

**That Sound in your Head:  
Guitar Tone Values in the Entrepreneurial Age**

A Dissertation Presented

by

**David Matthew Brounley**

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The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation investigates the ways that guitar sounds are packaged, valued, and folded into musician subjectivity in the early twenty-first century United States. Based on a multi-year ethnographic project at New York city musical instrument store, I argue that the sonic logics that have emerged in guitarist consumer culture are framed by the entrepreneurial values associated with neoliberal ideology. Through interactions in stores, popular media, and in everyday conversations concerning sound, many guitarists consider it a responsibility to produce unique sounds that represent their personality. These composite sounds, usually described as a player's "Tone," are often likened to sonic fingerprints in both industry literature and casual conversations. Drawing off the importance of this term within guitarist consumer culture, I theorize Tone as a sonic epistemology grounded in the logic and ethics entrepreneurial values.

The musical instrument shop is an important fixture in many twenty-first century American musicians' lives, and yet it has been underexamined by scholars interested in music and capitalism. Indeed, many of the musicians I have interviewed claim to attribute their sonic fluency and self-perceived status as musical connoisseurs through interactions in these spaces, therefore I find it important to give them proper attention. As I recount interactions and interview, I investigate the cosmopolitan discourse-network the sales floor engenders. It is a useful space to study long-standing questions in musicology and music theory, for instance the economization of sound, the linguistics of timbral experience, and community building amongst amateur musicians.

# Table of Contents

|                                                                        |            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>List of Figures.....</b>                                            | <b>vi</b>  |
| <b>Acknowledgements.....</b>                                           | <b>vii</b> |
| <b>Introduction: Workers Do Not Write.....</b>                         | <b>1</b>   |
| Publicness in Musical Instrument Shops .....                           | 1          |
| Emic Ethnographies of Work .....                                       | 6          |
| The State of Musical Instrument Retail in the Early 21st Century ..... | 13         |
| Chapter Outlines .....                                                 | 17         |
| <b>Chapter 1: Listening with Capitalist Ears .....</b>                 | <b>21</b>  |
| Heterophonic Shopping .....                                            | 21         |
| Unboxing a Guitar .....                                                | 26         |
| What's it like to be a Guitar in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century? .....   | 30         |
| What's it like to sell Guitars in the 21st Century? .....              | 35         |
| Selling an Eric Clapton Stratocaster .....                             | 39         |
| Sound, Timbre, Tone .....                                              | 42         |
| Guitarist Consumer Culture .....                                       | 47         |
| Neoliberalism and the Guitar Market .....                              | 54         |
| The Entrepreneurial Ethics of Guitar Tone.....                         | 61         |
| <b>Chapter 2: Negotiating Timbre .....</b>                             | <b>71</b>  |
| Customers Know Best... ..                                              | 71         |
| Timbre: Music Studies' Final Frontier .....                            | 75         |
| Cosmopolitan Guitar Talk .....                                         | 81         |
| Timbre as Indexical Cluster .....                                      | 85         |
| The Guitarist Consumer Public.....                                     | 87         |
| Towards a Music Theory of Gear .....                                   | 91         |
| Drastic Allure: \$119.99 plus tax .....                                | 97         |

|                                                                                                                                     |            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Chapter 3: When Distortion was Noisy -- Guitar Sounds in Capitalist Historiography ....</b>                                      | <b>101</b> |
| Distorted Truths .....                                                                                                              | 101        |
| Always be Innovating .....                                                                                                          | 103        |
| “Rocket 88” .....                                                                                                                   | 104        |
| Intentionality and the “Male Birth” of Distortion.....                                                                              | 106        |
| Domination and Vibrational Politics in a Guitar Shop .....                                                                          | 110        |
| Weaponizing Distortion .....                                                                                                        | 114        |
| Distortion as Product .....                                                                                                         | 117        |
| Unofficial Historiographies .....                                                                                                   | 122        |
| <b>Chapter 4: Sounding Deregulation —The Gibson Government Series .....</b>                                                         | <b>124</b> |
| The Raid.....                                                                                                                       | 125        |
| Gibson’s Response.....                                                                                                              | 133        |
| The Global, but still very American, Guitar .....                                                                                   | 136        |
| The Government Series .....                                                                                                         | 144        |
| <b>Chapter 5: “The Ridiculous Hype that Offends So Many is Not of My Making”: The Klom Centaur and the Sonic Entrepreneur .....</b> | <b>149</b> |
| The Sonic-Entrepreneur-Connoisseur.....                                                                                             | 150        |
| Sonic Transparency.....                                                                                                             | 156        |
| These are Essential (But I Can’t Really Tell You Why) .....                                                                         | 158        |
| <b>Conclusion: Writers Who Work .....</b>                                                                                           | <b>163</b> |
| Ethnography of the Mundane .....                                                                                                    | 163        |
| The Gift.....                                                                                                                       | 164        |
| Writers of the World Unite! .....                                                                                                   | 172        |
| <b>Bibliography.....</b>                                                                                                            | <b>175</b> |

## List of Figures

|                                                                                                                           |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 1.1: The Gear Page Word Frequency Analysis.....                                                                    | 43  |
| Figure 1.2: Harmony Central Word Frequency Analysis.....                                                                  | 44  |
| Figure 3.1: Image of RML Electron Fuzz Distortion Box (left) and the JHS Double Barrel<br>Overdrive (right) .....         | 116 |
| Figure 4.1: Breedlove Guitars Tonewood Guide .....                                                                        | 130 |
| Figure 4.2: The headstock of a 2021 Gibson Les Paul Tribute at Sweetwater.com with a “Made<br>in the USA” stamp .....     | 140 |
| Figure 4.3: A Government Series II Les Paul in Gunmetal Gray .....                                                        | 146 |
| Figure 4.4: Government Series II Certificate of Authenticity .....                                                        | 146 |
| Figure 4.5: Advertisement for the Gibson Government Series Les Paul in Guitar World<br>Magazine, February 4th, 2014 ..... | 147 |
| Figure 5.1: Interior and Exterior of a Klon Centaur .....                                                                 | 152 |
| Figure 5.2: Exterior of a Klon KTR Overdrive Pedal .....                                                                  | 153 |
| Figure 5.4: Interior circuitry of a Klon KTR.....                                                                         | 159 |

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# **Introduction: Workers Do Not Write**

## **Publicness in Musical Instrument Shops**

You are a customer walking through a large department store, pushing a cart, browsing the many offerings stacked neatly onto steel shelves and framed by boldly lettered price tags. The aisle is wide and easy to navigate. The floor is clean and decorated with the company's signature color scheme. The air resonates with the soft beeps from the checkout aisle, the rustling of merchandise being shifted on shelves, and the squeak of shoes on a tile floor. These sounds are all blanketed by a generally inoffensive music peppered with produced voice-overs announcing special deals. This is a place you have been before, even if you have never visited this particular location. It is comfortable, familiar, and seemingly transparent.

Retail spaces seem public and mundane, but they hold within them invisible and private worlds. Anyone who has worked in the retail industry will recognize a given store's publicness as a carefully constructed charade. Teams of workers have positioned these items before you enter, following weekly rotating shelving diagrams, often called "planograms," that are released by corporate headquarters. Some manufacturers have paid for eye-level shelf positioning or dedicated displays that increase the chances that you will pick their marginally more expensive brand of dish soap. The wide aisles, sometimes referred to as "action alleys," maneuver you past products with the highest profit margins. They weave a route that strategically shuttles you through nearly every department before you find the product you came for. Much of the surveillance and manipulation is sonic. Private conversations echo through in-ear radios between employees as they watch for shoplifters with the intensity of Cold War spies. Doors painted to blend in with the sales floor walls hide warehouses, bathrooms, offices, and break rooms, perhaps bearing small placards announcing them as for "Employees Only." Point of Sale systems, inventory control scan guns, and hidden computers bring up proprietary screens that detail pricing, gross margin, total daily sales numbers, product availability, and traffic flow analyses that require a senior employee's password to access.

Consumers are rarely aware of these invisible layers of surveillance. This mindset could also be said to be an intended result of a constructed corporate strategy. Workers who handle maintenance and inventory are encouraged to be as invisible as possible. Training regimens

dictate which employees are to engage with customers, and which employees should fetch help when approached. Warehouse associates may be hesitant to answer a question for fear of accidentally angering a customer and being reprimanded, instead looking for a customer-facing employee who is properly trained to represent the company's image. Sociologist Chris Warhurst says that contemporary service-industry workers are encouraged to resemble "house-elves in Harry Potter," which is taken from a direct quote from one of his interlocutors. Specifically referencing housekeepers in the hotel industry, he says, "Guests forget that they exist and are, moreover, encouraged to forget them."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the same can be said of retail employees, perhaps with the caveat that when they are made visible by the shoppers' gaze they should follow procedure until they can safely become invisible again.

This dissertation takes place in such an environment: born from a recognition that the structures of work at a large musical instrument store mask important goings-on in modern musical life. Originally, I did not intend to critically examine my experience within the musical instrument retail industry. I came to work in retail, like many thousands of musicians before me, to support my other life goals. My previous experience with musical instrument shops led me to believe that they were benign spaces of commerce with little to say to the loftier projects of dissecting music cultures. As I experienced the hidden work of music retail, I decided to embark on a deeper examination of the store's role in shaping musical practice. Day after day I replaced price tags, shelved warehouses, attended sales meetings, and sold literally millions of dollars' worth of musical gear to all who entered. I talked about music, sound, and timbre with thousands of customers as they filled out credit card applications to purchase their dream instruments. I broke down boxes from guitars shipped from far flung places as I hung them in neat rows according to price, color, and style. The confluence of music, commerce, globalization, and sound felt so natural and I decided it was important to investigate— and to denaturalize.

I am not the first scholar to explore music shop cultures, nor am I the first to recognize the ideologies that circulate in such spaces. In sociology, Carey Sargent has conducted participant-observation in American musical instrument shops, probing issues of gender and concluding that the shops contribute to a larger trend of "deskilled" labor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Warhurst, "From Invisible Work to Invisible Workers: The Impact of Service Employers' Speech Demands on the Working Class," in *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World*, ed. Marion G. Crain, Winifred R. Poster, and Miriam A. Cherry (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 215.

<sup>2</sup> Carey Sargent, "Playing, Shopping, and Working as Rock Musicians: Masculinities in 'De-

Ethnomusicology, Max Katz has written about small sitar shops in India, examining the ways the stores become centers for memorializing past musical traditions.<sup>3</sup> Kevin Dawe has written extensively on the “Guitarscape,” a term he uses, following Appadurai, to describe the global flows of guitar products, discourse, and ideologies through which instrument shops are a central site.<sup>4</sup> All of these works agree that musical instrument shops are important places where musicians feel the collapse of their artistic and economic selves. But, in reviewing these studies, I noticed an absence of the more private happenings of a musical instrument retailer. My experience in the realms of hidden retail work prepared me to expect this. An etic perspective is shielded from the machinations of business, marketing, and labor that are necessary to examine in order to answer important questions. How do instruments get into consumers’ hands? What conversations precipitate into evaluations that lead to a sale? How do the sounds of the store envelop workers, consumers, managers, and visitors in distinctly different ways depending on the circumstances of their entering for the day? What implications do these interactions have for the condition of contemporary musical self-identification?

These were questions I could explore due to my relationship with Music World, which is a large U.S.-based musical instrument chain with many locations across the country.<sup>5</sup> I was hired by the company in 2014 as part of the sales team for a new location in midtown Manhattan. My reasons for taking the job were initially simple. Work at Music World was comparatively lucrative when compared to the other types of work available to city graduate students. I could make the money I needed to support my family with the flexibility needed to continue on my degree path. Upon showing up for the first day of training, I found myself to be both remarkably similar and distinctly different from my coworkers. Not many of them were pursuing degrees, but we were all musicians, and, importantly, we were mostly straight, cisgender men. During my first year at Music World, I worked with very little critical attention to the store’s life. I sold guitars, collected a paycheck, and went home to focus on my studies. Something changed halfway through my second year of employment. A series of interesting interactions with coworkers and customers caused me to stop and consider what was happening.

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skilled’ and ‘Re-skilled’ Organizations,” *Gender and Society* 23, no. 5 (October 2009): 665-687.

<sup>3</sup> Max Katz, “Sites of Memory in Hindustani Music: Yusuf Ali Khan and the Sitar Shops of Lucknow,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 23, no. 1 (2014): 67-93.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Dawe, *The New Guitarscape in Critical Theory, Cultural Practice, and Musical Performance* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2015.)

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I pseudonymize the store’s name and the names of my interlocutors.

In one such moment, I successfully sold a vintage 1954 Fender Hardtail Stratocaster to a customer named Hal who was visiting New York from California. We had been talking for about an hour, playing different guitars, and discussing the differences between early '50s Stratocasters. There was a lot to talk about. We swapped stories of shows where we may have seen this type of guitar onstage. I asked if he knew of Abigail Ybarra who had just retired after winding pickups for Fender since 1956. He wondered if this guitar was ever treated with superglue: "You know that's how Clapton sets up his guitars right?"<sup>6</sup> Before I knew it, the guitar was in its road-battered case and I was processing a black, titanium American Express card. The little green price screen read \$25,041.25. The card machine displayed "approved" and beeped as if I had just rung up a Snickers bar.

At that time, I had never seen so much money change hands so quickly. I silently asked myself, "What could possibly justify this instrument's extraordinary asking price?" I reframed the question a bit more politely and asked. Hal told me that he was not particularly interested in the guitar's rarity or history. He did not even identify as much of a collector or someone who was looking specifically for a 1954 Stratocaster to "put it in a glass museum case." Instead, he was interested in the *sound* of the instrument, mentioning that he had been looking for an instrument that could deliver the "perfect strat sound" for some time. To Hal, the perfect guitar sound was priceless.

I was taken aback by Hal's ease of affixing a dollar value to a specific sound. This event seemed very far from the idealized capabilities of sound and noise to disrupt capitalist containment described by so many sound studies articles. In *Keywords of Sound*, David Novak hails the 'creative force of noise' as essential to "developing alternatives to capitalism."<sup>7</sup> Deborah Kapchan understands "sound knowledge" as "a way to break free of the discourses (of capitalism, of culture and education, of neoliberal politics) that make and remake the body in

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<sup>6</sup> Apocryphal stories of famous guitarists' gear preferences are repeated ad nauseam in shops such as Music World. This story involves Eric Clapton bucking traditional lutherie techniques and coating the entirety of his guitar neck in super glue. It is reminiscent of other stories where unconventional, devil-may-care attitudes pay huge artistic dividends, such as Eddie Van Halen's experimentation with "Frankenstein Guitars" and Rory Gallagher's penchant for guitars that have been left out in the rain. There is a fair bit of irony inherent in the fact that manufacturers and customers celebrate these instances that ostensibly were born out of a lack of access to shiny new instruments in order to sell shiny new instruments.

<sup>7</sup> David Novak, "Noise" in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 131.

their own images.”<sup>8</sup> But here, a customer was telling me that the noisy sound of an electric guitar was exactly the element that prompted him to make an incredible leap of capitalist faith. While I do not doubt these authors would agree that sound can clearly become enmeshed in capitalist logics, I became interested in investigating exactly how this happens. In what ways and for what reasons do guitar sounds become harnessed, containerized, and valuable? How exactly does a “perfect strat sound” come to command a price tag of \$25,041.25?

\$25,041.25 was \$5,291.25 more than a full-year Teaching Assistantship stipend at my university in 2015. This guitar—which when you boil it down is just a few pieces of wood, some magnets, some machined parts, and some wire—was quite literally worth more than I was in 2015. I made around \$650 before taxes for the sale. I went home that night feeling very strange. I felt complicit in something. Selling an instrument at such a high price almost seemed like a farce, and, indeed, many people in the store considered it so. The instrument had sat behind a glass window for nearly two years: more of a statement piece than something that was seriously for sale. There was a stunned feeling around the store when other employees discovered the instrument was gone and my personal daily sales numbers (which are visible to all employees through a computer program with restricted access) reflected more than two weeks’ worth of sales in one day. Some employees seemed to consider the customer to be somewhat of a sucker, not because the guitar was overpriced compared to others like it, but because even they could not see a reason why anyone would agree that a guitar should be so expensive.

Returning home from this strange day, I felt complicit in serving the store’s capitalist goals. As a practicing musician, it often felt uncomfortable to collapse music making into matters of dollars and cents. However, I also had an intense feeling of satisfaction following the sale. I remember Hal’s language, his face as he exited the store with the instrument in hand. I remember his insistence that the sound was perfect and worth pretty much anything. I realized that this was not a phenomenon that only exists amongst customers seeking extremely expensive instruments. It is a sonic ethos that permeates nearly every sales interaction at Music World. Large, promotional posters featuring Questlove, Steve Aoki, and James Hetfield frozen in expressions of deep, affective pleasure flank customers as they try instruments, instructing them to seek the

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<sup>8</sup> Deborah Kapchan, “Body” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 44.

joy that can only come with musical ecstasy. Customers joyfully chat with other customers — almost always complete strangers— detailing their lifelong ambitions to own a perfect setup of musical gear. Employees perform work satisfaction based on proximity to instruments, covertly picking up guitars to practice when the managers are not looking. “It’s the best-worst job I’ve ever had,” one of my coworkers confided in me. “My boss is always up my ass but at least I get to hang out around guitars all day.”

These are, perhaps, observations I could not have made had I not been actually working at the store. My position offered a very different view of the musical instrument industry than has been explored before. The aforementioned scholars interested in musical instrument shops entered these spaces as participant-observers, but etic perspectives of retail life will always be stymied by the fact that the entire facade exists to thwart non-employee perceptions of what is really going on. Their experiences will be hindered by the walls of privacy built up by corporate machines, be they literal, legal, or merely provoked by their interlocutors’ ulterior motives for making sales, not getting fired, or just trying to have an easy day. This is not to say etic studies of musical instrument shops are always doomed to fail—on the contrary I find many of their points to be very evocative of experiences I’ve had during my own ethnography. However, this is to say that musical instrument shops have a lot more to teach us about sound, value, and musician subjectivity than can be gleaned from a visitor’s perspective. I decided to get to work, by going to work.

### **Emic Ethnographies of Work**

There is a long history of the ethnography of work that can trace its lineage back to Marx’s call for “A Worker’s Inquiry” in 1880. Marx published a 100-item questionnaire imploring the workers of France to respond to him, seemingly embittered with the bias of bourgeois academics’ descriptions of worker conditions.<sup>9</sup> Marx proposed what might be described as an early attempt at undercover sociological study, searching for qualitative data from workers themselves without having to enter spaces where the apparatuses of power that constrain them might hinder their answer. In the introduction to his questionnaire he writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx. “A Worker’s Inquiry,” *The New International* 4, no. 12 (December 1938): 379-381.

“We hope to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer and that only they, and not saviors sent by providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills of which they are prey.”<sup>10</sup>

Marx’s questionnaire is, not surprisingly, written with revolutionary recruitment in mind. It includes loaded questions such as: “If you are employed in industries in which the work done is measured by quantity or weight, as in the mines, don’t your employers or their clerks resort to trickery, in order to swindle you out of part of your wages?” These prompts are surely not genuine studious attempts to understand worker conditions, but impassioned calls to arms.<sup>11</sup> It is generally reported that Marx never received a single response to this publication, a testament that is reflected in Trotsky’s own comment on the working class, saying, “Good practical workers do not write handbooks, and theorists, who do the writing usually, have no experience of the practical side of work.”<sup>12</sup>

What if the workers did write, or maybe more accurately, what if writers about work went to work? My project is inspired by the methodologies used by Jamie Woodcock in his study of call centers in the United Kingdom and Karen Ho in her study of Wall Street workers in New York City. These studies come from different points of entry and make understandably different conclusions. Woodcock sought out a job at a UK call center specifically to conduct ethnography and “uncover [this] resistance and the possibility of organization.”<sup>13</sup> His methodology involved a deep ethnography of the day-to-day practices in the call center paired with analysis of the site’s power structures. He consistently remains on the lookout for both covert resistances, for example extending break times, and outright resistance, employees challenging managers and even walking off the job. The “undercover-ness” of his study is palpable and his writing is charged with the anxiety of his interlocutors’ precariousness.

Karen Ho’s methodology lies closer to my own as her initial foray into her site, a Wall Street investment bank, was not necessarily ethnographically driven. She had always been interested in the conditions of work on Wall Street but did not seek a specific ethnographic project until she had been working at a major investment firm for some time. Her analysis is more sociological than Woodcock’s, exploring the habitus of employees in the finance industry

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 379.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 381.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Trotsky, “Not by Politics Alone Does Man Thrive,” in *Problems of Life*, trans. Z Vengerova (London: Methuen, 1924), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Jamie Woodcock, *Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 33.

and conducting Taylorist work-day analyses.<sup>14</sup> Instead of homing in on moments of resistance, she focuses on the machinations of the corporate culture and its resultant effect on employee actions. The firm's strategies of corporate control include strategic hiring from pools of applicants with elite socioeconomic status, justifying the firm's importance to large scale world-building, and framing employee's lives with market logic. She concludes that corporate cultures demand that workers consider themselves to be "liquid": embodiments of the disembodied market that they serve.<sup>15</sup>

Both Ho and Woodcock's emic methodologies lead to different conclusions than may have come from outsider or participant-observation ethnographies of work. In a corporate boardroom or a call center, an ethnographer could not hope to "deep hang out," as numerous anthropologists have described the goal of reflective social ethnography, without the kind of access that only comes through employment.<sup>16</sup> In a retail setting, as I have detailed, etic methods are similarly obfuscated. Retail spaces are constructed to be as public feeling as possible and may lead ethnographers to conclude that their experience as members of the public are enough to draw conclusions about the day-to-day goings on. But the work of constructing these public spaces begins before the store opens, continues after the store closes, and begets a strong training regimen on the part of the employees to disguise the conditions of work from customers.

To give a small example of this, let us consider the pay structure at Music World, which is based on sales commissions. Sales associates, like I was, are required to both know their position on the all-store ranker at all times, while also keeping their compensation structure a thinly veiled secret from their clients. The company encourages emotional investment in sales

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<sup>14</sup> Karen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 33-34.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 187-188.

<sup>16</sup> I explicitly cite Geertz (1998) in this example as his article's usage of the term resonates specifically with my reflexive ethnographic approach. Geertz advocates for an engaged approach to ethnography that treats interlocutors less as anthropological subjects and more like co-researchers. This has been a guiding principle in my own fieldwork at Music World. However, Geertz has been criticized for not properly recognizing anthropologists before him who coined the term "deep hanging out" as a way of describing certain ethnographic practices. Geertz does mention James Clifford (1996), who used the term in a pejorative way to describe ethnographic methods that he views as methodologically lacking and bearing more resemblance to "travel writing" than scholarship. Geertz attempts to reclaim this term as a positive, guiding principle for ethnography. However, Geertz does not track the genesis of the term back through Clifford's original citation of Renato Rosaldo (1989), who coined the term "deep hanging out" to describe ethnographic fieldwork in urban spaces that was presciently reflexive, but not necessarily appropriate for long periods of fieldwork. In short, I believe that Geertz's usage of the term best reflects the methodology I employ in my fieldwork but recognize that his reputation for "reclaiming" the term "deep hanging out" is complicated by an incomplete citation history.

metrics on the part of their employees, but actively works to hide that from clients in the hopes that they will perceive employees as obsessed with the emotional labor of customer service and not merely motivated by a paycheck. Customers frequently ask if sales associates make commission, and the sales associates are instructed to deflect and claim it is not important. However, when talking to managers, their commissions need to be of the utmost importance and associates who do not perform a drive to increase their sales month-over-month are subject to termination or reassignment to lower-paying roles.

The institutional privacy of the corporate space complicates anthropologists' efforts and undoubtedly shrouds their conclusions. If a visiting anthropologist walked into Music World and asked about commission, they would likely come away with the impression that the workers do not find it to be very important. In fact, commission is one of the most present drivers of store business, leading associates to consciously and unconsciously evangelize specific products. Commissions are usually greater on private-brand items and service plans that fetch a higher profit for the store.<sup>17</sup> Contests incentivize the sale of specific products or add-ons, paid for by third party vendors looking to boost sales. These moments are purposefully made invisible to anthropologists like Sargent, who draws etic conclusions from her participant observation study identifying an organizational habitus of "masculinist fantasy of the rock musician lifestyle."<sup>18</sup> It is not that Music World is absent of masculinist fantasy — in chapter Three I will elaborate on this fact—but it is to say that performances of the 'rock musician lifestyle' are less important in the breakroom of the manager's office than they may seem on the sales-floor. Music World workers often perform a devil-may-care, de-skilled habitus in order to serve more specific organizational goals of making money and not getting fired. The "masculinist fantasy" Sargent describes is sometimes sales strategy.

For instance, during a slow period at the store, I walked into a conversation of sales associates comparing their favorite adjectives to use when describing gear they didn't like but needed to appear excited about. One associate, Kevin, said he was fond of the term "rock and roll," explaining that he really only ever said that to describe a guitar that he thought was

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<sup>17</sup> "Private brand" refers to items produced by companies owned by the retailer and that therefore carry a much higher profit margin. For instance, at Music World, whereas cables produced by third-party brands sold for typically a 200-300% markup, whereas "private brand" cables were sold for a 2000-3000% markup. Commissions typically incentivize employees to favor private brand items that deliver more margin to the store's bottom line.

<sup>18</sup> Sargent, "Playing, Shopping, and Working", 280.

uninteresting, but a customer wanted to buy. Another, Tara, said she used “wicked” to the same effect. I realized that my word was “killer,” as in “that Squier Stratocaster is absolutely *killer*.” The language we used in all-store meetings was far more professionalized, surrounding key performance indicators and corporate initiatives. It is imperative for Music World employees to speak both languages fluently if they wish to be successful. The only way to know this, is to work alongside them. Trotsky’s words ring true to me again: “Workers do not write.”

In the past ten years, anthropology has recognized a need to adjust ethnographic techniques to skirt around the iron veils of twenty-first century capitalist structures. A 2016 volume entitled *Invisible Work: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World* takes this fact as a strategic focus, where scholars grapple with the many mechanisms by which service-sector labor is disguised from the public. In her introduction to the volume *Invisible Labor, Inaudible Voice* Arlie Hochschild asks “Why do all these forms of invisibility matter? Because unless we look, see, and think about them, we are likely to miss the big picture of a vast global workshop.”<sup>19</sup> Writing about invisible labor can take many productive forms, but there is no substitute for writing from the standpoint of invisibility itself if that is at all possible. Simon Carmel demonstrates the limit of gaining access to invisible sites—in his case hospital Intensive Care Units—in the contemporary era, warning that ethnographers may unintentionally become “gossips” relying on “false friendships” rather than “honest and candid ethnographers.”<sup>20 21</sup>

It is perhaps because my friendships were not “false,” that it became immediately apparent that my ethnographic project would present challenges. Firstly, the culture of corporate

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<sup>19</sup> Arlie Hochschild, “Forward: Invisible Labor, Inaudible Voice” in *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World*, ed. Marion G. Crain, Winifred R. Poster, and Miriam A. Cherry (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Carmel tempers this critique by elucidating the ways that analyzing gossip can become a fruitful ethnographic tactic by “recognizing both the importance of attitude and the link between gossip and curiosity.” However, his article focuses on the act of gossip as potentially untrustworthy and does not address the ways that gossip can be structured by the conditions of work within which an employee lives. For instance, at Music World, social-media gossiping has led to terminations and employees have learned to be careful about saying bad things about the company behind its back. Any employee of Music World would gossip about their job to an ethnographer, but their gossip would be largely constrained by the corporate culture: even with assurance of anonymity, sharing particular experiences with someone they did not fully trust could come back to them. The invisible gossip that happens at bars after work between employees is drastically different from the type ethnographers might be able to glean from developing relationships with employees outside of work.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Carmel, “Social Access in the Workplace: Are Ethnographers Gossips?,” *Work, Employment, and Society* 25, no. 3 (September, 2011), 555.

privacy would make it very difficult to achieve sanctioned permission from the company to collect data—either qualitative or quantitative— while serving an official capacity as an employee. I had access to thousands of internal documents that verified many of my conclusions but drawing upon them would at best create tensions with my employer, who I still relied upon for sustenance, and at worst would violate corporate secrecy agreements. Music World is also skeptical of even more casual studies of its sales-floor. In fact, managers had demonstrated before that they were resistant to allowing even visiting students or customers to take audio or video recordings, or interview anybody on the premises. I was once personally charged with informing a small team of business students from a nearby university that it was “company policy” to not allow store visitors to conduct research.<sup>22</sup> If I wanted to write about my experiences—both from moments I was on the clock and moments I was hanging out after hours—I would have to do it surreptitiously and without any explicit permission from the corporation.

This is not to say that nobody knew about my project. In fact, my aims to use my experiences in the store for a scholarly book were about as open as any secret could be. Throughout this dissertation, I draw from many interviews that occurred after work at New York City bars or in my coworkers’ apartments that were granted knowing full well that they would accompany data gleaned from work in the store. One of these interviews even occurred with a store manager, who is one of the highest-ranking local employees. Similarly, I informed every customer I could about my double role, aiming for complete transparency in my method. With very few exceptions, any customer I interacted with willingly spoke to me knowing that their comments may be collected in a book on guitar sound and the musical instrument industry.

It is curious to note the readiness with which my coworkers and managers accepted the project, provided that it did not blow up into something large. One manager candidly told me that he was ok with me writing about the store for school in general terms, “as long as it doesn’t end up in the *New York Times*.” There were certainly limits to what my coworkers deemed acceptable, but in general they were glad that a book about guitar sound was being written,

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<sup>22</sup> I found no official company policy barring such research, but managers at individual Music Worlds are ultimately responsible for who is allowed in the store. I have worked with other Music World managers that allowed students to use the space for school projects and even gave journalists access with no need for corporate blessing. This is all to say that, despite the fact that I was ordered to send these particular students away, I am not violating any existing non-disclosure policies in this dissertation.

finding something that resembled justification in the fact that the topic they were so emotionally invested in was worthy of social capital no less valuable than a PhD. This is a testament to the seriousness with which guitarists consider their lives as consumers and dedicate emotional labor towards the reproduction of what I will later theorize as a “consumer culture.”

In addition to the issues with corporate secrecy, there are more pressing issues of power dynamics inherent to the structure of some of my ethnography. Approaching interactions about guitar sound from the perspective of a salesperson invites a host of biases that deeply affect what is said. It is undeniable that, especially towards the beginning of my project, my livelihood was contingent on the fact that I sold as much as possible. Music World pays its employees on a commission structure, and, therefore, every interaction with a customer is an opportunity to put more money in the salesperson’s pocket. As a result, I often found myself torn between my twin motives while I was in the store. Throughout my six-year career with Music World, I have earned approximately \$300,000 in wages and commissions off of over \$3,000,000 in sales. I was later promoted to store management where I managed a team of sixty employees and supervised a store with a total yearly sales forecast in the tens of millions. In no way did I enter the shop with the initial intention to write about its place in the musical instrument market. It was simply a job that paid me more than most other avenues of income available to me at the time and allowed me to organize my schedule around my university studies.

The store became a laboratory of sound where I could feel my own implication as someone responsible for reinforcing a consumer culture. The socialities of instruments ceased to be theoretical, becoming real as I displayed them: both according to corporate guidelines or “planograms,” but also according to my own taste in the moments I was allowed to experiment. Deskilled labor became less of an observation, than a struggle I was imbricated in as I was put into economic positions to abandon PhD research to survive in the increasingly expensive atmosphere of New York City in the 2010s. To not share this would be to render the invisible spaces of the music shop as casual to ethnomusicology’s overall project of elucidating musical activities. Due to the consolidation of the musical instrument industry, corporate musical retail has become a nearly unavoidable space in the life of a 21st century musician, I felt an urgency to continue.

## The State of Musical Instrument Retail in the Early 21st Century

One of over 300 locations around the United States, Music World—and other retail chains like it— have become major, if not downright unavoidable, hubs for musicians in nearly every area of North America. This is a fact that has been much maligned by fans of local musical instrument stores — industrially referred to as “mom and pop” shops— that have been unable to compete with the scope of Music World and its competitors’ and are often forced to sell to conglomerates or close. But even as small musical instrument stores have become less abundant, the industry on the whole has exploded as instruments and recording equipment have become smaller, cheaper, and more accessible to middle-class Americans.

Paul Théberge identified this industrial sea-change twenty-five ago writing, “popular music has become increasingly integrated with technologies of sound production and reproduction... and the creation of these new technologies has taken place within the high-intensity market context of contemporary capitalism.”<sup>23</sup> Théberge goes on to describe how the adoption of easily transportable electronic and digital music technologies has shifted the act of self-definition in music towards an act of “learning ‘to manage’ both with and without new technologies.”<sup>24</sup> To own and use these technologies is to wrangle their seemingly infinite sonic possibilities into new and unique sounds. It also requires musicians to come to terms with what Théberge calls the “incursion of capitalist relations upon their creative practices at the most fundamental level.”<sup>25</sup> In short, as musicians’ practices became increasingly linked with the march of technological progress, their creative processes became more and more inseparable from their knowledge of the musical instrument marketplace.

In the early twenty-first century, Théberge’s comment on modern musicians striving for self-definition through sound and “learning to manage” within a capitalist musical instrument industry rings truer than ever. Falling barriers to entry in musical production continue to redefine music-making practices on both an amateur and professional level. The same sorts of musical equipment that could have cost upwards of \$1999.99 for an amateur musician in 1999 can now be easily purchased for \$199.99 plus tax. The lines between amateurism and professional music making have blurred as the sonic quality of easily affordable equipment rivals the gear that could

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Théberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 242.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 255.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*.

only be found in professional studios in previous eras. But alongside this oft-celebrated story of digital technology facilitating a democratic disruption of the music industry, there are other economic forces that have had just as profound an influence on quotidian music practices.

Firstly, there has been consistent consolidation of both musical instrument manufacturers and retailers into a few core companies since the late-1980s. Just as the recording industry winnowed down from the “Big-Six” to the “Big-Three” in the 1990s and early 2000s, the musical instrument industry has similarly consolidated through a series of mergers and acquisitions.<sup>26</sup> For example, the Fender Musical Instruments Corporation (FMIC) boasted in their 2012 SEC Public Offering Registration Report that they had the “#1 market share by revenue in the United States” in the guitar category, partially attributing that success to their recent acquisition of the Kaman Music Corporation (KMC).<sup>27</sup> Fender has since sold KMC, but, as of 2020, still owns four other large guitar manufacturers that have historically been their competitors, the first of which they bought in 1995.<sup>28</sup> The same is true of companies such as Korg, Gibson, and retailers such as Guitar Center or Sam Ash who both boast a portfolio of private brands they own.<sup>29 30</sup>

At the same time, the guitar and amp market has become increasingly precarious over the past ten years. It is a matter of public record that companies such as Fender, Gibson, and Guitar Center, the nation’s largest musical instrument retail enterprise, have held substantial debt since

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<sup>26</sup> The consolidation of the recording industry in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is a well-documented story in popular media and scholarly music studies. There are many books that detail the acquisitions and the consequences for artists such as *Cowboys and Indies* by Gareth Murphy, *Fortune’s Fool* by Fred Goodman, and *American Popular Music Business in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* by Russell and David Sanjek.. these publications detail the consolidation of record companies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The consolidation of the musical instrument industry is addressed in some works such as *The New Guitarscape* by Kevin Dawe and *Guitar Makers* by Kathryn Marie Dudley.

<sup>27</sup> United States Securities and Exchange Commission, *Form S-1 Registration Statement: Fender Musical Instruments*, Mark D. Van Vleet. 3931, Washington DC: SEC Archives, March 9, 2012. <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/767959/000119312512101896/d293340ds1.htm#toc>

<sup>28</sup> These are Squier, Jackson, Charvel, and EVH. Fender has owned Guild and Gretsch before but sold them. It is surprisingly difficult to find definitive information about the company’s history of mergers and acquisitions. Company literature — even in official filings with organizations with the SEC— is vague as to the scope of their purchases.

<sup>29</sup> Guitar Center’s private brands include best-selling guitar producers such as Mitchell, Lucero, Acoustic, MarkBass, and Livewire. Together, according to a 2018 LA Times report, Guitar Center’s private brands make up 15% of its overall inventory. Sam Ash owns Samson, a popular live-audio brand which reported more than 14 million dollars in sales in 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Jaclyn Cosgrove, “Guitar Center Looked Ready for its Swan Song, but Now the Retailer is Gearing Up for an Encore,” *LA Times*, June 6, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-guitar-center-future-20180606-story.html>.

the early 2010s. Fender was forced to abandon their 2012 Public Offering due to outstanding debts in the hundreds of millions. A *Fortune* article that covered the IPO's failure points out that at least 1/6<sup>th</sup> of their sales were tied to the retail chain Guitar Center, which in turn reportedly held a long-term debt of \$1.57 billion due to declining sales.<sup>31</sup> More recently, Gibson Guitars declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2018, citing an overall decline in interest in their products.<sup>32</sup> I analyze the context of Gibson's bankruptcy in more detail in chapter Three.

The financial problems of musical instrument manufacturers are often chalked up to guitars losing a popularity battle amongst young musicians. In June of 2017, *The Washington Post* published an article entitled "Why my Guitar Gently Weeps: The Slow, Secret Death of the Electric Six-String Guitar and Why it Matters."<sup>33</sup> In the article, music writer Geoff Edgers describes the electric guitar industry as plagued by unsustainable growth and lowered demand, pinning most of the blame on the perceived lack of interest amongst the children of Baby Boomer rock fans. Responding to venerable Nashville guitar shop owner George Gruhn, Edgers writes:

"When he opened his store 46 years ago, everyone wanted to be a guitar god, inspired by the men who roamed the concert stage, including Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix, Carlos Santana, and Jimmy Page. Now those boomers are retiring, downsizing and adjusting to fixed incomes. They're looking to shed, not add to, their collections, and the younger generation isn't stepping in to replace them."<sup>34</sup>

Edgers goes on to quote many famous ambassadors to the Baby Boomer rock tradition — from Gruhn to Beatles front man Paul McCartney— as bemoaning the loss of the male guitar hero icon and linking it to falling sales. "Now it's more electronic music. Kids listen differently," he quotes McCartney saying. "They don't have guitar heroes like you and I did."<sup>35</sup>

Critics that bemoan the "death of the electric guitar" equate declining sales and corporate insecurity to a loss of the musical values represented by the baby-boomer era "guitar hero" figure. Industrial studies tell a different story. Guitar World published a summary of a 2017 study by IBISWorld that the guitar industry has actually "posted a 1.4% annual growth rate from

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<sup>31</sup> Omar Akhtar, "Why Fender Pulled its IPO," *Fortune*, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <http://fortune.com/2012/07/20/why-fender-pulled-its-ipo/>.

<sup>32</sup> Jem Aswad, "Gibson, Iconic Guitar Company, Said to be Nearing Bankruptcy," *Variety*, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <http://variety.com/2018/biz/news/gibson-iconic-guitar-company-said-to-be-nearing-bankruptcy-1202704143/>.

<sup>33</sup> Geoff Edgers, "Why My Guitar Gently Weeps: The Slow Secret Death of the Electric Guitar," *The Washington Post*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/lifestyle/the-slow-secret-death-of-the-electric-guitar/>

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

2012-2017—is expected to continue to grow until at least 2022.”<sup>36</sup> The National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) boasts similarly optimistic outlooks, admitting that the growth is not as expansive as in prior eras, but is still sustainable.<sup>37</sup> As of 2019, they report that the “fretted instrument” market rose by 5.57% and that it was the fourth-fastest growth category in the industry behind “effects,” “electronic player pianos,” and “other electronic products.”<sup>38</sup> The “death of the electric guitar” has become a convenient rallying cry for musical instrument company executives seeking to deflect the blame for their companies’ declining sales away from overexpansion or misguided strategic focuses.

It is evident that— despite the fact that industrial statistics forecast continued growth—the perceived “death of the electric guitar” has affected individual companies’ directions in terms of product design, strategic initiatives, and advertising focuses.<sup>39</sup> In the 2010s, there were concerted efforts by guitar manufacturers to revamp their marketing, recasting sound production technologies as luxury products that deliver personalized and unique experiences. Gibson Guitars, under the tenure of CEO Henry Juskiewicz, openly discussed transforming their company from merely a guitar manufacturer to a “music lifestyle brand,” with aspirations of becoming the “Nike of Music Lifestyle.”<sup>40</sup> Brands like Fender, Ernie Ball, and Ibanez have intensified their attention to “custom shop” instruments, where buyers could intimately control each aspect of their guitar’s construction.<sup>41</sup> In 2014, NAMM boasted that the custom guitar market rose 39% between 2009 and 2014, stating that “It appears that the upward climb in the sales of custom, high-end, luthier-crafted acoustic guitars has little to do with fluctuations in

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<sup>36</sup> Jackson Maxwell, “Guitar Industry is Growing, Study Finds,” *Guitar World*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.guitarworld.com/news/guitar-industry-is-growing-study-finds>.

<sup>37</sup> National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM), *NAMM Global Report 2019*, ed. Caussby Challacombe and Erin Block, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Edgers, “Why My Guitar,” 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Matt Lemay, “Gibson’s Bankruptcy is a Cautionary Tale about Corporate “Innovation””, *Medium*, May 2, 2018, <https://medium.com/on-human-centric-systems/gibsons-bankruptcy-is-a-cautionary-tale-about-corporate-innovation-bba75442d167>

<sup>41</sup> Fender opened its “custom shop,” a factory dedicated to bespoke instruments by acclaimed luthiers in 1987. Since then, bespoke guitars have become a focus by nearly every major instrument retailer. Richard Hoover, president of Santa Cruz Guitar Company, asserts that this is a natural progression in the arc of a serious guitarist. “As players age, they gain appreciation. They hear the sound of a custom instrument. They start to realize that true sophistication of sound is achievable. They develop a taste for the extraordinary, and nothing is ever the same after that.” (NAMM, “Demand Up”, 2020).

fashion and everything to do with the perennial quest for the very best.<sup>42</sup> Marketing focuses of major retailers emphasize the luxury aspects of instruments for sale, putting highly valuable instruments at the center of spreads and moving away from values of accessibility or artist endorsement.<sup>43</sup>

This is a far cry from the ways the guitar industry has been previously considered in music studies. Andre Millard's 2004 book *The Electric Guitar: A History of an American Icon*, hailed the guitar as emblematic of the "mass-market, middle-class values" of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> Millard describes the electric guitar as a democratic instrument, claiming that its accessibility and association with popular music directly represented the values of mid-century America.<sup>45</sup> His liberal amazement with the political potential of the electric guitar is difficult to maintain in the current paradigm, a testament to how quickly the industry has changed. Twenty years into the twenty-first century, the line between production and consumption in popular music is no longer an "intermingling" as Théberge calls it, but, rather, a full-blown fusion that has had enormous consequences on the ways musicians evaluate, listen to, and understand sound.

## Chapter Outlines

This dissertation takes the US musical instrument market seriously as an integral force of not only the contemporary music industry, but also the sonic epistemologies that undergird popular musicians' praxis. At its core, it asks a simple question: what can be learned about contemporary musical life by hanging out in a guitar shop? The simple answer is: quite a lot. One can discover the languages used to describe and marketize sounds. One can learn about the missions that drive performers to spend incredible amounts of money on customized gear. The journeys through which an assemblage of global parts travel to become an instrument that proclaims itself to be American are on full display. Ultimately, I became interested in the inseparability of sound from its economic frames in an unavoidable space where activities

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<sup>42</sup> "Demand Up for Boutique and Custom Guitars," National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.namm.org/news/press-releases/demand-boutique-and-custom-guitars>.

<sup>43</sup> This fact can be easily gleaned from a survey of marketing posters released by Guitar Center and Sam Ash over the past ten years, but I specifically have learned this from internal marketing conversations at corporate events. In one such Music World retreat held in 2020, the chief of marketing shared his vision for "gear as hero," detailing how his visual merchandising team frames guitars in dramatic photoshoots that encourages consumers to "imagine themselves playing".

<sup>44</sup> Andre Millard, *The Electric Guitar: A History of an American Icon* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins, 2004), 3.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

economic hailing and sonic education are seamlessly collapsed. Throughout the next five chapters, we will enter the world of big-box musical instrument stores and see what we find.

In chapter One, I introduce my main ethnographic site which I have pseudonymously called “Music World”. Specifically, I will investigate the ways guitarists understand guitar sounds as valuable economic objects. I begin with a critical organological analysis of the 21st century electric guitar, asking not only how they come into the shop but also how they are handled, considered, and eventually sold. Through recounting stories of quotidian interactions from my fieldwork, I conclude that, at Music World, guitar sounds are enmeshed within the neoliberal ethos of the moment. Concomitantly, I theorize the concept of “Tone” as a sonic ideological apparatus that frames the musician’s relationship with sound as one of personal investment. I use Tone exactly how it is vernacularly used in what I call guitarist-consumer-culture, a field of social activity that encompasses guitarists’ relationship to the musical instrument market across multiple sites and texts. Through Tone, engaging with the marketplace is a project of self-improvement and it is exactly sound’s effervescent materiality through which Tone can become such a powerful indicator of its exchange value. Shoppers who enter the store are encouraged to chase the “sound they hear in their head,” to achieve sonic individuality and fit the parameters of the perfect neoliberal musical subject.

Chapter Two narrows the focus of sonic cultures at Music World by investigating the machinations of the timbral lexicons that circulate quite evenly throughout the cosmopolitan and international guitarist community that visit the store. I begin by outlining the repetitive and mundane structures of selling at Music World and discuss the ways conversations about sound are framed as negotiations, both of meaning and of exchange value. Through analyzing these many conversations, I question music studies’ insistence on the “paradox of timbre.” I argue against either considering timbre to be wholly phenomenological or wholly material. In short, I propose students of timbre focus less on *what* timbre is and instead analyze *how* timbre happens. Timbre unmistakably happens in a guitar store showroom.

My fieldwork informs an understanding of timbre as a type of linguistic negotiation that I contend is quite separate from any material sound being produced. Drawing from Charles Sanders Peirce and Thomas Turino, I describe the understandings of timbre that are performed through the many adjectives guitarists use to describe it as an indexically clustered game of mutual ambiguity. Understanding timbre as a text rather than a sign brings me to an analysis of

guitarist consumer culture as a whole. Following Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner, I describe the connections amongst guitarist-consumers as a “public” that is knitted by their shared attention to sound. Finally, I ask how the linguistic vacuum at the bottom of timbre operates as a feature, not a bug, in the context of a sonic market. I conclude that it is exactly timbre’s vacant ontology, called its “drastic allure” by Isabela Van Elferen, that makes it such a powerful container of value as it is able to be recursively defined within the market’s shifting context.

Chapter Three is a historiographical examination of guitar distortion, which is by far the most frequently discussed (and therefore sold) guitar sound at Music World. I investigate the gendered and racialized histories of the distortion’s market power through examining the sound’s history and contemporary meaning. There are many stories of distortion’s “discovery” and first usage that range from Ike Turner’s “Rocket 88” to Link Wray’s “Rumble.” They all seem to share a basic formula of accidental promethean discovery of unbridled sonic power that comes under the purview of genius engineers. These apocryphal tales are widely circulated in guitarist consumer culture, and I contend that they do important historiographical work that support contemporary understandings of sound as a fungible commodity. The history of distortion is a triumphant capitalist narrative that casts sound as product, configuring it into a historical schema of innovation that affects the ways consumers listen and evaluate sounds in the current market. Following the work of Tara Rodgers, Aleisa Alissiman, and Robin James, I show how the promethean histories of distortion that pepper guitar advertisements, coffee-table books, and online commentary are not only coded masculine or white because white men are almost always involved, but also because the casting of the sound in an epistemology of design automatically subjugates sound in an epistemology of patriarchal capitalist control.

Chapter Four traces a different strain of neoliberalism’s entrenchment in the modern guitar market by examining a specific moment where messy ideology comes into direct contact with product design. This moment came in 2004 when the Gibson Guitar Company was indicted on alleged violations of international trade agreements pursuant to their importation of lumber from Madagascar. The outpouring of support from right-wing politicians in the US likened the government’s encroachment of free-trade to tyranny, and Gibson briefly became a flag-carrying symbol of right-wing protectionism. Gibson leaned into this identity even further once the wood that was confiscated by the government was released back to them. They produced a line of “Government Series” guitars that were constructed from the formerly incarcerated lumber. These

guitars were marketed towards libertarian ideals boasting “currency green cases,” painted in a special color called “government drab,” and featuring certificates of authenticity that were printed to resemble the US constitution.

In reviewing the case of the Gibson Government series, I ask what this specific product can teach us about neoliberal politics. The reaction to Gibson’s court case reveals the contradictions between open free-trade and aggressive economic protectionism that form the base of neoliberal ideology. The value of foreign wood that is formed into an all-American product show the inherent unevenness of global markets and complicate conventional value-making logics. Following Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Kathryn Marie Dudley, I show how the global flows that transform foreign lumber into guitars that are icons of American conservative values imbue instruments with complicated political identities that influence their relationships with the musicians who buy them.

Chapter Five returns to the concept of entrepreneurial values by examining the persona of the “entrepreneurial hero” as it exists in guitarist consumer culture in the form of virtuoso engineers. My primary case study involves a 1990s era overdrive pedal called the Klon Centaur. Originally designed by guitarist-engineer Bill Finnegan, the Klon acquired a cult value amongst guitar aficionados and is frequently sold for upwards of \$2000. In examining the justifications of such inflated value — what Finnegan himself refers to as “ridiculous hype” — we see consumers emphasizing sonic attributes over collector value in hot debates over the pedal’s hefty price tag. The story of the Klon demonstrates how guitarists not only valorize builders like Finnegan as entrepreneurial heroes, but also understand their own fetishization of niche products as sonic investment. Returning to discussions of cultural neoliberalism as outlined by Wendy Brown and Ilana Gershon, I theorize an ethical grounding for understanding the evaluation of specific guitar sounds that is rooted in logics of self-investment and entrepreneurial ethics.

This dissertation was born by accident. A seemingly simple job led to a shocking reconsideration of the music shop’s role in musical life. I let my fieldwork lead the way and attempt to keep my questions simple. Why can guitars become so expensive? How does one put a price on sound? How does the economic frame of a 21st century guitar shop shape sonic understanding? Throughout this dissertation, I investigate the ways that musical instrument shops are unavoidably important spaces in shaping modern musical life and how we listen with capitalist ears.

## Chapter 1: Listening with Capitalist Ears

### Heterophonic Shopping

It's another very loud day at Music World, the largest musical instrument shop in New York City, where I have spent the last four years both working as a sales associate and conducting ethnographic research.<sup>46</sup> The windowless retail floor is filled with instruments either on the wall or in the hands of players seated at amplifiers. When you are standing near the main counter — a rectangular “corral” situated at the center of the sales floor— it is difficult to pick out any one musical phrase. Occasionally, coherent moments emerge from the din: a three-note pattern, the whirr of the technician's drill, or a recognizable riff, more often than not a butchered version of Guns N' Roses' “Sweet Child O' Mine.” These sounds fade away as quickly as they are heard, absorbed into the cacophony.

Walking through the departments, the sonic architecture transforms and sharpens. The Pro Audio department is saturated with sounds of digital pianos, synthesizers, and drum machines. The acoustic guitar room resonates with the scraping of fingers against steel strings. Although there are very few walls dividing the store, sonic spaces demarcate where each type of product is sold. The bass department shares fifty square feet of open floor space with the DJ department, but sonically they are worlds apart. An invisible curtain of competing sounds creates a border between them, and its boundaries are continuously renegotiated as traffic swells on either side.

Only a few sounds penetrate every space with impunity. Hidden speakers in the ceiling blanket the sales floor with a classic rock soundtrack, giving the store a barely audible cohesion. The same speakers project the employees' voices as they call for manager assistance and announce special financing plans. These interruptions cut through the sonic chaos with the familiar, tinny sound of a supermarket intercom, often causing customers to pause their playing and look up to the ceiling towards the sonic source. Near the main entrance, a giant television

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<sup>46</sup> This chapter is based on ethnographic observations conducted between January 2016 and August 2018 both from the perspective of a visiting participant-observer to the shop and as an employee interacting with customers as part of day-to-day retail work. The name of the company has been anonymized. Cited interlocutors were aware of my double role as both an ethnographer and an employee and all names have been pseudonymized for privacy.

screen flanks the escalator that leads to the street. A repeating video of a digitally simulated crowd welcomes all as they enter. The faceless fans drown out the sounds of the sales-floor, chanting indecipherably for everyone as if they were playing at Madison Square Garden. Entering and exiting the store feels like walking onto a stage.

Music World Manhattan is the flagship location for the billion-dollar national chain boasting over 300 stores across the United States. Through my time here, I have grown to know this store as a vibrant meeting place for contemporary musical life in New York City. Located in the heart of Times Square, Music World attracts clients from a wide array of musical backgrounds. Broadway pit musicians frequently visit to buy small supplies like strings or reeds in between shows. Workers from nearby office complexes visit on their lunch breaks to unwind with a guitar and dream about their next purchase. Parents and children travel from as far as New Jersey and the Bronx to take music lessons and absorb the atmosphere of a flagship location.

As Times Square is the center of Manhattan's tourist industry, there is a constant stream of customers from around the world looking to purchase musical instruments and supplies. In one count that I completed in April of 2016, I found that sixty percent of customers with whom I engaged were not from New York. Seventy-five percent of these visitors were from overseas.<sup>47</sup> Many of these visitors mentioned that the store was one of their primary reasons for visiting New York in the first place, as musical instruments tend to be a great deal cheaper in the United States than at their local dealers.<sup>48</sup> Over the course of my fieldwork, I interacted with Brazilian rock artists, Nigerian music educators, and even a cohort of French commercial pilots who brought instruments home on nearly every flight to sell in Europe for a profit. The heterophony of the store suggests this global clientele.

But so too does it reveal the way that the store commodifies music and sound. Music World is an unabashedly capitalist space. Almost everything inside its doors has a price: from the twenty-thousand-dollar guitars living behind locked glass cabinets, to the six-dollar packs of banjo strings efficiently exhibited on rotating gondolas. While walking through the store, it is

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<sup>47</sup> This data was gleaned from short conversations with 49 customers on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> One client named João revealed to me that in his home country of Brazil the Fender Stratocaster guitar he was buying would have cost at least three times as much due to the import taxes imposed by the state. This is a fact that I have not been able to verify with industry publications but have heard from many South American customers in particular.

difficult to imagine music outside of capitalism, as seemingly all the tools needed to create music are neatly displayed on shelves defined by large and colorful price tags.

This chapter considers how life at Music World bridges the gap between sound and commerce. Through a critical examination of the quotidian goings-on of a large music shop, I discover that it is a formidable site for maintaining what I will theorize as a “guitarist consumer culture” that binds many diverse musicians together in a shared understanding of sound as a commodity. The seriousness with which my interlocutors approach guitarist consumer culture — be they customers, fellow coworkers, or corporate bigwigs— reveals that it is powerfully generative of a more general sonic epistemology that extends outside of the store’s doors. In short, life at the store instructs musicians to listen with capitalist ears.

Although many of the arguments I present could be extended to encompass the musical instrument industry on the whole, I limit my study to interactions amongst guitarists at the store. From my research, I have found that guitarist consumer culture is a particularly organized and concrete space that occurs in vast discourse networks online, in popular media, and in micro-interactions at music shops. The consumer culture is organized around a love and respect for guitar sounds and the process of creating the ultimate guitar sound is figured as an almost spiritual journey that guitarists must take. This journey involves knowledge of hundreds of products, idiosyncratic sonic descriptors, and commitment to proper investment in one’s art. The ideal endpoint for the journey is a sonic fingerprint composed of a chain of musical products that create a composite sound unique to the individual player. Within the guitarist consumer culture, the store itself is the primary training ground for a sonic understanding that figures sound as a personalizable commodity and an extension of selfhood.

Amongst guitarists, semantic meaning is mapped onto sonic qualities with Byzantine detail, and many guitarists perform sonic fluency through their mastery of both technical and descriptive sonic languages. In chapter Two, I will delve deeper into the machinations of this lexicon. However, aside from the typology of atomized sounds that guitarists use at Music World, there exists a larger understanding of composite sound specific to the individual player that is often referred to as “Tone.” You see the word tone everywhere in a musical instrument shop. It is emblazoned on guitar knobs, splattered on advertisements, and repeated in conversations between customers. Sometimes, it is an innocuous term that is used to describe a particular effect, such as a “tube overdrive tone.” Here, the word references a distinct, singular

type of sound. It is Platonic, relatively specific, and generally communicable. But other times, the word is intonated with reverence and poise, harboring a non-specific definition of sonic excellence. It is considered to be a goal, not an object. This is a “Tone” that was invoked to me in a conversation with a player named Sam as he was shopping for guitar pedals. “I want to start taking my Tone seriously,” he said before letting me know that his budget was around five-hundred dollars.

Throughout this dissertation, I will be using Tone with a capital “T” to reference what I perceive to be a distinct understanding of sound performed in guitarist consumer culture and should be considered to be separate from concepts of sound or timbre. This decision is based on my interactions with many guitarists who conceptualize Tone as an abstract sonic imaginary that guides their musical practice. While Tone is not usually capitalized in guitarist discourse, there is a noticeable conceptual difference between its usages in singular and plural forms. For instance, in interviews promoting the Fender Mustang GT amplifier, product manager Rick Heins champions the product’s ability to recreate “classic amp tones.”<sup>49</sup> However, the amplifier’s companion app is simply called “Tone,” of which the Fender website says, “We all want perfect tone. Some of us spend our lives pursuing it. We scrutinize every note with painstaking detail, and we look to our guitar heroes with godlike admiration. Most of the time, perfect tone is an upper-echelon goal we only dream of reaching.”<sup>50</sup>

Additionally, using a capital “T” separates my theorization of Tone from the multitude of ways the concept is already used in literary studies, musicology, and sound studies. For instance, I do not wish to invoke Sianne Ngai’s intricate theorization of literary tone as “the affective-aesthetic concept that will implicitly inform all the analyses of the aesthetics of specific feelings that follow.”<sup>51</sup> I will also separate the ways Tone is conceptualized by my interlocutors from the ways the term is often used as either a direct synonym for timbre, a constituent part of timbre, or more broadly to describe a pitched sound.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Hegel McClelland, “The Sound and the Fury: A Case for the Fender Mustang GT Amplifier,” *Men’s Journal Online*, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.mensjournal.com/gear/the-sound-and-the-fury-a-case-for-the-fender-mustang-gt-amp-w497175/>.

<sup>50</sup> “5 Tone Tips: You’ll Just Sound Better,” Fender, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.fender.com/articles/tone/5-tone-tips-you-just-sound-better>

<sup>51</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>52</sup> The collapse between concepts of “tone” and “timbre” in music studies is perhaps best evidenced by the terms’ definitions in the Grove Dictionary of Music. Murray Campbell’s entry “Timbre” defines it as “the tonal quality of sound.” Similarly, William Drabkin’s entry “Tone (iii)” describes it as “the quality of a musical sound. An oboe might be described as producing a ‘reedy’ tone, whereas a flute produces a ‘mellow’ tone. See Timbre.”

This separation of meaning within the same term is very natural to guitarists, who easily interchange between Tone's twin definitions. It is quite clear when they are distinguishing between its usage as a sonic descriptor and a guiding ethos. Possessive pronouns are usually attached to the term when it is used in the more grandiose sense and it is frequently cited as justification for what may seem like outrageously expensive purchases. Over the course of hundreds of conversations, I have heard many variations on this theme. Customers enter the store looking for a new accessory, such as guitar pickups, in order to improve their personal Tone. They explain their decision to buy an expensive condenser microphone as a necessary investment to properly capture the subtleties of their Tone. They take out lines of credit for thousands of dollars in order to afford incremental additions to their guitar rig as they constantly search for a perfect Tone.

It is the ever-presence of the term "Tone" that led me to taking it seriously as an organizing force for guitarist's relationship with sound and the marketplace. I began to ask: what is this "Tone," that is repeated so consistently at Music World? Tone, as it occurs in guitarist consumer culture, is a slippery concept— Dave Hunter of *Guitar Player* magazine once called it the "most abused word in the guitarist's lexicon" — referencing how it has come to mean many different things to many different people.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, Hunter celebrates Tone as the mainstay, magical ingredient to his readers' passion, saying two sentences later that, "Tone is not purely subjective, I believe, but can be defined and observed. That said, it's not a scientific phenomenon to the extent that it can be mathematically quantified, and I'll be damned if I — or anyone— can put it into words that do justice to what our ears perceive."<sup>54</sup> It is important to Hunter, as it is to many of my interlocutors, that Tone is recognized as liminal and non-fungible, belonging as much to the engineers as it does the philosophers.

So, what is Tone and how do you get it? It is assembled from every aspect of playing the instrument: from plucking your preferred string with your preferred pick on your preferred guitar with your preferred pickups. Then you might run the signal through your preferred cables to your preferred chain of effects. After that, you would realize that composite signal through your preferred amplifier, often outfitted with your preferred set of tubes and preferred speaker. The chain goes on and on, with each decision taking on incredible importance towards the overall

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<sup>53</sup> Dave Hunter. *Tone Manual: Discovering Your Ultimate Electric Guitar Sound*. (New York: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2011), 10.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

ethical goal of producing good guitar Tone. To be a good player, you need to produce good Tone. To produce good Tone, you need to invest time and money.

This is why I theorize Tone as a different concept from sound or timbre. In short, Tone is a financialization of sound, contextualizing it within the frame of contemporary capitalist values. It is a framework for understanding sound as a commodity that exceeds the sum of its fungible parts and orients the listener towards considering sound as an element in a larger non-fungible product of self. In this chapter, I will explore this concept as it occurs within the arena of guitarist consumer culture. Through critical examinations of life at Music World, I will connect Tone to neoliberal values of entrepreneurship, work ethic, and individual expression.

We should step back and examine the structures of a store where Tone thrives. As I detailed in chapter One, the musical instrument market has undergone an intense process of market consolidation and globalization over the past fifty years. This transformation was rapidly exacerbated by both the falling costs of digital sound production and legislation such as NAFTA that enabled companies to export production overseas. The instruments that make up the corpus of products so integral to guitarist consumer culture and understandings of Tone have complicated, global lives which are inexorable from the sonic epistemologies they support once they are unboxed, bought, and absorbed into a player's Tone.

### **Unboxing a Guitar**

Despite its relative quietude compared to the sales floor, the warehouse at Music World is a social space. It is a meeting place where products near the end of their various commodity chains await inauguration into the social lives of their end users. The company operates three major warehouses across the United States. The first is the central warehouse in Kansas City, where the majority of Music World's items begin their journey. A speed dial function on our telephones connects the local store directly to a warehouse representative, who, despite being located in Salt Lake City, can run comprehensive searches of the Missouri warehouse's stock. They send items through various shipping services to other warehouses that hold not just musical instruments, but an unfathomably large variety of items, stretching for miles, concealed within similar looking brown cardboard boxes. I have only once been inside one of these mammoth shipping centers that pepper the highways across the tri-state area. Walking the aisles, one could hardly distinguish a guitar from any other similarly packaged product. It makes little sense to

even try to identify items except by long tracking numbers that index the packages' destinations, but not their contents.

The most important warehouse is the in-store stockroom that is connected to the sales floors at each individual location by a pair of swinging metal doors. Here, tracking numbers are forgotten and instruments patiently await their release from their cardboard prisons. In the guitar aisle, boxes are sorted by brand, but little else. On the shelf, boxes originating in Asia, Mexico, California, and Europe engage in a constant dance of removal and replenishment. One of the most useful skills one can acquire working in the warehouse is identifying the make of the instrument based on box alone.

Xavier, or X, works as an operations associate and is responsible for receiving and prepping guitars for display or "staging." As we were working together to unload an early morning shipment, he explained to me how he differentiates Fender's line of products as they come off the truck according to the cardboard boxes' size, color, and quality. "The Squiers," he says, referring to Fender's lowest priced brand originating from various contracted factories in China, "are in those smaller, yellow looking boxes." The Squier boxes are certainly not bright yellow but look slightly more jaundiced when lined up against other cardboards on the shelf. X also detailed how the cardboard is "thin and plasticky...very easy to rip with your hands." He demonstrates as he tears open a box, revealing yet another box made of the same material, the word "Squier" emblazoned on the front. "Why is there another box?" I ask him. "Wouldn't it be cheaper to make a stronger box than use two thin boxes?" "I dunno man, that's just what they do," he says as he cuts open the box-within-a-box. Inside, there is a black Squier Affinity Stratocaster tightly wrapped in a thin Styrofoam sheet and a headstock guard made of a more rigid cardboard. "They're not even serialized," he remarks as he hangs a price tag advertising "199.99" off the G-string. Perhaps this was a reminder to himself that he does not need to take extra steps to count the guitar into the system by serial number. This is an important step for more expensive instruments to count them specifically and track losses.

"You can tell the Mexis because their boxes are lighter (in color,) but they're still small. No cases in those things." "Mexi" is a common term used to describe Fender's Standard Stratocaster series, constructed in Ensenada, Mexico and costing between \$499.99 and \$999.99. He takes a box down without glancing at its tag and begins cutting the liberal amount of tape on the sides. Inside, there is a red guitar wrapped in a styrofoam bag and braced with foam spacers,

suspended so the sides don't touch the cardboard. He reaches in and pulls out the instrument, virtuosically breaking down the packaging into flat pieces and stacking them upon the other box. The entire process takes about thirty seconds. A few items fall out of the box: a small plastic bag containing an instrument cable, a strap, and three pieces of paper. X quickly gathers these pieces, puts them into a manila envelope, and labels it "Mexi Strat, Candy Apple Red" along with the last four digits of the serial number. Later, when the guitar was sold, the sales associate would return to the warehouse to search for its corresponding envelope and deliver these accessories to the buyer.

"The Americans are these big boys," X continues as he reaches for a larger, tan, rectangular box with a yellow shipping label on the top. It is made of a thicker cardboard than the others and is emblazoned with a solid black Fender logo. Opening it up, he pulls out two small styrofoam spacers. "Hold this," he says. I grab the end of the box as he shimmies the black, faux leather case out. The cases fit tightly inside the box and required a good deal of effort to free. "Why not just cut the box open?" I ask. "We keep these boxes," X replies. "The guitars come out, but the cases go back inside and back on the shelf." Looking back on the shelf I see what he means. There are rows of these large boxes holding cases, but no guitars. Labels on each box delineate the specific guitar it belongs to, describing models and serial numbers. The sizes and colors on this shelf are much more evenly distributed than the aisle that holds the boxes containing guitars.

After receiving the truck, identifying the guitars that were not yet on the sales floor, unboxing them, affixing price tags, and re-labeling the empty boxes, X loads the guitars on to stands and carts them out to the sales floor. There, we carefully sort them on the double-decker hanging displays in the Fender section. First, we sort according to price, with more expensive instruments on the top rack, traveling down in price from right to left. This process is called "defragging" and frequently employees are assigned the task of "defragging" the guitar wall to return the section to order after customers have rifled through the offerings.

The most expensive guitar in this section is \$1999.99 and X explains that if they were above that price, they need to be secured with a hanger that locks. Once the guitars are in price order, X makes some changes to ensure that no two guitars that were next to each other are the same color. This was an instruction from his manager and created a more colorful palette of options. Finally, he scans each new guitar to inform the inventory system that they were on the

floor. This would be useful later if we were asked to track down the location of any particular instrument.

This work is quotidian and at times can be repetitive and boring. But still, it is clear that X enjoys placing hands on the instrument. He, like many employees at Music World, will often take the time to admire unattainably expensive instruments with wistful desire. Working with instruments itself is a perk of the job, and many customers recognize a seductive aura of the product that employees may appreciate. During mid-afternoon hours, the sales floor is peppered with “regulars” who visit multiple times a week to soak up the escapist atmosphere. These visitors are often on first-name terms with employees and come from a wide spectrum of New York City life. Memorable regulars I interacted with include an accountant from Ernst and Young, a few members of a nearby Broadway cast, and a concierge staffer from a high-end Times Square hotel. These regulars buy very infrequently but share the same plaintive reverence for the products and the space as X does. They can be often overheard saying something to the effect of, “man this is a cool job” referencing the excitement of working alongside guitars. As often, customers express sympathy for the workers in regard to the loud sounds that fill the guitar floor at peak hours.

In traveling from warehouse to warehouse to retail floor, the instruments move between different social spaces and their identity as traditional commodities seems to shift. In her study of the Matsutake mushroom commodity chain, Anna Tsing notices something quite similar. For Tsing, because the mushrooms are harvested in Oregon according to idiosyncratic systems of values and are eventually given as gifts in Japan, they are “salvaged from the capitalist commodity chain.”<sup>55</sup> When shipping companies sort them according to rationalist packing standards, they rob the mushrooms of their social value and convert them into data points on a manifest. However, Tsing finds that the mushrooms are immediately, or as she puts it “magically,” transformed into a relational object that exceeds its exchange value once they are unpacked. As they enter the social space of the Japanese gift economy, they shed their disguise as a global commodity they put on as they make the journey across the Pacific.

While guitars are sold and are not destined for a gift market as the Matsutake are, I see similarities in the ways the boxes are packed, anonymized, and later re-imbued with a social

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<sup>55</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015): 123.

value that exceeds their identities as platonic commodities. “Do you ever talk to the guitars?” I asked X, half joking. “Sometimes when I open them and see a really cool one,” he chuckled. “Like, *damn* look at you.” I have heard X and many of the other workers in the warehouse repeat this same performance, vocally inaugurating particularly special guitars into the space of the store as they discard the brown packaging that restricted them to a colder identity as a transportable commodity.

### **What’s it like to be a guitar in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**

The 21st century has rightly brought a reconsideration of a question that is easy to take for granted, namely, what is an instrument? Since the 19th century, organology has held instruments to be objects that are precise and static, but whose histories can also be described with the vibrant — if deterministic— energy of biological classification. Hornbostel and Sachs are best known for this approach with the creation of their instrumental classification system that strives towards a “universalist” ideal in the early 20th century.<sup>56</sup> In their system, categories such as membranophone and idiophone sort instruments in the manner of biological families from which a multitude of evolutions can arise.

Margaret Kartomi’s 2001 review of developments in organological classification demonstrates the extent to which taxonomy remained a primary area of focus in organological research until the early 2000s. While there was much debate as to how to properly theorize a taxonomy of instruments, twentieth century organological research is mostly devoted to developing a taxonomic system with a wide-enough breadth to accommodate shifting trends in research. Interestingly, many of these systems of taxonomy attempt to include various methodologies for classifying instruments by their “cultural-emergence” as well as the static mechanical attributes.<sup>57</sup> This is no doubt in service to larger discursive turns in anthropology and ethnomusicology that began to dominate the field in the late twentieth century and began to question the Eurocentricity of existing instrumental taxonomies. Kartomi points to Steven Feld as a scholar who was particularly clear in his call for a fresh look at organology in the mid-1990s, simultaneously validating the fact that older taxonomies cannot speak to the “current

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<sup>56</sup> Erich M. von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs, "A Classification of Musical Instruments," trans. A. Baines and K. Wachsmann, *Galpin Society Journal* 14 (1961): 5.

<sup>57</sup> Examples include Merriam (1964), Kartomi (1990), and Dawe (2001).

critical and reflexive trends,” while also welcoming a “revival of interest in systematic studies of classification” that can account for the goals of reflexive ethnomusicology.<sup>58</sup>

More recently, there has been a concerted effort amongst musicologists and ethnomusicologists to build a new theory of organology that acknowledges instruments as intimate social objects rather than empty mediums for transmitting musical meaning. Dubbed “critical organology” by Maria Sonevytsky, this scholarly trend calls for a reexamination of the musical instrument as a cultural actant.<sup>59</sup> Rather than pursuing projects of taxonomy that consider instruments to have static ontologies, critical organology attends to the important cultural work musical objects do as they are crafted, played, bought, sold, and involved in the production of history. Sonevytsky demonstrates that instruments, in her case accordions, are imbued with polysemic racial “codes” that are constantly re-negotiated as they are built, played, and talked about.<sup>60</sup> Other authors, such as Allen Roda (2007), Steve Waksman (2003), and Eliot Bates (2012) all write towards this purpose.<sup>61</sup> For instance, Bates examines the tensions in the Turkish Saz’s status as a national icon, asking how the instrument actively participates in the creation of a modern Turkish culture.<sup>62</sup> These studies ask us not to speak of the musical instrument with the same platonic language of biological classification —as is best exemplified by the Hornbostel-Sachs system as it is still sometimes taught in introductory ethnomusicology courses.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Margaret Kartomi, “The Classification of Musical Instruments: Changing Trends in Research from the Late Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to the 1990s,” in *Ethnomusicology* 45, no. 2 (2001) :283-314.

<sup>59</sup> Maria Sonevytsky, “The Accordion and Ethnic Whiteness: Toward a New Critical Organology,” *The World of Music* 50, no. 3 (2008): 101.

<sup>60</sup> Sonevytsky, “The Accordion,” 101-118

<sup>61</sup> There have been attempts to consolidate the tenets of critical organology. For instance, a 2013 panel organized by Emily Dolan at the American Musicological Society annual meeting in Pittsburgh, PA was explicitly titled “Critical Organology.” Less explicitly, the Society for Ethnomusicology’s “Klaus Wachsmann Prize” has recently favored organological works that are in line with the cultural ambitions outlined by Sonevytsky and Bates, for instance the most recent winner *Squeeze This! A Cultural History of the Accordion* by Marion Jacobson. However, there has not as of yet been an edited volume or article that has been well cited enough to, in my opinion, explicitly establish the field as methodologically distinct.

<sup>62</sup> Eliot Bates, “The Social Life of Musical Instruments,” *Ethnomusicology* 56, no. 3 (2012): 363-395.

<sup>63</sup> Here I refer to both the actual Hornbostel-Sachs taxonomies and the recent attempts to update it, for instance Margaret Kartomi’s 2001 article “The Classification of Musical Instruments: Changing Trends in Research from the Late Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to the 1990s” which asks important questions about its legacy but settles for updating the system’s language rather than suggesting a critical approach.

I understand the push for critical organology as a corollary to debates in anthropology on constructions of value.<sup>64</sup> In the introduction to his book *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*, David Graeber outlines the history of this scholarly focus. According to Graeber, orthodox Marxist understandings of value are not readily conducive towards anthropological projects. For Marx, value is derived from the human labor involved with production and is therefore intrinsically linked with capitalism. But anthropological theorists have asked how and why value systems perpetuate in the non-capitalistic societies they study. Graeber traces these interventions into Marxist economics through Georg Simmel, Pierre Bourdieu, Arjun Appadurai, and a myriad of other theorists to demonstrate the methodological concerns of anthropologists who see value (economic or otherwise) as an important social force.<sup>65</sup> What we are left with is a need to synthesize a new theory of value that considers both the structures of Marx's equations and the messy social lives of objects as elucidated by anthropology.

The 21st century guitar market is an interesting case study to explore questions of both critical organology and anthropological value. Guitars are considered by consumers to be both intensely personal and social, as well as generally transportable and valuable. People buy guitars for all sorts of reasons. Some enter a shop like Music World to pick out their first instrument, filled with excitement and anxiety about beginning a life in music. Some invest - hold rotating lines of credit of hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase instruments for collections, many hoping that they will accrue value as they age.<sup>66</sup> For some, guitars are a religion— for others, they are a stock future. The instruments hang silently ready to accept both interpretations of them, not seeming to mind if they are considered with impassioned social fervor or by a calculated economic gaze.

Beyond the electric guitar's split identity between commodity and musical partner, the instrument can also be a troublesome figure in debates on digitality, sound, and materiality due

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<sup>64</sup> My understanding of the anthropological value and how it can explicitly relate to music studies is indebted to both Timothy Taylor's 2016 monograph *Music and Capitalism* as well as the keynote lecture he delivered at the 2014 University of Toronto Graduate Students Symposium entitled "Valuing Music."

<sup>65</sup> David Graeber. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. (New York: Palgrave, 2001.) 23-49.

<sup>66</sup> Revolving credit lines at Music World are called "AR Accounts," short for artist relations accounts. Many artists and studios do take advantage of this service, but so do many customers who are hobbyists but routinely spend thousands with the company. One such customer I have had a great deal of contact with owns an electricity repair company in Brooklyn, but in 2019 spent well over \$50,000 on guitars alone. Another customer lives in Germany and routinely wire-transfers sums of \$20,000 to the store to pay off his AR account and leave room to freight ship many instruments at once overseas.

to its hybrid nature. Electric guitars themselves operate very similarly to a traditional string instrument, and, without amplification, direct material contact between the player's mechanical motion and the sound produced is preserved. Within the schema of instrumental taxonomy, the guitar is a "composite chordophone" belonging to the family of "necked box lutes." The primary distinction between electric and acoustic guitars is the hollowness of the box. But, when the electric guitar is combined with amplification, the sonic identity of the electric guitar becomes more convoluted. Sure, the initial impetus of the playing action involves the same mechanics as other stringed instruments, but the final sound is alienated from the original motion. The intermediaries involved should cause us to ask where the instrument stops and ends, a question whose complexity can be grasped by attempting to account for every step in-between the mechanical motion of plucking the string and the final, resultant sound.

First, there is the makeup of the instrument's body. What kind of wood and shape alters the palette of sonic outcomes in ways that can be clearly printed on a spec sheet or price tag? Woods such as mahogany and maple are held in high esteem for their resonance, weight, and sympathetic frequencies. It is not uncommon for electric guitarists to own multiple guitars with different wood makeups that deliver different timbral goals. Then there is the type of magnetic pickup that is set in the guitar's body. There are hundreds of options to choose from including single coils, humbuckers, noiseless pickups, and rails. Guitarists concern themselves with the sonic differences between alnico and neodymium magnets and even the length of wire that is passed around them. There are even more intermediaries to consider before the final sound is produced including selections of instrument cables, output jacks, effects pedals, power supplies, strings, tuners, picks, amplifier tubes, and speakers. The staggering amount of options for customizing a sound that exists between the player's fingers and the amplifier's speaker engenders a billion-dollar market of gear and invites consumers to consider their consumerism as an intensively creative and virtuosic endeavor.

If any one of these parameters change — from the length of the cable, to the gauge of the strings, to the year the guitar was made, to the battery's output level— the resulting sound changes. Entire books have been written to outline the minute changes each choice offers, such as Dave Hunter's previously mentioned series of "practical handbooks" for guitarists.<sup>67</sup> The

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<sup>67</sup> Dave Hunter, *Tone Manual: Discovering Your Ultimate Electric Guitar Sound*, (New York: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2011).

composite sound at the end of the chain is amalgamated of all of the decisions made before it: purchasing decisions, knob adjustment decisions, and pedal-ordering decisions. It is therefore not easy to fully disambiguate the sonic identity of any one particular item in the chain: we must instead consider the entire network of objects as equally complicit in the instrument's identity and activity.

Paul Théberge makes this argument in his article "Musical Instruments as Assemblage," remarking that it is becoming increasingly necessary for scholars who engage with musical instruments to consider them as techno-social assemblages rather than platonic objects. In reference to the electric guitar, he talks about U2's The Edge, who is famous for using many complicated effects systems, as an example of a musician whose sonic identity is comprised of intricate human and non-human relationships saying, "The Edge effectively becomes part of the 'integrated circuit'—a kind of real-time, musical embodiment of actor-network theory, human and non-human actors working together in a seamless, co-determined process."<sup>68</sup>

The 21st century electric guitar is a fully globalized instrument. Gone are the days where major guitar manufacturers like Fender, Paul Reed Smith, or Ibanez have fully retained their identity as uniquely tied to one geographic region. Materials for guitars travel on shipping tankers across oceans and factories manufacture instruments composed of wood from Madagascar, electronics from Taiwan, and machined metal parts from Mexico. This is, of course, not a new phenomenon.<sup>69</sup> As early as the 1950s, economists have been commenting on the staggering complexity of global market supply chains and the alienation of products as they go through various methods of production. Leonard E. Read's 1958 article "I Pencil," follows the route of a pencil from tree to factory, charged with a Liberal amazement of the potential of fast, global markets.<sup>70</sup>

The implications of globalization on the electric guitar's identity are considerably different from that of a pencil. Not only are guitars more expensive, used by fewer people, and require more labor hours to produce but also a guitar's most generalizable use-value is to make

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Theberge, "Musical Instruments as Assemblage" in *Musical Instruments in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Identities, Configurations, Practices* ed. Till Bovermann, Alberto de Campo, Hauke Egermann, Sarah-Indriyati Hardjowirogo, and Stefan Weinzierl (Singapore: Singer Press, 2017): 65.

<sup>69</sup> This particular combination of parts sourcing is based on a typical 2010s era Fender Standard Stratocaster, but the same kinds of multinational sourcing can be found in nearly every major guitar manufacturer.

<sup>70</sup> Leonard E. Read, *I Pencil: My Family Tree as told to Leonard E. Reed*, (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., 1999.)

sound. Markets of sound are slippery and can seem resistant to commonplace capitalist logics of value. How does one value a sound? Surely, we can look to industries like Hi-Fi to see that there are quantitative parameters that delineate “expensive sound” from “cheap sound”.<sup>71</sup> A speaker boasting a wider frequency response will often be more expensive than a speaker with a lower one, the chief indicator of value being the variety of sounds it can reproduce. But the sounds themselves aren’t being sold — just as they are not in the case of records — instead the speakers sell a “sound to come.” A promised sound and a potential experience.

Electric guitars pledge a similar benefit. They are imbued with a sonic potentiality, but one that is importantly different from a Hi-Fi system. They promise a sound you will make in tandem with the product. Without the player, the guitar is a shiny mantelpiece adornment — another important stratum of its overall value that for the moment I will put aside. They promise a sonic imagination that is seemingly limited only by the player’s acuity. How do you put sonic imaginations into a showcase and slap a price tag on it? Again, to reference Theberge, now that we are comfortable with products that offer “any sound you can imagine,” how have we built the markets to sell them that can be so easily represented by ascending shelves in a music shop?

### **What’s it like to sell Guitars in the 21st Century?**

Each morning at Music World begins with a sales meeting — called a “huddle” — where the entire staff gathers to discuss the daily tasks. Workers are divided according to their department role and pay class, although all non-management jobs are referred to as “associates.” Operations associates handle shipping, receiving, merchandising, and inventory control. The lowest paid position in the store, they seldom interact with customers and spend the majority of their time in the warehouse counting, tagging, and sorting the various products the store handles. Rental and Repair associates work in siloed departments, offering musician services that are barely profitable in and of themselves but generate new sales business. The most numerous of the staff are the sales associates, each assigned to a different department such as drums, guitars, or pro audio. They spend their day walking the floor, greeting customers, and closing deals. The

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<sup>71</sup> Studies of Hi-Fi culture, such as those written by Keir Keightly (1996) and Michael Bull (2005), often focus on the social implications of carving out ecstatic sonic space in the private and public areas. The identity of these sounds as “expensive” can be left to stand for themselves, with greater attention paid to the listeners’ performances as attenuators to high end sound technology. Delving into the machinations of the Hi-Fi industry and the ways its community reinforces a sound-quality spectrum that maps onto price may be a fruitful topic for further research.

only members of the store paid on commission, they are incentivized to sign customers —often called “guests”—up for credit cards or extended warranty plans.

The nomenclature used to describe retail industry roles —from customer to manager— has shifted over the past twenty years to distance itself from a callous sounding sales-focused frame to a warm customer-service focused frame. Salespeople are now generally referred to as “sales associates,” while sales managers now hold a variety of titles such as “team leader” or “customer service manager.” At Music World, words like “team” or “crew” have replaced terms like “sales force” or “warehouse staff.” Trader Joes has been particularly inventive with these title changes, modeling their team after naval rankings with “merchant,” “mate,” and “captain.”

The impetus for these changes can be traced back to the late 1960s, with the aptly named Manpower Administration at the United States Department of Labor publishing a document entitled “Job Title Revision to Eliminate Sex and Age Referent Language from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles.”<sup>72</sup> The term “sales associate” appears in the 1975 revision to this document as the suggested revision from “salesman” specific to the musical instrument retail industry.<sup>73</sup> This is not to say, however, that the occupational title immediately took hold at the store. Vestiges of the job titles “salesman” and “sales manager” still appear in everyday contexts in the store. The point of sale system has a field notated as SLMN, where an associate enters their unique ID to receive credit for a deal. Sales Manager titles were only recently changed from “Sales and Training Managers” to “Customer Service Managers” and employees who have worked at the company since before 2014 will often still refer to their direct reports as “STMs” out of habit.

But why “associate?” Why not “salesperson” or “sales representative?” Aside from the fact that the dictionary of occupational titles recommends the term, the “associate” title has embedded itself into Music World’s overall culture of entrepreneurial ethic. The term “associate” implies a social agreement made between employer and employee that is distinctly different from the power differentials between the proletariat and the petit-bourgeois so often described in late-capitalist theory. Associates work in tandem with their employers, they mutually benefit each other, they are encouraged to think of themselves as productive members of the company rather than cogs in the machine. Whether or not this changes the regulations governing

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<sup>72</sup> United States Department of Labor, Manpower Administration, “Job Title Revisions to Eliminate Sex-and-Age-Referent Language from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. Third Edition,” ED 114-580, 1975.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*, 91.

timeclocks, assigned duties, or performance tracking fades in comparison to the overall esprit du corps the title evokes. The term associate could be said to transfer the responsibility of the company's solvency to the baseline workers, implicitly treating them as responsible for the company's health in good times and bad.

To that end, the sales culture at Music World is fairly atomized. A manager once professed in a meeting that he considered associates to be "kiosks in a mall" where they were expected to "grow their own business" within the structure of the larger store. Associates are expected to know their standing on the all-store sales ranker at all times and be in touch with their personal sales goals. Managers frequently perform "spot-checks" with associates to test this knowledge. If an associate does not know their personal metrics, they can expect a dressing down. In this way, competition is not only encouraged, but required. However, over competition is also frowned upon. If an associate "sharks," meaning they take more than their fair share of available deals, they risk being ostracized by the crew or even facing disciplinary action by management. The balance is delicate, but focused around the singular goal of selling instruments, an activity that has many names such as "slinging gear," "rolling deals," or "getting sauce."

Another one of my managers once described Music World as an "old-school style company," referencing the fact that it has retained the structure of individualized commission sales as many other retailers have transitioned towards team-based incentives or no incentives at all. This is true of the majority of music retailers I have surveyed. Guitar Center, Sam Ash, Pro Audio Star, and Sweetwater all pay their employees on a tiered commission structure that has all but disappeared from other comparable retail sectors such as electronics, furniture, and, even in some cases, automobiles.<sup>74</sup> My manager also went on to explain that he also meant this in terms of the clientele's general attitude towards guitar prices as being negotiable. Rarely do consumers enter a Best Buy and attempt to haggle down the price of the newest MacBook. Industry pricing

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<sup>74</sup> The efficacy of commission-based compensation plans is a perennial research topic amongst marketing scholars. In Doug Chung's 2015 Harvard Business Review article "How to Really Motivate Salespeople," he outlines the difficulty of large-scale studies of compensation science due to companies' unwillingness to share details of their compensation program. In general, he points to a decline of heavily weighted commission structures in B2B sales throughout the late 20th century as positive for both overall sales growth and workers' remuneration. However, the situation is distinctly different at low-level retail sales positions, where the most that a given worker could expect to be compensated for lost commissions is a few dollars increased base-wage. Music World experienced these woes themselves as they attempted to eliminate commission compensation and increase hourly rates. The experiment was undercut by minimum wage hikes that quickly surpassed the increase, and commission was quickly reintroduced. It is important to note that this information comes from my perspective only and does not represent the actual rationalization of the company's executive team. However, no official explanations were given as pay was changed to workers and it was left up to the staff to make assumptions as to why their pay structure was changing.

agreements such as MSRP and Guaranteed Lowest Price models have trained customers to accept the sticker price as immovable and sale prices as unbeatable. But in musical instrument retail, this is not so. Frequently, customers play hardball and expect prices to be lowered. This indeed was the structure as late as the 1990s, where instruments were advertised with a “retail price” that was significantly higher than the “street price” which is the average one could be expected to pay.

Although Music World adheres to the more modern, flattened pricing matrices that other retailers use, the culture of the store is still charged with the energy of salespersonship. Meetings revolve around tactics for closing, promotions, and advice on converting customers from “just looking” to “just buying.” Salespeople’s metrics are carefully tracked, with daily reports detailing their performance on extended warranty additions, completed credit card application, and the dollar amount of sales generated per hour of labor worked. Through being aware of these metrics, an associate is asked to consistently evaluate their individual worth to the company’s bottom line and is coached to ever improve in order to justify their employment.

The majority of associates at Music World are young men between the age of twenty and thirty. For many of them, this is their first job and almost all of them are musicians. In one of the only existing studies on musical instrument retail workplaces, sociologist Carey Sargent conducted participant-observation-based ethnographies of guitar stores, probing issues of gendered labor in retail environments. In her study, she asks how “musical instrument stores continue to reproduce hegemonic (rock) masculinity,” contending that the organizational structure of the shops produces gender for both employees and customers.<sup>75</sup> She also points out that this is by no means a phenomenon unique to guitar shops, saying:

Music stores draw on particular masculinities associated with rock culture, but they are not unique environments. Bike shops, high-end sporting goods stores, and ski shops also invoke common (gendered) interests and commitments among shoppers and workers. As the lifestyles of workers and customers become endowed with value as products, the interaction of workers and customers involve a complex dance that not only involves buying and selling, but also asserting oneself as a “real” biker, skier, or musician and not merely a retail worker or shopper.<sup>76</sup>

Sargent’s observation on the politics of authenticity in musical instrument shops rings true with my own experience, as much of the time devoted in the workplace involves navigating social performances of virtuosic masculinities. Customers work to perform to employees,

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<sup>75</sup> Sargent, “Playing, Shopping,” 667

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, 668.

demonstrating their knowledge of gear, music, or the industry. Employees work to justify their existence as minimum wage workers, distancing themselves from their position by reminding everyone of their band's impending success or the degree they are currently pursuing. And within all of this, a language of sound is spoken: an integral part of communicating one's skill. Sargent is correct in saying this culture is not unique to the guitar shop, but what perhaps might be is the object of eventual attention and sale. Sound is different from bike parts and from ski poles. It's true of course that skiing and biking entails a feeling of ecstasy and motion, but the products themselves sit stoic, silent, and non-agential on shelves in the store. Sound is talked about differently and the performance of sonic fluency exceeds having an encyclopedic knowledge of the latest products.<sup>77</sup> Gendered performances can also come by way of linguistic games and verbal battles to determine who is the superior arbiter of shared sonic experience.

### **Selling an Eric Clapton Stratocaster**

It is 3PM on a Tuesday, although in the windowless basement of Guitar World it might as well be midnight. Strategically oriented rail lighting draws eyes towards endcap displays and the luminescent reflections from the DJ lighting display flashes strobe beams and patterned gobo lights onto the carpet of the guitar department. The store is quiet for now, but I am approached by a manager and instructed to restock the string shelf before 4PM, when the store usually expects a robust gaggle of customers looking to kill time before the doors open at Broadway theatres.

In the middle of reorganizing the Ernie Ball section of the display, a tall, bald man appearing to be in his mid-forties approaches me. Politely, he asks if I work there and if I was available to assist him. Per company guidelines, I immediately drop what I'm doing to chat with him, carefully qualifying his needs so I might suggest an appropriate product.

This type of interaction is very typical of day-to-day life in the store and is the subject of frequent training in sales meetings and videos dedicated to sales education. In the back of my mind, I run through the steps of a sale, which is trained in store meetings and through online

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<sup>77</sup> Perhaps the best corollary to the social cultures of guitar consumerism can be found, strangely, in the studies of the wine industry. Taste, like sound, is an elusive product that defies the same sort of market classifications that govern value of other products. Like guitars, bottles of wine promise an ineffable experience to come. They both promote a transcendental experience, have a robust vintage market, and are attended to by a dedicated consumer base who steward an idiosyncratic dialect to describe their character.

instruction. Following these steps is often pitched as being mutually beneficial for the company and the customer: making the company money and getting the customer what they need, even if they don't know exactly how to ask for it. The structure of the sale is often referred to as a "funnel," and is depicted by an inverted pyramid-shaped chart in the manager's office. First, ask a series of open-ended questions to gauge what the customer is looking for. Be sure you do not make assumptions or alienate them with too much technical information. Ask directly about budget, musical tastes, and goals. Second, introduce a few products to consider, asking permission to show products that are out of budget and explaining the pertinent features and benefits of each instrument. Finally, and it is often stressed that this is the most important part, ask for the sale. Use a proven closing technique to overcome objections and gently establish urgency. You could use the 'assumptive close' — "I'll go grab the case!" You could opt for the 'trial close' — "If I had it in blue would you take it today?" Or you could use the 'puppy-dog' close — "If you don't like it in a week you can always return it!"<sup>78</sup> But whatever you do, don't let your manager catch you not following the funnel, every time, with every client.

Readers who have worked in any type of sales environment are sure to recognize this process, as I have found it remains largely the same whether one is charged with selling guitars, clothing, stocks, or retirement plans. The approach is systematic and trained, relying on the assumption that, if everything is done correctly, the conversation will end in a sales transaction. This is the orienting social interaction in a space like Music World, importantly governing both the activities of the employees and the customers.

The man, introducing himself as Jim, informs me that he is looking for an electric guitar and that he used to play in his youth. It is quite common at Music World to meet this type of customer: an amateur who is seeking to restart a hobby they abandoned long ago. With an initial budget of under \$1000, I brought him over a few Mexican Fender Stratocasters (costing around \$700) and a Gibson Les Paul Studio (costing around \$900). My idea was to have him demo, or try, them both to narrow in on the kind of instrument he preferred.

When I returned ten minutes later, Jim seemed unhappy. I asked him what was wrong, and he explained: "These sound cheap. I want something that sounds more expensive." Equating perceived sound quality directly with price is often implied, but rarely verbalized as bluntly. I

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<sup>78</sup> It is called the "puppy-dog" close to reference the low-probability that something sold will get returned. If you take a puppy-dog home to your family, there is not a very good chance that puppy-dog is coming back to the store even if it makes a mess of your home.

pushed and inquired why they sounded cheap. Jim responded sheepishly, saying that they did not sound “full” enough, qualifying his statement with another reminder that he did not consider himself to be a virtuosic guitarist. I validated his opinion and fetched a more expensive guitar; one I knew would sound drastically different. Pulling the Fender Eric Clapton Signature Model off the tall wall, his eyes widened slightly at its shiny black finish. The pickups were emblazoned with gold lettering reading “noiseless.” I explained that it referred to their design, which was intended to preserve the signature sound of a Stratocaster while eliminating a sonic side-effect of single-magnetic-coil pickups: sixty-cycle hum.

Jim plugged in the Stratocaster and began playing, his reaction sharpening as he strummed. “Yeah, this fills out the sound,” he said as he strummed through an AC/DC song. Five minutes later, he was ready to buy a full \$600 outside of budget. When I asked him what he liked best about the instrument, he said that it sounded like he had imagined a guitar should sound and that the others seemed like they were just “knockoffs.”

These interactions are mundane at Music World, occurring in some variation nearly every day of my fieldwork. But they are interesting to consider. What about the instrument so clearly delineates its value, especially for amateur players? What does it mean to “sound cheap” or “sound expensive?” And most importantly, why are people like Jim so insistent that they are motivated by Tone? What is the importance of having good sound, how is that importance instilled in the player, and how much will a consumer pay for it? Instruments like the Eric Clapton Signature Stratocaster live complicated social lives in the world of a guitar shop. Sitting on the top shelves, surrounded by guitars that look nearly identical to them, and sporting high price-tags, they rely on the consumer’s opinion and know-how to justify their price. There are few obvious characteristics that delineate their value from any other black Stratocaster. And while country of origin, weight, wood choice, neck profile, and accessories factor into purchase decisions, none of them have as equal weight to the determination of value as sound. Despite it being nebulous, difficult to describe, and ultimately impossible to quantify in any meaningful capitalistic sense, sound remains the operative factor in instrument evaluation: their final price tag being completely conditional on its promise to fulfill an imagined tone.

## Sound, Timbre, Tone

In 1938, America's "number one salesman" Elmer Wheeler summed up his approach with a maxim that remains a mainstay in American sales culture: "Don't sell the steak, sell the sizzle!...The sizzle has sold more steaks than the cow ever has, although the cow is, of course, mighty important."<sup>79</sup> Indeed, I have had managers at Music World lead meetings with these words garishly displayed on power-point presentations. But what is "the sizzle" of a musical instrument? What are we selling? What are consumers buying?

During my fieldwork, it became immediately clear that the "sizzle" was sonic. The store teems with sonic verbiage and customers buzz with excitement about sounds they love. It is rare that even an amateur customer will admit that their primary draw to a particular instrument is not sonic. Even when features such as neck profile, wood grain, and electronics make an impact, many of my interlocutors have been quick to rationalize the benefit in terms of sonic value. For instance, a shiny maple fretboard may be worth it because it sounds "brighter." A beautiful grain on a guitar's top may signal increased "resonance" due to a choice cut of wood. Surely, they are not drawn to the instrument because it would look great in their living room, they are interested in it because it promises amazing sounds. Buying a guitar for its looks is vainglorious but spending on sound is the sign of a dedicated musician.

A frequent credo in Music World sales training is that the sales associate's job is to "give customers permission to buy." This is often reinforced as an upselling tactic, with specific reference to product features that customers may perceive as luxurious or non-essential. One manager shared his favorite variation of this tactic, suggesting that sales associates tell customers that "color is important, because you need to walk by it every day and *have to* pick it up to play. If it doesn't scream out to you, you'll never practice!" This example takes it as a given that the customer deems color as non-essential to the value of the guitar. The same could be said for other products. Rarely is the color of a car a substantial determining factor of its value. *Sound* is the essential feature to a guitar's value. In guitar sales, sound is the car's horsepower, the stock's potential, and the wine's reputation. Sound is the sizzle.

Guitarists talk about sound a lot. Thousands of pages on web forums such as Harmony Central and The Gear Page demonstrate the extensive amount of time guitarists devote to

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<sup>79</sup> John McNulty, "The Sizzle," *The New Yorker*, April 8, 1938  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1938/04/16/the-sizzle>

discussing their craft. Even cursory looks at these forums shows the urgency of perfect guitar sound. As of May 2020, Harmony Central’s “guitar forum” includes over four million posts and countless more comments. A word frequency analysis of the site’s 10,000 top viewed posts reveals a striking continuity amongst commentators in discussing “sound” and “tone,” both amongst the top ten most used words on the forum (see Figure 1.1 and 1.2).<sup>80</sup>

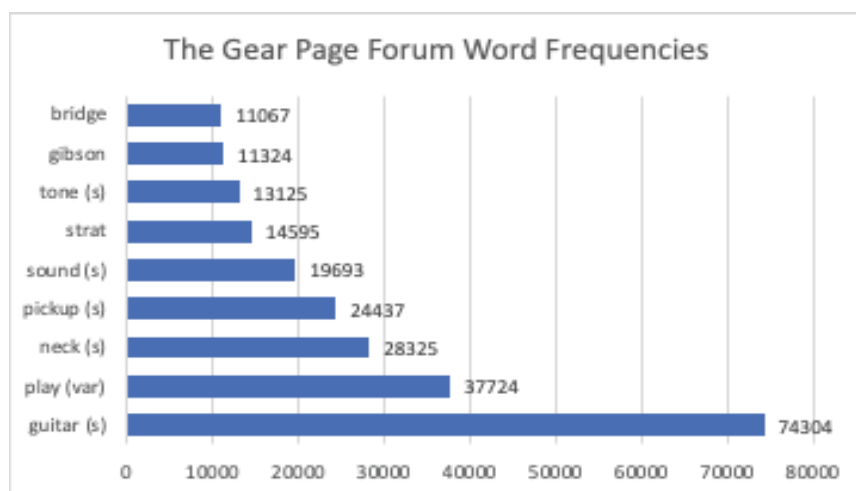


Figure 1.1: The Gear Page Word Frequency Analysis

<sup>80</sup> This data was gleaned using a custom word frequency web-scraper developed by Ryan Brounley that analyzes all pages of a given web forum. The data was filtered by removing the top 100 most common words in the English language and compiling misspellings or variations (sounds or sounnds) into one data point for frequency analysis. Pluralization and variants were combined into single data points and notated. The program was run on May 1st, 2020 and includes in its data set posts ranging from 2003 to the present, sorted by popularity in terms of views. The program was stopped after processing the 10,000 most popular articles. Many thanks to Ryan, the author’s brother, for his assistance in creating this valuable tool.

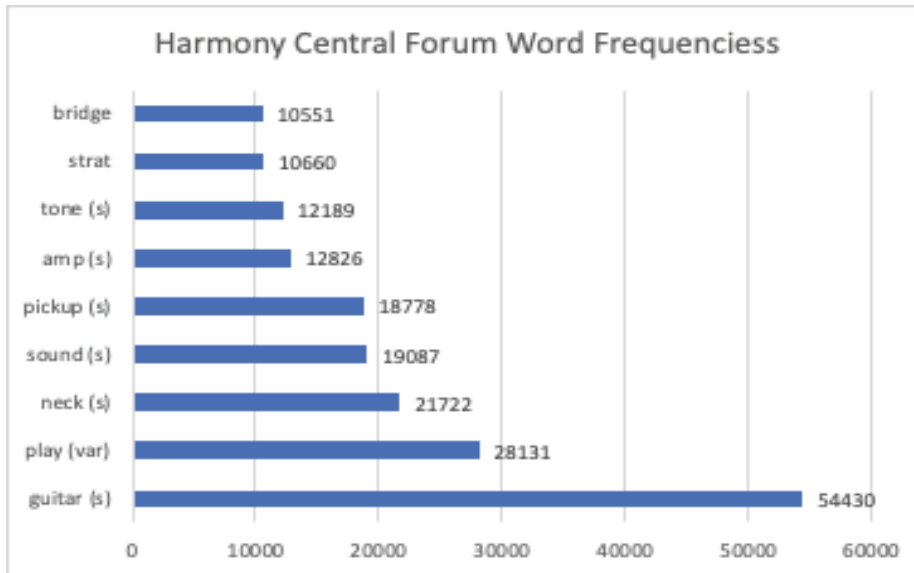


Figure 1.2: Harmony Central Word Frequency Analysis

This analysis is representative of the high emphasis guitarists place on sound in their social circles and corresponds to experiences from my fieldwork, where conversations about sound dominate interactions between employees, customers, managers, and vendors. There is a consistent and intricate lexicon that guitarists rely upon to describe sound. In chapter Two, I will unpack the specific mechanics by which this lexicon generates sonic meaning and value and argue that it may offer an intervention into music studies' analyses of timbre. Descriptors like “crunch,” “warble,” “squeezed,” and “shimmery” are widely employed between guitarists, despite the fact that they do not seem to directly index specific, physically identifiable parameters of sound as some timbre theorists seek to prove.

At Music World, one is constantly surrounded by and enveloped in this discourse, whether it is regarding the resonant characteristics of tone woods, strings, accessories, or amplification devices. Magazines like *Guitar Player* and *Guitar World* are displayed on the counters, featuring full-length articles with tips on achieving good Tone in the same repetitive character that fashion magazines mention fad diets. For instance, on the cover of the April 2020 *Guitar Player* a smiling Eric Johnson promises to give us the “secret of great tone” and claims that “gear is just 12% of your tone.” Tone is secretive, elusive, but, importantly, attainable by any guitarist who walks into the shop. Unlike finger technique or songwriting, it doesn't require thousands of hours of practice or a musical education in the traditional sense. It simply requires attention. If a buyer believes in the value of great guitar Tone and is willing to pony up for some

new gear, they can immediately acquire a connoisseur status and produce a sound that is theirs to own.

The word “Tone” is often enunciated in guitar shops and in the media with a mystical emphasis that separates it from more mundane sonic descriptors. One blog post describes the ideal sound as “tonal nirvana,” saying “Tonal nirvana is when the tone that lives in your heart and between your ears comes into perfect harmony with the sound emerging from your speaker. Everything in between those two points is just the means to an end.”<sup>81</sup> In guitar pedal internet forums — for instance the reddit.com forum entitled /r/guitarpedals—Tone is both revered and joked about having an intoxicating effect on the body. Tone is linked to addiction with posts describing users that began to buy guitar gear and are struck with “Gear Acquisition Syndrome,” or “GAS.” Forums are filled with posts of pedal boards, amplifiers, and guitar collections with titles such as “The Addiction Begins” or “After Two Years of Collecting Pedals, I am Finally Done....For Now....”<sup>82</sup> In some of these posts, Tone is sometimes spelled “toan” calling attention to the similarities between experiencing guitar sound and sexual ecstasy.<sup>83</sup>

In a 2010 article called “The Psychology of Tone” published in the popular magazine *Premier Guitar*, writer Johnson Cummins implies that Tone begins in the player’s brain with imaginary sounds that become “desirable prey” and invites the player along a quest to sonify them.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, I routinely speak to guitarists who complain of not being able to find the Tone in their head, which aligns them in a sonic pedigree of guitarists who attune to sound so carefully. The ability to recognize and create good Tone is considered by many to be a musical skill as important as learning scales. Although there are many guitarists who decry that fact and argue that sonic fetishization distracts from more important parameters of musicianship, the industry has accepted the ecstasy of Tone. Popular magazines, advertising campaigns, and conversations between musicians in the store revolve around evaluating various timbres that combine to make great guitar Tone.

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Kobylensky, “Is Tone in the Fingers?” *Sweetwater*, December 10th, 2018, <https://www.sweetwater.com/insync/is-tone-in-the-fingers/>

<sup>82</sup> These posts were published on reddit.com/r/guitarpedals by Minderasr in June 2019 and Sparklybud in April 2020 respectively.

<sup>83</sup> “Toan” appears frequently as a purposeful misspelling that can often be elongated to “toaaan” when participants are poking fun at each other but is sometimes used unironically to evoke a sexualized response to sound.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson Cummins, “The Psychology of Tone,” *Premier Guitar*, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010, [https://www.premierguitar.com/articles/The\\_Psychology\\_of\\_Tone](https://www.premierguitar.com/articles/The_Psychology_of_Tone).

Tone is a central concept around which all else moves at Music World. The ethical boundaries of Tone are very simple: there is good Tone and bad Tone. Along this spectrum, other binaries such as “cheap” and “expensive,” “distorted” and “clean,” or “Boss” or “boutique” all accrue different meanings according to the individual consumer’s ears. What becomes “good” or “bad” Tone is celebrated as subjective and representative of the artists’ inner life. For instance, Mitch Gallagher writes:

The tone you create and how you produce the tone comes about because you have an aural picture in your mind of the sound you want your hands and your instrument to create — fat, thin, bright, or dark, the sound you make is in direct relation to the sound you *want* to make...you might be surprised by how much what you *want* to hear is what you *do* hear.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, Steve Vai says in an interview regarding his journey as a guitarist that “the way you sound is a reflection of how you’re hearing yourself in your head.”<sup>86</sup> The sounds themselves take a backseat to the idealized Tone the musician hears in their head. As long as the musician is working towards the goal of bringing their individual guitar Tone to life, they are acting authentically. The market, of course, takes most of the winnings.

In the introduction to the edited volume *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone*, Fink, Zachary Wallmark, and Melinda Latour highlight the ambiguities of guitarists’ timbral lexicons. They liken tone to Bruno Latour’s concept of the “quasi-object,” dismissing the assumption that “fixation on gear is nothing but reification” because “at the end of every signal chain is a living person.”<sup>87</sup> There may be a concept of “Tone” that is within the scope of Actor Network Theory. Many guitarists seem to naturally adopt the productive nature of Latour’s assemblages, networks, and actants to describe their own relationship with their instrument. Actor Network Theory has much to say to organology and I credit those who employ its methodologies to destabilize the platonic ideals of 20th century musical instrument studies.

My fieldwork has brought me to the conclusion that “Tone” does not circulate as an object, but rather as an ideological apparatus that undergirds guitarist consumer culture in a variety of sites. Fixations on gear may indeed be a form of reification as Fink, Wallmark, and

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<sup>85</sup> Mitch Gallagher, *Guitar Tone: Pursuing the Ultimate Guitar Sound*, (New York: Cengage Learning, 2011): 2.

<sup>86</sup> Curtis Fornadley, *Tone Wizards: Interviews with Top Guitarists and Gear Gurus on the Quest for the Ultimate Sound*, (Self-Published, 2015): 298.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Fink, Zachary Wallmark, and Melinda Latour, “Chasing the Dragon: In Search of Tone in Popular Music” in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, edited by Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Latour argue, but the importance of this sonic reification has in producing guitarist culture cannot be understated.

Indeed, it is one of the very few constants that binds guitarists from different cultural backgrounds together in the meeting space that is Music World. Rock musicians from Argentina and Reggaeton musicians from the South Bronx are worlds apart musically, but they share a dedication to the betterment of their Tone. It is, in fact, the vacuity of Tone's ethos that provides it with its immense stickiness as an ideology that produces a consumer culture.

### **Guitarist Consumer Culture**

Scholarly work on music can gloss over music's complicity in the production of capitalist culture, seeing it as a problem to be solved rather than a condition of modern music-making to be investigated. Popular music studies in particular has a history of distancing its object from the simplistic, capitalistic definitions that have pigeonholed it as nothing more than artifacts of an unsavory culture industry. Much of the early work that makes up the popular music studies corpus is dedicated to finding value in music that is outside of its discrete market value. Projects of justification argue for a categorization of popular music as pieces worthy of serious study by ascribing them authentic, aesthetic value.

In the search for popular musical value—be it cultural, aesthetic, or idiosyncratic—scholars like Frith and Gracyk take for granted that the structures of normative music making in capitalism are given and well-understood. Billboard charts and record sales are left to stand for themselves as testaments to popular music's capitalist identity and very little has been said about the mechanics of popularity in the shifting capitalist frames of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century. Where fields like economics, anthropology, and sociology have generated convincing theories as to how capitalist culture is performed and produced, music scholarship can revel in the potentiality of the object to understand capitalist hegemony. As sociologist Motti Regev puts it, the incorporation of popular music like rock into the corpus of musicological subjects that qualify as aesthetic masterpieces are “understood as success in terms of the logic of the field” implying that trends in contemporary aesthetics is a great starting point for understanding capitalist behavior.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Motti Regev, “Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music,” *The Sociological Quarterly*, 35, no.1 Feb. 1994, 87.

I am by no means the first to make this point. Indeed, the dichotomy between considering popular music as either commodity or aesthetic is present in nearly every era of popular music studies. Adorno and Horkheimer's writings on the "culture industry" — in particular Adorno's 1941 article "On Popular Music" — dismiss popular music as nothing more than "a multiple choice questionnaire" that instructs lessons of capitalist conformity.<sup>89</sup> The many attempts to grapple with this critique in the twentieth century led to scholars such as Simon Frith and Paul Henry Lang writing against justification and the fetishization of the musical object as one not beholden to capital. Lang writes, in 1997, that "modern musicology often denies the 'mystery' of historical reality, reducing it to morphology and style criticism, divorcing the human spirit from the historical," although he uses the argument to offer a rebuke of "social biases" in critical musicology.<sup>90</sup> Frith, in his studies of popular music value, writes that listening involves a feeling of "ownership" of music, highlighting the aesthetic pleasure of pure consumption as an indispensable factor of popular music experience.<sup>91</sup>

Timothy Taylor's career-long focus on music and capitalism aims a critical Marxist lens at the field by demonstrating the long history of commoditization of music. Taylor sees the commoditization of music as a fundamental fact within capitalism that makes good on Marx's prediction that cultural objects could not remain immune from market logics. Taylor investigates the dynamic process of music production and discovery in the 21st century. He at once accepts Adorno and Horkheimer's declamation that music has largely been subsumed into a smattering of culture industries as he also attempts to move forward from considering fields of capitalist activity to be the scholarly realm of highfalutin theories that dismiss their importance in the study of everyday life. "Cultural industries are not monoliths with undifferentiated workers simply producing sterile commodities," he says. "People have actual lives."<sup>92</sup> Since these lives are lived "in and against" capitalism, it is imperative to give the proper credence to ways a capitalist life shapes musical consumption.

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<sup>89</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music [With the Assistance of George Simpson]," in *Essays on Music*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 437-470.

<sup>90</sup> Paul Henry Lang, "Editorial," *The Musical Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1967): 539. Accessed February 12, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/741232>.

<sup>91</sup> Simon Frith, "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate), 257-273.

<sup>92</sup> Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 182

Taylor is primarily interested in musical objects and the cultural value that sounds take on when they are organized, marketed, sold, and consumed as music. When discussing neoliberal subjectivity, he concerns himself with activities of taste making and artist branding, which are undoubtedly important to framing musician subjectivity. But sound studies shows us that listening is not a field of activity that is owned by musical experiences alone. Within the process of music making, there are many atomized engagements with sound that are as subject to capitalist purview as a recorded song. In many cases at Music World, my interlocutors' engagement with sound was decidedly not oriented towards what might be recognized as standard music production. Self-described "bedroom players" invested in elaborate guitar rigs for their own hyper-personal sonic enjoyment. They were playing music, but the marketization of sonic experience was something altogether different from the machinations of musical capitalism that Taylor describes. Where is the sonic product here? What is generating musical value and capitalist community if the end-product is a solipsistic sonic experience where music is involved, but not primarily discussed? I do not aim to deny the aesthetic, nor imply that guitarists solely listen as consumers. I do however seek to highlight the ways that consumerism is a frame that undergirds an epistemic understanding of sonic practice, with specific regards to the ways that twenty-first century capitalism has shaped music-making. In short, by inverting the same myopia that some music studies can place on the aesthetic object towards the act of conspicuous consumption of sound itself, I ask what can be learned by attuning towards the ways musicians consume?

I have said repeatedly that guitarists engage with a coherent understanding and appreciation of sound at Music World. This is without a doubt a type of "culture industry" that is most commonly delineated and subsequently derided by critical theorists. In the spirit of taking these culture industries seriously as creatively generative social fields, we need to introduce alternative theories for understanding their function and maintenance that, as Taylor has said, offer a "ground up" approach to studying capitalist life. Sociological theories of consumer culture are a great starting point that depart from orthodox Marxist understandings of fetishism, the culture industry, and consumption by unapologetically centering consumption as a central action in building the social.

Consumer culture theory — sometimes abbreviated to CCT— emerged in the late 1990s and has become not only a major field of inquiry in sociology and leisure studies, but also a core

concept in 21st century advertising. Theorists such as Mica Nava and George Ritzer posit that consumerism is a productive act that can inform the ways individuals who are imbricated in a consumer society engage with the material world.<sup>93 94</sup> Steven Miles summarizes such an approach stating, “material culture [is] facilitated by the market, which thus creates a particular relationship between the consumer and the goods or services he or she uses or consumes.”<sup>95</sup>

These developments in sociology bear a direct lineage to the Frankfurt School, but often deride the Frankfurt School’s conclusions as mass-culture theory. Consumer Culture Theory attempts to draw from key conclusions in the work of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Lukács whilst maintaining a focus on the immense productivity of consumer cultures. In other words, many Consumer Culture Theorists accept Adorno and Horkheimer’s arguments that capitalist ideology touches the everyday lives of its subjects through the culture industry, but, instead of pathologizing culture industrial consumption as a form of capitalist disease, recognizes the ways that the culture industry proliferates through social activity. Framing cultural activity through “consumption,” even when literal consumption and engagement with a marketplace is absent, both accepts the gravest of indictments by the Frankfurt school, while reforming their outlook to better represent the immensity of cultural activity in late capitalism, not reducing it to simplicity of ideological subservience and instead recognizing the agency, and therefore complicity, of everyday cultural consumers in reproducing the culture industry.

It bears mentioning that culture is a loaded term from an anthropological perspective. The reflexive turn in ethnography — most prominently theorized by Clifford Geertz in 1973 — has rejected the “culture concept” as a Eurocentric framing of indigenous relationships that cannot be employed to account for the entirety of human activity.<sup>96</sup> In 1974, John H. Moore described the culture concept — exemplified by Suzanne Langer’s work—as a Cartesian ideology that works to “separate man from beast.”<sup>97</sup> Scholars such as Abu-Lughod have highlighted the dangers that

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<sup>93</sup> Mica Nava, “Consumerism reconsidered: Buying and power” *Cultural Studies* 5 (1991):157–173.

<sup>94</sup> George Ritzer. *The McDonaldization of society: An investigation into the changing character of contemporary social life*, (Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge, 1993).

<sup>95</sup> Steven Miles, “Consumer Culture,” in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199756384-0135, Accessed 02/12/2021.

<sup>96</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Perseus), 1973.

<sup>97</sup> John H. Moore, "The Culture Concept as Ideology," *American Ethnologist* 1, no. 3 (1974): 539. Accessed February 12, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/643365>.

taxonomies of culture create hierarchies of human societies, implicitly favoring a teleological view of cultural history where European culture is the natural endpoint.<sup>98</sup>

Recent work in anthropology has reexamined the “culture concept,” with varying arguments as to why it may be necessary to readopt strategies of defining and examining cultures in the present context of global capitalism. James P Bogg’s 2004 article “The Culture Concept as Theory, in Context,” argues that, even though anthropologists may find issues of culture to be a problematic ideology, the “displaced concept” of culture “underwrites the hegemonic social order of the modern west.”<sup>99</sup> He argues that if scholars aim to examine the machinations of flattened global economic systems, they must re-appropriate the conceptions of culture — with a large grain of salt— and speak to the terms by which a globalized society categorizes its citizens.

When discussing the socialities of a space like Music World, we should not be afraid of the culture concept. Culture is actively built and maintained on the sales floor as customers leaf through magazines, talk with employees, or tell stories about their favorite shows. There is a palpable sense of musician citizenship that acts as the bedrock of the store’s community. There are many connections that bind visitors together, and the marketplace of sound is a very important piece of the puzzle.

In a consumer culture framework, communal consumer subjectivities are forged through a process of shared engagement with marketplaces. As Arould and Thompson, have put it, CCT studies often illuminate how “the marketplace provides consumers with an expansive and heterogeneous palette of resources from which to construct individual and collective identities.”<sup>100</sup> Consumption is understood as a field of activity that extends past classical Marxist theorizations. It becomes less of an act, than an epistemology: a situation of the capitalist subject who interpellates through consumptive activities. The importance of consumption to interpellation can recast activities that seem outside the boundaries of capitalist activity within the logic of consumption. This is a key point of Adorno and Horkheimer’s accusations of the culture industry. Consumer Culture Theory aims to understand the logic of consumption without

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<sup>98</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Ed. by Richard Fox, 137-162. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

<sup>99</sup> James P. Boggs, “The Culture Concept as Theory, in Context,” *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 2 (2004): 194. Accessed February 12, 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Eric J. Arnould, Craig J. Thompson, “Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 31/4 (March 2005): 868–882. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426626>

robbing capitalist subjects of their productive agency by pathologizing them in the context of a capitalist evil exerting its will over them.

Although he does not specifically adopt a consumer culture theory approach, Martin Scherzinger has critiqued musicology for operating under the assumption that “music in cultural practice cannot be reductively translated and transformed into the logic of commodification.”<sup>101</sup> He argues that it is all too easy to take the underlying economic logics that music lives within for granted, and instead train the scholarly ear towards “moments when gaps and fissures appear in the system.”<sup>102</sup> New musicology has been invaluable for restructuring musical thought to include a wide range of socialites, cultural expressions, and traditions. But in its search for music’s potential to offer experiences not reducible to capitalist logics, it may have missed the intricacies of music’s place in capitalist culture itself.

As I stand on the sales-floor at Music World, it is clear that there is a very coherent and well-defined guitarist consumer culture that cannot be reduced to a straw man by which other cultures are measured. We should surely critique it, but we should do so with as deep a look under the hood of its engine as possible. Indeed, like many ethnographers, I kept on the lookout throughout my tenure at the store for moments when the wall cracked, when activities of people exemplified some promise of an alternative musical epistemology not ruled by structures of value, equity, and service. I did observe many moments like this, the vast majority of my ethnography involved quotidian capitalist activity: timbral language infused with market logic, cash registers ringing, and discussions of sonic ownership.

Consumer cultures are reproduced through complex webs of mundane social labor where fetishization and reification are understood by participants as deeply meaningful, social activities. Tone delivers this formula: reframing consumerism of musical instrument products as a site for personal development and self-betterment. Guitar consumption is often framed as a near solipsistic endeavor in media representations, advertising, and in conversations between musicians. A 2018 article published by the internet music retailer Sweetwater relishes in the hidden labor of “chasing guitar tone,” saying, “Consider yourself a chef, serving up sonic delights for people’s ears. Sure, they probably won’t know all the little things that went into their meal, they may not even notice how you garnished their dish, but you do these things because

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<sup>101</sup> Martin Scherzinger, “Music, Corporate Power, and Unending War,” *Cultural Critique*, no.60 (2005): 27. Accessed February 12, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489209>.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 26.

you want to serve up the best experience you can. By giving yourself better ingredients that inspire you to do your best, you'll create a better product, and your audience will notice".<sup>103</sup>

Here, the chase for Tone is figured as a form of ritualistic, unrequited labor and is framed as a solitary, ethical praxis. Chasing Tone is a way for musicians to work on themselves. Tone is also figured as personal and best to be kept secret. The labor of learning to listen, constructing a rig, and experimenting with sounds is a silent labor, just as the labor of plating dishes at a restaurant is usually an invisible labor.

The nicheness of Tone is powerfully generative of a big-tent consumer culture. Guitarists can easily join the club of those who "take Tone seriously," by simply engaging with the marketplace. They pathologize themselves for being addicted to Tone and the continuous quest for sonic excellence. Tone is a personal journey that they all go on together. Yet, as guitarist consumer culture romanticizes the solitude of sonic experimentation, spaces like Music World show us Tone requires an intricate social life to accrue personal and economic value. Magazines, conversations on shop floors, product catalogs, and conversations between musicians contribute to a fluid sense of community amongst guitarists who engage with the marketplace, with their attention to gear and performances of sonic connoisseurship constructing a sonic epistemology that acts as the engine for the market.

How does one join in on guitarist consumer culture? It's as easy as swiping your Amex. The barriers to entry into this public are low, inviting all who care to participate to hail themselves as sonic experts whether they play professionally or are just starting out. Fender's recent focus on educational products typifies this big-tent political structure. Play works to distance the company's products from the stringent barriers to entry for most musical instruments: technique. By emphasizing that anyone can learn to play, they focus the customer's attention to the consumption of a musician lifestyle and sonic idiosyncrasies. A relatively cynical interpretation of their inclusion of these apps on all products— from two-hundred-dollar instruments to two-thousand-dollar instruments— is that educational apps work to overcome customer objections that their inability to play the instrument disqualifies them from being a productive member of the public of guitar connoisseurs. They imply that the consumer should

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<sup>103</sup>Mark Brody, "Chasing Guitar Tone: Is it for them and not for you?" *Sweetwater*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.sweetwater.com/insync/chasing-guitar-tone/>

figure that it is more important to love the instrument and to appreciate its sonic potential, than to be able to play like a virtuoso.

There is no prerequisite education to become a connoisseur listener and all listening in guitarist consumer culture is framed as active and productive. For Adorno, the cultural industrial listener is mostly rendered passive as opposed to the “ideal listener” who actively engages with music as it is played. He calls popular music “pre-digested,” stating that “the composition hears for the listener.... this is how popular music divests the listener of his spontaneity and promotes conditioned reflexes. Not only does it not require his effort to follow its concrete stream; it actually gives him models under which anything concrete still remaining may be subsumed.”<sup>104</sup> But Adorno also sees potential in all music to break through the epistemic walls of late capital. In his analysis of Mahler’s symphonies, he writes, “all music, with its first note, promises that which is different, the rending of the veil.”<sup>105</sup>

Within the current music industrial paradigm Adorno’s veil has become almost completely osmotic. There are many spaces in musical culture — including the guitarist consumer culture— where sounds are clearly subject to the trappings of the culture industry, but also are creative, transportable, and productive. Tone is a concept that comfortably exists on this liminal edge. It is fixed and predetermined by the products that enable it, but it is captivating and seemingly endless in its sonic potential. Unlike Adorno’s listener who is fixated on the tone of the opera singer’s voice, guitarists who invest in their Tone are actively creating as they consume and listen. They speak in lexicons of Tone to describe music they’ve heard, carve analyses of pedalboards, and generate theories of guitar Tone perfection. In doing so, their listening is a labor that produces value that can be extracted. It is not only extracted to sell more guitar pedals, but also by asking the consumer to perform a broader type of behavior that could be described as neoliberal rationality.

### **Neoliberalism and the Guitar Market**

Neoliberalism is a concept that has become somewhat notorious in its academic usage, and, therefore, I aim to use the term as consistently as possible. I understand neoliberalism as a hegemonic mode of discourse that has had profound effects on subjectivity, political rationality,

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<sup>104</sup> Adorno, “On Popular Music,” 439.

<sup>105</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5.

and, ultimately, epistemology since the mid-twentieth century. Stemming from macroeconomic theories advocating for deregulation and global free-market capitalism, neoliberalism has become the dominant socio-economic logic for contemporary global capitalism since the late 1970s. In this dissertation, I will not emphasize the ways the music industry has been literally neoliberalized—for instance the ever-globalizing and consolidated musical-instrument product chain. This is an economic fact that has been widely discussed and needs very little verification. Instead, following Wendy Brown, Ilana Gershon, David Harvey, and others, I focus on the effects of neoliberalism's governing rationality in cultural activity, in this case, guitar playing and musicians' relationships with sound.

In his article “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,” David Harvey examines the absorption of neoliberal ideology into western cultural logic. In marrying the economic agendas of globalized, free market capitalism to ideals such as “freedom” and “individual liberty,” Harvey argues that the proponents of neoliberalism have created a “hegemonic mode of discourse that has had pervasive effects on ways of thought and political-economic practices to the point where it has become incorporated into the commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world.”<sup>106</sup> Similarly, Ilana Gershon is concerned with the widespread proliferation of “neoliberal agency,” where subjects are encouraged “to enact corporate form of agency, produced by consciously using a means-ends calculus that balances alliances, responsibility and risk.”<sup>107</sup> For both Harvey and Gershon, neoliberalism has sufficiently colonized the social imaginary in the countries where it operates as the dominant economic ideology. It presents the social as networks of alliances engaged in cold market rationality, which affects not only the way that subjects are hailed by governmental or corporate powers but also how subjects recursively consider and hail themselves.

If we accept this notion that neoliberal economic policy has affected the subject's conception of self, or, as Gershon writes, has been remade as “a subject for itself” we must take seriously all of the spaces and discourses where neoliberalism directly interacts with its

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<sup>106</sup> Harvey, David. “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 610 (2007): 23.

It should be noted that Harvey is slippery when it comes to who “we” are in his description of commonsense and I find this problematic. I think it can be assumed that the “we” are members of western society whose livelihoods are explicitly bound up with neoliberal ideology or the service economy. It might even be necessary to further qualify the “we” on the lines of race or gender. I do not think that he means those who are impacted by neoliberalism, but a step removed from it as, perhaps, Hardt and Negri might discuss.

<sup>107</sup> Gershon, Ilana. “Neoliberal Agency.” *Current Anthropology*, 52/4 (2011): 539.

constituents.<sup>108</sup> There is no better site for this type of work than a big-box retail location, where complex commodity chains meet their ends and the social effects of neoliberalized and globalized markets are laid bare.<sup>109</sup> The regimes of values that are encouraged through advertising reinforce the technologies of self that neoliberal agency continually circulates through. In a sort of ironic twist, as economic procedures become further geographically alienated from the consumer, the economic ideologies which guide them become further entrenched in the consumer experience as a subject.

When looking at the recent history of the North American guitar market, the effects of neoliberal policies are quite clear from both an economic and social standpoint. The story and mythology surrounding the Fender Musical Instrument Company is an excellent example. Fender is probably the most well-known guitar manufacturer in the world.<sup>110</sup> Founded by Leo Fender in 1938 as a radio manufacturer in Fullerton, California, Fender quickly began building electric instruments and amplifiers initially responding to the wartime popularity of electrified Hawaiian lap-steel guitars. In 1951, Fender began to market mass-produced electric guitars, and created the basic styles that remain the cornerstone of its business today. By the 1960s the most iconic models — the Stratocaster and the Telecaster — were among the most played instruments in North America and became especially linked with the surf rock culture of Southern California.

By 1965 Fender was a massive operation but was still centered in a small factory in Fullerton. After a \$1.5 million sale to the CBS Corporation, production increased over 45% with the building of a new factory and the outsourcing of parts production to other manufacturers. In efforts to expand the brand beyond the United States, CBS entered into partnerships with Japanese factories during the early 1980s in order to build guitars for the Asian market. By 1985, CBS deemed Fender too costly an enterprise and sold it back to its shareholders. The beginnings of the new Fender Musical Instrument Company saw immediate changes to the commodity chain. U.S. production was shut down for a brief time as new factories were completed in California and Ensenada, Mexico. By 1987, the Japanese factory had pivoted to producing

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 545.

<sup>109</sup> “Big-box” is a neologism referring to massive chain stores that deal with a variety of vendors and often hold de-facto monopolies. As a store with over three hundred locations that account for more than 25% of the total worldwide business in the musical instrument market (a statistic proudly touted in routine internal emails but is difficult to prove,) Music World is unequivocally “big-box.”

<sup>110</sup> My overview of the history of the Fender Musical Instrument Company is derived partly by documents included in my company training with Guitar Center, partly from accounts published on Fender’s Website by Jeff Owens, and partly from the various books by Guitar Player Magazine writer Dave Hunter.

models under the name “Squier” and the entire “Fender” production line had been bifurcated between the two North American factories, which were less than two hundred miles apart.

The most significant event in the subsequent production of Fender guitars was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Spearheaded by George H.W. Bush’s administration and confirmed in 1994, NAFTA eliminated tariffs on nearly half of Mexican made products exported to the United States and Canada of which musical instruments were included. While the Fender Mexico factory had initially focused on producing guitar strings, by 1997 it was manufacturing “420 low to mid-level instruments” every day.<sup>111</sup> Directly after NAFTA, Fender split the production line of their solid body electric guitars into two categories that remain in place today. The Standard series is made in Mexico and, as of 2021, the instruments typically cost between four and eight hundred dollars. The American Standard series is made in Corona, CA and retails between thirteen and fifteen hundred dollars.<sup>112</sup> It is true that Fender still manufactures instruments in Korean and Japanese factories, but they almost always are marketed under the Squier label and cost fewer than five hundred dollars in the United States.

It is so clear that NAFTA, which Harvey calls part of the “institutionalist thrust” for the neoliberalization of North America, was a powerful influence on Fender’s product offerings that it has even built its way into common parlance amongst some guitarists.<sup>113</sup> As one of my duties in the store, I am responsible for appraising and buying used instruments. There have been multiple occasions where a customer approaches me with a Mexican-made guitar containing an “MN” serial number boasting that it is a “pre-NAFTA” guitar.<sup>114</sup> Here, “pre-NAFTA” specifically refers to guitars made in the early 1990s, when the Mexican factory was merely assembling guitar parts made in the Corona factory. The necessary corollary, which would be “post-NAFTA,” would refer to the guitars built once Fender scaled up its Mexican production in the mid-1990s.

But what makes the Fender scenario especially interesting is how the market logic of distinguishing between less costly Mexican models and more costly American models becomes

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<sup>111</sup> Chris Kraul, “Fender Strikes a Chord Within Maquiladoras,” *The Los Angeles Times*, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1997. Accessed May 20th 2016. <http://articles.latimes.com/1997/sep/05/business/fi-28977>.

<sup>112</sup> Prices are based on average “street value” as of May, 2020.

<sup>113</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 36.

<sup>114</sup> Serial numbers can tell you a great deal about a guitar’s age, factory of origin, and rarity. Here “MN” designates a guitar built in the 1990s and the subsequent numbers would identify as pre 1996 or post 1996, the date usually referenced in the “pre-NAFTA” and “post-NAFTA” designations.

entangled with discourses of distinction and authenticity in marketing and conversations amongst guitar aficionados. Almost immediately after the scaling up of production to Mexico, Fender began including “U.S.” or “American” in almost every model produced in California. This practice continues today and is reinforced by the company’s sales playbook. A few months ago, I entered the store and was pulled aside by management for a special training session with visitors from Fender’s Arizona headquarters. After taking me and several other sales associates out to lunch, they gave a presentation outlining the tiers of Fender products available in our store. “We’d like you not to refer to them as Mexican Strats,” said one of the trainers, a middle-aged man wearing a tie adorned with various electric guitars. “Instead, call them ‘standards.’ We’ve found that customers respond better to that language.” They also handed out special tags to hang on American made models that read, “Handmade in the U.S.A.” as part of a recent advertising campaign they were running on radio and in local billboards.<sup>115</sup>

The sales trainers offered us other tidbits of wisdom, for instance, suggesting we reinforce the idea that the two factories are less than a three-hour’s drive apart and that the same foreman managed them both. I remember thinking that the presentation’s message seemed contradictory. On the one hand, they were requesting us to preserve the structures of objective value between the two instruments by memorizing the differences in specifications and encouraging us to upsell to more expensive American-made products. On the other hand, they were deliberately trying to break down the structures of subjective value in this divide both by psychologically avoiding the issue (avoiding words like ‘Mexican’ or ‘Cheaper’) and authenticating the Mexican instruments against their American counterparts (focusing on their similarities down to the hands and geographies that produce them.)

Fender leans on marketing tactics emphasizing local authenticity, a delicate spectrum meant to maintain their identity as an American company as their business becomes increasingly alienated from their single factory history. But within these efforts, they stumble on logical contradictions that are inherent to neoliberalism on the whole. For one, they emphasize the local while embracing the global. The consumer is encouraged to value both the idiosyncratic, handmade, local guitar while at the same time marveling at the affordable, yet highly playable, imported guitar. We are far from valorizing the democratizing power of mass-produced

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<sup>115</sup> As an aside, I also saw one of these billboards on my most recent trip to Toronto proclaiming the Stratocaster to be an “American Original: Handmade in the U.S.A.” The backdrop featured red, white, and blue Stratocasters and the words “American,” “Handmade,” and “U.S.A.” were all stylistically linked by the same red lettering.

instruments as Millard claims the electric guitar originally represented. The rhetoric is set up to individualize and corporatize the consumer rather than encouraging a middle-class consumer mentality. Fender does this by valorizing stable geographies and artisanship rather than the mobile images of production lines to which consumers have ostensibly become accustomed.

In my fieldwork, I repeatedly observed the ways consumers repeated these valuations in their discourse and relationships with instruments. By far the most common question I am asked when greeting a new customer is “what do you play?” Here, they are not asking if I play the guitar, that much can be assumed by the large nametag on my lapel that reads “Guitar Certified.” They are inquiring as to which specific model I prefer. Do I play a Fender Stratocaster? Or maybe a PRS Custom-24? It seems innocent enough at first, but, when interrogated, “what do you play” becomes a question loaded with neoliberal logic. First, it assumes a direct relationship between the instruments I play and the person I am; the guitar is yet another one of the many fragments that comprise a complete sense of self. The instrument, here, becomes what Michel Foucault would call a “technology of the self,” and the act of recognizing a similar self-governing fragment in another instantiates a neoliberal sociality mediated through a commodity.<sup>116</sup> Secondly, the question “what do you play?” assumes a certain degree of consumer choice both in regards to the commodity (the guitar) and the lifestyle in which the commodity intimately participates. As Harvey notes, neoliberalism “proved more than a little compatible with that cultural impulse called ‘post-modernism’ which had long been lurking in the wings but could now emerge full-blown as both a culture and intellectual dominant.”<sup>117</sup> Here the postmodern obsession with self-identification and individuation seamlessly intertwines with the neoliberal economic logic of commodity value in a simple, four-word question that I heard thirty times a day at Music World.

In one interaction with a customer named Jake, I responded by telling him the guitar I play: A 1979 Gibson Les Paul Studio. He responded by saying “I’m a Fender Guy myself” and then listed the many Fenders he owns. “What does it mean that ‘you’re a Fender guy?’” I asked politely. “I guess it means I jive with their overall thing,” he said, his hesitant voice seeming to almost acknowledge how coded and vague his statement was. “I don’t rock hard enough to be a Gibson guy.” For Jake, and countless other customers with whom I’ve had similar interactions,

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<sup>116</sup> Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988,) 18.

<sup>117</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005,) 42.

the Fender lifestyle was as consumable and as important to the product as any specification with musical use value. The valuation of choice along the lines of lifestyle that these small interactions reveal, demonstrates how audible the discourses of postmodernity and neoliberalism are in the store environment. On a casually related note, Fender just released a new guitar model dubbed the “postmodern strat,” which is advertised as “based simply on our own subjective view of what works best in a single instrument... opening the door to an even wider range of individual musical expression and creativity.”<sup>118</sup>

The Mexi/American divide comes up most readily in purchase decisions where a customer is deciding whether or not to cross the financial gap between the two. At Music World, this frequently arises in “trade-in” transactions, where customers sell their used instruments in exchange for discounts on new gear. In one of these transactions, a customer named Steve was selling his 2005 Standard Stratocaster (made in Mexico) in order to buy a brand new American Standard Telecaster. “I just couldn’t play it anymore,” he told me as I was processing the sale. “The American ones just play so much better. You can feel it in the neck. There were more hands on the guitar.” For Steve, the American Stratocaster not only represented a superior quality instrument, but his ability to distinguish it as such demonstrated his developing virtuosity as a player.

There is perhaps no better example of bullish, neoliberal rationality than Thomas Frank’s citation of an Enron executive who said “we could commoditize anything....Water, paper, air freight capacity, weather, computer chips, ad space on TV”<sup>119</sup> Timothy Taylor cited this example to highlight the fact that music is not immune from commoditization and is in fact ripe for the taking.<sup>120</sup> But what about sound? Sound, in and of itself, seems to be difficult to commodify as such. Early sound studies, such as Jacques Attali’s work *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, understands sound as a kind of base unit that, without further organization, is fairly resistant to capitalist capture. For Attali, noise holds great political potential as it disrupts the organizing orders of capitalism. Indeed, much of sound studies that followed have valorized sound as a key area for exploring life outside capitalism. Other scholars argued that sound is wholly compatible

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<sup>118</sup> Fender Musical Instrument Corporation, “Postmodern: Six Decades of Fender Firsts,” <http://www.fendercustomshop.com/series/postmodern/>, accessed 02/12/2021.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas Frank, “Shocked, Shocked! Enronian Myths Exposed,” *Nation*, March 21, 2002.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/shocked-shocked-enronian-myths-exposed/>, Accessed 08/02/2021

<sup>120</sup> Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 65.

with neoliberal rationality on a literal level. In her article “Neoliberal Noise,” Robin James notices the same properties of sound that resonate with neoliberal rationality, saying “Neoliberalism is a method that allows power to have it both ways. For example, deregulation is both ‘free’ (on the surface) and highly administered (in the background) ...” commenting that sound shares this malleability as it can be easily understood from both mathematical perspectives (Sine Waves etc.) and radically social perspectives (listening, taste).<sup>121</sup>

Sound’s physical intangibility does not hinder neoliberal capitalism’s ability to deploy it as a consumable object. On the contrary, sound’s aporic role as something that can be both objectively realizable and subjectively understood makes it a perfect target for neoliberal commoditization. In guitarist consumer culture, the ideology that guides listeners towards considering sounds as valuable commodities is what I refer to as Tone. As I have outlined before, Tone is a vacuous ideology that holds the potential to work for any adherent. But through studying Tone, it is clear that there are basic ground rules for evaluating sounds and timbres as Tone that ascribe very readily to neoliberal values of entrepreneurial ethics.

### **The Entrepreneurial Ethics of Guitar Tone**

Across neoliberal capitalist culture, personalization and self-investment are often heralded as ethical goals, conflating acts of consumption with the labor of self-knowledge. From smartphone advertising that instructs consumers to “Be Together, Not the Same,” to universities promising “Personal Education, Lifetime Success,” branding has increasingly addressed who Sarah Banet-Weiser calls the “individual entrepreneur.”<sup>122</sup> In many sectors, consumers are hailed as “entrepreneurs of the *self*,” charged with the responsibility of proving themselves to be unique and valuable subjects by actively engaging with the marketplace.<sup>123</sup>

These ideologies of individualism and self-distinction emerge through ceaseless, mundane debates about diffuse aesthetic details. This is certainly the case in music, and the emergence of entrepreneurial value systems has been especially evident in the musical instrument industry over the past ten years. As I have outlined in this chapter, guitarist consumer

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<sup>121</sup> Robin James, “Neoliberal Noise: Attali, Foucault, & the Biopolitics of Uncool,” in *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 52/2 (2014): 140.

<sup>122</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 76.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

culture is often self-aware of its long-winded, jargonistic, and self-indulgent focus on gear and Tone.

Consider a moment of such a mundane debate about unnamable aesthetic details found on guitarist Greg Howe's 2008 album *Sound Proof*. A fiery instrumental cover of Stevie Wonder's "Tell Me Something Good" ends with the familiar ping of an answering machine. On the line, a voice who identifies himself as "Brad Cordalhey" begins a twenty-nine second, breathless monologue, reminiscing about one of Howe's recent masterclasses at a local music shop.

*"Hi Greg, this is Brad Cordalhey, I just wanted to follow up on a conversation that I had with you at one of your clinics. Uhh... I consider myself a connoisseur of tone and I'm trying to get that sound that I hear in my head. You know the tube-screamers modified... uh...you know, I've got an 808 that's kind of a warm, cozy, curl up to the fireplace with a good book and a cup of hot cocoa, sort of a really comfortable sound, I call it a comfort tone.... and then the TS9s are a little more cozy than that..." (Answering machine turns off).*

The abrupt clicking off of the answering machine signals that the intended listener may be slightly annoyed with the caller or the characters he seems to represent. The performer seems to accentuate this fact, choosing a nasally, over-pronounced midwestern accent as he stumbles through esoteric descriptions of the sounds he yearns for. But beyond the humorous vocal performance, the caller projects a real sense of earnestness. Weaving together vivid imagery, references to specific pieces of gear (the "808" is a popular overdrive pedal that has been manufactured by Ibanez since the late 1970s), the caller invokes the deeply personal understandings of guitar sounds. "I'm trying to get that sound I hear in my head," the caller proclaims, calling attention to the importance with which he understands his mission to realize an ideal sonic imaginary.

It seems to be implied that Howe receives calls like this all the time, amateur guitarists looking to chat about guitar sound at length in an attempt to over-perform their status as "connoisseurs of tone." The answering machine clicks off and the recording abruptly shifts into the next track on the album, "Reunion." The memory of Brad is lost to eight more tracks of intricately constructed jazz-fusion. However, at the end of the album, the answering machine returns and Brad Cordalehey is back, this time rambling for nearly three minutes.

*Oh Hi Greg, Brad Cordalhey here. Yeah your machine keeps cutting me off, I dunno you gotta get a little longer message on there buddy. Anyway, uh...I've gone through the whole signal chain. I've tried using the effects loop, not using the effects loop. I've used a speaker emulator for recording, I've used direct cabinet, I've used... uh... PZMs... uh... I've used all-kinds of different mic techniques to get a myriad of*

*sounds and colors. The RC Booster, that gives me a little transparency, I can really sort of see into the sound and kind of climb into it like a full uh... aural experience. My god (laughs) the...the tube screamer redefining the sound, it makes my 808 even sound obsolete and I, y'know, always loved the sound of that. Uh...the BB Booster, uh... I thought that was fantastic. Looks not fancy, but beefy, I mean like a freight train coming at you at high speed hitting you in right in the stomach and knocking you on your derriere. Y'know, the single coil pickups too... makes a difference. If you use the humbucking pickups, you don't get quite as much of the high end. I also found some matched output uh tubes from the New Old Stock uh.. Tubes that I tried them and uh they really helped too uh.*

*Also, y'know, I find, and I don't know if you've ever found this out, but the compound radius neck uh... because of the way that it's built, it seems to yield a more delightful assortment of harmonics...uh..and y'know you shouldn't have a guitar body that weighs over four-point-three pounds.... Y'know four-point-four I mean to six, six at the most depending on the tone wood. And the exotic neck woods, y'know, I really, I'm straying away from those because birds eye and flame...oh they're sure pretty... but y'know what? They don't take the stress of the string y'know, they're, they're more elastic and I don't really think in terms of intonation, y'know, when you've got the buzzy feed? In the system going... you need really more just a really good solid piece of maple I think for the ideal neck and a rosewood fingerboard, Brazilian rosewood preferably because its more, it's harder and the strings have a certain sound that gives a richer, richer, deeper tone. Y'know, headroom is something I want...frilly highs. Y'know there's certain kinds of speakers too, like, if you've got the ones by Bob O'Day, the Vox old, Vox Bulldog speakers. Uh... he actually worked there for two years and when the assembly lines took over, uh they kept him on there because he could build a speaker faster than six guys on the assembly line and better, and the specs on it always were better and the durability factor and everything about those speakers I mean. So he initialed. He put his initials on them, so look for those initials. If you can find those from that, that, that, that six-month window, uh, that he was there in the later 60s uh you can.... PHONE HANGS UP*

Here, Brad makes it clear that the “sound in his head” is the result of a complex chain of gear. Beginning with descriptions of popular guitar overdrive pedals, such as the Xotic RC Booster, he continues to outline his knowledge of speaker cabinet emulators, microphones, amplifier tubes, guitar neck wood, guitar body weight, guitar strings, and even an obscure amplifier speaker. The abrupt hang up of the call as Brad is mid-sentence exemplifies that chain extends even further. It becomes clear in this recording that Brad is no longer asking for advice, rather, he is performing his virtuosic understanding of guitar sound production, atomizing the elements of sonic production to an increasingly minute and specific degree.

The humor of this skit works because of its proximity to the actual day-to-day language that many guitarists use when talking about their instrument, not only in terms of technical jargon but also terms of a larger performativity of sonic fluency. Brad's relentless mission to perfect his sound—to get the “sound in his head”—invokes the deeply personal understandings of Tone that many guitarists perform backstage, on retail floors, at national conferences, and in a litany of publications dedicated to the instrument's consumer culture. Indeed, when I first showed this track to friends I've worked alongside in musical instrument retail, they chuckled in recognition. “It's way too real,” my friend Jon said, explaining that it not only reminded him of the way customers talk in the store, but of how his bandmates chat at rehearsal.

These are the kinds of mundane conversations about sound that demonstrate Tone as a sonic epistemology that undergirds the 21<sup>st</sup> century guitarist consumer culture. But what ethical goals does Tone aspire to deliver? Throughout my field work, I have found that the guitar industry organizes itself around consistent logics of self-management, connoisseurship, and personalization. These logics present themselves in a variety of discourse spaces, from personal conversations about products amongst guitarists to centralized advertising campaigns reliant on themes of personal discovery through sonic attenuation. The continuity of themes is pervasive and has become central to many of my interlocutors' understandings of sonic presence and musical meaning. Like Brad, this logic leads them to incredible purchase decisions that evaluate sonic objects as personal investment opportunities and hail the player as a sonic entrepreneur. In the guitarist consumer public, “good sounds” and “bad sounds” are configured as “productive sounds” and “unproductive sounds,” depending on the potential they offer to a player’s overall personal sonic identity through a combination of products. Not surprisingly, these dichotomies are messy and vague, cloaked in both metaphorical and technical lexicons that reach for clearly defined properties of products like guitars, pickups, and pedals to describe their nebulous sonic value.

Achieving good Tone is a personal, ethical mission that dominates conversations on musical web forums such as The Gear Page and Harmony Central, where users post intricate manifestos arguing the values of their personal philosophies of Tone. It forms the basis of advertising slogans for Blackstar Amplifiers (“The Sound in Your Head”), Ernie Ball Strings (“In the Pursuit of Tone”), and the Line 6 HDX Multi-Effects Pedals (The Power to Design Your Tone). It has become an underlying mission statement of the musical instrument retail industry, so much so that Guitar Center — the largest music retailer in the United States — recently changed their slogan from “We Help People Make Music” to “Find Your Sound.” No longer do these stores explain their purpose as benign commercial spaces that provide musicians with the tools they need to create. Instead, they call attention to themselves as sites of education and self-actualization through sonic consumption.<sup>124</sup> With their tall walls of guitars and massive trophy

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<sup>124</sup> Guitar Center in particular has a long history of attempting to downplay itself as a traditional retail location, seeming to assume their clientele’s opposition to being sold something. “We help people make music” accomplishes this by framing their purpose as a public good, rather than a flagrantly capitalistic middleman. The same effect can be seen with their older slogan “All we sell is the greatest feeling on Earth,” which similarly explains away the realities of capitalism as a necessary stepping-stone to the feeling of playing music.

cases of pedals, they are altars to Tone, promising the consumer concretized sonic expressions of an imagined individuality.

Guitarists understand Tone as an essential expression of their individuality, often likened sonic fingerprints.<sup>125</sup> The concept is often figured as a possession, with media directing consumers to consider Tone to be hyper-personalized. “Find Your Sound,” says Guitar Center on large billboards across the country. “Own Your Town,” says guitarist magazines that review gear. The project of shaping a personalized Tone is so advanced that there are dedicated web-apps to assist guitarists in trying out different combinations of pedals, amps, and guitars to find their own, unique, perfect Tone. TonePedia, a German company, promises to help “find your tone, completely online.” By accessing a library of available sound clips that can be endlessly combined with effects available for purchase, the website proclaims that it will help guitarists to “start making the best gear decisions.”

The constant process of shaping and re-shaping their Tones through engagements with objects like guitar pedals, amplifiers, cables, pickups, and guitar strings produce systems of aesthetic values that, more often than not, align with the moral values of neoliberalism and self-management as outlined by Wendy Brown, Ilana Gershon, and Michel Foucault.<sup>126</sup> Discourse surrounding sound, Tone, and the modern guitar is compatible with the project of neoliberalism as defined by Brown as the “widespread economization of heretofore noneconomic domains, activities, and subjects, but not necessarily marketization or monetization of them.”<sup>127</sup> Through interactions with Tone players are encouraged to build themselves as unique and valuable economic subjects through the capture and ownership of sound in its various forms.

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<sup>125</sup> Equating guitar Tone with fingerprints is a recurring metaphor used by my interlocutors in discussing their relationship with sound. It has also been seized upon by corporations as a fruitful marketing tactic. For instance, Swedish guitar pedal manufacturer TC Electronic calls their line of digitally manipulable effects “Toneprint” and their logo features a blue guitar pick embossed with a fingerprint. Similarly, the New Jersey based guitar company Danelectro has recently adopted the slogan “Own the Tone” at the 2018 trade show of the North American Music Merchants Association. While it could be surmised that this slogan refers to the signature tone of Danelectro twelve-string electric guitars that has made the company famous, the campaign features printouts of the slogan superimposed over large fingerprint decals, inviting the interpretation that to “own the tone” is to wrap it up within your own individual sonic expression.

<sup>126</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. (New York: Zone Books, 2015).; Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton. (Amherst, MA: UMASS Press, 1988).; Ilana Gershon, “Neoliberal Agency,” *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 52, no. 4 (August 2011): 537-55.

<sup>127</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 33.

In her book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown is concerned with neoliberalism's ideological seepage into "every dimension of human life" and she outlines specific markers for neoliberal epistemology. As it became a dominant mode of rationality, which she explains was in part facilitated by a global transition from a "productive to an increasingly financialized economy," neoliberal rationality led to a reformulation of the economic subject—a new *homo oeconomicus* she says building off a term as old as Aristotle but more recently deployed by Michel Foucault. The neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* sees itself as "self-investing entrepreneurial capital, responsible for itself and striving to appreciate its value vis a vis other capital entities." This importantly reconfigures the immaterial labor of living with an eye towards efficacy and future self-value. In a neoliberal frame, skills, traits, cultures, and activities are assets to be owned and cultivated much like a robust stock portfolio.

An important distinguishing trait between the neoliberal self and other instantiations of *homo oeconomicus* is its sense of agency. Ilana Gershon argues that the neoliberal self is "reflexive," meaning that "people are subjects for themselves" free to make "conscious choices that balance alliances, responsibility, and risk using a means-end calculus." Gershon claims that, in a neoliberal episteme, it is the subject's moral responsibility to configure themselves as good subjects per the statistical logics of business, saying, "the neoliberal self is autonomous....it is only reflexivity that is presumed to be before social or self-construction in this perspective." The labor of living is mobilized as a productive force as subjects pursue this moral charge of self-management. And while this is not necessarily always serving an end game of making a sale, relationships with commodities play an important role in managing the neoliberal self as they are concrete items of ownership in an era where ownership is essential the production of subjectivity.

Guitarist consumer culture clearly hails its participants as self-sufficient small businesses as the neoliberal subject is described by Gershon and Brown. Consumption is cast as an essential and ethical activity by orienting the consumer towards projects of self-improvement. Acquiring the proper tools to produce good Tone is rationalized through the language of market-calculus. Just as companies strive for continuous growth, Tone is figured as a never-ending journey of self-actualization by "finding your sound," "owning your tone," or "discovering your individual voice." The money spent on products can be figured as an investment on multiple levels. For pros, investing in Tone is a literal investment promising better gigs, a larger audience, and higher

production values. For bedroom players, investing in Tone is self-care, delivering an embodied, escapist experience akin to Hi-Fi. For amateurs, investment in an instrument in general is an investment in education, setting one up for a lifetime of happiness in music.

Guitarists can talk about Tone as an almost sacred goal, many of whom spend thousands attempting to pin down its various elements. One of my interviewees, a middle-aged Australian man named Max, described it as a sort of asymptotic chase which cost him upwards of twenty-thousand dollars on amps, guitars, pedals, and cables. “I don’t think anyone can ever have the perfect tone, but I’m damn sure I’ve got one of the best sounds on the planet,” he said with an air of machismo. “What is perfect tone?” I ask leadingly. “I don’t know, but I do know what terrible tone is. I’ll let you know when I find its opposite,” he told me. I asked him to send me a recording when he found it to which he laughed dryly. Here, Max echoed one of the inherent contradictions in the discourses surrounding Tone. He understands it both as a measurable system of value as well as an ineffable, subjective phenomenon.

To echo Harvey, the discourse of Tone is also “more than compatible” with the neoliberal project. It straddles the objective and the subjective in such a way that mirrors neoliberalism’s delicate space between individuation and the matrix of counting.<sup>128</sup> Tone’s vacuity is exactly what makes it the perfect neoliberal commodity, as it holds the potential to rationalize a host of musical activities within the boundaries of neoliberal ethics. Tone sits in the comfortable spot between culture and economy — or maybe sociality and rationality— and consistently provides the industry with a wellspring of marketing material.

In *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture*, Sarah Banet-Weiser discusses the ways that 21st century marketing has fully absorbed the statues of neoliberal rationality, saying:

“If marketing in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was primarily about mass, homogenous audiences, and in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century about niches and authenticity, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century it is about increasingly elaborate relationships between producers and consumers through the principle of ‘engagement.’ The trick for contemporary marketers is how to create engagement that feels authentic while still privileging market exchange.”<sup>129</sup>

Banet-Weiser goes on to identify, among other tactics, a marketing focus on the “individual entrepreneur, that is not defined in the traditional sense of being a business owner or investor, but

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<sup>128</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 50.

<sup>129</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM*, 38.

rather is an entrepreneur of the *self*, a category that has exclusive hints to it but also gains traction as something that ostensibly can apply to anyone.”<sup>130</sup> For Banet-Weiser, brands do not simply appeal or sell to the entrepreneur of the self. She finds brand culture to be an important method of interpellation for consumer subjects who see themselves as individual cultural entrepreneurs. Rather than brand culture working to formulate collective political subjectivity, she sees the complex methods of engagement demanded by brands as a sort of outsourcing the work of creating a consumer public in the markets image through “a blurring of consumer and producer identities.”<sup>131</sup>

I believe the examples presented in this chapter demonstrate the fervor with which contemporary guitarist consumer culture is founded upon an understanding of music making as an entrepreneurial endeavor. Attending to Tone belies a consideration of music as a form of self-management—either running one’s musical brand as a business or considering participation in music as responsible self-investment. We see this in the urgency of Guitar Center’s branding to “Find Your Sound,” in TonePedia’s call for guitarists to “make good decisions” about their Tone, and in my interlocutors’ everyday insistence on creating unique sonic fingerprints.

Banet-Weiser sees neoliberal brand culture as an everyday context of Michel Foucault’s concept of “governmentality.” In his final lectures, Foucault formulates governmentality as an important technology of power employed by the then nascent neoliberal ideology that emerges in the everyday acts of hegemonic subjects.<sup>132</sup> Governmentality holds that the enterprising self will self-regulate in an effort to become a better business, and will, therefore, reinforce the governing hegemony. Governmentality means that power becomes interior to subjectivity rather than a boundary around it: it is a “conduct of conduct” that is primarily reinforced through biopolitics rather than upheld by the threat of disciplinary action. Brands focused on individual engagement become what Foucault called “a technology of the self:” a method or site that aids in building a sense of self in the image of the prevailing governing power.

In guitarist consumer culture, the ideology of Tone acts as a technology of the self that operates according to neoliberal rationality and reinforces entrepreneurial ethics. In short, Tone instructs guitarists to equate consumptive activities with ethical economic citizenship. It is

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>132</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton. (Amherst, MA: UMASS Press, 1988).

intricately folded into the consumer's sense of themselves where a distinguishing ear is a marker not only of a truly virtuosic musician, but also a truly virtuosic shopper. At Music World, these two categories become one and the same. Tone achieves its market power not only through the material labor required to produce it, but from the immaterial labor its attendants perform while playing, discussing, and interpellating through it. Sonic objects like the guitars, pedals, strings, and cables partially derive their market success by effectively harnessing this neoliberal framework, by positioning themselves as items of personal taste that contribute to larger sonic goals that practice neoliberal agency. I find all of these points beautifully explained in a YouTube comment to the video this chapter began with, where a user praises Wilco guitarist Nels Cline for "sounding like himself."

"This is exactly why I hate when people say things like "do you really need all of those pedals?" Or "why are you using all of those effects, don't you realize that they're taking away from your tone?" In my mind at least, these are the people who won't ever understand that in the end, it's all about sounding as much like yourself as possible and (more importantly) having a good time doing it! As guitarists, we're all entitled to our own opinions when it comes to creating the "best" sound possible, but regardless of what you use or how you play, as long as it sounds good to you, it's very likely that it will sound good to someone else."<sup>133</sup>

Through engaging with Tone, guitarists embark on an ethical education in neoliberal rationality, learning to manage themselves by managing the plethora of sounds they have at their disposal. Through the sonification of their own *homo oeconomicus*, guitarists learn to understand sound as a playground for entrepreneurial success and valorize other musician's creative prowess through the logic of financialization. A great guitarist with a great Tone is not so dissimilar from a great entrepreneur with a great business. They invest time, money, and labor to achieve an ecstatic end-goal. Within a neoliberal ethics, the divide between hobbyist and business pursuits collapse inwards towards a financialized worldview. Business is no longer just business, it is ecstasy. Similarly, music is no longer just music, it is profitable, even if that profit is merely the ecstasy that results from playing music.

But unlike a business, the parameters for success in Tone are not discretely measurable on a profit and loss statement. It is a game that anyone can win as long as they engage with the market with the expressed interest of individuating. In short, Tone is the marketization of timbre's vacuity of concrete meaning by creating little sonic stock markets in musicians' ears.

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<sup>133</sup> A Proc, "Comment Re: Premier Guitar Rig Rundown- Wilco's Nels Cline," 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GRSH8yxWjc>

The difficulty of communicating timbral materiality enables these markets to rise and fall according to idiosyncratic listenings and the lynchpin of stability is nothing more than an entrepreneurial ethos of self-betterment through sound. Studying Tone shows us that we listen with capitalist ears in more ways than one and that capitalist sonic epistemologies do not only reside within the realms of Billboard charts or the recorded music industry.

## Chapter 2: Negotiating Timbre

Is it just me or do many of the adjectives used to describe tone just seem silly? I hate it when I'm trying to describe how a guitar sounds and I find myself using words like "woody." Not only is great tone hard to get with an actual guitar and amp. It's hard to describe! Here... why don't you try to describe how the neck pickup on a GREAT Strat sounds? It has a sound I can hear in my head but fuck all if I can't describe it without sounding like a tool.<sup>134</sup> -User Pancake Bunny

### Customers Know Best...

A forty-something New Yorker in a dark suit stands with his arms crossed, staring intensely into a glass cabinet filled with colorful guitar pedals. Seemingly indifferent to the sounds of the store in one of its noisiest hours — it is around 5:30 pm and there is always an after-work surge of Times Square workers looking to blow off some steam — he inspects the price tags and the minimal information they disclose. Walking over, I greet him with the mandatory Music World employee greeting: “Welcome to Music World. What brings you in today?” I feel his eyes scan over my black Music World polo. He answers me, as many impatient customers do, by diving directly into a pointed conversation. “What do you think of this EP?” He is referring to a pedal made by Xotic Effects called an “EP-Booster.”<sup>135</sup> I stumble through a memorized pitch, outlining the features I expect him to be concerned with, but he interrupts me. “Yeah, you know, it takes on some grit at the end though,” he rattles off rather nonchalantly. Clearly my pitch had either been absorbed into the din of the surroundings or was simply ignored as meaningless sales chatter. I wonder, “What does that mean? What specifically is grit?” I didn’t get time to ask before he repeated himself more forcefully, as if he was afraid I hadn’t heard. “I mean, towards the end there, it brings on some grit.” He gesticulates with his left

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<sup>134</sup> PancakeBunny (2010, March 17). “Adjectives To Describe Guitar Tone” [Online forum comment]. Message posted to <https://www.harmonycentral.com/forums/topic/967870-adjectives-to-describe-guitar-tone/>

<sup>135</sup> A “boost” pedal amplifies the signal heading to the amplifier without adding the plethora of harmonics a typical overdrive or “distortion” pedal would. In the case of the EP-Booster, Xotic advertises it as giving a 20 decibel “unadulterated boost.” Here, EP stands for Echoplex, a famous tape delay system that gave this boost unintentionally. It is quite common in the guitarist timbral lexicon that descriptors demand a sensitive understanding of the sonic histories of recording technologies. This is complicated by the fact that most consumers could not have come into contact with the actual original sounds— an actual Echoplex machine is very cumbersome and hard to come by. It’s true of course that many guitarists come to know these historical sounds through a public archeology of recorded music, for instance the detailed analysis of historical guitar rigs on internet forums like the Gear Page or Harmony Central. I contend that pedals like the “EP Booster” do important work in constructing a fluid historical consciousness of guitar timbre that, in part, undergirds its indexical fiduciary and gives it such convincing power in the listening experience (and therefore market power.)

middle and index finger, joined together, and screwing upwards as they extend. He looks at me expectantly.

I had a few ideas as to what he could have meant. Perhaps “grit” here was referring to a slight breakup resulting from “clipping,” when a signal’s strength exceeds the limits of the compression. This is certainly how some pedal manufactures have chosen to propagate the term—for instance the Pigtronix Philosopher’s Tone compressor has a dedicated “grit” knob.<sup>136</sup> But, I have also heard “grit” refer to the sound of overdrive more generally. In common parlance, it is synonymous with “dirt,” which has been a signifier for the sound of an overexerted vacuum tube amplifier since at least the 1950s. “Towards the end,” might refer to the sounds that the pedal makes when it is dialed up to the maximum settings, or it might refer to how the sound changes with sustained tones. I have found that temporal metaphors are commonly deployed in guitarists’ discussion of sound to highlight the processual nature of guitar tone production.

The man’s simple statement “it takes on some grit towards the end” harbored all of these potential interpretations, but, importantly, they were not to be explicated. As a fellow connoisseur, I was just supposed to know. I felt and appreciated the moment of the contingency inherent in all communication. He was invoking a term that made perfect sense to him and expected it to scan in a group of others who attend to the minute differences in guitar sounds. Every second I was not responding, I was losing credibility as a member of this club, distancing myself from the shared space of imagined affects he was eliciting me to join. The urgency for me to validate his sonic experience was made even greater by the uneven power relationship of the salesperson-customer relationship. The sound the customer is describing, the one he is imploring me to help him identify, is worth money: \$119.99 to be precise. There are other “boost” pedals that use the same basic parts, are manufactured in the United States and seem relatively similar from the EP Booster in terms of construction that cost as little as \$49.99.<sup>137</sup> It became clear that

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<sup>136</sup> Even though knobs dedicated to a timbral signifier might seem like a great example of the interaction between physical sound processing (in this case, through electronic engineering) and the signifiers that describe it, one quickly realizes how little consistency there is between what different knobs do versus what different knobs say they do. For instance, according to Pigtronix engineer Andrew Pitcher, the Philosopher’s Tone pedal grit knob mixes the source signal with the compressed signal so as to gradually clip sine-wave peaks into hard compressed square-waves. Another good example is the use of the word “tone,” in guitarist technology. When printed on equipment dials, tone can mean anything from effecting an EQ sweep (minimizing bass frequencies as the knob is engaged) to minimizing electrical impedance on magnetic pickups to increase attack.

<sup>137</sup> Here I am thinking of the Electro-Harmonix LPB-1 (Linear Power Boost 1). While it could be argued that the Xotic EP Booster is a slightly more complicated product, the fundamental function and conditions of production are virtually the same.

to not validate the sonic surplus value of the product was to lose the sale. As an employee whose daily performance was closely tracked, every sale felt urgent. To lose one sale was a small step in a slippery slope to unemployment.

At this point, I decided to just nod in agreement. He beamed in recognition of our shared knowledge. “Would you like to play it up and find that grittiness?” I asked, appropriating his term, secretly wishing he’d show me what he’d meant. “No,” he replied. “Just box it up.” It seemed that all he needed to make a purchase decision was the expressed validation of another set of trained ears as he had read enough about it on blogs and through product magazines to know it was worth it.

The vast majority of conversations overheard at Music World follow patterns similar to my interaction with Max, where the negotiation of timbral meaning is of central importance. The store buzzes with people talking about sound with varying levels of fluency. Timbral signifiers pepper price tags and store signage, advertising products that promises “transparent overdrive,”<sup>138</sup> “squashed cleans,”<sup>139</sup> or “warm delays”<sup>140</sup> to name a few. Other adjectives are overheard with less direct connection to industry advertising copy, but that are still easily communicated amongst guitarists. As I have helped guitarists find products that fit their needs, I have been asked for sounds that are “spanky,” “woody,” “resonant,” or “tight” to name just a few. In the rare cases that words fail to describe the sound they are looking for, they share recordings or even resort to onomatopoeic vocalizations to capture the sound they desire.

There is an energy of justification at the heart of these interactions: a commitment to validating specific sounds’ monetary value through performances of connoisseurship and knowledge. Any confusion that arises in disambiguating a timbral signifier from a specific sound is often resolved by a comfortably stoic market appraisal. In short, the “grit” Max is referencing is relegated to a passing curiosity when it is realized that the EP Booster’s identity as a “gritty” product is substantively delineated by its price.

Timbre can seem to disambiguate itself from the objects that produce it. In music theoretical discussions of timbre, instruments and other sound producing objects can fade into the background as either empirical analyses or questions of phenomenology attempt to investigate the timbral experience. In her 2019 essay “Drastic Allure: Timbre between the

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<sup>138</sup> For example, the Electro Harmonix Plumes, the Xotic AC Booster, and the Wampler Tumnus.

<sup>139</sup> For example, the Wampler Ego Compressor, and the Xotic EP Booster.

<sup>140</sup> For example, the Keeley Cavern, the TC Electronic Echobrain, and the MXR M169 Carbon Copy.

Sublime and the Grain,” Isabella van Elferen describes this. gap as “the aporia of being drawn into a void which appears to be real but which — the closer you get to it— flickers in and out of earshot and comprehension.”<sup>141</sup> The distance between timbre as a “thing” and an “object” is exactly what van Elferen argues musicians and scholars find so alluring.

At Music World there is very little distance between the timbral object and the “thingness” of sound-producing equipment. Pedals, guitars, and synthesizers are defined and evaluated according to promised timbres. Timbres themselves are ratified by the process of commerce: they are reified by the negotiations of worth that lead to the cash register. Within this ecosystem, consumers such as Max engage with the store as a training ground for timbre. Negotiating a sale is akin to negotiating timbral identity and within this frame a cosmopolitan community of listeners and players is forged. The fetishistic aporia of timbre is present only insofar as it does not disturb the commercial reality of affixing prices to things. The market invades the philosophical gap of timbre’s im/materiality and retrain guitarists to consider timbre along its terms.

In this chapter, I draw from my fieldwork at Music World to investigate the cosmopolitan timbral lexicons that ground the majority of interactions in guitarist consumer culture. In doing so, I ask how these discourses may speak to ongoing scholarly debates in music studies on the nature of timbre. I leave this analysis unsatisfied with musicological investigations that rely on timbre being a “thing,” be it experiential or objectual. In studying the machinations of timbral meaning within the economic frame of the guitar shop, I contend that timbre is a performative text that is related to, but ultimately separate from, sonic materialities. In my fieldwork, I employ a deconstructive ethnomethodology influenced by sociologist Harold Garfinkle that elucidates the precarity of sign-referent relationships in timbral signifiers. Then, following Peirce, I analyze timbre as indexing clusters of multifarious meanings rather than specific sonic attributes. Finally, following Kittler and Warner, I show how these utterances recursively define the community of guitarists who use them to understand sound.

Not only does the performance of timbre create a cosmopolitan guitarist consumer public through shared attenuation, but the aporia constituent to timbre’s identity is a condition that engenders it with a commotizability beyond other sonic parameters. This is not to say that sonic

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<sup>141</sup> Isabella van Elferen, “Drastic Allure: Timbre Between the Sublime and the Grain” in *Contemporary Music Review*, 36/6 (2017): 616.

materiality is not present in the formation of timbral lexicon, but to recognize the aporia between sounds themselves and timbral signifiers and, more importantly, to highlight that timbral meaning is constructed through acts of discourse. Musicologists may do better to separate the linguistic machinations of timbre and the ways they are enveloped in capitalist epistemology from felt affective sonic experience.

### **Timbre: Music Studies' Final Frontier**

Many studies concerning timbre begin with a similar hedge, recognizing timbre as a problematic object of study that eludes the standard analytical toolboxes from their respective fields. Megan Lavengood has described this trend in timbral scholarship as resembling a bad stand-up comic trope, saying most articles begin with a Seinfeld-esque “What’s the Deal with Timbre?”<sup>142</sup> There have been countless volumes, conferences, and university classes dedicated to hand-wringing over timbre’s resistance to the academic music-analytical toolkit. Its continuous stubbornness as an analytical object continues to plague music scholars who attempt to grapple with even basic questions. How do we represent timbre in prescriptive notation? How do we understand it as a meaning-making stratum of musical experience? What physical sonic attributes result in distinct timbres?

Even partial answers to these questions promise a deconstruction of basic musical knowledge and attacking timbre has become a bold mission. The purported gains are immense. Anthony Gritten writes that understanding timbre may uncover key insights into the survivability of homo sapiens, arguing that the very emergence of the human subject is “profoundly dependent” on the “surprise” of timbral meaning.<sup>143</sup> Naomi Waltham Smith has written extensively about timbre as an essential deconstructive force in philosophy, concluding that “Timbre...is the excitation that makes philosophy possible and the resonance that philosophy forgets in order to make sense.”<sup>144</sup> Just as it drives sales in a guitar shop, timbre’s elusiveness has breathed new life into music studies, for some transforming it from a stoic vestige of the quadrivium to an active push into the unknown.

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<sup>142</sup> Megan Lavengood, “What is the Deal with Timbre?” *Megan L. Lavengood Music Theorist Blog*, March 14, 2016. <https://meganlavengood.com/2016/03/14/what-is-the-deal-with-timbre/>

<sup>143</sup> Anthony Gritten, “Depending on Timbre,” *Contemporary Music Review* 36/6 (2017): 530-546.

<sup>144</sup> Naomi Waltham Smith, “Deconstruction and Timbre” in *The Oxford Handbook of Timbre* ed. Emily I. Doland and Alexander Rehding, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2021): 60.

Why is timbre so troublesome? What is the nature of its unresolvable lack that other musical parameters like pitch, rhythm, and harmony do not seem to share?<sup>145</sup> In discussing what she calls the “paradox of timbre,” Cornelia Fales suggests that timbre’s problem arises from its apparent sourcelessness. Musical parameters like melody and harmony are easy to understand as having an intentional source, emerging from the library of music-theoretical knowledge present on the score or in the musician’s mind. With timbre, there is always a difference between a timbre’s source and the timbre we hear. The experience timbre of a violin is not reducible to the sum of its parts — for instance strings, wood, and the player’s technique. There is no prescriptive material to point to and compare the sound against. Fales posits that there is a fundamental paradox of timbre resultant from the divergence between physical sounds and experienced timbre, asking “How can we reconcile the success with which we identify a source with the fact that the sound we hear is demonstrably different in timbre than the sound emitted by the source in question?”<sup>146</sup>

There have been many analytical attempts to grapple with the “paradox of timbre,” that can, generally, be separated into a few methodological categories. First, there are those who approach timbre from a positivist standpoint, applying music theoretical structures and scientific analysis to uncover root relationships between the language we use to identify timbres and measurable acoustic parameters. For these scholars, the platonic timbral object seems to exist in the same way an electron might. It is difficult to detect and categorize, but, ultimately, there is a positive connection between physical sound and timbre. The popularity of fast-Fourier transform spectrographic imagery as a means to analyze timbre has greatly increased since the 1990s, when digital computers became sophisticated enough to run full spectrums in a short amount of time. Since the publication of Fritz Winckel’s *Music, Sound and Sensation: A Modern Exposition* in 1960, many theorists—such as Jurgen Meyer, John Latartara, and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson to name a few— have seized upon this exciting tool to demonstrate links between acoustic material and timbral perception. For instance, Ciro Scotto created a “theory of distortion” in *Music*

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<sup>145</sup> Here I reference the general assumption by music studies that these sonic parameters are axiomatic. There are very few studies that feel the need to hedge the liminality of pitch before deploying a voice leading analysis. However, in recent years, there has been very interesting work that applies the same rigorous, deconstructive analysis found in timbral studies to other musical parameters. For instance, Holly Watkins’ has written extensively on the reliance on spatial metaphors such as depth and movement that are generally used to describe music without critique. Christopher Morris employs a Derridean approach to musical understanding in general, claiming that “Musical Platonism is today’s uneasy default position in the academy.”

<sup>146</sup> Cornelia Fales, “The Paradox of Timbre.” *Ethnomusicology* 46, no 1 (Spring 2002): 57.

*Theory Spectrum* that builds taxonomies through a “quantized view of the distortion continuum based on spectral analysis that produces a series of transformations connecting an absolutely linear signal to a signal containing total harmonic distortion.”<sup>147</sup> This search for empirical evidence of timbral descriptors has become very common in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century timbral studies. A few examples include Harris M. Berger and Cornelia Fales’ article on “heaviness” in metal music, and David Brackett’s 1995 book *Interpreting Popular Music*. Approaches like this work to close the gap between timbral rhetoric and measurable sonic properties by exploring direct lines of indexicality between them.

It is true of course that many of the theorists involved with exploring the capabilities of acoustic analysis and its relationship to perception do not end up with strictly positivist claims. Fales and Berger, for instance, conclude their study, which exhibits a host of spectrograms and intricate physical connections to music described as “heavy,” by saying, “Heaviness is a comparative term, and in any given listening act, the quality of heaviness experienced by a metalhead is informed by his/her past experiences with distorted guitar sounds. Our research emphasizes the significance not just of cultural context or immediate situated context but of the lived context of past musical forms for the present perceptual processes.”<sup>148</sup> However, much more effort is given in the article to mapping the correlations between the acoustic and the perceived than mapping out the machinations by which specific cultural processes engender the acceptance of “heavy” as a specific and valuable sign.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are theorists who approach timbre from an embodied phenomenological perspective. Within this framework, timbre is considered to be resistant to physical analysis as it emerges from individual, sonic human experience. Fales is best known for this approach, describing experienced timbre as governed by individual “perceptualizations,” which she defines as “any cognitive operation that contributes to the perceptual outcome of a signal beyond the actual acoustic elements of the signal.”<sup>149</sup> For Fales, perceptualization involves confirmation bias, where the perception of material sounds themselves is translated through the listener’s personal expectations of what they should be

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<sup>147</sup> Ciro Scotto, “The Structural Role of Distortion in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 179.

<sup>148</sup> Harris M. Berger and Cornelia Fales, “Heaviness in the Perception of Heavy Metal Guitar Timbres: The Match of Perceptual and Acoustic Features over Time,” in *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 196-197.

<sup>149</sup> Fales, “The Paradox of Timbre,” 60.

hearing. Fales grapples with the divorce between the information we can scientifically glean from the source signal and the ways that information is perceived, claiming that the way timbre is experienced starts from the signal, but is not reducible to it. Other theorists like Rebecca Leydon and David Blake have continued this phenomenological approach to timbral studies, carving interpretive frameworks for timbre based on listener expectation in, respectively, the music of George Crumb and early 21<sup>st</sup> century indie rock.<sup>150</sup>

While the concepts of perceptualization and timbral dissimilarity are useful and certainly describe some aspects of guitarists' sonic language, studies that rely on an understanding of timbre as primarily a psychological phenomenon can repeat the same assumptions that are made in stringent quantitative analyses. They can assume that the terms people use to describe timbre are metaphors in a vacuum, directly standing in for imagined expected, ideal listening experiences and belie a misattribution to actual sonic phenomena. For instance, Fales stresses that timbre is an "informationally unconscious phenomenon," that "is free to operate with little direct scrutiny by a listener, creating effects that are intense but also hazy in definition, difficult to articulate, and freely attributable to other features of the musical context."<sup>151</sup>

But in studying timbre in guitarist-consumer culture, I find this problematic. On the retail floor, timbres are not entirely freely attributable. They are captured into products that promise specific, idiosyncratic timbres and are sold for varying sums. The TS808 hand-wired pedal that sparked debate in the Gear Page forum retails for \$199.99, promises a sound that has both flexible intrinsic value and distinct exchange value. The commentators seemed to be actively negotiating their perceptualizations and justifying the industry's valuation. Thus, their understanding of the pedal's promised timbre is revealed as emergent and dependent on intricate social negotiation. This is far from "informationally unconscious," and, in moments like these, we learn that timbre leads an intensely social life. It is given shape and meaning by agreed-upon attention towards it, and it is imbued with a social indexicality that cannot be said to be altogether separate from its ontology as a sonic phenomenon.

Some scholars interested in the perception of timbre follow a different track, building multidimensional scales of timbre based on perceived timbral dissimilarity. These authors tend to

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<sup>150</sup> Rebecca Leydon. "Clean as a Whistle: Timbral Trajectories and the Modern Musical Sublime." *Music Theory Online* 18, no. 2 (June 2012).; David Blake. "Timbre as Differentiation in Indie Music." *Music Theory Online* 18, no. 2 (June 2012).

<sup>151</sup> Fales, "The Paradox of Timbre," 91.

agree with the phenomenological standpoint that studying individual perception should trump acoustical observation in timbral experience, and they form intricate experiments to map perceptions onto a spectrum that attempts to represent participants' responses. In a 2010 review of these types of studies published by Bruno Giordano and Stephen McAdams in *Music Perception*, they conclude that there are "significant associations between the structure of MDS (multi-dimensional spectrum) models and mechanical properties of stimuli." In other words, they assert that timbral experience seems very linked to the mechanical properties of the source sound.<sup>152</sup> But, importantly, they do not claim a positivist correlation between perception and acoustics, focusing instead on perceived "timbral dissimilarity" between different sounds. As dissimilarity is a subjective judgment, they insist that timbre itself is not directly mappable onto acoustic parameters but claim that the perception of timbre is negatively derived from the recognition sonic difference. While this data is convincing for sounds with very different mechanical sources, such as drums and pianos, MDS models and theories of timbral dissimilarity do very little to explain the ways people talk about and evaluate timbre. The question remains, how do people take their sonic perception and weave them into shared linguistic systems of communicating the ways something sounds good, bad, expensive, inexpensive, crunchy, or clean?

All of these approaches examine timbre and perception from the sanctity of the academic laboratory. Meanwhile, timbre lives outside. While the academy grapples with its paradoxes, physicality, and perception, timbre crisscrosses around the social world with ease. This is particularly true amongst musicians who play electrically mediated instruments such as the electric guitar or electronic instruments such as the synthesizer. Because these instruments afford players such a wide array of timbral choices, timbral manipulation is an essential element of performance practice. It is because that timbre lives in the social that I contend that a timbral analysis should pay close attention to semiotics. This is not to say that sound begins and ends with language, but to recognize the pragmatics with which every-day musicians understand timbral meaning through the social.

There are consequences of separating timbre as object and timbre as an object of the mind that defines Fales' "paradox of timbre." For Simon Waters, the discourses surrounding

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<sup>152</sup> Bruno Giordano and Stephen McAdams, "Sound Source Mechanics and Musical Timbre Perception: Evidence From Previous Studies," in *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 28/2 (December 2010): 159.

“timbral music” — by which he means a genre of electroacoustic music popular in the UK in the 1990s —reinforce the objectification of timbre as a discrete system and exclude the “social intentionality” of the listeners.<sup>153</sup> Waters continues by suggesting that this analytic lens reinforces the hegemony of the “forced enlightenment” and the rational theoretical apparatuses that accompany western classical music’s place in the academy.<sup>154</sup> His critique of the agendas behind this analytic resonates with Stefan Helmreich’s examinations of the underlying assumptions of scientific practice.<sup>155</sup> Like Helmreich’s discussion of how objectifying concepts like “life,” or “sound” lays important epistemological groundwork for the hard sciences, Waters claims that objectifying “timbre” and removing it from its social sphere does important ideological work for music scholarship.

To Waters’ argument, I add that the objectification of timbre in both common parlance and the music academy does important ideological work for the political economy of music by creating systems that consider sound objects to be resistant to capitalist logics. Systematizing a platonic object of timbre —whether it be psychoacoustic or empirical— supports a romantic understanding of sound as excessive, ephemeral, and resistant to capitalist purchase and reduction. Material sound does indeed exist apart from capitalism, but our methods of listening, playing, and understanding material sound are contingent upon our very understanding of material value within shifting capitalist epistemologies, particularly since the industrialization of instruments and other sound-producing objects in the mid-twentieth century. In short, it matters a great deal that, in order to produce guitar timbre, a typical American guitarist needs to enter a space like Music World and buy equipment. For this reason, I find that there is perhaps no better place to observe the social life of timbre than a corporate musical instrument shop, where the business of sound is paramount and the retail experience has been carefully constructed to lead towards one moment: the point of sale.

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<sup>153</sup> Simon Waters. “Timbre Composition: Ideology, Metaphor, and Social Process”( *Contemporary Music Review*, 10/2, 1994): 133.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>155</sup> Stefan Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life: Essays in the Anthropology of Biology and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

## Cosmopolitan Guitar Talk

Discussions of timbre dominate day-to-day conversations at Music World. Terms like “crunch” circulate throughout guitarist consumer culture as specific — and valuable— sonic descriptors. Musicians turn to the idiosyncrasies of specific products to negotiate timbral signifiers, as evidenced by the plethora of web forums dedicated to parsing any given product’s sonic identity.<sup>156</sup> In forums like *The Gear Page* or *Harmony Central*, many users meet and debate not only the relative value of a given piece of gear, but also the ways in which its sound can be described. For instance, in a February 2017 forum thread dedicated to the Ibanez TS808 Hand-wired Overdrive pedal, a respectful argument erupted over the pedal’s characteristic sound. User Rhinocaster states, “I think it’s one of the smoothest and most open sounding of the 808 offerings.” Another user, named Abram4235, responds critically saying “I didn’t think it was. It sounds like a tubescreamer. Nothing special... it just doesn’t do the vintage tones as well.”<sup>157</sup> Yet another user, Leftyman, chimes in with another retort claiming “I have to respectfully disagree with those who say it sounds like your typical TS (tube screamer). At first listen, maybe but after you have had some time with it, it has a smoothness and natural warmth that although subtle is there.”<sup>158</sup>

These sorts of exchanges are very common on these forums. They demonstrate that users consider the sounds of the guitar products to be subjective, but also readily described through a thicket of language that indexes a myriad of specific ideas shared amongst the users. Here, “smoothness,” “openness,” “tube-screamer,” and “vintage” are not necessarily referring to measurable strata of the sound, but each adjective is accepted as a specific idea that users should know.

As I have stated in chapter One, Music World’s location in Times Square affords it an international clientele of musicians who are attracted to visit both by the United States’ reputation as being a center for musical instrument production and by the comparatively lower prices paid at conglomerate music stores than can be found in their home countries. In speaking

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<sup>156</sup> *Harmony Central* and *The Gear Page* are the most popular of these types of forums, attracting thousands of subscribers who suggest gear to each other, debate the value of certain products, and talk about guitar culture in general.

<sup>157</sup> Rhinocaster (2017, February 17). TS808HW-Thoughts on it [Online forum comment]. Message posted to <https://www.thegearpage.net/board/index.php?threads/ts808hw-thoughts-on-it.1794871/>

<sup>158</sup> Kb813 (2017, February 17). TS808HW-Thoughts on it [Online forum comment]. Message posted to <https://www.thegearpage.net/board/index.php?threads/ts808hw-thoughts-on-it.1794871/>

to many different guitarists, from many different countries, it became clear that there is a global cosmopolitan language for describing guitar sound that is used by musicians who attune to the musical instrument marketplace.

In Spanish, for instance, terms like “clipping” and “delay” are often used either in English or with a close Spanish cognate. Other audio terms, such as “ganancia” and “limpio” are direct translations of English timbral signifiers — “gain” and “clean” respectively— that are as removed from their literal context in Spanish as they are in English. As a result, guitarists generally have a language to discuss sound with each other even when other language barriers prevent fluent conversation.

Timbral descriptors that circulate in a guitar shop carry meaning that is assumed to be shared by fellow connoisseurs. There does not need to be a physical or literal correlation. A term such as “grit,” creates a space of assumption between two listeners. It holds meaningful weight within the common discourse of guitarist consumer culture but is understood to be highly variable. Grit, and other terms like it, have meaning but fall short of directly indexing a physical sonic attribute. Sound is by no means the only stratum of communication where meaning defies one-to-one sign relationships. Following Peirce, sociologist Harold Garfinkel was interested in uncovering the roots of this type of common-sense discourse, where the speaking parties are relying on the “mutual unintelligibility” of their phrases.<sup>159</sup> One tool of his ethnomethodology is “breaching,” which entails pressing an interviewee into trying to explain what they mean when they invoke common sense discourse. Garfinkel gives the example of the phrase “I’m sick of him,” where, when breached, is revealed to rely on a mutual intelligibility between the two conversers. No one is literally sick, but the other person “knows what they mean.” Of this phenomenon, Garfinkel says:

“The anticipation that persons *will* understand, the occasionality of expressions, the specific vagueness of references, the retrospective-prospective sense of a present occurrence, waiting for something later in order to see what was meant before, are sanctioned properties of common discourse.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Harold Garfinkle, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, (Prentice Hall: New York, 1967).

<sup>160</sup> *ibid*, 41.

As part of my study of timbre around the store, I conducted breaching experiments with friends, customers, and colleagues in regard to common timbral terminology. It was really no surprise that we very quickly arrived at the indexical brick wall, where we could go no further without outright admitting that we had to rely on our shared social knowledge. Garfinkel finds that the way people speak, don't speak, or assume common intelligibility from others are important factors in social constructions. Following Peirce's classification of signs, he studies "indexical expressions" where meaning is dependent on the social context between speakers. These mostly appear as idiomatic expressions or metaphors that have been weaved into common parlance. But far from just considering these moments as linguistic quirks, Garfinkel asks us to consider them as the apparitions of constitutive social agreements that are necessary for creating meaning.

A conversation regarding multi-effects pedals (pedal boards that can produce a variety of guitar effects) with a customer named Martin ended at such an impasse.<sup>161</sup>

Ma: "I bought it when I started, and I need something richer now"

MB: "What do you mean richer? Like more expensive?"

Ma: "No." Laughs. "Richer in sound. Less *tinny*."

MB: "So rich is the opposite of *tinny*?"

Ma: "No. Rich is like warm. *Tinny* is, metallic, you know what *tinny* is. It is just *tinny*."

MB: "I guess I do. What sounds *tinny*?"

Ma: "A DS-1 sounds *tinny*."<sup>162</sup>

MB: "Is a DS-1 rich?"

Martin was a visiting musician from Buenos Aires, Argentina, one of the many South American travelers who made the store a mandatory stop on his yearly trip to New York. In our conversation, we mainly spoke Spanish save for a few words he repeated in English. *Tinny* was one of those words. He only translated to "metálico" when I pressed him to, only to immediately switch back to calling it *tinny*. As he later explained, he did this to avoid me thinking he meant a "metal" distortion, which refers to the genre of metal and has a different sonorous connotation. Still, *tinny* revealed itself to have specific timbral meaning in both languages as an indexical cluster that transfers relatively seamlessly across Spanish to English barriers in the given social context. In other words, timbre as a concept is the result of socially negotiating a sound's

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<sup>161</sup> In the above interaction, I translated all non-italicized words from Spanish. *Tinny* is italicized to emphasize that it was originally used as an English term.

<sup>162</sup> A DS-1 is a famous Boss Distortion Pedal that is often used as a timbral benchmark for other shades of distortion.

referent. It is a process of continually testing a cluster of symbols in attempts to reach a solidly indexical object.

The other interesting term Martin used in our conversation is “rich,” or “rico.” I asked if he meant more expensive because “rico” can specifically translate to wealthy, rather than the other English definitions of rich regarding flavor or subject matter. I’ve heard other Spanish speakers invoke this idea with the term “profundo,” a more common sonorous metaphor in Spanish. Martin seemed insistent on using the English cognate. When I asked him why, he told me that is what all of his friends back home say.

This went on for quite some time, as many of my breaching experiments did. This is not meant to prove that my interlocutors did not know what they were talking about. To the contrary, both Martin and I felt we could hear exactly what these terms were indexing but only in attempting to follow the chain of indices did we realize that we were relying on each other’s perceived expertise to make sense. Garfinkel calls this the “taken-for-grantedness” inherent to discourse, calling attention to the fact that social context is imperative to meaning but not frequently raised in explicit terms. Through my work at the store, I have had very similar conversations regarding other standard terminologies used to describe guitars, such as “spanky pickups,” “transparent distortion,” and “warble.”

Through our discussion, Martin and I discovered that, by caring to negotiate the boundaries of particular guitar timbres, we are part of a shared community. Martin assumed in our interaction that I, as a guitarist and employee at a large shop, would understand his abstractions of tonal gradients in the terms he used. He assumed this because this is the way he interacted with musicians at home, online, and in other print mediums. This is the language with which the pedals themselves are marketed. And had I not pressed him on the terminology he invoked, it would have worked. Indeed, we eventually found him exactly the sort of sound he wanted. Martin ended up leaving the store with four pedals: an Ibanez Tube Screamer, a Boss Chorus Pedal, a Pro Co Rat Distortion, and a TC Electronic Flashback Delay. The total ticket was \$479.96 plus tax.

## Timbre as Indexical Cluster

These moments of linguistic entanglement in common discourse are similar to what Thomas Turino, also following Peirce, calls “indexical clusters,” where context divorces signs from their more literal referents and “repeated grouping of a set of signs such that the signs become indexically tied to each other in one’s experience.”<sup>163</sup> For Turino, an indexical cluster arises when “connections among the signs become fact in our experience and begin to be taken for granted, ultimately going unnoticed, regardless of whether there are real connections among the objects of the signs.”<sup>164</sup> In other words, the indexical coupling of signs like “tinny,” “spanky,” “buzzy,” and other quotidian timbral phrases becomes more important to carving out timbral meaning than any real connection the material sounds they attempt to point towards. Turino’s unique deployment of Peircean terminology is useful for describing sonic designators that are often maligned for their liberal usage by musicians as they describe their sonic practice.

For instance, in his 2018 essay “That’s Not Something to Show in a Concert: Experimentation and Legitimacy at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales,” Eduardo Herrera theorizes the concept of “experimentalism” as an indexical cluster in a similar fashion to my usage of the term. Responding to his interlocutors’ usage of the term in often contradictory ways—more often than not as a positive differentiator in determining the value of new music in Latin America—he says, “the kinds of practices, sounds, ideas, and attitudes that the community of creators and connoisseurs in Buenos Aires around CLAEM were calling “experimental” were a sign not of *one thing* but of a *cluster of things* that included not only musical trends but also subjective positionings within the broader art world of classical music composition.”<sup>165</sup> Considering concepts like “timbre” or “experimentalism” as indexical clusters, aptly demonstrates the social agency of sonic language while maintaining immanent links with the sense world that structural linguistics can often gloss over. Thus, indexical clusters have differences from Saussure’s concept of empty signifiers or Jameson’s theory of floating

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<sup>163</sup> Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 118.

<sup>164</sup> Turino, *Music as Social Life*: 110.

<sup>165</sup> Eduardo Herrera, “That’s Not Something to Show in a Concert: Experimentation and Legitimacy at the Centro Latinoamericano de Altos Estudios Musicales,” in *Experimentalisms in Practice: Perspectives from Latin America*, edited by Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 36.

signifiers, insofar as meaning is widely agreed upon and the referents provoke specific sensory experiences.

Acknowledging timbre to be an indexical cluster brings its ontology into focus by recognizing that timbre can be inculcated by sonic phenomena but is not reducible to sound itself. The guitar timbral signifier of “clean” is an interesting example to consider with this lens. The definition of “clean” sound exemplifies what Isabella von Elferen has called the “ex negativo” definitions of timbre: it is only described by what it is not.<sup>166</sup> When guitarists talk about clean tone, they are usually referencing the sound of an electric guitar that is unimpeded by signal degradation. However, when pushed, many guitarists who attend carefully to their sounds are resistant to reduce clean’s definition to only the absence of interruptions. This is well demonstrated by the following conversation I had with an interlocutor named Dean, who is a frequent customer at Music World.

MB: You keep talking about clean sound. What does that mean?

DV: Clean is the sound of a guitar with no coloring. Just the guitar.

MB: So, the guitar unplugged?

DV: Well no... actually the amp is involved. And there are different types of clean. To me, the perfect clean means that I hear every aspect of the guitar. The wood, the frets, the wire around the pickups. But I don’t hear more of that. Clean is just clean. It’s the sound of everything working in a direct connection.”

M: Ok, so what’s the opposite of clean?

DV: “There are a lot of opposites of clean because clean comes before. You need to master your clean sound before you add to it. It’s like a palette”

MB: “Before we talked about overdrive as a sort of palette”

DV: “Yes, but clean is the pallet to overdrive.”

“Clean is just...clean.” He said it with a sort of reverence, looking upwards and clearly imagining the cleanest-clean he could. We’d hit an impasse in our conversation. I was just supposed to know what clean tone was, just as when a guitar advertisement promises “soaring cleans,” the consumer-musician is being called upon to assist in drawing discursive boundaries of clean tone. They might do this by playing the product and deciding it does not deliver what it promises. Or they might give the “clean” sound its ultimate realization, by spending thousands of dollars to purchase it. The definition of the timbre “clean” is dependent on this back-and-forth negotiation of indexical order in all aspects of the discourse network. In this view, timbres like “clean” cannot be reduced to metaphors to be compared with individual perceptions or discrete sonic phenomenon. There is no space between the sound and the sign. Clean is just...clean.

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<sup>166</sup> Van Elferen, “Drastic Allure”: 616.

## The Guitarist Consumer Public

The majority of my fieldwork at Music World was remarkably mundane and repetitive. Interactions between sales associates, customers, and managers followed steady rhythms of not only work and commerce, but also a coherent aesthetic regime of timbral attenuation. Conversations about sound at Music World are, for the most part, consistent in form from person to person. Pinning imagined sounds to specific products usually entails a negotiation of meaning, but this fact is sublimated by the persistence of sonic signifiers such as “clean,” “dirty,” and “gritty,” that most guitarists can use to communicate without highlighting their linguistic vagueness.

Music World sales training is partly responsible for the repetitiveness of this conversational structure. While in training, associates are taught the “four parts of the sale”: Greet, Qualify, Pitch, and Close. This structure is common to many sales professions and helps normalize sales interactions and speed up the pace of buyer to seller interaction. In the greet phase, associates are encouraged to welcome the customers to the store and ask basic questions about their needs. Pitching and closing direct the customer towards the register with the intent of upselling their purchase as much as possible. Standard sales techniques such as “adding on,” or “the assumptive close” are taught to expedite the process of turning over customers and maximizing key performance indicators such as average basket and items per transaction.<sup>167</sup>

It is in the qualifying stage of the sale that the uniqueness of sound as a product becomes the most apparent. Associates are taught to ask pointed questions about the customer’s favorite type of music, sounds they are looking for, and budget. For instance, an associate is encouraged to ask questions about the customer’s musical tastes, years of playing experience, and spending limit to properly gauge what products to pitch. These questions are much vaguer and more personal than, say, ones asked in a furniture shop. Where a furniture sales associate may be prodding the customer to give them a sense of the size of the room or color preferences, Music World associates are attempting to pin down a desired sound. Some questions I have either used or overheard include: “If you could sound like any one musician, who would it be?” “What kind

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<sup>167</sup> “Adding on” entails suggesting accessories the customer may want to take home along with the main piece. For instance, when buying a guitar the associate is encouraged to present the customer with items such as a gig bag, a humidifier, a cable, or a pack of strings to bolster the sale. The “assumptive close” is one of many closing techniques taught to sales professionals to overcome last minute objections. The sales associate may assume the customer is ready to buy, saying “should I go get one in a box for you?” Average basket refers to the average dollar amount (pre-tax) of all of the associates transactions. Items per transaction is the number of pieces sold on a given ticket.

of distortion are you looking to achieve?” “What about your current setup isn’t sounding right?”

The structure of the sale clearly frames interactions between musicians and employees at Music World as negotiations of sonic meaning, and, therefore, economic value. This is not surprising given that Music World is a store. Buyers enter to buy and salespeople work to sell, giving each interaction clarity. Negotiations about timbral meaning happen alongside other types of negotiation, such as price haggling. However, the importance of negotiation as a social mechanism to understand sound extends outside the commercial spaces where it is laid so bare.

What kind of social spaces do conversations like this facilitate? It is certainly exclusive to those in the know, but it also seems to traverse more traditional modes of social division, such as borders, language, and community. Kevin Dawe’s recent concept of the “new guitarscape” is useful for considering these questions within the context of global capitalist power.<sup>168</sup> For Dawe, the guitar’s transformation into a hyper-globalized commodity warrants reconsidering its social life. To study “the guitar” as a global monoculture ignores its changing cultures as they merge and diverge from broader social developments. He calls for studying the “guitarscape,” which he defines as the “general circulating of the guitar phenomenon,” inexorably entangled with music, culture, history, and society in a heterogeneous network.<sup>169</sup> Here, Dawe places the guitar inside Arjun Appadurai’s “scapes,” dimensions of global, cultural flows that are the building blocks for new imaginative worlds. Appadurai’s “scapes” are fields of mobility where people, ideas, money, and even places travel in “non-isomorphic paths.”<sup>170</sup> In talking about a “guitarscape,” Dawe means to include the entire social history of the guitar and its conceptual mobility across borders and markets. Considering the guitarscape would also require looking at how it interacts with other Appadurain “scapes,” such as the ethnoscape (movements of people across borders), the finanscape (the money that funds guitar production), and the ideoscape (the ideologies that guitars engage with).<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Dawe first introduced the term “guitarscape” in his article on Turkish guitar cultures entitled “The Guitar in Turkey: Erkan Ogur and the Istanbul Guitarscape.” It has been much expanded upon in his recent monograph.

<sup>169</sup> Kevin Dawe, *The New Guitarscape in Critical Theory, Cultural Practice, and Musical Performance* (Burlington VT, Ashgate, 2015).

<sup>170</sup> Arjun Appadurai. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture* 2, no 2, (1990): 12.

<sup>171</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

This large category is useful for positioning the instrument in context of larger global flows and power relations, which are palpable in the meeting place that is Music World. But is it a specific enough concept to encapsulate the sense of community curated through Tone-centric conversations such as the one I shared with Martin or Dean? Surely the discourses are mobile, as the guitarscape implies, but how do they operate? I find that the negotiation of timbre is one of the core mechanisms to the guitarscape. Through performances of sonic fluency and a playful linguistic struggle towards figuring out timbral meaning, a large community of music makers and listeners figure themselves as a social audience. Spaces like Music World can be understood as a meeting ground for what Michael Warner calls a “public” of musicians, who are linked by the way that they address timbre and the ways that timbre addresses them.

Fredrich Kittler’s concept of “discourse networks” is very helpful in thinking about the social life of timbre. Kittler combines the Foucauldian examination of historically contingent practices with the important realization that media acts as a physical and mental training program. From a Kittlerian point of view, conversations, posters, advertisements, and magazines, but also prices, and names of sounds circulating in music shops like Music World, all work together to lay out a cohesive training ground for listening. And much of this trained listening is ultimately understood through timbre, which becomes one of the most important elements of music-making for musicians who are making a purchase decision. As the musical instrument industry—like many other industries—has become globalized and neoliberalized, this store-as-training ground can be said to speak for a large population of musicians across many musical traditions who understand the breakdown of the sounds they make through their feedback within this discourse network. Many musicians I meet acquire their sonic fluency through this network—among others— which is facilitated by the larger epistemological framework of capitalist power.

Many of my interlocutors describe this educational apparatus directly and consider themselves to be bona-fide graduates of these training grounds of listening. These timbral experts speak an intricate language of guitar tone, ranging from the language of hyper-specific electrical engineering, to forms of coded language that have been in use for years. The emergence of the global capitalist music market and the proliferation of Anglophonic guitarist media through the internet could be said to have contributed to the flattening of these regional discourses and created a lingua franca for popular music timbre. We can see this, perhaps, in Martin’s

revelation that “tinny” is a popular timbral descriptor in his Argentinian guitarist community, borrowing the word from its popularity in English guitar advertising that circulates worldwide.<sup>172</sup>

In one of my interviews, a 30-something musician named Dean self-professes to be a “tone expert.” “I’ve read everything,” he said to me once, as he was talking about his intricate guitar rig. “Everything online, every book, watched every video, I’ve read it all!” When he starts talking about guitar effects, his expertise gives you no reason to doubt him. He described attending a special workshop in Michigan to learn details of amp design, the intricacies of combining digital and analog effects with isolated power supplies, and even the specific speaker cones he outfitted his four amps with so they maximized the sonic effect of his massive pedal rig.

Building off of the work of Kittler and Jürgen Habermas, Warner describes the social world as composed of networks of publics: discursive spaces that create relationships amongst strangers. A public comes into being by merely being addressed, and circularly perpetuates itself as it continues to produce discourse that addresses it. As Warner says, publics are not separate from the discourses that bind them in a social imaginary. They are one and the same and they are everywhere.<sup>173</sup> Unlike Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities,” Warner’s publics are generative and autotelic, coming into being solely by virtue of being attended to. Another important development in Warner’s theory of publics is his expansion on what is considered a “text.” Where most readings of Anderson’s “print capitalism” are explicitly concerned with ideologies that are propagated through literal printed texts, Warner considers any media object capable of marking spaces of discourse to be textual. He says, “Often, the texts themselves are not even recognized as texts — as for example with visual advertising or the chattering of a DJ— but the publics they bring into being are still discursive in the same way.”<sup>174</sup>

What are guitarists performing in these negotiations on the discursive boundaries of timbral signifiers but the building of a public through the circulation of texts? We are relying on media objects that direct our metaphorical lexicon: magazines like *Guitar Player*,

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<sup>172</sup> I have spoken to many customers from South America specifically who have expressed the importance of the internet to staying plugged in to the latest trends in guitar timbre technology. Whereas publications like *Guitar Player* and *Guitar World* were difficult for them to come by in the past, they are now avid readers of the website. Statistics for international web visitors or circulation outside of the United States are difficult to come by, but it is clear that publication’s shared parent company, Future PLC, has invested heavily in developing brand awareness for its publications outside of the country. On the corporation’s public website, it boasts its global reach by claiming its mission is to “connect over 120 million people worldwide with their passions.”

<sup>173</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 65-67.

<sup>174</sup> *ibid*, 68.

advertisements, internet resources, documentary films, conversations with friends, and informal classes given by other musicians to name a few. We are also assuming a relationship between us that exists through them even though we could be strangers from different continents. All of these media objects give timbre the formal properties needed to captivate a public's attention. Timbres are texts, in Warner's sense, as they are circularly defined by the publics that engage with them, and that negotiate and renegotiate their boundaries.

### **Towards a Music Theory of Gear**

Popular music theory often belies an underlying goal to reconcile methodologies of western classical music theory with the musical understandings that permeate popular musicians' praxis. Some methodological trends —such as Walter Everett and Alan Forte's adaptation of Schenkerian analysis to study folk music and the Beatles—amend music theories invented to describe western classical music to a popular music context. Other scholars — such as Philip Tagg or Allan Moore — have centered their careers on imagining a music theory derived from and made for popular music by eschewing traditional theoretical analysis. In both streams, the project of popular music theory essentially retains the hermeneutical goals of Western classical theory. They approach popular music with the perspective that it demands to be descriptively theorized with whichever particular toolkit they choose to use.

Thus, popular music studies can repeat the same methodological divides between music theorists, ethnomusicologists, and musicologists that exist in the study of other types of music. This does a deep disservice to popular music, as it implicitly dismisses the theories through which popular musicians think to curiosities of historical fact rather than serious ways to understand music. A music theory of popular music should not relegate the musical understanding of popular musicians to the status of mere anecdotal, descriptive response to an unseen musical engine. Instead, it should take the ways popular musicians work, discuss, and understand their craft as its starting point.

Here I will turn back to timbre studies. Through this chapter, I have detailed the importance of timbral discussion to the forming of guitarist communities and bestowing musical meaning and value on sound. But the work should not stop there. There are endless ways in which knowledge of music gear is essential music theory to popular musicians much in the same way that knowledge of harmony conditions orchestral composition. Music scholars should do

much more to unpack these interactions and reshape what popular music theory has come to mean.

In many conversations with academics who also work as popular musicians, I have asked why we do not have a music theory of gear. Musicians love gear, even pathologizing this love into the self-effacing moniker GAS or “gear acquisition syndrome.” Jan-Peter Herbst and Jonas Menze’s have written a book that investigates this tendency of contemporary musicians to “play the GAS game” as a means to identify themselves within a community of musicians who similarly attune to gear.<sup>175</sup> Herbst and Menze point out that musicians obsessing over their tools is not an exclusively 21<sup>st</sup> century condition, but that internet shopping cultures have intensified musician-consumer’s relationship to gear through easier access, shorter purchase time, and online community. In such a musical environment, gear research is as important as practice. Therefore, I believe it can be said that a theory of gear needs to be written as it ascribes to the performance practice of popular musicians who engage with the contemporary musical instrument market.

This is not a theory that needs to be derived mathematically. On the contrary, it only needs to be listened to. At Music World such a music theory is actively negotiated through discussions of the varying musical potentialities of guitars, keyboards, software, amplifiers, and cables are key debatable points that bind together cultures of popular musicians. Musicians begin and end their recording process with the gear they have at their disposal: idiosyncratic combinations of musicians and sonic equipment. To describe popular music recordings as if they have a semblance of a work outside of these idiosyncrasies is to jettison the importance of gear as merely anecdotal and secondary to the frameworks of musical understanding that ground western classical music theory such as melody, voice leading, and harmony. But in speaking to popular musicians at work, we find the gear is often the primary descriptive element in their own process and begs to be taken more seriously.

Popular musicians constantly reference specific pieces of gear in their timbral lexicons. Just as genericized trademarks such as Kleenex or Chesterfield have come to replace tissue or sofa in many region’s common parlance, words like “808” or “Vox” have taken on a sonic meaning that is beyond other timbral language. There is both a learned specificity and a mystical

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<sup>175</sup> Jan Peter Herbst and Jonas Menze, *Gear Acquisition Syndrome: Consumption of Instruments and Technology in Popular Music* (Huddersfield, UK: University of Huddersfield Press, 2021), 231.

respect in these utterances. Guitarists insist that certain sounds can be defined through descriptions of the gear they use, but at the same time they leave room for their timbral lexicon to be diffuse and open to interpretation. Curtis Fondalay's book *Tone Wizards* consists of seventeen interviews with famous guitarists on "the quest for the ultimate sound," and contains many examples of how musicians perform this approach to sonic theory. Fondalay's interview with blues guitarist Joe Bonamassa exemplifies the tenuousness with which professional guitarists balance timbre as both a controllable stratum of musicianship and as a guiding musical philosophy. When asked if "Can you teach or coach someone to achieve great tone," Bonamassa answers:

"You can tell them what tone you think is good. If they don't agree with it, then it won't get very far. People usually default to the sound that they hear in their heads. They will twist the knobs to get it where they think it sounds good. Whether the rest of the world thinks so or not is another subject. Great tone is very subjective."<sup>176</sup>

Earlier in the interview, when asked to describe his own tone, Bonamassa gets more specific about how he "stacks the mids," saying:

"The amp is where it starts. Basically, the Marshall is the high, the low, and your saturation, but it is a little bit scooped in the mids. Now, to make a full-range tone, you could put a Boss EQ in front of that amp to add the mids back in. The problem is when you do this; you will lose the top and the bottom. That's where the second amp comes in. Fenders generally have a narrower frequency range, if you take the bright switch off, which is always wise. They don't go as high, and they certainly don't go as low as a Marshall, so naturally, the mids come forward. So when you pair any Marshall amp, particularly the Jubilee, with a Fender-style amp, you get this stacked mid-range sound. All of a sudden, the mid-range that was lacking in the initial base sound is now perfectly balanced, but you didn't lose your high and low end. So you have this full range sound that has plenty of headroom where nothing is working too hard to achieve this; you're not running the amps all the way up and you're not blasting the input with an EQ. The result is a very complex overdrive that is still clear. That's been my little trade secret. It's not really a secret; I'll show anybody."<sup>177</sup>

In this passage, Bonamassa is doing music theory. He gives us no discussion of scales, harmonies, or rhythmic modulations, although he would be quite comfortable talking about those topics as well. Instead, Bonamassa delivers an intense prescriptive analysis of timbre using the keywords that circulate in guitarist consumer culture. Terms like Marshall amp, headroom, and complex overdrive are indexical clusters that are widely known to his readers. But while they signify complex, multifaceted sonic experiences they are grounded by a fiduciary link to the

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<sup>176</sup> Curtis Fondalay, *Tone Wizards: Interviews with Top Guitarists and Gear Gurus on the Quest for the Ultimate Sound*. Self-Published, 2015, 202.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid,

musical instrument marketplace. In short, guitar sound is imprecise in its semiotics but precise in its resonance with attendees to shared sonic experiences in relation to specific products.

Unpacking these keywords is a rabbit hole. Terms like “Fender-style amp” do not neatly map on to measurable sonic phenomena like subharmonic activation. They are also not completely described by the idiosyncratic ways products are used to attain them, such as tube saturation or specific chains of effects. However, I have given a glossary below of my best approximation of what Bonamassa may mean by each timbral signifier in an attempt to show the general communicability of such phrases.<sup>178</sup>

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Marshall Amp | Referencing an amplifier made by the Marshall Company, also called “British Sound” or “growl.” This almost always refers to EL34 or EL 84 tube driven amplifiers with between 50 and 100 watts of output power that are either original to the 1960s or recreations of said models. Marshall amps are generally considered to have a darker and punchier sound than other brands with high emphasis on lows and high mids. <sup>179</sup> |
| High         | High frequencies for most products are usually between 6 and 8 kHz, although the term can refer to manipulation of frequencies as low as 2 kHz and as high as 16 kHz. <sup>180</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Low          | Low frequencies for most products are between 60 and 150 Hz. <sup>181</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Saturation   | Simultaneously references the level to which a sound is distorted (fully saturated = fully distorted) and the physical act of reaching a high enough level of power, that the vacuum tubes in an amp achieve an unrestricted electron flow between the cathode and the plate. Most tube amps cannot actually achieve “true saturation” as they are limited and it would be                                                                |

<sup>178</sup> This glossary is based both on information learned from employee training materials, web forum discussions, and articles that detail the specifications of popular guitar amplifiers and pedals. I purposefully draw from the same sort of materials that many of my interlocutors use as a reference point for their definitions of sound. This may mean that certain definitions do not exactly match up with industrial specifications as outlined in signal processing manuals. Instead, I seek here to elucidate the clustered indices of such terms as they are understood in guitarist consumer culture performance practice using the kinds of materials my interlocutors study.

<sup>179</sup> “JVM410H,” Marshall.com, accessed May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <https://marshall.com/amps/products/amps/jvm/jvm410h>

<sup>180</sup> Alex Lynham, “A Guitarist’s Guide to EQ: How to Make your Guitar Tone Bigger and Better than Ever Before,” *Guitar World*, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.guitarworld.com/features/a-guitarists-guide-to-eq-how-to-make-your-guitar-tone-bigger-and-better-than-ever-before>

<sup>181</sup> “MXR M108S Ten Band Graphic EQ Product Manual,” Jim Dunlop, accessed May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <https://www.jimdunlop.com/content/manuals/M108S.pdf>

|                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    | dangerous. Sonic distortion maxes out before true saturation occurs. However, the sonic perception as to how much power is being pushed through the tubes is called saturation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Scooped            | Referring to a dip in amplitude for a specific guitar sound in the 500 hz to 1.6 kHz range. This is a desirable sound for rhythm guitar and power chord playing but needs to be augmented for soloists so they can cut through the mix. <sup>182</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Top                | A slightly more general reference to high frequencies that is often used to describe the perceived balance between highs and lows.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Bottom             | The same as top but for low frequencies.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Fender Amp         | Referencing the sound of an amplifier made by Fender, most commonly the Twin Reverb, Super Reverb, or Bassman. Also called “American sound” or “twang.” Most American amps use 6V6 or 6L6 tubes and favor the low-mids and high frequencies, resulting in a smoother, brighter sound. <sup>183</sup>                                                                                                                                                  |
| Narrower Frequency | A shrinking inward of the most audible frequency bands                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Bright Switch      | A switch found on most 1960s and 1970s era Fender Twin Reverb amplifiers that activates a capacitor that connects the high pass audio filters (which are responsible for equalization) with a part of the volume potentiometer (knob) called the wiper (varies resistance). It boosts the amplitude of high frequencies so they form a larger part of the balance at low volumes where generally low frequencies would overpower them. <sup>184</sup> |
| Jubilee            | Referencing the 1987 Marshall Silver Jubilee, which was a very popular amp amongst heavy metal guitarists and has been reissued multiple times. The Jubilee was based on the 60s era JCM800, but allowed for variable power, meaning it could saturate at lower volumes. In comparison to other Marshalls, the Jubilee is generally understood to sound a bit more nasally and favors high-mids. <sup>185</sup>                                       |

<sup>182</sup> Joe Gore, “The Recording Guitarist: Is it a Sin to Scoop your Mids?” *Premier Guitar*, August 31, 2015, <https://www.premiarguitar.com/diy/joe-gores-recording-guitarist/scooped-mids-guitar>

<sup>183</sup> Prosound HQ, “British vs. American Amps: The Complete Guide,” <https://prosoundhq.com/british-vs-american-amps-the-complete-guide/>

<sup>184</sup> Tone\_Terrific, “Understanding Fender Bright Switch,” posted by coltranemi2012, November 11, 2013 <https://www.thegearpage.net/board/index.php?threads/understanding-fender-bright-switch.1346771/>

<sup>185</sup> “The History of the Silver Jubilee,” Marshall.com, accessed May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2022, <https://marshall.com/amps/products/amps/jvm/jvm410h> <https://marshall.com/live-for-music/history/history-of-the-silver-jubilee>

|                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stacked Mid Range  | “Stacking” refers to using multiple products to attack the same frequency bands. In terms of “stacking mids,” he means using two amps to specifically augment a target frequency range of around 1-2 kHz. A common technique to take control of a frequency band is to eliminate it from the amp (roll off the mids) and then use a multitude of booster pedals to replace the mids that offer more specific control in that crucial range. <sup>186</sup> |
| Base Sound         | This does not mean bass or low. This means the resultant sound from manipulating the power functions only, before augmenting equalization from the knobs that control the tone stack filters (presence, eq, brightness, etc).                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Balanced           | Balance refers to the level of equalization across the guitar’s entire spectrum of about 500 Hz to 16kHz. Meaning can change with context, but in general it means a reasonably flat experienced volume of highs, high mids, mids, low mids, and lows. Because under different circumstances each frequency hits our ears different, the amplitudes are almost never “balanced,” instead the perception of acoustic balance is at stake.                   |
| Full Range         | The full range of a guitar is, for most products, between 60 Hz and 16kHz. A “full range” sound uses techniques to sonify elements of each frequency in between.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Headroom           | The perceived volume level between what is being played and where saturation or clipping would become unwieldy. When talking about clean sounds, it means the level of volume you can play before tube distortion. When talking about distorted sounds, it means the level of saturation before “breakup,” or unsatisfactory fuzzing that occurs when the power of the amp overloads its ability to create clear sound.                                    |
| Working too hard   | A guitar sound that is strained or operating near the limit of its abilities.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| EQ                 | An equalization pedal such as the MXR ten-band EQ or the Boss GE-7 that augments the signal before it enters the power stage of the amplifier.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Blasting the Input | Increasing the signal voltage before it is amplified by using a pedal that boosts the signal before plugging into the amp. For amp purists, this is usually a bad thing as it hinders the amplifier’s ability to do its job. It can be an unsatisfactory side-effect of using a pedal like an equalizer or some delays like the Echoplex. For common usage, it is a necessary thing to drive louder                                                        |

<sup>186</sup> “Tone Stacking with Two Amps,” *Premier Guitar*, April 6, 2012, <https://www.premierguitar.com/pro-advice/tone-tips/how-to-use-two-amps-at-once>.

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                   | sounds out of smaller amplifiers. Sometimes, guitarists purposefully blast the input through “channel jumping,” meaning that they connect two channels on an amplifier with a small cable to get access to the idiosyncratic tone profiles of each channel and increase the signal level to the power amp. |
| Complex Overdrive | Complexity generally refers to the overall quality of the overdrive sound. It can reference subharmonic activation, an idiosyncratic mix of high and low frequencies, or varying degrees of even saturation. In general, “complex” here can stand in for “good sounding.”                                  |
| Clear             | Overdrive that is “clear” or “transparent” references an inaudibility of the equipment working to produce a sound. There is a further discussion of the meaning of “clear overdrive” in chapter Five.                                                                                                      |

I do not claim this glossary to be authoritative. Quite the contrary, these descriptions represent my best attempt to encircle a sense of core meaning to each timbral descriptor, which I hold to be indexically clustered, that is specific to the guitarist consumer public. Descriptors like ‘blasting the input’ or ‘complex overdrive’ may seem to be idiosyncratic or onomatopoeic ways of describing sound that are personal to Bonamassa. In fact, to guitarists in the know, they are evocative of clusters of sonic meaning that hold as much descriptive weight as western theoretical concepts such as quarter tones or authentic cadences. Moreover, these clusters of meaning are economically reified in the sense that they exist within a marketplace of sound. If there are any doubts as to whether or not a “Marshall sound” is real, one only has to visit their website where it is specifically hailed and evaluated.

Music theory may do well to change its general consideration of timbral descriptors to be theory in practice, rather than sonic objectifiers that needed to be hermeneutically processed through its historical toolkit. There already exists a heuristic method to properly unpack what Bonamassa is saying about timbre in this passage. The training grounds are found in the world of popular music making.

### **Drastic Allure: \$119.99 plus tax**

Sound can seem troublesome to students of capitalism and often serves as a case-study for those searching for material that is either representative of or antithetical to the mechanics of capital. There is perhaps no better example of this than Jacques Attali’s 1977 work *Noise: The*

*Political Economy of Music*, which broadly outlines the ways that changing understandings of music portend large scale changes in economic epistemology. Attali considers noise to be a basic sonic unit without which “nothing essential happens”.<sup>187</sup> Music is “the organization of noise” and Attali claims that this organization precipitates into societal organization.<sup>188</sup> In short, Attali inverts classical Marxist divisions between base and superstructure, claiming that the superstructural element of music is prophetic to social change

Attali’s equation of noise to chaos, music to organization, and his claim that changes in sonic epistemology can speak to, and even portend, changes in economic structure heightens the stakes for sonic scholarship. Those following Attali’s lead deploy sound studies to discover the edges of capitalist epistemology concluding that sound’s resistance to full subsumption into capitalist logic presents opportunities for exploring life beyond capital’s borders. Greg Hainge, Marie Thompson, and David Novak all follow this scholarly track and build theories of sound that are antagonistic to common-place logics.

Sound does have a powerful ability to problematize capitalism from both material and abstract perspectives. It is relatively resistant to containerization and materially destabilizes boundaries and borders that capital would prefer to remain intact. On the other side of the coin however, sound produces and reflects upon capitalist rationality. Robin James, reading Foucault through Attali, suggests that contemporary neoliberal capitalism “uses the laws of acoustics as the mode of capitalist production in general”.<sup>189</sup> She argues that the tenets of deregulation and statistical rationality that make up the core of neoliberal capitalist logic find an apt idol in sonic materiality. A perfect neoliberal subject would move just like a sound. It would cross borders with impunity, perform a sense of individualism, and operate along measurable strata. Tara Rodgers similarly discusses sound as materially analogous with capitalist, patriarchal hegemony. The politics of sonic wave control describe, rather than destabilize, the gender dichotomies that feed capitalist control.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. by Brian Massumi, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977): 2

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>189</sup> Robin James, “Neoliberal Noise: Attali, Foucault, & the Biopolitics of Uncool,” in *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 52/2 (2014): 140.

<sup>190</sup> Tara Rodgers, “Towards a Feminist Epistemology of Sound: Refiguring Waves in Audio-Technical Discourse,” in *Engaging the World: Thinking after Irigaray* ed by. Mary Rawlinson, (SUNY Press: Albany, NY, 2013): 195-214.

Standing in a place like Music World alerts one to the fact that, for all of its potential for dissent, sound is well understood by capitalism. Besides it being an analogous system for capitalist control, sound lives as a product that is subject to market logic. Let us for a minute imagine that sounds were traded as a commodity on stock markets much like gold or cotton. Sounds have as much of a material worth as any other commodity. They travel the globe, fluctuate in value, and generate billions of dollars a year in wealth. Sounds can be captured and stockpiled in the form of recordings and the promise of sounds to come can be controlled in terms of training and sonic equipment. Theoretically, its markets could be measured, traded, and regulated. What would these sounds cost? By what parameters would corporate algorithms predict sonic futures? What sonic parameters would delineate material differences between sonic commodities? Could a sudden resurgence of grunge in the United States portend a few cents rise in “fuzzy” guitar sounds in the United Kingdom? Would more sounds be hailed as “fuzzy” to capitalize on this market surge? Could this create popularity in terms of musical taste and the types of sounds produced across the globe?

This already happens, albeit not with the speed and dexterity of stock trading. Sonic products such as guitar pedals, synthesizers, and headphones are continuously re-packaged to respond to changing tastes and developing technology. Prices rise and fall according to specific sounds’ collective desirability. As I have shown, much of the focus of timbre studies surrounds what timbre is, but few people have asked “where does timbre happen?” One answer is, clearly, in the musical instrument marketplace where timbre’s contemporary market power is directly attributable to its referential flexibility.

Pitch and volume are widely understood as having specific referents and they do not make for very good markets in contemporary capitalism. This is not to say that they were never marketized. One could argue that sonorities such as the tri-tone were once understood according to the epistemic logics of the middle-ages where “good” and “bad” sounds were chiefly judged according to the ethics of the church. But today, it does not make very much sense to deem pitches as good, bad, expensive, or inexpensive outside of perhaps an examination of the marketplace of musical taste. It is exactly this proximity between timbral definition and taste that consistently inspires scholars concerned with timbral ontology. Isabela van Elferen has recently

called this unpredictability as “precisely the core of timbre’s aesthetic surprise” and therefore the kernel for its status as music’s most troublesome epistemological object.<sup>191</sup>

To summarize, we know a lot about timbre’s contradictions. It is material, yet ineffable. It is personal, yet communally recognizable. It is difficult to scientifically qualify, but easy to describe in the vernacular. Throughout this chapter, I have proposed setting aside the project of teasing out these contradictions. Instead I conclude that timbre’s stickiness has less to do with what it is, than how it happens. Van Elferen suggests in her introduction that “the sound of a tree falling in a wood still has a timbre even if there are no ears around to hear it.”<sup>192</sup> I am not so sure. It surely produces sound, but without discerning listeners to attempt to negotiate the properties of said sound, I propose that timbre does not happen. In short, timbre requires a breaching question and a recognition of mutual symbolic unintelligibility. Timbre happens in the social and can thus become subsumed within market logics as it has been in the musical instrument industry.

Van Elferen describes timbre as engendering a “drastic allure,” pointing to the paradox of its existence as being the very attribute that makes it irresistible to listeners. She resists any ontological definition of timbre, instead focusing on timbre’s inhabiting of the space between an “unstable thing” and an “ungraspable object.”<sup>193</sup> Timbral descriptors such as “grittiness” are as much a signifier of product value as they are sonic referents. They allow the “object” of timbre to not only be grasped but traded. While timbre’s sonic material referent is clustered and unclear, its economic referent is stable and itemizable enough to be included on a profit loss statement. The aporia between timbre’s existence as an “object” and a “thing” is the condition that makes it the subject of romantic attachment, but it is also the condition that makes timbre so freely commoditizable. In other words, timbre’s “drastic allure” could not only be said to be highly generative of scholarly work, but also a cornerstone of the negotiation of sonic value in the musical instrument industry.

The challenge of timbre studies comes in both working around sound’s drastic allure, while also closely attuning to the ways that ideology co-opts timbral vacuity. In the fluent timbral understandings that make up the foundational texts of the guitarist consumer public, we see this challenge laid bare.

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<sup>191</sup> Van Elferen, *Timbre: Paradox, Materialism, Vibrational Aesthetics*, (Bloomsbury Academic: New York, 2021): 5

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Van Elferen, “Drastic Allure,” 630.

## **Chapter 3: When Distortion was Noisy -- Guitar Sounds in Capitalist Historiography**

### **Distorted Truths**

The history of rock guitar cannot be extricated from the history of instruments and gear, and, although rock reverberates through a manifold mixture of sounds, guitar distortion is singularly recognizable as its most emblematic sonic feature. Guitar distortion is so intrinsically linked with rock's history, that its very sonic nature is often allegorized as sympathetic with the overall significance of the genre's emergence. Hagiographical stories of distortion's first usages parallel claims on the relatively sudden eruption of rock as a distinct genre in the 1950s. Intensifications of distorted sounds ring out comfortably beside increasingly radical rock politics through the late 20th century. In all, the history of guitar distortion is inseparable from the history of rock and distortion has carried a consistent epic allegory. Guitar distortion is understood both in scholarship and in the popular media to sound the revolutionary spirit rock has come to claim.

In this chapter, I interrogate the sonic history of guitar distortion and attempt to untangle some of the ideological work it accomplishes in the sounded temporality of rock. I critically analyze guitar distortion from the position of a 21st century listener and practitioner, paying particular attention to the ways that distorted sounds of the past are recontextualized to serve the historiographical agendas of neoliberal capitalist rationality. I begin by analyzing frequently told discovery stories of guitar distortion, which typically involve an accidental discovery of sonic potentiality through using abused equipment. Importantly, I will neither attempt to give a definitive history of guitar distortion, nor evaluate the veracity of these stories that circulate widely regarding distortion "invention" or "discovery," depending on the storyteller's perspective. Instead, by treating these stories as industrial mythology, I find that the repetition of tropes claim distortion to be, not a diffuse sonic phenomenon, but a discrete product that emerged in the 20th century through a teleological history of progress.

I argue that by figuring distortion as part of a generalized teleology of productivity in late capitalism, sonic histories found in online commentary, scholarship, industrial advertising campaigns, and print media reinforce a racist and patriarchal historiography. The myths

surrounding distortion's invention create sharp lines of pre-history and history, encoding past sounds as uncontrollable and Other, while current sounds are considered to be engineered, perfected, and encapsulated by the market. I further contend that this prevalent historical consciousness validates the market's contemporary hailing of distortion as a technological product as it has been molded from an unbridled past, straightened, whitened, and controlled. In doing so, distortion sounds the benefits of relentless innovation of late capitalism and has accrued an official historiography that repeats the tenets of entrepreneurial ethics and neoliberal rationality. The historical consideration of distortion as a usable sonic tool frames sound as resource, distortion as product, and the musicians who developed its usage as inventor-innovators. Particularly in the musical instrument market, attention to distortion's history invites consumers to recast Rock history under the historiographical banner of capitalist prowess.

I continue this discussion by asking how the metaphors of violence common to discussions of guitar distortion perform similar historiographical assumptions, hailing sound as a product. From the very beginning, distortion has been characterized as a violent sound both in terms of the means of its production (pushing musical equipment to the point of damage) and in terms of affect on the listener (complaints of physical pain). Even as the novelty of distortion has worn off, the musical instrument industry continues to revel in metaphors of weaponization. The distortion industry is littered with examples of products whose marketing emphasize increasing loudness, sonic abuse, and explicit references to weapons of war and sexual domination. As I survey some of these examples, I ask how an intensifying politics of hypermasculine domination has cemented distortion's proximity to a larger capitalist historical outlooks of male prowess. Following Tara Rodgers, I examine distortion as a sound that is the result of what, following Luce Irigaray, calls a moment of "male birth," and how consistent descriptions of the sound as quintessentially masculine encourage an understanding of Rock history as fundamentally anti-feminist.<sup>194</sup>

To conclude, I will ask how a historiographical analysis of guitar distortion may speak to conversations in sound studies surrounding the political agency of noise. I contend that distortion and noise are not the same, both in terms of ontology and historical meaning. Following sound students such as David Novak and Steve Goodman, I analyze distortion's proximity to noise in

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<sup>194</sup> Tara Rodgers, "Toward a Feminist Epistemology of Sound: Refiguring Waves in Audio-Technological Discourse," in *Engaging the World: Thinking after Irigaray*, ed. Mary Rawlins (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2018):195-214.

terms of its potentiality for sounding political disruption. I conclude that, if distortion ever was noisy, its contemporary ideological linkages to patriarchal-capitalist control make it difficult to imagine a future where it may be noisy once again.

### **Always be Innovating**

Music history has always reserved a special place for its geniuses and innovators. Its addiction to the contributions of successful white men has been a systemic affliction since the 19th century. Tia DeNora's 1997 book *Beethoven and the Construction of Musical Genius*, articulates this critique. DeNora deconstructs the celebration of musical genius and concludes that it is representative of both the specific exclusivities allotted to composers with patronage and the popularity of post-enlightenment natural philosophy. DeNora contextualizes genius as a sociological bias of the times, and the music revolutionary's reputation still largely follows romantic ideals.

While it can be argued that the romantic consideration of musical genius has never left us, the myth-building enterprise of music history has bent to encompass a definition of the musical revolutionary that is less naturalistic and more economically minded. In short, the hero of contemporary musical myth is not the irrepressible genius, but the unshakable entrepreneur. This is especially true in the world of popular music, where success has been quantifiably measurable since the introduction of Billboard charts in 1936. Now, ideas of natural musical genius can be separated from that of the driven musical innovator. The image of the first can somewhat require a lack of economic activity, while the second is marked by their contribution to capitalist progress.

Guitar distortion offers some lucid examples of recent myth-making that construct a discontinuous history of 20th century musical progress. As one of the most celebrated sounds of 20th and 21st century music, there is a large amount of popular attention to its history. The earliest uses of guitar distortion are perennially debated topics that I have frequently encountered in my ethnographic research on twenty-first century guitarist consumer culture. In the past five years alone, there have been documentaries (such as *Fuzz the Sound that Revolutionized the World*), podcasts (All Things Considered December 13<sup>th</sup> 2014 by Allyson McCabe), and numerous print media articles that lionize the first uses of guitar distortion as a revolutionary sonic moment of 20<sup>th</sup> century music. In addition to these published accounts, there is a robust

community of guitar sound connoisseurs communicating in a litany of online messaging platforms such as The Gear Page and Harmony Central, that practice a diversified armchair history, sharing earlier and earlier examples of guitar distortion that resembles the sort of “backdating” projects found in some musicological investigations of clausulae family trees and romanticisms.

The various narratives of the discovery of guitar distortion follow a consistent narrative mold that assumes sound as unbridled, the musician or producer as a disruptive innovator, and the legacy as paradigm shifting. In my field work, I have found that many guitarists like to tell some version of this story with a revolving cast of characters. There is a story of guitarist Paul Burlinson discovering a tube missing in his Fender Deluxe amplifier before recording a 1956 recording session with Johnny Burnette.<sup>195</sup> There are stories of Charlie Christian cranking amplifiers past their limits to try and emulate a saxophone.<sup>196</sup> But the most enduring and popular story that retells the first usage of guitar distortion by far, surrounds the Sun Records March 1951 recording of “Rocket 88” by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats.

### **“Rocket 88”**

The story, as it is frequently retold in rock history compendiums and as lore between musicians, begins with an accident. Saxophonist Jackie Brenston and his band were traveling on Memphis Highway 61 to Sam Phillips’s first Sun Records studio. Somewhere along the way, the driver hit a bump and guitarist Willy Kizart’s bass amplifier fell off their truck. Upon arriving at the studio, it was clear the amplifier had been damaged as it fuzzed and sputtered. Producer Sam Phillips, who would later become famous for his collaboration with Elvis Presley, intervened to save the session. In an interview, Phillips remembers, “when it fell, that burst the speaker cone. We had no way of getting it fixed.... It would probably have taken a couple of days, so we started playing around with the damn thing.”<sup>197</sup> Phillips stuffed the speaker cone with newspaper in order to muffle the sputtering, and the amp began to create a distorted sound he compared to a saxophone. Instead of burying the sound in the mix, Phillips gave it a heavy presence in the mix. The resulting sound that emanated from the broken-down amplifier became the track’s signature

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<sup>195</sup> Baker Rorick, “Paul Burlinson: Train Keeps Rollin’,” *Vintage Guitar Magazine*, March 1998, <https://www.vintageguitar.com/2900/paul-burlison/>.

<sup>196</sup> Amy Lee, “Charlie Christian Wanted to Play Hot Tenor!” in *Metronome*, February 1940.

<sup>197</sup> Robert Palmer, *Rock & Roll: An Unruly History*, (New York: Harmony Books, 1995): 203-204.

timbre achieving a legendary status in the rock community. The track went on to reach number 1 on the R&B charts in 1951 and would later be recognized as one of the first successful Rock 'n' Roll tracks of the early 1950s.

The reasons Rocket 88 is often cited as an early example of what would become known as Rock 'n' Roll is not only reducible to the guitar's sound. The track's upbeat jump-blues style, lyrical themes celebrating teenage frivolity, and Jackie Brenston's blues-shouting vocals firmly place it within the parameters of the genre. It is worth mentioning that discussions of the distorted timbre of the guitar are notably absent in many rock history books written in the 20th century. For instance, Robert Palmer's 1995 book and PBS series *Rock and Roll: An Unruly History* briefly tells the story of the busted amplifier, but dedicates much more time to the automobile-focused lyrics of "Rocket 88" in situating the track within his lineage of rock history.<sup>198</sup> Similarly, Nick Tosches's 1984 book *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll* strongly argues for Jackie Brenston's inclusion as a prominent figure in Rock history due to his involvement with "Rocket 88", but leaves out the story of Kizart's broken guitar amp entirely.<sup>199</sup>

There are even differences in primary source accounts of the story. Sam Phillips consistently told the s broken amplifier story until his death in 2003, using "Rocket 88" as an example of his recording philosophy. In a 1986 Rolling Stone interview he retold his process of stuffing the amp with newspapers, saying "I have no doubt in my mind that this was the first true rock & roll record....The more unconventional it sounded, the more interested I would become in it."<sup>200</sup> Interestingly, Ike Turner did not seem to put too much emphasis on the distorted guitar sound. In a 1995 interview as part of the PBS documentary series *Rock Renegades*, Turner at first doesn't remember the story as the interviewer expects him to. When he recalls the car accident, he corrects the interviewer saying that it was an upright bass that got broken and that the amp made a little fuzz before moving away from the topic.<sup>201</sup>

I want to stress that my position here is not to evaluate the veracity of this story or make any claims to contradict the accounts of the people there. Whatever may have happened, this story has undeniably become a firmly planted legend in the canon of not only rock history, but

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>199</sup> Nick Tosches, *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984): 108.

<sup>200</sup> Elizabeth Kaye, "Sam Phillips: The Rolling Stone Interview," *The Rolling Stone*, February 13th, 1986, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/sam-phillips-the-rolling-stone-interview-122988/>

<sup>201</sup> Ike Turner, "Rock and Roll Renegades: Interview with Ike Turner [part 2 of 3]," *GBH Archives*, November 1995, video, 08:10, [https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_A447C751880B4828BE676C77CAC8BAF2#at\\_490.148\\_s](https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_A447C751880B4828BE676C77CAC8BAF2#at_490.148_s)

the product history of the electric guitar as distortion's promethean moment. The many modern accounts of the 1951 recording session nearly always include a joyous focus on the legend of Kizart's amplifier, accentuating the importance of the distorted guitar sound as a key part of Rock's novelty and historical importance. For instance, a 2019 article "Culture Sonar" identifies the track's "buzzing and distorting on record" as the "key elements of rock and roll."<sup>202</sup> In a 2014 episode of Seattle based KNKX public radio, John Kessler and Nick Morrison feature various recordings that influenced early rock, proclaiming "Rocket 88" to be the "first-ever Rock and Roll song" due to its distorted guitar. "There's still one very important ingredient in rock and roll: a distorted guitar...Distortion is a sound, but it also implies a sense of being out of control. Rock and Roll is not safe. And if it is safe, it's not rock and roll."<sup>203</sup>

Aside from what has been printed, I have been involved in countless conversations at Music World with shoppers who, with a showing of pride, repeat the story of "Rocket 88." These guitarists revel in the powerful history of guitar distortion and perform this folk knowledge as part of musician pedigree. I had one customer specifically ask if we had any "broken amplifiers" in the back that he could buy in order to recreate early 50s distortion. I encountered many other customers who used "Rocket 88" as a sonic reference point for discussing early Rock sounds, almost always accompanying that description with a retelling of the story. They imply that guitar distortion was laid waiting to be discovered up until 1951. Once it erupted onto the scene music was changed forever. This is less of a myth of naturalistic musical genius, and more of a myth of intentional scientific innovation. It is exactly because the "Rocket 88" myth has so much staying power and visceral importance to many musicians' sonic historical consciousness that we must examine the ways it encodes the sounds of guitar distortions past.

### **Intentionality and the "Male Birth" of Distortion**

What separates the usage of distortion in "Rocket 88" from previously recorded distorted sounds? This is a majorly debated topic amongst guitar sound aficionados. There are many

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<sup>202</sup> Kit O'Toole, "'Rocket 88': One of The Pioneering Songs of Rock," *Culture Sonar*, August 8th, 2019, <https://www.culturesonar.com/rocket-88-one-of-the-pioneering-songs-of-rock/>

<sup>203</sup> John Kressler and Nick Morrison, "This We Agree was the First Ever Recorded Rock and Roll Song," *Behind the Beat*, KNKX Public Radio, audio, March 4th, 2014, <https://www.knkx.org/behind-the-beat/2014-03-04/this-we-agree-was-the-first-ever-recorded-rock-and-roll-song>

earlier examples of recordings that feature distorted guitars. But, advocates for “Rocket 88’s” sonic significance emphasize that “Rocket 88” was the first track to use the sound “intentionally.”

Intentionality of use is a key concept in positioning guitar distortion as a product. It also delimits the contributions and usages of guitar distortion that predate its adoption as a studio technique. A 2014 forum on [progressiveears.org](http://progressiveears.org) contains a characteristic discussion surrounding this question. User “No Pride” subtly dismisses distorted sound from bebop jazz guitarists as tangential to the consideration of the forum, which largely surrounds the Willie Kizart legend, saying: “As for distorted guitar, I remember hearing a boot of a jazz jam session in somebody's home with Charlie Parker, and the guitar player, George Freeman had a pretty distorted sound; that had to be in the early '50s. I doubt that the distortion was intentional (probably just a little amplifier that couldn't handle the volume), but it existed nonetheless.”<sup>204</sup> Other conversations online about, for instance, Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s 1938 recording of “Rock Me” or Mary Osborne’s live recordings of “Rose Room” — both of which clearly contain the sounds of overdriven amplifiers — the question of intentionality disregards them as truly salient historical moments. Instead, many of these accounts work to highlight the ways distortion is used with abandon, connecting the sound not to a display of virtuosity or technological control but instead the feminized, and racialized, domains of accidents and carnality. Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s guitar “howls and screams,” according to one *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* article regarding her Rock Hall Inauguration, connecting the sound to an extension of her body rather than the willful use of technique.<sup>205</sup> Insistence on the intentionality of distortion’s usage, automatically casts it as a “technique” rather than a sound and creates historical divisions surrounding artist’s usage as either a natural extension of their musicality, or a calculated intervention into the sonic landscape.

Arguments in online forums on the history of distortion set up similar divisions by dissecting the famous origin stories against their performed fluency in the limits of guitar technology. ‘Usable’ distortion vs. unusable distortion becomes a central concern. Take for

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<sup>204</sup> User No Pride, post to “Page Didn’t Invent the Distorted Guitar Sound,” *Progressiveears.com*, July 11th, 2014, 11:43 AM, <https://www.progressiveears.org/forum/archive/index.php/t-9742.html>

<sup>205</sup> Melissa Ruggieri, “Sister Rosetta Tharpe: Singer Influenced Key Rock ‘n’ Roll Figures,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 12th, 2018, <https://www.ajc.com/entertainment/music/sister-rosetta-tharpe-singer-influenced-key-rock-roll-figures/UTzkipIsRNvvenWoaTGamtM/>

instance part of this 2011 exchange on *The Gear Page* where user PGISSI states, “I have heard the sound of sliced speakers, cone movement causes the edges of the slice to oscillate at a much higher freq than the rest of the cone, uncontrollably so, it’s not remotely musical...the last thing it sounds like is usable distortion.”<sup>206</sup>

In these stories, intentionality towards usability is an aesthetic activity that encodes what Jennifer Lynn Stoeve has called a sonic color line between Black musicians and white male engineers.<sup>207</sup> It divides the history of distortion into a “prehistory,” where distorted sounds are present but not thought about, to a “history” where distorted sounds become an integral compositional tool of rock production. We can see these narratives emerging in the focus on Sam Phillip’s role in the Jackie Brenston recording. Phillip’s decision to not only include Kizart’s distorted guitar is conveyed as risky, brave, and revolutionary from the standpoint that the sound was difficult to control. In *Good Rockin’ Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock and Roll*, authors Colin Escot and Martin Hawkins explicitly make this claim, saying:

“Rather than submerge the distorted sound of Kizart's guitar, Phillips took a chance and over amplified it, making it the centerpiece of the rhythm track. Kizart played a simple boogie riff in unison with Ike Turner's piano. Raymond Hill contributed two screeching tenor sax solos, and Brenston rode over the top with a hugely confident vocal that belied his tender years. Phillips later characterized "Rocket 88" as the first rock 'n' roll record. Its raucous, unbridled energy certainly foreshadowed much that was to follow, although arguably it owed a greater debt to what had come before.”<sup>208</sup>

This is very much in line with the myth-making practices Phillips surrounded himself with throughout his whole career, acting as a white savior and genius engineer/entrepreneur with an idea to capture and control black music (particularly Delta Blues) and sell it to a white audience. Yes, the account admits, Phillips owes something to “what had come before,” but the risks he ostensibly undertook in producing a song with distorted sounds reinforce the assumption that distortion only came to exist as a distinct timbre when it was inaugurated as a product and technique available to engineers. The focus on Phillips’s intentionality of distortion usage by “making it the centerpiece of the track” greatly credits him with the creative agency of catalyzing

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<sup>206</sup> User PGGSI, post to “Amp Distortion History Question,” *Thegearpage.net*, February 3rd, 2011, <https://www.thegearpage.net/board/index.php?threads/amp-distortion-history-question.845063/page-2>

<sup>207</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoeve, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

<sup>208</sup> Colin Escot and Martin Hawkins, *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the Birth of Rock 'N' Roll*, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2017): 36.

the Rock paradigm shift. The account highlights the difficulties in wrangling a “raucous” sound and packaging it into an accessible framework.

This perfectly demonstrates the positioning of Phillips’s agency as what Tara Rodgers has called a “male birth” moment, subtly relegating the other musician’s contributions as simple extensions of their embodied musical practice.<sup>209</sup> In her work on the epistemology of electronic music, Rodgers considers the historiographical biases of scientific naturalism in sound terminology. Following Irigaray, Rodgers analyzes the objectification of sound as a “wave” as a mechanism of sonic control, comparing sonic terminology metaphors of nautical mastery. She highlights the ways terminologies that define sound as a controllable variable instantiate moments of “male-birth” that “delimit who and what counts” in sound and music.<sup>210</sup> In short, by considering sound to follow a teleological history of mastery, sound becomes enmeshed in patriarchal histories of scientific progress.

“Rocket 88” tells the story of a “male birth” of distortion, drawing a defined gender and color line across popular music history. Phillips’s account explicitly downplays the contributions of musicians like Ike Turner, Jackie Brenston, and Willy Kizart to highlight what he sees as the true historical lineage of rock: the development of production. Black musicians in the studio have little to no agency to be intentional with regards to distortion’s usage in popular retellings of the “Rocket 88” story. Their use of distortion is figured as naturalistic, accidental, and without compositional merit. The act of playing with distortion is effectively separated into prehistory and history, and the moment of Sam Phillips’s intentionality is the central catalytic event. The same is true of the accounts of Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Mary Osborne. For them, distortion is not discussed as an intentional compositional decision, rather, as part of a sonic prehistory where the sound is considered carnal.

In this style of mythmaking, intentionality becomes a framework by which parties interested in the history of guitar distortion—and thus Rock in general—distinguish the moment that a sound becomes the property of a discontinuous intellectual history. Inherently, intentionality of distortion use also marks the moment when the sound exits the realm of embodied praxis that is coded as Black and/or feminine and enters the domain of composition

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<sup>209</sup> Rodgers, “Toward a Feminist Epistemology”, 213.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 215.

that is coded as white and/or masculine. Distortion is implicitly hailed as technology in histories that intend to uncover its progeny.

### **Domination and Vibrational Politics in a Guitar Shop**

From the very early stages of my fieldwork, I was made acutely aware of the challenges of maintaining sonic personal space in a store filled with musicians who liked to play very loudly. As previously discussed, the open outline of the floor creates natural sonic divisions between departments, which I have experienced repeatedly as I made the thousands of trips between the showroom and the warehouse. On a usual day, the sounds merge seamlessly as if someone is pushing a crossfader between drum tracks, DJ sets, heavy metal riffs, and the scratchy clanging of acoustic guitars. But this soundtrack is interrupted frequently by players who challenge the sonic architecture of the space, asserting their own sonic presence in a variety of ways.

One such moment occurred during a sleepy Sunday morning shift in August of 2017. I entered the shop at 10:00 AM and began performing daily opening chores that had been assigned. While polishing Stratocasters and verifying the price tags on the sprawling amplifier floor, I began to hear an excruciatingly loud guitar echoing from a showroom dedicated to high-end and vintage guitars that made up the store's easternmost department. Even though I was nearly sixty feet away and the room was encased by thick glass walls and sound absorbent studio insulation, the overdriven blues riffs carried throughout the store, drowning out the conversations of the early-morning customers that wandered the sales floor.

Ken, the other associate on duty that morning, shot me a sharp disapproving look with an air of frustration, almost as if to say, "here we go again." Indeed, sales associates often needed to gently approach customers who were playing too loud and wake them out of their hypnotic state to ask them to please turn down. This was never one of our favorite chores as many customers were liable to protest, or at least feign adjusting the amplifier before returning to high volume shredding. Ken's glance was akin to a standoff: who was going to venture into the din and save the eardrums of the employees and customers?

I lost this non-verbal battle, presumably because I was a couple of feet closer to the room. I put down the guitar I was polishing and walked towards the glass door. With each step, the air grew thicker with abrasive vibrations, causing me at one point to cover my ears with my hands

only dropping them to pull the metal handle. As the door swung open, the sound was near deafening to the point that it was difficult to discern which key the guitar was being played in, let alone what song was being attempted. The room was empty, save for a man in his 30s dressed in a white collared shirt perched on a stool in front of a Marshall Plexi Half-stack amplifier.

The customer's back was to me, but I could tell from the empty guitar stand to his right that he had chosen a Gibson Les Paul Traditional II, a model fitted with not only high powered "Classic 57" pickups, but also a 20-decibel boost switch that could make the guitar even louder. The amp had also been "jumped," a technique that is commonly used with Marshall amplifiers to boost the output power. By connecting the two channels with a second instrument cable, the customer had managed to nearly double the volume of the already excruciatingly loud 100-watt power amp. At this point, it was apparent that we were not only dealing with a huge amount of volume, but also a risk of damaging the store's property.

I inched forward and began to call out for the customer. "Sir," I first said forcefully, but timidly, my voice getting pushed back at me by the unrelenting sound like a kite in a thunderstorm. I tried again with more of a yell, "Sir!" I exclaimed trying to fight back, but still to no avail. It wasn't until I came around him and put my hand on top of the amp that he abruptly ceased playing. After such a prolonged sonic attack, the silence was physically painful, and I became instantly aware of a slight ringing in my ears as the echo of the last chord faded away. The man didn't look at me, instead piercing a fiery gaze at the amp's control board with visible aggression.

Before I had the chance to politely ask if he could turn down a bit or inform him that we don't allow customers to jump amps in the store, he softly spoke to the speaker. "If you turn this down, I'm walking right out of this store and not buying fucking anything," he said before adding an ominous "be careful." Taken aback, I contemplated my next step. Should I allow him to continue colonizing the sonic space of the entire store in the hopes he might spend \$3000 on an amplifier? Should I remind him politely of store policy and not care if he walks away? Should I go get the store manager and pass the buck? Before I had the chance to respond he resumed playing furious hair metal riffs, forcibly denying me the opportunity to respond. Feeling heated, annoyed, and abused (both physically by the sound and verbally by his attitude) I left the room and called for the store manager James over the store intercom.

James, a tall, thin Houston native who relocated to New York to open the Times Square location prided himself on his talent to defuse any situation. This pride was well-earned, and I had no doubt he would be able to deal with this peacefully. Already onto the customer, James marched towards the high-end room and yelled forcefully from the door, “Hey Man, it’s gotta come down.” Once the playing had ceased, he qualified his request saying, “We love having you here and it sounds great, but it’s gotta’ come down. People are complaining.” The pissed-off customer put the guitar on the stand, shouted more than a few obscenities at James and then bolted for the escalators. The amp was left buzzing loudly from some sort of broken connection and James unplugged it to take to the repair department for a check-up. I never did see that amplifier again and sometimes wondered where it went as I walked by the empty space on the floor.

This moment, to be sure, was an outlying example of the vibrational ecology of Music World, but it speaks to the politics of sonic domination that undergird many guitarists’ logic of sonic presence. Loudness, a material attribute of sound that can be felt as much as it is heard, is a necessary corollary of Tone, but at times is also an antithetical partner. But it would be wrong to chalk up the projection of sonic domination to loudness alone. As Steve Goodman writes in *Sonic Warfare*:

“the problem of solely prioritizing the amplitude axis (between loudness and quietness) when considering the politics of sonic intensity is that usually it comes at the expense of a much more complex set of affective resonances distributed across the frequency spectrum...In other words, to a micropolitics of amplitude must be added a micropolitics of frequency.”<sup>211</sup>

Goodman argues that in addition to paying attention to the sonic power of the “amplitude axis” we should also consider the use of frequency, citing his concept of “bass materialism” as an important stratum of sonic domination. True, the thick-bass rich sounds emanating from the Marshall amplifier traveled much further through the sonic barriers set up throughout the store (pillars, glass doors, insulation, and other vibrating instruments all modulated the frequencies experienced by bodies outside of the immediate space). But I became less interested in the mechanics of this sonic domination, than for the reasoning. Why do distorted guitar sounds dominate? Why is the act of using the guitar specifically, with its immense and specific amplified sounds so prevalent in the retail space?

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<sup>211</sup> Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012): 193.

First, the problem of customers attempting to sonically dominate an area of the store is not at all unique to the guitar department. The drum department, with its enclosed sound-proof cymbal room, has a reputation for being chaotic and filled with teenagers and Manhattan workers on their lunch break looking to let off physical steam by attacking the instruments with barbarian fervor. Similarly, the DJ department, filled with Serato controllers and CDJ's often pulsates with the volume of a club as amateur DJ's use the equipment to hone their skills. But when I asked employees Mitch and Blake of the other departments about the practice of telling people to "turn it down," I was surprised to find their experiences to be different from those of us who spent most of our days in the guitar department. "People usually get it," Mitch said candidly saying he rarely had a problem with customers encroaching on other players' sonic space. As for DJ's, Blake responded that he usually just came and turned the volume down on the master mixer and was rarely met with much resistance.

I am not arguing that there is something especially brash, rude, or eccentric about guitar players that accounts for these different experiences, but the omnipresence of this problem with loudness on the floor does open up lines of inquiry into the equations of loudness, power, and gender in guitarist sonic culture. Indeed, many musicological studies that focus on the gendered performance of guitar use loudness as the constitutive baseline strata in power. Walser links loudness with discourses of white, male power and heroism, saying:

"Western constructions of masculinity often include conflicting imperatives regarding assertive, spectacular display, and rigid self-control.... Musically, heavy metal articulates a dialectic of controlling power and transcendent freedom. Metal songs usually include impressive technical and rhetorical feats on the electric guitar, counterposed with an experience of power and control that is built up through vocal extremes, guitar power chords, distortion, and the sheer volume of bass and drums."<sup>212</sup>

For Walser and others, sheer volume —whether it occurs on record, in a concert hall, or in a guitar shop— is a key attribute of hypermasculine performance in a rock-based context. In these accounts, distortion is linked with loudness as a dominative sonic characteristic. Walser quotes a *Guitar Player* magazine interview with blues guitarist Lonnie Mack to exemplify this feeling. Mack says, "Distortion gives that feeling of ultimate power. The more distortion you get, the more satisfying it is. There's something slightly superhuman, psychologically speaking, about the sustain, the nearly endless notes."<sup>213</sup> Walser connects this feeling of power to male

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<sup>212</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*: 107-108.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

heteronormative understandings of carnal power of emission and domination. But the domination that distortion engenders is not limited to dominating sonic spaces or bodies, there is a subplot of dominating the *sound* of distortion itself based on the understanding that it was previously wild, dangerous, and uncontrollable. In accounts of amp mutilation, early fuzz box design, and the trajectory towards complete sonic saturations of heavy metal, distortion is weaponized and controlling the weapon becomes a point of affective pleasure for the players.

### Weaponizing Distortion

Accounts of guitar distortion often repeat tropes of distortion being cultivated and dominated, taking over the sound's agency to do intentional damage. Distortion is frequently talked about with forceful, militaristic language communicating the immense affective antagonism the sound presented to the sonic status quo of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century United States. These accounts accentuate both the sound's brutality as well as its carnal affective potential. Take, for example Tolinsky and DiPerna's description of distortion's political messaging when they write "The resources of feedback and distortion allowed an electric guitar to evoke a nuclear meltdown, a dive-bombing aircraft, the ominous thrum of heavy machinery."<sup>214</sup> Another telling example can be found in *Vice* article entitled "Ride the Feedback: A Brief history of Guitar Distortion," claiming: "The fifty watt amplifier was a machine gun, changing music in the same way that the weapon changed warfare," or, later on in the same article, "extreme amplification captures human powerlessness in the face of technology, but it also presents a way to fight back. To our eardrums' dismay, amp, speaker, and distortion technologies will only improve as musicians seek more punishing levels of volume".<sup>215</sup> It is clear that, to many, distortion's history is a pleasurable violent one and some distortion origin myths instantiate the sound by way of destruction and mutilation.

Link Wray and his Ray Men's 1958 instrumental single "Rumble," is another story in distortion's history that is often repeated to valorize the sound's violent history. By his own admission, Link Wray achieved the signature fuzz tone of his guitar by purposefully poking holes in his amplifier, saying in an interview "When I made 'Rumble' they didn't have no

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<sup>214</sup> Brad Tolinsky and Alan Di Perna, *Play it Loud: An Epic History of the Style, Sound, and Revolution of the Electric Guitar*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017): xiv.

<sup>215</sup> J. J. Anselmi, "Ride the Feedback: A Brief History of Guitar Distortion," *Vice*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mbpaaa/ride-the-feedback-a-brief-history-of-guitar-distortion>

[effects] boxes, right, so I had to get my own distortion. So I was searchin' for sounds, and to get the distortion I had to punch holes in my amplifier speakers with a pencil.”<sup>216</sup> There is also the story that, despite Rumble being entirely instrumental, the track was banned from American radio play for fear of starting a riot. This detail is sometimes directly linked to the overwhelming volume and distortion of the instrumental track. In *Rolling Stone*'s 2005 obituary for Ray, James Sullivan writes “As legend has it, Wray poked a pencil through the cone of his amplifier to achieve the song's groundbreaking fuzz tone. Its ragged, ominous chords, overdriven and dragged to a crawl, sounded like an invitation to a knife fight. At a time of national hysteria over juvenile delinquency, many cultural scolds took the song's implied threat literally.”<sup>217</sup> The ban is more likely linked to the fact that the song's title referenced gang violence.

Link Wray is not the only guitarist who sought to produce distorted tones through amp mutilation. Roy Buchanan and Dave Davies have both repeatedly stated that they used razor blades to destroy speaker cones in amplifiers in order to achieve the fuzz tones their early sixties recordings feature. Recollections of Jimi Hendrix, perhaps the best-known guitar destroyer of the 1960s, and his distorted guitar sounds are often talked about in militaristic terms. Hendrix's amp technician Nate Shalgo once reverently wrote, “I always say he didn't play a song so much as he beat it up. His notes were gunshots. His chords were bombs. His solos were firing squads. Other guitarists are too gentle.”<sup>218</sup>

Themes of weaponization and mass destruction are prevalent in modern guitar pedal advertising, especially amongst pedals that offer powerful distortion sounds. Death by Audio advertises their Fuzz War pedal saying, “Call in the Army, the Navy, Scotland Yard, your mom, and the Mario Brothers! You'll need all the help you can get to stop this endless wall of fuzz from raging! This kill all circuit explodes the meanest, nastiest, most insane distortion to make you the ruler of the fuzz universe.” Similarly, Retro Mechanical Effect's “Electron Fuzz Custom” pedal includes knobs labeled “pain” and “hurt,” along with a volume unit meter that strongly resembles a Geiger counter.

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<sup>216</sup> Steve Newton, “Link Wray: My One and Only Interview with the Inventor of the Raunchy Riff” *Georgia Straight*, July, 3rd, 1997, <https://earofnewt.com/2014/06/29/link-wray-my-one-and-only-interview-with-the-inventor-of-the-raunchy-riff/>

<sup>217</sup> James Sullivan, “Guitarist Link Wray Dies,” *Rolling Stone*, November 21st, 2005, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/guitarist-link-wray-dies-106991/>

<sup>218</sup> Keaton Patti, “Voodoo Child: Hendrix's Guitar Tech,” *Medium.com*, June 5th, 2017, <https://medium.com/@KeatonPatti/voodoo-child-hendrixs-guitar-tech-3a7e45cb8fd4>

This is far from the only explicit connection between distortion and physical violence drawn upon in guitar marketing. There is the JHS Double Barrel, where two separate distortion pedals are combined into one and likened to a shotgun. The Fender Pugilist distortion pedal promises to add “heavyweight gain to your rig.” The Electro Harmonix Operation Overlord is emblazoned with images of soldiers storming the beaches of Normandy with machine guns. Even general slang words used amongst electric guitarists such as ax, shredding, arsenal, and gat all connect sound and violence.<sup>219</sup>



Figure 3.1: Image of RML Electron Fuzz Distortion Box (left)<sup>220</sup> and the JHS Double Barrel Overdrive (right)<sup>221</sup>

There is no question that distortion has the power to hurt and lends itself well to the materialist sonic domination of space. Waksman, Walser, and Goodman have all rightly connected sonic dominion to hypermasculine performance in rock. But the celebration of distortion’s capacity to act as a weapon and its roots in destructive activity such as destroying amplifiers or burning guitars also does important ideological work in qualifying a gendered history of distortion as an industrial sound. Continuous emphasis of distortion’s capabilities of affective violence contributes to a large meta-historical understanding of distortion as a quasi-mystical, wild sound, that is brought under control through processes of ingenuity and prowess. It effectively equates the sound, and the products which create it, to a weapon not only in spirit,

<sup>219</sup> Axe is a commonly used word for a guitar. Shredding means either to play very quickly and powerfully, or, more generally, to practice. Arsenal is used frequently to describe a guitarist’s complete collection of gear including guitars, amps, pedals, and other accessories. Gat is a term I have heard specifically from customers from Australia and New Zealand to describe their electric guitars.

<sup>220</sup> “Electron Fuzz Custom,” Retro Mechanical Labs FX, <https://rmlfx.com/archives/711>.

<sup>221</sup> “Double Barrel Pedal,” JHS Pedals, accessed May 16, 2022, <https://www.jhspedals.info/double-barrel-v4>.

but in a teleological progression of weapons technology that moves from unwieldiness to systems of production, control, and intensification. Much like the emphasis on intentionality in early distortion usage, emphasis on its weaponization hails the history of the sound as a product history.

### **Distortion as Product**

Attempts to define distortion can suffer the same trappings of vacuity common to all timbres. As a sonic phenomenon, it is easy enough to produce and recognize according to techniques in sound engineering and signal processing. Distortion involves either a planned or unplanned manipulation of a given input through the mediation of some piece of equipment. Most generally, nearly all audio effects could be grouped under the umbrella of distortion, but, in practice, the term is most frequently reserved for processes that fundamentally alter a base signal by way of amplification.

Glenn White and Gary J. Louie's book *The Audio Dictionary*, a widely used textbook in sound engineering programs, defines distortion as separable into six subtypes according to the different circumstances of their production. The dictionary defines most common types of guitar distortion as "nonlinear distortion, manifesting as harmonic distortion or intermodulation distortion," meaning that the amplifying equipment changes the waveform of a given input through the process of amplification.<sup>222</sup> These defining characteristics of distortion are so general, they become oxymoronic with closer analysis. White and Louie acknowledge this in the same paragraph where they attempt to clinically describe distortion with a tempered admission that "for many years engineers have struggled to formulate an objective measure of the subjective effects of non-linear distortion, but this has proved to be a nearly impossible task."<sup>223</sup> Fundamentally, the existence of a distorted sound requires an a priori non-distorted sound, which can never be fully realized. Therefore, as distortion is defined, it is simultaneously polemicized: a sonic allegory of the cave. But this does not change the fact that distortion has material impact and is the basis for a billion-dollar market of sonic products. In light of this, I contend that instead of asking what distortion is, perhaps we should ask, what does distortion signify?

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<sup>222</sup> Glenn D. White and Gary J. Louie, *The Audio Dictionary: 3rd Edition*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005): 114.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

For many, distortion sounds out both the aesthetic and ideological messaging of Rock, erupting into mid-20<sup>th</sup> century recordings with a cataclysmic message of excess and refusal of musical norms. Distortion usually involves physical strain on the amplifier, and some scholars highlight its signification of hypermasculine desire. As I have previously mentioned, Robert Walser has written much to this end, saying “distortion functions as a sign of extreme power and intense expression by overflowing its channels and materializing the exceptional effort that produces it.”<sup>224</sup> Walser continues to link distortion with compositional style in heavy metal music, for instance musicians’ increased affinity for the open-fifth “power chord” in heavily distorted genres like heavy metal.<sup>225</sup> The affective presence of a distorted power chord, for Walser, physically reifies the dominative, masculine ideology of Rock in the 1970s and 1980.

Distortion is also often discussed as offering profound insight into the core paradoxes of sonic logics, signifying the very liminality of sound itself. Stefan Helmreich has written that listening to distortion generates larger questions of sonic presence, arguing that if we practice a careful transductive anthropology, we may well realize that the conditions of presence are, at their core, distorted and mangled.<sup>226</sup> Band of Susan’s founder Robert Poss makes similar points, when he claims that distortion is polemical to “myths of sonic neutrality,” and therefore becomes “the seasoning that makes bland musical foodstuffs palatable.”<sup>227</sup> “Distortion is truth,” he says, highlighting the importance of the sound to the sonic philosophies of professional guitarists.<sup>228</sup>

The problematic ontology of distortion is linked to — and can sometimes be conflated with — the ontology of noise. Marie Thompson and Greg Hainge are interested in the philosophical boundaries of noise, searching for a way to liberate noise from its status as a purely relational concept. Thompson, for instance, draws on affect theory to “recognize noise as a perturbing force-relation that, for better or for worse, induces a change.”<sup>229</sup> Rather than “characterizing noise as a type of sound or a value judgment that is made of sound,” as she argues most noise scholarship does, Thompson focuses on noise’s bodily affect as proof of its

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<sup>224</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 42.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>226</sup> Stefan Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life: Essays in the Anthropology of Biology and Beyond*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015): 225.

<sup>227</sup> Robert Poss, “Distortion is Truth,” in *Leonardo Music Journal* volume 8 1998 45-48, 45

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect, and Aesthetic Moralism*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 42.

materialist positivity.<sup>230</sup> Hainge's ontology of noise searches for a similarly materialist definition of noise. Following Deleuze's inversion of difference to be a productive rather than reductive force, Hainge highlights the fact that noise is constitutive to all sound.<sup>231</sup> Distortion, which is a noisy sound, often exemplifies the types of sonic politics imbued with the relational perturbances of noise. Indeed, we have already reviewed examples of rock fans and critics, crediting distortion with sounding out the core political significance of rock as a genre that partially defined itself as offering escapism from normativity and order.

But distortion has another life and history, one not based in aesthetics or theory, but in a global industry. Here, distortion is not a condition of sound or a constituent element in all sounds. Its ontology is not up for debate. Its affective presence and muddled semiotics certainly provoke interesting conversations about sound and politics, but, importantly, the sound itself is also highly transactional and valuable in a global musical instrument market. In a place like Music World, distortion is a commodity amongst others. Distorted guitar sounds are a major sonic focus of the multi-billion-dollar musical instrument industry, most prominently through sales of effects pedals and amplifiers which promise authentic and controllable ranges of distorted guitar sound. According to the 2019 National Association of Music Merchants (or NAMM) global report, which is seen as the definitive summation of musical industry statistics, effects pedals alone accounted for over 100 million dollars in sales in the United States alone.<sup>232</sup> This is not in and of itself proof of distortion's specific market power, but it is demonstrative of the extent to which the musical instrument industry has subsumed distortion—and other sounds like it—as fully commoditized objects that circulate in a consumer culture and a product market. Rising interest in boutique amplifiers and effects pedals have sparked excitement amongst musical instrument industry professionals. A comment from the 2015 NAMM report states, in a cheekily incredulous tone, "One of the brightest spots in the market was effects pedals...Chalk up the gains to fickle guitarists .... they have returned to the tonal authenticity of the humble pedal." This comment relishes the market potentiality of guitar pedals, a majority of which create distortion.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013): 7.

<sup>232</sup> National Association of Music Merchants, *2019 NAMM Global Report*, ed. Causby Challacombe and Erin Block, 13.

<sup>233</sup> National Association of Music Merchants, *2015 NAMM Global Report*, ed. Causby Challacombe and Erin Block, 11.

The industrial importance of guitar distortion has created an economic sonic history of the sound that is able to be containerized and traded, mostly in the form of amplifiers and guitar pedals. This industrial history can be heard, and it spans from distortion's "invention" in the early 1950s through a litany of 20th and 21st century products that promise temporalized sound. For instance, a consumer looking to produce a 1960s era fuzz sound can easily find products such as the ElectroHarmonix Satisfaction pedal, which is specifically designed to emulate a British Invasion era guitar distortion. Customers searching for ultra-saturated distortion like the sounds used by 1980's guitarists, can purchase an JHS Space Commander which is emblazoned with a retro, 80s arcade style graphic.

In these examples, the distorted sounds and the products that create them are inexorable and, therefore, distorted sounds themselves signify specific temporalities. This is problematic to some metaphysical considerations of sound. Jonathan Cohen argues that reducing sound to its relationship with time is based on inaccurate considerations of sounds being "individuals" as opposed to being "abstract properties."<sup>234</sup> He writes, "it is generally held that concrete individuals can but abstract properties cannot occupy temporal locations and extents, so this conclusion would provide one way of securing the needed conclusion that sounds are more closely bound up with time than other sensible qualities."<sup>235</sup> Cohen seeks to liberate sound from the historical trappings of visual color, ascribing it with an atemporal power to crisscross history. This view is largely challenged by sound students, but, more often than not, to emphasize sound's power to fluidly move through time rather than be indentured to temporality. For instance, Stephen Kennedy's book *Future Sounds: The Temporality of Noise*, argues against Cohen, and, following Attali, highlighting noise as a "premonitory" sound.<sup>236</sup> In this vein, sonic temporality signifies the passage of time.

Distortion producing products, such as pedals or amplifiers, offer a specific type of temporal experience of sound that are backwards looking rather than future oriented. In Cohen's terminology, we might say that distortion offers a way for sounds to become individuals, thereby accruing historical solidity. A distortion pedal can effectively bypass the metaphysical concerns

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<sup>234</sup> Jonathan Cohen, "Sounds and Temporality" in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics: Volume 5*, ed. Dean Zimmerman, 303–320 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010): 305

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 306.

<sup>236</sup> Stephen Kennedy, *Future Sounds: The Temporality of Noise*, (Burlington, VT: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing): 4.

surrounding sound and time, offering a relatively simple consideration of its sound as a pointed signifier of past musical moments. I believe this is exactly what one customer meant when he told me that the reason he liked buying distortion pedals was because he thought of them as “sort of a musical time machine.”

Sounded temporality is a key component of distortion’s industrial value, much in the way that terroir and vintage figures into the value of wine. In guitarist consumer culture, temporal designators like “vintage” or “70s” are just as common as more frequently studied timbral designators like “crunchy” or “heavy.” Knowledge of guitar distortion’s industrial history and the way the sound has changed through the 20<sup>th</sup> century has become a key part of sonic evaluation. At the 2019 NAMM show, the largest musical instrument trade show in the world held at the Anaheim Convention Center, Ibanez included a display of their tube screamer line, neatly organized into a timeline of its company’s sonic history. Guitar shop floor-rooms often organize their pedals and amplifiers along the lines of sonic age, not necessarily by the actual age of the product, but the age the product’s sound suggests. At corporate guitar shops like Music World, standardized merchandising templates sometimes dictate that pedals are grouped according to the sonic period. I have personally spent hours rearranging cabinets of pedals at Music World, ensuring that products that aim for 80s style hair-metal distortion are close together for easy shopping.

Distorted sounds effectively sell a sonic history, as guitarists can generally place a given sonic output on a sonic timeline. This necessarily configures the history of distortion —and 20<sup>th</sup> century guitar sound more generally — as a technological history of products in the consumer’s ear. Repeated stories of sudden inspiration like Jackie Brenston’s “Rocket 88” or Link Wray’s “Rumble” complement this industrial narrative by giving historiographical guidelines for distortion’s sounded temporality. If sound is a product that signifies a certain time and place, it demands a history that has a beginning.

## Unofficial Historiographies

Alecia Assmaan writes that “historiography involves a rhetorical use of language and, in spite of all claims to impartiality, a specific vantage point, an unacknowledged agenda, a hidden bias.”<sup>237</sup> For this reason, historiography has been mobilized as a powerful tool for stimulating narrative control. In anthropology, the concept of “official historiography” is reserved for historical hijacking by dictatorial governments looking to justify their means by controlling access and interpretation of historical facts. The stakes are not nearly as threatening in the construction of distortion’s historiography, but the techniques are similar. Through industrial attention and the proliferation of Rock lore, I believe I have demonstrated that distortion has accrued an unofficial historiography of capitalist progress that serves 21st century neoliberal rationality.

Neoliberal historiography emphasizes what Robin James and Shannon Winnubst have called a “logic of fungibility,” meaning that everything can be considered to have a history of transactability and financialization. This historiography is unofficial as it carries no discrete mandate, such as imperial enforcement or dictatorial erasures of historical writings, but it does appear frequently in commonplace historical consciousness. The history of guitar distortion is a great example of this, as it reveals an accepted understanding of sound’s place within a coherent product history. Understanding guitar distortion by way of a historical schema of innovation deeply affects the ways consumers listen and evaluate sounds in the current market and reinforces more general historiographical agendas that validate capitalist futures. The promethean histories of distortion are not just coded masculine or white because white men are almost always involved, but also because the casting of the sound in an epistemology of product design automatically subjugates sound to ideologies of patriarchal-capitalist control.

These retellings do important work in reproducing a late-capitalist worldview where all histories are histories of commodification, marketization, innovation, and improvement. This can be tricky territory for popular music historians to navigate. We must simultaneously recognize the financialized and commoditized nature of our objects of study, while also fighting to unravel the techniques that falsely simplify sound and music into unofficial historiographies of capitalist innovation that implicitly reproduce sonic color and gender lines. The formalist telling of popular

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<sup>237</sup> Aleida Assmaan, “Transformations between History and Memory,” in *Social Research* (75/1 49-72 Spring, 2008): 53.

musical development as a story of innovation and control is more than compatible with the neoliberal historical project of painting a picture of the past as a series of investments that have produced dividends in current aesthetic praxis.

Scholarly literature on “noise” can sometimes fall into this trap, by virtue of overemphasizing noise’s politics as anti-capitalist. Jacques Attali’s influential writings that theorize noise as polemical to the capitalist status quo have prompted many writers to intricately theorize the political potential of noise. As David Novak summarizes in *Keywords of Sound*, “the creative force of noise is not only essential to the politics of cultural identity, but also in developing alternatives to capitalism.”<sup>238</sup> While the politics of material noise certainly should be analyzed, there is a danger in disambiguating noise too much. I contend that there should be a difference between the politics of noise music and the political agencies of material-sonic objects considered noisy in general. Robin James has already launched this critique by stating that “neoliberalism works like an audio equalizer. It recycles noise, feeding it back into and thus *intensifying* signal.”<sup>239</sup> In other words, neoliberalism is capable of hijacking noise and mobilizing its political potential to serve its own goals of reimagining history. The history of distortion shows us this.

Guitar distortion may have once been noisy in the sense that Novak and other noise scholars theorize the political potential of noise to be. It may have once interjected into the sonic status-quo. But I think it would be too much of a stretch to say that the “politics of distortion,” as they exist through the retellings of distortion history, are equivalent to the politics of noise. As we track this sound and the discourses surrounding it, we uncover unofficial historiographies that mobilizes its sonic revolution to tell a story of the creative power of capitalist rationality. As we move forward in unpacking the histories of popular music mythologies and, perhaps especially, popular music’s integration with product industries we should tread carefully and try to discover ways to unsettle these historiographical biases.

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<sup>238</sup>David Novak, “Noise” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015): 131.

<sup>239</sup> Robin James, “Neoliberal Noise: Attali, Foucault, and the Biopolitics of Uncool,” *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 55 no. 2 (Spring 2014): 144. Emphasis original.

## **Chapter 4: Sounding Deregulation —The Gibson Government Series**

The previous chapters of this dissertation have considered neoliberalism in the context of its epistemological groundwork. Generally, I contend that a neoliberal frame for activities such as listening or sound production is not necessarily ascribable to specific events in the economic history of music. There are examples where one-to-one relationships can be identified — such as the rise in “customizable instruments” since the consolidation of the industry into a few core companies – but, in general, individual events fade into the background as coincidental when compared to large-scale social changes linked to neoliberalism’s epistemic supremacy across many fields of economic life.

In this chapter, I will examine a case where the messy contradictions of neoliberalism come into direct contact with the musical instrument industry by examining the circumstances surrounding the Gibson Guitar Company’s alleged infringements upon both international trade agreements and United States importation regulations in the early 2010s. After being accused of violating the Lacey Act by illegally importing Malagasy timber, Gibson embarked on a public campaign against government trade regulations. Quickly, the company’s story became embroiled in the larger political narrative of the Taxed Enough Already (or TEA party), which declared the Gibson case as unfair and exemplary of the Obama Administration’s government overreach.

In this chapter, I critically examine the circumstances of Gibson’s alleged malfeasance within the context of the company’s changing business identity. Gibson, like many other guitar manufacturers, has experienced great change since its founding in the 1920s, both in terms of their marketing focuses and the increasing global scope of their production. I offer the electric guitar as a particularly curious product to analyze in the context of globalized commodity chains. Despite being comprised of materials that are most-often sourced internationally, the electric guitar itself has maintained a strong nationalistic identity. Following Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, I unpack the guitar’s identity as a commodity. I contend that the electric guitar invites a product identity that can simultaneously celebrate the neoliberal tenets of free trade and expression, while also articulating hyper-local nationalist ideology.

I then turn to Gibson’s radical response to their prosecution, namely, their construction of guitars made from wood that was incarcerated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as

part of the investigation. Gibson deliberately appeals to a right-wing American audience by marketing these guitars as representations of their noble fight against government oppression dubbing the instruments “the Government Series.” I analyze the contradictions the Government Series guitars present, highlighting the ways political ideology creates credibility and exchange value for the product line. I end by contextualizing this micropolitical study within the push for critical organology in the academy, arguing that the case of the Gibson Government Series is a perfect example of why instruments demand to be studied as having complex social lives.

The case of Gibson’s alleged violation of lumber import law and the social fervor surrounding the Government Series Les Paul presents interesting questions into the social life of the 21st century electric guitar. Throughout this dissertation, I have focused on the machinations of guitarist consumer culture and the production of capitalist rationality through the ways guitarists consider sound. In this chapter, I shift to considering the materiality of guitars themselves, particularly in the ways that their obfuscated supply chains are both symptomatic of global capitalist networks, but also productive of what Anna Tsing calls “polyphonic assemblages.”<sup>240</sup> I ask how is it possible for a guitar like the Government Series to accumulate monetary and social worth as a symbol of American conservative resistance, when it is composed almost entirely from materials that are surreptitiously harvested from overseas plantations? How does the instrument embody the tense and often contradictory values of neoliberal rationality, both championing deregulated global trade while simultaneously celebrating right-wing anti-globalist sentiments? Finally, how does the materiality of an electric guitar, particularly its wood quality, contribute to its overall value and what evaluative methods do companies use to determine wood quality and legality?

## **The Raid**

On the morning of November 17th, 2009 employees of the Gibson Guitar Company were greeted at the doors of their Nashville, Tennessee factory by a cadre of federal agents from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. With search warrants in hand, the agents sent the staff home for the day and conducted a raid of the factory. By the end of the day, they had seized a shipment of ebony and rosewood along with computer records, documents, and six completed

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<sup>240</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015): 24

guitars.<sup>241</sup> At the time, the nature of the allegations were vague with the media simply reporting that Gibson had been accused of importing illegally harvested wood. This came as a bit of a shock to many followers of the Gibson brand. Like many other guitar companies, Gibson aligns itself with NGOs such as Greenpeace and the Rainforest Alliance, featuring both non-profits' logos on their website. At the time, CEO Henry Juskiewicz sat on the board of the Rainforest Alliance, and, when interviewed about the 2009 raid, he firmly claimed that all wood Gibson imported was vetted according to prevailing industry ethical standards. Seemingly looking to avoid a public relations disaster, Juskiewicz's responses were demure, non-specific, and professional. He commented that Gibson was "fully cooperating with agents of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as it pertains to an issue with harvested wood," only adding that he thought the government's case was unfounded.<sup>242</sup>

While the Gibson raid sent a few shockwaves through media outlets dedicated to financial news, the case lay dormant for some time. Gibson made no further mention of the 2009 raid, and instead became focused on other legal matters such as a copyright infringement suit they were bringing against the Guitar Hero video franchise. Meanwhile, the government quietly continued to build its case under the jurisdiction of US Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee Jerry Martin. According to Gibson, no criminal charges were officially filed and the government withheld the seized material.<sup>243</sup> Juskiewicz took a leave of absence from his position with the Rainforest Alliance pending the outcome of the investigation and largely remained silent on details of the investigation.<sup>244</sup> In general, the 2009 raid attracted only a small amount of media attention, with most of the commentary occurring in publications dedicated to trade and sustainability. Notably, the now defunct International Centre for Trade and Sustainability Development claimed that Gibson's case was the "the DOJ's only high-profile

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<sup>241</sup> Craig Havighurst, "Why Gibson Guitar Was Raided by the Justice Department," *The Record: Music News from NPR*, August 31st, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2011/08/31/140090116/why-gibson-guitar-was-raided-by-the-justice-department>

<sup>242</sup> Dave Itzkoff, "Guitar Plant is Raided," *The New York Times*, November 20th, 2009, [https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/21/arts/21arts-GUITARPLANTI\\_BR.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/21/arts/21arts-GUITARPLANTI_BR.html)

<sup>243</sup> Gibson Guitar Company, "Gov't Says wood is illegal if U.S. Workers Produce it," *Gibson.com*, press release, August 25th, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120418155905/http://www.gibson.com/absolutenm/templates/FeatureTemplatePressRelease.aspx?articleid=1340&zoneid=6>

<sup>244</sup> Paige McClanahan, "The Lacey Act: Timber Trade Enforcement Gets Some Teeth," *Biores: Analysis and News on Trade and Environment*, 4/1 (March 22nd, 2010), <https://ictsd.iisd.org/bridges-news/biores/news/the-lacey-act-timber-trade-enforcement-gets-some-teeth>

enforcement case under the expanded Lacey Act, but observers say that similar raids are sure to follow.”<sup>245</sup>

On August 24th, 2011 the government once again executed search warrants at Gibson factories. This time, federal agents entered two factories in Nashville and one in Memphis to enact search warrants at 8:45AM. They seized a much larger amount of wood and an unspecified number of completed guitars, shutting down the factory’s operations for the day. The next day, Juskiewicz gave a press conference outside the Memphis factory, fiercely denying any wrongdoing and accusing the government of excessively forceful action. “We had a raid with federal marshals that were armed, that came in, evacuated our factory, shut down production, sent our employees home and confiscated wood.”<sup>246</sup>

Gibson published a press release on August 25th, 2011 that outlined their aggravation in even bolder terms. The document, titled “Gov’t Says Wood is Illegal U.S Workers Produce it”, emphasizes that the guards were “armed with automatic weapons” and that they had entered the facilities “without warning or communication of any kind.” “Gibson has complied with foreign laws and believes it is innocent of ANY wrongdoing, “the press release continues, “We will fight aggressively to prove our innocence.” <sup>247</sup> This 2011 statement projects a very different tone from the demure, lawyerly responses promising cooperation after the 2009 raid. Juskiewicz also set the stakes as high as the preservation of due process itself, claiming in an interview that “Our business has been injured to millions of dollars. And we don't even have a court we can go to and say, 'Look, here's our position.'”<sup>248</sup>

After the 2011 raid, the government published more details about their allegations. Andrea Johnson, the director of forest programs at the Environmental Investigation Agency, clarified the charges against Gibson, alleging that their importation of Malagasy wood violated provisions in the 2008 revision to the Lacey Act. The 2008 revision notably changed the definitions of foreign wood to encompass lumber imported to the United States and immediately brought guitar manufacturers under its purview. Particularly, she emphasized that Gibson had

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<sup>245</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> Havighurst, “Why Gibson Guitar Was Raided.”

<sup>247</sup> Gibson Guitar Company, “Gov’t Says.”

<sup>248</sup> Havighurst, “Why Gibson Guitar was Raided.”

“been on the ground” in Madagascar to determine if the importation was legal.<sup>249</sup> Despite assessing the risks involved, the company continued to import wood, and, therefore, were liable for prosecution.

Originally enacted in 1900 and signed into law by President William McKinley, the Lacey Act is often cited as an example of egregious overreach in arguments over the limits of government enforcement on global trade. It continues to be a perennial example in American political conversations surrounding the balance between necessary regulation and government overreach. Proponents of a strong Lacey Act — such as the Rainforest Association and the Sierra Club— argue that it is a vital regulation to combat unfair trade policies and protect the United States’ environment from the invasion of foreign species.<sup>250</sup> However, critics of the regulation cite it as an example of government obstruction that hinders the process of free trade and puts an unfair burden on small businesses to vet incoming products on a global commodity chain that is difficult to authenticate.<sup>251</sup>

One of the final congressional actions of the 110<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress was to pass a five-year extension of the Food, Conservation, and Energy act of 2002 (also known as the Farm Bill). Signed into law by President George W. Bush, the 2008 Farm Bill made significant changes to the original language of the Lacey Act, significantly expanding the Act’s scope in terms of enforcement over U.S. lumber importation. Section 8204 of the 2008 bill titled “Prevention of Illegal Logging Practices” amends the Lacey Act’s definition of “plant” to include, not only

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<sup>249</sup> Molly Peterson, “Why Gibson Guitars ran afoul of logging rules, and why activists are in Anaheim for NAMM,” *Pacific Swell: Southern California Environment News and Trends*, January 19th, 2012, <https://archive.kpcc.org/blogs/environment/2012/01/19/4332/why-gibson-guitars-running-afoul-logging-rules/>

<sup>250</sup> In a statement on their website, the Sierra Club “debunks” myths about the Lacey Act’s reputation as government overreach, passionately lobbying the public to consider it necessary policy. It specifically addresses the 2008 revisions, saying “since being amended in 2008, the Lacey Act has shown a strong track record of success. It is critical that the United States continue to play a lead role in combating illegal logging by fully enforcing the Lacey Act.” Similar statements appear on other conservationists’ websites.

<sup>251</sup> There are many conservative opinions contemporaneous with the passing of the 2008 Farm Bill that assail the Lacey Act for exemplifying government overreach and over-regulation. The Heritage Foundation in particular opposed the amendments with Paul Larkin writing a strongly worded indictment of the Lacey Act in 2012 calling it “a trap for the unwary, placing honest businessmen and businesswomen at risk of criminal liability for unknowing violations of hyper-technical foreign laws and regulations.” Senator Rand Paul was well known for his opposition to the Lacey Act reforms and for calling for repeal of both the 2008 amendments to the Lacey Act, as well as other key changes dating back to the 1980s.

endangered species of wood under its purview, but all kinds of wood.<sup>252</sup> This was partially in response to the previous law's unspecific and unenforceable definitions on wood sourcing, and many manufacturer's successful sourcing from illegal forests by merely shipping logs through a third-party state or by misrepresenting the actual species. By expanding the scope of enforcement to logging in forests that did not contain endangered species, the new Lacey Act guidelines gave the government a stronger legal cause to enforce import laws and combat illegal logging practices.

These new guidelines presented immediate challenges for large guitar manufactures like Gibson, who are constantly in need of overseas wood for their manufacturing. Many varieties they use, such as Brazilian Rosewood, were already regulated by international trade agreements such as NAFTA or the CITES treaty. However, more common species of wood that made up the bulk of their importation and production, such as Basswood, Ebony, and East-Indian Rosewood, only came under the legal jurisdiction of the Lacey Act once the 2008 revisions went into effect in 2009. Suddenly, proving chain of custody of the majority of lumber imports was not only a matter of press relations, but one of serious legal risk in the United States.

In the past, most manufacturers adhered to the guidelines of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), a German based environmental non-profit that issues chain of custody certificates proclaiming wood imports as sustainably and ethically harvested. In theory, the FSC's criteria for certification also exceeds the requirements of the Lacey Act. It not only requires that the imported wood is legally harvested according to international trade laws, but also requires standards of protection for indigenous people and the environment that are not explicitly stated in many importation laws. However, FSC does not conduct its own audits and participation in their programs provides no legal indemnity.<sup>253</sup>

Gibson has a particular need for mahogany and rosewood, as they are core components of their signature Les Paul series and are not common to North American forests. The type of wood that manufacturers choose matters, as it offers one of the few objective indices for determining an instrument's value. In guitar sales, characteristic sounds of wood are tied to a given species' physical properties such as density, hardness, and grain structure. Maple,

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<sup>252</sup> Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-246, 122 Stat. 2053 (2008), <https://www.congress.gov/110/plaws/publ246/PLAW-110publ246.pdf>.

<sup>253</sup> Forest Stewardship Council, "Mission and Vision: Protecting Forests for Future Generations," FSC.org, <https://us.fsc.org/en-us/what-we-do/mission-and-vision>

mahogany, and spruce are core signifiers in guitarist consumer culture for describing the composite sounds of instruments. This discourse is so central to the acoustic guitar trade in particular that they are featured on price tags in guitar shops, with descriptors like “all mahogany back for deep, booming tone” neatly bracketing the prices and financing offers.

Furthermore, certain woods have acquired legendary aesthetic value through their historical usage and rarity. Nearly all guitar manufacturers highlight their use of “exotic woods,” such as Brazilian Rosewood, Bubinga, or Madagascar Ebony. These wood varietals have long been favored by guitar manufacturers for instilling both a worldly aesthetic quality onto their instruments and providing a tangible foothold in the tricky linguistic dance of describing instrument value. The various sonic properties of different woods are a key element of guitarists’ sonic descriptions of their instruments and are also highlighted in consumer education. For instance, in figure 4.1, a section from Oregon acoustic guitar manufacturer Breedlove’s website named “optimizing your sound” charts common sonic descriptors of different wood species.



Figure 4.1: Breedlove Guitars Tonewood Guide<sup>254</sup>

In her book *Guitar Makers: The Endurance of Artisanal Values in North America*, anthropologist Kathryn Marie Dudley finds that tone wood appreciation is a key discourse in an

<sup>254</sup> “Acoustic Guitar Tonewoods: What They Bring to your Sound,” Latest News, New and Featured Products, Breedlove Guitars, Accessed May 12, 2022, <https://breedlovemusic.com/acoustic-guitar-blog/acoustic-guitar-tonewoods-what-they-bring-to-your-sound>.

intensification of the luxury, handmade guitar market during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Calling this movement the “second golden era” of guitar lutherie, she argues that it has emerged in a contradictory economic space that is both enabled by global neoliberal economic policy while standing against the corporatist guitar companies that moved large swaths of their production overseas.<sup>255</sup> Madagascar became a key space in the global guitar trade after the Brazilian Government outlawed the exportation of Brazilian Rosewood — long the most valued tone wood in a luthier’s toolbox— as part of the 1992 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or the CITES Treaty. Rosewood and Ebony from Madagascar seemed like excellent alternatives as they possessed similar tonal qualities to Brazilian Rosewood and were legally plentiful enough to meet consumer demand for exotic wood instruments. Some environmental scholars credit the CITES protections of Brazilian Rosewood directly with the expansion of logging efforts in Madagascar to fuel both the luxury furniture market and the musical instrument market.<sup>256</sup>

It is clear that collective imports by the United States from Madagascar rose sharply in the late 1990s and early 2000s, although the extent to which the gains involved wood sourcing specifically is unclear. According to the United States Census Department, the US imported 53.3 million dollars’ worth of goods in 1992 and by 2008 was importing over 300 million Malagasy goods a year.<sup>257</sup> But, after the 2009 Malagasy Political crisis where Antananarivo mayor Andry Rajoelina led a coup d’état, trade relationships with the United States broke down. Total imports fell by nearly 75% and many guitar factories immediately stopped sourcing wood from Madagascar for fear of doing business with a potentially hostile state. As CEO of Martin Guitars Chris Martin said in an interview with NPR’s All Things Considered, “What we heard was the international community has come to the conclusion that the coup created an illegitimate government. That's when we said, 'Okay, we cannot buy any more of this wood.’”<sup>258</sup>

Doing business in a government where a coup is suspected of taking place is not in and of itself a violation of U.S. lumber importation laws such as the regulations of the Lacey Act. However, the political crisis brought new attention to the region and its chaotic history of lumber

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<sup>255</sup> Kathryn Marie Dudley, *Guitar Makers: The Endurance of Artisanal Values in North America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): xvii.

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<sup>257</sup> United States Census Bureau, “Trade in Goods with Madagascar,” Census.gov, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c7880.html>

<sup>258</sup> Havighurst, “Why Gibson Guitars.”

regulation changes. In 2006, the Malagasy government passed a series of laws banning the exportation of “unfinished” ebony, meaning wood that had not been formed into a specific product. Malagasy exporters frequently ignored this law and exported wood blanks without authority for guitar fingerboards throughout the 2000s. Rajoelina’s coup led some environmental activists to worry that illegal logging may intensify within the political chaos. But the transitional Malagasy government issued a decree in 2010 that expanded the purview of the 2006 law, outlawing the exportation of rosewood, ebony, and other precious timbers for 2-5 years.

Corruption and sideline lumber deals still ran amok in Madagascar during the political crisis. According to forestry scholar John Innes, the Malagasy government often granted companies unofficial permission to export wood by special ministerial order. Companies like Gibson, who had long-standing relationships with lumber exporters, who in turn had long-standing relationships with government officials in Madagascar, successfully subverted both the 2006 Malagasy law and the 2010 transitional government ban through unknown arrangements. Innes claims these questionably legal methods of subverting regulations are rampant in the lumber market, arguing that “it creates considerable uncertainty which, combined with the local difficulties of enforcement, have created ideal conditions for illegal logging to flourish.”<sup>259</sup>

According to the United States Government investigation, Gibson commissioned a report on the legality of wood sourcing in Madagascar, and, despite concluding that it may be a violation of Malagasy Law —therefore by extension violating the Lacey Act — ordered four shipments of Ebony and Rosewood between 2010 and 2011.<sup>260</sup> As a result, the factories were raided on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011 by federal authorities who seized hard drives, paper records, and the wood that had been allegedly trafficked. In this case, while there was no specific embargo on Malagasy lumber in the US Code, the fact that the Malagasy government had specifically restricted exports to the US made imports illegal under the Lacey Act. Gibson had allegedly circumvented these restrictions by passing lumber through India, bringing many of their imports of rosewood and ebony into question.

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<sup>259</sup> John Innes, “Madagascar Rosewood, Illegal Logging, and the Lumber Trade,” *Madagascar Conservation and Development*, Vol. 5/1 (June 2010), 6-10.

<sup>260</sup> United States Department of Justice Department of Public Affairs, “Gibson Guitar Corp. Agrees to Resolve Investigation into Lacey Act Violations,” press release, August 6th, 2012, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/gibson-guitar-corp-agrees-resolve-investigation-lacey-act-violations>

Immediately, there was an outpouring of both backlash and support from musicians. For some, the Obama administration's decision to enforce the rarely cited and over 100-year old Lacey Act was an encouraging sign that no industry, no matter how small, was exempt from laws governing the sustainable importation of wood. For others, this rare enforcement was a sign of petty transgression according to obsolete legalese. The story quickly grew from an obscure, procedural case regarding importation laws to a key example for those arguing loftier issues of governmental overreach. Cable news was peppered with celebrities like Ted Nugent fiercely defending Gibson and ultimately connecting their troubles to apocalyptic predictions of a government gone awry. In the background the lawyers met and the wood remained incarcerated in a government warehouse.

The wood was detained for four years, but, after a lengthy investigation and forceful lobbying from both Gibson and the TEA party movement, the government released large portions of the suspected cargo in 2014. The company settled out of court paying a three-hundred-thousand-dollar penalty and a fifty-thousand dollar "community service payment" to the National Fish and Wildlife foundation.<sup>261</sup> Not long after the investigation was concluded, Gibson released a line of three-hundred guitars made with the reclaimed wood. These instruments— dubbed the "Government Series" — were heavily marketed towards consumers who found the case against Gibson to be emblematic of aggressive government overreach. They included certificates that quoted the US constitution, "currency green cases," and were finished in a gray-tan lacquer sardonically named "government tan." The instruments were so successful that Gibson released another line of instruments in 2015, dubbed "Government Series II" that extended the campaign to more affordable price points, which again quickly sold out.

### **Gibson's Response**

After the second raid in 2011, both Gibson's press releases and reactions in the media quickly shifted from unassuming corporate jargon to fiery anti-bureaucratic rhetoric, repeating American conservative stances that governmental regulation is equal to economic persecution. Some articles such as CNN Money's "Gibson CEO Fight's Back," emphasize that the Lacey act is "a century old" marking it as a draconian and antiquated form of bureaucracy that does not fit

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<sup>261</sup> *ibid.*

the current paradigm of global capitalism.<sup>262</sup> CEO Henry Juskiewicz embarked on a public lobbying campaign to highlight what he saw as an egregious overreach by the Obama administration. These events coincided with the rise of the Taxed-Enough-Already (TEA) Party and the 2012-midterm elections, where Juskiewicz soon found himself rubbing shoulders with self-proclaimed constitutionalists. He appeared multiple times on radical right-wing talk show host Alex Jones's Infowars radio show and became a frequent contributor on Glenn Beck's Fox News show. Juskiewicz even began speaking at TEA Party rallies organized to critique the Obama administration's policies.<sup>263</sup> One such rally held on October 8<sup>th</sup> 2011 and titled the "Support for Gibson Guitars Against DOJ Intimidation" included speakers like Phil Valentine, Steve Gill, and Amy Kremer all of whom are closely linked with Tennessee TEA party organizations.

In these appearances, Juskiewicz oscillated between attempts to remain focused on the specific concerns of the Gibson Guitar Corporation and broader characterizations of the Obama administration's enforcement of environmental regulation as assaults on American economic freedom. He continuously shifts the argument from questions of commodity chains, to questions of labor, dubiously explaining the government's problem with his company's policies as tied to who was working the wood. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Juskiewicz claimed the government was treating his employees "like drug dealers," and also claimed the prosecutors had implied that the case would go away if Gibson outsourced their woodworking labor overseas.<sup>264</sup> Here, Juskiewicz is referencing a contested ministerial order Gibson had produced that allowed the exportation of fingerboards, but not lumber.<sup>265</sup> This was a crucial detail in determining the legality of their imports — as finished wood products do not fall under Lacey Act purview while unfinished lumber does. Juskiewicz distorts this legal question into a broader critique of the Obama administration, painting them as unfriendly to homeland manufacturing. His argument powerfully resonated with conservative and libertarian movements, and he was

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<sup>262</sup> Les Christie. "Gibson's CEO Fights Back." *CNN Money*, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011, [https://money.cnn.com/2011/09/02/smallbusiness/gibson\\_guitar/index.html](https://money.cnn.com/2011/09/02/smallbusiness/gibson_guitar/index.html)

<sup>263</sup> The "TEA" in TEA Party stands for "taxed enough already" and is also referencing the 1773 Boston tea party protest.

<sup>264</sup> James R. Hagerty and Kris Maher, "Gibson Guitar Wails on Federal Raid Over Wood," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 1st, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111903895904576542942027859286>

<sup>265</sup> Neela Banerjee, "Gibson Guitar Becomes Cause Celebre for Conservatives," *The LA Times*, September 27th, 2011, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2011-sep-27-la-na-gibson-guitar-20110928-story.html>

invited to accompany Speaker of the House John Boehner to a speech President Obama was giving on the United States job market.<sup>266</sup>

It certainly seems that, for Juszkievicz, invocations of broader conservative causes were a means to an end in securing victory in his specific case. However, groups of Gibson's supporters seized upon the story of the raids to speak to their own causes, however distant they may be from the particulars of lumber importation regulations. For instance, in an interview to publicize a Nashville rally TEA party activist Amy Kremer remarks "We have illegal immigrants crossing our borders every day, they're breaking the law. The government is not doing anything about it, but yet they're concerned about these little pieces of wood coming into our country?"<sup>267</sup> Kremer's confabulation of environmental regulation with the TEA party's protectionist, anti-immigration rhetoric was typical of right-wing commentary surrounding the Gibson raids.

Other commentators compared the government's case against Gibson with their perceived attack on the second amendment. Bob Barr, a former congressman turned conservative blogger writing for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, warned that guitar owners may "be in Uncle Sam's cross hairs," and compared the government raids to fears of firearm confiscation. In a 2011 op-ed he writes, "In 2000, Charlton Heston, then serving as president of the National Rifle Association, and fighting gun control proposals, held a flintlock rifle over his head and declared famously, "from my cold dead hands." Gibson's CEO needs to rally freedom-loving Americans similarly; raising a Les Paul Gibson guitar over his head. All Americans who believe in freedom and limited government should come to Gibson's defense; not just those who are guitar players."<sup>268</sup>

Popular guitarist Ted Nugent also made remarks that equated the confiscation of Gibson's wood with second amendment causes. In a 2012 personal blog post entitled "Crimes Against Gibson Guitars, Nugent states, "My all-American sonic-bombast weapon of choice for 50 years has been those world-class pieces of musical art, the mighty Gibson guitar. I own a stunning arsenal of them. It wouldn't surprise me if some Fed-zilla-stooge from Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr.'s Department of Gunrunning Injustice will try to tell us American

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<sup>266</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> Bernie Becker, "Tea Partiers Rally for Gibson Guitar," *The Hill*, October 9th, 2011, <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/186405-tea-partiers-rally-for-gibson-guitars>

<sup>268</sup> Bob Barr, "Gibson Guitar to Uncle Sam — "From My Cold Dead Hands," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution: The Barr Code*, August 31st, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111114154214/http://blogs.ajc.com/bob-barr-blog/2011/08/31/gibson-guitar-to-uncle-sam-%E2%80%93-%E2%80%9Cfrom-my-cold-dead-hands%E2%80%9D/>

guitarplayers that we can only buy one fully automatic Gibson guitar a month.” Nugent continues that, “Once President Romney is elected, I want him to put a commission together to identify dumb laws that serve no purpose other than to harass American citizens and businesses.... I recommend this commission start with the Lacey Act. My arsenal of Gibson guitars would howl in delight.”<sup>269</sup>

These violent and evocative proclamations imply an interesting relationship between instruments and economic ideology. For Nugent, the sound of a Gibson guitar is inherently de-regulative in the sense that it lends immense personal power to the individual player. Interfering with the flow of notes emitting from the instrument, likened to the spraying of bullets, is to commit a bureaucratic crime against the socially de-regulative forces of musical art. The guitars’ identities are identified by the hands of the player and not subject to their geographic histories. Through a complex de-regulative identity, the guitar’s social life is completely alienated from any condition of its material production. They become American weapons made from globally sourced materials. They have no historical memory of being deforested or traveling the ocean in neatly sorted shipping containers. Instead, they “howl with delight” at the prospect of governmental deregulation, by way of repealing the Lacey Act, enabling their procreation by any means necessary.

### **The Global, but still very American, Guitar**

I reported for my shift at Music World at 8:30 AM in June of 2019 and saw the sales counter littered with identical plastic tags. They resembled the kind of placard that hangs on a hotel room door, but instead of reading “do not disturb” they all boasted “made in the USA.” The management team handed each of us about thirty tags and instructed us to hang them behind every American-made guitar in the store. This included the Fender American Standard series, the Gibson Les Paul Standards, and the Paul Reed Smith Custom 24. One of my coworkers asked, “What about the PRS SE’s?” He was referencing the fact that PRS has a line of guitars where the parts are manufactured in Korea but are physically put together in the United States. “Go for it,” the manager said. The message was clear: for guitarists, even being a little bit American sells.

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<sup>269</sup> Ted Nugent, “Nugent: Crimes Against Gibson Guitars,” blog post, tednugent.com, August 22nd, 2011, <https://www.tednugent.com/nugent-crimes-against-gibson-guitars/>

For as “American” as many guitars purport to be, the supply chains that bring each instrument to Music World are global, distributed, and opaque. This is not to say that previous eras of guitar manufacturing have been fully transparent and local: it is true of course that guitars have been assembled from a multitude of global materials since the creation of the first mass-produced guitar products in the mid-20th century. However, the scope of the guitar industry’s global network has greatly expanded since the late 1980s. Not only do most large manufacturers operate factories across many countries, but also parts and raw materials are sourced from all around the globe with varying levels of supply chain transparency. This makes any economic or anthropological project surrounding the global guitar incredibly difficult. Since the guitar is a product assembled from many different parts, it is hard to determine any concrete details surrounding the origin of each necessary element.

Consider the Gibson Les Paul Standard, selling in 2021 for \$3,400 dollars before taxes.<sup>270</sup> As we work backwards from the showroom floor, the movements of this instrument and its constitutive parts becomes increasingly obfuscated with every step. A Les Paul hanging in the high-end room at Music World arrived there by truck from a corporate distribution warehouse in the Midwest United States. Before its purchase by Music World, it was constructed in Nashville, TN at the Gibson factory, proudly finalized with its famous “Made in the USA” imprint on the back of the headstock.<sup>271</sup> Machined parts used in the construction of the instrument, such as pickup covers and tuning machines, are frequently produced by European companies such as Schaller. Similarly, electronics for the Les Paul are typically manufactured in Taiwan. The wood itself is most often sourced from Southeast Asia, Africa, or South America. However, licensing agreements between these companies make it difficult to discover exactly where each part may have originated from as they infrequently boast their country of origin in service to Gibson’s brand image as an American manufacturer. The result is that, like so many 21st century products, a guitar that so famously boasts that it was “Made in the USA,” is likely composed of parts with a global history that are made invisible by both marketing and supply chain diversity.

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<sup>270</sup> This is the “street price” of the instrument, a common term in the musical instrument industry for the retailer’s MAP guidelines (minimum advertised price). Most manufacturers also designate a “list price,” also known as MSRP (Manufacturer’s Suggested Retail Price), for each piece which is substantially higher. In the cases of the 2019 Gibson Les Paul Standard, the MSRP is \$5,569.00 but nearly every retailer actually sells it for the “street price” of \$3,399.99, often pointing out the \$2,270.00 difference as “savings.”

<sup>271</sup> Gibson began stamping headstocks with “Made in the USA” in 1970. The stamp is present on most Gibson solid-body electric guitars, unless they are reissues of models from before 1970.

The contradictions inherent to the guitar's national identity are perhaps best exemplified by the most important material to guitar manufacturing: wood. Wood quality is by far the most prized and nebulous attribute of an electric guitar's value. Appraising instrumental wood quality involves many visual, sonic, and tactile evaluations. A beautifully quilted front piece, or "top," is commonly graded as "AAA" or "AA" according to its aesthetic appeal. Wood used for backs and sides of acoustic instruments are chosen for their tonal characteristics such as resonance, decay, and brightness. Neck and fingerboard woods are evaluated according to their comfortability and resilience with marketing that focuses on their playability and longevity.

The Les Paul is Gibson's flagship electric guitar model and consists of three types of wood: mahogany for the body, rosewood for the fingerboard, and maple for the neck and decorative front-piece, or "top." This formula has been more-or-less consistent since Gibson began production of the Les-Paul model in 1954, and any instruments that deviate from this basic design are designated as specialty models. Indeed, Gibson's marketing materials often reference the signature wood combination of the Les Paul as the guitar's defining characteristic. For instance, a 2013 advertisement for the Les Paul Standard boasts that the guitar "follows the same formula as the most beloved Les Pauls of all time," and that "the marriage of solid maple top and mahogany back....provides a blend of richness, depth, punch, and clarity that no single-wood guitar can provide."<sup>272</sup> The effervescent sonic qualities of wood are a key component in Gibson's branding as a luxury guitar manufacturer and become paramount to the company's justification of their ever-increasing prices.

Nearly all of the wood types used to make guitars in North America is sourced from overseas, particularly from Southeast Asia and Africa. Gibson in particular relies on relationships with plantations in Fiji to cultivate their great need of mahogany for their guitars. Depending on the price-point of an instrument, the fact that the wood is imported can either be a value-adding premium or a demonstration of cost reduction. For example, advertising copy for Epiphone Les Pauls, Gibson's lower cost manufacturer, usually makes no mention of wood source. However, higher priced instruments such as the Gibson Les Paul Standard frequently boast the country of origin as an exotic feature. Rosewood species such as East Indian Rosewood are particularly

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<sup>272</sup> Gibson Guitar Company, "Les Paul Standard," web advertisement, <https://legacy.gibson.com/Products/Electric-Guitars/Les-Paul/Gibson-USA/Les-Paul-Standard.aspx#:~:text=The%20marriage%20of%20solid%20maple,single%2Dwood%20guitar%20can%20provide.>

evocative, painting a picture in the customer's mind of the company scouring the world for premium cuts of wood.

In the 1950's, when the company first began producing solid body electric guitars, Gibson had only two import sources of Mahogany and Rosewood as both wood species are not readily found in the United States. All things considered, the kinds of trade present in the mid-twentieth century luthier business were simple transactions, with a point-to-point commodity exchange. Their local timber retailer sourced the blanks from Fiji and delivered the shipment directly to Gibson's factory in Tennessee. As the company grew, their lumber sourcing became increasingly diversified and complex. As part of Gibson's 2018 Bankruptcy filings, the company listed thirty separate firms they relied on for wood sourcing, and that is just those to whom they were indebted at the time of their bankruptcy and therefore legally obligated to name. Beyond this, each of these firms, such as "Pacific Western Timbers" to which Gibson owed \$971,758 at the time of bankruptcy, are known to have engaged in their own wood sourcing from many other nodes in the supply chain.<sup>273</sup>

The result is that a given piece of mahogany that makes its way onto a 2018 Les Paul could have been sourced from a number of forests across the globe, its geographical history becoming fully obscured by the time it is manufactured into an American guitar. Lumber mills in Southeast Asia can harvest mahogany for musical instruments to be made in the United States, as well as cabinetry in China, contributing to an alienated network of organic materials that circulate the globe. Aside from certain woods that require special certification to sell, such as Brazilian Rosewood, there is no reliable way for a consumer to track or authenticate the origin point of their guitar's individual parts

Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing has written extensively on the productivity of the disorganized commodity chains of "niche-based capitalism." Globalized flows of raw materials and products self-organize sites of raw material harvesting, evaluative sorting, manufacturing, and trading into separate economic niches that are separated by a web of complex connections. Companies often rely on the sheer complexity of their global supply

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<sup>273</sup> Publicly available trading records such as those found through the S&P Global Market Intelligence database confirm that Pacific Western Lumber (PWL) is incorporated in both the United States and Fiji and receives frequent imports of mahogany from Fiji. Again, this is just one of many trading intermediaries that Gibson relies on for lumber importation. Since Gibson is not a publicly traded company, their full records are not publicly available but their indebtedness to PWL requires them to disclose their business relationship in Chapter 11 documents.

chains to justify operations that approach “the edge of legitimacy” by admitting their inability to properly account for each node in their commodity chain. Referencing Nike, Tsing writes:

Niche-based capitalism is not omnipotent. Indeed, almost by definition, it is disorganized. Despite the paranoid exertions of top-of-the-chain firms such as Walmart, no one can fully keep track of the activities of every firm on the chain. As Nike, quoted at the start of this essay, put it, “With such cultural, societal and economic diversity, our supply chain is not only large, but complex and ever-changing, making compliance standards and assurance, as suggested by our Code of Conduct, and precise progress measurement extremely difficult.”<sup>274</sup>

Gibson used this very argument as part of their outrage towards the U.S. government’s enforcement of Lacey Act provisions. Beyond facilitating excuses for potential corporate malfeasance, supply chain confusion opens the door for companies to convincingly market their products with a fluid sense of locality. Tsing describes modern niche-based commodity chains as “infused with polyphonic rhythms,” calling attention to the complex ways commodity production is globally distributed and therefore products can accrue complex identities.<sup>275</sup>

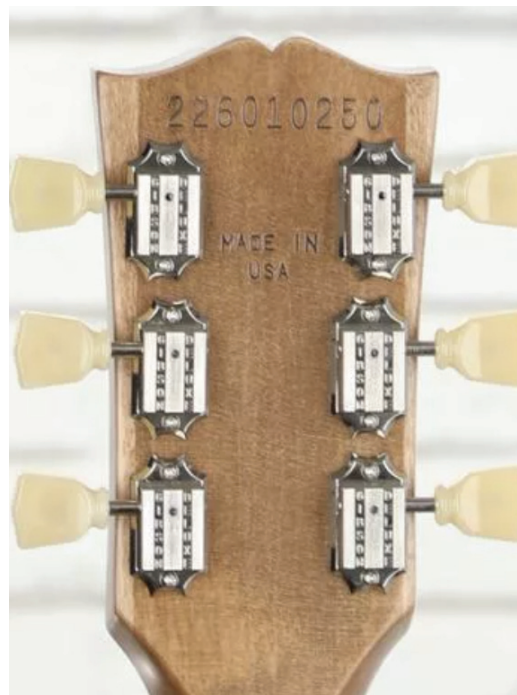


Figure 4.2: The headstock of a 2021 Gibson Les Paul Tribute at Sweetwater.com with a “Made in the USA” stamp<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Anna Tsing, “Supply Chains and the Human condition,” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture, and Society*, vol 21/2, 148-176: 172.

<sup>275</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*: 24

<sup>276</sup> Sweetwater, Gibson Les Paul Tribute Honey Burst, web page, <https://www.sweetwater.com/store/detail/LPTRFHNH--gibson-les-paul-tribute-satin-honeyburst>, Accessed December 16th, 2021.

This obfuscation is not necessarily the result of nefarious corporations looking to disguise profiteering from global outsourcing. Products like wine or drumsticks portray their national identities in marketing by leaning into the locality of their supply chain. The relative simplicity of their ingredients enables a local marketing strategy. For instance, many Vic Firth sticks consist of only a single piece of American Ash. Products like Apple iMacs or electric guitars are assembled of too many internationally sourced parts to rely on a place-based marketing schema. Instead, they accrue supra-national identities through a reduction of the supply chain to core moments in production. An Apple computer proudly situates itself as an American product by boasting that it is “Designed by Apple in California, Assembled in China” on the back of every product.<sup>277</sup>

In a qualitative study of consumer reactions to product of origin labeling, marketing scholar Stephen Saunders found that the verb “designed” does important work in constructing a hierarchy of labor, figuring “design” as a more valuable labor-act than “assembly.” In particular, Saunders is interested in Apple’s labeling of the iPod, gleaned a variety of reactions from his online interlocutors as to what the marketing slogan implies. He concludes that:

For high-tech products such as the iPod, using the term ‘designed in’ was a far more important quality cue than ‘assembled in’. It was highlighted that the design phase was where the economic value is created and where most of the manufacturing costs are located. Consumers were therefore very concerned where a product was designed but not concerned where it was assembled. Assembly was seen as the low-skilled phase in the supply chain, which could take place anywhere. The economic reality meant that the assembly had to take place in a country where labour was relatively cheap.<sup>278</sup>

Participants in Saunders’ study did reveal an understanding of Apple’s deliberate attempt to shift consumer attention away from potentially unsavory capitalization of low-cost, overseas labor by highlighting the products’ Californian identity. However, they also willfully accepted the iPod’s geographic history as intrinsic to the product’s appeal. One commentator said:

You think of California, not the actual state, with its endless dismal boulevards full of muffler shops and donut stores, but the California of memory: the Beach Boys, the Summer of Love, and the beatniks, a utopian land of opportunity, an escape, where you go when you leave behind the cold winters and your conservative parents back in Cleveland. And ‘Apple’ in California is, of course, on the literal level, a computer company, and not a very nice one, but put those words together and you think of apple orchards, and the Beatles, and you think of how Forrest Gump got rich off of Apple stock. And ‘designed in California . . .’ It’s not made. It’s designed. In California. Like a surfboard.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Apple will substitute “China” in this logo for other countries such as India or Vietnam.

<sup>278</sup> Stephen G. Saunders, “Consumer-Generated Media and Product Labelling: Designed in California, Assembled in China,” *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 34, no. 4 (2010): 474-80.

<sup>279</sup> *ibid.*

In this telling example, Apple leans on their reputation as an iconic American brand to sidestep their supra-national identity in the consumer imagination. They hail the multifarious flows of globalized labor as less important steps in the product life cycle. By de-skilling labor that has been shifted overseas, enabled by neoliberal free-trade agreements, they maintain a powerful branding image of local authenticity even as they globalize. The Apple slogan tells the consumer that labor may be globally distributed, but the more important labor is still very American.

Electric guitar marketing often relies on the same tactics. They work to maintain their American identity, even as their supply chain becomes increasingly globalized. A Gibson guitar draws from its history as a company that was solidly contained within Tennessee to create a national identity as an American icon. Marketing slogans boasting “heritage,” “freedom,” and “made in the U.S.A” work to cast away any realization that the guitar is composed of parts from multiple continents. Guitar parts traveling on shipping containers across the sea are figured as nation-less: they only achieve citizenship when they are fashioned together as an all-American instrument. Marketing encourages guitar buyers to ignore the instrument’s prehistory, except under the colonial gaze of exoticizing foreign woods. Still, these woods do not meet their potential unless they are manufactured according to American design and the product’s polyphonic origin is subsumed by the electric guitar’s geographic identity as an American product.

As they hang from hooks in thousands of guitar stores across the United States, Gibson Les Pauls do not openly perform their complex global histories. On the contrary, they suppress their polyphonic supply chain by emphasizing its symbolic status as the material representation of American rock and roll. This awkwardness is intensified by the specificity with which guitar connoisseurs attend to the sonic properties of the constituent material of given instruments. I have spent countless hours breaking four or five of the same model guitars out of boxes so the customer can choose the one that they believe has the best cut of wood. The wood’s journey from South Asia to New York does not factor into this final evaluation, and the cuts of wood destined for guitars undergo drastic shifts in categorization and evaluation in their journey from tree to store. This chain of value making celebrates deregulation as an essential ingredient to product quality.

Considering the electric guitar's geographic identity as separate from its means of production can also come from far more personal acts. Porous wooden guitar necks absorb the sweat of players and rosewood fingerboards are literally imprinted by thousands of hours of practice. The minute a guitar is purchased, it sheds its identity as a commodity. Instead, it becomes a musical partner, a time-capsule, and an idiosyncratic music-maker. At this moment, the guitar is born into a world where value is constructed in terms of its relationship with the player, not by way of its commodity lifecycle. Ethnomusicologist Eliot Bates has called for further study into the "social life of musical instruments," writing "much of the power, mystique, and allure of musical instruments, I argue, is inextricable from the myriad situations where instruments are entangled in webs of complex relationships—between humans and objects, between humans and humans, and between objects and other objects."<sup>280</sup> Bates later singles out the guitar as an instrument that lives a particularly profound social life, referencing literature where guitars are anthropomorphized and teach their players. These literary accounts of the guitar bear a great deal of similarity to the ways guitarists readily consider the socialities of their instruments in conversation. During one telling moment during my fieldwork at Music World, a customer playing a used Fender Stratocaster told me "I can feel the riffs I grew up with in this neck. Whoever had this before me played with soul," as his fingers danced through familiar, pentatonic-blues riffs.

The electric guitar's social life imbues each instrument with fluid politics. As they move through their various commodity chains, they can gain political significance. Neoliberalism is a similarly mercurial, capable of shapeshifting to meet various expectations. Electric guitars, then, become perfect champions for de-regulation, as they can perform the neoliberal ideal in a number of ways. Value making and marketing explicitly ignores many geographical details of the instrument's sourcing, and, instead, focuses on the instrument's potentiality for an idiosyncratic connection with the end-user. The preservation of the instrument's geographical vacuity facilitates a personal, social consideration of the instrument's value on the part of potential buyers. In doing so, the definition of the de-regulative ideal can simultaneously celebrate global heterogeneity (such as reveling in the supra-national sounds of exotic woods) while also bending towards protectionist stances focused on ideals of nationalism prowess and determination.

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<sup>280</sup> Bates, 364.

The electric guitar's maintenance of American identity despite its global origins is a necessary prerequisite to the special value Gibson's guitars would accrue during their various investigations. In their outrage over regulative enforcement, Gibson implies that their instruments sound the de-regulative ideals of American capitalism. Their release of the "Government Series" line of electric guitars would make this point even more explicit.

### **The Government Series**

Upon receiving the confiscated wood back from the government Gibson acted quickly, announcing limited edition "Government Series" guitars that were made from the reclaimed blanks. In the official release, Gibson boasted that the Government Series was "dedicated to a dark time in Gibson history. They also announced that, due to the limited supply of incarcerated wood blanks, only 1,750 guitars would be made. According to the Los Angeles Times, the Government Series sold out within minutes of the announcement, and it was only until a second run of Government Series guitars was produced in 2015 that they arrived on major retailer shelves.<sup>281</sup>

This move to capitalize on the constitutionalist fervor surrounding the Gibson raids was very typical of Juskiewicz's corporate philosophy. Juskiewicz originally bought the company in 1986 as part of a group of investors seeking to save the company from ruin. Gibson's previous owners, the Chicago based music company Norlin, had accrued a sour reputation and were within days of default. Norlin era Gibson guitars — meaning guitars manufactured between 1965 and 1983 when the company was under their control— are still often referred to as the worst instruments Gibson has made. It was imperative for Juskiewicz to shift the company's direction.

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, Gibson returned their focus to instrument quality, and, by and large, convinced many musicians that their instruments were once again world class. After the 2008 financial crisis, Gibson's future plans began to shift again. Juskiewicz made repeated statements that he intended on transforming the then dying musical instrument manufacturer into a lifestyle brand. Intending to make Gibson the "Nike of the music world," Juskiewicz's expansionist focus involved expanding the company's purview into the consumer

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<sup>281</sup> Ryan Faughnder, "Gibson Guitars Made with Government-seized Wood are Sold Out," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014,

audio market and even into clothing.<sup>282</sup> Through strategic purchases of audio companies such as KRK (2011), Tascam (2013), Stanton (2011), and TEAC/Esoteric (2013), Gibson self-consciously transformed itself from a legacy musical instrument manufacturer into a future-looking company with diverse investments across the musical lifestyle space. Juskiewicz proselytized this transformation in the press until he was removed as CEO in 2018 in the wake of Gibson's Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing. In an interview with *Billboard* magazine published just weeks before his dismissal, he demonstrated frustration that his decades-long strategy had not worked, saying:

[The industry is] stuck in a time warp, and the 'purists' have a very loud voice on the online forums. If you are a kid today, you have an iPad by the age of two, and if you're not offering new technology you're old. Kids today may think some music from the 50s is kind of cool here and there, but what other industry do you know that hasn't changed since the 50s? Those guitars from the 50s are what the purists want, but we have to have something new and exciting. Imagine if the camera had never changed. Innovation is a part of every business to some degree, but [the guitar industry] hates it. The kids demand it, and if you don't have it, they walk."<sup>283</sup>

Gibson's trouble with the law came exactly during the period that Juskiewicz was attempting to capitalize on the company's brand power and propel it into a post-guitar future. With the 2011 association with the constitutionalist political lifestyle, Gibson drew strong connections between customer's politics and their marketing.

The Government Series guitars are striking in their mundaneness. Hanging on the wall in a store's Gibson section, their matte finish seems to blend behind the surrounding guitars' sparkling gold or sunburst tops. This color choice seemed to be a statement, as was noticed by conservative blogger Nathan Harden, who writes "the body is painted in a custom color the company has named "Government Tan"—suitably drab—a nod to the joyless reality of living under the heavy thumb of stifling bureaucracy. I promise you, I'm not making this up. Go to the website and see for yourself."<sup>284</sup> The government series also was available in colors such as "Olive Drab" and "Gunmetal Gray."

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<sup>282</sup> Randy Lewis, "Gibson Brands transforms guitar-making into a diverse 'music lifestyle' firm," *The LA Times*, June 16th, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-gibson-brands-guitar-henry-juskiewicz-20170618-htmlstory.html>

<sup>283</sup> Isaac Weeks, "Gibson CEO Talks Challenges Facing Guitar Retail Industry: 'These Are Troubled Times'," *Billboard Pro* February 23rd, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/pro/gibson-ceo-henry-juskiewicz-guitar-retail-interview/>

<sup>284</sup> Nathan Harden, "Gibson Guitar Company Gives Feds the Finger," *Ricochet: Conservative Conversation and Community*, January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014.



Figure 4.3: A Government Series II Les Paul in Gunmetal Gray<sup>285</sup>

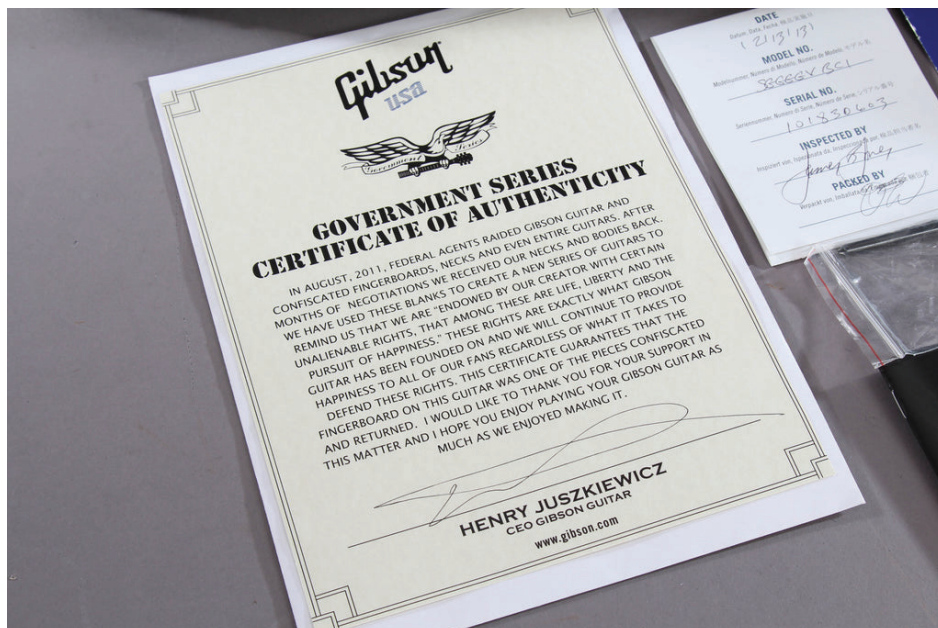


Figure 4.4: Government Series II Certificate of Authenticity<sup>286</sup>

Apart from the color choice, the copywriting used to market Government series guitars is strongly imbued with the constitutionalist values that supported Gibson through the raids. The special edition case is “currency green” closely resembling the signature color of the US dollar. The magnetic pickups are said to deliver “scorched earth tones,” evoking the jingoistic patriotism

<sup>285</sup> Government Series II, Sweetwater, Accessed May 16, 2022, <https://www.sweetwater.com/store/detail/LPSTGGVBC--gibson-government-series-les-paul-government-grey-les-paul>

<sup>286</sup> “2013 Gibson SG Government Series Dark Grey,” Guitarchimp, Accessed May 12, 2022, <https://guitarchimp.com/products/2013-gibson-sg-government-series-1-dark-grey>

of American Vietnam War supporters. The headstock features an embossed golden eagle clutching a guitar neck, an icon bears strong resemblances to TEA party iconography such as triumphant bald eagles and the iconic snake of the Gadsden Flag. The official marketing byline used in online advertisements and print media reads as a call to arms, encouraging buyers to “Fight the Powers that Be with this Powerful Les Paul.”<sup>287</sup>



Figure 4.5: Advertisement for the Gibson Government Series Les Paul in Guitar World Magazine, February 4th, 2014<sup>288</sup>

Each guitar comes with a personal note signed by Juskiewicz himself ensuring the buyer that the wood used to create the instrument was incarcerated. Printed on a cardstock aged to resemble 18<sup>th</sup> century parchment, the certificate proudly proclaims:

In August 2011, federal agents raided Gibson Guitar and confiscated fingerboards, necks and even entire guitars. After months of negotiations, we received our necks and bodies back. We have used these blanks to create a new series of guitars to remind us that we are endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These rights are exactly what Gibson Guitar has been founded on and we will continue to provide happiness to all of our fans regardless of what it takes to defend these rights. This certificate guarantees that the fingerboard on this guitar was one of the pieces confiscated and returned. I would like to thank you for your support in this matter and I hope you enjoy playing your Gibson Guitar as much as we enjoyed making it.

That the wood used in these guitars was incarcerated explicitly links the detention of the materials to an increase in cultural value. The Gibson website advertises the Government Series as “an American original now an American icon of freedom,” casting the wood’s troublesome past as a marker of revolutionary spirit.<sup>289</sup> The intense marketing surrounding the Government

<sup>287</sup> Guitar World Staff, “Gibson Guitars Announces Government Series II Les Paul” Guitar World, February 4th, 2014, <https://www.guitarworld.com/gear/gibson-guitars-announces-government-series-ii-les-paul>

<sup>288</sup>

<sup>289</sup> Gibson Guitar Corporation. “ES-335 Government Series.” Accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016. <http://www.gibson.com/Products/Electric-Guitars/2015/Memphis/ES-335-Government-Series.aspx>

Series reveals that its hefty price tag cannot be fully reduced to scarcity. Indeed, during my fieldwork, I engaged with customers who considered the instrument to be less of a collectible, and more of a performance of their political lifestyle.

I sold a Gibson Government Series guitar on one occasion in February 2016. I met a customer named John.<sup>290</sup> John had recently moved to Queens to live with relatives to pursue a career in music. In his search for a guitar, John discovered the limited-edition Government Series ES-339 hanging on the wall. It was a used instrument that the store bought one week prior. He was instantly fascinated with the instrument and especially perked up at the notion of a “currency green case.”

When I told him the story of the guitar, he began on a diatribe against government overreach as he ferociously played through a heavy distortion pedal. After about thirty minutes, he put three thousand dollars in cash on my register and gleefully read the certificate out loud. It was clear from my interaction with John that the ideological values the Government Series projected dominated his relationship with the instrument. More than sound, age, aesthetics, or scarcity, it was the guitar’s value as an extension of his political identity compelled him to make an incredible purchase decision.

The Gibson Government Series offers a rare moment of clarity in an otherwise swirling ecosystem of value. Gibson’s deliberate marketing towards libertarian ideals demonstrates the powerful ways an instrument can accrue social value that overwhelms any other specification. Upon further inspection, the commodification of an instrument’s social life is directly enabled by obfuscation of the commodity chain. The de-regulative priorities of neoliberal ideology are served at every turn. First, an increasingly polyphonic commodity chain makes the process of determining a product’s place of origin seem impossible. Second, the vacuity of geographic identity can be shaped through strategic marketing. Finally, the boundaries between product value and lifestyle can be collapsed to imbue the instrument with a social identity that can be intertwined with the player’s lifestyle. In the case of the Government Series, the target market is the constitutionalist conservative movement of the mid 2010s. The electric guitar’s political identity as a de-regulative force is endlessly pliable. The American icon can be whatever kind of American it wants to be.

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<sup>290</sup> As always, the names of my interlocutors are pseudonymized.

## Chapter 5: “The Ridiculous Hype that Offends So Many is Not of My Making”: The Klon Centaur and the Sonic Entrepreneur

As part of a 2012 “Rig Rundown” video published by the magazine *Premier Guitar*, jazz-rock guitarist Nels Cline gives viewers a tour of the expansive musical toolkit he uses when playing with the popular Chicago based band Wilco. After surveying his many amplifiers and telling various stories of how he acquired his prized guitars, Nels turns to the aspect of his rig that comprises close to half of the forty-minute video: his collection of almost thirty effects pedals spread out on two pedal boards and a small table to his right. The camera pans across each of the pedals as Cline demonstrates their usage. The camera hovers over a golden stompbox bearing three large knobs and a striking decal of a centaur poised to attack. “The lynchpin of my sound generally tends to be the Klon Centaur overdrive,” Cline says as the shot zooms in tightly to the road-worn pedal. “It’s almost infamous at this point ‘cause they’re impossible to get and cost a ton of money...but I love it.”<sup>291</sup>

To those familiar with the Klon Centaur Overdrive Pedal, Cline’s aside about the pedal’s infamy is a sardonic understatement. Since its release, the Klon Centaur has been one of the most controversial products in the guitar pedal marketplace. In 1995, guitarist and entrepreneur Bill Finnegan began selling the Klon Centaur for \$225. Between 1995 and the pedal’s discontinuation in 2009, Klon sold almost 8,000 pedals reaching a final retail-price of \$329. Today, these little golden boxes (often called “golden horsies” or referred to simply as “Klons”) commonly sell for over \$6000 on the used market. Rarely do musical products accrue this level of value increase over their lifetime, and the Klon’s price tag has triggered fervent debates amongst pedal enthusiasts surrounding questions of sound and appropriate value. Countless YouTube videos offer blind tests between the Klon and its \$50 competitors, searching for a justification for the pedal’s infamy. Reviewer West Warren compares arguments over the pedal’s worth on popular online message boards such as Harmony Central or The Gear Page to another mythological creature: Hydra, who grows three more heads when one has been cut off.<sup>292</sup> Throughout the hundreds of forums dedicated to this debate there is a wide range of superlative

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<sup>291</sup> Premier Guitar, “Rig Rundown: Wilco’s Nels Cline,” YouTube video, 38:32, Jan 24th, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GRSH8yxWjc>

<sup>292</sup> West Warren, “Builder Profile: Klon’s Bill Finnegan,” *Premier Guitar*, January 21st, 2014, <https://www.premierguitar.com/gear/bill-finnegan-klon>, accessed November 1, 2021.

opinions ranging from outright vitriol to wonderment. Some argue it is the “best pedal they’ve ever heard” or the “most desirable pedal on the planet.”<sup>293</sup> Others, bemoan it for being the “most over-hyped and overpriced used pedal in existence” or even the reason why they “hate the music business and the shockingly stupid guitar consumers.”<sup>294</sup>

Finnegan’s newer versions of the pedal —made after he reopened his operation in 2012— bear a personal statement in lieu of the mythical logo. Instead of featuring an image of a Centaur, the new pedals — dubbed “KTR” or “Klon the Reissue” — feature a curious entreaty in bold white lettering: *kindly remember: the ridiculous hype that offends so many is not of my making*. Here, Finnegan directly addresses the reputation his products have gained, attempting to manage the expectations of buyers who would undoubtedly pay far beyond market price.

In this chapter, I offer the story of the Klon Centaur as a lucid example of how neoliberal rationality shapes the marketing and reception of guitar products in the 21st century. I build on my theorization of Tone as the underlying sonic ethos by which guitarists are encouraged to consider sound’s value to consider how the Klon’s product identity reinforces neoliberal ethics of entrepreneurship, transparency, and governmentality. I contend that the market success and notoriety of the Klon Centaur is not reducible to the pedal’s scarcity. Instead, the pedal’s infamy and inflated exchange value is ascribable to its representation of entrepreneurial success. By using the Klon, guitarists contribute to their sonic individualism and configure the process of guitar sound production as what Foucault refers to as a “technology of the self.” Following Wendy Brown, Ilana Gershon, and Sarah Banet-Wiser, I analyze the powerful mythology of the Klon’s invention, the attempts to protect the secrecy of its inner workings, and conversations about the pedal found in guitarist media.

### **The Sonic-Entrepreneur-Connoisseur**

Coffee table books are a significant part of guitar aficionado’s media library — along with the magazine literally called *Guitar Aficionado* which was founded in 2009. Books like Mitch Gallagher’s *Guitar Tone: Pursuing the Ultimate Guitar Sound* or Scott Kahn’s *Modern Guitar Rigs: The Tone Fanatic’s Guide to Integrating Amps and Effects* describe methods of

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<sup>293</sup> Playrightaway, “A Review of the Most Desirable Pedal on the Planet, the Klon Centaur,” YouTube Video, 4:13, May 27th, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpE2zQhil1k>

<sup>294</sup> HTSamurai (2009, November 29), “The Klon Centaur: Per Zachary Guitars” [Online forum comment]. Message posted to <http://ilovefuzz.com/viewtopic.php?f=149&t=7468>

achieving great guitar tone with the same seriousness as any other music theoretical treatise. The story of the Klon's invention is widely circulated through these publications, through the hundreds of web forums dedicated to discussing the product, and through anecdotes shared between players as they discuss their sound. Indeed, I first heard some version of this legend at Music World, when a customer came in to sell us a Centaur. As my managers furiously sent emails to higher ups to approve a respectable offer, the Klon owner regaled me of his meeting Bill Finnegan in the 1990s, hailing him as a visionary and lamenting the fact that he needed to sell his prized pedal to pay rent.

Dave Hunter's popular coffee table book *365 Guitars, Amps, & Effects you Must Play: The Most Sublime, Bizarre, and Outrageous Gear Ever* dedicates an entire two page spread to the Klon, saying:

“Although it never really says so, the Centaur, with its simple Gain, Treble, and Output controls, is essentially a low-gain overdrive pedal designed to make an already good-sounding tube amp sound better. Used right it does so in spades and becomes one of those virtually transparent yet addictive effects that is extremely hard to switch off. Juicier overtones, larger apparent sonic size, greater dynamics, improved responsiveness— all are yours when you step on that Klon. Of course, they come at a price.”<sup>295</sup>

The story of the Klon begins in the late 1980s, when Bill Finnegan, a Boston based musician-engineer, encountered a problem: his large Fender Twin Reverb amplifier did not produce saturated distortion at the low volumes demanded by the smaller venues he frequented. After trying multiple overdrive pedals — most notably the Ibanez Tube Screamer which had been out of production since the late 1970s — he worked to invent a new overdrive circuit. The Ibanez Tube Screamer had too great an effect on the resultant sound, effectively erasing the signature overtones the Twin Reverb is known for. Finnegan was searching for a circuit that emulated the amplifier's unmediated breakup and “would make you unaware that a pedal was involved.”<sup>296</sup> Over the next few years, Finnegan enlisted the help of various friends at MIT to build the new pedal. After much experimentation, he created the Klon Centaur, a pedal that notably used germanium diodes in lieu of the silicon diodes that were more common in widely available overdrive pedals.

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<sup>295</sup> Dave Hunter, *365 Guitars, Amps, & Effects You Must Play: The Most Sublime, Bizarre, and Outrageous Gear Ever*, Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Publishing, 245.

<sup>296</sup> Warren, “Builder's Profile.”

The Klon began its life in obscurity. Over the course of the Klon's fifteen-year run, Finnegan never managed to bring his product to mass-market scale. By his own description, he built 8,000 Centaurs on a "on a cheap folding card table in a succession of small apartments."<sup>297</sup> This did not stop the pedal from becoming popular in elite musician circles. After celebrity endorsements by Jeff Beck and Peter Frampton, the waiting list grew from months to years. This scarcity propelled the Klon's price-tag upwards in the used market. Eventually, the order list became too daunting and Finnegan shut down the company in 2009. But, while the actual product itself was now rendered a collectible, the sound of the Klon continued to reverberate through the pedal market. Hundreds of Klon imitators, called "Klones," hit the market attempting to recreate the signature sound of the pedal. Finnegan seemed to predict this eventuality from the start and went to great lengths to protect his work from plagiarism. To thwart would-be reverse engineers, Finnegan "gooped" the circuits of each of his pedals, covering them in a black epoxy that disguises the details of the circuit paths and any identifying markers of the components.



Figure 5.1: Interior and Exterior of a Klon Centaur<sup>298</sup>

The goop did not stop amateur pedal builders and musical instrument manufacturers from emulating the Klon's tone, especially after its discontinuation. The best known of these Klones is the J Rockett Archer pedal, which was born out of a dispute between Finnegan and a few

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<sup>297</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> The photographs in this chapter are of pedals that were graciously lent to me by a friend with whom I worked at Music World. For privacy, I will not use his name but thank you! The lack of the "golden horsie" logo is common for Klon Centaurs made in the mid-1990s.

engineers he contracted to try and bring the Klon to the mass-market. When their business relationship dissolved, J Rockett released a pedal, called the Archer, based on their exact knowledge of the Klon circuit. They were not the first to reverse-engineer the pedal, but they certainly attracted the most infamous reaction from Finnegan himself. He voiced his dissatisfaction and even derided the authenticity of the J Rockett Archer, even though he could not sue for copyright infringement as in the United States circuit diagrams cannot be patented. As of 2022, there are many mass-market Klones that litter the shelves of retailers like Music World. Pedals such as the Wampler Tumnus or the Ceriatone Horsebreaker imitate the mythical branding of the Klon Centaur to reference their progenitor. Other pedals, such as the MXR Sugar Drive or the Xotic AC Booster are only recognizable as Klones through reading marketing copy. They promise “transparent sound,” a signal to the Klon’s sonic intention.

The shades of difference between the reproductions and the real Klon generated obsessions in guitar players who pride themselves as Tone connoisseurs. The online market for DIY kits, Klones, and real Klons began to explode through the early 2010s and continued even after Finnegan decided to reopen for business in 2012. His new pedal was enigmatically dubbed the KTR, although it is suspected that stands for “Klon the Reissue.”<sup>299</sup> The KTR utilizes the same circuit diagram as the Centaur, however it is constructed with surface mount assembly electronics instead of through hole circuitry. This more modern production technique speeds up production. Emblazoned with its wry slogan and ostensibly identical internal workings, the KTR is a commercial success. It is still being made in select batches as of 2021, selling for three-hundred dollars. On the secondary market, the KTR fetches between seven-hundred and nine-hundred dollars.



Figure 5.2: Exterior of a Klon KTR Overdrive Pedal<sup>300</sup>

<sup>299</sup> Samhambone (2013, January 16), “Klon KTR: What Does KTR Mean” [Online forum comment]. Message posted to <https://www.thegearpage.net/board/index.php?threads/klon-ktr-what-does-ktr-mean.1201671/>

<sup>300</sup> Photograph taken by the author.

This story performs the Klon's brand. It is a boutique, collectible product. It was invented by a determined entrepreneur. It lives to be appreciated, boasting an elusive sonic identity that can only be properly grasped by the most enterprising and discerning players. It has all the elements of an epic in the entrepreneurial age, where tech geniuses solve problems before they're problems and the bold consumers who are "early adopters" are hailed as visionaries. Walking into a store like Music World, a customer would be lucky to see one. It would almost certainly be displayed on a high shelf behind a locked glass cabinet bearing a price tag ten-times that of its closest neighbor. Whenever one was displayed at Music World New York, some customers gawk at the pedal with the same reverence as the memorabilia that flanks the walls. Some customers simply walk by without noticing it – after all, it is just a metal box. Attending to the Klon immediately situates a guitarist as a musician who cares about Tone. The pedal's infamy represents a powerful niche in the musical instrument market framed by a respect for sound, history, and the indomitable spirit of product-creators.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, effective salespeople work to inhabit as many brand-niches as possible. Many consumers enter the retail space with a sense of niche-based identity, searching for a product that fits within their personal worldview. Statements as simple as "I'm a Fender person" or "I take my Tone seriously," give salespeople valuable information towards their aim of making a sale. These statements are not reducible to questions of fetishism or brand elitism. Instead, they are framed as identity interpolation through engagement with musical products.

As discussed in chapter One, Sarah Banet-Weiser has shown how 21<sup>st</sup> century brands emphasize consumer "engagement" and formulates marketing as a "technology of the self" qua Foucault.<sup>301</sup> The Klon's brand works as a "technology of self" in service to neoliberal governmentality by emphasizing entrepreneurship on both the level of the producer and the consumer. Finnegan is heralded as an entrepreneurial inventor hero: he had a problem, came up with an innovative solution, and, through hard work, overcame adversity to find success. The myth of the Klon's sonic power begins with this image. Finnegan, a guitarist turned engineer, hunches over a card table making 8000 pedals that sound so different that they changed the industry. Indeed, in the pedal community Finnegan is akin to Steve Jobs: a reclusive and eccentric marketing genius.

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<sup>301</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 76.

When purchasing a Klon, the consumer is also hailed as an connoisseur. By using such an expensive guitar pedal, they self-identify as someone who doesn't accept the market options as they stand, searches for a solution, and pays for the product. For instance, one Music World customer told me when I asked him what he thought of the Klon that he considered the pedal "some sort of acknowledgement that you take your tone seriously."

Klon users usually don't see the pedal nor its sound as an autonomous form of art. Instead, they see it as a building block in the larger assemblage of their Tone—a key contribution to a personalized sonic fingerprint that encompasses both the sounds themselves and the composite brands of products that produce the sounds. The sounds made using a Klon Centaur are talked about as being properly owned and earned with an explicitness sound rarely affords. Its value stems from the ease in which it fits into the project of self-management and self-governance and in the ways it signals a player's position within this economic system. In this context, Tone in general could be understood as sound reconfigured as a "technology of the self" and the Klon's value partially stems for the multiple ways it helps guitarists manage their selves through sound.

As I have discussed in chapters One and Two, Tone is a pervasive ideology undergirding the relationships—both explicitly capitalistic and not—between guitarists and the sounds they own and play. Tone reconfigures sound as a quintessentially neoliberal commodity, by harnessing it through a discourse of connoisseur privilege. The politics of Tone in popular music making certainly predate the advent of neoliberalism's cultural logic. But, as neoliberalism has grown to colonize both the governing economic structure of the musical instrument market and the commonplace epistemological framing for music making in general, it has found a compatible ideological partner in Tone's ephemeral definition and its connoisseurs' entrepreneurial spirits. Through a critical organological approach, I argue that the Klon's meteoric rise is not wholly reducible to product scarcity and leisure commodity value. Instead it is endemic of neoliberal politics of Tone as it is negotiated by players in the store, on the stage, and in the media.

First, I will discuss the Klon's perceived "transparency," which is a sonic trait that is widely valued in the distortion and overdrive pedal market. The Klon promises to disappear into the player's personalized tone, aiding from afar but not colonizing the personality of the sound. I contend that this promise of self-effacement instantiates an ethics of Tone that draws market

power by performing neoliberal morality. Then, I will look at how consumer understanding of the pedal's value — which is usually directed at specific electronic parts dubbed “magic diodes”— speak directly to the contradictory logic of neoliberal agency, balancing a firm belief in statistical rationality with a tolerance for magical excess. The focus on the pedal's parts as the locus of tangible value serves the market ideology, as it provides a measurable, scientific rationale for the pedal's exchange value while simultaneously emphasizing the entrepreneurial ethos of Tone.

### **Sonic Transparency**

For an object that produces and alters sound, the Klon has a surprising unique differentiator that is repeated in almost every discussion of its tone: it is heralded for its ability to sound like it's not even there. Returning to the story of Finnegan's original impetus for creating the Klon, he sought to create a “pedal that would make you unaware a pedal was involved.” Indeed, this has become the distinguishing characteristic for the Klon and all its emulators. In comparison to pedals that alter the sonic characteristics of amplifiers, the Klon emphasizes its ability to disappear into the amplifier's natural sound. This sonic quality is frequently referred to in guitarist consumer culture as “transparency.”

The Klon was one of the first pedals to define itself using terms such as natural overdrive or transparency. Its legacy can be traced through the increasing value these qualities have come to accrue in the pedal market. Since the Klon, many pedals have been marketed with an ear towards the sonic quality of transparency. For instance, a 2018 advertisement for the Xotic Effects' RC Booster, promises that “the best characteristic of this booster is to have no character at all.” Similarly, a byline printed on the box for the Wampler Euphoria Transparent Overdrive claims that it is the perfect pedal for those who “love their tone,” because it “reacts like a tube amp.” Both of these pedals are frequently described as Klon emulators and present less-expensive options for consumers looking to purchase the Klon's sound, without paying thousands of dollars.

It might seem strange to non-guitarists that someone would assign such value to a pedal whose stated purpose is to be aurally inconspicuous. For most other products that musicians use, the object's sonorous qualities seem to be importantly present, or as Ted Gracyk might say “ontologically thick.”<sup>302</sup> Sonic qualities such as resonance, saturation, or playability are

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<sup>302</sup> Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994): 43.

recognizable by the ways they shape and alter the final sound. Transparency is an ontologically thin sonic characteristic. Pedals that are marketed as transparent are meant to have little sonic bearing on the composite sound of the resultant chain of effects. They accomplish the goal of pushing the amplifier to higher saturation levels but are supposed to stay silent as they do so.

In guitarist consumer culture, “transparent” pedals have staying market power. Usage the visual metaphor of “transparency” begs the question: what is it transparent to as for instance glass is transparent to light? What is so worth preserving that a self-effacing pedal’s sound becomes so valuable? What moves through it unhindered and why is it so important that it remains pure?

In *Any Sound You Can Imagine*, Paul Théberge analyzes the creative conditions afforded by electronic instruments saying, “the technical separation of the physical interface from the sound-producing mechanism in electronic instruments may account, in part, for the apparent autonomy and uncommon power that “sounds” have in determining how you play them.”<sup>303</sup> For Théberge, the schism between the physical interface and the final sound alienates the sound from physical human action, and, therefore, imbues it with an autonomous sonic power. As early as 1997, Theberge noticed the effects this autonomy had on musician ethos imbuing non-mediated, acoustic instruments with a sense of authentic instrumentality.

Théberge is analyzing characteristics of synthesizers and digital instruments. With these instruments, the mechanics of the “technical separation” that alienate the player from the final sound are clear. Haptic feedback between the player depressing a key and hearing a sound is encoded. With the electric guitar, technical separations are fuzzier. Ultimately, even when a guitarist is using a large amount of effects pedals, they maintain a connection to the physical action of plucking a string. Therefore, the definition of technical separation changes with each players’ individual taste. Some players feel alienated from their final sound just by using an effects pedal in the first place. Others consider their entire composite Tone when assessing the level of perceived artifice. In short, guitarists themselves draw lines between authentic, unmediated, physically induced sounds and hyper-mediated, artificially constructed sounds.

There is a wide latitude of sounded authenticity in the sonic world of the electric guitar. Importantly, this opens up niche-based markets that tribalize consumers along the lines of their

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<sup>303</sup> Paul Théberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 199.

personal definitions of authentic sounding guitar Tone. The Klon appeals to those who care about preserving the sonic authenticity of their equipment. By remaining transparent to the guitar assemblage, the Klon hails itself as having little agency in the production of Tone but is greatly complicit in making *better* Tone.

Transparency is not the only sonic descriptor in the guitar pedal market that follows this logic. For instance, the recent wave of “true bypass” pedal circuits promise to eliminate any audible signal degradation when the pedal is turned. Pancake patch cables shorten the distance that signal needs to travel from the pick to the speaker. Mechanically, these products promise to eliminate noise and highlight meaningful signal. However, these mechanics serve a greater goal of pursuing the most ecstatic and effective Tone possible. Negatively considering mediation as antithetical to the goal of good Tone situates these products into an ethical continuum. To attend to tonal authenticity is to care. To care is to spend money on bettering your Tone. In short, the ethical calculus of transparency and tonal authenticity reinforces marketplace engagement and figures imagined sound as a technology of the self that is crucial to maintaining neoliberal *homo economicus*.

Tone helps explain a large part of the Klon’s rising reputation and market value. In its transparency, the Klon promises to capture the ethical spirit of Tone by shedding its own autonomy as a sound production device and acting as a non-partisan aid to achieving your personal Tone’s full potential. This transparent ideal is quintessentially neoliberal insofar as it makes promises not to intervene with *homo oeconomicus*’ sonic expression. The Klon aids from afar but aligns with a means-end ethical calculus. Thus, it is rewarded with market value for sacrificing its own agency in pursuit of the authentic neoliberal self.

### **These are Essential (But I Can’t Really Tell You Why)**

If you crack open the Klon KTR, you’ll find another hidden message from the creator inscribed on the circuit board itself. A little arrow points to two diodes— the only ones visible from this side of the unit— pointing to a small inscription reading, “these are essential.” This inscription is a strange partner to the message on the front of the pedal, which boldly questions the agency of the pedal’s value. The highlighted diodes seem to posit a partial explanation: the hype is not of Finnegan’s making, but the reason it exists is hidden within the unique circuitry.

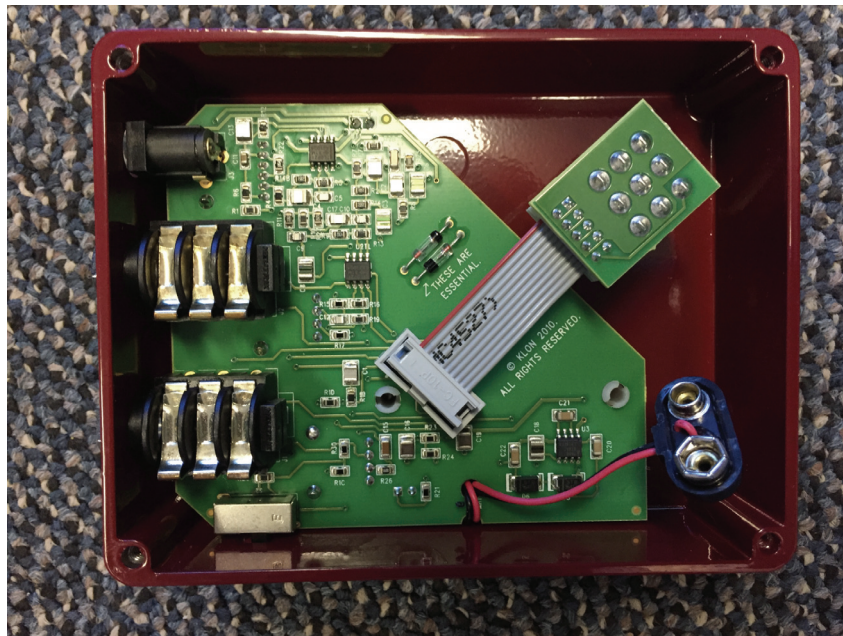


Figure 5.4: Interior circuitry of a Klon KTR<sup>304</sup>

Finnegan insists on the importance of these diodes in interviews, attributing his pedal's popularity to the exclusiveness of these particular germanium parts in the third amplification stage of the Klon's circuit. He claims he acquired them from a German manufacturer for whom they had become obsolete in the late 90s. He describes the process of selecting the diodes as laborious and frustrating, saying:

"I started out ordering both germanium and silicon diodes, but pretty quickly I began concentrating on the germaniums. Usually, though not always, they sounded more natural to me than the silicon ones did. After months and months of listening, I felt a particular new-old-stock germanium diode sounded best in the circuit, so I thought I should buy as many of those as I could afford. Eventually, I found a distributor that had a significant quantity of them. They were stocking them for a huge OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer), who—without any warning, I gather—stopped using that part. I bought them all at a good price. The distributor was thrilled to be able to sell them and not have to eat them."<sup>305</sup>

The types of diodes used in the Klon is significant. First, germanium diodes hold a degree of nostalgic value as they were originally favored in the early fuzz pedals of the 1960s — such as the Maestro Fuzz Tone— but had fallen out of fashion with the advent of cheaper silicon components. By the 1990s, the sound of Germanium diodes had already been established as a vintage alternative to modern, surface mounted silicon effects pedals. Companies such as Dunlop began to market their pedals along the lines of which type of semi-conductors they used and

<sup>304</sup> Photograph taken by the author.

<sup>305</sup> Warren, "Builder's Profile."

expected consumers to be fluent in the sonic implications of the different elements. Take for instance, this description of a Germanium Fuzz pedal made by the venerable pedal manufacturer Robert Keeley:

“Subjectively the sound of Germanium offers a smoother, more-ear pleasing distortion. Whether that’s technically due to greater capacitances, lower bandwidth (Germanium can’t handle those higher frequencies that can sometimes lead to harshness) as well as lower gain, it can sometimes lead to more gratifying sounds.”<sup>306</sup>

Second, the diodes Finnegan uses are “NOS” or “new old stock” parts of which he claims to have bought the last batch. Specifically, they are German 1N34A diodes that were made in the late 1950s. By clearing the market of these parts and then attaching such importance to them, Finnegan succeeded in imbuing the diodes with scarcity value. Other pedal manufacturers may use germanium diodes, but they are not German 1N34A diodes. More importantly he mythicizes the pedals sound by ascribing the process by which the sound is created to small differences in parts that are difficult to objectively verify. In this way, these 1N34A diodes inhabit the same aporia between qualitative and quantitative value verification that different wood varietals achieve in the acoustic guitar market. Like the shades of difference between the resonance of Bubinga and Mahogany, the difference between 1N34A diodes and conventional germanium diodes, or between these German 1N34A diodes and those made elsewhere, relies on the guitarist consumer public to ratify their sonorous effect. In short, ascribing sonic value to a specific part packages subjective perception of difference into a countable, objective fact. This conflation of sonic agency with statistical specificity is similar to the mechanisms of neoliberal rationality discussed by Gershon.

Finnegan may have begun the interest in attributing the Klon’s unique sound to these parts, but it was the guitarist consumer public that inflated the importance of these parts from small unique differentiators to loci of huge surplus value. As early as 2004, internet forums appear to try and “decode” the identity of the so-called “magic diodes” that “push all the right frequencies.” These discussions of diodes and electrical components carry with them the energy technical expertise that seems to validate the worth of the Klon in neoliberal value schemas: where exchange value should be easily explained by free-market economics and social statistics. When examining commentary surrounding the “magic diodes,” these technicalities are quite

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<sup>306</sup> Robert Keeley, “Germanium vs. Silicon Transistors,” blog post, September 11, 2013, <https://robertkeeley.com/2013/09/germanium-transistors/>

casual. There are deliberate attempts to preserve the unexplainable excess of the diodes ability — their “magic” — while, at the same time, performing a neoliberal expertise characterized by fluency in scientific jargon to back up material worth. Take for instance this quote by Chris Van Tassel, a co-founder of J Rockett pedals who made the controversial “Archer” Klon after working with Finnegan on a failed Klon reissue:

As much as I want to say that Bill's smoking crack with regard to the sound of diodes, he was absolutely right... We decided one day that we would take the Archer and we would test out the real "supposedly unknown" diodes (which we had) against probably about 50 other diodes. And I'll tell you, it was a dramatic difference on all of them. So yes, the diodes really do make all of the difference. With different diodes you can get close. But with the right ones, it's that extra 5 percent of the touch, the sound, and the feel.”<sup>307</sup>

Similarly, after this blogger gives an exhaustive overview of the intricacies of the magic diodes that includes a comparative impedance analysis against other diodes, they conclude:

“As you may know if you know me or follow my blog, I am really skeptical about the Klon’s “mythical” reputation... but I am really surprised... I will do a blind test to be sure that my brain is not playing with me, but it seems like there are differences with high gain settings.”<sup>308</sup>

In both of these analyses, they preserve a sense of wonderment and fascination with the diodes’ ability to make “better sound” than others, while still adhering to a scientific and objective methodology. In a rare response to some of these speculations and comments on the value of the “magic” diodes” on a 2012 web forum, Finnegan posted:

I'm aware that a number of people over the years have made snide remarks about what they've tended to refer to as the "magic" diodes, and stated that they can't hear a difference between these and whatever diodes the various would-be cloners use, so here's what I've said on the subject many times and will now say yet again: I have never considered this particular diode (a specific part from a specific manufacturer, back when they were still making it) to be "magic" in any way - I simply consider it, after a ton of listening to every possible substitute, to be the best-sounding diode in my circuit, a circuit that I and my two design partners (successively) worked on for four-and-a-half years and that I understand from the inside-out, in a way that I have a hard time imagining any of the would-be cloners could... To those people who claim not to be able to hear a difference between what it has to offer and what other diodes have to offer in my circuit, my question is a simple one: REALLY?”<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Chris Van Tassel, “J Rockett,” *Phillip Dodge Tone Report*, May 15th 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160211125115/http://tonereport.com/blogs/interviews/prepare-for-launch-an-interview-with-chris-van-tassel-of-jrockett-audio-de>

<sup>308</sup> Coda Effects, “Klon Centaur Clone and Mods (Aion Refractor),” blog post, September 2015, <https://www.coda-effects.com/2015/09/klon-centaur-clone-and-mods-aion.html>

<sup>309</sup> Finnegan/Klon (2012, January 25), “New Klon Pic” [Online forum comment]. Message posted to <https://www.thegearpage.net/board/index.php?threads/new-klon-pic.1018759/page-34>

Here, Finnegan insults the Kloners who “claim to not be able to hear a difference” and downplay the importance of the diodes. His declaration amounts to an ethical injunction against overanalyzing the reputation of the magic diodes that he — and others — have constructed.

Neoliberalism uses of statistical rationality to justify its worldview. In fact, neoliberalism is an ideology of virtuosic concealment: injecting goals of efficacy and hidden processes of control into noneconomic domains. By attending to products like the Klon, we might reformulate Wendy Brown’s statement that in neoliberalism “*homo oeconomicus* vanquishes *homo politicus*” into “*homo oeconomicus* masks *homo politicus*” by absorbing politics and cultural difference into its technical work of self-management.

The Klon Centaur’s surprising market value is not reducible to simple matters of scarcity. It is wrapped in various cultural regimes of value that ascribe social and monetary worth. In particular, I’ve discussed the ways that the Klon is monetized through a politics of Tone that circulates in the guitarist market. The contemporary politics of Tone is a political economy of sound that operates according to neoliberal rationality and practices a neoliberal ethics. The brand and entrepreneurial values of the Klon Centaur reinforces these ethics by remaining transparent to the larger ethical goals of getting good Tone. The Klon also delicately balances the objectivity of electrical engineering with the subjectivity of magic, principally claiming that sounds become more than the sum of their parts in the guitar assemblage. Tone achieves its market power not only through the material labor required to produce it, but from the immaterial labor its attendants perform while playing, discussing, and interpellating through it. Sonic objects like the Klon partially derive their market success by effectively harnessing this neoliberal framework, by positioning themselves as items of personal taste that contribute to larger sonic goals that practice neoliberal agency.

## **Conclusion: Writers Who Work**

### **Ethnography of the Mundane**

My fieldwork at Music World was shockingly mundane. The structures of work rarely changed, following a consistent beat of a centralized corporate control. My interlocutors' actions often blurred together, even as I painstakingly attempted to unravel their personal stories. I frequently talk with other scholars who ask me to share interesting tales from Music World. I have a few. I sold musical instruments to some famous musicians and actors. Once, a thief was handcuffed on top of my cash register as they attempted to flee the store. I may have also helped some international tourists beat up some new guitars with keys so their local customs agents would think they were used and therefore not taxable. These moments were interesting, but as my writing continued it became clear that they did not reveal the true value of conducting ethnography in a retail space.

In fact, it was the mundaneness of Music World that became my primary focus. Every day I heard similar questions and stories. "Are these pickups over-wound?" "Did you know Clapton used Superglue on his guitar necks?" "At home I've got a Blues Deluxe, a Klon Centaur, and two Stratocasters..." I do not mean to imply I was particularly bored of these conversations. On the contrary, I found such enjoyment in my work that I stayed at Music World far longer than my economic conditions dictated. My interlocutors' repetitions, amusing as it could be at times, was inspiring. The consistency of the cosmopolitan ideology demanded investigation into its machinations and origins.

In this dissertation, I have mobilized my ethnographic and life experience to show a side of music making that is nearly unavoidable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States. The rapid consolidation of the musical instrument industry over the past twenty years has created a world where being a musician requires engagement with corporate entities. Musical instrument brands are loci for subject interpellation, taking advantage of sound's aporic nature to capitalize on musician's immaterial labor. The tenets of neoliberal citizenry are repeated in musicians' pride of sonic individuality. But for how domineering the central ideology of neoliberal commerce has become, it is not completely invisible or unshakable. There are moments where cracks reveal themselves as the rules of economic citizenry are broken. Amazing moments, where peoples'

ears prick up to listen, if only for a short while. Moments later, the cash registers start to ring again. In conclusion, I offer an account of one of these moments.

## **The Gift**

It's about 6:00 PM and the after-work crowd is streaming down the escalators into Music World. I am working the sales floor with three other associates. We are fielding a barrage of requests from customers, directing them towards the bathroom or specific departments. Minute by minute, the sound level increases. The manager on duty, Caitlyn, is surveying the scene from her post behind the repair bench near the entrance. Clipboard in hand, she scribbles down the hourly sales figures and traffic count while vigilantly looking for signs of an impending deal.

There are many body language cues she has taught the staff in order to triage customers during busy hours. For instance, customers walking around with hands in their pockets may be nervous, but ultimately interested. Customers hunched over an amplifier typically do not like to be approached until they are ready to purchase. Finally, there is the holy grail of Music World body language cues: a customer gently picks up a guitar and thoughtfully turns it over to look at the back. Caitlyn demonstrated this at a recent sales meeting, mimicking the subtle action with a nearby Taylor acoustic guitar. As she gingerly turned the guitar over in her hands she said, "this is Music World sign language for 'come talk to me.'" Caitlyn uses her own hand gestures to signal to her team when she recognizes such signs. I see her identify a middle-aged man near the Fender section slowly turning a Stratocaster over in his hands, intensely inspecting the wood grain of the back. She catches the eyes of an employee, rubs her hands together, and gestures towards the customer with her chin. He immediately rushes over to engage with the potential buyer.

I was not quick enough to secure that particular deal, so I wander the sales floor with no particular agenda. After a few minutes of ringing up small tourist transactions for packs of New York City emblazoned picks or Ibanez T-Shirts, I walk into the glass adorned room at the store's north wall, passing the large twenty-foot-wide silver sign clearly demarcating the space as the high-end room. The high-end room feels very different from the main sales floor. As you pass through a set of glass doors, the monotonous carpet of the main store gives way to wood paneled flooring. The din of the amplifier department, only fifteen yards away, fades into the muffled sounds of a neighbor playing music two doors down. To the left, a four-foot-high bar spans the

north wall. The underlit fixture glows gold through a transparent stone bar top. Behind the bar stands a brightly lit trophy case containing five beautiful guitars, all of which are priced well-over ten-thousand dollars. These instruments brightly reflect dedicated spotlights, secured behind locked windows. Next to the trophy case, a series of beer taps creates the illusion that this may not be a retail location at all, but rather a distinguished music venue. The taps are fashioned out of headstocks from Gibson, PRS, and Fender guitars: all of which are strung and can be tuned, but, sadly, produce nothing when drawn.

Along the perimeter of the high-end room, two tiers of instruments are neatly arranged on locking hangers attached directly to the faux brick walls. These guitars are the highest priced instruments in the store, and, being that Music Word NYC is a flagship location, some of the most expensive instruments the company sells. To the right, two rows of twelve Les Pauls each make up the Gibson Custom Shop section, their varying bursts arranged by gradient for maximum visual effect. Fifteen Fender Custom Shop guitars hang on the opposite wall as if they are lining up for a 19<sup>th</sup> century battle on the fields of Alsace.

On the back wall, vintage instruments—which at the time of this writing Music World defines as instruments made before 1985—are hung on a decorative fixture made of jagged reclaimed wood. There is a small stage filled with expensive amplifiers and stools as well. Small LEDs cast red, green, and blue lights over the instruments, creating the impression of a stage sike and immediately orienting the room’s inhabitants as either audience or performer.

A mother and daughter sit on round, uncomfortable wooden stools on the stage. The daughter is playing a Gretsch Country Gentlemen guitar, a large, idiosyncratic instrument associated with country guitarist Chet Atkins. She strums the instrument uncomfortably, fighting against the awkwardly heavy body and thicker than usual strings. The chords ring softly through the otherwise quiet room, clashing first against Elliott Smith’s “Waltz No. 2” and then ACDC’s “TNT” as they played at a gentle volume through the overhead speakers. On the other side of the stage, a teenage boy paces the vintage wall staring longingly at the various instruments with his hands clasped behind his back as if to signal that he was nervous touch anything so expensive.

As the only salesperson in this sector, I walk up and introduce myself, first to the mother and daughter and then to the teenager whom I learned are named Jean, Sally, and Bill respectively. Bill assures me right away that he is just looking, but Jean has another agenda. She immediately informs me that it is Sally’s birthday this week and that they were looking for a

“high-end” instrument, implicitly emphasizing the fact that it was important that it cost “a good chunk of change.” I have found this qualification to be a fairly typical way some people begin transactions, by immediately expressing that money wasn’t an object, or, depending on how you look at it, money is the *only* object. Although it might be fair to limit this to wealthy New Yorkers who visit the store, I have heard this time and time again from visitors as well.

I sit on a stool and ask Sally what drew her to the Country Gentleman guitar. She replies that she likes its tremolo bridge and is looking for something that was hollow bodied. I strategically gather similar instruments, including a bright red Duesenberg, and place them on stands surrounding their station. Duesenberg is a German guitar manufacturer known for their retro-50’s style colors, big tremolo bridges, and overall streamlined look. They are also the preferred guitars of at least three of my clients who are professional church musicians, and I never really figured out why. The Duesenberg seems to immediately call out to Sally who excitedly picks it up and begins to strum through some memorized chord progressions.

Behind me, Bill watched longingly as he stands near a vintage 1960s Rickenbacker. Seeing his expression, I take out my keys, unlock the instrument, and offer it to him to try. He gingerly handles the guitar, repeatedly asking me if I was sure it was allowed. I plug it into a nearby amplifier, shrugging off his hesitation. He strums the first chord of The Beatles’ “A Hard Day’s Night” and smiles.

I left the high-end room to continue my rounds but return after ten minutes to check in on Sally, Jean, and Bill. By now, they have struck up a lively conversation. Sally had shown Bill a few new chords, and they are trading solos over a blues progression. Jean sits on a stool a few feet away from the pair, listening intently and laughing. A good salesperson knows when to interrupt and when to stay silent. I pop my head in, give the trio a thumbs up and leave. Often, instruments sell themselves and there is no need for my intervention at this moment.

I spend another ten minutes of ringing up small transactions at the main counter outside the high-end room, all the while monitoring the situation out of the corner of my eye. Bill sets down the Rickenbacker, leaves the room, and asks me to direct him to the bathroom. I showed him the way and entered the code. As he enters, I feel a tap on my shoulder. It is Jean, urgently beckoning me back to the high-end room. As I am following her in, she tells me that they want to purchase the Duesenberg Sally is playing. I feel momentary giddiness: that single four-thousand-

dollar guitar surpasses my entire daily sales goal and it is barely the third hour of my shift. I stand to make about one-hundred dollars from the transaction.

Once we enter the high-end room, Jean fervently looks around to ensure we are alone. She explains that she was grateful for Bill's kindness and help and wished to purchase the guitar he was playing as a gift for him. "Listen," she says to me in a hushed voice. "I have been very fortunate in my life and when I do something nice for my family, I like to do something nice for other people."

The vintage Rickenbacker Bill was playing cost three-thousand dollars before tax. Jean does not bat an eye at this fact and does not ask for a discount. Instead, she gives me a few ground rules for the purchase with the assuredness of someone who frequently purchases unexpected gifts at stores. First, she wants to make sure her name is not on the receipt I give Bill for the instrument. She explains that the guitar should be in his name in case there is an issue. Second, she asks me not to give Bill the instrument until she has left the store. She does not want attention or thanks from him. Third, she wants the entire transaction completed as quickly as possible. She hands me her credit card and asks me to go get the guitar cases.

I walk out of the high-end room in a daze, tightly gripping Jean's credit card. It is not that the guitars are expensive. I have sold many instruments far more expensive than these. My bewilderment stems from the nature of Jean's request. I have never encountered a customer who wishes to blindly purchase a gift for a total stranger. Beyond that, it is nearly inconceivable that a customer would wish to purchase a gift of that magnitude anonymously. I shake myself out of my confusion and think logistically. Jean requested I complete this transaction quickly, so I rush to the warehouse to fetch the cases. As I am combing the aisles, my brain is spinning. How do I even accomplish this transaction? Aside from the peculiarity of trying to keep Bill in the store until Jean and Sally depart, I realize that I literally do not know how to ring up these instruments.

In order to complete a transaction at Music World, employees need to navigate the proprietary point of sales system. This system — colloquially called 'green screen' — contains all of the necessary tools to process an endless number of retail tasks. Every store process, from inventory management to customer account balances, is contained within this system. On each of the forty computers at Music World, the screen softly blinks waiting for employees to enter their password.

Green screen is hilariously ancient looking by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. Its list of options looks more like something from a 1980s hacker movie than a modern retailer. Employees are required to memorize a litany of numerical commands to access even the most basic functions. There are different commands for hundreds of options such as sale, layaway, repair, credit card type, and rental. It is not uncommon that an employee needs to seek a manager for help just to discern how to get green screen to recognize a specific sales situation. Managers often reply in the language of the software's code, such as, "run a 09 ticket then use a 24 ticket to apply it to the 10 ticket." This means to take the money on store credit, convert it to the secondary customer account, then apply that credit to the sale. The register areas of the store are filled with the sounds of furious fingers clicking numerical keypads, fighting the software to comply with each customer's individual need.

Despite green screen's obtuse configuration, it is a brilliant piece of software. It was built for Music World and accomplishes any task an employee may need so long as they have the right experience. Being a long-time denizen of Music World, I am proficient in green screen's quirks. I rarely, if ever, need to seek help from higher management to figure out how to handle a given situation. Earlier that day, I had a customer who wished to pay for a layaway deposit on a used instrument at a location in California. The customer also wanted to pay with a combination of cash, gift card, and credit card. A few keystrokes later, the instrument was reserved for him three-thousand miles away.

Jean's request to anonymously purchase a three-thousand-dollar instrument presents problems for green screen. The program is built to administer thousands of transactions of every conceivable type, but it does not have an easy pathway to anonymously purchase a gift. Furthermore, the structure of the system actively would hinder me from completing the transaction. Gift cards are capped at five-hundred dollars for fraud prevention purposes, eliminating them as an option to anonymously transfer funds. Serial numbers of guitars over one-thousand dollars prompt screens requiring extra credit card information, erasing the anonymity Jean desired. To the point of sale software, anonymously purchasing a three-thousand-dollar guitar without leaving breadcrumbs back to the buyer looks like fraud. It simply will not let you proceed.

After fetching the case, I hurry to Caitlyn who is still supervising the floor from behind the repair desk. She immediately notices the cases for two very expensive guitars in my hand and

lights up. “What do you have cooking?” she asks with a wry smile. I frantically explain the situation to her and see her face contort with confusion. “She wants to do what?” Caitlyn tells me that she does not know if the request is logistically possible and begins typing commands into green screen. “It’d better be,” I reply. “If not, that’s ten-thousand out the window.”

Caitlyn instructs me to go back to the high-end room and stall for time as she picks up the phone to call her manager. Bill has returned and is jamming with Sally. Meanwhile, Jean looks visibly impatient. I quietly inform her that I stored the cases near the front and that my manager is working on the transaction. In the meantime, I invite Sally to pick out accessories for her new guitar and point to the fixture directly outside the doors containing hundreds of guitar straps. I take her Duesenberg, polish it off with a cloth from my pocket, and return to Caitlyn’s station.

The transaction involves by far the most complex maneuvering of green screen I have ever seen. Swearing under her breath at the computer, Caitlyn opens and closes many screens as she holds the phone to her ear with her shoulder. After a few minutes, she has arrived at a solution. We would have to sell the guitar, immediately return the guitar, apply the credit to seven separate gift cards, and then resell the guitar to Bill using the gift cards. Additionally, we would have to document the transaction and gain a corporate authorization code to bypass the fraud system. According to Caitlyn’s manager, this was the only way to trick the computer into realizing the gift as a valid transaction.

Finally, I call Jean to the counter where she completes the nearly eleven-thousand-dollar transaction. As she is signing for the purchase, one of my colleagues distracts Bill in the high-end room. As Jean and Sally are readying themselves to leave the store with their new instrument, I cannot help myself from telling her how special this moment was. Jean dons a sardonic frown with her hands on her hips and says, “I told you I didn’t want thanks!” She throws her head back in laughter, thanks me for my help, and begins walking towards the exit.

I walk back to the high-end room and Bill looks up at me. Sensing that he may have overstayed his welcome, he unplugs the Rickenbacker and brings it up to me to lock back up. By now, word has gotten around the store about my customers and a small crowd of employees are shyly standing near the entrance to the room. I pull the guitar’s road-battered case from the behind the counter and set it on the bar. Bill looks understandably confused. Searching for the right words, I demurely say, “I don’t know how to tell you this, but Jean just bought this guitar

for you.” Bill looks at me, then at the Rickenbacker he is holding, and starts to cry. He asks me through soft tears if he could thank her. “No,” I say. “She just wanted you to have it.”

The employees around me start clapping spontaneously, recognizing that they had just witnessed something special. I hand Bill his receipt, which bears no financial lineage to Jean. At this point, I cannot help imparting some advice. “You shouldn’t sell this Bill,” I say reverently. “If you need to part with it, maybe you also give it as a gift.” Bill promises not to sell the instrument and leaves the store brushing away tears. I never saw Bill, Sally, or Jean again.

This shocking moment encapsulates the tensions between instruments’ extraordinary social lives and the corporate environment of Music World. Gift giving has long been analyzed as a special circumstance in capitalism, either presenting possibilities for post-capitalist life or reaffirming the totalizing reason of capitalist epistemology. Theodor Adorno yearns for a return to gift giving that has “its happiness in imagining the happiness of its receiver,” asking the reader to recognize the methods by which Capital has corrupted the act of giving.<sup>310</sup> Jacques Derrida, following Marcel Mauss, recognizes the act of gift giving as part of the “madness of capitalist reason,” arguing that there is virtually no mechanism of modern gift giving that truly clash with capitalist logocentrism.<sup>311</sup> I opt to not make such broad claims about my interaction with Jean, Sally, and Bill. This story stands for itself as an example of a rare moment of breakage in the otherwise regimented retail space that is Music World.

This act of anonymously giving an extremely expensive guitar may have opened a crack in the corporate façade of Music World. Every employee that witnessed the transaction and clapped at its conclusion felt so. But, within minutes, the store’s mundaneness was restored as they scanned products, looked up inventory, and performed chores. For me, the real value of this story does not stem from imaginations of what kind of post-capitalist future it may or may not portend. Instead, it is valuable in examining the solidity of the capitalist mechanics that made the moment difficult to imagine and process.

First, there was the sheer shock I felt at being asked to administer an anonymous gift. It is an understatement to say that such a request is rare. It is unthinkable. I had never been asked to help with such a gift before I met Jean. I would never be asked again throughout my nearly ten-

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<sup>310</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott, (London: Verso Books, 2020): 120.

<sup>311</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 34.

year tenure with the company. As a first reaction, I thought Jean might be attempting some kind of credit card fraud. The realization that she was, in fact, earnestly looking to purchase an anonymous gift sharply revealed the structures of retail surveillance of which I was complicit. In a retail environment, it is far more likely that a customer is trying to steal than trying to give. The feeling of self-responsibility that employees are conditioned to feel, as discussed in chapter One, reinforces a worldview where all fields of activity in the store are meant to abide by capitalist logic. When something happens that questions that logic, one's first thought is not necessarily wonder. Instead, it is a conditioned sense of suspicion. This follows with fear for repercussions based on the shift of personal responsibility for failing to properly guard and surveil from the company as a collective to the individual worker.

Second, the problems with green screen elucidated the ways that all activities at Music World are expected to abide by economic logics. Green screen gives employees an impression of creativity by containing options to convert varying customer needs into calculations. The breadth of the point of sale system cannot be fully appreciated until a situation arises where it does not comply. Green screen understands gift giving, but only in the way that it is deemed appropriate by the unspoken rules of capitalist ethics. A customer can purchase a gift card or print a gift receipt that allows a gift receiver to return the item without knowing the final cost. The logic of gift giving green screen understands takes gifts to be fungible. It immediately suspects any type of gift act outside of its understanding to be potentially fraudulent, mirroring an employee's first reaction. Does this code mirror a prevailing sense of neoliberal corporate ethics, or does it instruct one? Perhaps both, but the fact that Jean's transaction was so difficult reveals the extent to which the rules of capitalist citizenship is literally hard coded into experience at Music World. It takes great effort to break the pattern.

Finally, I found the spontaneous emotional reaction Bill demonstrated when he was given the gift to be very curious. As I have discussed in this dissertation, guitars are interesting commodities that shift identities. They can be containerized as objects with discrete economic value as easily as they can be seen as emblems of personal identity and ideology. A guitar becomes a very different type of object through its journey from an organized warehouse to a player's hands. I did not gather that Bill's emotions were based on an incredulousness to the value displayed on the Rickenbacker's price tag. By the time he received the guitar, its value had become completely social. Giving the instrument was an act of liberation. It removed the fifty-

year old instrument from the cold regime of vintage collectibles and merged it with a young musician's social life.

The thoughts and contradictions Jean and Sally's gift revealed were fleeting, but important. As a worker, time stopped. The structures that conditioned my work at Music World were momentarily clear. However, the speed with which the corporate normalcy of the everyday enveloped the moment. Within ten minutes of Bill leaving the store with his new Rickenbacker, I was back to work.

### **Writers of the World Unite!**

So much of this dissertation has been about sound and labor. There is the labor of working at a retail music store, with all its precarity and bias. There is the immaterial labor of fashioning sounds into personalized Tone that is extracted by the modern musical instrument market. Finally, there is the invisible labor of engagement that happens throughout the musical instrument industry, forming sonic logics that greatly affect the way guitarists listen.

Throughout my experience, I have also had to reckon with the conditions of academic labor in the 21st century. As a working graduate student, it was at times nearly impossible to balance my livelihood with my work. As of yet, the two have not met. It is therefore worth ruminating on the conditions which allowed me to finish this dissertation and degree. It is a story of a pandemic and broken windows.

The last weeks of March in 2020 were aptly described by one of my coworkers as the "calmest apocalypse imaginable." The temperatures were warmer than average and trees in my local park were beginning to show signs of life. But the city seemed emptier with every ride I took from Crown Heights to Manhattan. COVID-19 had arrived in New York City. Infection rates were climbing with horrifying and astonishing speed. Each day the retail workers of New York were forced to reckon with the non-decision of either risking infection or risking termination.

By this time, I had risen through the ranks of Music World and was the store manager of a different location from the site that made up the majority of my fieldwork in this dissertation. It was a nightmarish position in 2020. The requirements of having to manage through a crisis put all my scholarly work completely on hold. I worked nearly every day the entire month of March and was constantly on the phone with my superiors asking for help. On the final day we were

open, a customer put their foot through our glass storefront window. At the time, I was on the phone with a VP, asking them if there was a contingency plan for the city shutting down entirely. As he was explaining the situation, I had to abruptly hang up when one of my employees burst into my office and informed me of the vandal. I remember seething as I vacuumed up the shattered glass and wondering what was next. The next day, the Governor's order came down: New York was closing for business. I rode an empty train to work, sent my staff home, barricaded the doors, and went home to wait.

I spent days on the phone, informing each one of my sixty-four employees of an indefinite furlough. Only 50% of them would ever return. I myself was furloughed a few weeks later. Like millions of others, I was left with income or health insurance. Call after call to New York State finally resulted in benefits allotment. I realized that this was the first time through my entire graduate career that I was being adequately supported to complete my degree with no restrictions.

A large part of this dissertation was written in this time period. I confess, I do not know if I ever could have accomplished this project if the world had not stopped turning. The engine of retail that I have worked to detail throughout this dissertation had enveloped me. It was not only the hectic schedule and consistent paycheck that retuned my priorities. It was the sense that the store was mine. I was responsible for its continued success and I felt as it may burn down if I looked away for even a second. The store did not burn down, but it had to close for me to realize this sobering fact.

I began this dissertation by asking what might be accomplished by upending Trotsky's assertion that "workers do not write." In Trotsky's capitalism, he might have hoped for accounts of injustice that may spur revolutionary action. He implies that the secrets that lie in the workplace are plain to see and inherently evil. If workers were empowered to write about their every-day subjugation, then revolutionary activity may follow. There are surely still worksites that follow this mold, but the structures of work in much of the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States are far muddier. Writing about work involves picking through unfathomable layers of mundane experiences. It involves an awareness of one's own conditioning. It also involves working, as the structures of surveillance and secrecy systematically bar outsiders from ever glimpsing true goings on.

Underfunded graduate students state universities in the United States constantly reckon with the challenges of work. They should write about it more frequently. The systems and structures that govern neoliberal governmentality expertly hide in the fine print on contracts, in the unspoken rules of labor, and in the structures of individual responsibility in workplaces. They are slight, invisible, and they demand investigation. At Music World, there was a saying that was repeated between workers if anyone was having a bad day. We would say to each other, “remember, it’s just a music store.” This aside could be said to frame this entire dissertation. If, upon ethnographic investigation, the machinations of neoliberal identity are so powerfully present in “just a music store,” then they will be also found in a myriad of other sites. For a 21<sup>st</sup> century ethnographer interested in capitalist reality, one might best get to work by going to work.

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