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"There's Some Sh*t in There": Communication Strategies in the Recording Studio

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ABSTRACT

When musicians, producers, and engineers interact in the recording studio, how do they communicate and negotiate their differences to reach consensus? This paper will address two communication strategies that use a range of sonic associations and aesthetics: 1) the use of metaphors; and 2) the use of references to other recordings, artists, and genres. Using video recordings and interviews with participants, this paper focuses on how these different communication strategies had a significant impact during recording sessions made in November 2019 at McGill University in Montréal.

1 Introduction

The recording studio as a site for creative collaboration has received growing attention over the past two decades by scholars, a range of studio practitioners, and those who combine some or all of these competencies [1,2,3,4,5,6]. In this article, our interdisciplinary research team, consisting of two producer-engineers and two musicologists, builds on our previous work by focusing on how those involved in a recording session—musicians, producers, engineers, technicians, students, musicologists—communicate and negotiate their differing points of view [7].

The material for this study comes from a recording session that took place at the Schulich School of Music of McGill University in Montreal over two days in November 2019. The band, led by a singer-songwriter and including a keyboardist, guitarist, bassist, and drummer, arrived at the session with rough demos of two songs that they hoped to transform into polished, commercial recordings. Most of the band members were students or recent graduates of popular music/jazz performance programs in Québec institutions of higher learning, and the session itself was a training session for students in McGill's graduate program in sound recording. The two producer-engineers, GM and RK, are both experienced professionals with long histories of working with high-profile artists. This background is significant because it played a role in how the various agents interacted.

During the session, the rough demos were revised substantially by the producers and musicians. Because of the collaborative nature of the creative revision process, and because the collaborators were for the most part working "aurally" (without musical notation), verbal communication became a crucial sphere to communicate musical ideas. Although

speech in a popular music recording session can use technical musical vocabulary, it often relies on metaphors to describe different sounds/timbres/ colours or modes of playing/singing, as well as to indicate approval or disapproval of what has just been played. The phrase "There's some sh*t in there" (used by GM during the sessions to explain that some worthwhile musical material had been generated) is an example of just such a pithy use of metaphor and is typical of the way participants in recording studios communicate with one another.

Musical communication often occurs without verbal language; musicians communicate with one another using musical sound, often in an intuitive or unconscious manner, as music-making is filled with an infinite number of minute adjustments and responses that musicians make to one another. This non-verbal dimension, while central to any interaction between musicians, is ephemeral and thus difficult to document, although some scholars have traced musicians' responses to one another in contexts including the recording studio as well as those that are highly improvisational, such as jazz [4,5,8,9,10,11,12]. Our concern here, however, is primarily on the use of verbal language to communicate about music. We analyze the communication process via close examination of interchanges that occurred during this session. Our materials consist of observations made during the session, the study of video recordings of the session, and follow-up interviews with the participants.

2 Communication about Music

Beyond the use of musical notation or the meta-language of music theory, both of which are fairly precise and specific within narrow parameters, what makes it possible to communicate verbally about music sound? This paper takes its cue from the work of sound anthropologist Steven Feld in which he argues that humans communicate about music in a relational process in which they use metaphors in a series of "interpretive moves" [13]. That is, "meaning" is not a static entity that is transferred intact from one human to another but rather something that is formed in the process of people using language to interact around music. In Feld's words, "Communication is neither the idea nor the action but the process of intersection whereby objects and events are, through the work of social actors, rendered meaningful or not" [13]. We extend Feld's work (following the work of others who have done ethnographic work in recording studios), which focused largely on how music listeners communicate their experiences, to examine how musicians, studio producers, and recording engineers use verbal language to co-create music in the recording studio [4,14,15]. The agents in the recording studio must negotiate different personal musical histories, social backgrounds, and differences in personality, temperament, experience, and power to arrive at a consensus, however fragile it might be. The recording studio thus becomes the site of understanding communication as "a socially interactive and intersubjective process of reality construction through message production and interpretation" [13]. We analyze the verbal and musical negotiations during the session to understand how shared understandings— "the intersubjective process of reality construction"—were realized via the use of interpretive moves; metaphor and analogy; reference tunes, genres, and artists; and the social backgrounds, histories and career trajectories of the agents participating in the session.

One of these modes of communication deserves further explanation: the form that analogizing/ metaphorical discourse takes in communication about music through reference to other artists, recordings, songs, compositions, and genres. This form of communication corresponds roughly to two of Feld's "interpretive moves": the *locational*— "placing the object that one is hearing within a subjective field of like and unlike items and events"; and the *categorical*— "relating the piece to a class of things—anthems, and patriotic songs . . . parodies of important texts" [13]. In the case of this session, the singer (NA) brought in reference tracks—recordings that she thought could serve as a basis for the sound and musical style for the songs to be recorded. In the course of working on the arrangements and adjusting the performances, the participants also referred to a wide range of other artists and recordings as a way of illustrating what musical ideas they had in mind.

3 Communication in the Studio – Working out the Arrangement

The session got off to a rollicking start as the band ran through a song, "Horizon." This initial rough take closely resembled the demo track they had recorded earlier and then played for the main producer on the session, GM. The guitarist (PL) noted that "being this is the first session, the first phase is just to find your place in the song without taking up too much space" [16]. He continued to describe how the song was new to him and the bass player and that they "didn't have

a precise vision of the song before entering the studio; we had a reference track that wasn't the same tempo and a lead sheet with a basic bass line with some ideas, but . . . we were in an exploration mode." GM's initial reaction was not terribly enthusiastic: "Okay, well the rest's just gonna be painful" [17], offered as a prelude to his critique of the song, and a comment that elicited laughter. From the beginning, an awareness of the extreme differences in experience between producers and musicians—an awareness that all the participants who were interviewed after the session noted—set the tone for studio interactions. As PL commented later: "NA was the leader, but George was higher in authority for the session, and SB [the keyboardist] had the title of musical director, but we were under George." Both NA and PL recollected that they were in awe of GM's resumé, and they were eager to learn from working with him [16,18].

Throughout the initial rough take and the ensuing discussion, communication occurred either in a physical manner, via the music-making (or dancing) mode, and using verbal humor and playfulness. The conversation took an explicitly metaphorical-associative turn during a discussion of the bass line. In the initial run-through, the bassist had played a rather basic part, sticking mostly to the roots of the chords, and rhythmically reinforcing the groove established primarily by the drummer and secondarily by the guitarist and keyboard player. NA explained (during the session), that her initial idea was for the bass line to be an essential part of the song's identity, and that she was reluctant to have it play less, an explanation that puzzled GM, who responded "You're absolutely right in saying that. It just that it is not . . . quite . . . working. Do you have a tune as a reference idea? Let's hear it." GM's response may have been prompted by the gap between the simple, almost generic part that the bass played initially and the idea of the bass line as "an essential part of the song." The mode of communication then turned to a metaphorical-associative mode via the use of a reference recording.

Returning to the control room, NA played the reference tune, Tom Misch's "South of the River," which features a very active bass part that establishes a countermelody to the vocal in the song. GM immediately observed, "that's [the Misch recording] completely different than what we're doing," then turned to the bass player and asked, "You would be carrying the tune, you up for that?" As it turned out, prior to the session, NA had given the bassist a notated part closely resembling the bass line of "South of the River"; however, the bassist did not play NA's notated bass part on the rough take (the run-through at the beginning) as he didn't have enough time to practice it ahead of the session. GM was unaware of this detail, a gap in communication that contributed to some of the confusion elicited by the playing of the Misch recording. After it was decided to double the bass part at the octave with the guitar, it took about an hour for the bassist and guitarist to learn NA's scored bass part. Adding the new, busier, bass part necessitated slowing the tempo from (quarter note equals) ca. 125 (without a click) to 115 (with a click). Both factors radically changed the feel of the song. GM explained the rationale for the change: "Guys this is 115… We like this, it's a little bit more relaxed and gives you more room for expression, 'cause that's the thing [i.e., feeling] for what she played [Tom Misch's song]. Slow tempo tells a story." Trying to play at the new tempo initially evoked feelings of discomfort among the musicians, as evidenced by the following exchange: NA asks everyone "Yo guys is this slow?" [17], to which GM answers, "No it's fine. He's [the bass player] barely able to execute that line; that means it's too *fast*, not too slow." After several run-throughs and complete takes of the song, the band became acclimated to the new tempo.

4 Metaphors, Instruments and Formal-Technical Terms

In addition to the use of the reference tune to communicate the desired sound, feel, and genre context for "Horizon," the use of verbal metaphors to communicate ideas abounded in this session. The following are examples of metaphors in GM's suggestions to the musicians:

the drummer is advised to "think like a drum machine";

the original ending of "Horizon" is described as a "train wreck";

the band is encouraged not to "worry about clams";

the musicians are exhorted to "dig in" more;

the drummer is told "to play straight in the middle of the road";

the guitarist needs to make the guitar tone more "saturated";

the synth sound needs to "get back to something with edge";

> the guitarist, when overdubbing his solo, should "sit back just a little on it," "make it a conversation" and then, "lay it *waaaay* back."

At one point, a misunderstanding occurred when GM worried that the keyboardist was heading off to a "dark area," whereas previously, GM had requested that the keyboardist "play on the darker side" (this dual use of a metaphor resulted in laughter). Many of these metaphors are widely used in musicians' discourse, which only underscores the need and broad acceptance for metaphorical language in talking about music. Feld himself explains that metaphoric discourse about music arises because music is a "metaphoric discourse in its own right. . . . Interpretive moves in talk, then, are attempts to recreate, specify, momentarily fix, or give order to emergent recognitions of the events that take place so rapidly and intuitively when we experience musical sounds" [13]. Music, then, evades precise equivalencies in verbal language, yet everyday communication about music requires us to speak about it.

Apparent exceptions to this assertion about metaphoric language are the meta-language of music theory, and—in verbal discourse specific to popular music and jazz—reference to specific instrument models, amplifiers, microphones, effects, MIDI patches, sound modifications derived from recording software (e.g., ProTools, Logic) and references to other specific forms of music technology. This particular session was typical in this respect, filled with references to different pianos and electric pianos (acoustic piano, Rhodes, Yamaha), synthesizers (Prophet-5, Model D [Mini-Moog?]), guitars (Les Paul, Stratocaster), and guitar/amplifier effects (reverb, delay, chorus, overdrive). GM at one point wished they had a six-string bass, while RK suggested that it would be good to use the higher pickup on the bass. The names of specific instruments and other forms of music instrument technology function then as stand-ins (another form of metaphor) for a technical-scientific discourse (e.g., reference to frequencies and amplitudes) that would ultimately be less precise anyway.

Less commonly found in this recording session, but not entirely absent, were examples of a more technical vocabulary that shows some connection to formal musical training. At one point, GM advises the keyboard player to "resist the impulse to turn everything into seventh chords"; the bassist suggests that he play more "staccato" in order to emulate the sound on Misch's recording; and at another point, GM says that he "wants to listen to the top because he thinks they can find another four bars of bass to put in the intro." Though these occurrences were rare in this session, their use seemed to avoid some of the misunderstandings that accompanied the use of less standardized metaphors.

5 Artists, Songs, Genres

Another way of communicating in the studio uses artists, songs, and genres as a kind of shorthand to evoke particular sounds, grooves, formal patterns, playing techniques, etc. References to artists and songs can be a way of bringing to mind a genre (thus a kind of part-to-whole relationship, or *synecdoche*), or they may refer to a specific musical process. We have already discussed one example of this mode of communication when relating the anecdote of how a reference track was used. Here, the reference track served as a model for overall "feel," groove, genre, and for a specific approach to the role of the bass. A few other examples will convey the range of references to artists and songs:

> GM invokes Bob Dylan as a way of drawing attention to the lack of contrast in the chorus and verse in the second song attempted in the session, "Always Forward, Never Back";
>
> "Boogie on, Reggae Woman" by Stevie Wonder is mentioned as an example to argue for using pitch bends on a synth;
>
> John Mayer, Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones, and the Rolling Stones in general are used as suggestions for a possible guitar sound;
>
> Bruce Hornsby's song (with Don Henley), "The End of the Innocence" is mentioned to illustrate what GM described as the "shadow"—the use of a synth pad behind a piano that GM would like to use in "Horizon."

In addition to serving as models for particular instrumental sounds, these artists act as references to genres: Bob Dylan to urban folk and folk-rock; Stevie Wonder to soul and funk; John Mayer to recent pop-rock; Brian Jones/The Rolling Stones to classic rock; and Bruce Hornsby to the pop-rock of the late 1980s/early 1990s. The explicit invocation of genre burst into the open when two large genres, "jazz" and "pop" (one could even call them "supra" or "meta" genres) were contrasted as an attempt to resolve a conflict over the arrangement of "Horizon."

After working out the bass part, slowing the tempo, and modifying the form of the song, the band recorded a "scratch" track. One aspect of the new bass part was its doubling by the guitar. The previous arrangement of "Horizon" had featured the guitar playing an instrumental chorus. The new bass line played throughout the verse and chorus of the song, only ceasing briefly during the pre-chorus. During the recording of the scratch track, the guitar stops doubling the bass line in the chorus, switching to the melody. GM asks the band why the guitar stopped doubling the bass line and switched to the melody in the chorus: "It was great. Now it's scattered." It becomes clear that the band decided on this change after GM had returned to the control room. GM then summarizes the apparent difference of opinion about the guitar's role in the chorus: "I'm trying to build you a pop song - F*ck Jazz. . . . Pop songs are all about clear ideas repeated. It gives you the right kind of bed, a lot of room to overdub. . . . The bass line [what the musicians and GM had agreed was the heart of the song] has become diffused, out of focus."

Based on the aural evidence, an outside observer might wonder why GM thought that the musicians were taking a jazz, rather than pop, approach to the song. The singer, NA, speculated that "maybe he said it because he knows I studied jazz? . . . . I didn't want it to be jazz either. Maybe because the hook was instrumental guitar? . . . . It was my direction for the guitar to play the hook. . . . This comes from Tom Misch's song. He's a guitarist and in a lot of his songs the voice is in the verses, but the chorus is a guitar playing a lead." The guitarist, PL, added that he "really liked that part" where GM defined a pop song. "When this was filmed everyone was into jazz, but . . . we're now all in pop gigs." Illustrating the musicians' involvement in jazz, at a couple of moments during the sessions, while fooling around between takes, the musicians break out into spontaneous jazz-like versions of "Horizon," driven especially by the pianist.

There are two elements here that contributed to what could be interpreted either as a conflict or a misunderstanding in the perception that the chorus in the scratch track represented a jazz approach. The first of these elements is the decision to have instruments play the melody and two-part instrumental polyphony (bass and guitar) in the chorus, a decision with sonic associations of jazz. The second element concerns the biographies of the musicians. As mentioned earlier, at the time of the session all of the musicians were enrolled in, or had recently completed, programs in higher education in pop/jazz performance. Quebec's higher music education system is unique in North America in how it affords broad accessibility to high-level instruction in popular music. Thus, it is typical to find a high percentage of young professional musicians in the Montreal area with extensive formal training that includes familiarity with jazz. For example, NA was currently enrolled in McGill's jazz program, and the other musicians all had jazz experience through their academic training and professional experience.

For these reasons, although the scratch take of "Horizon" would probably not have reminded many listeners of "jazz," there were multiple reasons (i. e., the instrumental chorus and the musicians' backgrounds) that provide context for GM's apparent assumption that the band's decision to break the unison bass line in the chorus was due to a tendency to default to a jazz player's way of playing and arranging. GM's response was to insist on the guitar doubling the bass line, and then to suggest that the chorus instead be sung: "It could be a much cooler vocal line that it is a guitar line." Although the guitar-led chorus had been an integral part of the song as NA conceived it, her response is a good example of the complex interpersonal dynamics involved in communicating in the studio, and the kind of rapid internal calculations that occur in the process of compromising. As NA recollected, "I was definitely attached to that guitar sound. But I told myself that we can always try something and if it doesn't work, we scratch the idea, so I was open to trying it. . . . because he [GM] knows what he's talking about." This change necessitated a period of adjustment as NA had to develop a convincing way of wordlessly singing the chorus that respected GM's encouragement to keep the song more "pop": "I was figuring out what to use as syllables. . . . I was searching for what fits that's not jazz." Such a statement underscores how even minute musical decisions reflect the role of genre considerations and the interpersonal power dynamics of a session; these decisions must be made "on the fly" as the performance of the song is modified from take to take. Such rapid-fire adjustments correspond to Feld's idea of "categorical" interpretive moves, now applied to music-creation as well as to verbal discourse about music.

After reviewing the video footage of the session, the authors speculated that some of the confusion in developing the arrangement came from differences in opinion about the recording order of each musical

element (an interpretation also voiced by musicians during follow-up interviews). For example, the producer-engineers were anticipating how additional melodic guitar parts would be overdubbed during the chorus section at a later stage of the recording and then added to the doubled bass/guitar line. However, it seemed more important to NA and the band members to include the guitar chorus melody from the outset as part of the basic or "bed" tracks of the song. This divergent conception about the role of the basic tracks reflected different levels of experience with (and possibly different aesthetic orientations toward) recording popular music: the producer-engineers heard the basic tracks as part of a what they imagined would be a more elaborate finished recording, whereas the musicians were thinking more in terms of a "live-in-the-studio" aesthetic.

6 Comparison with Previous Research and Conclusion

Several contrasts stand out in comparison with the session analyzed in our previous study [7]. The musicians in the previous session were older, more experienced, and arrived at the session with the arrangements for the songs clearly worked out. This ruled out the need for reference tracks, and increased the efficiency of the session, as considerably less time was spent on working out the basic arrangements for the songs. Discussions about which sounds to use for synthesizer and lead guitar parts proceeded more quickly. It is perhaps for these reasons that the discussion in the earlier article could confidently assert that a collective set of musical values facilitated the consensus on how to resolve challenges that occurred during the session. Abstract notions such as Csikszentmihaly's "social field" and Bourdieu's "habitus" were invoked to help explain how a shared sense of possibilities and constraints enables participants to harmonize their different backgrounds and expectations in the course of resolving disagreements [4,5,19,20,21]. This article adds specifics about the social dynamics of a session, in particular the different levels of experience of, and the power differential between, the participants. We go even further here by arguing that the act of communicating about music is itself a process that makes it possible to negotiate different musical values and harmonize the different stakes that agents may have in a particular session. Rather than a pre-existent set of social values or a "habitus" that organizes the participants' behavior, this article has examined the communicative acts in greater detail in order to demonstrate, in Feld's words, the "socially interactive and intersubjective process of reality construction through message production and interpretation" [13]. In this view, an intersubjective reality that makes consensus possible results from the process of communication itself.

One could take another step and analyze the larger cultural "frame" that makes the communication process possible and meaningful (and perhaps returns us to considerations of pre-existing "social values" and the "habitus"). Feld discusses how the use of interpretive moves and the engagement with music in time "are dynamically linked, and the linkage typically produces a boundary." One of the "expressive ideologies" connected to the idea of a boundary or frame "has to do with *identity*, the means by which music communicates sameness or difference of character as it exists among music makers, makers and listeners, individuals and groups" [13]. Such differences and samenesses have much to do with how the musical field of genres is organized, and with how musicians, listeners, and other agents involved with music place themselves in relation to music. For example, several scholars have documented how race and gender have affected access to the studio, to different roles in the studio, and to inclusion and exclusion in genres [22,23,24,25]. Such differences are often difficult to document in the activities, reflections, and recollections of agents co-creating in the studio (despite some famous examples of inter-group tensions in recording sessions). In this particular session, both gender and linguistic differences could have possibly played a role in how the session unfolded. NA was the only woman present who participated in creative decision-making (although other women were present in the cohort of sound recording students); and the musicians communicated amongst themselves in French while the language in the control room was English (in Quebec, linguistic difference is an area of intense political and media debate). NA was not aware of how her gender impacted her experience; and neither NA nor PL were aware of communication difficulties or resentment due to the different languages used in the live and the control room. As NA explained, "Bands in Montreal sing in both languages, [like] Arcade Fire, Charlotte Cardin."

Indeed, while larger patterns of the power dynamics found in social interactions and institutional structures may be reproduced in the recording studio, musicians are often not consciously aware of their influence when they are making music (though this

can vary widely depending on the specifics of the recording context) [26]. Moreover, humans engaged in everyday verbal communication may not be aware of these larger cultural frameworks either. The moment-to-moment interplay of music-making in the studio exists in the liminal zones of communication that occur non-verbally in the act of creating music in real time [27,28]. Feld argues that speech about music fills an adjacent zone to this liminality, as "interpretive moves in talk" emerge in recognition of the challenges of "specifying" or "giving order" to musical events [13]. It should come as little surprise, then, that verbal discourse in the studio, permeated as it is with metaphor and synecdoche, would not necessarily lead participants to reflect on the role of larger cultural frameworks in their decision making more than they would otherwise in their daily lives.

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