

On The State of Lo-Fi

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Thesis: The definition of lo-fi music has been shaped and bent more and more over the past two decades, and where there is a rich and complex history, there is also a bright but hazy future.

Lo-fi music has always been associated with the anti hi-fi, whatever the studio was, it was not, whether by active choice, or by budget limitations. This, home recording, do it yourself attitude, lent the ear to pioneers and geniuses who would otherwise have gone undocumented or unheard.

Can you solidify this movement or progression as processes or specific sounds or artifacts?

Where do purists draw the line? What about digital artifacts? In the age of democratization of technology, where most people with an interface are able to record in 32 bit audio at home or create entire records on their phone, I posit that lo-fi was never process. It was always ethos.

Lo fi music started as soon as home self-recording was made possible in the 1950's and 60's, with mono and 2 track reel to reels. You can hear Nick Drake's late mother, Molly Drake, in home recordings dating back to the 50's. There are many recordings but none really define the genre more than just predate. The earliest influence of many lo fidelity acts can be found with some garage rock and proto-punk such as the 13th Floor Elevators, The Sonics, MC5, The Stooges, and The Velvet Underground, recorded on substandard equipment cheaply

(Unterberger). Brian Wilson can be noted with having one of the first home recording studios, using it from 1967-1974 (Unterberger). Paul McCartney also had access to an early 4 track recorder and made his debut record “McCartney” in 1970 (Unterberger). Early 4 track consumer models date back to as early as 1968, being used by artists like Paul McCartney and R Stevie Moore (Unterberger).

Tascam began marketing their very successful “4 channel quadraphonic tape recorders” in 1972 , leading to early pioneers like Todd Rundgren with his record *Something/Anything* (Unterberger). The available technology having retailed for just under a thousand dollars, musicians had access to similar possibilities of recording as the Beatles and a lot of their earlier influences, previously made unavailable without a huge recording budget and a record deal (Unterberger). The technology until that point was only made available to artists because only record labels had the resources to develop these technologies, custom building a lot of boards and early multitracking machines. It was really only when the technology developed, with the introduction of 4 track and 8 track consumer grade reel to reel recorders, that the home-recording element began to develop consciously with early acts like The Cleaners from Venus and Half Japanese through the mid to late 70’s (Unterberger).

They would record everything, and distribute everything themselves, something previously undone without major label backing and money (Unterberger). The release of the Tascam Portastudio in 1979 marked the peak of the tape underground, artists home-recording and distributing among themselves, sometimes only a few hundred or even a dozen units at a time and mostly relying on word of mouth (Unterberger). This setup the next decade for a lot of atomization within the home-recording and lo fi genre as the bar for entry was lowered more

with advancing cassette recording technology. This movement of DIY music set up a lot of the framework for how we understand independent record labels and studios to work today.

In Alexandra Suppers article “Listening for the Hiss: Lo-Fi Liner Notes as Curatorial Practices.” she speaks on the acceptance of eccentricities, flaws, and artifacts as not exceptions or distractions but necessary to see the bigger picture. She specifically does this by examining liner notes as a means for the artist to contextualize their music and these imperfections, allowing a proper “frame of reference” for listening.

Alexandra Supper defines “Lo-Fi” music as being in direct contrast to hi-fi and “state-of-the-art” recording equipment. She goes on to say that qualities emblematic of lo-fi music include “low signal to noise ratio and a rough and ragged sound quality often failing to mask hum, static, tape hiss, and other noises endemic to the very process of recording (Supper).” Supper outlines lo-fi more generally as an approach to recording but also, at times, amateurish performance and instrumentation (Supper).

She also makes a bold but historically backed claim that a recording cannot be “‘hi-fi’ or ‘lo-fi’ in and of itself, by virtue of the flaws, distortions or noises it may or may not exhibit; rather, it is the context surrounding the recording and the conditions under which it is listened to that make it one or the other (Supper).” Our idea of fidelity has changed throughout the years as more advanced means of sound reproduction changed public perception, from the limited wax cylinder and direct to disc cutting, to magnetic tape, to digital recording. In addition to the recording process, playback has changed throughout the years for the consumer of the music too, each medium having its own inherent flaws (Supper).

Supper also talks about the actual act of listening. For means of playback such as vinyl or tape, there are hisses and pops that the listener tries to listen past. In order to appreciate and understand lo-fi recordings, it is important, instead, to listen for those qualities. Those precise qualities, the artifacts from the recording process, are integral parts of the listening experience (Supper). Where the aim has usually always been to create a seamless reproduction or uninterrupted listening experience, lo-fi music allows a special kind of fourth wall break. Supper argues that liner notes are a tool that artists use to get the audience in the right frame of mind to listen to the album, just as if your friend was to explain a song before showing you.

Many lo-fi liner notes have a lot to do with the location of the recording (Supper). By avoiding a studio, they are forced to record at home or at a friend's house, a space that feels and acts like a space, with thin walls and noisy pipes and neighbors. You could make an album in your bathroom because you like the sound of your voice in there. Operating in such a way, many artists under the lo-fi umbrella believe, creates authenticity not present in hi-fi recordings. Perhaps the best definition that Supper offers in that she considers something lo-fi not if it contains imperfections or artefacts but if it is recognized by the listener as "an integral part of the music (Supper)."

Elizabeth Newton in her article "Lo-Fi Listening as Active Reception." talks about how it has allowed us to appreciate "failed musical performances" and even to an extent encourage the listener to participate in the construction of the music while listening. This allows songs to exist but also take on new life in the mind of the listener outside of just the performance aspect or whatever limitations the artist may have. Newton believes that the most unwanted parts of the recording, the artefacts or the mistakes "carry aesthetic value as pure sounds" and goes on to say

that “while high fidelity logic operates according to pretenses of transparency, a lo-fi recording exposes its devices of recording, foregrounding its own constructedness (Newton).”

Anne Danielsen adds to the dialog on the sound of lo-fi and home recording in her article *Digital Signatures : The Impact of Digitization on Popular Music Sound* by reminding the reader that at the time of its invention, analog media was silent or at least in comparison to its Edison wax counterpart. Prior to digital recording, “recorded sounds had always been enmeshed in the noises inherent to the mediating process (Danielsen).” Digital is also able to produce a dynamic range of up to 98 db and recreate all of the frequencies in the human range of hearing (Danielsen).

Danielsen sums up the conversation best by adding that, the reason musicians now prefer that analog characteristic is because it is seen as an opportunity now more than a burden of the time it was invented (Danielsen). “We hear it differently when we use it differently (when we can take it or leave it) (Danielsen).”

This music can also be seen as the death of the recording studio, or at the very least the way it existed. Andrew Leyshon in his article *The Software Slump?* No longer are the days where the top studios are owned by the majors and have dedicated technical teams that make bespoke equipment for their bespoke studio. While this is crucial in the way people explored the studio in the 1960s and 70s, cheaper technology began making home recording possible (Leyshon).

According to Leyshon, the switch to digital recording changed the demand for space and time in the studio by allowing artists to for the first time do pre production, and even parts of their record at home.

An example of a modern pioneer of this medium today would be Steve Lacy. Most of his music is recorded with an iRig straight into his iPhone, recording guitars or bass with just the phone on his lap, including his work on Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN* (Pierce). In a recent interview he's been said to work this way to prove a point, that tools don't really matter, that it's the song and the music behind the recording that will always make it (Pierce). He says, "If you want to make something, grab whatever you have and make it (Pierce)." All of his grammy nominated music has been made with GarageBand for iOS. It allows him to work portably and always have his work on him.

The microphone in a phone, particularly the iPhone can make great recordings if placed correctly in a room. Recording technology has trickled down to every layer of access since the inception of home recording and is now at a point where everyone has a studio in their pocket, but what does this mean for lo-fi music?

It means that higher and higher quality solutions are going to be made cheaper and cheaper as time and new technology move forward. I believe that in the 2000s and especially the 2010's artists began embracing this democratization of recording technology instead of overvaluing the aesthetic of a particular medium or technology like a Tascam. You begin to see the shift where every one who wants to make music just has a digital interface and its lowered the cost of entry a great deal. Many of these recordings are still made at home or with friends. Lo-fi has always been more-so centered around the idea of doing it yourself than home recording technology and as it improves so does the quality of the music people are able to make. Home recording technology has always been at the crux of lo-fi music, and it's changed. Yes, you can romanticize your 424, but the idea that one piece of home recording technology is more authentic

than another is completely subjective. It's purpose has always been to serve the music and be where people need it.

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