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Chapter Ten

Technostalgia: How Old Gear Lives on in New Music

Trevor Pinch and David Reinecke

Introduction

For many musicians and collectors, the musical instruments of the past live on in the studio, on the stage, and for those rare enough instruments, in the vault.¹ Paradoxically, many of the finest guitars end up on the wall of collectors' homes never to be played again. Vintage synthesizers, such as the Moog Minimoog, have acquired such a legendary status that they are unaffordable to most working musicians. Even old instruments and pieces of equipment that are not particularly rare, such as the Fender Deluxe tube amp favored by rock musicians for its classic rock sound, present particular problems for gigging because of their weight and fragility. Indeed old and valuable instruments are actually for many musicians a pain: they are fragile, insurance policies may circumscribe use, and they are an inviting target to be filched.

Age has become a fetish in the world of guitars where large amounts of money are paid for a specially "reliced" guitar. As one company, Relic Guitars, which offers this service claims, "The idea behind relicing a guitar is to artificially replicate the natural wear that occurs over the many years that the instrument has been played. This procedure involves aging the hardware, and creating authentic looking wear marks on the neck and body of the guitar."² This is little different (other than the shock of deliberately scratching up anything as beautiful as a guitar) from the specially manufactured patched and faded jeans and denim jackets currently in fashion. There clearly is value to be found both in manufacturing age and age itself.

Teasing out this value to be found in what we call vintage gear, the whole coterie of old instruments, amplifiers, and recording equipment, and how their use is bound up in current identities, practices, and technologies found among musicians is our goal in this paper. In exploring the relation between the past and present, embodied through music equipment, we can better understand what we mean

by “technostalgia” in relation to vintage gear. Nostalgia is commonly understood as a desired return to an ideal past in response to a troubled present (Davis 1979). On the contrary, we hope to show that “technostalgia” is more than a return to an ideal past, but rather an attempt to mediate between past and present to achieve a particular sound and feel (Hennion 1997).

How then in practice do musicians deal with this bewildering range of choices of sounds, instruments, and equipment which they face in a digital age? How do they blend the new and the old? How do they learn about what if anything to value in old gear? What is it in old instruments they particular value? And, most importantly, how do they achieve their ideal sounds? To answer these questions we have been carrying out a small ethnographic investigation (including in-depth interviews) among a select number of rock and electronic musicians. We hung out with these musicians, visited their studios, and watched them perform. These musicians range from hobbyist musicians to professional musicians. We selected our subjects from our two local scenes (Ithaca, where Trevor is based, and Philadelphia, where David is based) and supplemented this with other contacts.³ All the musicians we chose to interview are known especially to value old instruments and equipment. All have access to and knowledge of digital equipment as well. The gear we cover here includes guitar amplifiers, synthesizers, the Wurlitzer electric piano, electric guitars, mixers, effect devices, and tape recorders.

The Sound Is the Starting Place

Trevor asked a musician, Park Doing, who happened also to be in his own department at Cornell University, whether he ever used vintage gear. Park was proud to announce that he was mixing his latest album in a nearby recording studio that housed the original mixing board used to make several albums by Elvis Costello and the Attractions. To understand why he wanted to use that board, he said we needed to understand the sort of music he made – rock and roll.

When he was growing up in the Midwest, Park listened to what is now called classic rock, bands such as The Who, the Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, Grand Funk Railroad, and Steppenwolf:

And the sound, for me what a band should sound like, is a two part equation; the first part is being raised on classic rock. ... [W]hen I was twelve or thirteen that's what I heard. That's one level.

The second level for Park was punk rock, which has been a lasting influence, not least because it empowered him to form a band himself. He absorbed the punk ethos of not being overly reverent towards equipment, disparaging what he called “gear heads”:

You know the Sex Pistols stole all their equipment from David Bowie goes the story, so it was never about “Look at all this great gear I have.” ... I was never like a “gear head” person ... You could get a good Les Paul but you should, like, paint it or scratch it.

From his exposure to punk, Park also developed a fondness for what he calls “trashy” sound: “To get technical about it: the compression is all removed, the reverb is all taken out, the gloss is removed and you get this trebly, cacophonous, the instruments are not separated, um, raw sound.” For Park, “Cool and trashy, that’s rock and roll.” Park believes that a proper rock band must use what he calls “real” guitars and amplifiers, “a Fender Telecaster through a Marshall stack or amp or a Gibson custom or SG.” Park always searches out studios which have gear used in the 1960s and 1970s because he believes that this era was the high renaissance of sound:

There was so much money involved in the commercialization of rock and roll, in particular the sorta psychedelic blues-rock, in the U.S. in the 70s. As a consequence, there was a lot of money to be put towards recording equipment and money that today doesn’t really exist ... these guys [referring to Glyn Johns who recorded The Beatles] were just high level ... to me that era with really big magnetic tape and these vacuum tube electronic modules and these mixing boards like the one we have at the studio. I see that now as a kinda heyday of industrial investment in recording.

He elaborated further upon what this means for his recording practices:

Those fellows in the 70s really had it and that’s where the gold is in having your band sound like a rock and roll band. ... So we record in town and use the Neumann microphones that The Beatles used ... and for me they just understood about power, and meat, and energy, and aggressiveness combined with a warm and engaging sound.

Recording the Sound: Tape versus Digital

Park thus makes every effort to find and use studio equipment that will lead to the “gold.” He is not worried that the sounds he is after are invariably processed through digital computers and recording consuls. Park acknowledges that nearly all studios today use computers and digital recording:

The board we have at Mecklenberg ... we don’t go to tape and that’s actually rarer and rarer, I think the White Stripes did an album two albums ago and they

went straight to tape. Then if you're at a level like myself, then you make compromises, and part of the compromises come at the editing realm. Editing in digital is just a dream, you just can't imagine what goes on.

In this respect, Park is similar to all the musicians with whom we talked: although they may favor particular old instruments and equipment, they are quite willing to use digital equipment when the occasion merits it, especially if they perceive big benefits. Park, for instance, is fond of using a software program known as Protools:

PD: I've got this sorta trashy bombastic rock sound, the level that Protools diminishes that compared to the ... universe it opens up to me in terms of being able to arrange takes and arrange music, it's like [holding his left hand about a quarter of an inch above the table] it messes it up that much and I get *so much* out of it [holding his right hand about three feet above the table].

TP: So you're not an analog purist?

PD: If I had the money and the time you know I would go all the way ... I don't have a whole lot of resources for this, so it allows me to record a record in a legitimate way and that's a huge difference ... it's the all or nothing difference.

The digital recording process has become so cheap and versatile that it is difficult to resist for a small-budget musician. Indeed, all the musicians we talked to used digital recording, although they might "go all the (analog) way" if they ever became wealthy enough (Pinch and Trocco 2002; Horning 2004). Some musicians thought that tape was good in its own right because it added a particular character to the sound not found in digital recording. One Ithaca-based musician interviewed, John Robert Lennon (aka Inverse Room), had just bought a new TEAC tape deck for his home studio (all his previous recordings had been made on a computer):

Well you know it's tangible. And I didn't start recording until digital stuff started coming out – though I've been a musician most of my life and I gradually upgraded my digital stuff and I'm working on a computer now. But there's something um intangible about digital recording that made me long to have a, you know, big old tape deck. And it's really fun to use and I like the way it sounds.

TP: Does it sound noticeably better than the digital stuff? Or inferior?

JRL: No it's different. No, no, it's neither. I know there are a lot of analog purists who really, who insist that tape sounds better and I suppose it does and I suppose if you consider a really high end calibrated tape deck, maybe it does sound qualitatively better than a computer system. But the fact is it's so easy to use the computer and you can edit everything. And if your outboard gear is OK, then the

sound that goes into it is good and it will come back sounding more or less the same. Whereas this, the tape machine sorta imparts a certain character to the recordings that is not there in a computer. So it's a nice addition to a digital studio.

One Philadelphia-based electronic musician we interviewed, Starkey (aka Paul Gleissenger), had also just bought (with a musician friend) an old eight-track tape recorder for \$250, of which seven of the tracks were usable. Starkey found that he had in the past occasionally “bumped things to tape” because he liked the compression sound which the tape produced. For Starkey, who works almost exclusively on a laptop to make his digital music, it is analog compression that he values most:

There is something to be said about analog processing. It does sound better in general. But a lot of the stuff I am working is like samples anyways. So what really does it matter? Where it really matters is compression. Analog compression just sounds better. There is something to be said about putting audio through tubes and tube amplifiers and adjusting sound that way. That is what I am really interested in right now, talking to friends who work with hardware.

As with John and Park, it is a special quality of the sound when processed through tape and tubes which this musician puts a premium on.

Analog versus Digital Synthesizers

In the realm of synthesizers, too, we found that the musicians were quite prepared to use a modern software synth when the need arose for live performance or recording; these software synthesizers emulate the sound of older analog synthesizers. John, who owns an impressive collection of analog synthesizers, noted: “Oh yeah I’ve got like some software Minimoogs. Yeah I’ve got a bunch of software synths and they sound quite good, I think ... and most purists would say the software doesn’t sound as good as the hardware, and they’re probably right but it sounds very close.” But the old analog synthesizers have something digital synthesizers don’t have: the tactile controls of knobs and wires (used to patch in different sounds). Thus John also has a modular analog system:

JRL: I want to turn the knobs and mess with the patch cables, you know. I like building things. It’s tactile ... you know there is something about ... I like playing around with stuff and trying new things. And the modular system is perfect, you can ... swapping out a module with a new one, it’s not very costly and you can put a new one in ... it’s like an endless self-replenishing hobby.

John prefers the tactile interface of his modular synth (built from a kit), with its knobs and patch cables, for the flexibility it gives him to pursue his “self-replenishing hobby.” But if he ever needs the famed Moog sound, he can simply pull it up on his computer. Starkey owns two analog synthesizers, including a Roland Juno 60, but uses mainly digital samples and software synths in his music. He claims the latter actually has some advantages over the original analog synths they emulate:

Yeah a lot of things try and emulate analog stuff ... but there is stuff that can't be done analog. There are even programs like Korg when they came out with their Legacy Collection of synths [Korg emulated their famous MS-20 analog synth]. They emulated them as close as possible, the sounds, the filters, the way they worked, but also made some of the synths – which were monophonic – have the option of being polyphonic, which you couldn't do on the analog. Whereas they can do that with the software, so it is like you had that hardware but you were able to mod it so that actually it did polyphony.

Starkey is here referring to a synthesizer that in its original analog version was only monophonic (one note at a time), but which became polyphonic (many notes at a time), in its software version, thus offering a modification (or “mod”) that was impossible with the original hardware synth. This permits him to use analog sound, but to do it using modern digital advantages like polyphony, and thus do “stuff that can't be done analog.”

The whole issue of emulation is a fascinating one in the world of synthesizers (Pinch 2003; Porcello 2004), because even early analog synthesizers claimed to be able to emulate other electric instruments, such as Hammond organs, as well as some orchestral instruments. With each succeeding generation of synthesizer claiming to emulate a greater range of instruments, including earlier synthesizers, a whole plethora of embedded emulations would seem to follow – that is to say, a digital Korg Triton emulating an analog Minimoog ought also to be able to sound like a Minimoog emulating a flute. But despite this seeming logical possibility, only one sound or a very limited range of sounds from the earlier synthesizer are actually emulated. At the heart of all emulation lies the power of the simplification entailed in the representation of sound – many possible sounds are being reduced to a smaller subset. A saxophone, for example, will sound different depending on who is playing it (Charlie Parker or the guy down the corridor), and where it is played (smoky club versus concert hall), and for what sort of music it's being played (pop or jazz) – and yet all these possibilities are reduced to one sound, simply labeled “saxophone.” Furthermore, this one sound is now heard as the definitive saxophone sound and shapes perceptions of what a saxophone should sound like. The paradox is that, despite the claims that synthesizers are able to produce more and more different sorts of sounds, each synthesizer also becomes recog-

nized for distinctive and characteristic sounds, such as the famed bass filter sound of the modular moog synthesizer (carried over into the Minimoog) or the bell-like sounds made by the Yamaha DX-7. As we see throughout this chapter, it is very specific sorts of sounds, often peculiar to one instrument (or to be more precise, one part of the instrument – referred to below as “the sweet spot”) that these musicians are after.

All the musicians interviewed agreed that gear from the past and present both offer unique advantages in terms of sound and sometimes tactile feel. The particular mixture of the old and new varied. All agreed, however, that the process of figuring out the right combination was detailed and extended moving from the novice listener to the experienced manipulator. Educating amateurs interested in vintage gear is a process of both listening and actively engaging in the sound being produced, guided often by a more learned third party. But more often than not, there is some luck involved as well.

“I Gotta Real Amp Too”

When Park decided to become a rock musician he knew the sort of sounds he wanted to make and knew he needed an amplifier. But he had no experience with electric guitars and amplifiers. Park describes himself as “word of mouth guy” and, unlike “gear heads,” he doesn’t research equipment. With the amplifier he lucked out. In Ithaca there is a guitar shop staffed with sufficiently skilled musicians (including several who have played in numerous bands) to sell Park what turned out to be an appropriate amplifier for the sort of music he wanted to play:

So when I went into the guitar store ... I didn’t have a group of people or a mentor or someone to tell me what to do. I had \$400 and I told the guy what I had and “I’d like to get something that’s a legitimate amp” ... and he instantly said “We’ve got this Fender Deluxe Reverb, it just came in, and I’ll sell it to you for four hundred. And that’s a real amp and that’s what you should do.” I said “OK.” I bought it within fifteen seconds of the thing. I think I may have plugged the guitar in a cursory manner but I didn’t really know how to play.

Park then played with the amp in his band and came to love it:

I took it out and from that time on when I play and stuff, guitar guys love that amp. They come up to me and say, “Oh Deluxe Reverb, oh yeah that’s an awesome one.” You know and guys who are like heroes of mine [he names some musicians], they had Deluxe Reverbs and I remember being thankful that the guy had given me a legitimate, a cool amp so could be like “I gotta real amp too.”

The sound of classic rock depends crucially on the amp and guitar in combination. Park had less luck with buying his first electric guitar. He knew that a Les Paul was a desirable guitar and wanted to find one:

I was leaving Dayton, Ohio, and I stopped in Columbus where all my friends were ... [T]he university has about sixty thousand students ... ten thousand of them are in rock and roll bands! And I'm sitting there with a guy I just sort of casually knew and he was down on it and he couldn't pay his rent ... and he was like "I'm trying to sell my guitar and nobody will buy the guitar." And I said, "What kind of guitar is it?" And he opened it up and it was black Les Paul from 1980. But to me it was like a cool ass black guitar. He goes "I need \$350 to pay my rent. If you buy this guitar, I'll go buy a case of beer and we'll have a party the rest of the night" ... and like so I couldn't resist and bought it right on the spot and took it with me on the plane.

Park slowly discovered over time that the 1980 Les Paul Artist he had purchased was part of a discontinued range in which Gibson experimented with active electronics (circuits built into the body of the guitar, which modify the sound), and as a result, the guitar has an extra three switches and knobs. Park found that the sound the guitar produced was thin and "too electronic," and also it was hard to tune. Park struggled to make the classic rock sound he was after. Things changed, however, when he was befriended and mentored by one of the major rockers on the Ithaca scene, Johnny Dowd, who guided Park to a new guitar:

Finally Johnny Dowd said like "That guitar's ridiculous. And it's not even the sort of guitar you should have. You need a Telecaster or Stratocaster." He himself is a total gear head and knows everything about the guitars and everything. And those switches on it he didn't like any of that stuff. He called me one day [from a newly opened vintage guitar store] and he said "I've got your new guitar down here. Bring that old one with you we're going to trade it in." And I was a little bit wary, but Johnny Dowd was like a hero to me, he was like real ... the real deal. And if he said I should trade my guitar in then I should trade my guitar in.

Park had mixed feelings about the trade because his Les Paul looked "so cool and black," and Johnny now wanted him to trade the guitar for a new one built in the store:

So I went down there and the guy looks at it and he says "OK I'll trade you even." But what was he trading me for? It wasn't a real Stratocaster he was trading me for; it was just a Stratocaster they had made in the store ... but it was made really well and it has a whammy bar, floating bridge, and it sounded like, you know

Johnny is playing it through the amps. And at that time, I knew like that Johnny knew what a guitar should sound like. Me myself I couldn't really rig it up; like if I had to stand there and say "This is the good sound and this is the bad sound" It would be dicey, like I wouldn't really know.

Park had many regrets about trading in his name brand guitar, especially as he couldn't yet tell which sounds were "good" and "bad" in the new guitar. Over time, however, he came to realize the wisdom of Johnny's advice:

But as time went on, I love that guitar now, you know and it's like when I play that guitar with the Fender amp, I think the guys who made the guitar, they knew how a Strat should sound, and they got that sound and for me who couldn't really afford a new Stratocaster and definitely not a vintage one. I feel like now I have a great sound and now I can tell. Like now I can tell it's a good sound.

What Park points to here is how he relied upon the expertise and ears of the more experienced Johnny Dowd to buy the right sort of guitar to match his amp. He learns the lesson that it is not the look or name brand of the guitar which matters, but how it sounds, and how it is matched to his amplifier and to the style of music he wants to make (Waksman 2004). Over time, as he gains more experience, Park too learns that he can tell, "it's a good sound." More importantly, his sound is a mixture of a new guitar and an old amplifier, coming together in the right mixture to his ears, once trained.

Finding the Sweet Spot: Tinkering, Twiddling, and Tweaking

Having bought the correct amp and guitars is of course only the beginning. The musician must learn to make the sorts of desired sounds. Often musicians have several amps and guitars, and each will require a lot of work to find the right combination of settings. This is the main quest and one of the major headaches for Nick Gonedes. Nick is a Philadelphia-based musician who has a sizeable collection of vintage amps. He is what Park would refer to as a "gear head." Nick loves to spend hours discussing the technicalities of different vintage amps – their pre-amps, controls, tubes, transformers, and layout, and who used what amp to make what sound. He notes that often these amps come with manuals showing how to set up particular sounds reminiscent of famous players with equally famous tones:

The Rivera and the Boogie come with these manuals that say something like "Stevie Ray Vaughan sound," like turn this to 4, this to 5, this to 3. I have never been able to do that. I turn the knobs and think this doesn't sound anything like Stevie Ray Vaughan. It is partly because the speakers are not the same, the guitar

is not the same, maybe I hit the strings on my guitar harder than they do. So you just have to sit down and figure it out yourself.

The DIY tinkering ethos, so common to young men, and documented in many other technical areas like ham radio (Haring 2007), hacking (Levy 2001 [1984], Turkle 2005 [1984]), and hotrodding (Post 1994) seems to come into play here as Nick proceeds to tinker with his setup in search of his own particular sounds. For instance, this is how he worked with one of his favorite amps, a vintage Mark I Boogie amp:

It took me easily almost two years to get the sound I wanted out of that amp. Because I have multiple guitars ... when I go out to play, I take two or three guitars with me. I have to decide what sounds good with the Strat, what sounds good with the Gibson, what sounds good with the Rickenbacker. So you have to sit there and just screw around with the thing, and there are times when you just want to throw the amp against the wall. I need to get rid of this thing. You just have to be patient, especially when the tone and volume controls are interactive. I would pick a weekend right and just block it out. The next six hours I am going to do nothing but twiddle knobs. Actually that can be a problem too, because after a while your ears get tired. I don't know if I am hearing things that well after a while.

Having found the sound he wanted for a particular guitar, Nick would use a card index system to remember how to set up the amp:

So I have these 5 x 7 cards for every amp that I take out to indicate what the settings are that I want. So when I am setting up I can look on the card; that is what I want for the Strat; that is what I want for the Les Paul.

Nick, who works as a professor at the Wharton Business School by day, makes a card for every amp he uses. He gets frustrated by amps, such as the Mesa Boogie Tremoverb, which do not have numbers on the knobs: "That completely pissed me off! I had to write things down like 12 o'clock, 1 o'clock." He has also replaced all the chrome knobs on this amp with black ones because "I am playing out at places where there is not much light; the knob is reflecting and I can't see shit what my settings are."

For Nick the search is for the "sweet spot" in every amp. "There is [a] spot that I want for better and for worse, my musical tastes are not very broad. There are certain things that I want, certain sounds I want, and that is what I am trying to get. Once I get it, that is where I want to stay." The skill starts with knowing what sort of sound he wants to make; then buying the right piece of equipment; and finally, sitting down for a lengthy period of time to just tinker. He may use settings found

in manuals as rough guides, but in the end it is his own “twiddling knobs” for hours on end that leads to his finding the desired sweet spot. Lastly, to help make this knowledge transportable and replicable (at least the initial settings – one imagines Nick still has to tweak things in performance), he has devised his own file card system for remembering the settings.

Finding the sweet spot in equipment is not always a matter of trial and error or dependent upon a skilled musician as a mentor like Johnnie Dowd in Park’s case. With the Internet, the collective wisdom of many enthusiasts for vintage equipment is available through numerous chat forums and user groups. Participants often describe in loving detail how they have restored individual instruments (blogs can be followed for particular restoration projects). They provide numerous details of the sounds they have found and so on. This is a particularly good source of information for complicated electronic instruments with a range of controls and settings such as synthesizers. By using the Internet, John was able to find the sweet spot on his Ensoniq synthesizer, which enabled him to produce what he described as one of his favorite synth solos ever on his latest recording:

That particular sound, I found that on-line, I downloaded the sys-x code for it and I think I changed it a little, I tweaked it a little [Sys-x is a standardized system for recording particular configurations of settings on any Midi-controlled instrument like a synthesizer]. The great thing about that sound is there’s this place in the filter and its on any synth filter, but I’m thinking particularly of this Ensoniq where the resonance is poised right before it overloads into self-oscillation ... Before it goes out of control. And that patch is really perched on that edge ... And the amount of – what do you say – the frequency that is controlled by the resonance, by the “after touch,” after you hit the key when you press it harder it will start to whistle; it will go “yeeurweeeeooww,” so at certain moments during the solo I was able to do that. That patch perfectly takes advantage of the strengths of that particular keyboard. You know it right before it all breaks up and that’s where that patch lives ...

Imprecision in Old Instruments

For John, who has numerous vintage instruments in his studio, including guitars, drums, synthesizers, pianos, a reel-to-reel tape recorder, and effects devices, the sort of sound he is after is also mediated by his deep knowledge of recording. He finds that analog effect devices in particular produce powerful emotional sounds when they are set up, so the sound almost starts to break down:

It’s the same with effects with compression and so on, you turn it up all the way, it sounds real crap, you leave it way down, it sounds sorta wimpy. But if you get it

right in that spot, it's usually the spot right before open distortion. You know like Stax records from the 60s. Motown was like a cleaner sound, the Stax engineers were always trying to overload stuff. And those vocals are right up in your face and you can hear the distortion in the preamps, and it's really emotionally satisfying.

For John this is what is dissatisfying with the numerous digital effect devices he has tried:

And it has to do with them finding the spot in the piece of gear that really worked[.] I think that in a lot of contemporary digital gear that spot doesn't exist. You know what I mean. Because it's meant to be on or off, to be clean all the way to the top of the gain. Whereas with old analog gear, you have to mess around, 'til you find the place where it's almost too much.

John's comment here is reminiscent of Starkey's earlier stated preference for analog compression devices during recording. It is often the imprecision in the analog gear that produces the desired sounds.

It is the imprecision and parts that don't quite work properly which give these old instruments and equipment their special value for a musician such as John. In a way, this is reminiscent of the value placed upon instruments before the age of mass production and electronics, when each individually crafted instrument with its own idiosyncrasies of sound and action were what people valued. If a Stradivarius violin could be mass produced so that each instrument sounded exactly the same and all the little unexpected resonances in the sound board were eliminated, then they would be less valued.

Although the musicians we interviewed were in general flexible about digital equipment, there were particular sorts of digital devices they would never use. Park was adamant that, despite having emulations of different guitars and amplifiers available on Protools, he would never use them. For Park, the most memorable sound recordings invoke unique human experiences, and because digital simulations all offer the same sound, by definition they are not going to be unique:

There is something about the sorta setting it up and the twiddling and the fiddling and the adjustments are subtle and the tubes, how they react and the whole thing, that I feel like the sound is my accomplishment and it's something that can't simply be mimicked or copied exactly. You know, with those emulator programs, the next guy who pulls up the Marshall emulator and puts it to 7 and puts it to 8, he's going to have the exact same sound as I, you know anything I do there [using the emulator] he can do. It's not unique.

John, on the other hand, finds that it is the tactile nature of real gear as opposed to simulations of gear to be fun and stimulating:

There's something about getting to play this [hits a note on the Wurlitzer piano] that's a qualitative different experience from software and playing it on a synthesizer keyboard. It's the feeling that you can tell the key is made of wood, and that there are metal arms with wood at the end, and that the arms – there are times when I open it up and I know what it's doing when I play it – and that thing, it's a tactile experience, and it's a visual experience as well as an experience of the sound in the recording. It just makes it more fun ... You know now when I have some free time and I can do some music, I can't wait to get in here and play the instruments rather than to get in here and generate simulations of the instruments.

It is the immediacy of old instruments and equipment which John finds particularly appealing:

You know the older I get and the more I learn how to use music equipment, the more I value immediacy. Just being able to sit down and play something. If you're inspired and striking while the iron is hot. I really value that as a musician. So technologically sophisticated stuff, which is nevertheless easy to use, is I think a great thing, and I don't object to new equipment at all. But most new equipment doesn't do that. So that's one of the reasons I like the vintage stuff.

For John, having the real instrument to play with is hard to separate from his love of reading about how the instruments were created. Next to his prized gear, John's studio has a shelf of books about the history of instruments:

I also feel like a connection to the past playing a real instrument from the past, I can imagine the people who might have played it before me. You know Ray Charles played the same keyboard; I'm a kinda tiny part of this big complex history that surrounds the instrument. It's the same reason that I have all these books about guitars and synthesizers and stuff because I love to read about how these things were developed, who got the idea, where the idea came from; the different obstacles that they overcame in coming up with the final version of it. You know that entire history. So that[']s when I sorta come down here and play stuff I feel like I'm kinda part of the next chapter of that. It's really enjoyable to think of.

Part of what is being stimulated is John's imagination about how he links to the history of an instrument and how he could be part of the "next chapter" of that history. This is not so much a longing for the past as a feeling of being in touch with

the past. For John, these old instruments are not about reliving the past, but about the next chapter of his own music.

Conclusion

Vintage gear and the sounds it enables mean a lot to these musicians, but in different ways. All of them are flexible: they will use both analog and digital equipment as the need arises, and are willing to make compromises where necessary; however, their underlying attitudes seem subtly different. At one end of the spectrum is Starkey, an electronic musician who works almost exclusively with digital samples and software synths. For him, analog instruments and effects are tools to be used on occasion to enrich the sound. They are often difficult to use because he is primarily a laptop musician and hence each analog device must be separately recorded and integrated into his digital setup. Also Starkey, unlike John, Park, and Nick, makes his living from music and must follow a tight production schedule where the ease of use and availability of digital effects are crucial. While Starkey is a digital guy who uses analog as a tool, Park is the reverse: he is an analog guy who uses digital as a tool. Park loves the 1960s- and 1970s-era equipment, but cannot afford to “go all the way.” For Park, digital recording and editing are tools, indeed indispensable tools, given the precariousness of his musical livelihood. For him, real sounds are the sounds made by a proper guitar such as a Strat through a vintage amp. He values the uniqueness which he tries to bring to his sound, a uniqueness which conveys something essential about human experience.

John is not as much of an analog purist as Park is, and, as we saw, he not only uses digital recording for its ease and versatility, but also finds value in several digital instruments and software synthesizers. But John is rather different from Starkey in his analog sensibility. Compare Starkey talking about the tape machines as something “to dump tracks to” with John who describes in loving detail the tactile quality of the machine as well as the sound. John, like Park, values something in the uniqueness of analog sound, its imprecision and imperfections, and the noise it produces, which he also thinks evokes human emotion.

Nick is harder to place. Like John, he is a “gear head” who really cares about the sounds he gets from vintage gear. He knows the gear intimately and can spend hours searching for the sweet spot in a vintage amp. But he does not express the same sort of desire for imprecision and imperfection. Indeed, one senses that with Nick and his card indexes of amp settings, he would prefer the vintage amps to work in the regular controlled repeatable way of digital gear. Nick’s house is stuffed chockablock with Victrolas, furniture, and clocks. Despite distinguishing himself from collectors by the way he actually uses the instruments he collects, one senses that his ethos is more towards that of a collector who happens to have a hobby of making music and playing his guitars and amps. His collection of amps

were the most pristine that David (who interviewed Nick) had ever seen – again indicating a collectors’ ethos.

Where do these excursions into vintage gear leave us in terms of understanding technonostalgia? As the literature on the sociology of nostalgia shows (Davis 1979), people tend to get nostalgic when there are problems in the present – they use the image of a desired past to comment on and criticize the present. Beyond criticism, nostalgia (as the German word for nostalgia, *heimweh*, literally denotes) is commonly understood as a homesickness of sorts, an attempt by actors in the present to return to a comfortable and ideal setting. Yet all four musicians interviewed in depth make no patent appeal to return to the era in which their vintage equipment was built. Their music, though inspired in nuanced historical ways, does not sound old. They record in modern digital environments interspersed with old gear, software synthesizers mix with real analog synthesizers, new guitars get plugged into old amps, and analog effects are used to spice up digital samples. They are making what they perceive to be original musical compositions.

Technonostalgia for vintage gear, in this case, does not necessarily mean getting back to a particular past, no matter how ideally constructed, imagined, or heard. Instead, for the musicians we interviewed, technonostalgia is movement toward both new sounds and new interactions, whether aural, social, or physical, made concrete through combinations of the past and present. Nothing is more ideal than the connection to the past via a “real” instrument used for making the music of the present or future.

Notes

1. <http://www.gibson.com/whatsnew/pressrelease/2002/jan22b.html>, retrieved 16 September 2007.
2. <http://www.relicguitars.com>, retrieved 16 September 2007.
3. In all, we interviewed and interacted with fifteen musicians. For this paper, we have selected four particular musicians, Park, Nick, John, and Starkey, who are representative of the attitudes we encountered during the fieldwork.