

## Representing Recording Studios of the Past: A Review Essay

Andy Bradley and Roger Wood. 2010. *House of Hits: The Story of Houston's Gold Star/Sugarhill Recording Studios*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

John Hartley Fox. 2009. *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press

Roben Jones. 2010. *Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

### Reviewed by Whitney Slaten

The recording studio, a site that music makers use to represent and produce sonic culture, is not merely a musical place. Recording studios are social, electronic, architectural, acoustic, and creative technologies of representation. Throughout recording processes, music industries seek to mystify the functional status of the studio among consumers of pop music. This encourages alienation between consumers and producers of popular music, rendering the agency of music business interests invisible, inaudible, and transparent. Roben Jones's *Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios*, John Hartley Fox's *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records*, and Andy Bradley and Roger Wood's *House of Hits: The Story of Houston's Gold Star/Sugarhill Recording Studios* present music scholarship with three recording studios that significantly contributed to American popular music. These works successfully document the local and national contexts in which these studios produced, as well as many accounts of individuals who were involved in the studios and specific recording sessions; however, these are books in which the representation of recording studios weighs heavily on celebrations of illustrious music makers and the popular music they produce. Jones and Fox are not as careful in attending to the diverse artistic and technological agencies of architects, carpenters, acousticians, engineers, musicians, producers, and business people in the history of the recording studios as are Bradley and Wood. Works such as these perpetuate readers' misunderstanding of the complexities involved in recording studio labor and inhibit scholarly analyses of popular music production. Representations of recording studio life comprise a small category of scholarship on popular music.

In addition to the three examples of histories about studios that this essay reviews, social scientists analyze the dynamics between individuals, technologies, and sounds in order to understand the role of music production in shaping popular cultures. These contributions primarily divide between those that describe the experiences of recording studio workers (Horning 2004; Jones 1992; Kealy 1979; Porcello 2003) and those that describe how the efforts of studio workers shape sounds that propagate in both local and global music markets (Green and Porcello 2005; Meintjes 2003; Veal 2007).

This sort of social scientific writing favors descriptions of the processes of record production. These works present studios as sites of labor in which social actions shape musical sounds and personhood in ways that blur the supposed boundary between the technological and the creative. Ethnographic methods afford greater access to the details of recording studio labor. Ethnographers such as Meintjes and Porcello, in their respective contexts, are able to directly encounter challenges associated with recording, experiencing the collaborations between producers, agents, musicians, and engineers, among other workers, as well as the studios' placement within specific genres and related industrial flows.

The three reviewed texts are not ethnographies. The authors of the texts write in a context that is temporally distinct from the now historical moments associated with the studios about which they write. This determines the primary question that organizes this review: How can histories of recording studios gain greater proximity to workers and recording processes without the benefit of physically co-present ethnographic methods?

Writing about recording studios that demystifies the myth of intimacy between the consumer and the recording artist facilitates music scholarship that explains the cultural tensions that determine the sounds and social lives of a pop album. In particular, analyses of what sociologist Howard Becker theorizes as the *art world* yield such explanations. According to Becker, "All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be" (Becker 1982:1). Descriptive emancipations of technology and the creative technological agencies of studio workers who are a portion of the pop music art world build productive and comprehensive analyses of recording studios. In contrast to how Jones and Fox more typically center on musical artists, I will consider the role of sound engineers in the recording studio in order to suggest a balance for representations of studio social life.

This review essay presents how each of these three recent texts attempt to represent recording studios of the past and how works of this sort might

benefit from listening practices and methods for representing temporality proposed by ethnomusicologist Thomas Porcello in his 2003 essay “Tails Out: Social Phenomenology and the Ethnographic Representation of Technology in Music Making.” My incorporation of Porcello’s phenomenology resonates with Jonathan Sterne’s history of *audile technique*: “a way of abstracting some reproduced sounds (such as voices or music) as worthy of attention or “interior,” and others (such as static or surface noise) as “exterior” and therefore to be treated as if they did not exist” (Sterne 2003:25). Sterne represents audile technique as one of many features within the social context of acousmatic sound reproduction, one in which listeners are split from a sound source in ways that are similar to how Jones and Fox were not present in the studios they represent.

Following the scholarship of Becker, Sterne, and Porcello, I posit that balanced listening to the inner technological implementations and the outer industrially produced intimacies of pop music recordings offer opportunities for encounters and representations of the many workers in recording studios, especially their creative technological contributions. After presenting the three texts and Porcello’s research methods, I offer an example of an audile technique that leads me to specific questions about studio workers. Along with Porcello, I argue that questions such as these can directly shape writing about recording studio representations of workers and the many processes of record production.

## Memphis Boys

Roben Jones lived in Hansford, West Virginia before moving to Gallipolis, Ohio. Before writing *Memphis Boys*, Jones was most active as a poet and had made her publishing debut in *Wild Sweet Notes: Fifty Years of West Virginia Poetry, 1950-1999*. She began the manuscript for *Memphis Boys* in 2002, roughly thirty years after she first heard the Box Top’s version of “I Shall Be Released.” Since that time, Jones has been a collector of the output from the Memphis Boys and American Studios. In *Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios*, Jones presents a history of the prolific recording studio most prominent from the mid-1960’s through the early 1970s. Jones tells the story of this studio through biographical profiles of rhythm section musicians, as she describes Chip Moman’s entrepreneurial efforts in its establishment. The book’s twenty-six chapters also include short biographical profiles, photographs, and a suggested listening section that annotates specific examples of the facility’s discography to familiarize the reader with its productions. *Memphis Boys* also discusses the recording work of renowned musicians including Aretha Franklin, B. J. Thomas, the Box Tops, Dionne

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Warwick, the Gentrys, Joe Tex, Neil Diamond, and Wilson Pickett as well as chart-topping songs such as “Do Right Woman” and “You Were Always on My Mind.”

Jones depicts American Studios as a particular locus for musical invention, a place that directly shapes an artistic characterization of American popular music, focusing on personalities rather than on labor or the technological complexities through which a collective fashioning of musical products emerge. In the introduction, Jones establishes a framework for a division of labor that privileges the highly skilled producers to the detriment of the the rest of the studio’s workers. Quoting Glen Spreen, an arranger for the Box Tops, Jones posits the following:

In ninety-nine percent of the recordings the producers, arrangers and musicians were the decision makers and in control . . . The producer and musicians were at the center of the sessions. The singer, for the most part, had little participation in the process of which songs were recorded and how those songs were interpreted. The producer and the musicians (mostly the musicians) decided on the interpretation, the arranger worked alone and no one heard his interpretation until the day it [the string and horn overdubs] was recorded. (Jones 2010: xii)

Jones uses the quote to organize the entirety of the book’s project, as constructed in the subtitle, “The Story of American Studios.” She reports how producer Dan Penn’s philosophy shapes American’s sound:

‘I’d say fifty-percent of the time most people are depressed about something, unless your 21 years old.’ That sentence would become the philosophy behind the deep melancholy of American Studios sound; the belief that adult life is full of pain and in the pain lies wisdom, and in the wisdom lies salvation. It would color almost every recording made by the musicians from then on. (47)

While Jones might detect the sentiment of melancholy in the music from American Studios, positing Penn’s interview response as *the* philosophy of the American Studios sound allows for the musicians to be foregrounded, as the efforts of other studio workers recedes into the background. She does present a good example of labor hierarchy through Penn’s words:

‘Darryl Carter was no engineer,’ he scoffed, ‘He was a gofer. He never did any engineering for me, I wouldn’t let anybody near my records! I just can’t put up with an engineer, they’d wanna go left, I’d wanna go right. I didn’t even know people were comin’ in and doing that! I decided they were the Enemy.’ (80)

Through this quote, Jones conveys tension between musicians and sound engineers. Penn describes a moment in which Darryl Carter inserted sound effects into the mix of one of Penn's projects. He had been searching for an effect to add, but Carter moved quicker, and it becomes clear that Penn's frustration colors the fervor of his dismissive regard of Carter's artistic contributions as an engineer. Given this sort of account, one that demonstrates the level of control and influence maintained by producers and musicians, the reader might wonder if the author's representation of this social dynamic is accurate.

But Jones does share a musician's recollection of a sound engineers' crucial role at American. Recalling a recording session, musician Bobby Emmons says:

'Why did they [sound engineers] remain in the studio for so long, working in between the console rewiring?' 'We kinda had "Tail Feather" hemmed up and we didn't want to lose the groove,' Emmons explained. 'We would do a take, they would rewire the equipment, do another take, another rewire, for a reported fifty-two hours (it was hard to find out much about time or sound equipment back then). They finally got it wired right. We had a studio.' (66)

Emmons' words complicate the producer and musician stronghold Jones promotes throughout the book by indicating how "they," the sound engineers "made" the studio with their rewiring efforts. This discussion of the engineers represents a varied labor experience at American, and Jones could do more to unpack the tense relations between engineers, producers, and the musicians. For example, how did Emmons's vague understanding of engineers' work contribute to a distance between different laborers? Jones also includes the following recollections of the engineers:

"Mike Leech called Chips 'a master mixer and engineer. I loved to hear his playbacks and I loved to watch him mix. He would play the console like it was an instrument. A cigarette between his fingers and manipulating the faders as the track went by. I learned a lot from watching and listening.' 'He was a great engineer, said B.J. Thomas; Hayward Bishop, no admirer of Chips, called him 'an expert engineer, the best tape splicer ever,' and described him as knowledgeable and authoritative on the matter of sound.'" (91)

Although Jones presents this positive description of one of the studio's engineers, Leech's position also suggests a distance between the musicians and the engineer. How did Chips mix certain tracks or splice tape? How exactly was Chips a better engineer than the rest? How did Chips contribute to or alter the studio's sound of melancholy? What was Jones' impression of

Chip's engineering? After many close listenings to Chip's work, Jones might have been able to ask specific questions about the engineer's contributions. If Jones asked Mike Leech the questions she developed from listening to recordings, Leech might have offered detailed recollections of Chip's creativity within the sound of the recorded music. The questions gained from this close listening, similar to the example offered at the conclusion of this essay, could have enhanced the study of Chip as an engineer. In addition, this would also strengthen the representation of American Studios' importance in the recording industry, not only as a site of musical creation, but also as a field in which numerous workers expertly contributed to the company's output.

### King of the Queen City

John Hartley Fox is an avid record collector who currently writes about performing arts in Sacramento, California. In the '80s, he worked at WYSO in Yellow Springs, Ohio where he produced four one-hour radio productions entitled "King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records" for National Public Radio. In his book of the same title, Fox presents the story of the small, independent record company in Cincinnati, Ohio from the 1940s through the 1960s. With chapter names including "Syd Starts a Record Company," "Business as Usual Was Pretty Unusual," and "We Broke the Shit Down," Fox details the story of owner Syd Nathan's struggles in establishing the company and presents the many recording artists that made the sound of King Records; artists who included James Brown, Bill Doggett, Grandpa Jones, Redd Foxx, Earl Bostic, the Stanley Brothers, Ike Turner, Roy Brown, Freddie King, Eddie Vinson, and Johnny "Guitar" Watson.

One of Fox's most compelling points in the King story is his contextualization of the company's geographic and market position as an independent record company located at the crossroads. Explaining the company's unique collective of artists and repertoire, Fox states the following:

King Records helped shape the musical ethos that made the tri-state area of Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky such a fertile field for musicians of all stripes. Many of these musicians (guitarist Lonnie Mack comes to mind as an example) seamlessly integrated ideas from blues, rock, country, bluegrass, and R&B into their playing. That in turn helped to develop a similar open-mindedness among listeners in this area. It's hard to say whether King Records created this situation or merely exploited it; I favor the former option. (xvi)

Fox's belief in a causal relationship between King Records' musical life and its geographic location permeates the book. Local themes and anecdotes

divide the book into chapters that address the beginning of the company, the hiring of specific musicians, the story of genre production, the development of new labels, aspirations of businessmen, neighborhoods in Cincinnati, and the end of King's activity.

Fox outlines how King's location and Nathan's interests in maintaining a racially and ethnically diversified labor force affected the record company's products. He discusses employees Henry Glover and Ralph Bass, two producers at King Records:

Henry Glover was the living embodiment of the color-blindness and open-minded spirit that Syd Nathan espoused and attempted to live by at King Records. Glover was a black man from the south, but he was [as] comfortable in the studio producing white country acts as he was in producing rhythm and blues acts. Glover knew the barriers erected between white and black music were artificial and not reflective of the way life was actually lived in America. Music was music, and a good song was a good song. It really was as simple as that. (Fox 2009: 26)

This presentation of US race relations prevents Fox from exploring exactly how Glover's subjectivity and his encounter with social difference manifested in the production of King's sound. How did Glover embody a self-reflective understanding of racialized music divisions as artificial? Furthermore, how did the remarkableness of Glover's work with country musicians, in spite of racial difference, emerge within a recording process? Fox's lack of engagement with Glover's technical navigation, social struggles, and triumphs with individuals or machines at King leaves the reader without a deeper understanding of how Glover made records.

Fox introduces Ralph Bass in a later chapter of the book, as one of the last "characters" among record producers:

Although he didn't try to pass for something he wasn't, there was always something different about Ralph Bass, a white man of mixed Jewish-Italian ancestry who crossed the color line and never looked back. Bass was a jive-talking wheeler-dealer, half artist and half con artist. He was a consummate record man. (Fox 2009: 86)

Fox presents Bass, a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, as a racialized figure who also works to personally, as well as professionally, cross color lines.

Bass was full of himself, but seemed to know it, in a way that made his shtick (and self-promotion) more entertaining than irritating. He moved freely between two parallel worlds at a time in America when relatively

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few people crossed the racial divide. Bass was a pioneering record man, but he was proudest of the role he played in bringing blacks and whites closer together through a common love for music. (86)

In an extended excerpt, it is clear to the reader that Fox conveys Bass's experiences at King without asking critical follow-up questions. Fox admits Bass's stories were so "lovingly tended and told, it seemed a shame to burden them with extra exposition unless absolutely necessary" (87). Bass describes the difficulty associated with his earliest business transactions that eventually led him to Nathan's company as well as monumental events in King's history. As King's artist and repertoire agent, Bass went to Georgia in search of new musical talent and was successful in signing James Brown during this trip. Bass articulates the pride in signing Brown before Leonard Chess of Chess Records. Bass' words form a single, unbroken narrative, and leave the reader wondering how he understood his role in constructing a relationship between race and music at King.

These examples demonstrate Fox's top-down representation of record making at King. The author fills the pages with stories about famous stars, talented musicians, popular styles, storied business deals, heroic men, innumerable celebrations of glorified artistic discoveries, and legendary musical origins. A methodology that focused on King records as an "art world" might have focused more on individual and group interactions, as well as the negotiations between musicians, engineers, producers, executives, and the material culture associated with the production processes of the time. Fox partially includes a bottom-up description of King's history in the first chapter of the book in his explanation of the World War II rationing of shellac:

Some shellac *was* making it to this country, and although the War Production Board limited its nonmilitary use, as certain amounts made its way to record companies. The three major labels of the day, RCA Victor, Decca, and Columbia, had first crack at the available shellac, but even so, the Big Three drastically reduced production, limiting releases to the most popular artists." (3)

If the limited supply of shellac affected the Big Three, how did this limit affect King Records? How did this limit affect Glover and Bass's selection of artists who would become popular? How did this affect the labor of mastering engineers who needed to operate lathes in the precise process of cutting the recording's groove into the limited supply of shellac? These questions and their answers might seem distant from the agenda of the top-down representation of the record company. Fox could have continually referenced



material culture in the story of King Records, helping the reader to experience a stronger encounter with how the people of King Records worked.

## House of Hits

Andy Bradley is a professional recording engineer and has been the chief engineer at Sugarhill for the past twenty-five years. In that capacity, Bradley has been involved in many Grammy-nominated recordings, from a diverse set of musical genres. Bradley is also the chief recording engineer at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. Roger Wood is a Professor of English at Houston Community College Central. He has written *Texas Zydeco* and *Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues* and has contributed to *The Roots of Texas Music*, *The Handbook of Texas Music*, and *Encyclopedia of the Blues*, among other publications. Wood is a member of the Board of Directors of the National Council for the Traditional Arts. *House of Hits: the Story of Houston's Gold Star/Sugarhill Recording Studios* details the history of the Texas recording studio beginning with founder Bill Quinn's development of a home studio and moves through numerous examples of recording sessions. Bradley and Wood, present a wide range of workers involved with the studio's success. In ways similar to the previously mentioned texts, *House of Hits* presents the contributions of famous artists such as Willie Nelson, Bobby "Blue" Bland, George Jones, Beyoncé and Destiny's Child, Lightnin' Hopkins, Junior Parker, Clifton Chenier, Sir Douglas Quintet, 13th Floor Elevators, and Freddy Fender, among others. Unlike the previously discussed books, Bradley and Wood devote time to less commercially successful musicians and producers at the Golden Star/Sugarhill recording studio.

Bradley and Wood show how "experimentation" mediates the social interactions and the technological choices at Gold Star/Sugarhill Studios. They note the popular mode of recording music in Texas preceeding that of local recording studios:

As far back as 1908 the groundbreaking folklorist John A. Lomax was transporting his newfangled portable equipment across Texas to make the earliest field recordings of many previously undocumented cowboy songs that are now considered American classics. Then, in the 1920s and '30s during the first major wave of commercial recordings of popular music, New York-based companies (such as RCA Victor and Columbia) regularly sent engineering teams to Texas to conduct sessions in hotel rooms and other makeshift locations, producing some of the most momentous music recordings of the era in the process. (xiii)

In the introduction of *House of Hits*, the authors describe a particular relationship between Texas and music recording as "makeshift." This technical

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focus appropriately transitions into a discussion about the growing presence of recording studios across the state and Quinn's interests in devising new ways to record musical sound. According to Bradley and Wood:

Keen on electronics, Quinn had long been intrigued by the way sound vibrations could be captured in grooves on a disk and then duplicated and played back on a machine. Utilizing primitive or improvised equipment and substandard raw materials, and guided evidently by an inquisitive endurance of trials and errors, he eventually taught himself how to make records. Despite wartime shortages of basic materials that had generally paralyzed the industry, he independently started commercially recording and pressing discs. (xiii)

Quinn's interest in exploring innovative ways to use his small allotment of materials exemplifies the experimentation that Bradley and Wood closely follow in their story of the studio. The authors pursue the details of Quinn's use of record making materials in the following way:

He somehow arranged to purchase an older, phased-out pressing-plant machine from an unidentified source. Then he inquisitively began to tinker with it—experimenting, modifying, and updating it until it could meet his needs. He also scoured the city's resale shops and garage sales, buying all the old 78 rpm records that he could find. He then pulverized them in a coffee bean grinder, melted down the resulting shards and dust, and thereby reclaimed the reconstituted shellac-based material. However, the paper labels attached to the recycled records somewhat contaminated the resulting substance, and that lack of purity negatively affected the sound quality it was capable of reproducing. Nonetheless, the process worked. Because the recycled matter was pliable and doughy, it was generally nicknamed 'biscuit.' Mack McCormick, who knew Quinn firsthand, says that Quinn regularly scheduled 'biscuit days' devoted to acquiring old records for reprocessing to yield ingredients for making new ones. (17)

Unlike Fox, Bradley and Wood not only mention the national rationings of shellac, but they also describe how this pervasive shortage affects work at the studio. In addition, Bradley and Wood present a diversification of labor, unlike Jones' and Fox's favoring of artistic processes in recording studio histories.

Additionally, Bradley and Wood demonstrate technological choices that precede the recording sessions. In an explanation of musicians' and engineers' technological needs for experimentation, they write:

Back in those days, neither tone controls nor equalizers existed. Thus, when a client requested that the sound be 'brightened' (by increasing treble) or "darkened" (by decreasing treble or increasing bass), Quinn would remove

a capacitor and resistor or two from the rear of the machine and replace them with alternates that sometimes achieved the desired effect. (36)

Alterations of electronic circuitry directly affect musical timbre in this instance. Prior to equalization potentiometers, engineers like Quinn performed explicit manual labor that was quite common in the early recording studios. The following moment also presents an example of technological experimentation producing a temporal sound effect:

There were also several smaller analog tape decks that were used to create the relatively new echo technology for vocal processing. Engineers had discovered that if you split the vocal signal off to a tape recorder that was rolling in record mode, and then brought that signal back from the playback head to the mixing board, you would have a slightly delayed signal which, used with discretion, could enhance the original vocal. This technique is often referred to as slap-back echo or delay, used frequently on early rockabilly, country, and rock 'n' roll records. (63)

Listeners hear the slight delays of slap-back echo as a timbral effect more than being one of temporality. However, as Bradley and Wood describe above, it is a process that entails delicately manipulating the timing and retiming of how audio signals record to tape. Similarly, engineers can create this effect manually, but it demands musicians' time and attention away from production in the recording studio. Bradley and Wood help readers understand the social and technological phenomena within the recording studio environment as divisible by space and time.

*Memphis Boys*, *King of the Queen City*, and *House of Hits* are historical accounts of famous recording studios. However, similar to ethnography, these works interpret the studios as sites of social agency and the prevalence and placement of interview responses from individuals who worked at the studios demonstrate how these works partially contribute ethnographic information.

Recent ethnographic representations of recording studios have advanced scholarly understandings of the numerous social negotiations within productions of popular musics (Greene and Porcello 2004; Meintjes 2003). Ethnographers' confluence of interviews, descriptions of production processes, and analyses of recorded musical sounds give their writing depth of analysis on sounds, labor, and performance. In particular, these ethnographers' placement and interactions within and around the recording studio activities offer successfully detailed accounts of the studios. But what can a historian do when removed by space and time from such intimacy? Can an author successfully write a detailed representation of a recording

studio without having had the opportunity to be physically co-present in the studio?

Time alienates Bradley, Wood, Fox, and Jones from Gold Star/Sugarhill, King, and American, respectively. However, time could have been a basis through which these authors might have constructed a proximity to the studios. Thomas Porcello posits how critical engagements with temporality through playback listening offers ethnographic methods for encounters and representations of recording studio life. In his article “*Tails Out: Social Phenomenology and the Ethnographic Representation of Technology in Music Making*,” Porcello theorizes multiple vantage points of experimentation in the recording studio. He assesses representations of recording studios from the position of the ethnographer who is writing about recording studio social life, to that of the engineers who technologically mediate the sonic occurrences in the recording studio, as well as the position of the artist who makes multiple takes and retakes of his or her musical performance.

Porcello considers pre- and post echoes in recorded sound from an audio tape that was improperly stored as a way to frame his understanding of how recorded music and its production involve an interpenetration of listening agendas by engineers, musicians, and ethnographers. Pre-hearing, hearing, and re-hearing are common in the context of studio sound engineering; as Porcello argues that his experience in the recording studio environment also required a similar violation of musical time that has been basic to ethnography. He writes:

I find the first spot I'm after and listen through it. I hit the rewind and play it again. And again. Now I'm in control of today's recording session. I define what was significant and what was not. I can make those significant events happen as many times as I want them to. Later, on my transcribing machine, I will even be able to speed them up and slow them down. But for now, I listen to them and think. Stop. Rewind. I play what happens for five minutes before and after each event to get a better sense of context. (Porcello 2003:270)

His ability to stop, rewind, and play, as described above, allows him to make use of every recorded moment in order to develop better questions or reaffirm his analysis. Roben Jones' *Memphis Boys*, John Hartley Fox's *King of the Queen City*, and Andy Bradley and Roger Wood's *House of Hits*, each offer opportunities for a practice of Porcello's pre-hearing, hearing, re-hearing method, one that would have enhanced the representation of sound and labor practice within studios.

In the next section, I follow Porcello's method of “Stop. Rewind. Play.” as a researcher who seeks information about recording studio labor through an example of an edit in a James Brown single recording.

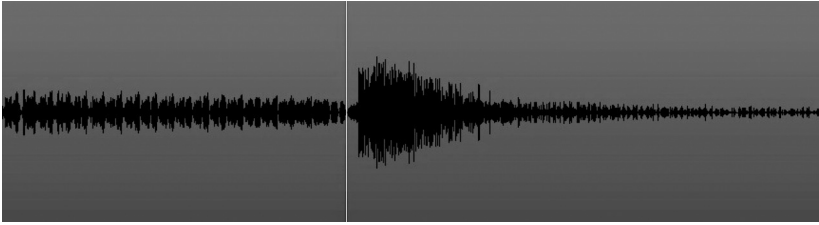
## 2 Minutes and 22 Seconds

I endeavor to apply Porcello and Sterne's particular audile technique to King Record's 1966 single of "It's A Man's Man's Man's World," performed by James Brown (from the compilation *Number 1's*, Universal Music Group, 2007). I am listening for specific sonic features that reveal the labor of the recording process beyond lyrical, melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic contributions. First, I choose my multiple listening technologies and control the acoustic properties of my auditions. On my desk are Westone UM3X triple driver in-ear monitors, Sennheiser HD 25-1 II headphones, Alesis M1 Active Mk2 near-field studio monitors, an Apogee Duet firewire digital audio interface, and an Apple MacBook laptop.

Through my laptop's primary music player software, I search for "It's A Man's Man's Man's World." I double-click on the title and the recording begins to play. I am sitting two feet from the plane of the loudspeakers and I distance my head equally between the two. By turning up the multi-function aluminum knob on the Duet, and according to my sound level meter, I amplify the playback of the recording to an average of 86db C-weighting. I listen twice to the recording that lasts two minutes and forty-five seconds.

I hear an edit during the second playback, at approximately two minutes and twenty-two seconds into the recording. I power down the loudspeakers and connect the Sennheiser headphones to the Duet. I adjust the signal level of this playback to be similar to the levels that emitted from the loudspeakers. I fast forward to 2:22 and hear the edit again through the headphones. After a few playbacks with the headphones, I follow the same procedure again with the Westone in-ear monitors. In this progression from loudspeakers to headphones to in-ear monitors, I am encountering the recording through my auditions that transition from a blend with the acoustic properties of my listening space to an audition that reduces the impact of these surrounding acoustics, which foregrounds the recording's sonic features. Through these listenings, I realized that one or a few of the many people who produced this recording made the edit milliseconds before a strum of the rhythm guitar.

From a musical standpoint, 2:22 is an understandably ideal time for an edit. It is at the end of the last chorus of the song and at the beginning of the coda. Moments before the edit, during the chorus, James Brown sings, "... a woman or a girl." Subsequently, instrumentalists in the group individually, yet simultaneously contribute *ostinati* before the edit. The drummer plays a repeated eighth-note; sixteenth-note triplet (containing a note, a rest, and a note); and eighth-note pattern on the closed high-hat cymbals. He mutes the snare drum with his hand and plays rim shots on beats four and ten. The combination of these sounds outlines both the duple and triple grooves of the song's 12-8 meter. Moving at a pace of approximately one hundred



**Figure 1:** On the left is the pre-edit, with bass and strings resonances. On the right is the post-edit, with the initial rim shot/guitar and subsequent void of bass and string resonances

fifty-two beats per minute, in which the eighth-note represents the beat, the bass player performs the root pitches of the repeated E-flat minor to B-flat minor 7 chord progression that consistently maintains a harmonic rhythm that moves every dotted half-note. The pianist, also following this harmonic rhythm, plays six first inversion E-flat minor triads before playing six first inversion D-flat Major triads, which correspond to the third, fifth, and seventh chord tones of the B-flat minor 7 chord. The pianist plays each of the twelve triads on each beat of his ostinato. The rhythm guitarist plays the same chords as the pianist. However, rather than play one chord per beat, the guitarist plays the chords along with the drummer's rim shot, on beats four and ten. The tenor saxophonist is slightly behind the beat and a few cents flat at the attack of each entering pitch, playing the I-V pitches in unison with the bass player only at a comparatively higher octave. Members of the string section perform three ascending diads, one per dotted half note, with the following pairs: B-flat/E-flat, D-flat/F, and B-flat/G-flat.

The immediate silencing of the bass and string section caught my attention and made me aware of the edit at 2:22. The edit occurs just before a fourth beat, almost masked by the intensity of the transients of the rim shot and the staccato rhythm guitar's triad. The ostinati of the drummer, pianist, and guitarist seem unbroken throughout the remainder of the measure and the remaining twenty-three seconds of the recording. However, while I heard either the sustain or decay of the string section and the bass part during beat four in the measures before the edit, I am not able to hear these features just after the edit. Someone has removed them. Who removed the resonances and how did they do it?

In order to gain more information about this edit, I import this recording's audio file into my digital audio workstation software, where I am able to view a graphic representation of the recording's waveform (see Figure 1). After waiting a few moments for the image to load, I expand the vertical dimensions of the waveform. I then drag the virtual play-head cursor to 2:22 and I zoom my horizontal view of this moment in order to see the waveform data that represents the distortions associated with the edit. I see



**Figure 2:** The stylus of the turntable is at the point of the edit: 2:30. Image from the YouTube video “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World-James Brown & The Famous Flames”

the edit. Before and after the “temporal location” of the edit, I see differences between the energies of the waveforms. Most of the waves before the edit are thick, and the computer draws them in bold. This most likely represents the deeper fundamental frequencies of the bass and the timbral complexities of the string section. I do not see the visual mark of these intensities in the same way that I cannot hear them directly after the edit and before the bass reemerges in the last half of this measure.

In listening again to the music of the last twenty-three seconds of the recording, I hear James Brown sing, “he’s lost . . . in the wilderness . . . he’s lost . . . in bitterness . . . he’s lost / Lord have mercy now.” In addition to the eighth-note triads, I also hear the pianist improvise melodies. Could it be that James Brown or someone associated with King Records wanted to take these improvisations from another take and splice them into the end of the final mix? Alternatively, were these musical features at the end of a longer version of the recording that someone had to shorten somehow?

With these questions in mind, I return to this listening project the next day. After a search online for this song, I encounter a video of someone playing a King Records 45rpm record of “It’s A Man’s Man’s Man’s World.” It is the same version that I had listened to the day before. This playback is fifty cents lower in pitch and the corresponding tempo is also slower than what I had listened to the day before, perhaps due to the motor of the person’s turntable. Now 2:30 is the time of the edit. Regardless of these differences, I see that the stylus is very close to the end of the remaining playable grooves in the record, at the time of the edit.

As the turntable’s playback suggests, it is possible that the time constraints associated with recording media of the era determined how workers produce popular music and how popular music sounds. Following Porcello, my hearing and rehearing the recorded sounds not only leads me to the edit but also my encounter and relationship with multiple temporalities associated with the recording. This implementation of an audile technique also brings me to more questions about the edit and who made it.

Who decided to make the edit? Did they intend the edit to cover a mistake or does the edit help in allowing the recording to fit on one side of a 45? Who decided to cut the mixed tape before the fourth beat at 2:22? Was it an engineer, James Brown, or a producer? An engineer probably cut and spliced the audiotape. Did he or she use an Ampex tape machine or the less expensive Scully brand? At what speed did the tape record and play across the heads of the tape machine, 7.5 or 15 inches per second? In addition, given the decision to make the edit just before the transients on beat four, did the engineer make a perpendicular or diagonal cut in the tape with his or her razor? This would control how abrupt or smooth the sound of the transition would be. How did the budget for this recording project determine how much time the engineer had to fast forward, play, and rewind the tape to locate the edit point and hear and rehear the quality and transparency of his or her edit? With this edit so close to the end of the recording, did King Records higher-ups care much about this edit, given how relatively pristine the beginning and middle of the recording sounds? What might that have meant for the dignity of this engineer and his or her work amid the other members in the art world of this production?

Answers to these questions bring the reader of recording studio history closer to the labor of record making. Uncovering who decided to make the edit at 2:22 could lead to questions about how that individual made editing decisions on other recording projects. This, as well as the worker's method for cutting tape, might develop an understanding of the style of that worker. In turn, readers' encounter with this type of representation would appropriately rebalance their conceptualizations of effective technicality and affective creativity attributed with certain members of the recording studio art world (Porcello 2003:267). The type of tape machines in the recording studio could point to how successful that studio was in attracting business. Perhaps this might also indicate the price of the hourly rate at the New York City studio in which Brown recorded the song. This information might contribute to the readers' understanding of how much time the editor had to cut and splice the tape, clarifying the challenges that this person faced while making the single. These connections do not simply or concretely emerge from the critical listening work presented earlier, as much as the questions that could lead to these sorts of connections. Historians of recording studios can utilize these listening practices to ask interviewees specific questions about studio labor, questions that help in reorganizing written accounts of recording studio life that do not disproportionately amplify the star-studded interests of a mystifying recording industry.

As Porcello's analysis indicates, an author's encounters require special attention to the spatial, temporal, and social dynamics of recording studio



life. Technological mediation determines the ability of a studio to enable engineers, musicians, and authors to fluidly transcend phenomenological boundaries between space and time. Writing about recording studios that does not effectively interact with audio technology or the techniques of recording studio laborers will continually fail in disclosing knowledge about popular music production.

Historical approaches to the classic recording studios of the past, such as the three presented earlier, offer opportunities for authors to present the relatively slower collaborations between recording artists and sound engineers. The quicker and smaller digital versions of the machines and complicated circuits of the present make the process of decoding varied labor experiences an even more difficult task for authors who describe current day recording processes. In addition, both the entrepreneurial consolidation of the many recording studio artistic and technological responsibilities into one person and the advent of laptop digital audio workstations that continually diminish the number of large-scale recording studios determine the call for additional ethnographic methods for representing the production of contemporary popular music.

Roben Jones' *Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios*, John Hartley Fox's *King of the Queen City: The Story of King Records*, and Andy Bradley and Roger Wood's *House of Hits: The Story of Houston's Gold Star/Sugarhill Recording Studios* are successful in introducing scholarship to three recording studios that significantly impacted the course of American popular music. These books also represent themselves as examples of an established method of representing popular music production that should now transition toward research methods that rely on listening. Critical listening practices, as in the one above, should inform writing about popular music production in order to remix and balance the recognition of the people who participate in the modes of popular music production.

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**Whitney Slaten** is a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at Columbia University. His forthcoming dissertation examines the relationships between technological and social examples of fidelity within the context of professional live sound reinforcement engineering. This research contributes to scholarship about music, technology, liveness, and labor studies. Slaten has worked as a live sound reinforcement and recording engineer in New York City and has taught courses about sound engineering.

**Bradley Sroka** is a PhD candidate in the historical musicology program at the University of Southern California. He earned his master's degree in jazz history and research from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. He studies popular music, music criticism, and the aesthetics of music. His dissertation concerns the rock critic Robert Christgau.

**Sayo Yamagata** is currently an Enhanced Chancellor's Fellow at the City University of New York Graduate Center. Much of her feminist writing is preoccupied with critical points of collision in the 1960s between popular music, avant-garde scenes, and radical political movements. Her paper, "Representing Valerie Solanas: Productions of Gender and Sexuality in The Factory," appears in the forthcoming issue of *Folklore Forum*. Currently, she teaches at City College at the City University of New York.

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