Bytes and Backbeats

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Bytes and Backbeats
In one form or another, the influence of popular music has permeated cultural activities and perception on a global scale. Interdisciplinary in nature, Tracking Pop is intended as a wide-ranging exploration of pop music and its cultural situation. In addition to providing resources for students and scholars working in the field of popular culture, the books in this series will appeal to general readers and music lovers, for whom pop has provided the soundtrack of their lives.

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Bytes and Backbeats: Repurposing Music in the Digital Age
by Steve Savage
FOR TAMARA

Together we explored the world while I explored this world.
Preface

Several of the gracious readers of this book in its various drafts suggested that I should include some biographical information to help orient the reader to this work. I suppose all authors have a story about what brought them to their book, but perhaps in this case it is particularly relevant. My story begins with a career as a drummer during which time I played in numerous unsuccessful rock bands, learned some jazz without ever coming close to mastering it, studied and performed African music with a master drummer from Ghana, and spent a couple of years actually making a living as a musician playing in a dance band. I found playing four hours of cover songs five nights a week rather trying and abandoned that, and after a short but glorious stint in a punk band, I and my career transitioned into production and recording.

I discovered that the other side of the glass—the control room side rather than the recording room side—fit me better, and my career slowly built around recording. I had a 12-track studio in my garage (a short-lived Akai home-recording format) and recorded demos for rock bands for dirt cheap. One of those bands put its resources together to go into a professional studio to record a single and asked me to be the engineer/producer. I got my first taste of making commercial recordings and I was hooked. From there I recorded a variety of fledgling “new wave” artists’ singles and albums in the heady early 1980s and cut my teeth on 24-track analog recording. After a stint as house producer for a small indie label—where I built and learned to operate a lovely little state-of-the-art studio—I became a full-time independent record producer and engineer.

One tends to get work in areas where one has some successes, so it was through my work with the very talented songwriter Bonnie Hayes that I
have ended up working on many singer/songwriter music projects, and after three Grammy-nominated CDs with the master blues artist Robert Cray, I have had the pleasure of working on many blues records. I have also recorded jazz, R & B, rap, hip-hop, country, opera, music for musicals, and children's records. I have been the engineer and/or producer on over 100 commercial releases and have served as the primary recording engineer and mixer on eight Grammy-nominated CDs including records for Robert Cray, John Hammond Jr., Elvin Bishop, and the Gospel Hummingbirds. I have also taught recording at the college level one night a week for the past twelve years.

There was a recent survey conducted by the Recording Academy (the Grammy folks—an organization that I have been very active in) and sent to all the members of the Producers and Engineers wing of the Academy. Among the questions asked were these:

In your opinion, do the tasks performed by the producer, recording engineer, sound editor, DAW [digital audio workstation] operator and mixer each involve specialized skill sets and sensitivities that are differentiable from one another?

Do you specialize mainly in one of these tasks, or are you aware of audio production professionals in your technical/creative community who specialize mainly in one these tasks?

On sound recordings you were recently involved with, was each one of the 3 tasks of producing, engineering and editing performed by separate individuals, or were all 3 tasks performed by a single person?

I never saw the results of this survey, but I know what the answers were for most of us that do this work professionally. While these functions are defined separately on paper, they are not clearly differentiated in practice. We may specialize (I’ve done more mixing than anything else in the past several years), but we are almost all capable of, and called upon to take on, all of these roles as a routine part of our work. And in most recordings the three tasks mentioned in the last question are performed by the same individual, but in partnership with a variety of other people, including the musicians. These are the reasons that I and others are transitioning to the term recordist for people who work as active participants in the making of recordings. Functions such as engineer, producer, DAW operator, mixer, editor, and so on blur into one job held by the person taking primary responsibility for the recording at any given moment (and who this person or persons are may be as fluid as the jobs themselves). An even grayer area
concerns the term *musician*, as the roles and functions of music making have been so altered by the contemporary recording environment. It is often impossible to really differentiate between who is responsible for the music and who is responsible for the recording. An exploration of the intersection of the recordist and the music maker occupies the lion’s share of the work that follows.

The evolution of the book you are reading follows from the preceding career. Having become obsessed with music, I did not finish college coming out of high school. About a dozen years ago I decided to return to school, just because I always enjoyed the classroom. At the urging of a friend I stayed focused on getting a degree rather than simply taking classes, and after finishing my BA in Philosophy and Religion, and wanting more, my advisor recommended the Department of Humanities at San Francisco State University. There, through the good graces of Professor Cristina Ruotolo, I encountered a chapter from Michael Chanan’s book *Repeated Takes* and was surprised to discover a segment of academia that was considering the cultural implications of the work (recording) that I had been doing professionally for many years. This connected my return to school to my professional work in an unexpected way, and once again, I was hooked. Since then I have explored this field in some depth, having the good fortune of studying with the musicologist Nicholas Cook, whose work I admire (and who I reference fairly extensively in the following). Other colleagues that have provided welcomed and much-valued support and guidance include Philip Auslander, Serge Lacasse, Mark Katz, Mary Francis, Henry Stobart, Julie Brown, and Nikki Dibben, and it was especially satisfying to connect with Michael Chanan, whose earlier work had set me upon this journey.

Throughout this more recent academic work I have maintained my active career as a practitioner, and despite growing commitments as an educator I continue to work primarily as a recordist. Although I admire the writing of many musicologists and cultural commentators, it is my work as a recordist, as much as or more than my research, that guides my writing. I have been profoundly affected by the fluid nature of the creative process and the way that I must embrace and foster the unpredictable to be an effective recordist. The notion of fluidity, expressed especially in the forms of collaboration and community in the recording studio, has migrated from my work to my research.

I hope that my thousands of hours of studio work inform my analytical work in a way that fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation for
the process of making contemporary recordings. As the recordist you are there for the hundreds of hours required to make many popular music recordings. If you’re not there the whole time, then when something extraordinary happens you’re very likely to miss it. Those extraordinary moments—along with the hours of concentrated work, of sound under the microscope, of repetition and revision—bind the process together in the same ways that have always made music central to the human experience. Music remains central to my experience, and my work continues to feed my profound love of music whether in the studio, in the classroom, or as an author.
The involvement of those individuals that have had the most direct impact on this work is acknowledged as part of the narrative in the preceding preface. I am also grateful to the University of Michigan Press, and especially Chris Hebert and Albin Zak for their support in bringing this book into the Tracking Pop series. Beyond that I wish to simply express my gratitude to all of those who have participated with me in my musical life. I am blessed to have stimulating collaborators in the world of music production, wonderful colleagues in the academic world, and a family anchored by the love and support of my wife Tamara and our daughters, Sophia and Thalia. To all of you I offer my deepest gratitude for participating with me in all the ways that have nourished this book.

As is perhaps inevitable in a work such as this, I know that I will be continually encountering earlier sources that are relevant to the work here and new sources that both reinforce and expand various of the ideas that I present. To the extent that the work is deficient in acknowledging relevant sources I can only offer my regrets that they were not referenced as they might have been. At the same time I certainly welcome all additions to the literature. It is especially satisfying to continue meeting and developing relationships with the increasing number of colleagues who straddle the lines with me between researcher and practitioner in the field of popular music.
