

# 'Scratch and Mix: Sampling the Human Voice in the Metaphorical Phonograph'

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[Abstract]

This paper elucidates the practice by which composers and DJs use the turntable to 'scratch and mix' samples of recorded female voices, thereby reframing them into new contextual forms. The paper focuses on two pieces: 'Got 'Til It's Gone', a pop song by Janet Jackson and Q-Tip which samples and manipulates a fragment of Joni Mitchell's 'Big Yellow Taxi'; and Christian Marclay's turntable scratching on the voice of the late Maria Callas. The discussion is interpolated with a reading of Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *La Nausée*, for his literary embodiment of the recorded voice.

[Keywords]

voice; technology; electronic; Callas; Marclay; Sartre

## ***Introduction***

One night while reading, half listening to the television in the background, my ear was drawn to the sound of a male operatic voice that had become 'stuck', mid-aria. The voice was suspended for a length of time that far exceeded human capacity. I looked up to the television screen to see an animated piece of chewing gum delivering an aria upon the operatic stage. But his chewing gum body, and the vocalization itself, were frozen, mid-stream. He stood upon the stage, hands dramatically outstretched, and jaw hanging wide open, while from his chewing gum mouth a high note looped continuously. The sound caught my attention because I had expected the singing voice to stop for a break, and when it didn't, I was arrested by the sound of this impossible human voice.

## ***Adorno's Fears for Recording Perfection, & Early Turntable Experimentation***

In his essay of 1928, 'Curves of the Needle' Theodor Adorno outlined his observations and fears for the recorded voice, and what he regarded as the growing problem of attainable perfection within the recording industry.

As the recordings become more perfect in terms of plasticity and volume, the subtlety of color and the authenticity of vocal sound declines as if the singer were being distanced more and more from the apparatus.<sup>1</sup>

To Adorno, it seemed that recorded perfection was further abstracting an already disembodied voice. Adorno compared the process of ‘cleaning up’ recordings to photographic technique, which he said ‘borrowed from lifeless psychological painting’.<sup>ii</sup>

Shortly after the publication of Adorno’s essay, composers Ernst Toch and Paul Hindemith experimented in creatively sabotaging the gramophonic plate for original compositional purposes. Their *Originalwerke für Schallplatten* (Original Works for Disc) which featured at the Neue Musik Berlin festival in 1930, celebrated the possibilities and constraints of the new gramophone medium, and mark some of the first known experiments in manipulating vocal utterance using the new technology. Their early exploratory treatments of the recorded voice revealed possibilities that composers would continue to explore throughout the century of recorded sound. The experiments of Toch and Hindemith marked the beginning of an elaborate interplay between the human voice and the recording mechanism, in which the machine revealed itself in the audible voice, just as the voice was both re-enlivened and re-invented in new and imaginary forms, through the machine.

Since then, numerous composers including Edgard Varèse, John Cage, Pierre Schaeffer, and hip-hop artists from Grandmaster Flash to DJ Spooky have looped, transposed, and transformed the record plate for compositional ends, in a technique now commonly known as Turntablism. John Oswald describes the art of turntablism or scratching thus: ‘A phonograph in the hands of a “HipHop/scratch” artist who plays a record like an electronic washboard with a phonographic needle as a plectrum, produces sounds which are unique and *not* reproduced – the record player becomes a musical instrument’.<sup>iii</sup>

This article looks at two such instances of turntablism used for the refashioning of a pre-existing recording into a new work. Both pieces stem from the latter part of the twentieth century – Christian Marclay’s turntable remix *Maria Callas* of 1988, and Janet Jackson and Q-Tip’s pop single, ‘Got ‘Til It’s Gone’ (1997). These pieces sample, recycle, and transform the voice upon the record plate until it surpasses what is humanly attainable. The original vocal recording is refashioned – scratched and looped, cut and spliced, and then reassembled, into an entirely new form. This article examines, through the recorded object as locus, the re-contextualization of vocal material into new musical forms.

### ***La Nausée and Phonographic Listening***

Let us begin by visiting Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1938 novel *La Nausée* (*Nausea*). By the time of publication, phonographic or gramophonic listening had become a part of the everyday domestic experience for the middle class, and Sartre describes so eloquently our experience of listening to the human voice in a recording.

Sartre’s novel is particularly elucidating in defining the very traits that make the recorded object so distinctive. One such characteristic is the phonographic record’s very *inevitability*. At one point, while listening to recorded music in his living room, the protagonist Roquentin comments, ‘the vocal chorus will be along

shortly', and a little later he anticipates, 'a few seconds more and the Negress will sing'.<sup>iv</sup> Unless he intervenes, predictable events at particular times become intrinsic to his experience of listening to the song on the phonograph.

It is this very *inevitably* which indicates that this is a *recorded* document. Unlike live performance, which is by its very nature unpredictable and organic, the song Roquentin listens to on the phonograph is contained in a static, re-playable, reproducible form, and with it the human voice is housed in perpetuity within the recorded medium. Roquentin describes such an instance of listening to the phonographic image thus,

Madeline turns the crank on the phonograph... I recognize the melody from the very first bars. It is an old rag-time with a vocal refrain.<sup>v</sup>

Through the novel, the author continually returns to such descriptions of phonographic listening, and in these repetitions, Sartre enacts through the text the experience of repeated listening to the same performance on the phonographic plate.

The voice sings:  
Some of these days  
You'll miss me, honey.<sup>vi</sup>

This 'recorded' couplet winds its way through the text as a looped trope. And when it does so, Roquentin, and the reader, hear the song and imagine 'the Negress', her voice emanating from the phonographic plate and into the room.<sup>vii</sup> The author's very reference to 'the Negress' hints to an objectification of the voice and the persona behind it, for although she remains nameless (and her identity has become the source of debate), this choice of terminology folds voice, skin color and bodily presence into one composite term.<sup>viii</sup>

The protagonist here imagines the body behind the song:

The voice, deep and hoarse, suddenly appears and the world vanishes, the world of existence. A woman in the flesh had this voice, she sang in front of the record, in her finest get up, and they recorded her voice.<sup>ix</sup>

Roquentin conflates the physical body of the singer with the 'objecthood' of the turning record plate, and ironically it is this which enables him, through the listening, to become fully conscious of his own existence:

The woman: bah! she existed like me, like Rolleban, I don't want to know her. But there it is. You can't say it exists. The turning record exists, the air struck by the voice which vibrates, exists, the voice which made an impression [on] the record existed. I who listen, I exist. All is full, existence everywhere, dense, heavy and sweet.<sup>x</sup>

But, critically, the inevitability of the song is sabotaged by a glitch in the playback mechanism of the phonographic needle.

The voice sings:  
*Some of these days*  
*You'll miss me, honey*

Someone must have scratched the record at that spot because it makes an odd noise... this tiny coughing of the needle....<sup>xi</sup>

In the needle's 'coughing', the presence of the performer – our imagining of 'the Negress' as she sings – is disrupted. In malfunctioning, the phonographic plate instead highlights the very presence of the machine. Through this mechanical disruption, the voice on the turntable becomes accidentally looped, as the needle settles into a specific groove upon the record plate.

### ***Remixing the Past: You Don't Know What You've Got 'Til It's Gone***

A similar 'coughing' of the needle takes place in the contemporary moment, but instead of an accidental scratch, the aberration is audible because of a deliberate 'scratching' technique on the part of disc jockey Q-Tip. The sampling occurs in Janet Jackson's pop song 'Got 'Til It's Gone' (1997), in which Q-Tip samples Joni Mitchell's archival voice. Mitchell's refrain, extracted from her song 'Big Yellow Taxi' from *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970) is recast in the new song as a repeating background loop that laments, 'Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone'.

In the remix, a fictional 'past' and 'present' are evoked through careful post-production treatment of the voices themselves. Contemporaries Janet Jackson and Q-Tip are nudged to the front of the mix, whilst Joni Mitchell's voice sonically comes to speak for a former time. Under Q-Tip's direction, Mitchell's vocal presence is subordinated through fragmentation and looping of her voice in its 'turntable' re-contextualization.<sup>xii</sup> Post-production techniques applied to the voice render it ghostly, insubstantial, waif-like. Reverb has been added to push her voice into the back of the listening field, and equalization – especially high band pass filters – are applied to thin the sound of her voice. These production techniques reinforce Mitchell's physical distance – both audibly and historically – hinting to a 'past now gone'. These post-production techniques also call attention to Mitchell's voice *as a recording*, and highlight the dichotomy between the mediated voice and the 'pure' one.

To confirm a sense of 'the archive', Mitchell's voice is treated with a superimposed post-production 'phonograph effect' – a digital plug-in of LP crackle which sonically references a sense of some 'former' time, what Mark Katz deems 'the unspecified past of the vinyl age'.<sup>xiii</sup> Katz states, 'In the age of noiseless digital recordings, this sonic patina prompts nostalgia, transporting listeners to days gone by'.<sup>xiv</sup>

So Jackson's song creates a musical analogue of the past, through sound, which also happens to fit appropriately with a sense of nostalgia for a past love affair which seems to lie at the heart of the song's subject matter. In this way, Mitchell's phrase, 'you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone' takes on multiple levels of

meaning – from thematic references to a past relationship, to the sonic level which features Mitchell's distant echo from another era, coupled with the warm crackle of the analog LP. All these elements of the past are re-inscribed back into the new hip-hop remix.

As noted earlier, Mitchell's subordinate, far-away vocal role co-exists in a post-production dialogue with Q-Tip's rap and Janet Jackson's apparently front-of-field and digitally 'pure' vocal presence. But use of the term 'pure' should be qualified here, for the voice appears to be 'pure' because of its subjection to elaborate methods of post-production. As Jonathan Sterne observes, in our contemporary listening, these voices may signify 'naturalness', when their voices are, in actuality, highly processed according to the conventions of pop song technology.<sup>xv</sup> Techniques such as close-proximity recording on high-quality microphones, and post-production technologies such as heavy compression and are applied to the voice to convey a 'clean', digital transparency. These all ensure that Jackson and Q-Tip's voices appear full, rich, crisp, and present, and deliver a cultivated, highly produced, carefully engineered 'naturalness'. The inclusion of an out-take of casual dialogue between Jackson and Q-Tip at the song's opening helps to affirm this theatre of naturalism, and also serves to confirm the fiction that the making of their song occurs somewhat spontaneously.

The treatment of Mitchell's voice evokes a former time, but also demonstrates that, through recording technology, such a moment can be referenced, canned, and infinitely reproduced. That is, Mitchell's voice is subjected to DJ 'rubbing' and 'spinning' techniques that render the voice infinitely reproducible, loop-able, and subject to the whim of Q-Tip's thumb and forefinger. For example, towards the end of the song, Mitchell's lyrics become indiscernible, reduced to meaningless babble, her voice is transformed into an abstracted, disembodied voice object.

In the turntable remix, Mitchell's voice becomes an unwitting subject that spins on the record plate, her song broken into fragments of, at times, indiscernible non-logos utterance, 'chu-chu-chu-chu-chu don't know what you got 'til it's gone', we hear her stammer. At the end, after scratching away on Joni Mitchell's voice through the song, Q-Tip allows himself the last word: 'Dust', he blows, at the song's close, pointing perhaps to the fragility of the archival material rendered upon the metaphorical phonographic plate, as well as alluding to the song's theme of a relationship now past.

In a similar nod to finality, the end of the affair between Roquentin and Madeleine in *La Nausée* is signified with a nostalgic playing of the record 'for the last time'.

Madeleine goes and sets it on the gramophone, it is going to spin; in the grooves, the steel needle is going to start jumping and grinding and when the grooves will have spiraled it into the centre of the disc it will be finished and the hoarse voice singing, 'Some of these days' will be silent forever.<sup>xvi</sup>

### ***Maria Callas – 'Freeing' the Voice Through the Turntable***

We turn now to Christian Marclay's turntable remix of the great operatic star, Maria Callas. This Callas re-contextualization occurs on his 1988 piece, *Maria Callas*, originally released on 10" vinyl, and which features on the collection *Plunderphonia and Vox*. This piece addresses many issues that lie at the centre of reinventing and blending the old in the new.

In *Maria Callas*, Marclay as composer/DJ uses the turntable medium as a source of play and creative expression, exploring techniques not dissimilar to those used by hip-hop artists such as Q-Tip. The process of recontextualizing Callas' voice for this piece involved the playback of archival records that are mixed and manipulated simultaneously on multiple turntables, and the result recorded. Further layering was achieved through the use of subsequent overdubbing. For Marclay, the turntable seems to provide both the means and the limitations by which the voice can be manipulated, and he works compositionally in the space between the constraints of the medium, and the possibilities it affords.

In the first ten seconds of the piece, Marclay sounds Callas as she appears on the 'original' archival recordings. This opening passage invites the listener to hear the singer and to imagine her physical presence upon the operatic stage, accompanied by full and reverberant orchestra, much as Roquentin evoked 'the Negress' in listening to her voice. This opening section of the remix calls to mind iconic black and white photographic images of Maria Callas, now imprinted on our collective cultural memory.

To affirm the historicity of the recording, we may well notice that Callas' voice is coupled with the requisite archival crackling of the LP (this time, however, the crackle we hear is an artefact of the LP disc's playback, rather than a post-production addition in Janet Jackson's song). Just as the photograph captures a trace of the person for perpetuity, the LP record serves to immortalize and enshrine the vocal signature of the singer, and the LP crackle simply serves to affirm 'authenticity' (just as the grain of an old black and white photograph somehow attests to its provenance).

So in Marclay's Callas remix, the opening passage physically locates the singer in the expected concert hall context. Immediately upon establishing this illusion, however, Marclay integrates the original recording with multiple layers, producing a kind of 'Callas Squared', in which a multiplicity of 'Maria Callas' vocal characters join the stage. Now the numerous vocalists each engage in their own high-pitched, climatic, melismatic aria – the internal body made expressively vocal, the ritualized *ololyga* in the contemporary arena.<sup>xvii</sup> At this moment, our listening shifts from hearing the 'pure' voice object of the singer, to hearing the recorded object, *as* a recording, and as it is manipulated by Marclay's finger and thumb. Marclay calls attention here to the recorded voice *as* a recording. Yet there is an intrinsic power to Callas' voice that speaks of the strong presence behind the recording.

Carolyn Abbate (*Unsung Voices*) distinguishes differing levels at which we apprehend the voice in opera. She observes that the *voice object* appears at the moment when the sound of the singing voice commands all of the listener's

attention, and this occurs particularly in melismatic passages. (That is, where one syllable is prolonged over several notes.)<sup>xviii</sup> Abbate points out that melismatic passages ‘destroy language’ by splitting words and separating syllables until they are no longer discernible.<sup>xix</sup> By destroying language, plot and character are compromised, and thereby physical presence. Thus, in the Queen of the Night’s second aria Abbate says that the Queen, ‘suddenly becomes not a character-presence but an irrational nonbeing, terrifying because the locus of voice is now not a character, not human, and somehow not present’.<sup>xx</sup>

Maria Callas’ natural voice is capable of realising such seductive and unbridled melismatic passages. Marclay’s remix serves to further liberate the melismatic voice – he once stated of his working practice: ‘I destroy, I scratch, I act against the fragility of the record in order to free the music from its captivity’.<sup>xxi</sup> In Christian Marclay’s recontextual framing of her voice, a tension surfaces between the power of Callas’ natural melismatic voice – both as terrifying and seductive as it may be – and Marclay’s own control, liberation, and electronic transformation of Callas’ voice as *voice object*.

Ironically, Callas’ melismatic voice appears at its most forceful in Marclay’s turntable recontextualization when, like the frozen high note of the chewing gum advertisement mentioned earlier, the melismatic voice is deliberately suspended on a particularly high note of the aria, and for a duration that stretches beyond natural capabilities. In one instance, at 55 seconds into the piece, the high vocal note is caught and held for over 45 seconds. At this moment, the suspended voice signals the moment of both technological and third-party mediation, the point at which Callas’ acoustic presence all but disappears, only to be replaced by the voice object and the sound of the composer/DJ’s intervention upon it. Further, by suspending the voice far beyond human capacity, Marclay disrupts that very sense of *inevitability* that goes hand in hand with listening to a recorded song, and in doing so, he draws attention to his medium of intervention: the turntable. In a playful reversal of roles, he *sounds* the turntable through Callas’ voice.

Throughout the remix, Marclay scratches and scrubs particular vocal ‘moments’ on the record plate, which loops or fragments the voice, thereby sending it on a rollercoaster ride of vocal theatrics. The composer/DJ could be seen as the circus master, the voice released for a moment from its cage, sent about the circus tent in exaggerated theatrical high jinks – cartwheels, tightrope walking, and repeated rotations on the high swing.

Marclay uses the technology to extend Callas’ voice beyond its natural physical properties, making this virtuosic performer even more superlative than her original form would allow. But in Marclay’s re-framing of her voice within the turntable re-contextualization, an inherent struggle becomes apparent – between the power of Callas’ own natural melisma, and Marclay’s intervention and transformation of it. Through technological means, Marclay creates a seamless looping and analog superimposition to generate a ‘meta-voice’ – a voice more powerful, remarkable, and agile than the singer herself. And in doing so, he fashions the singer into a fantastical hybrid model. She becomes a body of many throats, the Lernean Hydra, an impossible creature of mythology and fantasy.

Marclay and Q-Tip's turntable re-contextualisations transform the archived voice through turntable techniques of scratching, looping, and multi-tracking, using the original vocal source material and the turntable as a creative platform for new compositional expression. These new pieces, which re-fashion the new from the old, articulate a struggle between the composer/DJ, the voice object of the original recording, and the phantom presence that is invoked in the recorded voice.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Adorno (1990), 'Curves of the Needle', 48.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Oswald (2004), 132.

<sup>iv</sup> Sartre (1964). 21, 22.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., 21

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>viii</sup> 'Some of These Days' was in fact recorded by Sophie Tucker, 'the last of the white red-hot mamas'. This fact affirms that 'the Negress' terminology is indeed nothing but a term, for it bears no biographical validity beyond the fictional imagination of the author. See La Capra (1983), 206-207.

<sup>ix</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*, 102.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>xii</sup> The term 'turntable' is used in current lexicon to describe either the analog mechanism, or its digital equivalent.

<sup>xiii</sup> Katz (2004), 146.

<sup>xiv</sup> As Mark Katz remarks of the phonograph effect, 'This noise, real or digitally simulated, is now firmly part of our modern sonic vocabulary, and can be powerfully evocative to listeners. It was long deemed an unwanted addition to the phonographic experience by both the industry and listeners, but ironically became a valued a meaningful sound when digital technology finally eliminated it'. Katz (2004), 146. As Professor Barbara White points out, 'You don't know what you've got 'til its gone!'

<sup>xv</sup> Sterne (2007).

<sup>xvi</sup> Sartre (1964), 173 – 174.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Oloyga* being 'a ritual shout peculiar to females', those shrieking, high-pitched, unmediated moments of vocal ecstasy uttered by the female body during – traditionally – ritual practice, climactic moments, or women's festivals.<sup>xvii</sup> See Carson (1995), 125.

<sup>xviii</sup> Abbate (1991), 11-12.

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> Seliger (1992). 67.

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