply showing up.

### The meaning of indeterminacy

Understanding indeterminacy as both the rejection of virtuosity and the promotion of live, participatory encounters allows for an understanding of attachment (Hennion) and what it means to succeed (Alexander) in *Noise Music*. Taylor distinguishes his from more traditional genres where the focus on making records is "a waste of time," and he specifically cites the notion of canonical "progress" as false. Demonstrating how this relativity looks in practice, Jamie reports a concert experience easily recognizable to anyone in the community,

One of the opening acts was so excited because he went to a flea market and he bought this oscillator, and so he had one like, triangle-wave oscillator, and that was the only thing he had - he didn't have pedals or anything - he just plugged it into this little amp and he went 'weeeewr weeeeeewr, weewr weewr weewr' [laughs] - and he did that for five minutes, and everybody was just like [making a face] "you have got to be joking me." And then he finished, and everyone clapped, and he said "okay, do I have time? Maybe I'll do one more," and people were just like "NO!" And he said "okay, okay... Thanks!" and everyone clapped for him again. And it was just like, you had something you needed to do and you did it - and that's awesome - and okay, you're done! I mean it honestly felt good to everyone.

She contrasts this experience when she recalls a particularly impressive show by a veteran *Noise* artist that she had a chance to see twice on the same tour: soon into the second performance she sees it's exactly as the first, "every stage in their music is entirely preplanned, and there's no freedom.

And to me, that's the real antithesis to Noise. It's like fake Noise, in a way." The very notion of "fake Noise" – a concept we have seen widely deployed in our observations and interviews – is key to the authentication of practical experience, as it reveals the inherent tension which distinguishes Noise as performance from a purely music-textual endeavor. Tethering Noise to the local realm of practice makes it difficult to reduce to commoditized "entertainment." In live performance, this means disrupting the transaction between audience and performer; as Taylor asserts, "I don't need the responsibility of entertaining anybody."

Unlike "entertainers", Noise Musicians, exemplifying Hennion's "amateurs," conceive what they do as "organic", "instinctual", and what many expressed as "doing your own thing" – even if in negative terms, as Taylor concludes: "there's really nothing that would give me a sort of validation that I've chosen the right path, and a lot of times I think I've ruined my life by choosing the path that I've chosen. There really wasn't a conscious choice to make difficult music. It's just what keeps me interested."

The indeterminacy prized in Noise is not without its problems, and it can make people uneasy: we have seen performances fail when equipment breaks, when a touring musician feels exhausted in her fourth week, when police respond to neighbors' complaints, or when audiences don't like what they are hearing or seeing. But the threat of failure only raises the stakes of participation. Vic privileges this immediacy: "if I thought a show was great, nothing can ever change the fact that at the time, when I did it, it was great." Jamie details the trade-offs involved in essentializing the here and now: "the absolute best performances I got in my life were for like 20 kids, and nobody wrote about it and there's no video. And, you know, that's kind of sad, but it's also not sad, because I was really psyched on the experiences I had."

## Conclusion

Theorists have declared Noise Music either a failure (Smith, 2005), or a success-by-failure (Hegarty, 2001), as though an objective status of failure were actively pursued. However,

such critical accounts operate in an intellectual vacuum, disengaged from a sociological understanding of aesthetic meaning taken from the practice of social life (Eyerman and McCormick, 2006). If Noise Music fails in theory, this theory is predicated largely upon a conventional notion of what music is meant to “be”, and ignores what the practice of music actually “does”.

Given a view of Noise Music as the sheerest of musical listening experiences – indeterminate in construction, yet reliably indeterminate – the phenomenon presents an ideal intersection in which to link Hennion’s pragmatic theory of taste to Alexander’s dramaturgical theory of culture. Hennion inspires us to look to the interactions between individuals, spaces, and objects to understand and embrace the indeterminacy inherent to every context. Alexander’s perspective posits the delimitation of the spaces of interaction – we hear background representations such as “performance” and “not-performance”, “artist” and “audience” even as respondents describe fluid spaces of interaction and minimize such either-or categories – as well as an analytical perspective that differentiates background from immediate representations. Attention to preexisting meaning structures allows for an understanding of the ways that meanings are made and, importantly, how they are sustained through even the most sporadic and over-whelming interactions. We find that interactive performance is central to the construction of meaning in Noise, and argue that understanding Noise as founded in live performance allows the analyst to understand why so many find Noise Music to be egalitarian, empowering, and meaningful. Though a shrewd mode of discourse analysis, Alexander’s structural hermeneutics would not help us understand Noise beyond its recorded artifacts. Recorded media do not explain why participants find Noise compelling, or how these “attachments” develop. Hennion’s approach, with its symmetrical valuation of practice, reveals the indeterminacy of interaction, where messiness and serendipity affect the creativity at the heart of Noise. The emergent properties of technological sound present liminal spaces within the performance, as do the direct interactions between artists and audiences, with little emotional distance in between. By adding Hennion’s pragmatic action to

Alexander's dramaturgical performances, we discover that rather than destroying music as we know it, Noise Musicians seek to expand the language of music while creating a space of direct engagement with sound, and each other.

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