The advent of vinyl was paved by a fifty-year journey that began with a stylus reading a groove on a wax cylinder. Thomas Edison’s phonograph, which converts the wax cylinder’s grooves into sound via a diaphragm, was developed in 1877. The first sound recording played back on the phonograph was Edison mouthing the words, “Mary had a little lamb.”

In one sense, the story of sound recording begins with these words and moves through nearly 150 years of sound recording development from wax cylinders and vinyl records to compact discs and MP3s. The standard tale here is one of increasing levels of sound fidelity—a journey from the low fidelity of the gramophone to the high fidelity of the compact disc. However, in another, more philosophical sense, the invention and development of the phonograph marks a very late stage in the development of sound recording—a journey that dates back to a power first attributed only to the gods.

In this chapter, I would like to explore the general idea that power comes through the ability to control sound in society from two
different but related directions. The first brings together Theodor W. Adorno’s concerns with the phonograph record and Jacques Attali’s theses about the role of sound control in social and political power to argue for a unique role for sound control in the neoliberal economy: namely, that the invention of high fidelity plays an important role in sustaining the political economy of music established by Attali. In short, if Adorno is right that the most authentic sound from phonograph records was set before technical advancements in sound quality and control, and Attali is right that what we call the new economy—late capitalism or neoliberalism—grew in strength along with the development of the record industry, then the invention of high fidelity was necessary to ensure that the authenticity issues alluded to by Adorno did not stunt the growth of both the record industry and neoliberalism. The conclusion that follows from this is that the recording studio became, in effect, “the control room” of late capitalism.

The second direction examines Attali’s theses about noise control through a reading of Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing* (1989). I will argue that Lee’s film illustrates how resisting sound control—that is, the control room of late capitalism—has the potential to bring about social and political justice. Lee’s film suggests that there is a correlative relationship between sound control and economic control that reveals both the limits of neoliberalism as well as the emancipatory potential of sound.

In sum, if the illusion of high fidelity keeps the neoliberal economy chugging along, then the practice of noise control protects it against failure. Let’s begin though by looking back at the divine powers of sound control before respectively passing on to considerations of high fidelity and then noise control.

**WAX POWER**

The ancient gods were said to have three essential powers: making war, causing famine, and recording sound. This might seem
like an odd triumvirate of powers, particularly the latter power, but imagine a world where there is no means to store information other than memory. The sounds that we make to one another in discourse, and those that we hear in the world around us, can only be repeated and passed along to others through acts of memory.

It is somewhat fitting then that when the ancient Greek philosopher Plato discussed memory, he asked us to imagine it in one sense as a “block of wax, which in this or that individual may be larger or smaller, and composed of wax that is comparatively pure or muddy, and harder in some, softer in others, and sometimes just the right consistency.”¹ “Let us call it,” he says, “the gift of the Muses’ mother, Memory, and say that whenever we wish to remember something we see or hear or conceive in our own minds, we hold this wax under the perceptions or ideas and imprint on it as we might stamp the impression of a seal ring. Whatever is so imprinted we remember and know so long as the image remains; whatever is rubbed out or has not succeeded in leaving an impression we have forgotten and do not know.”⁴ Although the imprinting of perceptions or ideas on wax here has more in common with block printing than a stylus making sound impressions on soft wax, the notion that this act might be regarded as “the gift” of a god to humankind assumes that the actual power of total memory is one held by the gods—and not humankind.

Plato also says that Homer too struggles to explain human memory and “hints at the mind’s likeness to wax.” He attributes to Homer the view that “When a man has in his mind a good thick slab of wax, smooth and kneaded to the right consistency . . . the impressions that come through the senses are stamped on [the] tables of the ‘heart.’”³ Wax then for thinkers following the leads of Homer and Plato embodies the potential of sound recording—a potential that is ironically or perhaps even fittingly—first fulfilled in the late nineteenth century by Edison by means of the self-same medium: wax. The implication then that the Muses’ mother, Memory, has a mind of perfectly constituted wax that preserves
all recorded sound offers one way to understand how recorded sound as memory might be regarded as a godly power in ancient civilizations. But still, set next to the power to create war and cause famine, that is, to take away life, doesn’t the biopower of recorded sound pale in comparison? Wars and famines are the instruments of death and destruction in which life is always precarious. The gods have the ability to both give life and take it away, and these powers in the form of inflicting war and famine upon humankind are their most awesome and fear inducing. Given the biopower of war and famine, might we expect outcomes of a similar order to also be attributed to those with the ability to record sound?

First of all, without the ability to record sound it would be very difficult to have any reliable information—that is, “knowledge”—of the past including knowledge of past wars and famines. Indeed, the context of Plato’s comments on the waxen nature of memory were part of a more general effort to define knowledge. Recorded sound gives us the ability to know, for example, that the first war in recorded history took place in Mesopotamia in 2700 BCE between Sumer and Elam and that one of the first famines on record occurred from 2770–2730 BCE during the reign of the Egyptian pharaoh Djeser. We also know through recorded sound that this ancient famine was caused by the failure of the Nile to break its banks seven years in a row. Knowledge of these events and others from history are only possible because they have been passed down to us through early sound recording.

However, it is also certain that there were wars caused by humankind before the one that took place in Mesopotamia in 2700 BCE, but because there is no record of them, we have no knowledge of them. Same too with famines, both those caused by natural circumstances such as drought and those “deliberately engineered to kill.” In fact, we know through recorded sound that in the ancient Greco-Roman world, “siege-induced famines were not unusual” and that “military manuals explained how to destroy food supplies and poison water reservoirs.” These records show,
for example, that Julius Caesar used a siege-induced famine to conquer Vercingetorix’s Gauls at Alesia in 52 BCE.\(^9\)

Moreover, the line between knowledge of the past and its absence is in large measure marked by the ability to record sound. Therefore, our knowledge of the time before the invention of the cuneiform script, the first writing, in Mesopotamia (which is now called Iraq) in 3200 BCE is very limited. The prehistoric era is thus generally set as ending around the time of the invention of writing, or for our purposes, around the time of the invention of sound recording. And while the oldest known cave paintings are said to be forty thousand years old, and predate by far the invention of sound recording, their power is of a different order than that of early sound recordings. While these prehistoric cave paintings are amazingly beautiful art, they do not provide much more knowledge of the past than fossils and bones excavated from the ground.

The ability then of the gods to record sound is the ability to know the history of the world in its totality—and with this knowledge comes great power. By comparison, the scattered fragments recorded in history books or recounted from generation to generation pale. Recording though is important not just because it provides us with a more extensive knowledge of the past but also because these records can be used as a means of social and political control. In fact, as you will recall from chapter 1, Attali goes so far as to propose “Recording has always been a means of social control, a stake in politics, regardless of the available technologies.”\(^10\)

“Always,” of course, does not mean “forever” but rather refers to the five-thousand-year history of recording. It is a period that extends backward from the digital recording of the present through Edison’s invention of sound recording and the recorded histories of ancient Greece and Rome back to the cuneiform script of Mesopotamia. During this period, the period of recording, writes Attali, “Power is no longer content to enact its legitimacy; it records and reproduces the societies it rules. Stockpiling memory, retaining history or time, distributing speech, and manipulating
information has always been an attribute of civil and priestly power, beginning with the Tables of the Law.” Ancient lore has it too that the necessity and power of recording sound increased as the bond of the verbal contract began to weaken and break down. Recording provided more assurance that contracts and agreements between parties would be honored and thus increased the level of control in society.

Still, the amount of social and political control available through recording was relatively limited compared to what occurred after Edison’s invention. Attali comments that “before the industrial age,” recording “did not occupy center stage: Moses stuttered and it was Aaron who spoke. But there was already no mistaking: the reality of power belonged to he who was able to reproduce the divine word, not to he who gave it voice on a daily basis.” But with Edison’s invention and the advances in sound recording that followed, power came through the ability to control sound in society. “Possessing the means of recording allows one to monitor noises, to maintain them, and to control their repetition within a determined code,” writes Attali. “In the final analysis, it allows one to impose one’s own noise and to silence others,” he continues. Attali then directly follows this comment with a chilling quote from Adolf Hitler from the Manual of German Radio published in 1938: “Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany.”

Radio though is not a means of sound recording. Still, it is a primary means of sound control and, used appropriately, a vehicle of power, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. Fittingly, the same year as Hitler’s remark about the controlling power of radio, Adorno would move from England, where he had been living since fleeing National Socialism in Germany in 1934, to New York City for the purpose of working at the Princeton Radio Research Project.

Although it was not Adorno’s aim at the time to either leave
Europe or write extensively on radio, the Princeton Radio Research Project, which provided Adorno with a funded position, gave Max Horkheimer, who set up the opportunity, a way to bring Adorno to New York City. From his arrival in New York City in February of 1938 through November of 1941, when funding for his position was not renewed, Adorno wrote extensively on radio. His major work from this period, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, was left unfinished at his death and has recently been reconstructed and published.14

I mention Adorno’s work here because in *Current of Music* and elsewhere, he comments on the ways in which sound recording affects music. In *Current of Music*, his express topic is how radio transmission transforms our perception of music. His critical physiognomy of live radio music, while less savage than his critique of phonographic music, is still highly negative of the emancipatory potential for music transmitted by radio. He sees both (and not just phonographic music as noted in the previous chapter) as “steps in the mechanization of musical production,”15 which he views as destroying authenticity in music. Here again is the key passage from Adorno on the destruction of authenticity in mechanically reproduced music with his added comments about radio: “Now, we believe that this authenticity, or aura, is vanishing in music because of mechanical reproduction. The phonograph record destroys the ‘now’ of the live performance and, in a way, its ‘here’ as well. Although the ubiquity of radio observes the ‘now,’ it certainly is more hostile to the ‘here.’”16 In short, for Adorno, music and our perception of it changed in the age of mechanical reproduction, albeit not for the better. Music became both a commodity and an industry through its mechanical reproduction. However, Adorno does not take the social, political, and economic implications of recording sound as far as Attali, who argues that the phonographic record brought about a new economy: neoliberalism.
Prior to 1958, there were no commercially available sound recordings in stereo. But that all changed when the record company Audio Fidelity previewed a “stereo” long-playing recording at the Times Auditorium in New York City on December 13, 1957. On one side of the LP was a stereo recording of the Dukes of Dixieland jazz band and on the other were railroad sound effects from steam and diesel locomotives. The initial print run was five hundred records, and Audio Fidelity offered free copies through an advertisement in *Billboard* magazine to anyone in the music industry who asked for one.

Then, on December 13, 1957, they introduced the first-ever commercial recordings in “stereophonic” two-channel sound. These new stereophonic records though were a luxury as not only did they require special equipment to play them, but they were much more expensive to produce—and therefore to purchase. The company, Audio Fidelity, was known for their “studies in hi fidelity sound,” that is, long-playing records that supposedly showcased the high-end sound capabilities of vinyl records. For example, in 1954, they released their debut album in this genre, *Merry Go Round Music*, a collection that the liner notes claimed to be “refreshingly pleasant, particularly for children” though advised to be “[t]aken in reasonably small doses.”

But in spite of the increased expense of purchasing and playing these records, stereophonic two-channel sound would by the end of 1958 be made commercially available by every major record label. Yet, at the same time, all of these record labels also released long-playing records in “mono,” a two-version record release practice that continued well into the 1960s. There were even “Stereo Demonstration Records” available that high fidelity aficionados could use to test the effectiveness of their stereo playback systems. Decca records, for example, released one in 1958 called “FFSS- Full Frequency Stereophonic Sound.”

Often, the two record release system resulted in different cover
design and language, catering respectively to their different high fidelity markets. Consider, for example, the Platters 1959 Mercury Records album Remember When? Formed in 1952, the Platters were one of the most successful vocal groups of the early rock and roll era with forty singles making the record charts between 1955 and 1967. One of the first African American groups to be accepted as a major chart group, and, for a period of time, the most successful vocal group in the world, they were a perfect candidate at the time for a “luxury” recording release. By the time of the release of Remember When? the vocal group had already charted twenty singles in the United States alone.

The mono release (MG-20410) of Remember When? has a white space at the bottom of the front of the album cover with the words “HIGH FIDELITY” in large red letters with “Custom” superimposed in cursive lettering. The back of the album has the same verbiage but much smaller in the lower bottom quarter. The top half of the back is a photo of the group, and the bottom half is divided into half, with the left bottom half listing the songs and right bottom half giving an album description that begins “Here is a package of delicious memories, wrapped, tied, and delivered by the most popular singing group in the world” and ending with the sentence, “These are the songs for catching new memories of today, for making you pause and say in later years, ‘Remember when . . .’”
high fidelity recording then is marketed as yesterday’s, today’s, and tomorrow’s “memories,” a perennial vinyl purchase that you will cherish for your lifetime.

The stereo release (SR-60087) of Remember When? has a white space at the top of the front of the album with the word “STEREO” in large purple letters with the words “HI-FI” superimposed in black in a plain font. Like the mono version, the back of the album has the same verbiage but much smaller in the lower bottom quarter. But the similarities with the back covers stop there. First, below the “STEREO/HI-FI” on the back cover is the following printed in very small font size:

This Mercury STEREO record has been cut with variable groove spacing and electronic groove depth control, thus producing a 2-channel disc of exceptionally wide dynamic range, reliable stylus tracking throughout the frequency range, and startling clarity and definition of instrumental timbres.

This Mercury STEREO record should be played according to the RIAA standard with a stereo reproducing cartridge having a stylus tip not exceeding .7 mil. For best results, be sure that your two loudspeakers and amplifiers are correctly balanced in terms of output and phase, and that the loudspeakers are placed in the room so as to provide an even “spread of sound” from one to the other.
Second, instead of the back cover content being divided horizontally, it is divided vertically, with the right half cramming in the entire back mono cover text into this space: 1/3 of it for the group photo, 1/3 of it for the song list, and the other 1/3 for the same “delicious” album description. Then, below all of this the “STEREO/Hi-Fi” icon with above noted “stereo” blurb in small font.

However, it is the left half of the back cover of the stereo version that is completely different than the mono version of the album. Along with a photo of a recording studio, there is the following text:

This two-track recording was made in Studio A of the Compagnie [sic] Phonographique Francaise, Paris, France. Volume of this studio is 43,000 cubic feet. Reverberation time is 0.65 seconds from the lowest to highest frequencies recorded. Low frequency absorption is obtained from completely floating inside walls covered with small vibrating panels. High frequency absorption is rendered by rockwood pyramids, while sound diffusion, especially characteristic of Studio A, is gained thru wood pyramids.

This general description of the recording studio is then followed by more specific information about some of the sound control technology used in the recording of the record album:

**echo chamber**—The echo chamber is really a reverberation chamber which must be added to studio sound. Reverberation time varies from one to three seconds.

**speech imput equipment**—Studio A’s audio consists of a control panel of 10 line or mike mixers, two echo injections and one general and five independent echo channels. For stereo, the 10 mixers can be split into two times five imputs (for two stereo signals) and then later combined for a monaural signal (via a special combining network in the line amplifier.)
**mixing controls**—All mixing controls are studio-sliding-contacting-attenuators (Telefunken W 66) Carbon composition type resistors are employed in the W 66 to insure [sic] smooth and noiseless adjustments.

**amplifiers**—Amplifiers, except for the monitor-power amplifiers, are studio pre-amplifiers V-72 (Siemens). Tiny self-contained units, each has its own individually operated power supply. The two-stage hi-fi amp has a gain of 34 db at extremely low distortion. Used in these sessions as a mike-amp; line amp and even as an isolation amp.

**monitoring equipment**—The amplifier, a 25 watt V 69 Telefunken is a high power unit with extremely low distortion and flat frequency response. The loud speaker is an Electro-Voice SP 15 with very low transient distortion.

This is all great information about Studio A of the Compagnie Phonographique Française, Paris, France. However, it is followed by some additional “HI-FInformation” about another recording studio:

Recorded stereophonically at Barclay Studios Hoche, Paris, France, the following accent mikes were utilized:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Left Channel Pickup</th>
<th>Right Channel Pickup</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bass and guitar—RCA 44BX</td>
<td>24 violins—Neumann U-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drums—Neumann U-47</td>
<td>8 violas and 4 cellos—Neumann KM-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piano—RCA 77-DX</td>
<td>3 clarinets—Neumann U-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harp—Neumann U-47P</td>
<td>1 flute and 1 oboe—Neumann U-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocal solo—Neumann U-47</td>
<td>vocal group—Neumann U-47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A pair of Neumann U-47’s, set apart and above the grouped musicians and the Platters, recorded the separate left and right stereo channels, augmented by the above accent mikes. Stereo tracks were cut at 15 inches per second on a stereo Ampex 300. Gerhard Lehner was the engineer.

David Carroll, Musical Director

This, of course, is a lot of technical information. Obviously, the purchaser of the stereo version of the Platters, Remember When? is supposed to be both informed and impressed by it and can use this technical information to justify the higher price of the hi-fi stereophonic two-channel sound recording as compared to the lower priced hi-fi “custom” mono recording. While it is possible, it is not likely that someone would reject this album because of the “accent mike” choices (e.g., Why did they use the U-47P for the harp and not the U-47?). What then is the real purpose of the information on the left back half of this album jacket? Its purpose is to convince the consumer that there are qualitative fidelity gradations in sound recording that merit not only differentiations in the prices of the recordings and the phonographic equipment used to play them but, more generally, that fidelity matters with regard to sound recordings.
Each year the fidelity bar with regard to recorded music goes up incrementally. This is a story regarding the marketing of phono-
graphic records that goes back to its beginnings. Take, for exam-
ple, a 1908 advertisement for the Victor Talking Machine. The ad,
featuring an image of a singing woman opposite an image of the
Victor Talking Machine, includes the following text:

Which is which?

You think you can tell the difference between hearing grand-opera
artists sing and hearing their beautiful voices on the Victor. But
can you?

In the opera-house corridor scene in “The Pit” at Ye Liberty The-
atre, Oakland, Cal., the famous quartet from Rigoletto was sung by
Caruso, Abbot, Homer and Scotti on the Victor, and the delighted
audience thought they were listening to the singers themselves.

Every day at the Waldorf-Astoria, New York, the grand-opera
stars sing, accompanied by the hotel orchestra of sixteen pieces.
The diners listen with rapt attention, craning their necks to get a
glimpse of the singer. But it is a Victor.

In the rotunda of Wanamaker’s famous Philadelphia store, the
great pipe organ accompanied Melba on the Victor, and the people
rushed from all directions to see the singer.

Even in the Victor laboratory, employes [sic] often imagine they
are listening to a singer making a record while they really hear
the Victor

Why not hear the Victor for yourself? Any Victor dealer will gladly
play any Victor Records you want to hear.

There is a Victor for every purse—$10 to $300.18
To get a sense of the purchasing power of $10 in 1908, consider that in 2019 this amounted to $279.72. And $300 in 1908 amounted to $8,391.72 in 2019. The ad is in effect a “Turing Test” for the Victrola: it challenges the listener to tell the difference between a live vocal performance and the recorded playback of one. Presumably, when hearing the quartet from Rigoletto in “The Pit” at Ye Liberty Theatre, one will believe that it is being sung live by Caruso, Abbot, Homer, and Scotti when in fact their voices are being played back on a state-of-the-art Victrola.
It has been persuasively argued by Jonathan Sterne that “[p]eople had to learn how to understand the relations between sounds made by people and sounds made by machines.”20 So early advertisements by phonograph companies instructed people how to “understand” sound recordings. Close your eyes, suggested the ads, and try to tell the difference between a live performance and a recorded playback—a tradition in sound recording marketing that has continued at least through the cassette era with memorable ads like “Is it live, or is it Memorex?”

By 1927, the year Adorno would publish the first of his three major essays on the phonograph, Victrolas were now not just tabletop machines with big horns jutting out but elegant pieces of stand-alone furniture. In an ad by the company from this year, one again finds the image of a singing woman but this time set beside an “Orthophonic Victrola,” specifically “The Credenza, Model Number Eight-thirty.” Whereas the 1908 ad for the Victor plays on the uniqueness and wonder of hearing a “human voice” coming from a machine, twenty years later, the fidelity bar has demonstrably risen, with the language of “high fidelity” sound beginning itself to gel and take shape:

The human voice is human on the New Orthophonic Victrola.

A great artist sings in concert, and thousands press for admittance. Many wait in line for hours. Some are turned away, disappointed. Attend the concerts, by all means, but enjoy these same golden voices in your own home . . . whenever you wish . . . through the new Orthophonic Victrola.

This amazing instrument brings you vocal music in all its original purity and power. Tones of correct, natural volume; neither too thin nor too loud, but full, round and mellow. The new Orthophonic Victrola catches the very personality of the artist.
In no other way *can* you have such singing in your home, for the Orthophonic Victrola is based upon Victor’s new, scientific, Victor-controlled principle—“matched impedance.”

Another Victor achievement equaling that of the Orthophonic instrument, is the new Orthophonic Victor Record. It has new beauty and depth, a richer resonance. Recorded by microphone, and made from an improved material, practically all foreign noises have been eliminated. The new Victor Records are living re-creations of the artists themselves.

Words can give you but the faintest impression of the thrill in store for you at the nearest Victor dealer’s. Have a demonstration today. Go . . . in your most skeptical mood! There are many beautiful models of the Orthophonic Victrola, from $95 to $300, list price. Silent electric motor ($35 extra) eliminates winding. You play . . . and relax.31

The road from this 1927 ad with its rhetoric of recording tonality (e.g., “tones” can be thick or thin, empty or full, soft or loud, harsh or mellow, and so on) to the rhetoric of the 1959 Platters’ album sound control room is just a thirty-year journey, and the Platters’ album is only fifty years removed from marketing efforts just trying to explain what a “talking machine” does, namely, reproduce the human voice.

When Adorno wrote his first analysis of the phonographic record in 1927, he too was caught up in the mechanistic dimensions of the sound recording. However, unlike Victor and the other gramophone companies who were trying to get customers and listeners to see beyond the oddity of reproducing sound mechanically, Adorno saw all efforts at “mechanical music” including radio broadcasts, phonographic records, and film scores for both silent and sound film as mere “trends” and, in the case of phonographic records, trends that he was not “buying.” He regarded “talking
machines” with their “mahogany cabinets on little rococo legs”\textsuperscript{22} to be status symbols of debatable relevance to music. Comparable in his estimation to the photograph, the more phonographic records attempt to control sound, the more phonographically recorded sounds become inauthentic. Again, it is important here to recall that for Adorno, whereas the early photographic technology “had
the power to penetrate rationally the reigning artistic practice,” later efforts that claimed higher fidelity were merely a technological “illusion.” Moreover, as noted earlier, the same technological illusion holds for the phonograph.

For Adorno, the more music “recordings become more perfect in terms of plasticity and volume,” the more “the subtlety of color and the authenticity of vocal sound declines as if the singer were being distanced more and more from the apparatus.” In short, as technology works to improve sound fidelity, sound authenticity declines proportionally. This again is established in the fascinating fact that Adorno was not interested in accounting for the changes in sound recording technology over the forty-year span of the republication of his essay “Nadelkurven” in 1965 because he believed that it only further confirmed what he wrote in 1927: that is, records have been on the decline ever since the invention of the “talking machine.” Not even the new commercial recordings in stereophonic two-channel sound produced with low-frequency absorption obtained from completely floating inside walls covered with small vibrating panels and high-frequency absorption rendered by rockwood pyramids could shake this conviction.

I point out Adorno’s position on the phonographic record here for several reasons. First, it is very clear from at least as early as the late 1920s that Adorno rejected the idea that the fidelity of records could be improved with technological development. In fact, he considered it to be an illusion, one which he from a very early point in his career links to efforts by the recording industry not only to get people to buy phonographs and phonographic records but to draw them away from live musical performances, the space of authentic musical reproduction. And while the early ads from Victor like the one from 1927 noted above encourage consumers of music to “Attend the concerts, by all means,” they also suggest to avoid waiting “in line for hours” and “enjoy these same golden voices in your own home . . . whenever you wish.”

Second, throughout his career, one that spanned the early
development of the talking machine through the invention of stereophonic sound and the long-playing record, Adorno consistently rejected not only the technology of sound recording but also its products. Although in his last year he found opera records to be useful, it was not for the reasons given by the industry, such as to avoid waiting “in line for hours.” Rather, he found these records useful only because he saw the live performance of opera to be in decline and found that because opera records allowed you to listen to the music without having to endure its “theatrical” aspects, there was some value in operatic recordings circa 1968—as a way to save operatic music.

From a very young age, Adorno saw through the invention of high and higher fidelity as the technological perfection of musical recording. He saw it for what it is and was, namely, a commercial effort by the record and recording industry to get consumers to learn how to understand the relations between “sounds made by people and sounds made by machines.” The major aim of such efforts was not philosophical edification but rather economic enterprise, that is, to get consumers to purchase recorded sound. This marketing ruse extends to the quasi-philosophical notion that recorded sound somehow “embeds” the original sound in the recording.

As Sterne explains, “reproduced sounds are not simply mediated versions of unmediated originals.” 25 “Sound reproduction is a social process,” where “[t]he possibility of reproduction precedes the fact.” 26 Sound fidelity was invented through sound control in the recording studio. Writes Sterne,

Sound fidelity is much more about faith in the social function and organization of machines than it is about the relation of a sound to its “source.” . . . From the very beginning, sound reproduction was a studio art, and, therefore, the source was as bound up in the social relations of reproducibility as any copy was. Sound fidelity is a story that we tell ourselves to staple separate pieces of sonic
reality together. The efficacy of sound reproduction as a technology or as a cultural practice is not in its keeping faith with a world wholly external to itself. On the contrary, sound reproduction—from its very beginnings—always implied social relations among people, machines, practices, and sounds. The very concept of sound fidelity is a result of this conceptual and practical labor.27

Moreover, efforts to help us to connect “mechanical music” with “live” music go to the very use of the term *live* with reference to music. As Sarah Thornton has pointed out, the term *live* with connection to music only entered the music appreciation lexicon in the 1950s, where it was “part of a public relations campaign by musician’s unions in Britain and the United States.”28 At the time of the campaign, “the word *live* was short for *living*, as in *living musicians*.29 However, writes Thornton, “[l]ater, it referred to music itself and quickly accumulated connotations which took it beyond the denotative meaning of performance . . . Through a series of condensations . . . the expression ‘live music’ gave positive valuation to and became generic for performed music. It soaked up the aesthetic and ethical connotations of life-versus-death, human-versus-mechanical, creative-versus-imitative.”30 If the phonographic record struggled in its early history to make a connection to humans, both their voices and their lives, then by the 1950s this was solved by transferring the “life” of “living musicians” to the musical recording itself. In the process, it is the musical recording that comes to have the attributes of life through the term *live* used in relationship to it.

The biopolitics of this transfer cannot be more obvious: by transferring “living” away from the musicians to mechanical music via the phonographic records, sound control can also be said to “deny life” to musicians and to transfer it onto sound recordings. In doing so, we can add to Attali’s idea that “the stockpiling of use-time in the commodity object is fundamentally a herald of death,” particularly with regard to vinyl records, another layer of death to
vinyl, that of “living musicians” now becoming “living sound” or “live sound,” which of course heralds the death of the musician in recorded music.

As Sterne notes, the application of the term *fidelity* to sound was contemporaneous with the invention of the phonograph. Prior to 1877, fidelity was not applied to sound namely because there was no such thing as sound recording in which the human voice could be captured through what Adorno termed *sound writing*. “Fidelity,” writes Sterne, “is the quality of faithfulness to some kind of pact or agreement,” a notion, noted earlier, that takes us back to the origins of sound recording being born out of the failure of human-kind to honor verbal agreements. For Sterne, “the term *sound fidelity* has become a kind of technicistic shorthand for addressing the problems of sound’s reproducibility—a gold standard for originals and copies, an imagined basis for the currency in sounds.” To this, I would add that the term *high fidelity* has become a kind of shorthand too, although of a different order.

If sound fidelity refers more to the philosophical problems at the heart of sound recording, then high fidelity refers to the control rooms where these philosophical problems become economic ones. For it is in the sound control room that the illusions of fidelity are worked out by engineers who convince the listening masses to consume increasingly perfect sound products. It is not just that the standard of fidelity with regard to sound changes or increases over time; rather, it is the fact that this changing standard is the control room for the neoliberal economy borne out of Attali’s age of repetition. It is an economy that is established through a complex network of relations between recording practices, products, and technologies. Although music plays a role in this economy, it has become secondary to the processes that determine its conditions of recording and level of fidelity.

Adorno recognized very early on that fidelity with regard to sound was an invention and marketing ploy of the record industry. Although his approach to emerging generations of sound
recording “development” may seem reactionary, particularly his rejection of the latest versions of the Victrola and its recordings, it may in retrospect be viewed as a very early rejection of the emerging economy of late capitalism, particularly if viewed through the lens of Attali’s commentary on the political economy of music. The notion of high fidelity keeps music consumers hungry for increasingly higher levels of fidelity in sound recording and reproduction. An entire lexicon is created with regard to levels of tone and types of sound to keep the engine of neoliberalism well fueled and chugging along.

Michel Chion, one of leading theoreticians of sound, has even created a vocabulary to describe the “seven effects enabled by machines” regarding sound, which in his parlance, music is just one aspect. They are capture, telephony, systemic acousmatization, phonofixation, phonogeneration, and reshaping. While each of these seven technological effects has the ability to create sound, “it remains to be seen whether this represents an increase in ‘fidelity’—a notion ideologically and aesthetically as risky as would be the notion of faithfulness in the photographic image to the visible of which it provides us with a representation.” “In reality,” writes Chion, “the term ‘high fidelity’ is taken up from the rhetoric of advertising.” Then, to further his dismissal of the term, he notes that there are “innumerable” differences between the original reverberation and the recorded reverberation including the level of “spectral equilibrium, of space, of texture, and of dynamics.”

In my estimation, Chion’s work is the knockout blow to the notion that high fidelity means anything more than “buy this record because it keeps the neoliberal economy alive and well.” So, arguably, without the notion of high fidelity, the neoliberal sound economy would have melted away like the wax on Edison’s cylinders when exposed to high heat. What is most painful about our 130-odd year journey through the amazing world of higher fidelity is the irony that in its late stages, when we thought we were moving beyond vinyl records to compact discs and MP3s because
of their higher fidelity and the way they eliminate “noise” such as the pops and crackles heard on all vinyl records, the alleged higher fidelity of these records led to their resurgence today. And, with it, as I have argued previously, give neoliberalism a second life.

**NOISE CONTROL**

As noted in chapter 1, the evolution of musico-social relations moves through four stages for Attali. In premodern society, the first stage, music is an accompaniment to ritual sacrifice. Its social function is “to make people forget—to make them forget the violence entailed in the structuring differences to found and maintain the social order.”\(^{36}\) Attali is drawing music here into dialogue with work like René Girard’s *La Violence et le sacré*,\(^ {37}\) which proposes “a theory of ritual sacrifice as the central act of a cultural system generated by primal violence.”\(^ {38}\) In early modern society, the second stage, the function of music is “to make them believe—to make them believe in the intrinsic harmony of the social order under the command of a leader.”\(^ {39}\) In the third stage, capitalist society, the function of music is to silence people, “to make them listen silently and endlessly to music designed to distract their attention or stimulate their appetites.”\(^ {40}\) In this stage, music has been commodified, with its most uniquely identifiable forms to be found in the “hit parade,” Muzak, and the record industry in general. It is only in the fourth stage, post-capitalism, where Attali finds any relief from the musico-social relations associated with the forgetting, believing, and silencing of the earlier stages.

Attali’s fourth stage, which he calls *composition*, detaches itself from the technologies of sound recording that were so important to the development of his third stage, which he calls *repetition*. These technologies of sound recording include phonographic records, reel-to-reel tapes, eight-track tapes, cassettes, compact discs, minidisks, MP3s, and so on. If the emphasis in the age of repetition was the reproduction of sound through recordings, then
the emphasis in the age of composition will be live performances, the invention of new musical instruments, and the discovery of new genres of music and codes. As Eugene Holland puts it,

composition involves the reappropriation of music by ordinary people, and a novel merging of the roles of producer and consumer: rather than slavishly reproduce other people's music from a score, or passively listen to reproductions in silence, people in the era of composition will themselves enjoy their own music. The era of composition will thus put an end to the social alienation of music, which Attali defines as performing in accordance with a programme or code established in advance and by someone else; instead, message and code are to be invented and performed simultaneously in a process of continual creation where the process itself counts for more than the finished product.41

For Holland, jazz improvisation bears a strong resemblance to Attali's composition—and I do not disagree with him here. However, not only is the history of jazz improvisation more or less contemporaneous with the development of sound recording, which would fit jazz improvisation into the previous era, namely that of repetition, but in spite of finding its best work in spontaneous live performance, it is not a new genre of music nor does it rely much on the invention of new instruments. In fact, for many jazz purists, new instruments are an anathema to jazz music, and new genres such as jazz fusion are often viewed with disdain.

What I would like to suggest though is that we view moving beyond the age of repetition—and its attendant economy—to be less about the kind of music that is produced and type of instruments used than about the uses of “sound control” in its live performance. Attali is often criticized for leaving his thoughts on the age of composition incomplete, but this can also be viewed as an opportunity to imagine a relationship between music and political economy that moves beyond the neoliberal model found in the age
of repetition. To this end, I propose that we view Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing* as an effort to challenge the neoliberal economy through its use of music. Namely, the film is an effort to “fight the power” of neoliberalism and racism by breaking the musical silence of capitalism by blasting a hip-hop song throughout the neighborhood.

If it can be said that Hitler could not have conquered Germany without a loudspeaker, then it might in related fashion be said that Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) attempted to conquer the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn with only a boom box. The former was the epitome of hatred, evil, and racism, whereas the latter aimed to fight against them—though murdered in the process by the police with the “infamous Michael Stewart choke hold.” Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) attempted to conquer the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn with only a boom box. The former was the epitome of hatred, evil, and racism, whereas the latter aimed to fight against them—though murdered in the process by the police with the “infamous Michael Stewart choke hold.” The latter aimed to fight against them—though murdered in the process by the police with the “infamous Michael Stewart choke hold.”

Mookie (Spike Lee) responds to his murder by calmly walking through the crowd with a garbage can that he has just emptied and throwing it through the plate glass window of Sal’s Famous Pizzeria. The angry mob then trashes the pizzeria and sets it on fire. Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* is a day in the life of racially troubled America that begins in a radio station control booth and ends with the murder of a young man who set off a race riot by playing his boom box too loud that day. Although sound control is not the theme of the film, it plays an important role in it.

Throughout the film, Radio Raheem walks around the neighborhood with a massive boom box powered by twenty “D” batteries, which we know because of the scene in which he buys them at a convenience store. The volume on his boom box was getting softer, and the cassette tape of Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” was beginning to drag. The Korean clerk misunderstands his request and keeps asking him if he wants “C” batteries. Raheem calls him a “dumb motherfucker” and tells him to “Learn how to speak English first.” This though is just a taste of the racial tension set in motion by the use of his boom box.

The first is his sound standoff with a group of Puerto Rican youths. The youths are hanging out on a stoop drinking beer and
playing dominoes while salsa music blasts from one of their cars. Radio Raheem approaches them playing as usual his rap music, which is drowned out because of the louder volume of their salsa music. In Spike Lee’s script, he notes “Radio Raheem does not like to be bested; the salsa music from the parked car is giving him competition, this is no good.” So, in response to their loud salsa music, he turns his rap music to a higher decibel level. The youths then start to yell at him in Spanish but eventually concede to the superiority of his decibel level by turning off the salsa music in their car. Overjoyed that he has won this sound standoff, Raheem smiles and nods to them. He then turns down his volume to what Lee calls a “reasonable listening level” and continues his music bop around the neighborhood. One of the youths, Stevie (Luis Ramos), says to Raheem in admiration and bewilderment, “You got it, bro,” and after the competing boom box is out of listening range, he turns back on the salsa music on the car radio.

But the sound standoff with the Puerto Rican youths is merely a prelude to the major sound control battle in the film, namely the one between Sal and Radio Raheem. It begins in the film when Radio Raheem enters Sal’s Famous Pizzeria blasting his music asking Sal (Danny Aiello) for “two slices.” “No service till you turn dat shit off,” responds Sal. “Two slices,” replies Radio Raheem. Pino (John Turturro), Sal’s son, then echoes his father’s request, “Turn it off.” Sal then says, “Mister Radio Raheem, I can’t even hear myself think. You are disturbing me and you are disturbing my customers.” He then reaches under the pizza counter for his Mickey Mantle bat. Everyone in the pizzeria is poised for the moment to explode into violence, but it doesn’t this time. Radio Raheem turns off his music at the sight of the bat and continues with his order, “Two slices, extra cheese.” Sal puts the bat away and replies, “When you come into Sal’s Famous Pizzeria, no music. No rap, no music. Capisce? Understand? . . . This is a place of business. Extra cheese is two dollars.”

In the scene before he goes back to pizzeria, where he will be
murdered by the police, Radio Raheem runs into another character, Buggin’ Out (Giancarlo Esposito), on the street. Buggin’ is upset that even though Sal “makes all his money off us Black people,” there are only pictures of Italians, “Sylvester Stallone and motherfuckers,” on the walls. “We shouldn’t buy a single slice, spend a single penny in that motherfucker,” says Buggin’ Out, “till some people of color are put in there.” Buggin’ asks Radio why he only plays Public Enemy: “Is that the only tape you got?” “I don’t like anything else,” replies Radio.

When he enters the pizzeria with Buggin’ Out for the last time in the next scene, Radio is playing Public Enemy on his boom box louder than any other time in the film, including the salsa music standoff. Hearing the loud music, Sal says to him, “What did I tell ya ’bout dat noise?” Buggin’ Out then rides Sal about there being no black people on the walls of the pizzeria, but Sal ignores him focusing on controlling the “noise” Radio Raheem has brought into his restaurant. “What da fuck!” he says. “Are you deaf?” It then goes downhill quickly from here:

**Buggin’ Out**
No, are you? We want some Black people up on the Wall of Fame.

**Sal**
Turn that JUNGLE MUSIC off. We aint in Africa.

**Buggin’ Out**
Why it gotta be about jungle music and Africa?

**Sal**
It’s about turning that shit off and getting the fuck outta my pizzeria.

**Pino**
Radio Raheem.
Radio Raheem
Fuck you.

Sal
What ever happened to nice music with words you can understand?

Radio Raheem
This is music. My music.

Vito
We’re closed.

Buggin’ Out
You’re closed alright, till you get some Black people up on that wall.53

Sal then loses his temper and grabs his Mickey Mantle bat from underneath the counter and uses it to destroy Radio Raheem’s boom box, which was sitting on the counter blaring music throughout the verbal altercation. After a moment of general and musical silence after the destruction of the boom box, as described in the script notes of Lee, “Radio Raheem picks Sal up from behind the counter and starts to choke his ass. Radio Raheem’s prized possession—his box, the thing he owned of value—his box, the one thing that gave him any sense of worth—has been smashed to bits. (Radio Raheem, like many Black youth, is the victim of materialism and a misplaced sense of values.) Now he doesn’t give a fuck anymore. He’s gonna make Sal pay with his life.”54 Originally it was planned that “Raheem would grab Sal by the neck; slam his face into the counter, and drag him the length of the counter,” per Lee in his production notes.55 But Danny Aiello, who played Sal in the film, objected that it was too “slapstick and had been done a million times,” so it was decided he would pull him over the counter rather than give him a “facial.”56
Either way, Raheem has had it with Sal exercising his power over him by telling him to silence “dat noise.” He retaliates by choking Sal in an effort to silence him.

As a counterpoint to Radio Raheem walking around the neighborhood blasting his cassette tape of Public Enemy in his boom box, a radio voice is heard throughout the film. In a journal entry on the film, Lee writes,

Throughout the film we hear a DJ’s voice over the radio, broadcasting from some fictional station. This device has been used to death, but we might be able to rework it.

The station’s call name is WE LOVE RADIO. It broadcasts from a storefront on the block. The DJ looks directly out onto the street and observes all the comings and goings. Passersby can watch him as he rocks the mike. This is gonna be very stylized.

The DJ’s name is Mister Señor Love Daddy, the world’s only 7-24-365 DJ. That’s 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. He never goes to sleep. “I work overtime for your love,” he says.

Playing on the final words of School Daze, “Please wake up,” the first words of Do the Right Thing could be the DJ’s: “Hello Nueva York. It’s time to wake up. It’s gonna be hot as a motherfucker.” Vicious.57

In the film, Lee decides to reduce the workload of this DJ from twenty-four hours a day to twelve hours, making Mister Señor Love Daddy (Samuel Jackson) the “world’s only twelve-hour strongman.”58 The first words in the film are indeed, “Waaaake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Up ya wake! Up ya wake! Up ya wake!”59 They are being shouted by the DJ into a microphone, but we don’t see this. “WE SEE only big white teeth and very Negroidal (big) lips,” writes Lee in the script. 60 After this, the camera rolls back so that we now see it is a DJ in a radio station mouthing these words. After a bit more radio banter, the camera pushes back further. Writes Lee in the script, “The CAMERA, which is STILL
PULLING BACK, shows that Mister Señor Love Daddy is actually sitting in a storefront window. The control booth looks directly out onto the street. This is WE LOVE RADIO, a modest station with a loyal following, right in the heart of the neighborhood. From his control booth, throughout the film, Mister Señor Love Daddy airs updates and commentary on what is happening in the neighborhood. Everyone who walks by the station can see him twelve hours a day in the control booth and, of course, can hear his voice on the radio by tuning into 108 FM: “The last on your dial, but the first in ya hearts, and that’s the truth, Ruth!” “I’se play only da platters dat matter, da matters dat platter and That’s the truth Ruth.”

Released in the United States on June 30, 1989, *Do the Right Thing* is a masterful commentary on race relations in America at the time. Roger Ebert gives the film his highest praise, saying “I have been given only a few filmgoing experiences in my life to equal the first time I saw *Do the Right Thing*. Only a few penetrate your soul.” After viewing it for the first time at the Cannes Film Festival in May of 1989, Ebert walked out thinking “Spike Lee had done an almost impossible thing. He’d made a movie about race relations in America that empathized with all the participants. He didn’t draw lines or take sides but simply looked with sadness at one racial flashpoint that stood for many others.” Also, for Ebert, “there are really no heroes or villains in the film,” although many would disagree with this comment as well as the one that Lee does not “take sides” in the film. Lee has often been asked whether Mookie did the right thing by throwing the garbage can through Sal’s window after the murder of Raheem by the police. However, he notes, “Not one person of color has ever asked me that question.”

Regardless of whether the film was too middle class versus too militant, or whether Mookie did the right thing, Attali’s theory of musico-social relations gives us a powerful theoretical perspective from which to consider the film. If the function of music under capitalism is to silence people, then the actions of Radio Raheem
point in the opposite direction. Namely, his journey through the neighborhood blasting a song from Public Enemy allows him to defy the silence of music under late capitalism.

While it is true that he is playing a cassette tape recording that was produced and distributed through one of the corridors of the music industry, it is also true that his journey through the neighborhood playing this song is not a passive act of listening. The changing volume levels of the song are determined by the power struggles he faces at different points in the film. The loudest live performance of the song is left for his confrontation with Sal, who is viewed by Radio Raheem and Buggin’ Out as taking financial advantage of the majority African American population of the neighborhood. They point out that Sal is happy to sell them pizza but does not want to celebrate their culture and heritage on the walls of his business. The loud hip-hop music is in effect a live performance of defiance against neoliberalism, and efforts to enact sound control over it are efforts to preserve the neoliberal economy of repetition.

The song itself, “Fight the Power,” incorporates various samples and allusions to African American culture, including civil rights exhortations, black church services, and the music of James Brown. Moreover, when Spike Lee asked Public Enemy to compose a song for the film about racial tension in Brooklyn, he “wanted it to be defiant, I wanted it to be angry, I wanted it to be very rhythmic.”

But recall in Attali’s political economy of music, under both the ages of repetition and composition, music’s power does not come from its lyrics. In fact, it has its power in spite of its lyrics. Again, for Attali, the political role of music is not found in “what it conveys, in its melodies or discourses,” “but in its very existence.” It is important here to recall again what Attali said earlier about the nature of power in the political economy of music in a passage that goes the heart of his biopolitics: “Power in its invading, deafening presence, can be calm: people no longer talk to one another. They speak neither of themselves nor of power. They hear the noises
of the commodities into which their imaginary is collectively channeled, where their dreams of sociality and need for transcendence dwell. The musical ideal then almost becomes an ideal of health: quality, purity, the elimination of noises; silencing drives, deodorizing the body, emptying it of its needs, and reducing it to silence.” 67 Attali is more concerned about the effect of listening to music than its content. The effect of “Fight the Power” in the film is not passive response but just the opposite: everyone who hears the live performance of the music has a reaction to it. Even the three old, black guys in the film who sit on the corner and talk have a reaction to it; namely, the music is being played too loud. In short, the various efforts to control the sound levels of Radio Raheem’s music represent various efforts to confront neoliberalism. Radio Raheem has reappropriated music in support of something beyond neoliberal culture. The radio station in the neighborhood serves as a reminder of the 24-hour, 365-day a week droning of capitalism from its own “control booth.” In their failure, Radio Raheem’s attempts to break this cycle are both emancipatory and liberating.

CONCLUSION

This chapter began with the attribution of godly power to sound recording and ends with a human-all-too-human youth, Radio Raheem, using sound recording to fight political and economic power. Whereas the history of sound recording reveals its power to give life and to take it away through the manipulation of information and knowledge, and sound control allows one to impose one’s noise on others as well as to silence them, the live performance of music offers a way beyond the political and economic implications of noise control. But, like sound recording, noise control is both connected to godly powers and has a long history of social and political use in the exercise of power.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, circa 3000 BCE, the gods were said to use their powers in the exercise of noise control: “In those days
the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamour. Enlil heard the clamour and he said to the gods in council, ‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.’ So the gods in their hearts were moved to let loose the deluge.”68 The Romans were the first to enact by-laws in support of noise control. In 44 BCE, Julius Caesar passed the following: “Hence-forward, no wheeled vehicles whatsoever will be allowed within the precincts of the city, from sunrise until the hour before dusk . . . Those which shall have entered during the night, and are still within the city at dawn, must halt and stand empty until the appointed hour.”69 In fact, most cities around the world exercise one form or another of noise control. For example, the city of Bern, Switzerland, has noise control legislation dating back to 1628, when it passed a by-law “[a]gainst singing and shouting in the streets on festival days.” Over the years there were many other by-laws including a number prohibiting music playing and music-making, such as an 1879 by-law “[a]gainst the playing of music after 10:30 p.m.” and the 1918 by-law “[a]gainst carpet-beating and music-making.”70

Set alongside the long history of sound control, the control of sound in Do the Right Thing can be put in historical context. But to posit Radio Raheem, a youth with a boom box who walks the streets of Brooklyn blasting it, as a prophet of post-capitalism only makes sense in view of Attali’s theses on noise control. Otherwise, he is just a young man who wants recognition in a neighborhood where race relations are always already a lit match in a fireworks factory. Still, the power of Lee’s highly stereotyped racial imagery provides a strong setting to stage a post-capitalist world awakening from the silencing powers of noise control.

If the age of repetition started with the words “Mary had a little lamb,” then the age of composition arguably begins with live performances that fight the power of sound control. Historically speaking though they can easily be stamped out with noise control
by-laws, and herein lies the rub of sound control. On the one hand, the biopolitics of the age of repetition are such that stockpiling death through vinyl begets a silence that can only be broken by live performance; on the other hand, although live performance in the age of composition breaks this silence and is life-affirming, it is only possible in a social and political setting free of the legislation of sound, which given its long history does not leave much room for hope—or a post-capitalist utopia.

After all, Radio Raheem is murdered for his efforts to challenge the legislation of sound, whereas Mister Señor Love Daddy continues to thrive in his control room. If Radio Raheem exemplifies the emancipatory powers of music in the age of composition, then Mister Señor Love Daddy might be seen as representing the controlling power of music in the age of repetition. From his control room, he observes and comments on the comings and goings of the neighborhood. Although he implores us to “wake up!” he is more a symbol of the endless droning noise of capitalism that in the end only brings about silence rather than the voice of emancipation. As he says, his 108 FM is “[t]he last on your dial, but the first in ya hearts, and that’s the truth, Ruth!” It is a truth that is written on the hearts of the members of the neighborhood like the truth stamped on the heart of Homer’s man with a mind composed of “a good thick slab of wax.” It is the truth of late capitalism. And, Mister Señor Love Daddy’s statement, “I’se play only da platters dat matter, da matters dat platter and That’s the truth Ruth,” might be taken as an anthem for vinyl in age of repetition. His “platters dat matter” are not the vocal group but the vinyl records that keep the neoliberal economy chugging along—the only “platters dat matter.”

Lee’s film only suggests one way it might get loud in a post-capitalist age of live performance. Another way is imagining more music in the streets and squares of America: spontaneous live performances that take music from the silence of headphones to the noise of speakers blaring in celebration of freedom from the
powers of noise control. Question is, Will they too be cut down through sound control like Radio Raheem—or will they be allowed to perform their music in the streets and challenge the power that comes through the ability to control sound in society?

Adorno’s concerns with the phonograph record and Attali’s theses about the role of sound control in social and political power were shown to provide the setting for a unique role for sound control in the neoliberal economy: namely, the invention of high fidelity as a means of sustaining the political economy of music, as established by Attali. If Attali is right that what we call the new economy—late capitalism or neoliberalism—grew in strength along with the development of the record industry, then the invention of high fidelity was necessary to ensure that the authenticity issues alluded to by Adorno did not stunt the growth of both the record industry and neoliberalism. As we saw, the recording studio became, in effect, the control room of neoliberalism. Although Lee’s film shows how resisting sound control—that is, the control room—has the potential to bring about social and political justice, because there is a correlative relationship between sound control and economic control, the emancipatory potential of sound is limited. In conclusion, if the illusion of high fidelity perpetuates the neoliberal economy, then the continuing practice of noise control protects it against failure. Only when it becomes loud will we have a definitive sign that the neoliberal economy is in decline.