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## PART III

# Listening to the Underground



## 9

# Noise as Concept, History, and Scene

Noise has always been at the core of the underground, speaking in terms of both the genre of noise and the more nebulous resources of conceptual and sonic noise. Along with principles of improvisation and outsider DIY organization and politics, noise—sonic distortion, static, feedback, as well as the concept of disturbance and disruption—as a marker of marginality and turbulence has been important for underground musicians and thinkers. Noise indexes relative difference and exploration very well, whether we think of Lou Reed and *Metal Machine Music*, the Beatles and songs like “Helter Skelter,” Edgard Varèse in classical music, or more directly underground examples such as Merzbow or the New Blockaders. Noise connotes deviation from the norm in most contexts in which it is used. As such, it’s only to be expected that underground forms would deploy noise in ways that mark them as separate from the more polished and “musical” mainstream(s).

So noise is important across all underground forms, just as some notion of improvisation is likewise. But the *genre* of noise is also at the core of the underground. Developing in tandem with the earliest iterations of the underground in the 1970s, noise really came into its own as a genre in the late 1970s and 1980s with acts such as Whitehouse, Hijokaidan, Maurizio Bianchi, and others. It flourished throughout the following decades, as covered briefly in the Skin Graft case study in chapter 2, and currently boasts an array of subgenres across the United States, Europe, Japan, and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

The genre of noise is musically characterized by severe volumes; extremity and saturation of the frequency spectrum (tending to white noise);

distorted, overdriven, and fuzzy timbres; and a certain quality of antirefinement in form, gesture, and technique. Words are usually present only in the form of titles and band/artist names or as sloganlike mottos shouted by the musicians. The use of nonmusical instruments and of electronic instruments, both analogue and digital, is common, as are guitars with distortion pedals. In recent years, sophisticated digital audio workstation platforms have become common in noise, although many proponents of the genre cleave to older methods of sonic distortion and processing, such as cheap fuzz, delay, and echo effects pedals; contact microphones used with everyday objects, with musical instruments, and with the body; and very loud amplifiers.

Noise might reasonably be understood to include everything from power electronics (PE) to industrial, some forms of free music, post-noise genres such as hauntology and hypnagogic pop, DIY, avant-rock, and more. Not only this, but the noise genre and the concept of noise are among the underground's most examined subjects, as seen, for example, in Paul Hegarty's work, Iles and Mattin's *Noise and Capitalism*,<sup>2</sup> Nick Cain's "Primer" on noise,<sup>3</sup> Douglas Kahn's wide-ranging account of sound in the arts in the twentieth century *Noise Water Meat*,<sup>4</sup> David Novak's *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation*,<sup>5</sup> and the extensive range of noise 'zines and blogs.<sup>6</sup> Yet it's important to distinguish between the relatively integrated, if broad, genre of noise music (which incorporates subgenres like harsh wall noise and lo-fi and derivations such as industrial), on the one hand, and, on the other, underground musical approaches that might be seen to contain and play with noise techniques, such as post-noise, death ambient, and improv, but that, for general reasons of stylistic allegiance, are better considered as separate generic phenomena.

I'm focusing on noise and closely related genres in this and the next chapters. I develop an account of noise in terms of its aesthetics, which I relate in part and cautiously to deterritorializing processes of profanation and sublimation. These sorts of processes, discussed with respect to noise and lo-fi in these current chapters and developed in the context of the "productive nihilism" and *jouissance* of the extreme metal of chapter 12, should be taken as exemplary underground aesthetic modes. I start with a conceptual analysis of noise, before moving to more straightforward accounts of the music's history and the noise scene, using an extended case study of the Los Angeles Free Music Society to frame the former. Chapter 10 looks at the politics of the aesthetics of noise as an emblem of wider underground aesthetics.

### 9.1. Noise as Concept

In the beginning was the noise.<sup>7</sup>

Think of another noise: the chain is broken again and everything vanishes in the bewildered flight. The noise temporarily stops the system, makes it oscillate indefinitely. To eliminate the noise, a non-stop signal would be necessary; then the signal would no longer be a signal and everything would start again, more briskly than usual. Theorem: noise gives way to a new system, an order that is more complex than the simple chain.<sup>8</sup>

Michel Serres gives us a vision of noise as an interference that yet constitutes the (radical) origin of all systems. Noise here is the disorder that creates tension, instability, and ultimately development. Serres asks earlier in the same text, in deference to the notion that things “work because they do not work”: “Can we rewrite a system . . . not in the key of pre-established harmony but in what [Leibniz] called seventh chords? Not with the equilibrium he loved to mention in mind but with the waves and shock on line in mind?”<sup>9</sup> Noise here functions as a metaphor for the nonsymmetry that governs the universe. Noise stands in simply on the one hand as the antinomy of desired communication or arrangement and complexly on the other as the interruption of systems. Yet it is more than that, because even if noise “stops the system” by making an interruption, then in that interruption, in that moment of open possibility or active negation, the opportunity for change arises, and things can be set on a new course. Serres isn’t addressing noise music directly, of course, but his speculations serve quite well as structuring metaphors for how we might understand how noise is seen to operate, ideally, within noise music, as a sonic or indeed visual disturbance that transforms environments and opens listeners and musicians up to new possibilities, even if these seem gloomy and opaque or overwhelming.

In his twelve-part *Theses on Noise*<sup>10</sup> (see fig. 2) our old friend Mattin speaks about the “undifferentiated” and unpredictable conceptual and social force of noise as both sound and code, as opposed to its specific domestication in noise-musical discourse as a genre synecdoche or signifier, though he does also emphasize its sensual qualities. For Mattin, noise is potential, not something to be settled as genre or in the “self-satisfied avant-garde niche” he spoke about in chapter 6.

Dominick Fernow, the person behind such noise acts as Prurient and Vatican Shadow, echoes Mattin in identifying an extra- or trans-generic dimension to noise, where it’s seen less as a specific set of sounds and sonic techniques and

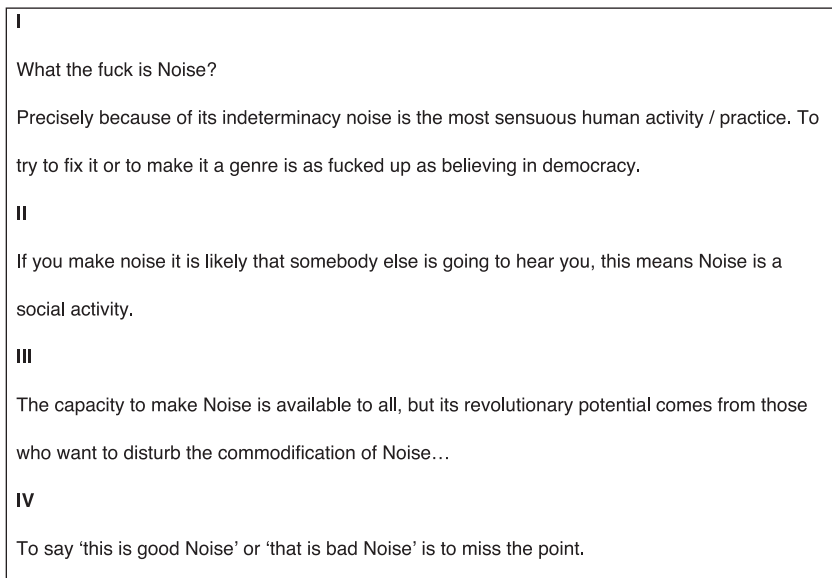


Fig. 2. The first four of Mattin's "Theses on Noise"

more as an existential or moral category. This echoes John Butcher's separation of improv into "ideology" and "genre"; these types of distinctions are typical of the ways that politics sometimes plays out in the underground on a discursive level, where musical sound or music-derived concepts are framed in heavily symbolic, political terms and come to be used as cultural resources. According to Fernow:

The way I define noise is the freedom to pursue personal obsession, outside of genre and audience. I think that's largely been lost; in a scene that's supposed to be approaching some kind of freedom, it's sad to me how conservative and conformist it's become. I think there's a problem now where noise for many people simply means distortion, and to me that might be noise *sound* but the ideology of it is really just total selfishness and self-exploration. . . . My involvement and interest in noise is entirely anti-musical; it's all concept.<sup>11</sup>

The philosopher Ray Brassier, meanwhile, in contrast to Fernow and Mattin, seems to conflate noise-as-concept and noise-as-genre:

What I consider interesting about noise is its dis-organising potency: the incompressibility of a signal interfering with the redundancy in the structure of

the receiver. Not transduction but schizduction: Noise scrambles the capacity for self-organisation.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of whether noise is being explicitly conceived in genre or conceptual terms or not, these are all moral and politically scored readings. And political potency of a general kind drives the noise genre, as seen across its various lexical (slogans, imagery), physical (riots, confrontational and/or violent performance approaches), and sonic (harmonic density, dynamic extremity) levels. Phillip Tagg and Karen E. Collins remind us of this political dimension of noise, quoting Jacques Attali and Claude Lévi-Strauss:

Jacques Attali calls noise “violence . . . a simulacrum of murder.” Lévi-Strauss found noise-making instruments to be associated with “death, decomposition, social disorder and cosmic disruption,” calling them “the instruments of darkness.” Dissonance is also associated with fright, terror, doubt, confusion, bitterness and fear. Using noise, like using volume, then, is seen as a method of empowering oneself against oppressors.<sup>13</sup>

In this vein, for Paul Hegarty:

Noise is a negativity (it can never be positively, definitively and timelessly located), a resistance, but also defined by what society resists. It works as a deconstruction, so, in practice, this means that identifying the noise in a piece of music is only the initial step; the next is to see noise as the relation between that first, explicit noise, and that which is not noise.<sup>14</sup>

Hegarty subscribes to a relational conception of noise whereby a thing (a sound, for example, or a musical-performative gesture) is formally constituted as noise by its context and its reception. He suggests at the start of his book that “noise is not an objective fact. It occurs in relation to perception—both direct (sensory) and according to presumptions made by an individual. . . . Noise is cultural.”<sup>15</sup> So noise is intersubjective, a judgment made by individuals in an intersubjective way, drawing on experience and depending on context, even if basic sonic phenomena such as distortion and feedback might be more readily seen as “noise” than other phenomena would be. Noise is cultural, but some things are more securely noisy than others are.

But noise is also that which is resisted, that which supervenes the relationship between itself and not-itself, such that it becomes a deconstructive force redefining the signal against that which it’s placed in relation. This deconstruction, again, depends on who did the constructing and who is doing the decon-



structing. As Attali observes in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, “What is noise for the old order is harmony to the new: Monteverdi and Bach created noise for the polyphonic order. Webern of the tonal order. Lamont [sic] Young for the serial order.”<sup>16</sup>

For Hegarty and Brassier, as much as for Serres and Attali, noise, qua abstract concept *and* qua specific sonic event, *reveals*, whether that revealing is of the limits or frailties of a system; of the “redundancy” or lack in the perceiving systems of its receiver; of the artificiality of seemingly “natural” boundaries between, for example, tonality and atonality in music; or, in a more positive sense, of new possibilities and alternative, even emancipatory, principles and procedures.

These various connections among systemic, musical, and cultural noise key us into an allegorical understanding of noise. The point is that the conceptual and the aesthetic and political are all joined in the multiple and mobile discourses around noise. I’ll consider each of these (inter)textual levels in turn through discussions of the history and then the scenic contexts of noise.

## 9.2. *Noise as History*

Noise, like other music, evolves under the influence of technology and culture; music is, in Simon Frith’s words, “an effect of historical forces—social, technological and musical.”<sup>17</sup> Music history is multiply mediated by these various forces and, like all history, is messy and endless. I’m not therefore suggesting that the musical developments surveyed below should be seen in a strictly causal historical relationship, but merely that they can be seen as correlates. I’m not, likewise, suggesting that these developments existed in a vacuum of “pure” music, but merely that these musics developed from broadly shared cultural and social and political and technological contexts and practices, such as the emergence of popular music as a mass cultural form, the new availability of cheap electronic musical instruments, globalization and the spread of neoliberal capitalism, and a postmodern “information age” blurring of boundaries between the “high” and the “low” through potentially converging cultural values.

The history of noise music in recent times, bearing all these influences in mind, is usually traced through a series of fairly recognizable historical moments and practices. It often goes from Schoenberg’s famous “emancipation of the dissonance” at the start of the century; through Futurist writings on modern machine culture and noise makers such as their *Intonarumori* that sought to infuse music with “dissonant, strange and harsh” sounds;<sup>18</sup> then on through innovations in popular music and jazz in the interwar years that brought various

modes of the urban together with song. It moves on through exploratory music using electronics from John Cage (such as his *Imaginary Landscape* series) and Edgard Varèse in the 1930s and 1940s to Daphne Oram in the 1950s and 1960s; through artists from Pierre Schaeffer to Terry Riley to the Who to the Beatles to Lou Reed, using new technologies and unexpectedly “noisy” sounds in their work in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. It culminates in exploratory free musics such as free jazz, exploring structural and sonic noise in the late 1950s and beyond. Various other popular musics and/or composers are often used to update the story a little, from dub to jungle and so-called Intelligent Dance Music (IDM) to modernists or neomodernists such as Helmut Lachenmann and Rebecca Saunders. The noise genre itself gets less coverage, though artists such as Merzbow sometimes prop up the narrative.

The ready availability and particular historical framing of all this music as valuable means that this male- and white-dominated narrative is one that seems to serve as the canonical cultural history of noise in the twentieth century. Kahn and Hegarty inhabit this kind of narrative for the most part, for example, though Hegarty, for one, is aware of how easy and potentially deadening such a familiar “series of historical negations” and “sequence of avant garde moves” might become without analysis and complication.<sup>19</sup> We’ll keep this useful, if skewed, historical background in mind in outlining the development of the noise genre itself in the United States, Europe, and Japan from the late 1960s on.

#### A. The Los Angeles Free Music Society and 1970s/1980s “Amerinoise”

The Los Angeles Free Music Society (LAFMS), mentioned in passing in chapter 1, is a loose federal organization that originated as an eponymous record label and a sort of defining framework—“a bunch of people with the same fetishes”<sup>20</sup>—for a scene in East Los Angeles in the early 1970s. I’ll spend a bit of time discussing both the music and the cultural contexts/practices of the LAFMS groups here as they provide important historical context for how the underground and fringe was configured in its early years and for the origins of the noise scene. (I analyze some of the music in more detail in the next chapter.) Information on the LAFMS is much more widespread than it used to be,<sup>21</sup> but in order to plug some gaps and get an insider perspective, I interviewed one of the founding members of the organization—or, as he preferred to call it in our interview, “disorganization”—Joe Potts.

The first direct moves in the direction of the LAFMS were made in 1973 by Joe and Rick Potts and Chip Chapman. Their group, Patients in East L.A., made improvised music featuring taped cartoon samples. They were later to

become Le Forte Four (following a transitional point using “Los Angeles Free Music Society” as an actual band name), with the addition of Tom Potts in 1975. Around the same time, musicians Tom Recchion, Harold Schroeder, and, later, Juan Gomez were gathering in the Poo-Bah Record Shop (in Pasadena) and making music of a similar art brut bent. The Doo-Dooetes, as these three were to be known, along with the free-form group Smegma (whose improvisational music featured strange trinket noise makers, alongside tapes and turntables), also of Pasadena, were to merge with Le Forte Four (and others) in 1975 under the banner of the LAFMS.

These musicians banded together around an identity as “mockers” who drew inspiration from jazz by the likes of Coltrane and “hippy” performers such as Charles Lloyd, weirdo and odd rock music such as Beefheart, and “nerd culture” in general.<sup>22</sup> The LAFMS is often positioned as an outgrowth of “weirdo” rock music and things like *musique concrète*—though Ju Suk Reet Meate of Smegma maintains that that group was “more of a rock band whereas the rest of the LAFMS were more arthouse”<sup>23</sup>—but I wanted to get some detailed sense from Joe Potts of the group’s past experiences and their relation to other musics, especially things like outsider culture and art music. Potts’s answer reveals a deep variety of musical experience in his and his peers’ background, courtesy particularly of one important art teacher:

At San Gabriel High School when I attended between 1967 and 1970 (Chip and Rick a few years later and my brother Tom a few years earlier as well) there was a teacher named Donald Sickler who taught an American Art History course. Along with surveying visual art from pre-1776 to the present, Sickler played the corresponding American “classical” music. Through that class we were exposed to Gottschalk, Copland, Nancarrow, Parch, Ives, Cage, Feldman, Tudor, Ashley, Crumb, Oliveros, Subotnick, Riley, Reich etc. Sickler also introduced us to the bargain labels like “Nonesuch” and “Odyssey.”

Potts went on in our interview to describe his and the others’ explorations of contemporary music of various kinds, revealing a depth of knowledge and engagement that suggests that this broadly described “art” music—as can be heard in the work of the LAFMS groups themselves—was at least as formative and important for the LAFMS as experimental rock and jazz were (showing similar lines of influence to the “free jazz, rock, improvisation, psychedelia, contemporary composition” connections Hegarty thinks a “certain listenership” would readily make with noise):<sup>24</sup>

After I met Chip I discovered Varèse because Chapman knew that he influenced Zappa. Once Chip started studying electronic composition at Cal arts he played us all of the stuff he was hearing such as works by James Tenney, Ingram Marshall, Morton Subotnick, and Harold Budd who were all on the faculty. By way of Chip's record collection I heard Stockhausen, Kagel, and Xenakis. One of the Cal arts faculty, Barry Schrader, started the first electro acoustic music series (in the world?) called Currents, at the Theater Vanguard in West Hollywood. Currents was a monthly tape concert that featured works by composers such as Marianne Amacher, Paul Chihara and Bebe Barron. . . . Also, I found a series of periodicals called "Source: Music of the Avant Garde" (1967–1973) that had scores by many contemporary composers. I remember a water piece by Max Neuhaus that made a huge impression on me because it straddled so many different boundaries.

Considering the variety and range of the LAFMS's influences (from Joe's perspective) and the way its groups are often written about and indeed self-described as concrète-influenced "mockers," it's interesting to note the mesh of influences seen here from different music traditions and contexts. Potts placed a perhaps surprising emphasis on the notion of composition in expanding on this idea of influence, while also making the expected connections to musique concrète and Frank Zappa:

Other LAFMS members have said something like "we were exploring the idea of being musical composers," the emphasis being on the act of making a composition rather than the content or form. With Le Forte Four (and the rest of the LAFMS perhaps to a lesser degree) we saw what we were producing as relating to musique concrète. All of the Le Forte Fours LPs were pieced together from stacks of recordings both original and found. We paid irreverent homage to the composers and music we loved. But, we were not interested in working from scores which seemed irrelevant in a tape composition, a bit like a phony attempt to legitimize improvisation. What L-44 was engaged in was a self-conscious tongue in cheek form of appropriation more or less inspired by The Mothers of Invention and The Mothers with Flo and Eddie. We appropriated the stuff we were listening to, laughing at, smoking, eating, drinking, and watching. We included our friends, enemies, our current vocabulary and in jokes. Then we took a step back a la "200 Motels" and appropriated ourselves trying to make the recordings. L-44 considered "serious" compositions, musical proficiency, and "musical expression" pretentious to the point of being laughable.

So Potts outlines here a typically postmodern mélange of high and low influences processed in a loose, irreverent, even deterritorializing way. He and his peers rejected what they saw as the pretensions of written composition while also trying to mimic Zappa's distinctive blend of high/low satire, his crossing of institutional and genre lines, his concrète and bricolage techniques, and his use of compositional approaches within the context of nontraditional composerly sounds and instruments.<sup>25</sup>

This humorous, caustic, and sometimes wild mix, amounting to the kind of broad modernist innovation without strict high-art allegiance discussed in chapter 1, is rife in the music (as we'll see in the next chapter); in contrast to the technical sophistication of contemporary composition and Beefheart (where the asymmetric polyrhythms and aperiodic phrasing emerge out of highly sophisticated musicianship) and, sometimes, Frank Zappa's keenly edited and compiled "Xenochronic" work, the LAFMS's music displays an intense sense of Dada disorder and juxtaposition, a consistent formal jaggedness, and a taste for surreal sonic collage. Although these qualities are obviously sometimes present in Zappa's music too, in the LAFMS things feel barely in control.

The disorganization's various groups' musical activities ranged from intimate tape collages, to wild noise improvisations, to tiny sonic curiosities derived from circuit-bending activities with basic technology and objects. In Byron Coley's words, "improvisation, concrete assemblage, kraut-moosh, tinkling, noise, and weirdness for the sake of weirdness were all perceived as hallmarks of the LAFMS ethos."<sup>26</sup> That "ethos" can be heard most notably on the debut Le Forte Four album *Bikini Tennis Shoes*.<sup>27</sup> It's also present on the various compilations promoting affiliate groups' music that were independently released through mail order by the LAFMS, including, between 1978 and 1980, the three-volume *Blorp-Essette* series<sup>28</sup> and the 1976 open-invitation pay-to-play *I.D. Artist*.<sup>29</sup>

As Edwin Pouncey has said, the LAFMS "held Fluxus-style concerts and happenings, (and) published a magazine called *Light Bulb*"<sup>30</sup> throughout the late 1970s, but I wanted to get a fuller sense of how the LAFMS groups related to each other at this time, how exactly they built an audience and communicated with that audience, and what kinds of shows they put on. Pott's answer is highly revealing not only of how a predigital underground went about building its primarily in-person and physical DIY networks but of how such an early underground practice couldn't even rely on the 'zine and label culture that grew up under the LAFMS influence in the 1980s:

When we first started to try and distribute *Bikini Tennis Shoes* we had one outlet, Poo-Bah. We carried copies to art events and gave copies to friends (some of

whom returned them). We would take copies to artist lectures and concerts and give them to the “celebrity.” There was no social media; there were no weekly art and music giveaway papers in LA and no zines. There was an active Mail Art scene which allowed us to mail free copies to people we were in the correspondence loop with, like Irene Dogmatic, Buster Cleveland and Jad and David Fair. We would send copies to groups like Throbbing Gristle and the Residents who were also active in Mail Art. I remember Genesis P’Orridge [of Throbbing Gristle] responding that it was impressive that we went so far as to make an LP period.

Potts’s answer really shows the DIY nature of the early underground, where musicians would bring copies of their music to sell at various gatherings and where one or two record shops would serve as a physical anchor point for the groups. It also shows how important snail mail was in this period, with the LAFMS making connections with other artists and musicians in America just as they did with groups such as Throbbing Gristle (TG) in the UK. These kinds of connections even extended as far afield as Japan, where the group’s influence has been profound:

I had an art exhibit in 1977 in Tokyo at Galleri Lunami, which included the AIRWAY single. Through that single several people in Japan discovered the LAFMS and in the early ’80s a number of LAFMS releases were purchased by Japanese record outlets. Takuya Sakaguchi [a journalist who runs the Neurec label] visited us in the early eighties and since then has consistently reviewed our work in Japanese magazines, released our records and forged partnerships between the LAFMS and Japanese artists.

Potts also discussed how important Poo-Bah Records was as a physical nucleus for the scene and how important snail mail was to the scene:

For our little area of LA, the San Gabriel Valley, PooBah was a lightning rod for strange music freaks and Tom Recchion saw what everyone was listening to and would suggest music he thought they should know about. Beyond that, Tom was (is) an avid correspondent and particularly in the 70’s when he was ordering records to sell at PooBah, Tom made contacts with experimental musicians all over Europe and the US. He also spent a number of weeks in the late Seventies (?) hanging out in London with musicians like David Toop and Paul Cutler. Tom lived briefly in New York and spent a very short period playing drums in Sonic Youth there. All the while Tom was (as he still is) the LAFMS ambassador. Also in the ’80s Fredrik Nilsen spent a while living in various Eu-

ropean countries and connected with some experimental musicians such as Einstürzende Neubauten.

In addition to the importance of mail and the record shop, this quote also underlines the global underground's *physical* basis in the 1970s and 1980s, showing how important *travel* was to the making of connections in that physically bounded and hardly well-publicized underground.

As far as building an audience and a reputation (to the extent that they had any kind of audience), Potts suggests that it was the work of a few good advocates, such as Ace Farren Ford with his Blub Krad releases, that was crucial in getting word out about what the LAFMS was up to, connecting them to audiences of somewhat similar weirdo acts such as the Residents and Beefheart. In addition to these important advocates, the LAFMS performed concerts for friends and others. Though, as Potts says, "very few venues would let [us] perform—usually when we tried to play in clubs or theaters it was not a good fit (as in we got kicked out)"—the LAFMS organized a range of shows in places like an "abandoned building next to Poo-Bah" and some small art spaces, mainly for "audiences of friends." Meanwhile, the LAFMS groups performed for more diverse crowds at places such as the publicly funded and community-focused Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions space (and even here we see the tentacles of mainstream society piercing something that is extremely underground and marginal), where they connected with industrial and noise groups such as Monitor and Boyd Rice's Non.

Underscoring the physical constriction of underground scenes of the 1970s and 1980s, similar to the audience constriction just referenced, Potts talked about how the LAFMS and other LA-based groups "really didn't know each other before that because we lived in different parts of LA and at that time there was no way to find out about events except through bulletin boards at local independent record shops and local college art departments." This isolation and marginality, in fact, are part of the reason why the LAFMS banner was invented and deployed by all its groups, as a way of uniting "a bunch of basically independent limited edition projects under a single name, and probably [giving] them much more visibility at the time that they were produced, and possibly a much more lasting impact."<sup>31</sup>

After just under a decade or so of activity, some members of the LAFMS, notably Tom Potts, Chip Chapman, and Susan Farthing (Chapman's wife and a collaborator of Le Forte Four), "retired." While the intensity of the 1970s and early 1980s tapered off somewhat, more generally speaking, some of the LAFMS acts remain busy to this day, performing all over the world at festivals



such as *Colour Out of Space* and *No Fun Festival* (in addition to 2010's *Lowest Form of Music*, a London festival dedicated to their work). In fact, Potts mentioned his and his brother's performance at the 2008 *No Fun as Dinosaurs with Horns* (a group that usually includes Rick and Joseph Hammer), good-naturedly observing that they "were not a hit with the harsh noise crowd" and that "only the 'potheads' liked [them]"; they had, it seemed to Potts, "broken an unwritten noise law."

Notwithstanding this apparent disappointment, Potts pointed out just how much correspondence he perceives between today's underground and the LAFMS, in terms of both sounds and tools:

It is odd to see how the things that we were doing out of necessity have become so entrenched in the experimental sound and harsh noise community. I am thinking of daisy-chaining rock effect boxes, using hand-made electronics and altered toys. I don't think that it is necessarily due to our influence but more a case of different generations of artists reinventing or revisiting it. It is also curious how some of the aesthetics that we gleaned from the experimental musicians before us (and either used or made fun of) have become so entrenched in the experimental music scene today. I am thinking of the avoidance of beats for one.

These aesthetic commonalities, while notable, contrast with the drastically transformed nature of the underground on a practical level over the past twenty or so years. In our interview, Potts lamented to a certain degree the lack of existence of spaces where musicians can go and collaborate freely—he himself runs a "soundShoppe," an informal experimental sound workshop in a publicly funded art space in Los Angeles, where "people just show up with their equipment and play together for three hours." He spoke in this respect about various efforts, so far inchoate, to cultivate such a space on the Web.

Potts, like Cardoso and others discussed earlier in the book, understandably regrets the relative absence of such local scenic nuclei in the digital age:

It is very hard for experimental musicians to find opportunities to play and almost impossible to be able to informally "jam" with people that you don't know. Part of what created the LAFMS (maybe a large part) were those kinds of informal jams at PooBah after hours, in the Smegma house, at the 35 South Raymond studios, in the Potts family living room, in the synthesizer studios at Cal Arts and the group experimentation that they generated.



At the same time, though, Potts recognizes how easy it now is to get access to even the most obscure discographies, saying that he “thinks it probably greatly expands the influence” of “obscure artists” such as the LAFMS groups. Potts also described to me how he’s further adopted digital modes of working in his own practice, releasing “small editions of CD-Rs,” which, he suggested, “if people want to post [online] after they sell out, so be it. . . . We never made money on our records (who does?); the main thing is getting the material to as many interested people as possible.” Contrasting this possible widespread digital dissemination of what started out as a physical “product” with the older analogue model, Potts finally pointed out that the LAFMS “used to struggle to get rid of 200 LPs—it took us years sometimes.”

The LAFMS, then, survives into the digital age, still somewhat marginal, though its influence has clearly spread, but also engaging with and participating in various digital ways of working while lamenting the breakdown of physical scenic nuclei so pervasive in the 1970s.

The LAFMS case study reveals a number of key things about the early underground. It shows us, first of all, the predominance of physical media and physical distribution channels in the 1970s. Second, it underlines the importance of local scenic locations and *personal* relationships in both establishing local scenes and connecting those scenes to the global underground. Similarly, the improvisatory, collage/concrete, oddball humor, and avant-gardish DIY noisemaking-as-musical-performance/composition of the LAFMS groups has proved to be of signal importance for the noise genre. The LAFMS groups can in fact be seen to have provided a DIY noise template—both in terms of their anintermediated self-generating mail-order network and local physical embeddedness and in their deforming, quasi-modernist innovative aesthetic techniques—that not only continues to be explored by noise artists active today but also, in itself, deserves to be recognized as noise and underground practice *as such*. In Byron Coley’s words:

The LAFMS was a lightning rod for pre-punk & non-punk musical whatisis from all over the globe. . . . One of the LAFMS’ prime functions was to transform itself (via “mere” extended activity) into a kind of magneto-art-sump for universal noise oddballs. Because it was physically locate-able, and copiously documented its members’ gush, the LAFMS drew disaffected weirdos to its hub in the way that doughnuts attract fat cops. Its name became a kind of secret handshake that allowed culturally disenfranchised puds & pudettes to identify each other.<sup>32</sup>

The various LAFMS artists, alongside early noise groups such as Non and sonic anarchists the Residents, might jointly be described in generic terms as something like “1970s and 1980s Amerinoise.” The nomenclature is not that important, however; the wider point I’m trying to make about these musicians is that they can be seen to constitute a cultural scene with European and American, art and popular roots and also practices that were to prove of signal influence on the future underground in general, from tape labels to Japanoise, free improv, and post-noise fringe pop forms alike. As such, I’d suggest that the LAFMS provides a particularly useful early identifier for the emerging outsider strains of culture linked in part to high-cultural modernist traditions and also to popular cultural developments that were to flourish within the underground in the coming decades.

### B. A Rough (Musical) History of Noise Music from the Late 1970s on

Noise music understood as such emerged in the late 1970s in Europe and America, following the LAFMS and other early forerunners, with a number of interlinked genres orbiting around the central sphere of harsh noise, the latter being a broad generic category that covers much noise music. Noteworthy examples of artists include industrial and power electronics artists such as SPK, Non, Throbbing Gristle, Whitehouse, and Nurse With Wound. Slightly later, in Japan, the LAFMS- and harsh-noise-influenced Merzbow, Ground Zero, Monde Bruit, Masonna, Incapacitants, Pain Jerk, Hijokaidan, and others, including more rock- or metal-anchored acts such as Zeni Geva and Ruins, all came to the fore of what was to become known as the “Japanoise” scene.

The industrial genre, one of those “fringe” underground genres that exists, in this case, on the fringes of popular culture and the underground, was named after Throbbing Gristle’s DIY record label, Industrial Records. In its first decade or so, acts such as TG, This Heat, and Coil blended extreme post-punk and electronic music noise experiments in a manner directed at revealing control systems in society and at invigorating audience emotion and disgust in response to what Hegarty summarizes as “a world of taboos, controls, limits [and] normalised behaviours.”<sup>33</sup> In TG’s case, spoken-word or garbled/sampled or chanted narratives of abjection (as in, for example, 1978’s “Hamburger Lady”) would be encased in skulking static and crude, pulsing beats, while other songs bleeped about in an ambient, noisy swirl (though gleaming or growling synth pop was also in their repertoire, as seen on 1978’s “AB/7A” and 1980’s “Adrenalin”). Concerts were confrontational and would sometimes end in harangues of audiences, as heard on “Maggot Death—Brighton” on

*Second Annual Report*. All of this, the concerts and the brutalized music, was delivered in the context of transgressive lyrical and visual themes building on the pre-TG 1970s performance art group COUM Transmission and their immersive Dadaist happenings, such as, most famously, the 1976 *Prostitution* show at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, the public funding of which caused an MP to proclaim COUM "wreckers of civilisation" (a rare public acknowledgment for even this fringe underground genre, predictably resulting from perceived moral offense).

TG's Cosey Fanni Tutti relates all of this taboo questioning to a political documentation program: "Industrial music was closest to journalism, a documentary in black and white of the savage realities of fading capitalism." TG's leader, Genesis P-Orridge, has likewise said, "It's the death factory society, hypnotic, mechanical grinding, music of hopelessness. Film music to cover the holocaust."<sup>34</sup> Chris Carter, another TG member, meanwhile points in the sleeve notes to the group's reissued 2011 catalog to the importance of noise in their music: "The Throbbing Gristle repertoire consisted of a diverse range of intentional (and unintentional) tonalities, timbres including: tape hiss, phase errors, white noise, distortion, clicks, pops, extreme high and low frequencies and occasionally silence. Please bear this in mind when listening to these recordings."<sup>35</sup> These industrial themes and practices, where sonic, political, social, and cultural disturbance formed by the capitalist crucible was prioritized, would be utterly crucial to much noise music for decades to come, the West Coast hippie- and LAFMS-inspired experimentalist tinkering of DIY improvisers such as the Sonic Catering Band notwithstanding: Paul Hegarty indeed suggests that "in Europe there is a clear continuum [in noise] with industrial musics of the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s," which he argues is "in the background of any globally situated noise music."<sup>36</sup>

Power electronics (PE), related to industrial in its emphasis on confrontation and transgression but of a harsher bent, was named by Whitehouse's William Bennett and features analogue and cheap digital synthesizers playing piercing high frequencies, distortion, and subbass rumble, in addition to (distorted) sampled speeches and screeched and screamed lyrics. All of this happens in a context of aperiodic, amelodic, and atonal gestures and designs, where song form is fractured into a loose rallying call of repeated lyrics and passages of blistering noise. But despite the even more extreme disturbances of PE as compared to industrial, as Nick Cain suggests, what *unites* industrial and power electronic artists is a desire to explore "linkages between noise, transgressive behaviour and taboo imagery."<sup>37</sup> The Japanese groups coming after all this, meanwhile, explored noise less as a political than a musical phenomenon, broadly speak-

ing, where the negating, resisting impulse of industrial music had been broadly subsumed by *musical* and/or affective concerns, though the symbolic political dimension of their practices and sounds as rejections of and revolutions within musical propriety and ontology should not be ignored, as it shouldn't be in later noise or post-noise music, where the taboo-baiting of earlier artists might be similarly absent.

Since the 1990s the noise scene has undergone wide hybridization. Latter-day harsh noise subgenres, such as harsh wall noise, which developed concurrently in the American and Japanese noise scenes of the 1990s with artists such as Monde Bruit and Incapacitants for the latter and Skin Crime and Black Leather Jesus for the former, are practiced by all sorts of artists, from K. K. Null to Werewolf Jerusalem, Kites, Hum of the Druid, and Wolf Eyes. These harsh noise genres sit alongside diffuse techniques and practices, from persisting power electronics (Genocide Organ); to DIY noise improv (Prick Decay, Sonic Catering Band, Morphogenesis); to the noisier ends of lo-fi, noise performance art (Justice Yeldham), concept-laden noise rock, and improvisation (Mattin); and to the wide genre(s) of post-noise music.

My use of the "post" prefix here denotes an evolutionary shift in the style while anchoring the music in various senses to the wider and original noise scene. Its alteration of noise should, I suggest, be seen in the same light as its transformation of rock; post-rock, according to that term's originator, Simon Reynolds, employs "rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes, using guitars as facilitators of timbres and textures rather than riffs and power chords."<sup>38</sup> Post-noise, I suggest, performs a related invigoration of noise technique, breaking apart its orthodoxies and inserting newer influences and references from popular culture alongside dyschronic affects (as in hauntology, particularly) and subliminal modalities (more on this later), both functioning as vital new elements of the music's expression. The addition of the prefix "post" works, then, to distinguish Daniel Lopatin's and his peers' music from its noise ancestry.<sup>39</sup> It also indicates their music's continued allegiance to noise experimentalism, cultural independence, and production and procedural techniques, such as the saturation of musical texture with FX and feedback and the preference for a viscous, indefinite sonic object over a refined musical canvass of more or less distinct tones and rhythms.<sup>40</sup>

All of this gives us a broad spectrum of current noise activity. The simple graph below shows representative examples of noise and noise-using genres in the lower row. The graph goes from left to right in order of importance of genre-coded "noise"—sonic extremity, confrontational performance, and so on—to the music's aesthetics.

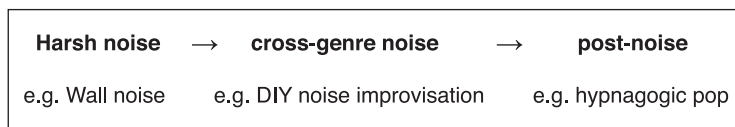


Fig. 3. The range of noise activity in 2016 ordered by importance of noise

### 9.3. Noise as Scene

In terms of record labels and so on, much of the noise scene is dependent on self-circulation, or at least on circulation by independent labels and local distributors such as Cargo Records or Forced Exposure. While the Web obviously enables musicians to sell their work online without much hassle, the kinds of small-scale, personally grounded relationships we saw in the LAFMS and Not Not Fun examples remain dominant. A close relationship has existed, for example, between New Age Tapes, which is the label post-noise LA musician James Ferraro used primarily for small-run releases of his music on CD-R or cassette, and David Kennan and Heather Leigh Murray's Volcanic Tongue.<sup>41</sup> Volcanic Tongue, mentioned a couple of times so far, is a distributor, a label, and, formerly, a shop, operating out of Glasgow and through its website. It provided Ferraro's UK and European audience with direct access to physical instances of his work when the shop was open. This access was especially prized given the cost of shipping from the United States to the UK and Europe, something that is still bypassed somewhat by Volcanic Tongue mail order. The physically marked but Web-facilitated relationship between New Age Tapes and Volcanic Tongue is exemplary in terms of international scenic channels.

In addition to this Web-facilitated physical nexus, there are, of course, myriad small, independent distributors of noise music that, because of the possibilities of the Web, have been able to enjoy wide access to international artists and that likewise enjoy an accessible presence on the Web for those who know where and want to look.

The American group Wolf Eyes provides an interesting example in this regard. Wolf Eyes has released some albums on a comparatively large label (*Burned Mind* and *Human Animal* on Sub Pop) and some on smaller but sizable noise and noise rock imprints (*Dead Hills* on Troubleman Unlimited, *Always Wrong* on Hospital Productions). However, the group releases the majority of its vast output, which generally takes the form of CD-Rs, cassettes, and, occasionally, LPs, on its own labels, American Tapes (run by John Olson, now defunct except for its Web store) and Hanson Records (run by former member Aaron Dil-

loway). Wolf Eyes has also been typical of the noise scene in the frequency of its collaborative releases, as for example with its albums with Anthony Braxton (*Black Vomit*), Smegma (*The Beast*), and Prurient (*The Warriors*); its split cassette with Metalux (Untitled); its split LP with the Skull Defekts (*Yes, I Am Your Angel*); and its split 7-inch with John Weise (Untitled), to name only a very small selection.

So while Wolf Eyes is untypical of noise artists in that it has released albums on a (comparatively) major record label and in the (again, comparatively) very wide exposure that its music has achieved, it's also highly typical of the scene in that its members collaborate widely and run their own limited-release, physical-media-focused labels whose activities are facilitated almost exclusively by the Web.

It also goes without saying that, in addition to the Web-mediated local to global and global to local connections of distributors and labels such as Volcanic Tongue and New Age Tapes, and the Web-mediated sales of labels such as American Tapes, much noise music circulates on blogs and peer-to-peer file-sharing services. These are simply too many in number to name, but significant examples of the former include Noise Not Music (which attempts to limit its sharing to "out of print or otherwise unavailable CD-Rs, cassettes and vinyl"),<sup>42</sup> harsh noise, the Static Fanatic, Mutant Sounds, Rob Hayler's Radio Free Midwich, and New Noise Net.

In his essay for *Noise and Capitalism*, Mattin discusses this kind of underground framework of DIY concerts, collapsed notions of producer and consumer, and Web-distribution models as they are exemplified in the noise scene:

The noise scene is founded upon people organising concerts in all kinds of places, releasing music in any kind of medium and finding, along the way, different means of distribution. This allows for many collaborations to occur. In this scene the do it yourself ethos is part of the survival. . . . People have been self-organising themselves by organising concerts wherever possible and more. This self-organisation, which constantly makes people change roles; from player to organiser, from critic, to distributor, helps people understand each other's roles. An example of this is Daniel Löwenbrück, who for the last 15 years has run the label and mail order outfit Tochnit Aleph. He has just opened the record shop Rumpsti Pumsti (Kreuzberg, Berlin), he performs under the name Raionbashi and he has organised concerts for some of the most radical artists in Berlin.<sup>43</sup>

This all points to a clear DIY ethos that uses new forms of media and the distribution and promotion they facilitate to produce the sort of self-determined net-

works of performer/composer-label-distributor-consumer/listener so common to the current underground model of culture, as we saw relatedly in the discussion of free improvisation in chapter 6. In this respect of collapsed boundaries among “producer,” “distributor,” and audience,” the noise scene, again like the underground more generally, can be seen to be a small-scale exemplification of Henry Jenkins’s “participatory culture,”<sup>44</sup> where hierarchies of consumption and production are made permeable to a substantial degree, and the resulting networks embed social as well as financial exchange. In addition, in the noise and underground context, the problems of subsumption and exploitation by large corporations entailed in the Web 2.0 contexts discussed by Jenkins are potentially circumnavigated to a degree through the scene’s comparatively tiny, anintermediated local nested circuits of exchange. We saw how this anintermediation and circumnavigation might connect to political ideas across Part II. I’ll turn now to questions of how politics further shapes, enters into, and is produced by this underground music “itself,” using specific noise “texts” to examine this question.