

How did the 20th century begin? Listening in.

A middle aged, bourgeois psychoanalyst in Vienna takes the time to listen, that's all, and it blows our world apart. And how did our world – of songs and CDs, singers and samplers – begin? With a man in a room, talking to himself about the devil? Maybe. With Alexander Graham Bell's poignant "Come here, Watson, I want you"? Or that carnal Frankenstein wrought in the alchemical crucible of a studio named Sun? Perhaps. Definitely with something plucked out of the air. All in all, with something overheard...

The microphone stands in for the analyst's calm, promiscuous ear: neutral, forgiving, open to everything, the slightest trace or stammer or spoken mark. What we hear plucked out of the air sounds like outposts of innermost feeling – an outposting of our intangible inner murk. The first field recordings head out to the other side of the tracks, to dirt roads, cheap hotels, juke joints; other islands, other worlds. Culture was hitherto used (pronounce the word both ways) to look for things to hear in concert halls, recitals, the hierarchy of the 12 tone scale like a chastity belt or Victorian stays, pinning the singing, ringing diaphragm inside prior circumscription: a certain predefined aspiration. Microphonics and psychoanalysis – these new phantom sciences – make tremors speak from the invisible Inside, where we can neither see nor want the very thing we have always been scared to have revealed. Other voices.

Sigmund Freud; the field recording; the nascent pop studio – all perform similar functions. Freud listens for things no one has noted before. Previously, physicians considered only the cast of external symptoms. Freud, in a cautious and canny act of suspended hearing, listens for things between the word: dot-dash series of phonemes, swallowed rhythms, repressions, omissions. Listening out for some other thing: the unconscious, its beady silence or askew telepathy. Listening for what speaks in places we don't expect to find it. We don't speak, as Lacan will later say: *it speaks*. What is called our interior world finds itself exteriorised, and in fact such clear distinctions are rendered dubious by the new gramophonic circuitry, by the new grammatisations of analysis and amplification. Recording equipment, like Freud's new science, produces new takes, topologies, topographies. It's no coincidence that one of the first uses for microphonic equipment is field

recordings, hermetic coils and dials used in the service of an opening distance. What might one day be called a vocal democracy: tongues untied, archived, allowed. Songs once considered below the belt, beyond the pale, grey room, black night songs. Itinerant blue shamans. Haitian ceremony. Hawaiian unheimlich. The advent of electricity means that such black spots and blue articulations became more than a local event. Such hand-held recordings now sound the way old silent films look: monochrome, brittle, haunted – a new mourning. Listen to early blues recordings and you can hear muffed chord changes, the buzz of tired strings, a myriad of local accents (the soft purr of Mississippi John Hurt or the apocalyptic bark of Blind Willie Johnson). Strangely enough, this 'X' factor has survived, lives on reformed, reknotted, in the spooky lo-fi of Will Oldham and Royal Trux, and the tragic last testaments of Kurt Cobain and Jeff Buckley.

Freud's theories and the coming remix of studio muzik together shatter the founding illusion of our centrifugal 'I'. The song becomes a viral dissemination: technologised, broadcast, relayed, replayed, addressed to everyone and no one. Recording projects the voice into a nowhere of a future, where it can listen back, say "that's not quite right" (according to what unspoken index?), and correct itself. In its procession, modern recording becomes a science of grafts and sleights. Far from our own spontaneous voice (a mongrel we can't always make do what we wish, make speak what we want), the Song soon becomes a technological paradigm: something which can be turned up, levelled out. Far from truthful, the microphone can record lies, doubts, concealments, allowing manipulative 'takes' of the voice from which a certain tone can be synthesized in the studio console. Thus, the presumed truth of the voice (as in some scene of confession or gospel gnosis) cannot be thought of as immutable, as the voice is always now – via recording – at a remove from itself, allowing the singer a certain overview or vantage they never possessed before. Each song becomes a history of the making of song.

The microphonic song is a trace taken out of the air and made monumental. Pre-microphone, the song was a performance with its place in a social continuum – now it is abstracted, sent into the everywhere air. When the singer first starts to sing into – and more

crucially for – the microphone, it was assumed that what was being captured were moments of immortal truth: the record of a performance which would exist whether the microphone had been there or not. But the microphone is like a syringe, which can put in as much as it takes out, filling the singer's head with hallucinatory notions. Outsiders slip through now, because the microphone is a short cut (like the telephone) which repays a more economical delivery, honouring the whisper as much as a holler. The most obvious effect of the microphone is that the usual paradigm of the overarching reach of the voice as signifier of higher truth – as in gospel and opera – could be overturned, allowing the new conversational song of singers like Billie Holiday, Chet Baker, Frank Sinatra. (Just as the 'theatrics' of the hysterical, under Freud's beneficent care, are replaced by a more truthful murmur.) Later, multitracking will allow a 'singer' like Brian Wilson – no voice at all in the old way of things – to pull off the assumption of a choral grandeur: his neurasthenic 'I' raised, remade, multi-plied.

There exists a fascinating document: a recording of Billie Holiday in the studio between takes, vamping, chattering, just rapping, jes' signifyin'... loving the sound of her own voice. She sounds like an angel, a grumpy big cat, a schizo; stoned, drunk; serrated, seraphic; a man, a wind instrument; or here and there something like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* crossed with Neal Cassady. And then she says this: "I'm tellin' you – me and my old voice, it just go up a little bit and come down a little bit. It is not LEGIT. I do not got a legitimate voice." Right there the unconscious speaks, speaks a truth more pinpointed than any analysis to come. There's also another revelatory scene in her (dubious, co-authored) autobiography *Lady Sings The Blues*, when she describes pressing her ear up against the parallel ear of a new gramophone to hear Louis Armstrong for the first time. Inaugural revelation, a preverbal dawn: "It was the first time I had ever heard anybody sing without using any words, [but] 'Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba' had plenty of meaning for me."

This idea that someone singing a song not their own, an apparently banal song, or a wordless song, can say as much as any 'important' authored song, goes against the tenets of rock's critical wisdom. James Baldwin amplifies the meaning of the young Billie's revelation when he writes: "It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and cadence, who

helped... reconcile me to being a 'nigger'." Tone and cadence, mark you – not any incendiary or explicit lyric.

Lyrical 'authenticity' has been consistently over-valued in the dominant (white) discourse, so much so you'd think it was virtually immaterial whether there was a microphone there or not, and a mouth to sing into it. Such phallogocentric criticism cannot bring itself to imagine that, say, the 'softest' song in the world might equally bear the harshest truths. The microphonic song insinuates encoded, bodily truths in a code often so subtle (with such infinite gradation of tone) as to be almost inaudible. We rub up against a wider 'political' discourse here, too, in relation to what Flannery O'Connor once called the black person's "very elaborate manners and great formality, which he uses superbly for his own protection and to insure his own privacy".

We can see here that Song is a 'survival' in at least two or three senses, a living on, an echo of something unsaid. (In some cases something which, if it was said out loud, might get the speaker jailed or lynched.) Billie Holiday's real 'autobiography' was her Song, and this revolutionary fact – that you don't need to pen your own words to make clear all the pain and pleasure, sense and ambivalence of a life – is an incredible thing, which births a properly 'microphonic' singing. When I think about Billie Holiday I think about a massive appetite; when I think about her drug habit I think of someone trying to fill themselves with a huge tranche of dispossessed land, all the space they have been denied in 'real' life – the spacy ease of a Sunday walk without constraint, worry or woe, free to drift with the lightest of steps. (Insert advert voice: "Only narcotics can do this!") In the Holiday song you hear a Brechtian balancing act (which isn't also painful and preachy on the ear), whose lyrics paint a more or less normative picture but where, if you listen – really listen – to the voice, you know things are otherwise.

It is often said of Holiday and Sinatra that they give an 'intimate' performance – but intimate for whom? With whom? The 'intimacy' of microphonic singing is also the distanced 'take' of recording and, thereby, transmission and reception at a distance. Intimacy is also the first step toward the promiscuous impersonality of a record buying public; of both the homogenous 'they' of popular reception and the Song's pivotal and ambiguous 'you'.

Even via the impersonality of disc, it was presumed that what you bought was the ‘true’ voice or persona of the singer. Presumption twice over: the listener’s assumption of their ‘own I’, and, in turn, the singer’s assumed truth-at-a-distance. However, as theorist Frances Dyson puts it, the voice is always already caught up in a prior symbolism: “Prior to any utterance, it is already caught within particular circuits, switchboards or ‘machines’ which both literally and figuratively encode, transmit and give meaning to vocal acts.” Which is to say, we always expect specific things of singers – we always expect something more. No one expects a guitar to embody truth: it is a fleeting temporal act (run, riff, solo) rather than an eternal verity. Yet despite the ravages and inroads of modernism, something about the sung still primes us for self evident truth. The singer’s voice, escaping embodiment, paradoxically embodies – and the microphone simply raises this paradox to a new pitch, a new economy of absence-presence in its neoteric circuitry. Thus with Holiday no one concerns themselves overmuch with what manner of truth resides in the supposedly ‘trite’ lyrics she is given to sing. The spell of truth is presumed to come from her personalised enunciation – voice as represented experience – as though the song were itself a body, replete with cuts, tracks and bruises: traces of the lived. In fact, Holiday spent half her time in song happily aswing. (Other instances of such fatal attraction-confusion are easily found: Kurt Cobain interpreted as apotheosis of a certain generational nihilism... when he may have been fatally sincere, almost childlike in his innocent hopes and dreams, heroin the only thing which could maintain him in his baby-frail hurt, keeping him endlessly in utero.) The lesson of this is: the minute we begin to garland the singer with projective imagery, something singular in the song dies. Unable to deal with the untrammeled mourning peal of the sung, we appliquéd the prophylactic gleam of image, myth, caricature. And in a way, put the singer to death.

To accord hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange, but also, to try to domesticate it, to make it part of the household and have it assume the habits, to make us assume new habits. This is the movement of culture.

Jacques Derrida

And this is precisely what happens. This is the history of our culture. All our favourite voices – slothful, wracked, diabolical, ethereal – brought into our sitting rooms to play. The recording studio and the analyst's room and our own new gramophonic hearth: simultaneously at home and beyond the homely, at once a room and an escape route where we can play hide and seek with our fears. The advent of the stylus/gramophone makes of our home a new spatio-temporal realm where we can shape our own deeply subjective timeframe in track-by-track increments. Where we can repeat the singer's experience, along a full range of Freudian response.

Freudian analysis, microphonics and voodoo have at least this in common: they arrange a spectral meeting (a coming to terms) with our lost voices and lamented others. We sing along with this body electric, suddenly inhabited by forgotten ancestors, speak with their voices, repeat their compulsions, do their bidding.

The question of a speculative realignment with dead family – with 'difficult' fathers or mourned mothers, lost brothers, dead twins, absent friends, longed for sisters – resonates all down our days. Hear it in Elvis and Billie; in Brian Wilson and Bob Dylan; and then nearer our own time in Lydia Lunch, Nick Cave, Diamanda Galas, Henry Rollins, Jeff Buckley, Kurt Cobain. Singers who scorn the easy lures of therapy culture, but who come to some account of their own in sound, in song. It is perhaps no coincidence that many of these same people will have problems themselves assuming the settled roles of family and home, of rootedness. As if once they had tasted the nomadic flight of song, the ground seems like a wanting place.

With the advent of full blown multitrack microphonia in the 60s, recordings definitively cease to be 'records' of any single event in space and time. The recorded voice is no longer the sure and certain residue of a 'performance', but the shifting centre of a collage of a thousand micro-performances, spaced out across different times and spaces. Différence made sublime, made hook, made hit. Divorced from any need to perform, the new studio song is a quantum event; the studio is a sounding board, be it for experiments in ego-transcendent sound (Brian Wilson) or ideological articulation (James Brown) or a strange, skewed admixture of both (Hendrix, The Doors, Love's Arthur Lee).

What would Freud have made of Brian Wilson? The Wilson who was

such an unstable mixture of will and illness (but never ill will)? The Brian who can sum up all of Freud's "Mourning And Melancholia" in one piercing phrase: "*I'm waiting for the day that you can love again.*" Like Freud, this is Brian's life: waiting, and listening. Brian knew. (Like so much of our century's 'lower class' or marginal geniuses, he knew without the cumbersome apparatus of over-educated knowledge.) "*I can hear so much in your sighs...*" Brian as radiophonic two-way ear. *Pet Sounds* not one more 'concept' album (in competition with kitsch piffle like *Sgt Pepper*) but as true, moving otobiography. Brian of that sublime moment in "Don't Talk (Put Your Head On My Shoulder)" when the line "*let me hear your heart beat*" is sung-softened-stirred-dissolved into "*being here with you...*". Beat and being commingled. Brian making a mother's sun of himself in silent opposition to the castrating paternal eye. In his whispered "*listen*" you can hear a glistening 'son' finally reclaimed, sublimated, sublimed, sent into a glorious bodyless ether/afterlife of sound where he can be how he hears: littoral sun not literal son, a merman raised by the Enochian tablet of the studio console into a polyphonic congress with mescaline nymphs and stereo sprites and a whole undulant sonic seascape... stoned, immaculate.

Once there is a microphone, no more canons. Anyone can break into this room with a breath; whisper into its waiting ear. Although not everyone can survive an encounter with the forbidding metallic thereness of this strange passive thief, the microphone. Go on, approach it: see how it makes your whole posture change, your throat tremble, your whole being turn in on itself. In the much-told Robert Johnson tale, for instance, no one seems to have noticed that the devil he met was microphone shaped. A microphone, moreover, that he never even sought out, which came to him, and but for which we might never have known his name, his dread, his glory.

After the microphone, no self-contained lineages. Only ghost minglings, unprecedented grafts, insane translations. From now on, Song will be an aetherial, porous space in which voices lose their demarcation; in which the ordinary is made uncanny; in which the dead speak, in which anyone can speak, or sing, or be surprised. The history of the microphone in this century includes not just blues and pop and C&W and so on, but Richard Nixon, the Reverend Jim Jones and Charles Manson's

songbook. And the recordings which seem almost too powerful to listen to are invariably those least tampered with. Artaud in 1947 with his apocalyptic radio ‘song’, “Pour En Finir Avec Le Jugement De Dieu” (itself a call to abandon pious constraint and let the body truly speak); Maya Deren’s groundbreaking explorations in Haiti; Bob Dylan’s *The Basement Tapes*; Peter Brötzmann’s late 60s free jazz blast *Machine Gun*. Take your pick, make or fake your own lineage... no more canons.

How will this century end? Listening for the final toll. Waiting for the dead to speak.

We may already have heard our definitive eschatological Song – in works such as Scott Walker’s nonpareil *Tilt* (1995) and Diamanda Galas’s *Plague Mass* (1991). Some will doubtless object that such works take the Song too far, onto unrecognisable terrain. But that is just the chance and the dare of our song’s survival. . . and why, too, we must constantly, vigilantly and mercilessly refuse any facile claims of an ‘End’ or ‘Death’ of the Song. Beware false prophets who come bearing essays which announce the ‘end’ of something: it usually marks little more than the exhaustion of their own resources – intellectual or financial. We need to think about not the end of song but the ends of song. Each singer must find their own end, their own will, their own way. In this way, song might be just beginning to truly speak... in the revivifying breath of a new mourning.

If a work like Walker’s *Tilt* is in some part ‘unlistenable’, as its detractors claim, perhaps that’s because our world, too, is now in sum unlistenable. One of the things that *Tilt* seems to suggest is, if we could hear everything in our post-Einstein, post-Auschwitz world – all the screams in the air, all the irrevocable negations of technology, all the ghosts – just a single moment of it, we would surely go mad from grief.

A switch is thrown and suddenly our ‘blues’ are global or cosmic, not individual. Such a feeling might destroy; might be too much for one fragile soul to take. We have indeed come a long way from Robert Johnson’s moan, or Artaud’s scream. Or sometimes, it seems, no way at all (listen to Diamanda Galas’s resurrection of blues standards on *The Singer* and elsewhere). This is one of the reasons *Tilt*’s song is literally in ruins: as though a normal song were not strong enough to hold what Walker is pouring into it. For tapping into the business of mourning is no

simple affair. What forces must such songs contain? Elemental, transmogrifying, tectonic. And just as the unwary magician can be rent asunder by calling down spirits too big for his talents, so the ill-equipped singer (and I mean this literally: a singer whose only equipment is illness, fragility, sickness) can suffer fatal combustion from going it alone into certain regions; from being our sole channel. Remember, songs are not displaced onto an instrument: they take place as a whorl of alchemy IN the singer's body (and ours). At times, it must feel as if the microphone is like some looming S&M master demanding more each time: each take, take it further, make yourself more of an object, more pain, your transcendence awaits...

How did the century end? Haunted, and haunted by its song.