

**A PAUPER OF POP: MAC DEMARCO, SOUND FIDELITY, AND THE POLITICS OF
NOISE**

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a subcultural reading of Canadian singer-songwriter Mac DeMarco's recording style. I examine how acoustic noise, crude production values, and do-it-yourself ethics exact symbolic and practical resistances to pop music hegemonies that privilege hi-fi sound and elite studio technologies. As an expression of what Dick Hebdige calls a "spectacular subculture," I argue DeMarco's self-taught recording style challenges technical standards in the recording arts, tastes underpinning the economy of popular music, and codes of masculinity in popular rock music. Borrowing from the work of Jacques Attali and Tony Grajeda, I explain how DeMarco's "lo-fi" Makeout Videotape recordings use noise and distortion to symbolize and enact ruptures in procedural and aesthetic scripts that denounce non-professional music production.

However, many of DeMarco's other recordings are not decidedly lo-fi. Focusing on songs from *Rock and Roll Nightclub* and 2, I argue DeMarco also challenges lo-fi mythology as a form of resistance, using its crude DIY production technologies to instead create a more refined aesthetic, downplaying noise and distortion. Drawing from ideological and material histories of sound fidelity in the work of Friedrich Kittler and Jonathan Sterne, I argue DeMarco exposes what Sterne calls *decompositionism*, "a plurality of relationships to noise for engineers, for listeners, and for many others through the total disassembly of sound" (*MP3* 126). While privileging music production rooted in the quotidian, DeMarco maintains an ironic distance, often disavowing the importances of his work. Borrowing from Susan Sontag, I analyze how DeMarco engages "camp" style through sound reproduction, turning his sociopolitical disruptions into cultural satires that he is himself also implicated in. My overall aim is to examine, through DeMarco's sound reproduction processes, how subcultural music styles can express and manifest their own alternative social codes and economies within pop music's aesthetic and technological hegemonies.

Lay Summary

Mac DeMarco's recordings demonstrate a productive approach to sound reproduction with rudimentary tools. As such, DeMarco models a way for musicians to self-record at the margins of professional studio networks by breaking down standard procedural and aesthetic scripts that often serve as barriers to artists. Drawing from DeMarco's own explanations in existing press materials, this thesis analyzes how his production style invokes and challenges definitions of sound fidelity, technical standards in the recording arts, and codes of masculinity in popular rock music. However, DeMarco also maintains an ironic posture, often disparaging himself and his own work. I argue DeMarco's recordings simply expose cultural discourses underpinning popular music rather than promoting a specific alternative.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Maxwell Stanley Hector Wainwright. It was completed under the supervision of Dr. Kevin McNeilly.

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For Michelle

1. Introduction

If you know of Mac DeMarco you probably know he's infamous for inserting a drumstick into his rectum during a naked performance of U2's "Beautiful Day."¹ If you didn't already know that, well, now you do and this piece of history aptly sums up the kinds of provocations DeMarco is known for. Years after the performance in a 2014 interview, it is still a starting point for CiTR's radio personality, Nardwuar the Human Serviette. Nardwuar leads in—as if already knowing where it will lead—by asking DeMarco, "You've only put drumsticks up your ass once, right?"² During the early stages of DeMarco's career, when he was based in Vancouver, these sorts of shock-rock antics were par for the course, clearly generating much of the initial buzz. Playing right into Nardwuar's hand, but nonetheless unfazed, DeMarco admits, "That's true, but I put something else up my butt in Vancouver a while ago at Ochi in Chinatown, which was my thumb." It's when Nardwuar then surprises DeMarco with a very explicit photo of the event, that finally a sheepish, gap-toothed grin emerges across the face of the latter, if only but for a moment. With his memory returning, DeMarco then, shameless and straight-faced, explains the photo in all its detail: "It's kind of a shock factor-style thing. The show'd gone a little bit weird. At this time we weren't the tightest band ever, so, you know, you've got to wow the crowd somehow ... Some people were probably offended but maybe others enjoyed it. I dunno." These sorts of playful boundary transgressions define much of DeMarco's career and, as Nardwuar's interview demonstrates, remain a focal point for the music press and his fans alike.

DeMarco, originally from Edmonton and whose actual name is Vernor Winfield MacBriare Smith IV, also makes recordings that provoke and satirize pop culture by assembling tropes and signifiers from incongruous music discourses. This thesis deconstructs and examines how DeMarco's recordings and recording procedures challenge taste trends in popular music and, specifically, the material and technological networks giving them form. I begin by describing and analyzing "Ode to Viceroy," one of DeMarco's most popular songs, to introduce

¹ Explicit content. If the reader dares, see "MAC DEMARCO - Beautiful Day - U2," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GMGia5B-mU>.

² See "Nardwuar vs. Mac DeMarco," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rM6_ezyfyV4&t=52s.

how his recordings often remind us simultaneously of music's unavoidable constructedness in spite of imparting a realistic, live-sounding listening experience. Expanding this discussion through theories and histories of sound fidelity, I argue "Viceroy" also exposes the technological and economic politics underpinning claims of what constitutes a desirable-sounding pop record. Second, merging subcultural theory and practical sound reproduction discourses, I argue DeMarco's first project under the moniker Makeout Videotape uses noise and distortion to symbolize a resistance against the standard yet elite technologies of professional studios. Though noise and distortion are aesthetic features, they are also rooted in DeMarco's own self-taught and crude production methods, affirming an alternative, working-class mode for making pop music. Finally, using his breakout 2012 album *Rock and Roll Nightclub* as an example, I explore how DeMarco also eschews noise and distortion, instead refining his homespun recording procedures into tools of cultural critique and satire. Overall, DeMarco often maintains an ironic distance from his work, refusing to disclose a critical agenda; however, taken together, his recordings model a productive balance of work and play while affirming that popular music is a practice available in the quotidian.

After eight years and five hit indie rock records, DeMarco has toned his live act down somewhat, favouring a marginally more mature attitude. He nonetheless remains carefree and flippant, making him a "cult leader for a new generation of slackers."³ It's not entirely easy though to cast DeMarco off as some kind of miscreant imp who happened to make it because, in the past, he liked grossing us out and returning a sense of irreverence to punk and indie rock. As well as slacker hero, he is somehow "one of the hardest working guys in indie rock" (Berke and Mamana). Those five releases under the Mac DeMarco moniker are largely acclaimed, with two of them earning the coveted "Best New Music" tag from popular trend-setting website, Pitchfork.⁴ DeMarco's recordings strike a balance, critiquing dominant aesthetics through parody and satire while simultaneously paying homage to features that make them appealing. All the more impressive is that DeMarco recorded and mixed most of them by himself at home with no professional training and with rudimentary equipment.

³ See Bassett, <http://www.nme.com/features/mac-demarco-canadians-eight-commandts-living-better-life-2135175>.

⁴ See "Mac DeMarco" at *Pitchfork*, <https://pitchfork.com/artists/30159-mac-demarco/>.

My project focuses on DeMarco's recording style which developed from Makeout Videotape. His signature recording sound is indebted to what is called "lo-fi," or low fidelity—a style of popular music rooted in low-budget, low-expertise, amateur recording. Lo-fi is at once an aesthetic, characterized by a rough, noisy sound, but also a practice emerging from a do-it-yourself (DIY) work ethic that embraces the accidental, the casual, and the contingent. Because we expect amateur recording efforts to yield a poor sound, lo-fi discourses establish a connection between aesthetics, DIY politics, and ideologies of realism in sound reproduction. To call an artist "lo-fi" is to refer to the materiality of their recordings and recording procedures—not their live performances. While it is possible to think of lo-fi in terms of live performance (amplifier distortion may be pop music's original lo-fi sound) the lo-fi style primarily refers to recorded sound. Referencing pop music press articles in "The 'Feminization' of Rock," Tony Grajeda provides my project with lo-fi's cultural history. Furthermore, I borrow his definition of lo-fi as

a kind of technical shorthand for 'home recordings,' those small-scale efforts made on such (relatively) inexpensive equipment as four-track tape machines. Unlike state-of-the-art recording techniques, low-fidelity equipment produces an utterly coarse sound, often failing to mask hum, static tape hiss, and other noises endemic to the very process of recording. Not simply a case of technology but also of technique, lo-fi has been used further to describe those musical performances marked by amateurish playing (often on minimal instrumentation), off-key singing, and certain casualness in delivery. This dual aspect of amateurism (in terms of performance) and primitivism or minimalism (in terms of equipment and recording processes) initially set the tone for what constitutes lo-fi. (233-4)

Here, Grajeda explains the duality in lo-fi discourse for which "an utterly coarse sound" is "endemic to the very process of recording" with "low-fidelity equipment." Those without access to professional equipment must make do with obsolete or low-grade materials like old stereo decks, reel-to-reel machines, and 4-tracks. But, poor sound can also come from a lack of experience. The common denominator here is an amateurism or, rather, non-professionalism that forms what lo-fi often takes as a causal link between production and aesthetics.

Lo-fi expresses its politics primarily through sound. Noise in a lo-fi recording signifies a refusal of standard ways of producing and hearing popular music recordings, an assertion of the amateur. In Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, aesthetic noise meshes "the codes of life, the relations among men. Clamour, Melody, Dissonance, Harmony; when it is fashioned by man with specific tools, when it invades man's time, when it becomes sound, noise is the source of purpose and power" (6). Through music, noise mediates symbolic expressions and material relations offering up a rhetorical tool to marginal resistances. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige is also concerned with the traffic amongst materials and their significances, what becomes "the construction of a style, in gesture of defence or contempt, in a smile or a sneer. It signals a Refusal," one with "subversive value" (3). Because of this, I will rely on Hebdige to theorize lo-fi as a "spectacular subculture" reacting to standardized sound aesthetics and hegemonic tastes in popular music. By forcing listeners to hear amateurism in practice, lo-fi artists assert the importance of being unimportant—a supposedly more 'authentic' form of expression celebrating music made at the working-class margins of professional and popular sound.

DeMarco's music is indebted to lo-fi but we can't exactly call all of it lo-fi. Across the development of his career, his recordings, though still relying on lo-fi's crude DIY technologies, take on a more polished, hi-fi sound that challenges lo-fi as a cohesive expressive mode. Like DeMarco's crude on-stage antics, we still hear a sully that challenges pop music's threshold of entertainment; but, we also hear a refinement gesturing towards populist aesthetics at odds with lo-fi's recalcitrant politics. Additionally, DeMarco's polish via lo-fi technology challenges hi-fi and engineering discourses that lay claim to what tools are necessary and what music sounds "good," claims that both appear as predicates for popularity and profit. Through recording stylistics, DeMarco deconstructs categories underpinning how we hear, talk about, consume, and produce popular music, undermining aesthetic standards that organize what Attali calls the "political economy of music." Providing my project with a theoretical frame, Attali hears in music's noisier aesthetics a potential to subvert material relations. "Music, the organization of noise," he writes, "reflects the manufacture of society; it constitutes the audible waveband of the vibration and signs that make up society" (4). Music is meaningful, but when examined closely

across its cultural, technological, and historical contexts, its meanings fray at the edges. Because music listening and production are so thoroughly enmeshed in technologies, Attali helps theorize lo-fi's aesthetic noise as an indicator of structural disruption in the music industry. By working between lo-fi and hi-fi, DeMarco challenges popular music's aesthetic standards while also calling into question the political capacities of his own supposedly disruptive practices.

DeMarco undermines basic distinctions that hegemonic and subcultural discourses use to organize popular musics. His recordings force together realism and artificiality, sincerity and irony, popularity and esotericism, attraction and repulsion, work and play, and importance and frivolity. It is thus tempting to hear in DeMarco the emergence of a new political economy of music which Attali calls composition, a rupture of codes that acknowledges "the constant presence of the potential for revolution, music and death" (147). "Truly revolutionary music" he continues, "is not music which expresses the revolution in words, but speaks of it as a lack" (147). By offering us paradoxes, DeMarco refuses to speak of resistance directly, but resists nonetheless by refusing coherent organization. He is a slacker but also a success story navigating and criticizing popular music's technological, industrial, and cultural hierarchies while exposing the spaces in-between as expressive opportunities; however, he is not outside them either, often acknowledging through satire his own complicity. As his career gains momentum though, DeMarco's recordings become decidedly less noisy. For his latest record, 2017's *This Old Dog*, his recording rig featured some of the highest end gear and, usurpingly, yielded a hi-fi-sounding album. Reacting to Attali, Jonathan Sterne questions composition, a political economy of music scripted by noise, conceptualizing instead what he calls *decompositionism*, simply "a plurality of relationships to noise for engineers, for listeners, and for many others through the total disassembly of sound" (*MP3* 126). I argue DeMarco's recordings aspire towards a state akin to Attali's composition, breaking down the lattices of taste and procedure, and opening expressive spaces for all musicians; however, they also challenge the capacity of noise as a revolutionary tool itself. As a whole, DeMarco's recordings more accurately enact decompositionism, exposing pop music's irreconcilable features, simply laying them out and letting them be.

“Ode to Viceroy,” one of DeMarco’s most popular songs, exemplifies how his often contradictory modes of expression challenge sub/cultural codes and discourses underpinning pop music. Constructed through musical composition, production values, and popular music tropes, “Viceroy” is at once sincere expression, pop-cultural parody, and self-satire. At the song’s centre is both a popular love ballad and DeMarco’s candid devotion to his favourite cigarette brand. The song’s lyrics present no apparent duplicity themselves. With an unadorned croon, bereft of mockery, DeMarco sings, “Viceroy / As it’s getting later / Heading for the corner / Already running dry / And oh, don’t let me see you crying / ‘Cause oh, honey, I’ll smoke you ‘till I’m dying.” The lyrics express little more than DeMarco’s absurd celebration of his cigarettes, personifying them as a femme fatale. Satirizing popular love ballads and his own devotion to Viceroy, DeMarco also shows how much he sincerely loves both. Describing his inspiration for the song in a 2014 interview, he explains how, while on tour, he was temporarily cut off from his beloved Viceroy and forced to smoke the Sheriff brand.⁵ After arriving home, he was united with his favourites—a lesser brand he elsewhere describes as “way too sketchy”—but admits, “it was kind of like I’d been cheating on my girlfriend ... I went back and was like ‘I’m sorry, why’d I ever do that?’ So I wrote a stupid love song about cigarettes. The lyrics came pretty quick.”⁶ Here, despite “Viceroy”’s subcultural popularity, DeMarco instead disavows the song’s importance, describing it as “a stupid love song.” Like much of his work, he approaches “Viceroy” with self-effacement, though sincere-spirited love songs and cigarettes are clearly amongst DeMarco’s favourite things. He still smokes Viceroy and dedicates much of his career to writing other love songs about his real-life girlfriend, Keira McNally.

The sonic characteristics of “Viceroy” straddle such boundaries as well, fetishizing the cheap and the crude alongside the refined. “Viceroy” revels in a mood Laura Snapes describes, perhaps with DeMarco’s live performance history in mind, as “downright greasy; his unpredictable, louche guitar melodies rise above the warped production and showboat with a

⁵ See “Interview: Mac Demarco — songwriting as ripoff and bad habits,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ftj08_ICb34.

⁶ See “Mac DeMarco answering my questions,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qk76m46MCG4&t=56s>.

laid-back, lubricated clarity that's more 'Sultan's of Swing' than slovenly slacker."⁷ Relying on contradictory descriptors to describe DeMarco's aesthetic, Snapes can't quite categorize DeMarco's style. He is a "showboat," but also "laid-back," his guitar melodies are "louche," yet "rise above" the otherwise "warped" production. Snapes's adjective, "greasy," invokes the opaque and slippery matrix of cheap, unhealthy foods; or, the aesthetically displeasing but functionally essential apparatus of machinery concealed from view. "Viceroy" sounds cheap and unhealthy; yet, these qualities lubricate its musicality. The same slippery opaqueness also paradoxically yields a "clarity" Snapes compares to the Dire Straits, a band lauded for their professional sound. She concludes that DeMarco puts "effort into playing the provocateur—and without dumbing his music down as part of the act."

What DeMarco provokes are the production distinctions that structure popular music. Though "Viceroy" may sound rather professional, DeMarco's amateur production also makes it sound slightly off. In Even Minsker's Pitchfork feature, we learn DeMarco used an old mass-market "Fostex reel-to-reel tape machine [which was] down from eight working channels to six, and he's also discovered a side effect of chain smoking right next to it: The tape is warped. 'The guitars sound so fucked up,' [DeMarco] says. 'It's amazing.'"⁸ He makes it sound like "Viceroy" is about smoking and made by smoking, drawing our attention to the recording's materiality and situatedness. It's something to consider in noticing that the recording's tonal centre rests awkwardly between A and B flat major at approximately 112Hz. Since most popular music conforms to the Western twelve-tone grid, "Viceroy" offers listeners a palette of frequencies that is ever-so slightly skewed from the one they expect. This contributes to the lazy, off-kilter sound Snapes describes as "louche," "laid-back," and "warped." The song's tonal centre, between two semi-tones, is both a symbolic and material disruption of pop music's standards. In order to perform "Viceroy" on the guitar as it sounds in the recording, one has to tune the instrument approximately one-third of a half-step up, or two-thirds of a half-step down from standard

⁷ See Pitchfork's *The Top 50 Albums of 2012*, <http://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9017-the-top-50-albums-of-2012/>.

⁸ Taken together, Minsker and Sharp reveal DeMarco using a Fostex machine for 2 as well as *Salad Days*. See their pieces respectively at <http://pitchfork.com/features/cover-story/reader/mac-demarco/> and <https://www.redbull.com/us-en/2-sketchy-days-with-mac-demarco>.

tuning. DeMarco however achieves this effect using varispeed, the modulation of recorded frequencies caused by altering playback speed. Most tuners do not accommodate such specific tonal centres outside the twelve-tone Western system, so, analyzing and understanding the recording returns us to the materiality of its production. Just to learn the song, we have to retune instruments, venturing ourselves between the lattices of schematized sound. If we are to take creative inspiration from “Viceroy,” and participate in warped music-making with DeMarco, we have to throw out the rule books along with him.

DeMarco’s music is often characterized by such distortions and is itself a symbolic disruption or reorganization of codes in the political economy of music; however, taking Attali’s cue, reactionary music like DeMarco’s “does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed” (26). Because DeMarco draws from many codes and discourses, this project takes an interdisciplinary approach to deconstruct and analyze some of those most relevant. In addition to Grajeda, Hebdige, and Attali, Friedrich Kittler’s *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* along with Sterne’s *MP3* and *The Audible Past* provide this project with material and ideological histories of sound fidelity that underpin modern pop music. From them, we observe hi-fi as an evolving narrative of realist expressions, technological progress, and desire for the latest sounds. Hi- and lo-fi may initially appear as opposite ends of a continuum, but DeMarco’s recording style often assembles features from both at once, breaking down their distinctions altogether. Additionally, DeMarco shows how lo-fi stylistics are not discretely limited to sound cultures. Susan Sontag’s “Notes On Camp” helps explain DeMarco’s own lo-fi style, showing it as an expression of camp that erodes distinctions amongst irony, sincerity, satire, and celebration. Snapes has already demonstrated—if only briefly—how DeMarco’s music pulls us in many directions at once. Continuing the discussion with an originary point of DeMarco’s music thus seems fitting: the lo-fi record.

2. Technology of Styles: Hi-Fi sound as Hegemony and Lo-Fi Music as Subculture

Lo-fi is a stylistic reaction against mainstream music and sound reproduction that both capitalize on what are concurrently deemed the best sounding technologies. Calling something lo-fi at once describes what it sounds like, and—maybe most importantly—describes what it *does not* sound like. Because lo-fi's DIY politics emerge through a reaction to hi-fi sounds and technologies that have become standard, it is helpful to describe hi-fi first. In *MP3: The Meaning of A Format* Jonathan Sterne summarizes a typical attitude of sound culture defining desirable reproduced sound:

the general historical trend of progress in communication technology is toward ever-greater definition and therefore greater verisimilitude. Within that proposition hide a few other common assumptions: (1) that greater definition is the same thing as greater verisimilitude; (2) that increases in definition necessarily enhance end-users' experiences; (3) that increases in bandwidth and storage capacity necessarily lead to higher-definition media for end users. The account of communication history implied by these propositions outlines a quest for definition, immersion, and richness of experience. Call it the dream of verisimilitude. (4)

By unpacking communication technology's progress narrative, Sterne immediately emphasizes the exact assumptions lo-fi style calls into question—assumptions that are commonplace amongst most engineers, artists, and listeners. At first blush, the relationship between verisimilitude and “definition, immersion, and richness of experience” may seem self-evident. A wider frequency response in a recording, for example, reproduces a greater spectrum of unmediated sound's tonal content and thus promotes more nuanced definition. This assumption however collapses verisimilitude and the upper threshold of sound-reproduction technologies' specifications, casting the best representation of reality as the most technically proficient one. This aestheticization of reality focuses on pure sound, eliding cultural contexts beyond the techno-aesthetics of sound-reproduction networks.

Despite engineers' efforts to quantify and schematize desirable listening experiences, the question of preference is unavoidable. There is no axiomatic reference point for reality. In *The Audible Past*, Sterne argues "[s]ound fidelity is a story that we tell ourselves space separate pieces of sonic reality together" (219). The reality of sound reproduction is itself just as valid as the reality of unmediated sound. In the context of making rock records, the reality of recording can even precede corresponding live performances, like it often does in DeMarco's process.⁹ Sterne's socio-historical account of sound fidelity explains how, in recording studios,

[p]eople performed for the machines; machines did not simply 'capture' sounds that already existed in the world. While the modern recording studio is largely an invention of the mid-twentieth century, recording has always been a studio art. Making sounds for the machines was always different than performing for a live audience. (235)

Clearly the reality of reproduction is a big part of pop music's various sounds. Calling recording "a studio art" as Sterne does reminds us that recording—though often involving different technologies—is also just as much a performance as live music. Furthermore, since live musical performances can be altered by a reproduction performance, claims of what sounds are more "realistic" fall open to scrutiny. Depending on one's perspective, a recording appealing to the reality of mediation could be deemed just as "realistic" as one appealing to the reality of a live performance. Instead of taking a coherent stance, "Viceroy," for instance, simply reminds us that, when it comes to the appeal of recorded sounds, material realities underpin their representations, but also that different ones can be likeable.

As indicated by its name, sound poor fidelity is lo-fi's central stylistic criterion. Like verisimilitude, the concept of sound fidelity is also a question of technology, representation, and reality. Elsewhere in *The Audible Past*, Sterne explains how, "[w]ithin a philosophy of mediation, sound fidelity offers a kind of gold standard: it is the measure of sound-reproduction technologies' product against a fictitious external reality" (218). Sound fidelity and verisimilitude relate insofar as they both strive to represent reality through technology; however,

⁹ See Berke and Mamana. Makeout Videotape's releases as well as *Rock and Roll Nightclub* were recorded even prior to DeMarco organizing a band.

verisimilitude and fidelity are not the same things. Though both may be measured, albeit vaguely, by “definition, immersion, and richness of experience,” the main distinction is that verisimilitude suggests attempted mimesis whereas fidelity simply indicates “a belief that media and sounds themselves could hold *faithfully* to the agreement that two sounds are the same sound” (AP 222). Theoretically speaking, fidelity may be mimetic but it does not necessarily have to be.¹⁰ The quality of a given recording’s fidelity is not a question of whether or not it sounds more or less like reproduced or non-reproduced sound.

The history of sound fidelity is so intricately intertwined with those of sound reproduction technologies themselves, that it demonstrates how fidelity is really more a question of perspectives on reality than a technology’s ability to archive it. As with DeMarco’s first and most easily distinguishable lo-fi recording efforts, mimesis was a distant goal for the earliest sound-reproduction technologies, but they were nonetheless considered hi-fi. Through mediation, reality was not yet a canvas to be reformed into something fictitious; instead, it was simply something to be reached. Sound fidelity, then, was faith in the possibility of mediation itself, “whether sound-reproduction technologies could effectively reproduce sound at all” (AP 246). Sound fidelity was not so much a concern of two sounds *sounding* the same but rather a concern of two sounds simply *being of* the same thing. For the earliest devices, the issue of fidelity was thus more of functionality than aesthetics. Take for example the phonograph, which Attali tells us, Thomas Edison developed “as a stenographic machine for the reproduction of speech, for recording discourse, the purpose of which was to stabilize representation rather than multiply it . . . The first phonographs functioned as recorders used on a very localized basis to preserve and transmit exemplary messages” (91). Initially, Edison’s phonograph had a very specific telos: reproducing human speech “as an archival apparatus for exemplary words” (92). For the phonograph, successful archiving of discernible human speech clearly took precedence over capturing aesthetic nuances, such as those required for the representation of complex music. For nearly three decades, this was the phonograph’s primary function as “speech was the only sound [that] was technically feasible to record before 1910” (92). Aesthetic quality mattered mostly for

¹⁰ Later, I argue that lo-fi purports to be more realistic than its hi-fi counterparts. Therefore, representing reality becomes less a question of definition and more a question of style.

making intelligible, discernible reproductions of basic human speech.¹¹ Therefore, for the phonograph, sound fidelity did not so much describe the quality of recording aesthetics themselves, but more so the instrumentality of aesthetics. Faith was held by people and located in machines. If the phonograph could reliably supplant the stenographer, it had a high degree of fidelity because users could have faith in the utility of its reproduced sounds. Kittler reveals peoples' faith in machines when he tells us that eventually "Edison saw his phonograph 'pressed into the detective service and used as an unimpeachable witness'" (83). By today's standards, the phonograph would not have sounded faithful to reality, but listeners certainly had faith that its sounds were at least of unmediated reality. It was a hi-fi machine if only because sound reproduction was itself only just a new feature of reality.

Sound fidelity however evolved along with reproduction technologies and faith was no longer simply held by people and placed in machines. With increasing sophistication and new functional discoveries, sound-reproduction "technology literally makes the unheard-of possible" (36). The reproductions themselves impart whole new sonic experiences for which expressions of faith could only be tied back to the reality of mediation itself. Fidelity could then become a question of how much a reproduction represents unmediated sound *and* how much it represents the reproduction process. For example, Kittler explains how the phonograph introduced the ability to change "the time axis of acoustic events by increasing playback speed or indulging in time axis manipulation (TAM)" (34). TAM created not only new expressive opportunities, but also a new aspect of reality to represent:

standardization is always upper management's escape from technological possibilities. In serious matters such as test procedures or mass entertainment, TAM remains triumphant. The Edison Speaking Phonograph Company, founded two months after Edison's primitive prototype of December 1877, did its first business with time axis manipulation: with his own hand the inventor turned the handle faster than he had during the recording in order to treat New York to the sensational pleasure of frequency-modulated musical pieces. (34-5)

¹¹ See *The Audible Past* as well, pages 246-256—particularly page 250—for Sterne's discussion of early phonograph tests.

The reality Edison reveals here is the network comprised of sound-reproduction technologies, the people who use them, their interactions amongst each other, and even the reproductions as signs of the network itself. Sound-reproduction technologies henceforth no longer just provide access to reality, but also are a part of it and help create it. Those “frequency-modulated musical pieces” New York heard signify the developing reality of sound-reproduction technology. They do not just reproduce the sound of Edison’s voice, but also the sound of Edison manipulating it through the gramophone—a sound otherwise impossible without the reality of the gramophone itself.

By these early standards of “high” sound fidelity, we would have to call DeMarco’s marginally-polished recordings hi-fi. His warped production on “Viceroy,” for instance, may not be an accurate representation of his unmediated musical instrument performances, but it clearly proves the basic functionality of the recording equipment. Like Edison’s TAM, “Viceroy”’s warped sound is due to varispeed, a tape-specific form of TAM, that bends the frequency palate during playback. If Edison’s 1877 New York performance demonstrates a high fidelity to the reality of sound reproduction, so does DeMarco’s. Of course, we are well beyond the primitive iteration of sound fidelity for which hi-fi simply denotes faith in the reality and functionality of sound reproduction technologies. Wide frequency and stereophony spectra give “Viceroy”’s sound a polish; however, its basic yet warped production doesn’t quite hold up to the more refined tones of *This Old Dog*, DeMarco’s latest offering, or any concurrent top forty hit for that matter. We need more recent histories of fidelity to more accurately contextualize DeMarco’s recordings.

As well as changing the texture of sonic reality, new sound-reproduction technologies in the 20th century also achieved more transparent forms of representation, forms that were more faithful to unmediated sonic experiences. In particular, vacuum tubes and stereophony narrow the discrepancies between mediated and unmediated sound and are generally considered positive aesthetic contributions to sound fidelity. Sterne tells us that in the 1920s

[b]y all accounts, audiences preferred [over acoustic machines like the phonograph] the sound of radio—which used vacuum tubes and electricity to receive, transmit, and reproduce sound across space. Electric recording grafted radio’s electric reproduction technology onto sound recording’s hitherto acoustic mechanism: it

allowed for a wider frequency spectrum to be heard and also for a greater degree of amplification than acoustic recording ... Electric recordings had more treble and bass and could be played at a considerably higher volume. (*AP* 276).

Through electricity, mediated sounds began to closer resemble their unmediated counterparts. Now capable of delivering very low and very high frequencies at higher volumes, reproduced sound could—in impossibly exaggerated terms—begin to create “a musical experience equaled only by the personal performance of the musicians” (*AP* 275).¹² Greatly improved by during the mid-twentieth century, electric sound reproductions became not only closer in volume to unmediated sound, but also started to include more sonic data audible to the human ear that earlier acoustic machines could not. Linking together an improved frequency spectrum and realism, Kittler defines modern hi-fi: “[t]oday realism is in any event strategic. An unparalleled surge of innovations ... finally provided us (beyond Bell Labs) with records whose frequency range approached both limits of the audibility range; that is, with high fidelity” (99). Hi-fi sound is, in part, the biggest, loudest frequency spectrum “from infra- to ultrasound ... not art but an expression of life” (100). Hi-fi is the largest slice of audible reality. Electric tubes helped shift the focus of faith away from the ability to simply reproduce and toward the reproduction’s aesthetics themselves. The reality of sound reproduction began to retreat from the aesthetic of listening to reproduced sounds, bringing us closer to a more common contemporary understanding of hi-fi.

More robust frequency palates and the introduction of stereophony are two aesthetic developments that established the bare minimum for what constitutes “hi-fi” in the mid-twentieth century until present. First, an expanded and amplified frequency spectrum can better mimic audible reality, but it can also go further, making audible for the human ears what was not possible before. Kittler explains how sound reproduction technologies of WWI and II simulated through loudspeakers sounds of war that were realistic enough to fool the enemy (100). But, other “sound location devices with huge bell-mouths [had] superhuman audibility ranges” which created a “new age of soundspace ... Ever since, human ears have no longer been a whim of

¹² An advertisement for the Orthophonic Victrola, quoted by Sterne.

nature” (100). These developments show how—though the material reality of reproduction may have sonically retreated from its reproduced sounds—the reproduced sounds themselves added new material to the reality of listening. If sound reproduction technologies are both accurately representing unmediated sounds and creating new ones endemic only to the reality of sound reproduction itself, then sound fidelity cannot be exclusively tied either to representations of unmediated or mediated sounds. High fidelity discourses thus do not belong to any one aesthetic schema and appeals to auditory realism therein are more expressions of preference or, rather, perspective on reality. Hi-fi is as much about sonic realism as it is about sonic abstraction.

Similarly, stereophony exemplifies how hi-fi sound can enhance audible realism and/or imagined, abstract sonic experiences. Introduced by EMI in 1957, stereophonic records began to make sound reproductions more resemble unmediated sound by providing them with an extra dimension (Kittler 103). Stereophony, according Albin Zak,

is a system of sound recording and reproduction that takes advantage of the psychoacoustics of sound localization. Using two loudspeakers separated in space, a sound can be assigned to one or the other or any proportional combination of the two and thus appear to emanate from any place along a horizontal plane. (145)¹³

No longer bound by monophony’s single, width-less perspective, sound reproductions began to better represent not just sound, but sound in material space: an unprecedented new field of sonic detail. Stereophony is a fundamental feature of representing unmediated sound. With monophony, width is non-existent. Mono can provide depth through varying the volumes and reverberation characteristics of mix elements, but it lines them all up in a row, on top of each other. A lead vocal could appear closer to the listener, but always in front, never beside. Stereophonic width can more accurately represent unmediated sound because it provides a left and a right. Simulation is rendered back as material space when two distinct speakers, separated by distance, give reproduced sound the ability to locate a sound in space. Reproduction of width in part defines sound fidelity because, in Kittler’s words, “[h]i-fi stereophony can simulate any acoustic space, from the real space inside a submarine to the psychedelic space inside the brain

¹³ For Zak’s more detailed definition, see *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records*, pp. 145-153.

itself' (103). Like enhanced frequency spectrum, stereophony is an effective tool in the realist's arsenal; however, it is also a prerequisite for representing abstract spaces and creating sounds outside the parameters of typical human audition. An improved frequency spectrum and stereophony demonstrate how hi-fi is not simply described by sonic realism, but begs for further aesthetic description.

"Viceroy" hovers nebulously between what sounds realistic and what sounds abstract. The recording itself has a fairly rich frequency spectrum, though there is a roll-off of sub-bass; the lowest frequencies peak rather low around 60 Hz while the highest frequency band extends to the end of my analyzer's measurable limit. What we hear in the recording, in terms of frequency content, is pretty close to what we would hear in a live performance. The recording also has a wide stereo image with good phase coherence. Instruments are spread out across the stereo spectrum, mimicking a live band setup. In the context of rock music, these features contribute to a refined sense of realism; but, with the slightly warped production, it's one that appeals to realities of both unmediated sound and those imagined through the process of mediation. By these descriptions, "Viceroy" fits the profile of a basic, modern hi-fi recording.

Rich frequency content and stereophony are basic assumptions of modern hi-fi, but the question of degrees is what sets "Viceroy" apart from many of its peers. Measured against the dream of verisimilitude, sound fidelity seems to be more about technical aestheticism than any particular mimeticism. One of Sterne's main points is that "every age has its own perfect fidelity" and today,

the term *sound fidelity* has become a kind of technicistic shorthand for addressing the problems of sound's reproducibility—a gold standard for originals and copies, an imagined basis for currency in sounds. Today, the term *sound fidelity* connotes a measurable correspondence between different sounds—implying finely graded electronic or digital measurements of frequency response and amplitude. (AP 222)

In a more modern context, sound fidelity discourses promise measurable, standardized aesthetic results, a promise that a recording or technology has at least as wide a frequency spectrum and at least as much dynamic range as its average peer. As engineers refine and market new products and recordings, they sustain "narratives of technological change and the transformation of

technical specifications [which] are folded back into an aesthetic and technological telos: the latest technological innovation equals the ‘best-sounding’ or ‘perfect’ sound reproduction” (*AP* 222). Theoretically, perfect fidelity defers faith back in its original premise, that two sounds are the same sound. It is what Sterne calls a “vanishing mediator” yielding “no loss being between an original sound and its copy” in its best effort representing reality (*AP* 218). Rendering quality into quantity and annexed from a particular realist agenda, perfect fidelity today is largely faith in achieving the “gold standard” set of numbers—an excellent copy, one not of reality per se, but instead, of its best representations. In purely technicistic terms, sound fidelity is a continuum for which aesthetic quality is measured by specifications rather than similarities.

Indeed, recent hi-fi discourses often define definition, immersion, and richness of experience in terms of equipment’s practical uses and marketable measurements. At a glance, today’s hi-fi seems to dream of them as intrinsic values instead of as the porters of unmediated experiences. While it may be the case for some listeners and performers, a hi-fi recording isn’t however simply an aestheticization of technical exercises. Though hi-fi may not be tied to a particular form of realism, realism nonetheless remains essential. “From its inception through its maturation,” writes Sterne, “the concept of sound fidelity was about audio realism, audible technique, and the artifice of reproducibility. Sounds could neither hold faith nor be faithful—that task was left to listeners and performers” (*AP* 282). Despite some equipment manufacturers’ marketing claims, even the best recordings and sound reproductions cannot produce a perfect copy of unmediated reality. To resolve this discrepancy, Sterne explains, listeners and performers imagine one. What is important for hi-fi “is realism, not reality itself” (*AP* 245). It becomes a question of what form of realism listeners and producers bring to reproduced sound.

It is this aspect of hi-fi discourse that “Viceroy” challenges. Instead of encouraging listeners to imagine a perfect copy of reality as a reference for their faith, “Viceroy” provides one in itself. DeMarco’s warped production won’t allow us to fill the gap in our imaginations with a near-perfect version of his multitracked performances. Instead, we are left with the realism imparted by a decent frequency palate and good stereophony as well as the reality of DeMarco’s playful varispeed modulations. The production challenges two facets of hi-fi. Listening to “Viceroy,” it’s difficult for us to wholly hold our faith in the imagined reality of a live band

performance nor the actual reality of DeMarco making it in his apartment. The recording's aesthetics privilege neither story, encouraging us to listen to the song at face value, as the product of a mediator that won't vanish even despite itself. Like the song's tonal centre, our faith sits awkwardly between the lattices of sound discourses as DeMarco reminds us of the inescapable absence left by even the finest measurements.

The absence DeMarco exposes is where ideologies begin to form. If hi-fi is really about expressing realism *through and with* the latest sound-reproduction technologies, then Sterne's account of fidelity brings us back to "the general historical trend of progress in communication technology ... the dream of verisimilitude" (MP3 4). Verisimilitude is after all a form of realism, a likeness to truth or reality. When we describe hi-fi, we are also describing the dream of verisimilitude; both are different articulations of the general narrative of technological progress through realism and sound-reproduction. Reading Sterne's two texts together reveals how hi-fi realism is an expression of faith "that greater definition is the same thing as greater verisimilitude [and] that increases in definition necessarily enhance end-users' experiences" (MP3 4). This amounts to a faith that technologies with the best specifications are valuable, meaningful tools for the recording arts; a faithfulness to the sounds they create when used well, according to their prescribed functions; and, faith in a version of realism for which the objects of mediation vanish the most, providing the most clarity.

As preferences for hi-fi sound inform and alter material relations, they begin to emerge as ideology. Sterne's analysis of MP3 tests conducted in the early 90s reveals hi-fi biases in sound engineering culture and how they turn aesthetic preference into ideology. Sterne explains how, for MP3 listening tests, "expert listeners" were chosen for their "bias that mimics the biases toward a certain level of technical sophistication that is more generally present in standards organization ... The name *expert listener* is therefore not accidental. It represents a structural bias in engineering culture and a political bias that shapes the making of standards and formats" (163). Implied by this schema, is that expert listeners were chosen because their listening skills and biases towards technically sophisticated sounds *should* define the sound of the MP3. Moreover, such expert listeners

are often drawn from the ranks of musicians, recording engineers, broadcast engineers, piano tuners, and audiophiles, all of whom must develop an ear for technology, an auditory virtuosity that facilitates making careful judgements and finely graded distinctions. In essence, the ideal expert listener functions as an extension of the reproduction system. (164)

All parts of the sound reproduction system are represented, from those who create unmediated sounds (musicians), to those mediating them (engineers), and again to those listening, interpreting, and judging (piano tuners and audiophiles). It is not simply a case of producers marketing their products for consumers, convincing them their technology sounds best. Instead, the technology itself represents, reproduces, and standardizes preferences already shared amongst all domains of the sound reproduction economy. The biases written into the MP3 reveals a consensus over the aesthetics of music recordings, one which—based on the ubiquity of MP3 use—now continues to extend its influence over listening habits. As we consume music from streaming services and traffic in shared MP3 files, we tacitly acknowledge this aesthetic standardization in pop music.

Amongst the various domains of popular music's political economy (artists, engineers, producers, labels, consumers, and etc) common sonic preferences form an aesthetic hegemony over reproduced sound. Recordings marked by all the tropes of modern production become, to borrow Dick Hebdige's words, "charged with a potentially explosive significance because they are traced and re-traced along the lines laid down by the *dominant* discourses about the reality, the *dominant* ideologies. They thus tend to represent, in however obscure and contradictory a fashion, the interests of the *dominant* groups in society" (*Subculture* 15). In our case, the discursive medium is sound recording which is formed along aesthetic lines by particular sonic tropes. The reality of reproduced sound is an ideological expression and the dominant group is made up of producers and consumers who more or less share a taste for a particular aestheticization of a realist ideology. Recordings that don't conform to similar aesthetic standards become dull, challenging, ostracizing, and/or more difficult to consume and are thus also harder to market; they begin to appear illogical. It is in exactly this space Hebdige theorizes subculture as a reaction to hegemony. Borrowing from Stuart Hall (1977), Hebdige defines hegemony as

a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by ‘winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural. (15-6)

When they validate and standardize aesthetic preferences by streaming MP3s, the music-consuming populace, corporate interests, engineers, and artists all form a provisional alliance and authority over taste by agreeing upon aesthetic standards of music recordings. Take for instance a recent *Pitchfork* feature that explains how the streaming service economy is encouraging a dominant sound for recording and production stylistics.¹⁴ Thus, a homemade, noisy, monophonic recording, destined for a market founded upon hi-fi stereophonic listening, seems less legitimate: “[h]egemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes ‘succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range’ ... so that subordinate groups are, if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all ‘ideological’” (Hebdige quoting Hall 16). Therefore, when we confront a recently made monophonic recording suffocating in hiss and distortion on a hi-fi stereo or pair of headphones, questions immediately emerge: “why is this in mono?” “why is a crude-sounding record being sold as finished product?” and, maybe more importantly, “why do people buy (into) it?”¹⁵ These questions alone begin to reveal an ideological space that seems illogical, illegitimate, and unnatural.

Despite its hegemony over the political economy of music, Sterne shows us that verisimilitude in the world of professional sound reproduction is nonetheless a “dream.” Since depictions of reality are themselves subject to ideological biases, “claims about increased definition or the pleasures of immersion are in many cases true, but they are not the whole story” (4). Lo-fi reminds us that realism in hi-fi sound is just as much a dream by challenging the idea that technological progress imparts recordings with better definition, immersion, and richness of

¹⁴ See Hogan, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/uncovering-how-streaming-is-changing-the-sound-of-pop/>.

¹⁵ See Sharp’s piece for details. DeMarco sold all 500 copies from the initial release and was subsequently offered to open for the popular Vancouver rock band, Japandroids.

experience. Grajeda, quoting a *New York Times* article, summarizes lo-fi's aesthetic values and realist ideology:

[in] a world of 'advanced' technology' that makes 'recordings as pristine and clear as possible,' where production values are felt to be 'too slick' and 'sterile,' lo-fi appears as the perfect response to 'a very processed, perfect sound.' Where aesthetics, economics, and method meet, lo-fi is posited as the 'genuine' article, offering 'an intimate sound with a raw edge.' (236)

A production style emerged whose realist ideology contravenes the first two assumptions of communication technology identified by Sterne, "that greater definition is the same thing as greater verisimilitude [and] that increases in definition necessarily enhance end-users' experiences. Instead, lo-fi discourse suggests increasing definition (1) is actually less realistic and (2) is not inherently more pleasurable. These counter-proposals house within them two assumptions of their own. First, "a lo-fi artist embraces incidental noise and incorporates it into the mix to achieve a heightened sense of reality"¹⁶ (Grajeda 236). This position assumes noise, rawness, and chaos are essential to the reality of sound reproduction and, by course, efforts to suppress and/or control them bely the reality of sound-reproduction. For lo-fi, intimacy between listener and artist is defined by the *presence* of meditation, rather than its *absence*. Second, since high definition sounds are not necessarily desirable, *good* sound becomes more a matter of taste than an objective of standardized production technologies. By casting reality as a measure of an artist's personal interactions with limited expertise and materials, while refusing claims of aesthetic superiority, lo-fi discourse critiques the realist ideology behind the vanishing mediator premise. It forces us to confront realism as a question of preference and perspective by flipping the dominant narratives of technological progress. "Either by refusing or by failing (both produce the same effect) to repress the signifier, lo-fi recordings" in Grajeda's words "deliberately incorporate rather than mask noises of the medium, thereby calling attention to their own constructedness" (246). It is a powerful rhetorical move: in a world where tastes are supposedly no longer essential, and aesthetics no longer a measure of quality, lo-fi foregrounds its own

¹⁶ Grajeda quoting Rene Chun's 10 January 1995 *New York Times* Article, "Fleeing Sterile Perfection for Lovable Lo-Fi Sound."

material processes, distinguishing it from hi-fi. The recording is not concerned with mimesis because it reminds us that it is itself continuous with material relations, thus making it actually seem more real.

3. Distorting Myths: The Production Style of Makeout Videotape

Regardless of how lo-fi sounds are recorded (or perhaps manufactured) they signify highly situated recording procedures, technologies, and environments. In Grajeda's reading, "you can never *not* know that your listening experience is mediated, never not hear the sound of the recording in the very act of revealing its own means of production" (244). DeMarco's earliest recordings under the moniker Makeout Videotape are exemplary; "SLUSH PUPPY LOVE," from 2008-9's *HEAT WAVE!*, sounds about as lo-fi as it gets. We can't help but hear traces of DeMarco's amateur recording procedure. The song starts with a splashy, reverb-drenched guitar counting in the tune with muted downstrokes, the lone signal already pushing the dynamic threshold of his Fostex VF-80 8-track. When the rest of the instruments join in, the song becomes an impenetrably thick cloud of noise. The collection of sounds are too much for DeMarco's Fostex multi-tracker to handle without imparting the rough, fuzzy tone. The guitar riff pokes out of the mix more than other sounds with its reverb, originally heard in the intro, now obscured by the noise of saturation. There is a percussion track behind the guitar riff, but it's hard to identify what the instrument is. There may be bass guitar below it all, but the low frequency distortion may also just be coming from the guitar's boomy low-end fighting for space amongst the other sounds. Assuming it is indeed an electric bass, note articulations and attacks are irrelevant: all that's describable are the frequencies of notes themselves, manifested by amorphous fuzz tones. DeMarco's vocal melodies, though catchy, in tune, and confidently-sung, struggle to rise above the noise. While the melody is discernible, DeMarco's lyrics remain mostly unintelligible. Apart from occasional word fragments, the only recognizable phrase is "Slush puppy love." As if suggested by the 'slushy' title itself, DeMarco's recording is less a "mix" and more a sonic soup. Sounds smear each other and into each other, obscuring melody and harmony with cacophony.

Like most lo-fi, a defining characteristic of the recording of "SLUSH PUPPY LOVE" is noise. Drawing from Mara Mills, Sterne explains how acousticians often defined noise in the psychoacoustic context "in terms of frequency characteristics: non periodic, irregular, or otherwise not behaving like pitched or recognized sound" (*MP3* 108). By this definition, there is

noise abounding in “SLUSH PUPPY LOVE.” While hiss forms the sonic backdrop, distortion produces much of the discernible noise here. In psychoacoustics, distortion can be timbral or tonal. Often described as grainy, fuzzy, or crunchy, distortion is a quality of a prior sound and cannot exist by itself. In the cultural context of popular music, it is easily recognizable as “the generic timbral qualities associated with various styles of rock” (Zak 60). Since distortion is an attribute of sound, it can behave like pitch insofar as it affects or latches on to the timbres of pitched sounds. Moreover, distortion can add new complexity and density to discrete pitched sounds by contributing overtones or harmonics. Since distortion is organizable and recognizable, it is not necessarily noise according to psychoacoustic definitions alone. However, distortion, as with any sound, becomes noise when it is disrupting pitched and recognized sound.

Evidently, in “SLUSH PUPPY LOVE,” layers of distortion disrupt the details of DeMarco’s performances, and from an engineering perspective, constitute a misuse of equipment. In a professional sound recording process aiming for transparency, distortion is noise because it is a material disruption, particularly, a discrepancy between two sounds across a mediation process. Electrical engineer and psychoacoustician Floyd E. Toole explains how

[a]udio devices should ideally yield outputs that are perfect replicas of the signals that went in, or perfectly scaled versions of those signals if amplification is involved. Transducers (microphones and loudspeakers) convert energy from one form to another, and again the requirement is that the output is a perfectly scaled transducer of the input signal ... The success of this is evaluated by measurements comparing inputs and outputs, looking for discrepancies—distortions. (77)

Distortion is in other words caused by a technical or procedural failure, the degree to which a replica fails to appear as the signal it is derived from. In Toole’s formulation, distortion resembles understandings of noise as disruption. Information theorist Claude Shannon defines noise as an interference, when an output signal differs from the input because “the signal has more information. Some of this information is spurious and undesirable and has been introduced via the noise. To get the useful information in the received signal we must subtract out this spurious portion” (19). In the input-output chain, distorting is an unwanted extra, a distraction of sorts. Distortion for Toole and noise for Shannon both describe a discrepancy between a sound

and its copy. Moreover, for both of them, this discrepancy should be unwanted. Shannon's imperative "must" dictates that noise is what impinges upon communication and that adding unwanted information interferes with a system's designated purpose. In what appears like his own iteration of hi-fi's vanishing mediator premise, Toole more explicitly reinforces the values of optimal technical performance and clarity for sound reproduction. "Success" in his definition is a matter of how little the signal changes. What both Shannon and Toole assert is that, when it comes to the way machines are designed to work, noise and distortion function in a similar manner: we can start to understand them together as disruption.

Thinking about noise more simply as a form of disruption allows us to theorize DeMarco's distorted recording style as a subcultural expression that spans aesthetic, material, and social relations. It is from precisely this intersection that Hebdige understands subculture. For him, subculture is a symbolic disruption of hegemony manifested through "the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups ... who are alternately dismissed, denounced and canonized" (2). The expressive forms and rituals are themselves how he defines style: the "transformations [that] go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards speech which offends the 'silent majority', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts myth and consensus" (18). Style is, rather, a process of appropriating the language of hegemony, which disrupts the dominant signifying practices. Hebdige himself turns to the language of information technologies when he writes that subcultures "represent 'noise' (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media ... as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation" (90). As with the measurable discrepancies between inputs and outputs, subcultures function like noise. They receive meanings and distort them by adding new contrary or "illegitimate" meanings. These are disruptive insofar as they create semantic discrepancies, or double meanings.

Anything manifesting in material reality can become a sign and subject to such semantic distortions. Describing the process, V.N. Vološinov writes that "any physical body may be perceived as an image; for instance, the image of natural inertia and necessity embodied in that

particular thing. Any such artistic-symbolic image to which a particular physical object gives rise is already an ideological product. The physical object is converted into a sign” (9). Of course, physical phenomena do not just signify themselves but carry many other meanings. In *Mythologies*, Barthes reads dominant bourgeois ideologies in images aggregated around consumable goods such as wine, milk, and plastic. For Hebdige, the languages of subcultures are primarily formed by mapping alternative ideologies through the consumption of everyday materials. Objects such as safety pins, zoot suits, and motor scooters become the linguistic units of “‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination” (18). Hebdige’s analysis of subcultural codes shows us how the matter of society can become the linguistic units for the language of its own critique. Like when “[s]afety pins were taken out of their domestic ‘utility’ context and worn as gruesome ornaments,” objects repurposed for subcultural expressions are disruptive because they violate their original utility (107). In an ironic inversion, the safety pin piercing flesh is hardly safe. For Hebdige, this “signified a relative material poverty which was either directly experienced and exaggerated or sympathetically assumed, and which in turn was made to stand for the spiritual paucity of everyday life” (115). By enacting a “transition from real to symbolic,” punk maps new, “illegitimate” meanings onto objects of hegemonic culture, which—like an imperfect transducer—go against or disrupt the dominant, functional meanings by creating a semiotic discrepancy—a distortion, or rather, a cultural “noise.”

Like fashion, musical style also offers an expressive outlet for spectacular subcultures. Vološinov reminds us that signifying practices take place across all senses, writing that “[e]very phenomenon functioning as an ideological sign has some kind of material embodiment, whether in sound, physical mass, color, movements of the body, or the like” (11). We are, for the moment, talking particularly about the material embodiment of sound in popular music, one given form by the economy based on sound reproduction and distribution technologies. Attali calls the exchange of pop music via discrete consumable units repetition. Repetition, the production, marketing, and consumption of recordings, turns music into “a material object of exchange and profit ... the first system of sign production” (88). In repetition, whole songs, pieces, recordings, and performances can perhaps be signs themselves. For instance, when contrasted to more

pleasing “pop” music styles, a rock song signifies aggression and resistance. However, our interest in style requires a more granular approach, one breaking down music’s constitutive features. If only in passing, Hebdige does provide an example, describing punk style as a particular constellation of musical tropes:

a barrage of guitars with the volume and treble turned to maximum accompanied by the occasional saxophone would pursue relentless (un)melodic lines against a turbulent background of cacophonous drumming and screamed vocals. Johnny Rotten succinctly defined punk’s position on harmonics: ‘We’re into chaos not music.’(109)

Punk’s basic instrumentation is common to plenty of popular music and, in the late seventies, electrified band music had already become a widely consumed commodity, recuperated and banalized by the hit parade (Attali 109). The electrified band, in short, became a standardized cultural form. So, when punk musicians take electric band music, render it hostile and recalcitrant, and then hold it back up, they are doing something similar as with the safety pin. Rotten himself explains how punk music’s meaning works: it empties popular band music’s tropes of musicality leaving chaos instead. Vocals are not sung, but screamed; drums are not rhythmic but turbulent; guitars are not harmonious, but assaulting; and saxophones not melodic, but un-melodic. In short, punk music distorts the popular electric band form’s common expressions. Like the with the safety pin, punk music appropriates the language of hegemonic culture’s commodities and changes how it makes meaning, though it plays out through performances and speakers instead of on the surfaces of the body.

With *HEAT WAVE!*, DeMarco creates a similar cultural disruption by enacting a version of punk musical style. Punk musical style however more often begins at the levels of music’s composition and live performance. DeMarco’s cultural disruptions, in typical lo-fi fashion, occur at the recording and production stages. Musically speaking, “SLUSH PUPPY LOVE” is hardly punk at all but rather a typical, direct pop song. The guitar riff introducing the song trades off with verses until the chorus. This pattern repeats twice, ending with the original guitar riff. The 4/4 time signature and guitar-drums-bass-vocals instrumentation are common to countless popular recordings. The rhythms are simple with little syncopation, and the chords sound mostly

consonant. DeMarco's vocals are mellow, tuneful, and melodic, tying everything together into what, in terms of composition and performance, sounds like a catchy pop tune. These sorts of features are consistent across all of *HEAT WAVE!*'s seven songs, which also on occasion directly reference other famous pop music examples. Track three is a more-distorted, stripped-down cover of Harry Nilsson's 1969 hit, "I Guess the Lord Must Be In New York City."¹⁷ If not completely indicated by the title, the bluesy guitar riffs of "S.R.V." playfully nod to the popular 1980s guitarist, Stevie Ray Vaughan. Though bearing little resemblance musically, "SLUSH PUPPY LOVE" and "HEAT WAVE" recall Paul Anka's "Puppy Love" and Martha and the Vandellas's "*HEAT WAVE!*" respectively.¹⁸ As a whole, *HEAT WAVE!* sounds like the work of an avid fan mining forgotten recesses of pop music, playing with them, and reproducing them through a glance of admiration, satire, or both at once. Breaking this down further though, first requires a more systematic analysis of the recording in turn.

Recording aesthetics are one such site of play for DeMarco. Despite presenting itself as a product of yesteryear's hits, *HEAT WAVE!* features a recording texture that shares few similarities with its source materials. Though recorded in different eras and—due to audio technology's development over the years—different tiers of clarity, the recordings *HEAT WAVE!* references nonetheless are all professional studio-produced efforts. DeMarco's recorded interpretations however signify quite the opposite. In "SLUSH PUPPY LOVE," a more extreme example, DeMarco's vocals are audible, but distortions overwhelm any semantic meaning rendering them all the more abstract and alienating for listeners accustomed to singing along to verse-chorus structures. Since the recording itself obscures the sonic definitions and boundaries of instruments, most details that would otherwise make the recording sound complex and interesting cannot be found, leaving the listener to largely confront distortion itself. Tonal differences, let alone articulations, exist only basically if at all. Because the mix sounds thoroughly saturated, it has a very narrow dynamic range. The pop hits influencing *HEAT WAVE!* flow with a sense of narrative created by interactions between loud and soft passages; however, "SLUSH PUPPY LOVE" just sounds loud from beginning to end. Not only is

¹⁷ See Greenwald, <https://www.allmusic.com/song/i-guess-the-lord-must-be-in-new-york-city-mt0002441681>.

¹⁸ See Wynn, <https://www.allmusic.com/album/heat-wave-mw0000198953>.

distortion the dominant sonic feature, but the recording's unwavering homogeneity edges toward monotony. Furthermore, the stereo image is virtually nonexistent, providing little sense of space. All these factors contradict the usual hi-fi recording frame of verse-chorus pop hits. As a recording, "SLUSH PUPPY LOVE" is a stylistic conflict, transgressing the boundaries of both pleasant and unpleasant listening experiences. It does not altogether surrender to recalcitrant avant-gardism though. Lurking beneath the murky tones is still a catchy, accessible pop tune. DeMarco's "sloppy, but poppy" recordings foreground the commonly assumed association between pop music and professional, hi-fi sounding production by rupturing it.¹⁹

This jarring aesthetic positions itself at the centre of pop music's status in capitalist economies. Pop music, framed by recalcitrant recording aesthetics, critiques the standards artists are supposedly held to in order to be marketable in the first place. Because of its non-professional sound, Grajeda argues lo-fi

deliberately plays on widespread perception of the demonstration tape. As an 'unfinished' product, the demo tape had always existed in the music world as a precommodity form, something not yet for sale (at least legally) but nevertheless functioning as a necessary step in gaining the vital attention of record company A&R types. With lo-fi the demo apparently has entered circulation, thereby rattling the usual order of things in the culture industry's standard grooming procedure for professionalization. (234)

More precisely, a lo-fi release up for sale not only rejects the assumed connections between musical and recording styles but also challenges the necessity of professional apparatuses in pop music's political economy.

DeMarco, without the supposedly vital attention of record labels, self-released *HEAT WAVE!*, selling out all 500 of its first copies, and landing him an opening gig with the fellow but then more celebrated Vancouver band, Japandroids.²⁰ His success is certainly due to frequent performances in the local music scene. (That his performances were notorious for lewd onstage

¹⁹ This is Sharp's description of *HEAT WAVE!*.

²⁰ See Fumano for details, <http://www.citr.ca/discorder/february-2010/makeout-videotape/>.

antics, undoubtedly drew extra attention.) However, the likability of *HEAT WAVE!*'s songs stands up for itself. Take Dan Fumano's 2010 Discorder feature praising how

Makeout Videotape's songs are charming, catchy, jangly gems with melodies and hooks as strong as any in your parents' '60s pop songs, just drenched in distortion and fuzz. When you hear the 'oooh oooh oooh's on the title track, it's hard not to fall in love at first listen. If it's possible to have a crush on a band, it seems like Makeout Videotape is that band for a lot of people.

Fumano not only celebrates the catchiness of DeMarco's songs, but emphasizes their timeless quality. His songs tap into a composition style that has always been popular and likely will remain so. For Fumano and apparently "a lot of people," the recording aesthetics do not betray the essential likability of the music. That the songs are "drenched in distortion" is but a trivial matter for some listeners, as it is for DeMarco himself.

DeMarco never considered *HEAT WAVE!* a demo. Despite recording it in his garage, he explains in Fumano's feature, "I had lived [in Vancouver] for three months or something, I didn't have any music friends, worked at a shitty Starbucks on East 49th. I was like 'Well, I'm not doing anything else. I might as well record a CD' ... I'm glad people like it." *HEAT WAVE!* is clearly a low-stakes effort for DeMarco, but his demeanour, which Fumano calls "self-effacing yet confident, funny yet candid," reveals that making a likeable pop record need not be anything higher. DeMarco's approach, challenging expected sounds of pop hits, comes from an established list of forebears lurking the fringes of pop music history. Elsewhere, in an interview with Tape Op, DeMarco acknowledges his inspiration from seminal lo-fi artists such as John Maus, Ariel Pink, Tomita, and R. Stevie Moore, all artists who privilege low-stakes recording.²¹ Makeout Videotape's aesthetic is partially mimicry of DeMarco's idols who "were all doing it at home. It sounded sketchy," he adds, "but I was like, 'Ah I want that sound'" (18). *HEAT WAVE!* is perhaps DeMarco's expression of paucity, loneliness, and boredom in a new city but it is equally one of his wide-reaching pop music fandom. There already existed a subcultural practice for which 'illegitimate' sounding recordings could be 'legitimate' records. Simon Frith argues

²¹ See Berke and Mamana for more of DeMarco's comments, p. 18.

that “in most popular music genres music-making emerges from from obsessive listening; a certain ‘fandom’ is thus built into the process” (55). Listening itself is itself a form of sub/cultural expression that pop musicians reform into their own musical production. Indeed, like its forbearers, *HEAT WAVE!* is by no means a household name, but it’s limited yet fervent fanbase nonetheless indicates that the demo-as-ironic-hit is both a desirable and marketable concept, forming the niche lo-fi style.

The story of *HEAT WAVE!* demonstrates how recording distortions can be unobjectionable or even desirable in pop records, but this is not to downplay its recalcitrance to hegemony. In the context of popular music, the sound we often call ‘distortion’ is associated with a particular technical disruption: clipping. Clipping is when a signal exceeds a piece of audio equipment’s ability to represent it, thus clipping (or disrupting) the natural peaks of the sine wave, creating the sound we call distortion. We should distinguish recording distortion though, because Zak has previously shown us how distorted electric guitars largely define popular rock music. Most experienced engineers will say though, that distortions from the recording procedure itself are to be avoided at all costs—even when recording rock music; it is a fundamental principle defining standard recording procedures. In *Audio Engineering 101: A Beginner’s Guide to Music Production*, Tim Dittmar tells novice recordists to

[b]e aware of the input level sent to a digital recorder. If the level is too hot, the signal will clip in a displeasing way ... Strive for setting recording levels somewhere between -20 and -6 dBFS. This will allow headroom for volume spikes, insuring that you won’t damage the integrity of the audio signal. If using an analog recorder, store signals much hotter to increase the signal-to-noise ratio. (122)

Here, unlike rock guitars, the sound of clipping is “displeasing,” something that will “damage the integrity of the audio signal”—a transgression of desirable recording sound. With analog gear, engineers should risk distortion only to avoid a high noise floor. Again, like a noise floor, acoustic distortion appears as a disruption compromising the integrity of a recording, as noise.

The specific subcultural significance of acoustic noise in *HEAT WAVE!* is most apparent with the Nilsson cover because it already existed as a hit song. Though sold, distributed, and consumed in different formats, “I Guess the Lord Must Be in New York City” is a product.

Describing through music “the entry of the sign into the general economy,” Attali argues how sound reproduction renders music a mass-producible, “material object of exchange and profit, without having to go through the long and complex detour of the score and performance” (88). Leaving aside their differences and philosophical complexities, records, radio, and, more recently, streamed or downloaded MP3s are musical expressions in the form of reproducible material products. A record, for instance, refers to a self-contained work of music but also the vinyl disc that it’s stored on. Recorded music’s various mass-producible formats, to borrow Sterne’s reading, function as “containers” that allow copies of audio to “circulate” in different material networks (*MP3* 194-5). Listening to recorded music subsumes consumption of material products like, say, a safety pin. However, unlike a safety pin, the format is not the primary value-laden product. Using Attali’s Marxian language, a recording’s use-value, though inalienable from the materiality of formats, is an attribute of the representation formats (do or could) contain. What is most valuable about a record is not the vinyl disc, but rather, the aesthetic experience it contains.

To state the obvious, typically we only buy records to access representation. Like with other media, it is an “economy of the sign” inscribed into an economy of containers, formats, and networks. Indeed, for some, not all formats are interchangeable because they affect differently the aesthetic experiences of the music they contain. Attali’s theory cannot, for instance, account for audiophile cultures and the resurgence of vinyl alongside the robust and more affordable streaming service networks.²² However, while different formats impart recorded music with different aesthetic frames, the music on them is nonetheless the focus—the product for production and consumption. Though *HEAT WAVE!* is noisy and distorted, it’s actually part of the appeal. By encouraging us to think of recorded music as products, signs to be consumed regardless of format, Attali helps explain how DeMarco’s noisy cover songs are a more explicit form of symbolic distortion: an expressive opportunity for subculture.

There are many orders of signification embedded in *HEAT WAVE!*, from those of DeMarco to those of his references. Recorded music, packaged in a format and rendered a

²² See Ellis-Petersen, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/jan/03/record-sales-vinyl-hits-25-year-high-and-outstrips-streaming>.

product, is perhaps itself “a sign of power, social status, and order, a sign of one’s relation to others” (Attali 100). However, Attali does not adequately explain how recorded music is also comprised of countless other social, cultural, and material signs. Punk music, for example, reveals how the electrified band signifies popular music. Constituting elements of electric band music can be broken down even further though. For instance, subtle differences of electric guitar tone signify different genres and styles of popular music. In one of my previous examples, Zak tells us how distorted guitars specifically signify different styles of rock music. When Attali reduces music as a repeated object to a sign, he cannot accurately account for the constitutive subtleties like timbral qualities of distortion tones that would distinguish music’s various cultural contexts. “Listening to music” he explains, “is to receive a message” (25). The message, though, is never definite or self-evident because “music cannot be equated with a language. Quite unlike the words of a language—which refer to a signified—music, though it has a precise operationality, never has a stable reference to a code of the linguistic type. It is not ‘a myth coded in sounds instead of words,’ but rather a ‘language without meaning’” (25). For Attali, music’s semiotic instability grants license to homogenize its meaning in repetition. Leaving aside the inaccuracy of this characterization (the pop hits Attali often refers to are filled with lyrics) I argue that subtleties of recorded music’s sounds actually do create and maintain cultural myths, and additionally, hold multiple meanings and values according to listeners’ unique perspectives, experiences, and ideologies.

As tone, distortion exemplifies how sounds can be recognizable and function as signs in music, but also refract meanings that reveal the different discourses within music’s political economy. Distortion is, as a whole, an easily identifiable sound; however, there are many sonic manifestations of distortion and many ways of creating it. Describing differences in distortion sounds and what they mean is incredibly difficult. For instance, Zak explains how musicians and recordists often manipulate distortion tonalities to express different emotions and invoke different rock styles. However, simply explaining and talking about distortion sounds requires us to fit them into codified scripts. To describe any given distortion sound, we need to cross-reference other sounds themselves or rely on “mental images conjured by adjectives such as ‘dark,’ ‘bright,’ ‘muffled,’ or ‘edgy’” (65). Trying to categorize and explain what different

distortion sounds mean brings us to the nebulous boundaries of codification. We become, in Barthes's famous words, so thoroughly reliant on "the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective" (*IMT* 176). Bonds between the sounds themselves (signifieds) and descriptive adjectives (signifiers) disintegrate when a tone feels between, for example, "dark" and "muffled." Despite engineers' best intentions, there is no essential grammar organizing tones. Our measurements, adjectives, and real-world examples all help signify tones' meanings; but, they also all insufficiently express the meanings given by subjective listening experiences. If the tonalities constituting recorded music adhere to a sign system, evidently its "social existence" is, to borrow Vološinov's words, "*refracted* ... By an intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community, i.e., *by class struggle* [emphasis in original]" (22). Tones are perhaps among the most extreme examples of what Vološinov writes, for a single shared tonal experience has multiple meanings across different subjectivities and discourses. Tones exemplify sound as a site of political struggle, one whose consensus of winners or losers draws from claims of subjective experience, taste, or measurement, and sometimes all at once.

So far, we've encountered both qualitative and quantitative meanings of distortion tones, but there are also exemplary meanings, referring to other recorded tones. Through synecdoche, statements like "I want my guitar to sound like the guitar in *x* song" use *x* song as a sign in cultural discourses attributing distortion tones to styles. As distortion tones show, recorded music's meanings depend on which discourses one applies to it, making its use-value an "expression of lacks and manipulations in the political economy of the sign" (Attali 101). Tone though, in music and acoustics, is a "sound of definite pitch and character produced by regular vibration of a sounding body," the sonic fingerprint of a resonating piece of matter.²³ But, tones change depending on what creates the resonance and how it is created. Plucking strings closer to their end, for instance, creates a sharper tone than plucking them closer to their middle. Because it bridges both matter and imagination, listening to and interpreting tones extends beyond the politics of taste and of the sign. At least implicitly, tone is an expression of particular socio-

²³ Definition 2.a. of "tone, n." from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

material relations as well. En masse, because of formats, we may consume recorded songs as if they were signs, but evidently they way they mean is far more complicated. Lyrics tell stories and tones signify emotions as well as socio-material relations. A recorded song signifies more like myth for Roland Barthes, both as “a system of communication [and] a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form” (*Mythologies* 217). A record is not just an object; the music it contains is an expressive aggregation of cultural forms. As formats, we consume records like products, but as aggregations of cultural forms, we consume them as myth.

This is how I intend to begin understanding DeMarco’s Nilsson cover, as consumption and re-production of myth. This reading should be tempered though as Barthes warns us that “there are formal limits to myth,” and that mythology “is a science among others, necessary, but not sufficient” (217, 221). My use of mythology here is in service of reading in part what already has been about style in sound and subculture for the sake of understanding where they may meet. DeMarco’s Nilsson cover is, like the other songs on *HEAT WAVE!*, an expression of productive listening practices. Because it is a cover version, though, “I Guess the Lord Must Be in New York City” is a distillation of the kinds of cultural myths DeMarco criticizes, appropriates, and celebrates in a more fragmented way elsewhere on *HEAT WAVE!*. His version, caked in lo-fi gunk, sounds little like the original, critiquing hit song aesthetics and production values; however, lodged in that critique is an homage to Nilsson and a desire to take part in his myth valuing playfulness and catchy, well-written pop music. By uniting these seemingly incongruous discourses, DeMarco celebrates the songwriting of pop hits while deriding the politics of technological elitism underpinning their production values. This amounts to a critique that seeks to return popular music production into the hands of the populace, encouraging listeners to, if not embrace the ‘character’ of amateur production aesthetics, at least accept them. Emphasizing production, *HEAT WAVE!* symbolically breaks down the hegemonic tiers in the political economy of music while suggesting that good songwriting is really all that is needed to make a record.

Indeed, *HEAT WAVE!* sounds vastly unlike the majority of Nilsson’s records, which often maximize the potential of hi-fi studio technologies. Nonetheless, *HEAT WAVE!* and Nilsson’s

music share a common feature: a dual posture playing between familiarity and difference that both satirizes and celebrates other pop music. By releasing a faithful cover of Fred Neil's "Everybody's Talking" alongside a reinterpretation of it, Nilsson plays up original lyrics while masking blatant similarities of production, composition, and performance between his two recordings. Taken together, they critique how popular music consumption can be insensitive to originality despite its supposed need for differentiated products. All the while, Nilsson was inspired enough by Neil's original to produce two versions of his own. Rather than through lyrical content and origin stories, *HEAT WAVE!* masks similarities by exacerbating differences in performance and production. On *HEAT WAVE!*, DeMarco covers Nilsson's original composition and renders it alien through noise, distortion, and simplified performances. In so doing, DeMarco criticizes the hi-fi frame with which we typically associate popular hit songs, challenging listeners to question their politics while they enjoy them aesthetically.

DeMarco's Nilsson cover appears as both an homage and a critique and it is on this basis that he participates in Nilsson mythology. DeMarco's direct and unadorned reinterpretation draws attention to the basic composition, signifying a sincere celebration of Nilsson's songwriting; however, DeMarco's vastly inferior production values establish a difference—a new order of signification—disrupting the tendency for hit songs to be framed by hi-fi sound. By sully Nilsson's song with lo-fi production, DeMarco—like Nilsson before him—takes a critical stance against the music he reveres in the very act of celebrating it. Both DeMarco and Nilsson play between mimicry and difference, using this dual posture for satires that reveal and undermine constructs of taste underpinning pop music criticism and the economics of the hit parade.

As an idiosyncratic and fairly autonomous singer-songwriter, DeMarco himself often garners comparisons to Nilsson. Indeed, both DeMarco and Nilsson similarly rely on (to borrow Juan A. Suarez's term) productive consumption of pop music tropes, an often humour-infused playfulness, and aversion to traditional forms of success.²⁴ Nilsson was known for synthesizing "disparate elements of both pop and rock traditions"—often covering artists while also supplying

²⁴ See Cohen, Hoby, and Richardson respectively for examples: <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/tracks/16549-mac-demarco-passing-out-pieces/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/mar/22/mac-demarco-salad-days>; and <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/23125-this-old-dog/>.

others with hits—and refusing to “cash in on his stardom” by not performing live.²⁵ Irony is a unifying thematic thread of Nilsson’s career, but it’s strung together with hit songs of both his and others’ creation. Recorded in 1969, “I Guess the Lord” is one of them, straddling the line between inspiration and mimicry. Basically a loose rendition of Fred Neil’s “Everybody’s Talking,” “I Guess the Lord” borrows tropes from country and pop music of the 1960s, fusing styles that “provided Nilsson with another Top 40 hit.”²⁶ Interestingly though, prior to releasing “I Guess the Lord,” Nilsson had himself just made an actual cover recording of “Everybody’s Talking,” which made it into the popular film *Midnight Cowboy*.²⁷ “I Guess the Lord” is Nilsson’s interpretation of a hit that sits right next to his very own explicit copy of it, and thus, is decidedly *not* a cover. However, Nilsson’s “I Guess the Lord” shares so much in common with his own version of “Everybody’s Talking” that they actually sound more like each other than his cover does to Neil’s original. Both Nilsson’s songs have similar tempos with “Everybody’s Talking” around 124 bpm and “I Guess the Lord” around 126 bpm. Also, both feature melodramatic orchestral string sections, similar chord progressions, and Nilsson’s plaintive lead vocal over arpeggiated steel-stringed instruments (guitar in the former and banjo in the latter, but both are highly associated with country music).

Nilsson’s two interpretations of “Everybody’s Talking” more or less characterize much of his larger body of work, both satirizing and celebrating pop culture at once. By releasing a song that is basically his slight re-imagining of his own copy to great commercial and critical acclaim, Nilsson creates a satire of originality in pop songs. He shows that what may be perceived as an original song can be little more than fresh lyrics, new vocal melodies, and a new mix. He also undermines a distinction music critics often make between what Simon Frith calls, in most extreme cases, “the cover version” and the “version.” A cover version, according to Frith, is a recreation that adds nothing new but also fails to capture the appeal of the original recording. Consequently, the “cover version is almost always heard as bad” largely because “[r]ock criticism is driven by the need to differentiate” (69). In opposition to the cover, what he calls

²⁵ See Unterberger, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/harry-nilsson-mn0000560208/biography>.

²⁶ See Greenwald, <https://www.allmusic.com/song/i-guess-the-lord-must-be-in-new-york-city-mt0006639734>.

²⁷ See Sullivan, <https://www.allmusic.com/song/everybodys-talkin-mt0034163369>.

simply “the version” often “refers to a situation in which the ‘copy’ is taken to improve on the original, to render it ‘bad’ by revealing what it could have been” (70). Nilsson’s “I Guess the Lord” empties this concept of meaning by giving us more of the idea of difference and less of an actual one. “I Guess the Lord” is almost a cover of “Everybody’s Talking” but Nilsson makes it more like a “version” by changing its origin story. For all his playfulness, perhaps at the listener’s expense, Nilsson’s committed exploration of Neil’s original idea nonetheless indicates thorough admiration of his source material. Despite their similarities and short release interval, both songs are commercially, culturally, and musically successful. So, as myth, “I Guess the Lord” contributes to a pop music discourse that both celebrates and satirizes popular culture through consumptive productive processes and virtuosic songwriting.

DeMarco’s “I Guess the Lord” cover does less to prod the threshold of originality and mimicry, but by covering Nilsson, he both invokes and participates in the myth of the singer-songwriter’s duel posture as cultural satirist *and* celebrator. DeMarco’s satire is different though; instead of targeting similarities of hit songs through composition, he exacerbates difference through sound fidelity. DeMarco’s version sounds so different from Nilsson’s it’s initially difficult to tell if it’s even the same song. The instrumentation is stripped-down, consisting of the basic drum-guitar-bass-vocal formula for rock music and omitting the sighing strings and banjos defining the original. The tempo is much faster at about 138 bpm, carrying a more direct, punchy 4/4 rhythm. As with the rest of *HEAT WAVE!*, lo-fi noise blurs the clarity of the recording making it sound distant and grainy, far from the studio clarity of Nilsson’s version. DeMarco even changes the title slightly, leaving out the word “City,” further emphasizing infidelity to the original.

Like the omission of the word “City” suggests, the differences of DeMarco’s version appear as a lack or insufficiency. The arrangements are paired down, the performances simpler, the production values lacking sophistication, and perhaps most interestingly, the sound is not even all there. The recording is very monophonic and, coupled with the copious distortion and noise, provides little sense of depth or width. The disparate sounds of the mix are condensed and overwhelming. Running the recording through a spectrum analyzer reveals little to no sub bass and a roll-off of high frequencies. Recalling that distortion as an effect of a signal exceeding

equipment's capacities, we hear *HEAT WAVE!* as DeMarco's insufficient production. The sound's dynamics are literally stifled and chopped off through the process of mediation. It's as if DeMarco as a singer-songwriter exceeds DeMarco as a producer. The song titles even indicate as much. At least on the Makeout Videotape Bandcamp page, all are in caps and the EP title itself is followed by an exclamation mark. The titles connote loudness and bigness, just like the instruments prior to becoming their reproduced counterparts. DeMarco adorns his guitar tone with reverb, mimicking the spaciousness his recording cannot provide. The performance itself is a rollicking rendition with fast, chunky strums creating—despite its simplicity and technical insufficiencies—an excitement and ambition that feels contained yet bursting at the seams. The recording is lo-fi in a stylistic sense, but also because it cannot faithfully reproduce DeMarco's grand performative and compositional gestures. Instead of serving the sense of excitement and popular ambition, the recording style belies it. It sounds as if the production imposes limits on the songs rather than giving them form. DeMarco presents us with hit songs that will never become legitimate hits.

Thinking of *HEAT WAVE!* as a production failure, though, is to miss its point. What makes it a subcultural expression, a distortion of Nilsson's ironic singer-songwriter myth, is that it is a production failure by design. As a reaction to hegemonies, subculture is the construction of "an alternative identity which communicate[s] a perceived difference: an Otherness" (Hebdige 89). But, it is the construction of a particularly subordinate otherness, one that is "if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all 'ideological'" according to hegemony's naturalized dominant ideas (16). Comparing DeMarco's version of "I Guess the Lord" to Nilsson's original exemplifies such a construction of subordinate otherness played out through sound fidelity and primitive production skills. However, Frith's distinction between a "cover version" and a "version" is perhaps too reductive for our discussion; versions can produce difference without the pretence of improving a song, simply showing instead a different emotional side. Difference is nonetheless the most striking feature of DeMarco's version; however, the basis of its difference in sound fidelity—from perspective of pop music's aesthetic hegemony—only makes his worse. The lo-fi production is itself an unfavourable difference by hegemonic listening standards, but it also disrupts listeners'

perception of any new emotional angle DeMarco takes through his performances. Rather, it creates a new emotional angle through production.

Much like Nilsson, part of DeMarco's lo-fi style is an expression of irony maintaining an irreverent posture towards popular music production aesthetics while remaining sincerely dedicated to song-craft. Nilsson satirizes the chasm between our desire for originality and perception of it, revealing the superficiality of hit song aesthetics while also celebrating them. DeMarco's version of this irony manifests when he publicly disavows his work, making it appear unimportant or frivolous, despite it being a sincere expression of his music fandom and compositional aspirations. In one interview, reflecting back on Makeout Videotape's recording setup, he explains: "I got this shitty Fostex multi-tracker, and I had no idea how to use it ... I set up this shitty little recording studio in the shitty garage of this shitty house I was living in."²⁸ Disavowing his gear, expertise, and recording space, DeMarco echoes both of Grajeda's key qualities of lo-fi—the "primitivism or minimalism (in terms of equipment and recording process)" as well as "amateurish playing ... and a certain casualness in delivery" (233). Though his performances are simple as opposed to, say, amateur, DeMarco's choice of the word "shitty" to describe his recording process speaks to both of lo-fi's qualities. First, using a curse word so casually in a published interview suggests he is and wants to be seen as an artist who is crass, crude, and yet easygoing. By delivering himself so casually to his fans and journalists, DeMarco lowers the stakes of what's expected of him. Since he doesn't appear to hold himself and his own work in high regard, why should we? Thus, DeMarco develops around himself a cult of amateurism and sets out his own low standard by which we judge him. His admission of not knowing how to properly use his own equipment appears less as an excuse and more as a 'necessary' choice aligning with his circumstances and general demeanour.

Second, by describing his recording tools, studio environment, and engineering skills as "shitty" DeMarco effectively compares them to bodily waste. Such a seemingly tossed-off comment has two facets worth noting in some detail. To begin with, DeMarco suggests his materials are waste: no longer useful or valuable; however, since he is capable of actually

²⁸ See Sharp.

making a record with inadequate materials for his own purposes, his comments imply that recording equipment's use-value is not just a matter of pure functionality. Just like his production skills, the efficacy (or non-efficacy) of DeMarco's materials become a matter of choice, and basic functionality is only the absolute requirement. Also, instead of using, say, "junky" DeMarco uses the word "shitty" and specifically invokes bodily waste. The failures of his recording materials become rhetorically aligned with his aforementioned failures as an embodied engineer. By presenting his and his materials' failures as part of the same package, DeMarco suggests his procedure is a natural extension of his artistry. His recording tools are just as much part of his sound as his actual voice. With these comments referring to his earliest and roughest-sounding work, DeMarco reproduces the dualist mythology of lo-fi culture. He provides listeners with the material and procedural context that fulfills the compliments, "amateur performances" and "crude materials," and thereby validates this common assumption of lo-fi sound. Because of his testimony, poor sound simply becomes a naturalized property of primitive materials and amateur production skills. Overall, DeMarco refuses us to let us take him too seriously.

DeMarco's self-effacing posture not only maintains the irony of his music but also gestures towards lo-fi style's DIY ethos valuing the quotidian and the amateur. Attali, Hebdige, and discourses on noise have helped us understand DeMarco and lo-fi in comparison to punk, but a more accurate description requires another complementary approach. Providing us with one, Susan Sontag sketches out in "Notes On 'Camp'"—perhaps itself a work of camp—how to understand the politics of a style that refuses to acknowledge itself as political. We can in part approach DeMarco's work as camp insofar as it begs "not so much a question of the unintended effect versus the conscious intention, as of the delicate relation between parody and self-parody ... even when it reveals itself as self-parody, [it] reeks of self-love" (282-3). When DeMarco gives self-effacing interviews about his engineering skills, he won't acknowledge that he takes himself seriously; but, of course he does take himself seriously because he deems his skills good enough to warrant making 500 copies of *HEAT WAVE!*. The politics in DeMarco's music lie in self-love, or rather, what about his music he actually values despite his posturing.

The Nilsson cover reveals two of these values at once. We've already observed DeMarco's reverence for classic, pop-hit composition style but his self-effacement also obscures

a very sincere dedication to DIY work ethics that have defined his whole recording career. As *Makeout Videotape* shows, lo-fi refuses popular music production by celebrating its own particularly situated mediation. With a lo-fi recording, “you can never *not* know that your listening experience is mediated, never not hear the sound of the recording in the very act of revealing its own means of production” (Grajeda 244). What distinguishes lo-fi from other explicitly mediatized recordings is that lo-fi situates its recording procedure specifically in spaces and reproduction networks deemed insufficient for recording, let alone hit-making. When lo-fi reveals its own means of production, it draws attention to everyday environments or non-professional tools. “Most discussion on lo-fi emphasizes *home* recording,” writes Grajeda, “whether as an effect of low-rent studio work or as an actual site of production. One hears of Liz Phair’s bedroom or Beck’s kitchen, basement tapes and garage tapes” (238). This approach opposes not only standard procedures but also their fundamental ethos of control. Since the earliest efforts to record music, “sound engineers quickly learned to prefer studio recording to on-location recording because the studio allowed them to control the acoustic environment much better—and thereby to control the actual sound of the recording” (*AP* 237). By positioning itself outside the studio and inside familiar spaces, lo-fi rejects control privileging instead the independent, low-stakes, and *laissez-faire* workflow, welcoming accidents as part of the process. When we hear the space, we are hearing less the artist and more their imperfect “studio” environment. Playing this up signifies intent to give up control over the sound—choosing one’s own production insufficiencies. By refusing both aesthetic hegemonies and their recording procedures entrenched in rhetoric of technological progress, DeMarco asserts the importance of production’s unimportance.

Lo-fi style often goes hand-in-hand with DIYism because its sounds signify non-professional studio spaces like homes, kitchens, and garages. By hinging on the mediation’s presence instead of its absence, lo-fi positions itself more within the material world than hi-fi, if only because it acknowledges and deconstructs the irony that even behind a vanishing mediator lies mediation. To borrow Grajeda’s thesis, lo-fi’s explicit constructedness expresses

not so much an unerring statement on the realism of sound as one expressing the ambiguous desire for realism itself ... lo-fi, I would argue, appears to acutely

represent this very experience (entailing what [Simon] Frith calls ‘imitative realism’), which is, finally, in all its irreducible mediation, precisely the reality of sound for us these days. (245-6)

Lo-fi does not ask listeners to hold faith in technical proficiency or the degree to which reproduced sounds resemble others, either real or imagined; instead, it asks listeners to hold faith in the relationship between reproduced sound and the materiality of mediation itself. The pact it asks of listeners also demands attention to socio-economic situatedness of recording processes. Rather, what is really at stake is that, as listeners, we are even hearing the recording in the first place—that despite all of DeMarco’s deficiencies, his record and other similarly-made records exist and inspire even just a select few. A lo-fi record shows faith in the real results of DIY work ethics.

There is a second political message though, lodged within the supposed situated immediacy of lo-fi style. As listeners, we experience mediation as part of the artist’s process. When we hear DeMarco performing as well as his garage and all his gear, we supposedly have a more holistic experience of his music. Hebdige notes how a similar intimacy for punk is central for expressing its DIY politics. He writes that “the boundary between artist and audience has often stood as a metaphor in revolutionary aesthetics ... for that larger and more intransigent barrier which separates art and the dream from reality and life under capitalism” (110). According to hi-fi discourse, lo-fi aesthetics function as a barrier obstructing the music. According to lo-fi though, the recording aesthetics are *part of the music*; they invite listeners closer into DIY processes that yield music which stands before them—tangible evidence of their success.

We can return to DeMarco’s cover version of “I Guess the Lord” as a simulacrum of revolution. By making us hear the traces of his insufficiencies, DeMarco figuratively brings us closer to his *real* process. That it is not at all remarkable helps create a discursive space encouraging other songwriters to do something similar. Michel De Certeau gives us a way of hearing the sounds of amateur producers as subordinate discourse converging with those of the popular. “Like tools,” he writes,

proverbs (and other discourses) are *marked by uses*; they offer to analysis the *imprints of acts* or of processes of enunciation; they signify the operations which are

relative to situations and which can be thought of as the conjunctural *modalizations* of statements or of practices; more generally, they thus indicate a social *historicity* in which systems of representations or processes of fabrication no longer appear only as normative frameworks but also as *tools manipulated by users*. (TPED 21)

When we hear Nilsson's hit song refracted through not just DeMarco's performance, but also his unremarkable, everyday circumstances; we hear a convergence of popular and recalcitrant music discourses together. Sontag articulates how this paradox makes politics: "[c]amp taste turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different—a supplementary—set of standards" (286). Sontag insists that asserting politics belies camp, but in the music world where judgements of good and bad are so thoroughly tied to economies and material hierarchies, declaring the values of both is about more than just taste; it is about how we purchase and manufacture taste. In DeMarco's cover we hear it all: the "shitty little recording studio," "the shitty garage" of his "shitty house," his celebration of Nilsson, the commitment to quality song-craft, and the humble populist gestures. By refracting the hit song through the everyday and presenting us with its paradoxes, like his heroes John Maus, Ariel Pink, Tomita, and R. Stevie Moore, DeMarco symbolically democratizes the production of pop music as well as its consumption. In the spirit of camp, his disavowal of the record creates politics by asserting their absence. We behold the values of incongruous tropes and create values left unsaid by DeMarco. Perhaps more exaggeratedly than his role models, by specifically covering a hit with lo-fi style, DeMarco helps open up cultural space for which we can enjoy a good song *and* a bad recording as listeners and artists alike.

HEAT WAVE! and DeMarco's Nilsson version bring us to the limits of what Attali's theory can provide this reading. DeMarco's play amongst competing musical aesthetics signals the rupture of hegemonic codes relating the production and consumption of music and by returning record-making to the quotidian, inscribing it with noise, *Makeout Videotape* suggests a reorganization of a political economy of music coded in the aesthetics of technological progress. Attali hopes ruptures such as *Makeout Videotape* are not just symbolic but actually hold

transformative value. He calls what he hopes to be, at least when he's writing in 1977, an emerging political economy called composition. Composition allows and encourages us to create our own relation with the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create. That is what composing is. Doing solely for the sake of doing, without trying to artificially recreate the old codes in order to reinsert communication into them. Inventing new codes, inventing the message at the same time as the language. Playing for one's own pleasure, which alone can create the conditions for new communication. (134)

Such a practice for which listening is production and music can be made everywhere by anyone is perhaps inscribed in literal noise—the disintegration of musical codes that *HEAT WAVE!* shows. But, DeMarco's music has evolved; there's reason to argue his success and influence began with noise, but only became significant by pushing beyond it. Sterne is also suspicious of Attali's utopianism arguing that, because of advanced reproduction and processing technologies, noise long ago ceased to be—or even signify—a real transgression. Sterne uses “the neologism *decompositionism* to describe the new malleability of sound and noise across cultural domains that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s” (MP3 126). While Attali encourages us to think of DeMarco as exemplifying composition, a revolution in music's political economy, decompositionism is a more accurate conceptualization of his career as a whole. “Instead of allowing noise to endure as a threat to order,” Sterne writes, “decompositionism gave noise its place within the world of sound and signal. Sometimes noise is hidden away; sometimes it is endowed with meaning and portent; and sometimes it is simply let be” (126). The noisiness of Makeout Videotape's recordings remains largely hidden away, so to speak, in relative obscurity. DeMarco's post-Makeout Videotape records though offer us an example of decompositionism and his music's more comprehensive relationship to subculture and hegemony.

4. “Tryin’ to keep it clean”: Varispeed, Signature Sound, and *Rock and Roll Night Club*

What makes DeMarco stand out from other lo-fi artists though is that over his career, at least until 2017’s *This Old Dog*, he has remained committed to lo-fi’s amateur, DIY production values, but moved away from their accompanying aesthetics of noise. Much like his rearrangement of cultural discourses, DeMarco ruptures assumed relationships between sounds and recording technologies as well. Grajeda notes how “some musicians recognize that we have passed beyond a long century of developments in sound technologies that amply demonstrate how thoroughly constructed musical recordings have become,” which includes the lo-fi aesthetic itself (237). Ironically, lo-fi sounds can just as easily be constructed through advanced digital technologies. Because lo-fi is often just as much a matter of necessity as it is of taste, there is a tendency for lo-fi artists to move to more professional studios as their careers advance, taking full advantage of hi-fi production possibilities. If it’s a matter of taste, professional studios can just as easily manufacture lo-fi’s perceptible chaos in a controlled environment. Waves Plugins for instance, sells a digitally-modelled version of Abbey Road’s classic Studer J37 tape machine. Using producer Billy Bush’s words, the plugin—which literally has a control for “noise”—offers users the “realism” of “old janky tape.”²⁹ Most importantly for him though is that its sound is just as legitimate as real tape because it captures “the subtle things that make it sound more real.” DeMarco is making music in a context where the connections between recorded sound and recording tools are already tenuous at best. What is remarkable about his career though is that, through committed DIYism, he has reversed this rupture’s logic, turning lo-fi tools into ones capable of achieving features of hi-fi sound.

Indeed, DeMarco’s popularity is largely due to the idiosyncratic, ‘signature’ sound of his recordings which fall between lo- and hi-fi. A brief Reddit search yields multiple results of aspiring singer-songwriters and home-producers exploring this discursive space, trying to “get

²⁹ See “J37 Tape,” <https://www.waves.com/plugins/j37-tape#butch-vig-billy-bush-j37>.

that ‘lo-fi’ ish sound.”³⁰ The key descriptor here is “ish.” DeMarco’s post-Makeout Videotape recordings are neither awash in crackles, pops, and harmonic distortion or exactly hi-fi-transparent either. Instead of playing up mechanical failures, they play up play itself. Though his assemblage of gear has evolved over his career, DeMarco is mostly known for relying on obsolete, mass-market tape machines which he uses for their distinctive operational qualities as well as their sound. In Jon Leone’s 2014 “macumentary” *Pepperoni Playboy*, DeMarco, with flippant sarcasm, explains how “[k]ids are always asking, ‘Mac, how do you do [it]? What’s the trick?’ It’s all pitch control yah dumb-asses. Get yourselves a tape machine. Get your fuckin’ head out of that Ableton shit, yah moron.” He then demonstrates with a tape reel of his *Salad Days* single, “Let Her Go.” Twisting a knob on his Fostex tape machine, he reduces the recorded speed for playback, both slowing the song’s tempo and lowering its pitch, et voilà: varispeed the Mac DeMarco signature sound, the same one contributing to “Viceroy”’s warped feel. The effect also recalls his commercial breakout album and debut as Mac DeMarco, *Rock and Roll Nightclub*. He calls it “that low voice Elvis thing” for turning what was originally his effort to sound like the Ramones into a deep-voiced, “jovial butt-rock” record.³¹ DeMarco owes much of his career to this sound, for it was this that initially drew the attention of Captured Tracks founder Mike Sniper, precipitating a record deal.³²

It is not surprising DeMarco’s varispeed caught Sniper’s ear. With the tape slowed-down, *R&RN* sounds thicker, denser, deeper and heavier; the low frequencies are chunkier. DeMarco’s usual rock instrumentation becomes louche and laboured sounding unlike any other rock record. Theorizing subculture through sound stylistics such as these returns us to Barthes and the adjective, “the poorest of linguistic categories.” In an effort around this dilemma, Barthes proposes that “it would be better to change the musical object itself, as it presents itself to discourse, better to alter its level of perception or intellection, to displace the fringe of contact between music and language” (*IMT* 180-1). He creates a critical tool which he calls “the *grain* ...

³⁰ See “How in da heck did mac get that ‘lo-fi’ wish sound on RNRNC ??,” https://www.reddit.com/r/macdemarco/comments/5sj4ts/how_in_da_heck_did_mac_get_that_lofi_ish_sound_on/.

³¹ See respectively Sharp and well as Berke and Mamana, p. 22.

³² See Sharp. Captured Tracks has since released all of DeMarco’s albums as well as re-releasing *Rock and Roll Nightclub*.

a dual posture, a dual production—of language and voice ... The ‘grain’ is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; perhaps the letter, almost certainly *significance*” (182). The grain is rather a signifier, formed by the meanings of lyrics and the materiality of the voice expressing them. It is a helpful concept because it invites our discussion to focus on how materiality creates musical meaning; however, the grain limits us to vocalizations or, at best, expressions of embodied performance. For *R&RNC*, DeMarco’s embodied performances are transformed into an impossible slow-time that is wholly unique to his performance *of* the Fostex which takes precedence in forming the sound. His signature sound—his “grain”—is not just him, but *him and his tape machines*.

To account for the materiality of DeMarco’s grain, Bruno Latour allows us to think of signature sound as an interaction between embodied performance and mechanical performance. Through a process he calls translation, the goals—what he calls “programs of action”—of humans and nonhumans change when they interact. For instance, DeMarco explains he first used varispeed because, he “thought, ‘I’m going to do basic power chord riffs, I’m going to do solos, and I’m going to do it really fast. [But] It turned out I’m awful at it. When I slowed things down it was like, “Ah, now I’ve got something”” (Berke and Mamana 20). From the nonhuman perspective, the Tascam 244’s varispeed, in concert with DeMarco’s attempt to cop the Ramones, forms a sound surely not even imagined by its designers. Latour’s intent “is not to extend subjectivity to things, to treat humans like objects, to take machines for social actors, but *to avoid using* the subject-object distinction *at all* in order to talk about the folding of humans and nonhumans” (193-4). Latour calls this concept a “collective—defined as an exchange of human and nonhuman properties inside a corporate body” (193). It’s not possible to think about DeMarco’s signature sound without varispeed and tape machines. Some acoustic instruments, like guitars, can mimic the effect of varispeed by being playing slower with a lower tuning. Varispeed though alters percussive attack transients in ways that can’t be performed by humans (imagine trying to clap hands both slowly *and* loudly). In DeMarco’s signature sound, “[o]bjects and subjects are made simultaneously, and an increased number of subjects is directly related to the number of objects stirred—brewed—into the collective” (196). The *R&RNC* sound is after all

a product of more than DeMarco and the 244, including microphones, instruments, cables, and even the recording space itself.

Earlier, Makeout Videotape has demonstrated for us how lo-fi signifies the creation of an inclusive pop music discourse for those with limited economic freedoms. Turning to DeMarco's actual recording technologies shows the discourse in action. Again, Latour provides a theory for this, using the term "collective" to describe "a deepened *intimacy*, a more intrinsic mesh between [society and technology]" (196). For *R&RNC*, the deeper intimacy DeMarco shares is with technology in a working-class position. He was working the nightshift at a grocery store which earned him just about enough to "live and hold down an apartment" with his girlfriend in Montreal.³³ There was little leftover for recording gear, so many of the technologies in DeMarco's recording collective are antiquated, broken-down, and consumer-grade. The Tascam 244, which he bought off Craigslist for \$200 was all he needed except for cords, mics, and instruments.³⁴ Like for *HEAT WAVE!*, the *R&RNC* sound is product both of DeMarco's imagination and frugal lifestyle.

Ironically though, DeMarco moves his sound away from lo-fi's characteristic distortion and noise sounds. In his apartment doubling as a studio, DeMarco did not use amplifiers for his guitar sounds; instead, they were all "super slimy, DI-style" (Berke and Mamana 20). DI, or direct inject, involves recording instruments directly into the source without mics. This offers a more faithful representation of electric instruments as the signal is not additionally coloured by an amp, room, or microphone. Though with different wording, DeMarco still explains that his aesthetic centres around the unpleasant; but, it doesn't necessarily correspond to harmonic distortion. Instead, the guitars on *R&RNC* are clean, though DeMarco uses the word "slimy" to describe tone. The *R&RNC* guitars sound somehow deep and thin; they're foundational to the songs, but their lack of girth makes them elusive. Like the tactility of slime, they slip away from your ears as you hear them; but, the association of clarity and slime is also symbolic of an alternative lo-fi discourse that ruptures the old one collapsing distortion, noise, and amateurism. Distortion in the context of reproduced sound (and guitar tone in particular) is colloquially

³³ See Wisgard, <https://www.thelineofbestfit.com/features/interviews/mac-demarco-112813>.

³⁴ See Berke and Mamana, p. 18.

known as ‘dirt,’ presumably because it is decidedly not clean. DeMarco, using the word “slimy,” inverts this association by confusing the clean and the dirty. In so doing, he positions his lo-fi recording practices to express more than just DIYism entrenched in a working-class lifestyle.

R&RNC is a joke record, but DeMarco’s varispeed, amongst other amateur production techniques, turns crass humour into satires of both subcultures and the popular hegemonic culture they resist. With some unusually extreme equalization, *R&RNC*’s mix, in his words, lets “things live in their sketchy zone” (Berke and Mamana 20). Sketchiness—denoting roughness but also connoting risk or danger when pushing boundaries—is an organizing principle of *R&RNC*. We hear this most in DeMarco’s vocals, which cease to sound like him, reemerging as a warped Elvis Presley caricature. Varispeed is seldom used so pointedly and purposefully for rock recordings and in *R&RNC*, it plays out like a satire of rock and punk music at each other’s expense. By reforming his Ramones impression into wonky populist rock, DeMarco undermines punk’s spectacular resistance, showing it as a gaudy version of what it’s resisting in the first place. By comparing his resulting, exaggeratedly deep voice to Elvis Presley, he foregrounds the unsettling edge lurking within the King’s sexual appeal. Playing up this lurid sense of sexuality through varispeed, DeMarco includes interludes, “96.7 The Pipe” and “106.2 Breeze FM,” which frame the record as if transmitted by sleazy radio DJs. The former tells us, in voice deep beyond the human range, that “up next, we’ve got a triple-shot of Mac DeMarco comin’ at ya, stuffin’ it down the chute.” The ultra-low voice digs into and draws out the sounds of words like “comin’,” “pipe,” and “chute,” pushing their sexual connotations perhaps too far for comfort. Overall, the sound reminds us of the cover image: DeMarco applying red lipstick copiously to himself while gazing seductively at us.

With *R&RNC*, DeMarco returns us to camp style with his warped lo-fi recording practices. Like *HEAT WAVE!*, *R&RNC* is a bricolage of tropes from disparate corners of pop music history held together precariously by DeMarco’s sense of humour. As camp, *HEAT WAVE!* uses lo-fi stylistics to offer a “supplementary set of standards,” gesturing towards a recording style that is both working-class and populist. Overly compressed with plentiful tape hiss, *R&RNC* does this also, but focuses more on caricaturizing the types of pop music tropes *HEAT WAVE!* celebrates. For Sontag, “Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular

kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (279). DeMarco’s collapse of punk and rock through varispeed is just one example. When slowed and pitched down to the extreme, punk sounds just like an exaggerated version of its antithesis, rock. Conversely, caricaturizing common rock sounds with a slightly off, highly mediatized sound satirizes their social construction by showing it through mechanical construction. It suggests that rock is perhaps as much an intricately woven fabrication as it is a spontaneous free expression. What makes DeMarco’s Elvis impression campy though is sexual exaggeration. Camp style involves “a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms” in ways that are “corny” or “flamboyant” (279). Elvis’s voice is one of the most famously sexualized male voices in pop music. “[W]e hear the body in the voice,” writes Frith, and as listeners we can take pleasure in the voice’s “physical possibilities, what it allows the mouth or throat to do” (193). The singing voice though is socially constructed in terms of gender, associating a low register with masculinity and a high voice with femininity, or in the case of falsettos, “the young [male] voice” (195). Elvis, however, was able to do it all. He was “his own doo-wop act, his bass no more unnatural than his falsetto” and thus embodied, with control and confidence a full spectrum of masculinity (195). He was at once mature (signified by his robust bass) and youthful (signified by his gentle falsetto) making his voice an embodied expression of an ideally comprehensive male sexuality.

The extremity of the effect on “96.7 The Pipe” is uncanny, showing the King’s attractiveness as something strange and unsettling. Frith points out that Elvis Presley “seemed to bask ... in the sheer voluptuousness of his own vocal noise” (193). It is this kind of distinctly male-coded confidence DeMarco takes to task with varispeed. Part of camp’s duplicity is revealing vulgarity in the refined and, by annexing the falsetto portion, DeMarco shows a version of the King who is only mature, inspiring all the associations we have of his waning days in Las Vegas. That DeMarco’s varispeed renders Elvis’s robust bass inhumanly deep turns the “naturalized” attractive male voice into something strange, unsettling, and grotesque—a voice that overshoots eroticism. That the voice is too deep suggests it is also somehow too sexually mature in a way that’s difficult to define. Bringing us back to DeMarco’s description of the *R&RNC* sound as “sketchy,” Sontag’s camp involves creating fantasies, but ones that are

carnavalesque, “too much,” “too fantastic,” “or not to be believed” (283). For camp, fantasy offers a way of expressing transgression and vulgarity but at a distance that renders it palatable or enjoyable. By pushing the boundaries of attractive male voices through unnatural exaggeration and into the fantastic, DeMarco creates a sense of danger that at once reminds us of the very real, alarming idea of being serenaded by a man who is inappropriately old, but also a disembodied form of masculine maturity that hinges on the sensuality of the mechanical voice itself. DeMarco’s warped mature-Elvis croon does not sound like a creepy old man, but an exaggerated version of male sexuality, located specifically in the mechanical production. It is strange but removed enough from reality to be sensuous through pure sound. DeMarco’s varispeed voice, commanding control and pleasure of its own unnaturalness, draws out vowel sounds in a ways that, like Elvis, are sensuous, but unlike him, are also sinister or “sketchy.” Through caricature, DeMarco makes us aware of how popular music and its production technologies re/construct gender and sexuality in forms that are perhaps unrealistic or artificial, satirizing an idealized masculine form in Elvis.

As he does for himself, DeMarco asks us not to take the satire of *R&RNC* too seriously; however, his irreverence and casualness are not always responsible. Elvis Presley and deep voices signifying dangerous male sexuality both share histories of white appropriation of black identity. As the “King of Rock and Roll,” Elvis is symbolic of male sexuality in white rock music, but also white rock as appropriation of black rhythm and blues. “For many African Americans” writes Michael Bertrand, “Elvis was less about innovation and more about continuation, namely the perpetual exploitation and misappropriation of black labour and artistry” (63). By specifically comparing his varispeed voice to Elvis, DeMarco invokes this history as an extra contextual layer; although, his satire of Elvis does not engage it critically. The racial criticism of Elvis’s music emerges from a history of white entertainers appropriating constructed ideas of blackness to create derogatory racial stereotypes and maintain racial segregation. Additionally, after the development of sound reproduction, which isolated the aural from the visual, the voice became a site for racial prejudice. Greg Goodale explains how, emerging in the interwar period right before Elvis, “voices are constructed as black or white. And during the formative period of American radio broadcasting, the visual classification system of

race had to be transformed into an aural classification system” (103). For example, Laurie Stras shows how the Boswell sisters exemplify white performers for whom “a lower tessitura, especially in women’s voices, seems to have been used as a signifier of blackness” (214). More specific to men, analyzing Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll’s Amos and Andy characters, Goodale explains how a “deep bass voice also signified blackness and, in particular, the hypermasculinity of those black men who threatened to disturb sexual norms” (103-4). In other words, white performers using a deep voice is part of a history of negatively stereotyping blackness.

With his varispeed voice, DeMarco’s target is Elvis, and by extension, the white rock music he epitomizes. It’s not that DeMarco misses his mark, but his scattershot satire incurs collateral damage along the way. The issue arises because he satirizes Elvis only in the context of white rock music when in fact, Elvis’s sexuality remains a pivotal fulcrum in the complex racial politics underpinning rock music as a whole. Part of Elvis’s sexual attractiveness was rooted in a sense of danger attributed to black masculinity, one constructed by racist white American popular culture. According to Gilbert B. Rodman,

Elvis violated the dominant racial *and* sexual taboos of the 1950s simultaneously. To be sure, in the eyes of many people the fact that Elvis was a white boy singing the blues was in itself a threat to the nation's moral fiber. Similarly, the sexually charged mania that Elvis induced in legions of his teenage fans struck many observers as more than enough to be alarmed by his rising star. (57)

That DeMarco uses the exaggerated lower male register specifically to amplify a hypermasculine sexuality in Elvis—considered at once erotic, other, and unsettling—reveals the critical myopia of DeMarco’s cultural satire. Through the voice specifically, DeMarco engages one of Elvis’s cultural transgressions that is very racially charged using an expressive trope that, in the context he invokes, is similarly racially charged. Indeed, Elvis is known for his seductively low croon and impersonating him, for DeMarco and most male singers, requires lowering one’s vocal register. The varispeed voice on less exaggerated *R&RNC* tracks like “Baby’s Wearing Blue Jeans” and “European Vegas” does a pretty good Elvis from “Suspicious Minds” and “Viva Las Vegas” because after all, Elvis is DeMarco’s target. However, DeMarco occasionally takes this

caricature to extremes and, in the context he's working, it doesn't sound innocent. DeMarco's satire ends up only working on a superficial level, unable to critically engage or work through the racial politics of Elvis's sexuality. Here, DeMarco's deconstruction of popular music creates expressive space between the lattices of sexuality and technology but comes at the cost of complicitly maintaining rock's status quo as white appropriation of black culture.

Like with his production values, DeMarco evidently embraces amateurism for his mode of satire on *R&RNC*. DeMarco would've been about twenty-one or twenty-two around the time he made *R&RNC* and based on his playfulness, self-effacing posturing, and lewd performances, his uncritical and likely accidental invocation of racial politics comes across as an unintended consequence of him being a young, amateur satirist, only developing his knowledge of popular culture. As an amateur satirist, DeMarco's impervious but voracious fandom draws him into popular white rock's failure as a whole to adequately engage its own racial politics. However, DeMarco otherwise seems to have a good sense of boundaries for I can only think of him parodying white (and mostly rock) musicians with examples such as the Beatles, Bachman-Turner Overdrive, Weezer, Limp Bizkit, Metallica, and U2. Overall, DeMarco's parodies focus on exposing pretences around other examples of pop music that are often about as irreverent as his own.

5. Conclusion

Since *R&RNC*, DeMarco's recording career is marked by steadily increasing maturity as well as sound fidelity. Aside from the coda of "Ode to Viceroy," after *R&RNC* DeMarco himself admits he "didn't really have any more of that [Elvis thing] in [him]." ³⁵ Albums like 2012's *2* and 2014's *Salad Days* still prominently feature varispeed, but to a much subtler effect, serving mostly to slightly warp the overall sound. As Sterne's decompositionism suggests, we can hear DeMarco's music as simply an exploration of "a plurality of relationships to noise for engineers, for listeners, and for many others through the total disassembly of sound" (*MP3* 126). Evidently we should pay close attention to who these relationships relate and the kinds of perspectives they involve. Sterne also notes in *MP3* how

critical-listening practice, working with live sound or studios, and certain kinds of musical equipment are still heavily gendered. Engineering culture is still very male in both number and flavor, as are other areas of musical subcultural practices, from musical instrument stores and record shops to music journalism. (165)

As the antithesis to standardized versions of these, lo-fi appears as a more inclusive niche in musical subcultural practices. Drawing from 1990s music press materials, Grajeda is not so optimistic for lo-fi, suggesting "that not only is the kitchen or bedroom recording characterized as a 'feminine' site of production but, moreover, lo-fi itself has been gendered feminine within the overall masculinist discourse of rock, a characterization that serves to devalue it on those very grounds" (238). That DeMarco's lo-fi deconstruction of rock masculinity launched such an influential career challenges Grajeda's thesis demonstrating, perhaps, how things have changed since the mid-nineties. There's a video from the 2014 Polaris Music Prize Gala, in which comedian Vish Khanna, interviews DeMarco about his more sexualized provocations, referring specifically to an exchange between the two involving "dick pics." "What's with you and the balls?" Khanna asks DeMarco. In response, DeMarco explains his sexual provocations are playful critiques of rigid, heteronormative, and prejudicial forms of masculinity: "Back in the

³⁵ See Sharp.

day, especially at my hometown, Edmonton, the kids I used to hang out with in high school were really homophobic, jockey, hockey-lovers ... I just thought it was always fun to blur the lines a little bit.”³⁶ Evidently, *R&RNC* follows suit but there is also plenty to consider for this in DeMarco’s lyrics, music videos, and live performances, all of which deserve attention in their own rights.

At least on record, DeMarco’s playfulness and satire have become more refined over time, turning inward as if more aware of the politics of apoliticism. For instance, 2012’s “Freaking Out the Neighbourhood” is an apology for a certain incident with a drumstick. In 2014’s “Passing Out Pieces,” DeMarco questions sharing his past shames with us. His latest album, *This Old Dog*, is literally about getting old while exploring the relationship with his estranged father. What remains constant with DeMarco though are his contradictions. He is still a slacker hero but also one of the hardest working indie rock musicians. He still likes to live “like a scumbag” while enjoying a career that brings him to venues like Radio City and advertising spots for Fender Guitars.³⁷ He still makes his records himself, rejecting formal procedures of music production, but has also embraced boutique studio equipment and hi-fi sound. Evidently, he takes himself seriously as a musician but will only let us see him as an affable goof.

When DeMarco smiles he gives us another metaphor for his music. Like the cultural space most of his music occupies amongst myths and discourses, his gap teeth are a space for all to see. The image of gap teeth itself has a fitting history as described by the Wife of Bath in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Mel Storm tells us that “[s]cholars have traditionally relegated” the Wife of Bath’s being gap toothed “to the providence of the physiognomists as the sign of a lecherous nature” and “figuratively betokens undisciplined speech” (123, 124). Such connotations of gap teeth befit DeMarco’s music which, in its approach, is often playful, casual, sexual, or voracious. Once, when questioned about his gap teeth with a mouthful of hot sauce, DeMarco responds in third person, “I’ll tell you a funny story about this guy. When he was a kid,

³⁶ See “Polaris Music Prize Gala 2014 - Full Show,” 1:45:35 - 1:51:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zseAB5pm5vQ&feature=youtu.be>.

³⁷ See Hoby, Pearis, and “Mac Demarco & The American Professional Stratocaster | Fender,” respectively: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/mar/22/mac-demarco-salad-days>; <http://www.brooklynvegan.com/mac-demarco-played-radio-city-music-hall-bowery-ballroom-pics-setlists/>; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-NImhyvOM8>.

[he] thought, ‘Oh yeah I’m going to need braces to get this shut.’ The dentist was like, ‘No, no, no.’ So, I did go through a point where I was like, ‘What’s up with this? What’s going on here? Y’know, why doesn’t anyone else have this?’” DeMarco answers his own question with a tone befitting its triteness: “You learn to love yourself.”³⁸ His maxim also speaks to his DIY recording procedures as a salute to accepting circumstance and discrepancy. Finally, as his use of the third person suggests, DeMarco always keeps his distance, leaving us with above all else, his smile.

³⁸ See “Mac DeMarco Tries to Stay Chill While Eating Spicy Wings | Hot Ones,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=920&v=0-BQ_yTNyTs.

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