

Squalid Infidelities 3: Big Fun in My Living Room

Randolph Jordan

At a recent audio/video tradeshow I found myself digging around the bins of a record dealer specializing in audiophile quality vinyl pressings. Not being an expert on the vinyl scene, I had very little idea as to whether or not some of my favourite music had ever been given the audiophile treatment. I figured one easy bet would be to check out the Miles Davis section. It seemed as though my bet was paying off; my excitement increasing as I flipped through the titles chronologically...until the section stopped just short of where my interest starts: the late 60s.

People who follow jazz will know the utter contempt with which Davis's *Bitches Brew* was treated at the time of its 1969 release. Surely 36 years later the genius of that particular album has become commonly appreciated. Or perhaps not, at least from a particular audiophile perspective. I was informed that, in fact, record companies who make audiophile pressings don't produce any Miles beyond the late 60s. The dealer told me there just isn't the market for it in the audiophile community. I have since learned that the complete *Bitches Brew* sessions, released on CD as part of the extensive Miles Davis "complete sessions" series, are also available in a 180 gram vinyl pressing. But it seems to stop there, and what I really wanted was some of the stuff released in the 70s, particularly *Big Fun*. Thus I began my investigation.

It seems that along with the "analog is best" mentality comes a particular philosophy about what kinds of music are best as well. It turns out that the best kinds of music are those which adhere to an understanding of music being something produced by musicians on

unamplified instruments with no intentions towards having their sounds captured and represented in any recording format whatsoever. In essence, the version of the audiophile ideal that I'm exploring here is that the best recordings are the ones that should never have been made in the first place. This seems like a contradiction, and of course it is. But in my opinion, the kind of purism I'm describing is founded upon a very particular contradiction that Jonathan Sterne has called the "vanishing mediator" in his book *The Audible Past*. The basic idea is that any technologies of recording/transmission should vanish from perception when listening to the final product. You'll hear the concept more commonly referred to as "transparency."

This idea is complicated to impossible extremes when any kind of studio manipulation enters into consideration. However, regardless of the material being represented on a recording, we are left with a peculiarity to the logic of transparency aside from the problems of theorizing the concept of the "original" (as explored in the first edition of this column): equipment of mediation is a necessary link in the chain between recorded performance and listener, but it is this equipment that the listener hopes will disappear. As is the case with vinyl fetishists, it is precisely the indexical link made possible by the material processes of phonography that are said to allow these material processes to render themselves invisible [1]. Transcendence of the equipment is, in other words, dependent upon its material embodiment.

At the heart of the idea of transparency is the concept of the "soundstage." In audiophile parlance, there are

two main things to which the term “soundstage” refers. One is the ability to understand the position of each musician and their instrument in a recording. This is dependent upon designing the recording according to the ideal of music performed live by musicians within a single space and maintaining the integrity of this ideal by placing any given sound in a specific spot – and keeping it there. The other main feature of a good soundstage is a system’s ability to draw attention away from its sources, especially with regard to the position of a pair of speakers. Being able to tell where the speaker is positioned in the room is bad. Being able to tell where an imaginary musician is positioned in the room is good. So it is interesting to note that audiophile interest in Miles Davis seems to have stopped at around the time that he attached a portable microphone to his trumpet and began moving around the stage while performing.

This mentality has spilled over into the realm of film sound production and exhibition, particularly where surround sound is concerned. One of the main principles behind surround sound speaker placement is that of the soundstage. No speakers, particularly not any of the rear speakers, should call attention to themselves. The soundfield should remain stable and not disrupt the spectator’s feeling of immersion within the soundscape of the film. Like two channel stereo purists, this philosophy of exhibition implies that program content will adhere to the philosophy. And indeed, in the vast majority of films we find a tendency towards using sound to create a feeling of stable environment even where the picture might suggest otherwise. This is most evident in the use of continuous soundscapes during scenes in which the picture editing is intended to be as “invisible” as possible. This is one reason why the standard shot/countershot scenario for conversation between two characters is not as disorienting as it should be. If a cut in the soundscape was heard every time a cut in the image was seen the experience would be far more jarring, if only for the reason that we have not been trained to internalize the convention of abrupt sound edits in the way that we have come to terms with continuously changing shots on the image track.

Disruption of immersion is a problem explored by Michel Chion in *Audio-Vision* when he discusses the idea of “in-the-wings” effects in surround sound. He notes that much more use was made of side and rear channels in the early days of the formats, but sound designers found that too much emphasis on the rear speakers drew attention to these speakers and away from the frame of the image. This situation was not

conducive to the ideals of a cinema that seeks to keep the processes of its production hidden. I experienced just such a situation last week when I threw on my DVD of *Monty Python And The Holy Grail*. I had forgotten about the film’s false start in which the credit sequence from a completely unrelated film is the first thing we see and hear. All of a sudden it stops, and from the right rear channel in the Dolby Digital 5.1 mix we hear the sound of the projectionist’s voice grumbling about having put on the wrong film by mistake. The isolated position of this voice startled me at first, and I was jolted into an awareness of the system of reproduction which was very appropriate for the reflexive nature of this particular comic routine. Of course the 1975 film was originally mixed in mono, and so arguments can be made about whether or not this use of surround sound is faithful to the original concept of the film. I generally prefer to stick with whatever format the film was originally designed for, but in the case of this particular gag I prefer the updated multi-channel mix as it suits their purposes splendidly. You should feel free to call me on this stance once you get to the end of this column and discover the potential contradiction it poses for my conclusions. For the moment, Chion suggests that this feeling of distraction by “in-the-wings” effects may simply have gone away as people became used to the new sound formats, and that perhaps with some changes to picture-editing practices it could have spawned a new realm of productive audio-visual collaboration. “So perhaps it was a mistake to have given it up so quickly” (Chion:84).

However, I suspect that the ideals of the vanishing mediator are so deeply ingrained that no amount of pushing sound through the rear speakers would have undone the deeply held ideals of the audiophile community whose Holy Grail it is to lose all awareness of the equipment responsible for the sounds it hears. My position, and it is by no means a new one, is that this equipment is as much an instrument of sound production as any of the “real” instruments held in such high regard. This is the basic principle behind the idea of the “scratch” in contemporary DJ culture, and long before that in the practice of scratching the surface of film found in many avantgarde/ experimental films. I believe that to ignore the instrument of sound reproduction is to lose a major part of what makes the experience of a great sounding system so profound.

I’ll finish with two brief case studies illustrating aspects of the ideas I’ve been discussing to this point. With *Star Wars: Revenge Of The Sith* just around the corner (and yes, my ticket for the midnight show on opening night

is tucked safely in my wallet), it seems appropriate to briefly consider the role of THX within the discourse of fidelity and its attendant problems.

The THX ideal has been at the forefront of efforts to try and reduce the differences between the controlled standards of mixing and the process of exhibition. In essence, it seeks to deliver upon the threat implied by Schafer's concept of "schizophonia" (see the second edition of my column for further discussion). The idea is to get all theatres standardized to THX specifications. In theory, if a THX certified film is played back on THX certified equipment, there will be no difference between master and duplicate, original and copy (Johnson:104). This has extended into the realm of home theatre in recent years, with THX certifying home electronics and companies like DTS claiming that their process for encoding DVD soundtracks essentially clones the master tracks, offering the original without any process of reproduction getting in the way.

Chion expresses dismay at the degree to which these kinds of projects have been extended. He laments the quest for sonic purification and banishment of coloration while expressing nostalgia for the sounds of the large acoustical spaces of older theatres (Chion:101). Chion suggests that standardization models for film sound (like THX) eschew notions of sonic fidelity in favour of homogenization (Chion:100-101). What is crucial here is that Chion's use of the term "fidelity" refers to privileging the sound of the space of exhibition over that contained on the film's soundtrack, being faithful to the space in which sound is reproduced, not to an idea of the original sound from whence the reproduction has come. This is a reversal of the way that fidelity has been used in the discourses responsible for the ideal of the vanishing mediator to which THX subscribes (see related column by Brian Crane).

Chion's desire for the sound of the acoustical exhibition spaces of old is, in the end, a desire for what I call realworld schizophonia, that in which a soundscape is doubled in the presence of reproduction technology, rather than the total soundscape replacement that Schafer fears and for which THX standards reach. Chion enjoys the interaction between reproduced sound and the space in which it is reproduced, a grounding in the here and now which allows schizophonia to exist without being fueled by the desire to "transcend the present tense" that Schafer suggests is characteristic of 20th Century life (Schafer:91).

I think Chion is well grounded in his stance. However, I do think the THX ideal has it dead right on one count: absolute fidelity between an original and copy can be achieved, but only in the relationship of the master recording to its duplicates. This essentially takes what is usually considered to be the copy and puts it in the position of the original. The original recording is the ideal to which all subsequent reproductions should adhere, not the idea of an original performance outside the context of recording. The mediation of recorded sound must be taken into account as part and parcel of that sound.

But now I have a problem. I like THX for the way it aligns master and duplicate, but not the way it adheres to the ideal of the vanishing mediator in so doing. If we're constantly aware of the space of exhibition, then how can we ever achieve fidelity to the sound of an original recording mastered for exhibition in a space very different from my living room? We're back to the problem of the non-identity theorists who suggest that, because of the realities of perception, an original sound really can't be found and thus shouldn't be sought.

Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in a version of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism: individuals are said to be non-existent outside of their relationships to others, yet in no way does this negate the fact that individuals are also whole and complete beings unto themselves. A master recording is like an individual sent out into the world. There is some way in which it can retain all its dignity as a distinct entity while having that identity necessarily bound up within the space that it must operate. Our local Quebec government might do well to read some Bakhtin as they prepare to launch into an escalating separatist campaign in the coming years. And I'm sure there's an argument for multiple-partner relationships to be found in there somewhere, but we'll leave that for another day.

And so, finally, let's go back to why it is that I was hoping to find a nice 180 gram vinyl copy Miles Davis's *Big Fun* in the first place. Side three consists entirely of the track entitled "Go Ahead John." Like a work of Magic Realism the piece hovers between the grounded and the fantastical. Five instruments are present: trumpet, sax, electric bass, electric guitar, and drums. For the first part of the track (listen to the first part of the track here), Steve Grossman's sax and Davis's trumpet (which solo at different times) are each fixed securely in a single central spot, thus keeping with the ideals of the stable soundstage. Dave Holland strikes a single bass note repeatedly for much of the piece, creating a

solid floor spread across the entire stage. Here we have the beginnings of a frustration of the soundstage, for while Davis and Grossman are localizable, Holland is somewhat ubiquitous. This frustration is taken even further on the drum and guitar tracks. Jack DeJohette's drumming is hacked to bits by producer Teo Macero, shifting quickly and abruptly between the left and right speakers, sometimes with units as small as a single snare hit. These aren't pans; they are isolated pieces of the drum track forced hard into one speaker or the other with an electronic switching device. This technique calls constant awareness to the position of our speakers in the midst of the stability of the bass and horns. As such, it was heavily criticized by many who felt that Macero had finally overstepped the bounds of his production privileges [2].

But wait, there's more. To top it all off, John McLaughlin's guitar accompaniment meanders across this stage with gestures reminiscent of the movement of the aurora borealis, drifting left to right and back again, sometimes hovering in the middle for a while like a ghost. This is also Macero's work, as is the treatment of McLaughlin's solo wherein all notion of stability is torn to shreds (listen to an excerpt from the solo here). It consists of Macero hitting some kind of button which shifts the track radically from a loud centralized position to a much quieter ambient version located far to the back right of the soundstage. It sounds as though someone was actually pulling the chord in and out of McLaughlin's amp at moments that precisely emphasize the accents in his playing. Finally, this treatment is interspersed with an overdubbed low volume track of McLaughlin providing his own accompaniment. These techniques call attention not only to the necessity of multi-track recording technology to make this possible, but also to the materiality of the electric instrument itself. In my opinion, Macero's treatments of both the drum and guitar tracks demonstrate a sensitivity to the essence of these performances that complement them wonderfully. To me, the production here is as inseparable from the performances as is lighting to set-design in film.

It is interesting to note that on the CD release of *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*, they provide the various takes used to create "Go Ahead John" with the intention of letting us hear the music "as played" rather than through Macero's production (listen to an excerpt from this here). Surprisingly, the drums and guitar are not mixed with a traditional stereo image in mind as I had imagined they would be. Instead they are placed hard right and hard left respectively, a result of the fact

that they were originally recorded in mono. The result feels very bland, like a DVD special feature that lets you listen to raw sound recorded on a film set before hearing how it is combined with post-production sound in the final mix. This is interesting for completists who love to follow all stages of production, but it's a far cry from the glory of the final product. Hearing these versions has re-affirmed that the studio is as valuable an instrument on that piece as any played by the five musicians.

What is most interesting about the *Big Fun* version of "Go Ahead John" is that it loses some of its meaning if heard in mono or from an off-axis position. Without the drum and guitar tracks shifting from left to right, the interplay between the stereo image and the confounding of this image is gone. You could also make this argument about music recorded with a traditional soundstage model in mind, saying that outside of the stereo image one cannot place the musicians in relationship to each other and thus the dynamics of their interaction is lost (a loss that is an inherent part of the highly separated positions of the instruments on the versions found on the Jack Johnson sessions). But the difference is this: "Go Ahead John" calls attention to the position of your speakers within the room as well as the position of the musicians in relation to one another. So to lose this is to lose the contextualization of the piece within the space of your listening area as well as the interaction between the musicians on the recording. With the traditional soundstage ideal, the loss is only about the context of the original recording trying to be represented *despite* the conditions of playback.

With "Go Ahead John" as it was released on *Big Fun*, Davis and Macero have fashioned a piece that offers a wide range of possible approaches to the concept of the soundstage. They deliberately call attention both to the position of musicians within the space of the performance, and to the position of the speakers within the space of the reproduction. This is honesty at its finest, and I would like nothing more than to be able to get my hands on a copy that respects the original material as closely as possible (post-production and all) so that the intended interaction between this production and my listening space might be fully realized. Then I would like hear films which operate according to similar ideals, and I would like these to be made available for home reproduction with uncompressed multi-channel soundtracks so that I can pit the original master recording against the particular acoustics of my listening space and reap the benefits of two distinct ideals operating as one. This is the fidelity I crave.

Randolph Jordan's last column was on Eyes Wide Shut in Synoptique 7.