Imagine yourself caught on a long train ride without your portable music player. Now, picture a world where the sound-recording phonograph, an ancestor to the MP3 player, is used for its initial purpose: dictating, or recording, lengthy telegraph messages for business executives. Musicologists and audiophiles alike have traced the innovations of sound recording through the decades, but identifying the phonograph’s impact on subjects surpassing music has proven to be strenuous.¹ Mark Katz, Associate Professor of Music at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has contributed much to this endeavour, exemplified by his 2004 monograph, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music*. *Capturing Sound* is a seminal text on the burgeoning topic of technology’s influence on music and culture. In clear and confident prose, Katz presents a well-organized approach to assessing the phonograph’s influence on music, society, culture, and even politics. While developing his catalogue of “phonograph effects,” Katz strengthens his principle argument by addressing memorable case studies drawn from the Caribbean Islands, India, Java, and America. By referencing events and ideals held by prominent figures within and outside of the discipline of music, Katz presents a strong case for his argument.


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that the phonograph changed the human reaction to music by introducing technology to musical life.

Katz presents a richly detailed argument in Capturing Sound, derived from a clear thesis stated early in his introduction: “my claim [is] that the technology of sound recording, writ large, has profoundly transformed modern musical life.”

Katz breaks up his argument into three main theories. First, Katz speculates that the phonograph’s cultural implications far outreached its initial usage, an argument worked out in great detail in chapter two, “Making America More Musical.” Second, Katz suggests that the phonograph’s ability to record has changed performance practice and compositional technique. He deals with this theory in chapters three (“Capturing Jazz”); four (“Aesthetics out of Exigency”); and five (“The Rise and Fall of Grammophonmusik”). Lastly, Katz postulates that the evolution of technology, brought about by the phonograph’s legacy, will constantly affect life in the present, and future — within or outside of music — a belief that he examines in his final three chapters: “The Turntable as a Weapon,” “Music in 1s and 0s,” and “Listening in Cyberspace.”

To support his main argument, Katz employs several powerful research methodologies. In his first chapter, “Causes,” Katz outlines six ideas that make up “phonograph effects,” a term he mobilizes to describe several of the phonograph’s influences evident in musical and social life: tangibility, portability, (in)visibility, repeatability, temporality, and receptivity. By constantly referencing factual events, objects, imagery, and supporting sources, Katz uses his methods to draw the reader successfully into his well-written narrative.

Katz’s first theory, suggesting that the phonograph’s cultural implications went far beyond the tool’s originally intended purpose, strongly supports his main argument and introduces the concept of the phonograph as a reflection of society. By the end of the second chapter, Katz has expanded the reader’s preconceived notions about the phonograph by exploring its use as a music player that eventually affected “contemporary attitudes about music, technology, morality, culture, education, class, race, and gender.” Additionally, Katz’s effectively opens up his examination so that it also considers philosophers, teachers, politicians, human rights activists, and social scientists, (among many others). William Howland Kenney uses a similar theoretical construct in his book, Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945, a text which outlines the phonograph’s affect on soldiers of the United

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3 Mark Katz, Capturing Sound, 79.
States’ military during the Second World War. Kenney describes the shipment of recorded “V-Discs”, playing at 78 rpm (rotations per minute), by the Roosevelt administration to the frontlines far from American culture, as a means to improve the morale of soldiers during wartime. Kenney’s reconstruction of this political event resonates with Katz’s hypothesis that the phonograph’s cultural implications reached well beyond what it was originally intended for, even reaching the war rooms of the United States of America in the 1940s. Considering how the phonograph served as a catalyst for cultural expression, Katz expands upon his first argument so that it relates back to musical innovation, addressing how the phonograph had an impact on the creation of twentieth-century music.

Katz suggests that phonographic influence buries itself within music while modifying techniques of human performance practice and composition. He argues that this infiltrates and alters very complex settings, such as the early development of jazz; the use of the vibrato technique in violin playing; and the expansion of the very definition of musical instruments – eventually including the phonograph itself. Peter Elsdon’s article, “Jazz Recordings and the Capturing of Performance” employs a similar argument, implying that studio recordings were used by jazz producers to capture improvised performances—recordings that musicians would later return to and learn from. Elsdon’s work mixes with Katz’s to point out two facets of the rapid growth of jazz inherently linked to technology: the constant improvement of improvisational styles so crucial to professional jazz musicians, and the constant emergence of new musicians “taught” through the study of these captured performances. Essentially, by comparing Katz’s Capturing Sound and Elsdon’s “Jazz Recordings and the Capturing of Performance,” we see the significance of Katz’s hypothesis that “shifts in performance practice are, in fact, a phonographic effect.”

By unpacking the influence of the phonograph on the practice of music making, Katz prepares his readers for a shift away from the study of the physical phonograph to an examination of the contemporary phenomena it inspired.

Beginning with his sixth chapter, “The Turntable as a Weapon,” Katz suggests that phonograph effects influenced contemporary musical innovations that signify individual expression and encompass the socio-musical battles of turntablists; the re-contextualization process in digital sampling; and the

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6 Mark Katz, Capturing Sound, 94.
controversial nature of file sharing. By fluidly shifting his study to the present
day, Katz outlines how lasting phonograph effects are still changing musical life,
while also anticipating their further evolution, stating, “Given the daily twists
and developments in technology, law, and culture, further phonograph effects are
sure to arise. Just watch. And listen.”7 Andrew Blake’s article, “Ethical and
Cultural Issues in the Digital Era” proposes the same theory as Katz, but
describes the act of digital sampling as a technique that has tainted the “original
creative genius which has surrounded most commercial music-making in
modern Europe and North America,” a position he emphasizes by providing the
subheading: ‘Making music digitally—the sampling problem’.8 [emphasis mine]
Blake argues that innovative individual expression within music causes the
disintegration of musical genius, a position that severely contrasts Katz’s.
Comparing the beliefs of both authors, it becomes clear that Katz maintains a
positive outlook towards the growth of new music caused by the phonograph,
which is refreshing to the reader. After completing the final conclusion, Katz’s
audience will profoundly feel that modern musical life has been, and is
constantly being, reshaped by the influence of sound recording technology—and
not necessarily in a bad way.

In addition to the three-pronged approach to arguing his thesis, Katz’s book
can also be viewed as employing three main methodologies. The second chapter,
“Making America More Musical,” explores the arrival of “good music” into
American homes and schools, and concludes with an analysis of the phonograph
as a producer of civilized culture in America by 1930. By referencing events and
contrasting ideals that defined the ‘good or bad’ question of the phonograph,
Katz’s timeline effectively follows the dilution of American’s zealous attitudes
regarding the positive or negative role the phonograph played as a cultural tool.
This organizational method successfully convinces the reader of Katz’s position
to such a degree that Katz’s final argument—refuting early twentieth-century
pessimism concerning the phonograph—becomes entirely palatable. The
author’s position that the phonograph was used for matters other than its
original purpose does not stop at cultural implications. Katz then shifts his focus
to the role of the phonograph in refining musical technique.

Katz’s analysis in chapter 3, “Capturing Jazz,” follows the development of
jazz using five of the six phonograph effects: portability, invisibility, temporality,
repeatability, and receptivity. By organizing phonograph effects into subheadings

8 Andrew Blake, “Ethical and Cultural Issues in the Digital Era” in Recorded Music: Society,
throughout the chapters within *Capturing Sound*, Katz clearly guides the reader through his complex examination, building on the information outlined in his first chapter. Katz uses this analytical method in several chapters, particularly “Aesthetics out of Exigency.” In so doing, Katz first educates the reader, then he introduces specialized evidence, situates his work as part of the existing discipline, and ends with an argument that strengthens the overall thesis of *Capturing Sound*. By guiding the reader along this path, Katz inspires and implores his audience to develop the knowledge needed for in-depth examination. *Digital Music Wars*, written by Patrick Burkart and Tom McCourt, contains a similar final chapter to *Capturing Sound*, titled “Digital Capitalism, Culture, and the Public Interest.” Burkart and McCourt outline efforts taken by wealthy recording industries to control the modern music business, while disclosing opposition to these efforts. Burkart and McCourt use a method similar to Katz’s, but their work is absent of personal opinion from any of the included authors. In comparison, Katz achieves what *Digital Music Wars* strains to do: convey a strong opinion that is made effective by how Katz situates memorable personal events and views held by important historical figures within *Capturing Sound*.

The few aspects in which I found *Capturing Sound* wanting occur in small portions of Katz’s examination that could be improved through expansion. Perhaps most lacking is a detailed treatment of gender roles and technology. Though Katz devotes a small portion of his monograph to gender roles, the importance of women in the evolution of electroacoustics itself, rather than a branch of it, could be developed more thoroughly. Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner’s *Women Composers and Music Technology in the United States: Crossing the Line* explores over 150 electroacoustic works by a wide array of woman composers, while displaying their digital and technological prowess, most ahead of their time. Hinkle-Turner argues that the role of women in the development of electroacoustics is severely understudied and neglected, an argument that could be used by Katz to discuss the small amount of women composers in electronic music. Katz’s section on the DJ battle, though informative, is still a far too limited treatment of the myriad gender issues inherent in a discussion about music and technology.

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In closing, Katz effectively uses three theories that reveal the nature of the phonograph’s cultural implications, its influence on musical performance and compositional technique, and its effect on contemporary musical expression and innovation. Covering a wide variety of topics, Mark Katz’s book has been, and will continue to be, referenced by theorists from a large selection of disciplines. Capturing Sound is an exceptional starting point for those who seek further knowledge of technology’s influence on music. Professionals at any level will find informative case studies within Capturing Sound, as they provide crucial evidence for the development of specific genres such as reggae, dub, and ska. Additional case studies explore the effects of the cassette on countries such as India, and Java, which can be used by anthropologists to examine North American influences on isolated territories.11 In summary, Mark Katz’s Capturing Sound is an extremely well organized analysis that remains specialized yet large enough in scope to present the musical and extra-musical factors relating to the phonograph and the phenomena it inspired.

Bibliography:


