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What was Lo-Fi?

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ABSTRACT

Recent use of the term “lo-fi” to denote a relaxing form of hip hop departs notably from its earlier use to refer to the poor-quality sound associated with music recorded at home on tape. This article reviews what lo-fi was, first by historicizing the category of “lo-fi” and its associations with poor sound, home-recording, and amateurism, noting that the relationship between these things was not necessary or consistent at the time, and then by theorizing an appreciation of imperfect recordings, which I liken to listening over a noisy channel of communication and which can sometimes suggest dramatic, socially resonant antagonisms.

KEYWORDS

Lo-fi; lofi; DIY; noise; cassettes; indie rock

Lofi Ping Pong appeared on the Nintendo eShop on 8 December 2020, described as “meditative rhythm ping pong . . . a rhythm game with great soundtracks in [the] lofi hip hop genre.” Its players return table-tennis balls in time with beats typical of the musical style popularized by a YouTube stream that began in 2017, “lofi hip hop radio—beats to relax/study to” (Winston and Saywood; Neal). “Ping pong” almost rhymes with “hip hop,” and the color scheme and brown-haired young woman of the game’s key art (see [Figure 1](#)) together evoke the stream’s accompanying visual of the “Lofi Girl” that the YouTube channel is named after, studying at her desk (see [Figure 2](#)). *Lofi Ping Pong* is not the only game to appear when searching the Nintendo eShop for “lofi.” *Slide Stories: Neko’s Journey* invites players to “relax with a soft lo-fi soundtrack” as they solve sliding tile puzzles. Another puzzle game, *TRIOS*, is based on math and makes the connection to Lofi Girl’s stream still more explicit in its subtitle *lofi beats/numbers to chill to* and offers “a selection of chill tunes and beautiful backgrounds to guide you into flow.”

What this brief sample shows, as well as the fact that lo-fi “to relax/study to” has become well known enough to cross into other media, is that the term “lo-fi” has come a long way from its mid-twentieth-century beginnings, when as an abbreviation of “low fidelity” it referred to sound quality deemed poor, inferior to that of “hi-fi” (high fidelity). The non-hyphenated form “lofi” can distinguish this more recent usage associated with relaxing hip hop beats (Winston and Saywood 52n1), but others re-hyphenate it when discussing the same music (Fintoni; Neal; Vigilante). On its surface the original sense of “low fidelity” does not carry associations of a particular musical style or even positive

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connotations, still less those of relaxation, meditation, chilling, or suitability for the combination of relaxation and work (whether “study,” ping pong or puzzle-solving) whose almost oxymoronic combination *TRIOS* aptly resolves with “flow,” a word that has come to refer to both.

It is not just with lofi hip hop that “lo-fi” has come to mean something more than “low fidelity.” In earlier decades, “lo-fi” meant something quite different. Consider the contrast between the “lo-fi” of these games and that suggested by the flyer for a concert named “Lo-Fi” that took place in New York City’s Lismar Lounge in 1988 (see [Figure 3](#)). In the hand-drawn style common in independent music contexts from which it comes,¹ the flyer depicts a figure, perhaps also feminized by what could be a dress, shielding her ears from cassettes and the jagged notes emanating from them,

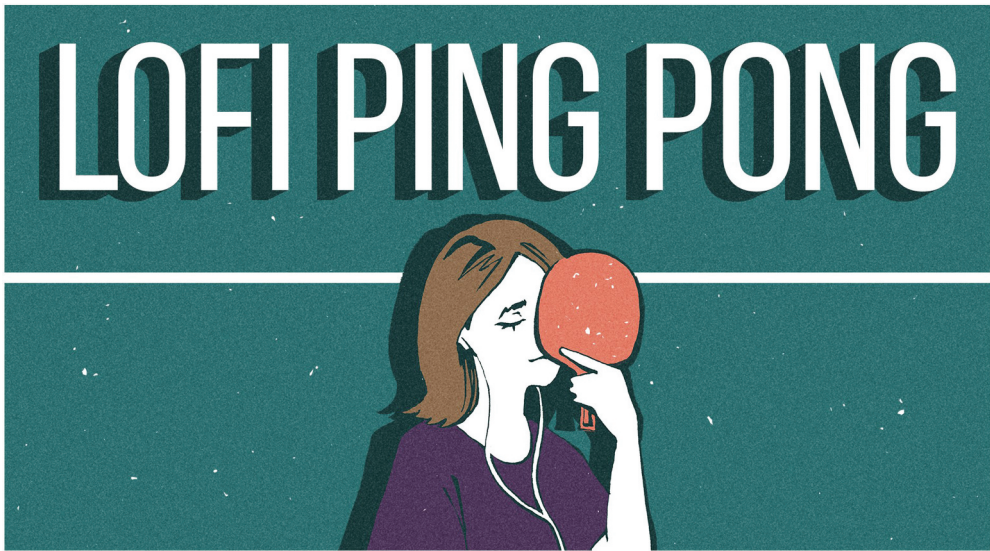


Figure 1. *Lofi Ping Pong's* key art.

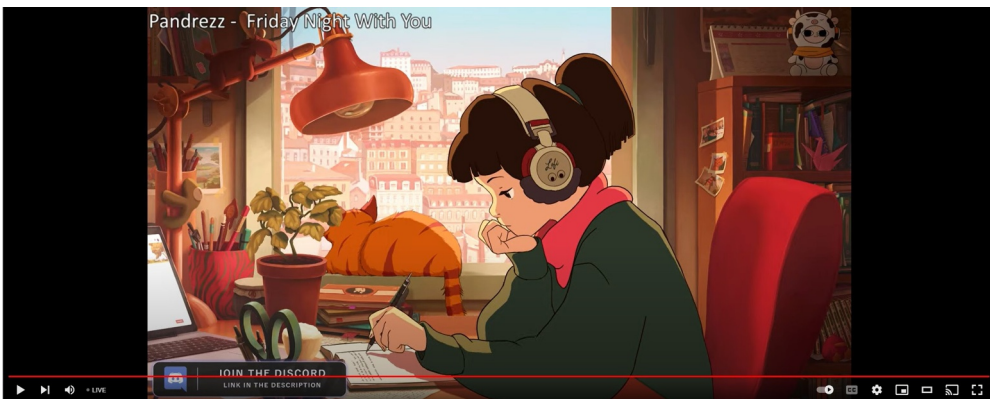


Figure 2. Lo-Fi Girl's YouTube stream “lofi hip hop radio - beats to relax/study to” as it appeared on 17 August 2023.

her hair standing on end—not an image of relaxation. “—HOME TAPES/POOR QUALITY—exclusively” reads her top, allowing the reader to associate “lo-fi” with the sound quality of the tapes, the music on them, or both. The event’s host William Berger also hosted a weekly half-hour segment on the New-Jersey-based independent radio station WFMU called “Lo-Fi” during the 1980s, where he played cassette tapes solicited through the mail, on which many of the acts appearing at the Lismar Lounge concert had featured (Berger).

WFMU was a key institution in the USA’s independent music culture at the time, and its magazine *LCD* described Berger’s segment as a “home tape showcase” (Radio Schedule) and “thirty minutes of home recordings produced on inexpensive equipment. Technical primitivism coupled with brilliance” (“This Turgid Sea”). This segment, its description, and the flyer bring together several elements under the heading “lo-fi”: recordings marked as poor quality, recordings made at home on tape, and a wider “technical primitivism.” In so doing, they reflected and actively contributed to an emerging definition of “lo-fi” that would become commonplace in indie rock culture by the mid-1990s. At that point “lo-fi” was being treated as synonymous with “DIY” (“do it yourself”) music, even though DIY did not necessarily mean that the resulting recording would have poor quality, or that a poor-quality recording was necessarily DIY. In fact, as we will see, the distinction between poor quality sound and music and the potential of DIY music recording was insisted upon by many advocates for independent music production on cassette in the 1980s.

Comparing these two contexts for the term “lo-fi,” one from the 1980s and one from the 2020s, we see significantly diverging meanings. We see different assumptions about the music’s aesthetic and affective potential and about how and why the music is produced and heard, and in neither case does the term merely refer to low-fidelity sound. Each represents an example of lo-fi appearing differently within different contexts or what, borrowing a phrase from Allan F. Moore, I will call different “historicized positions.” This article does not seek to consolidate or correct the meanings of “lo-fi” when they evidently continue to change, but rather to contextualize and historicize: to explore how “lo-fi” as a historicized position came to embody a particular conflation of various categories, perceptions, and narratives within—but, importantly, not throughout—independent music culture, beginning in the late twentieth century and later revolving largely but loosely around indie rock music. Because I am primarily concerned with this older sense of “lo-fi” and because these meanings for the term have lately been contested by lofi hip hop, the question in my title (a nod to Ryan Hibbett’s article “What Is Indie Rock?”) shifts to the past tense.

My first answer to the question “what was lo-fi,” then, is that it was a historicized position. My second answer takes a closer look at the aesthetics associated with but not unique to this historicized position, arguing that an appreciation of poor sound quality and imperfect recordings in general can be understood in terms of a noisy channel of communication, with “the music” as signal and the imperfections of a recording as noise. I will conclude by noting that neither this historicized position, nor the more dramatic instances of an aesthetics of a noisy channel, are easily applicable to the more recent milieu of lofi hip hop. In the process of answering the question of what lo-fi was, this article is also intended as a review essay that brings together and contrasts the many perspectives on lo-fi and its adjacent terms spanning

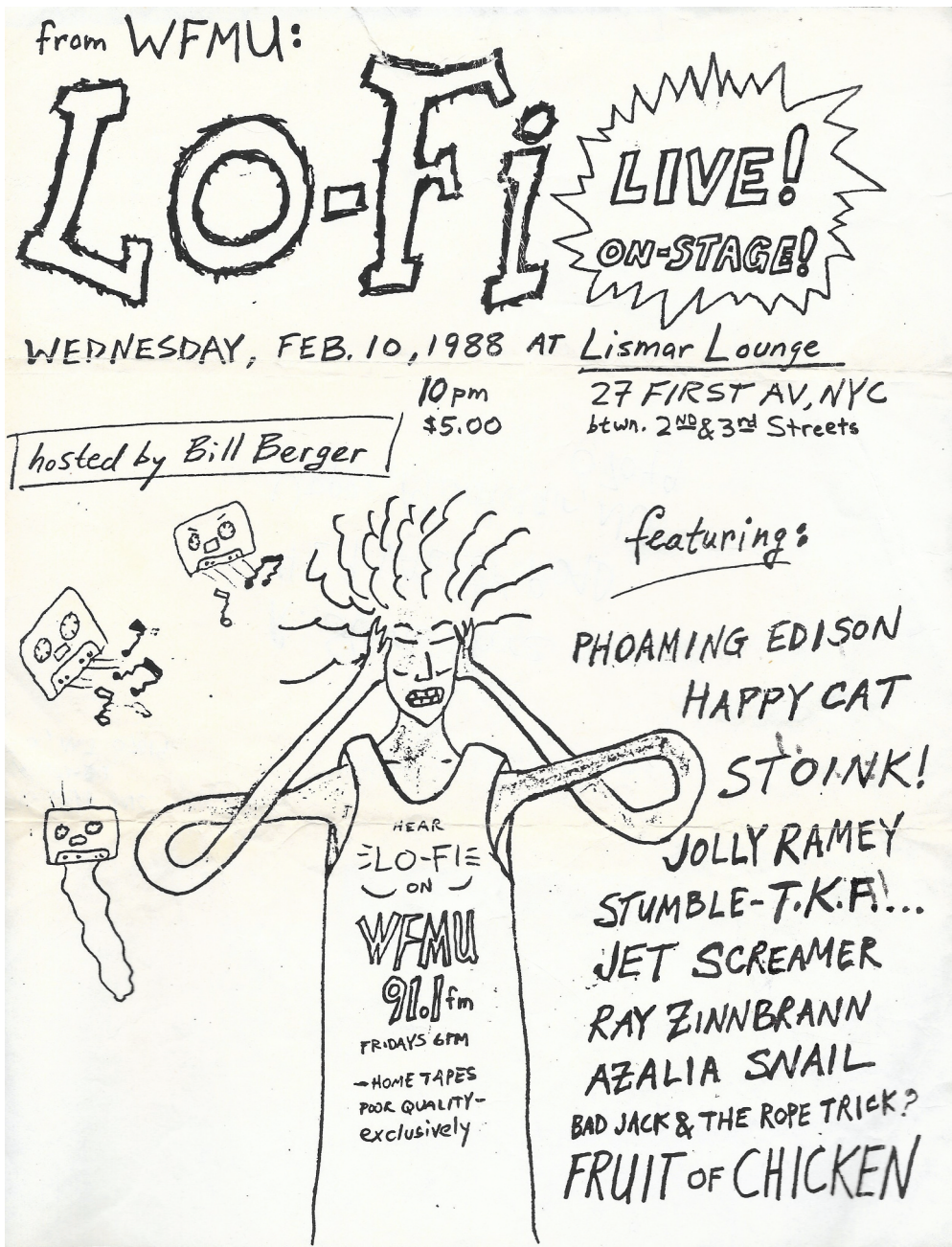


Figure 3. Flyer for a concert associated with William Berger's WFMU radio show "Lo-Fi" at Lismar Lounge, New York City, 1988, designed by Terry Folger (Berger). Courtesy of Ray Brazen, who played at the concert as Ray Zinnbrann. The album *Time Tunnel 1983-1988* collates Ray Zinnbrann's recordings from this era.

several decades of both academic and non-academic writing. If lo-fi is a historicized position, such writing has done much to reflect, contribute to, and sometimes question that position.

Lo-Fi as Historicized Position

The flyer for the “Lo-Fi” concert at Lismar Lounge in 1988 shows what I will call *the lo-fi narrative* beginning to take shape: the notion that music recorded at home on tape entails poor sound quality but is nevertheless worthwhile. Even though the flyer associates the term “Lo-Fi” with “home tapes” it maintains its associations with low fidelity, and in using the phrase “poor quality” and showing someone covering their ears the flyer plays with what it clearly knows to be low fidelity’s negative valence in wider society—that is, people’s evaluation of sound quality as bad, undesirable, or imperfect.

But before we consider how poor sound quality could be heard and appreciated it is important to note that this lo-fi narrative was not always true, even in the 1980s. It was not invariably the case that poor sound quality was considered an inherent, natural, or objective property of recordings made at home. Suitably enough, given the common suggestion of a causal relationship between lo-fi and authenticity (more on which in the second part of this article), Allan F. Moore’s observations on authenticity can well be said of lo-fi: that it “is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed” and “a construction made on the act of listening” (12). Or as Alexandra Supper puts it in her article on lo-fi, “a recording cannot be considered ‘hi-fi’ or ‘lo-fi’ in and of itself . . . rather, it is the contexts surrounding the recording and the conditions under which it is listened to that make it one or the other” (254; see also Coughlan-Allen, who uses the term “the lo-fi lens”). A benefit of the term “position” is that it suggests such contexts of listening *and* the viewpoint or opinion that might result, as in, for example, the statement “my position on this album is that it’s lo-fi, but that’s what I liked about it.”

We can think of music as being constructed and “fought for” as lo-fi within this historicized position in two ways: through perception and through discourse. Perception will be further explored in the second part of this article, but for now it suffices to draw on Eric Clarke’s application of J. J. Gibson’s ecological theories of perception to recorded music in “The Impact of Recording on Listening,” which gives much attention to noises of recording technology such as tape hiss and vinyl crackle. Like Moore and Supper, Clarke emphasizes the contextual nature of perception and replaces the notion of “fixed, objective properties” with “affordances,” which are “a consequence of the mutualism of environmental properties and the perceivers’ perceptual sensitivities.” In addition, because “perceptual information is always information *for* something . . . and picking up what is going on typically involves, or leads to, action” (48), affordances may involve negative and positive valences too, such as when a record is rejected or cleaned for being too noisy or appreciated for its noisiness, respectively.

Perception is cultural as well as individual, and as such the affordances of recordings are influenced by representations of and communication about recordings in their “surrounding discourse” (Jones, “Power” 349), which can take the form of conversations among listeners and musicians, periodicals (Harper; Newton), liner notes (Supper), or online forums (Stuhl). It is in such contexts that the narratives about production Brian Jones calls “production myths” can be disseminated and encountered (*Signifying*;

“Power”). “Whether a recording is considered lo-fi,” in such contexts, Supper notes, “becomes a question of whether these features are perceived as relevant qualities by listeners as well as performers.” Lo-fi is therefore defined by “a discourse which deliberately draws attention to . . . the lo-fi character of the music” (Supper 253, 258), is itself a “discursive formation” as Tony Grajeda suggests (“Feminization” 234–38; “Sound” 358–59), and for Jones results from “plausible routes to meaning and interpretation based on how the sound of the music engages with relevant points of discourse” (“Power” 349).

The following sections examine each of the elements that are typically conflated by the lo-fi narrative as historicized positions of their own, tracking their points of association within the historicized position of “lo-fi” while understanding that they were not always coterminous or related by necessity. As Jonathan Sterne observes about the ways that sound reproduction technologies have been assumed to progress over time, “Aesthetic pleasure, attention, contemplation, immersion, and high definition—these terms have no necessary relationship to one another” (*MP3* 5). One can say the same of lo-fi, the assumed opposite of high definition: lesser sound quality, home-taping, amateurishness, use of the term and reference to a category “lo-fi” itself—these things have no necessary relationship to one another, even if within some historicized positions it has seemed common sense to expect them to.

The Term and Category of “Lo-Fi” as Historicized Position

While the term “lo-fi” has not always appeared in discourse around music that could plausibly bear that name, it is nevertheless a good place to begin tracking lo-fi as a historicized position. Often spelled “low-fi,” especially before the 1990s, and sometimes intensified to “no-fi,” it began appearing simply as an abbreviation of “low fidelity” shortly after its opposite “hi-fi” became common in the 1950s for referring to both higher standards of sound reproduction and the consumer equipment with which to pursue them (Zak 44–48). Its meaning was self-evidently relational enough to appear without explanation, even in newspaper headlines such as “The Low-Fi Invasion,” for a 1964 article complaining about the “insufferably low quality of the sound” coming from truck-mounted public-address systems used for electioneering (Syrjala). R. Muray Schafer’s adoption of the term beginning in the early 1970s was similarly negative, denoting the noisy antagonist in his theories and ethics of soundscape: the “lo-fi soundscape” of the modern industrialized society, in which “individual acoustic signals are obscured in an over-dense population of sounds” (Schafer; see also Aragão). But, even as early as 1958, the term “lo-fi” was suggesting an imperfection that could be preferable to “hi-fi” if it meant the record in question could offer other attractions, thus giving it a valence that was not simply negative. In his role as a jazz critic, Kingsley Amis bemoaned the fact that an album called *Bob Crosby’s Bob Cats in Hi-Fi* had not been recorded by the original Bob Cats but by “an almost entirely new group,” exclaiming “for heaven’s sake, let us have the real Bob Cats, even in lo-fi” (Amis). Moreover, the headline of a 1970 article about historical music boxes, “It Was Low-Fi, but It Played” (Jenkins), suggests both that the term could go beyond sound reproduction

to encompass music-making in general and that it was apt to refer to archaic technologies of sound production, as it would in subsequent decades.

Although the term was used in such ways to describe sound quality in independent-music discourse beforehand, Berger's naming of his home-taper segment on WFMU "Lo-Fi" in 1986 in the New York City area, where many key independent-music institutions and periodicals were based, fostered the association of the term with the field of DIY production in general. But, as the segment's name and description suggested, it often held a punk-like fondness for examples that fell short of or inverted perceived norms of musical production (one that was shared by other WFMU DJs—Irwin Chusid hosted a show called "Atrocious Music" at the time, boasting "music that is, quite frankly, not good"—"This Turgid Sea").

By the mid-1990s newspapers and magazines were referring to a "lo-fi 'movement'" (Rotondi 49) and using "lo-fi" as a noun, one that referred to a particular category of indie rock under which certain acts were repeatedly grouped.² This implied or was accompanied by the lo-fi narrative's relating of DIY to poor sound quality and, increasingly, other perceived deficiencies in musical technique (Grajeda, "Feminization"; Grajeda, "Sound"; Jones, *Signifying* 42–98). A 1994 *New York Times* article was headlined "Lo-Fi Rockers Opt for Raw Over Slick." It was the year that Beck and Guided By Voices had become celebrated indie-rock acts, and the article discussed them alongside Pavement, Sebadoh, Beat Happening, the Grifters, and recent production approaches by Beastie Boys, the Breeders, and Sonic Youth. It defined lo-fi as,

Alternately called lo-fi, referring to the rough sound quality resulting from such an approach, or D.I.Y., an acronym for "do it yourself," this tradition is distinguished by an aversion to state-of-the-art recording techniques. Professional recording studios are often passed over in favor of four- and eight-track [tape] recorders. . . . Instruments and amplifiers also tend to be whatever's cheap and available rather than high tech, their sonic limitations central to the esthetic. . . . In a world of sterile, digitally recorded Top 40, lo-fi elucidates the raw seams of the artistic process. (Diehl)

This version of the lo-fi narrative goes further than the association of poor sound quality with cassettes—the term is interchangeable with DIY and implies an aversion to "state-of-the-art recording techniques," which are associated with pop hits. In November of that year the front cover of *Option* magazine (Figure 4) declared the issue a "Lo-Fi Lovefest" and listed the names of Liz Phair, Lou Barlow (also of the band Sebadoh), Pavement, Guided By Voices, Grifters, and Calvin Johnson (formerly of the band Beat Happening), with the feature inside echoing *The New York Times*'s account, especially of lo-fi as an active rejection of music-industry norms, as evident in its punning title "We'll Take the Lo Road" (Lips)—the article is notable for discussing the racial imbalance among the acts associated with lo-fi (Newton 53–54).

Soon such acts had become central to what amounted to a canon of lo-fi, one that was not truly consistent with its own narrative, having less to do with imperfect recordings or DIY per se than with acts and recordings whose sonic qualities were accumulating cultural capital within the predominantly white and male field of indie rock (Hibbett; Bannister, "Loaded"). One of the more overt examples of this appeared in the 1996 book *Rolling Stone's Alt-Rock-a-Rama*, where *Option*'s editor Mark Kemp listed the "Lo-Fi Top Ten" (actually twelve) acts as Hasil Adkins, the

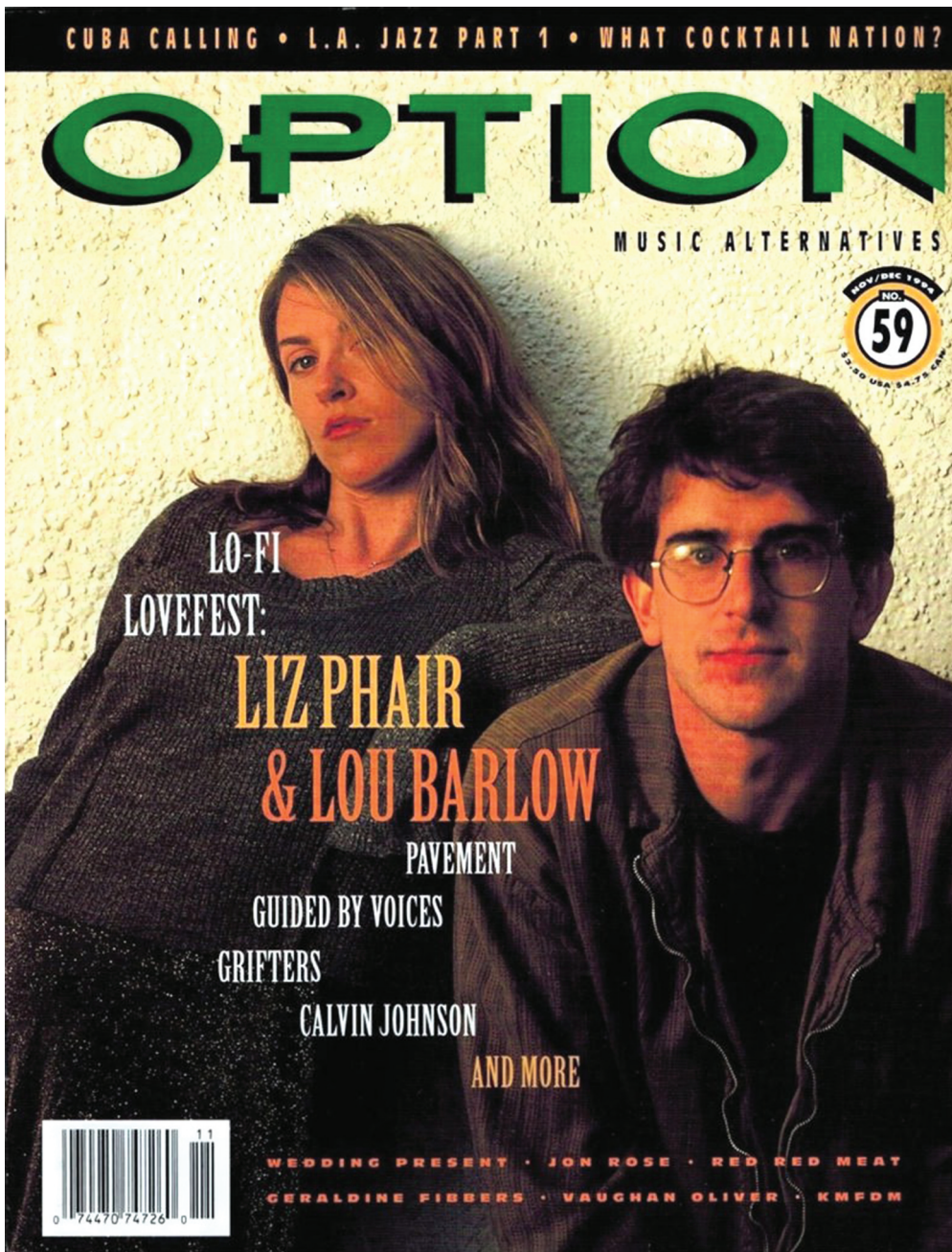


Figure 4. The cover of *Option's* November/December 1994 issue.

Velvet Underground, Half Japanese, Billy Childish, Beat Happening, Royal Trux, Sebadoh, Liz Phair, Guided By Voices, Daniel Johnston, Beck, and Pavement. Hasil Adkins and the Velvet Underground were both retroactive inclusions, who had recorded decades before the 1980s emergence of a category of “lo-fi,” and Liz Phair was described as “one of the few D.I.Y. geeks with a Y chromosome” (429)—a

surprising statement given the then-recent Riot Grrrl movement (see Newton 75–110).

Genre and canonism, intertwined as they are with identity, bear much responsibility for such exclusion from “lo-fi” of other musics that might otherwise have fit its definition during this era (Bannister, “Loaded”). Attention to hip hop in 1990s journalistic discourses on lo-fi seldom went further than Beck’s rapping and a mention of Beastie Boys in *The New York Times* article (Diehl). Hip hop is, of course, a “DIY” music, and scholars have noted aesthetics of imperfect recordings in hip hop moreover (e.g. Rose 74–78; Auner; Schloss 67–78; Marshall; Adams; Powell). Later studies of lo-fi by Jones (*Signifying*), Elizabeth Newton, and Joseph Coughlan-Allen have incorporated hip hop, and it has also been explored in the wake of lofi hip hop (Fintoni; Charnas; Neal). Electronic music tended to be excluded from lo-fi, too, meaning that the digital sound reproduction errors of “glitch” music in the 1990s (see e.g. Hainge) were typically passed over in discussions of “lo-fi.”

The term “lo-fi” has occasionally appeared outside of indie rock, often accompanied by the lo-fi narrative or a looser version of it. It has been commonly applied to another form of alternative rock music, black metal, since the 1990s—something tracked and questioned by Méi-Ra St-Laurent. Further afield, Albin Zak III uses the term to describe the aesthetic dichotomies of 1950s pop (48–51); David Novak explains that it authenticates certain forms of “world music”; Kenneth B. McAlpine applies it throughout his history of chiptunes to the digital devices of the 1980s that comprise much of that subculture’s music-making equipment, and Louise Meintjes uses it to refer to some of the sound produced in a South African recording studio. Finally, as well as referring to reductions in musical quality other than those that are the domain of recording technologies, as in the earlier example of the “low-fi” music box, the term has sometimes been found outside of music entirely, as in parts of Amy Spencer’s 2005 book *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* and in 2007 when a *New York Times* caption remarked that “stylish travellers seeking lo-fi experiences are cruising cross-country in Airstream trailers” (Silva).

Sound Quality as Historicized Position

Whether or not they are accompanied by the term “lo-fi,” the lo-fi narrative or its implication of a category of indie rock, perceptions of and judgements about sound quality are also made from a historicized position. This is most obviously true to the contemporary reader because the technologies of sound quality and the norms they relate to have changed over time, but even the concept of fidelity itself is particular to social and historical contexts of sound (re)production technologies (Sterne, *Audible* 215–86; Grajeda, “Sound” 360–61).

Judgements of sound quality made from different historicized positions can be seen to vary starkly even to recordings widely heard today as archetypically noisy, such as those of Robert Johnson. In his 2013 essay “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology” Mark Fisher asserts that “rock’s prehistory has only ever been available to us through a haze of crackle” and quotes Owen Hatherley’s observation that “listening to Robert Johnson you have, rather than the expected in y[ou]r face earthiness and presence, layers upon layers of fizz, crackle, hiss, white noise” (49). Compare this with

a review from around 1961 of the newly released Johnson compilation *King of the Delta Blues Singers* written for the folk revival fanzine *Little Sandy Review* by Barry Hansen, who would later become better known as Dr. Demento, DJ and champion of music he regarded as exotically eccentric. He remarks that “at no other time has a young singer of such genius, and possessing such pure style, been recorded extensively on first-class equipment. . . . The recordings, made in hotel rooms and offices are amazingly clear, brilliant, and lifelike for their time and place, and will give no listener cause for complaint” (11, 12). Hansen does qualify his comments with awareness of their context, and he is finding positive affordances and valences as part of the fanzine’s aim to inform readers on what is available in folk and blues music. Nevertheless, his review stops well short of representing the recordings as having poor sound quality, much less deriving the sort of meaning and fascination from it that Fisher and Hatherley do.

The sound reproduction standards of Fisher’s and Hatherley’s digital era no doubt played a role in throwing the noise of the Johnson recordings into relief. While it is possible that this meant they heard more and higher high-frequency noise during playback than Hansen might have done in 1961, the digital technologies of the twenty-first century had also made hearing analogue noise itself more novel, more perceptible, more meaningful, and more marked as being of imperfect quality than it had been in earlier decades (Encarnacao 62–64 and Adams 5–7 also make this point). This aesthetics of analog noise as archaic (Auner; Yochim and Biddinger; Jones, *Signifying* 153–211)—sometimes related to “technostalgia” (Van Dijck and Bijsterveld 121–66; Eley; Stuhl; Thompson, *Beyond* 3)—was central to the reception of new acts associable with lo-fi after the late 2000s, especially those who also adopted correspondingly archaic musical idioms from the twentieth century. Fisher himself did much to popularize the term “hauntology” for such music in the late 2000s (Campopiano; Roy 67–103), associating it with acts including Burial, the Caretaker, Little Axe, and those on the Ghost Box record label. Terms for other variants of the combination of noisily archaic sound reproduction and archaic musical idioms subsequently emerged and entered circulation, each of them suggesting the media and music of the 1980s or 1990s: “hypnagogic pop” (Keenan), “chillwave” (Carles), “glo-fi” (e.g. “Small Black”), and “vaporwave” (on whose lo-fi and nostalgic aspects, see Glitsos).

Cassette Culture and Home-Taping as Historicized Positions

Just as sound quality becomes possible and useful to perceive as imperfect from a historicized position, so does music recorded at home, on compact cassette, or “DIY” music in general only become notably “imperfect,” or even notable at all, from particular positions. One context in which such positions were formed and taken was that of independent music in the USA, which did much to establish a category of lo-fi in anglophone popular music beginning in the late 1970s. Its discourses explicitly spurned and critiqued major record labels, championing DIY recording and distribution as the alternative, regardless of genre, and did so especially vigorously when it came to what would be called “cassette culture” (Eley).³ *OP* magazine (1979–1984) was a foundational publication in US independent music (Eley 48), developing out of the radio station of Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, and its policy of playing independent records 80% of the time. When *OP* finished, two magazines were founded as spiritual

successors, *Sound Choice* (1985–1992) and *Option* (1985–1998), and by the late 1980s, the field was being covered by many dozens of fanzines.

In the mid-1980s these publications did not always conform to the lo-fi narrative, nor did they necessarily focus on “indie rock.” In fact, cassette culture (the 1980s independent cassette movement) and lo-fi (the 1990s indie-rock category) were divergent discourses, with Berger’s “Lo-Fi” segment representing a site of overlap between the two. Music by the canonical acts of the 1990s “lo-fi movement,” while often recorded onto cassette, was typically sold on vinyl and CD, making their analog sound quality seem all the more noticeable and intentional (especially on CD, an irony Pavement played with when they used a CD advertising slogan for the title of their 1991 EP *Perfect Sound Forever*). Cassette culture, on the other hand, was presented as a viable medium not just for the recording of music outside of major labels but its distribution too, and regularly went further by casting cassette culture as democratic, aesthetically diverse, and creatively adventurous in contrast to the perceived commercial motives of the major music industry. Periodicals printed editorials, articles, and letters to that effect and reviewed cassettes, including those sent in by readers. *Binary Load Lifter* began its Tape Reviews section by announcing “INDIE TAPES! They’re available by the bagful. We folks at BLL are delighted, because indie tapes are among the few sources of artistic expression untainted by market considerations. All have something to say, all can be heard by those who want to listen” (Rael). But they did not always position cassettes as “lo-fi” or as having poor sound quality. The cover of *Sound Choice*’s Fall 1985 issue (Figure 5), which took the “cassette revolution” as its theme, offers an instructive contrast with the flyer for the “Lo-Fi” concert at Lismar Lounge in 1988, showing the magazine’s clown mascot holding a cassette while throwing a record away. The only negative valence is of records, which the magazine implies it is “breaking.”

It was not only that a sense of poor sound quality could be absent or ignored in cassette culture discourses—they frequently emphasized and encouraged good sound quality. The Fall 1985 issue of *Sound Choice* and many other publications showed considerable interest in educating readers and potential recording artists as to the quality that could be achieved with the cassette medium and disabusing them of any notion that cassettes were sonically inappropriate for musical consumption. And while cassette culture in the USA was predominantly understood as emerging from “home-taping,” the causal relationship between poor sound quality and the “home” (or more specific locations with it such as the “bedroom,” “garage,” or “basement”), assumed by the lo-fi narrative and attested to in its production myths, was not a necessary one in its time. The highlighting of the home did make sense in aesthetic and ideological opposition to “the studio,” with its associations of the major music industry’s perceived standards and resources, but the intermediate term “home studio” nevertheless speaks to the continuum of possible arrangements. By the mid-1980s even stars like Kate Bush and Peter Gabriel were known for using home studios that, however well appointed, could technically have made them “home-tapers,” and Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska* (1982) was recorded on a four-track cassette recorder—but as major label artists they were not who independent music discourse was interested in. Discourses that might use a term like “home studio” tend to diverge from those of “lo-fi,” with the former referring to “affordable” equipment and the latter to “cheap” equipment. Synonymous terms with different valences perhaps, but these discourses did typically focus on different areas of the price spectrum.

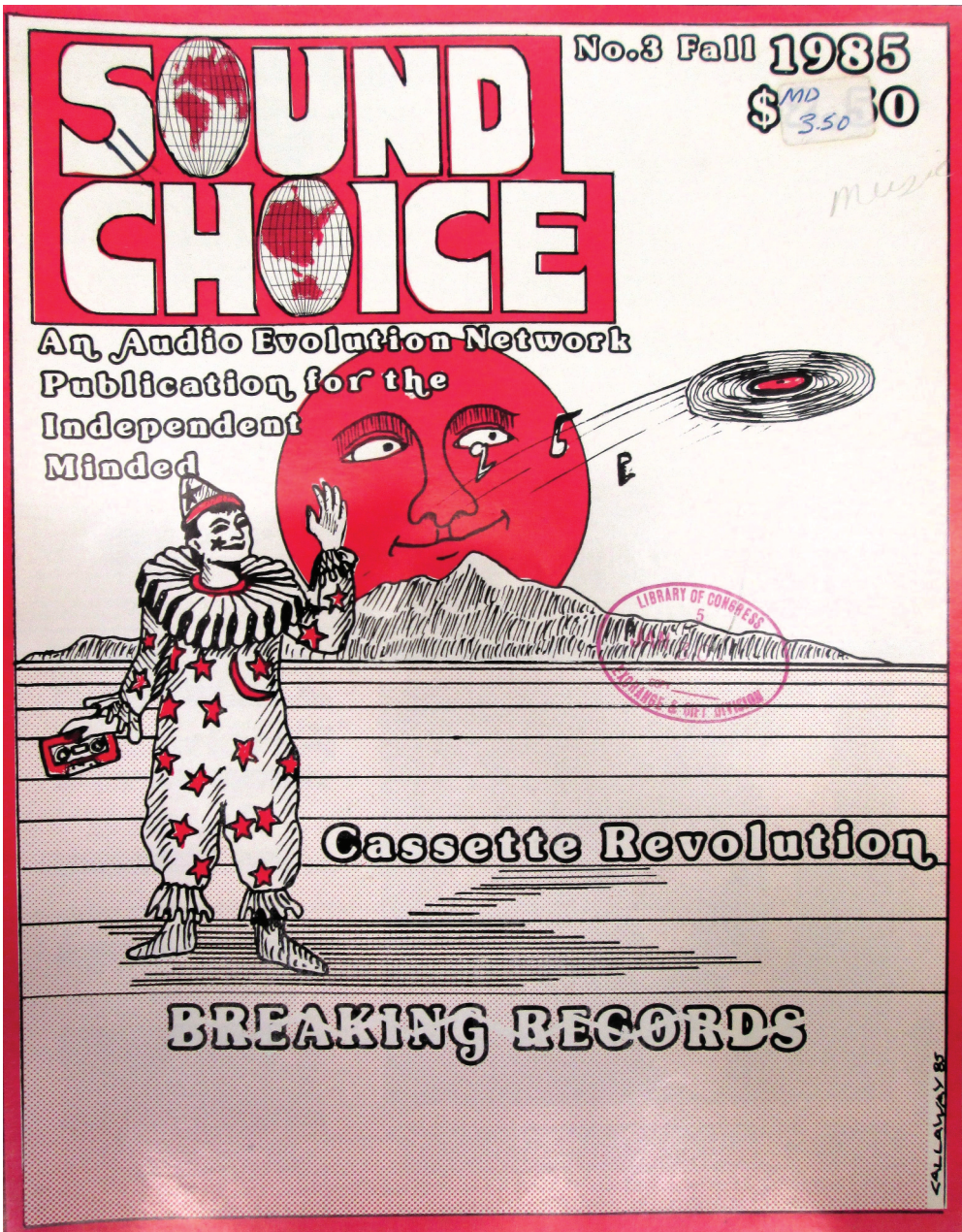


Figure 5. The cover of *sound Choice*'s Fall 1985 issue.

Multitrack tape recorders would sell for hundreds of dollars at least in the 1980s, while a recurring trope in the reception of artists like Daniel Johnston or Willis Earl Beal has been to inform readers of the price of their equipment, or name a brand or store suggesting the bottom end of the market: Johnston's "homegrown cassettes" were "recorded on a \$59 Sanyo ghetto-blaster on the cheapest tape available," for example (L. Black 39).

OP, *Sound Choice*, and *Option* promoted the home-studio approach by giving experts columns advising readers on recording equipment and how to get the best results from it. Studio engineer Craig O'Donnell began writing for *OP* in 1983 with an article on the sort of computer music rare in indie rock ("Home Technology") and in 1984 urged would-be users of a four-track cassette deck, its price given as \$400, to use only chrome tape, record carefully without overloading the signal and to clean the tape heads "every hour or so" ("Foster X15"). After *OP*'s final issue O'Donnell continued to write advice for *Option*, where he would observe that "cassettes have grown up from a cheap portable noise box to a very good sounding medium which we use to create master tapes and quality EPs and albums" ("Music Tech"). *Sound Choice*'s own "Audio Answer Man" column reiterated the call to clean tape heads because "dirty heads can give you bad high frequency response in both record and playback," and suggested regular demagnetization of them for the same reason (B. Black).

The presence of such a discourse within 1980s independent music suggests that its imperatives of DIY and home-taping did not wholly concede to the lo-fi narrative. But the advice given by the audio experts was evidently not always being followed—reviewers regularly reported poor sound quality and often held home-tapers to "professional" standards in the process.

Amateurism, Primitivism, and Slackers as Historicized Positions

In its first issue, electronic music fanzine *Synthesis* mapped recording standards to an amateur/professional dichotomy when introducing and justifying its "Hometapers" column:

These musicians usually write, perform, & produce their music within their own home, then record it on cassette—hence the name "hometapers." The term "hometapers" *is in no way* to be inferred by others as inferior musicians who are just doodling with instruments. Yes, there's primitive stuff out there, but *Synthesis* has also heard hometaper recordings that would make "professional" musicians jealous. (Marcewicz 2)

The author recognizes that the actual status of the musician regarding paid work does not determine musical or technical proficiency (see Finnegan 15) but nevertheless admires and upholds the high standards associated with professionals—they are being, as Moore put it, "fought for" within a historicized position. The application of such standards differed significantly across the pages of periodicals whose only cohering value was "independence" in music production itself—not a particular determination of what "independence" sounded like—and it became the source of some friction. One of *Sound Choice*'s reviewers declared in the magazine's letters section, "I am finding it increasingly difficult to align myself with the independent music scene in general. Amateurism is being elevated to style" (Vrtacek).

Amateurism was certainly being tolerated in some cases, such as when records had otherwise redeeming qualities, and was even enjoyed where it was perceived: "[T]his is amateur hour, make no mistake," wrote one review, "but [this band] believe in it, it's fun, and it might just work for you too" (DiMuro). The embrace of amateurism had been crucial to punk in previous years (Court 82–152), and it was especially permitted—expected, even—in association with the recurring trope of the "garage," which referred

both to an implied context of production and a style of simple, energetic rock from the 1960s (Hicks). An association between garages and independent recordings is evident in the naming of the short-lived section in the UK's *New Musical Express* (August 1980 to May 1981) covering independent records "Garageland," after the song by the Clash. Stylistic exceptions also extended to what one fanzine called "industrial and difficult music" that had "little time to worry about audio fidelity with their chain-saw screaming and saxes squawking" (And 13).

The embrace of amateurism often went considerably further, however, into a taste for primitivism. We have already seen that the term "primitive" was used, as in the description of Berger's "Lo-Fi" segment, to describe the "technical" matters of recording or the sophistication of the equipment used, but its usage in this era connects with a deeper primitivist aesthetics (Bannister, *White Boys*). While primitivism is most associated with early-twentieth-century racialized modernisms and with jazz (Chude-Sokei 27–43), an outgrowth of it can be seen in rock contexts since the late 1960s, fostered by figures such as Frank Zappa, Dr. Demento, critic Lester Bangs, and Irwin Chusid, who pursued it through his category of "outsider music" (Encarnacao 103–31; Marchesseau 45–54). Musical acts celebrated in its vein included the Troggs (e.g. Bangs 53–81), Godz (e.g. Bangs 82–92), Captain Beefheart (Ford), Wild Man Fischer (Sanjek), the Shaggs (especially after their 1969 album was reissued in 1980), Hasil Adkins, the Legendary Stardust Cowboy, and Jonathan Richman (Harper 103–11). While the term's connection with coloniality is typically less overt than it had been earlier in the twentieth century, it nevertheless retained what Colin Rhodes calls its reference to "someone or something less complex, or less advanced, than the person or thing to which it is being compared. It is conventionally defined in negative terms, as lacking in elements such as organization, refinement and technological accomplishment" (13). In their pursuit of authentic, unmediated creativity, rock primitivisms found Others beyond racialization, exploring childishness, mental illness, disability, social outsiders, rural hinterlands, and performance styles that could be regarded as "amateur" in the extreme, all of which could be paralleled in production myth and metaphor.

Primitivisms in US independent music of the 1980s, then, should be considered at least as much a product of taste as a natural or necessary consequence of independent cultural production. Its discourse enthusiastically facilitated the emergence of new acts that could be interpreted within this primitivist framing, most prominently Jandek, Half Japanese, Beat Happening, and Daniel Johnston. A review describing Jandek's music as "glorious low-fi tribalism" (SP) assumed—in line with primitivist assumptions of a lack of technique—that his guitar was untuned, when, in fact, the artist was deliberately using an alternative tuning (Marchesseau 33, 80–86). But "amateur" or "primitive" qualities were increasingly situated within the recording process itself, for which the term "lo-fi" was available, not least because these four acts each recorded themselves on tape, even if those tapes were later rereleased and more widely consumed on vinyl and CD. Johnston's recordings, which began circulating around 1984, were made single-track on a portable cassette recorder with a built-in microphone and had some especially perceptible degrees of distortion and noise. This, together with his instrumentation (especially his plastic chord organ), his lyrics (emotive, confessional, plausibly *naïf*), his high, sometimes fragile voice, and his hand-drawn packaging, meant that the distortion and noise

resonated especially well with the primitivist tastes of independent-music discourse. By the 1990s the discourse around him had become aware of his experiences of psychosis and consequent institutionalization, which allowed it to further interpret him as someone out of step with and unmediated by the expectations of the major music industry, its public, and the normatively “adult” world in general, all of which led to writers routinely extolling Johnston as authentic in the extreme (Harper 179–245).

Meanwhile the primitivisms of other acts, especially Beat Happening, could be regarded as affected, which in a context that prized authenticity so highly resulted in a more complex response—Beat Happening were described as having “a cultivated charm and primitivism” (Jackson). It was this complication of the trope of the primitive that saw it partly superseded in the early 1990s by another variation of the amateur—in this case the anti-professional—in the figure of the “slacker.” The acts that rose to prominence at this time were many of those covered in Diehl’s *New York Times* article, and they were perceived less often as naifs than as self-conscious, ironic, nonchalant, and lazy. These qualities (especially the last) were those of the “slacker generation,” a media talking point to which the new acts were repeatedly linked, their appellation and character coming from the 1991 film *Slacker*. In an article on “slacker bands,” the *Chicago Tribune* defined slackers as feeling that “poverty, or something like it, is accepted and expected. Too much ambition or success simply isn’t cool.” The writer noted that Pavement “avoid earnestness, guitar solos, virtuosity and technical proficiency” and that “even on CD, the tracks sound defective, as though they were being played with a dust-clogged stylus” (Kot 22). Under the headline “A Dylan in Slacker’s Clothing?” *The New York Times* described Beck as “determinedly sloppy,” his recent top 10 single “Loser” as “a mixture of self-mockery and sardonic defiance” and his “half-hearted” live set as “pure slacker attitude” (Pareles). This “attitude” is not the natural one of the amateur, of course. Rather it performs, for that particular point in the 1990s, a nonchalant non- or anti-professionalism that was widely read as a manifestation of indie’s skepticism toward industry-mediated stardom even within its own field of indie rock, which was now troublingly trendy, as addressed on songs such as Sebadoh’s “Gimme Indie Rock” or Pavement’s “Cut Your Hair.” What made this attitude ironic was that such acts could not escape mediation, not least because it was what brought them to the attention of the wider world in the first place. Such ironies of mediation are explored in the next half of the article.

Lo-Fi as Noisy Channel

Lo-fi and the lo-fi narrative emerged, then, from a particular historicized position rather than a necessarily coterminous relationship between sound quality, home-taping, and amateurism. What’s more, each of these latter three categories extends beyond what has been included in the category and canon of “lo-fi,” especially when it is centered on the 1990s indie rock “movement” bearing that name. Now that we have understood the specificity, inconsistency, and relativism of lo-fi as a historicized position and noted some caveats on judgments about sound quality, we are in a better position to theorize the aesthetics involved.

This section concerns *an aesthetics of sound or music in which musicians or listeners appreciate what they perceive as—or know can be perceived as—imperfections in a recording*. Whether or not this aesthetics ought to be given the name “lo-fi” is something of a moot point, especially since lofi hip hop seems less overtly interested in imperfections and the lo-fi narrative than the music previously grouped under the term. Certainly, this section will draw on a range of examples not limited to those that had been canonically associated with the 1990s indie rock category. Imperfections in a recording (henceforth *recording imperfections*) include the distortions and noises associated with sound reproduction technologies, especially those technologies perceived as non-optimal or to be used non-optimally, and, it should be remembered, are affordances that emerge from historicized positions. They include tape hiss, vinyl crackle, electrical hum, and frequency responses perceived as “poor,” but also the sorts of performance “errors” (e.g. “wrong” notes) and noises of the surrounding environment that might be perceived as detrimental to a recording take. Explanations and analyses of recording imperfections can be found at greater length elsewhere (e.g. Encarnacao; Harper; Jones, *Signifying*; St-Laurent). My argument here is that they are heard as differentiable from “the music” but that they do provide information meaningful to the interpretation of it in the same way that noise differs from signal within a channel of communication but can itself provide information. Since the relationship between noise and signal can be antagonistic, I also argue that lo-fi is not simply an enjoyment of recording imperfections, the finding in them of positive valences—they can also carry more complex, dramatic, even “conflicted” valences.

The first thing to note about the role of recording imperfections within this aesthetics is that they are perceived *as imperfections*, whether by the musicians or listeners themselves or by proxy, due to their awareness that other people will perceive them as imperfections. In other words, they are perceived as notable qualities of or events in the listening process and they are perceived as imperfect or nominally imperfect. It is not always the case that music that can in some way be regarded as imperfect is perceived that way, or should be. The distortion of rock guitar, for example, has a historical basis in broken amplifiers (Hicks 12–22) but the sense that rock guitar’s distortion makes it appreciably “imperfect” is often remote—as Robert Walser suggests, it came to be “perceived in terms of power rather than failure” by its adherents (42). Likewise, the timing of the beats of J. Dilla (an influence on lofi hip hop—Fintoni 345, 353) has at times been heard as “wrong” or “broken,” but is better understood as an innovation resulting in a rich new form of groove (Charnas).

Following from this is the second thing to note about recording imperfections, which is that they are heard as being at least somewhat differentiable from what is usually referred to as “the music.” Recording imperfections provide a framing for or commentary on “the music,” as if comprising an “outer” layer or “surface” of the medium, with its attendant noises and distortions. The differentiation between the two results from both perceptual processes such as auditory scene analysis (Bregman), distinctions between pitched and unpitched sounds, deviations from norms of pitch or timing, and from culturally understood distinctions between music and its means of (re)production. Surrounding discourses typically maintain the differentiation in some way. Sometimes listeners are encouraged to “listen past” or “listen through” the noise to reach “the music” (e.g. Perlman 787; Meintjes 220), a position which, to the extent that it is indeed possible,

stops short of an “appreciation” of recording imperfections. Such an appreciation is more obvious in the reversal of this position associated with lo-fi, which Supper calls “listening for the hiss” (257). But, typically, it is the relationship between “the music” and imperfections that is of interest to listeners, such as when imperfections serve to modify perception of “the music” in ways that can be heard as, for example, evocative, playful, or tragic. The relationship between “the music” and imperfection can become ambiguous or undergo revision when it is no longer just “the music,” “the song” or what are conventionally understood as “instruments” that are providing aesthetic interest. Writers have addressed this explicitly, such as in remarking that Daniel Johnston’s “tapes’ lo-fi sound is so cruddy that the Radio Shack machine [he] used becomes an instrument in itself, an ever-present rumble” (McGonigal 8), or that on Tickle Feather’s debut album “hiss, feedback, and even the abstract concept of cheapness and obfuscation were more or less instruments as well, coloring and shaping what we hear, burying certain motifs while embellishing others” (Love). The imperfections in question need not be those of recording technologies and so can even apply to live performance, such as in one review of a Pavement concert that wryly reminded the reader, “all that sonic shuffling and dicking about is part of the song, remember?” (O’Connell). Statements such as these still differentiate between imperfections and “the music.” Even if they are labeling the whole as music, the imperfections are differentiated as “instruments” or “parts” within it.

These imperfections are so important for surrounding discourses to mention not just because they are of interest sonically but also because they are understood as indicators of authenticity, that is, a lack of mediation (Moore 211–14). The mediation that is lacking might be anything deemed to undermine naturalness, immediacy, or spontaneity in music-making, or it might go further, lacking mediation by what is understood to be the aesthetic and technological normativity associated with the major music industry of the listener’s present day. As we have seen, the latter, as a strategy, is often considered to result from the countercultural disposition attributed the lo-fi “movement.” Yet many writers on the topic have observed that this entails a paradox because sound with imperfections that highlight the recording process is sound that is mediated (Lips; Grajeda, “Feminization”; Grajeda, “Sound”; Jones, *Signifying*; Stuhl; Aragão; Newton). Former *Option* editor Richie Unterberger exemplified this paradox when he explained of lo-fi that “the occasional shiver in the vocal, or even click of the tape machine or wrong note, let[s] us know that people, not machines, are behind the music” (321). In other words, machines that are audibly behind the music are letting us know that machines are not behind the music, an irony that has often been noted (Seiler 191; Perlman 791; Encarnacao 62, 64; Jones, *Signifying* 42; Monacelli 43–44). As Hibbett puts it, “in the strangest of ironies, the most direct evidence of production connotes its absence” (62). Sterne and Jones both call this a “conflicted aesthetic(s),” which for Jones also suggests ambivalence about music-industry mediation as a whole (*Audible* 225; *Signifying* 44, 52–61).

This paradox appears less acute when viewed in different ways, however. First, “machines” are perceived as such in degrees, especially when distinctions can be made—as lo-fi’s discourses did—between forms of technological mediation held to represent the state of the art and those that were deemed simpler or older, with each of these routinely being assumed to be “cheaper” or more “primitive” for being so. Second, even if technological mediation is audibly “present” through its imperfections, those

imperfections also indicate the “absence” (or relative lack) of a wider proficiency in technical and technological norms. Just as the 1990s category of lo-fi did, Wendy Fonarow extends an aesthetics of (non-)mediation beyond sound reproduction technologies and into the wider domain of “technical proficiency,” which “many indie bands are considered lacking in . . . this is viewed as a positive attribute within the indie community, because musicianship is viewed as formal training that distances a performer from the essence of music. . . . Formal musical training is seen as a form of mediation between musician and music” (42; Qirko describes the similar if more affected phenomenon of “dumb” performance in Nashville roots/Americana music). Third, an inability or unwillingness to conceal mediation can itself be experienced as a form of authenticity. As Emily Dolan observes, “the “honesty” of this music does not arise from the illusion of unmediated communication . . . but rather from openly emphasizing the process of mediation” (454), something that takes place both in the music-making and, as Supper adds, in the surrounding discourse (254).

But, despite the way that recording imperfections can be cast in a beneficent role as indicators of authenticity, it would be too simple to think of them as always having a positive valence, as being straightforwardly desirable to everyone who appreciates the music in which they are perceived. My use of the word “appreciate” here and at the beginning of this section does not only include, for example, “enjoy,” but also “recognize” or “acknowledge,” which do not necessarily entail such positive valences. As was the case with some of the writing on home-tapers, recording imperfections could be little more than tolerated as a necessary evil when compared to other greater appeals, or be permitted or expected in exceptional circumstances. But even the listeners who feel most positive about recording imperfections retain the sense that what they are hearing can be perceived as in some sense imperfect and in some sense differentiable from or within “the music,” even if only in the minds of others.

The differentiability of recording imperfections from or within “the music” can be understood in terms of the differentiation made in audio engineering discourse and communication theory between “noise” and “signal” within a channel of communication (e.g. Krukowski; Kromhout). An example of a noisy channel would be a conversation over radio waves accompanied or made difficult by interference, or by the weakness of the signal compared to the backdrop of noise. In an aesthetics of recording imperfection, the channel of communication is both the recordings themselves and the interpersonal enterprise of music-making and listening overall. The noisy channel applies to an aesthetics of recording imperfections in the narrow sense, since analog surface or electrical noises are some of the most well-known imperfections perceived in recordings. But it also applies in the wider sense of noise as “unwanted sound,” where it can include noises made by performers or their environments rather than those made by sound reproduction technologies themselves (and discourses around lo-fi frequently included these within their perceptions of imperfection). Further implications of noise within communication theory also apply, namely that noise can itself be communicative. In line with her argument that noise should be considered affective rather than negative, Marie Thompson draws on communication theory in explaining that,

In a communication system, noise will result in a deviation from an intended message for the sender. However, for the receiver, noise may play an alternative role—it may be a source

of new information that is of potential interest. . . . Noise threatens the reliability of the original message by distorting it and thus increasing its ambiguity. Yet, in doing so, noise has the potential to unlock new information . . . noise's "positive" role—its capacity to generate a new or augmented order of relations—coexists with its "negative," destructive role. (*Beyond* 54–55)

In this way, an aesthetics of recording imperfection can be thought of as communication over a channel marked—or "perturbed," a term Thompson regularly uses—by informative noise. Noise's "positive role" is how recording imperfections are perceived and how they function aesthetically: providing information that affects the overall meaning of the transmission, drawing attention to the channel that mediates communication (as Dolan noted) and to its condition(s). And again, even in this "positive" role, noises perceived as *noises* retain their social designation as "unwanted sound," even if only nominally or playfully. As Thompson puts it, "the noise within noise music can only ever be a simulation of noise 'proper'—a shadowy representation of its former, transgressive self" (*Beyond* 143). Noise becomes "formerly unwanted sound," "allegedly unwanted sound," or "sound unwanted by others," whether those others are the perceived purveyors of recording and musical standards, or other listeners projected as less adventurous in their listening practices (the "bad listeners" often alluded to in surrounding discourses—Harper), one of which can potentially be seen in [Figure 3](#).

This designation of sound as noisy is central to the significant correspondence between constructions of imperfect sound or music and those of disability. If disability is "culturally stigmatized bodily difference," with "difference" referring to "deviation from whatever is understood as normal at a particular time and place" (as Straus defines it in his study of music and disability, 9), imperfect sound can be understood as culturally stigmatized sonic difference, and in ways that encompass both sound reproduction technologies and music-making as a whole. Mara Mills and Jonathan Sterne show that sound reproduction technologies and comparative bodily capacities converge in concepts of impairment (Mills and Sterne), including as they pertain to channels of communication (Mills). Importantly, impairment does not necessarily imply a negative valence. Sterne effectively echoes Thompson's explanation of noise's "positive role" when he writes that "impairment may be a blockage, a failure, a defect, but it is also a supplement, rich with texture and potential meaning" (*Diminished Faculties* 32). When aestheticizing recording imperfections, the imperfect performing body can be perceived as a noisy channel in both a literal sense (in that performance impairments such as "wrong notes" become noises) but also in a metaphorical sense, with technologies of sound (re)production as a surrogate body, representing a musician's effort to communicate and perform. This aesthetics of impairment predates and probably prepared ground for the widespread appreciation of recording imperfection. What Laurie Stras calls "the damaged voice" is an example: it "continues to be accepted, even preferred, in many genres within popular music . . . in a reversal of what might be considered normate associations, damage here seems to be linked with concepts of authority, authenticity, and integrity" (Stras 174). Disability is a common trope in rock and its discourses, offering as it does "a symbolic reservoir for subcultural distinction" (Church 28) and can combine with an aesthetics of primitivism in the process, where it could be used in often ableist ways to understand imperfections in the recordings of the "outsider" acts (Harper 92–111, 223–38).

Dramas of the Imperfect Signal

When recording imperfections are heard as noisy impairments of a musical signal, “appreciating” them can be more a complex matter than simply positive or negative valences. The effect of recording imperfections might be minor, passive, secondary, only mildly intrusive—background information evoking the music’s material and historical contexts or even just lightly tinting the auditory scene. But in some cases, listeners to recording imperfections appreciate something altogether more dramatic. Signal (music) and noise (recording imperfection) can become antagonists, with the former communicating content and the latter potentially undermining that process. This tension supplies musical performances (including recordings) and their contexts (the interpersonal enterprise of music-making and -listening as a whole, especially independent music-making) with drama and narrative, pitting the presence and creativity of signal against forces that render it imperfect and would see it fall short. Thus, the noisy channel becomes the stage for conflicts that are both sonic and, as metaphor, socially resonant: *dramas of the imperfect signal*.

In the decades before the category of “lo-fi” emerged in the 1980s a drama of the imperfect signal—my use of the term “drama” echoes Straus’s use of it to describe the performance of disability in music—could be found in the damaged voice and its “rhetoric of heroic struggle” (Straus 177) and in the voices of blues and folk singers (Harper 78–80). It could also be found on bootleg recordings. A particularly famous example was *Great White Wonder*, a collection of Bob Dylan recordings containing excerpts from what became known as The Basement Tapes. Made with the Band in 1967, they have themselves become a canonical example of home-taping and recording imperfection (Encarnacao 135–38). “As benefits any enterprise in which anonymous promoters challenge the corporate omnipotence of [Dylan’s label] CBS,” wrote *The Washington Post* of the bootleg, “these tracks sound furtive and bootlegged, the recording quality being something akin to an Edison roll. The poor sound, however, cannot mask what are some fine—even great—songs” (Bernstein). Recording imperfections are cast here as a potential threat to the music, but they also afford a thrill of subversion.

This symbolic pitting of recording imperfections against the major music industry has been well investigated in the context of indie music (Fonarow 63; Hibbett 58–62; Bannister 117). Writing on lo-fi shortly after its 1990s prominence, Grajeda notes that “what is often at stake in the ethos of (anti-corporate) independent music is precisely what it means to sound alternative, to signify sonically an oppositional sensibility” and that the “economic struggle between independent and major labels” can be studied alongside the ways in which “that struggle is played out both aesthetically and technologically” (“Sound” 358). He cites Schafer and quotes Jacques Attali’s *Noise*: “noise had always been experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against the code-structuring messages” (363). While this socially resonant conception of noise allows a mapping of noise and signal to indie’s allies and opponents respectively (and by extension those of any counterculture or marginal or emerging culture, see e.g. Rose; Novak; Shank, *Political Force*; Monacelli) and as such explains much of lo-fi’s role as political gesture, it is not the only drawing of the battle lines that an aesthetics of recording imperfection can imply. Rather than simply siding with the noisy “counter-” over the hi-fi “culture,” lo-fi’s ironic “conflicted aesthetics” of (non-)mediation can

become an aesthetics of conflict, one that perceives the opposing sides struggling against each other within the musical channel itself. In other words, “listening for the hiss” can also involve “listening despite the hiss” or even “listening against the hiss.”

Noise can also represent the antagonist that is modernity, as it did for Schafer, because it can be cast as what renders signals perceptibly noisy (Mills 122–23). In technostalgia, the contemporary listening context establishes a poignant dramatic irony, because “the noise of the medium . . . was never meant to be noticed” (Thompson, *Beyond* 3). William Basinski’s *Disintegration Loops*, which digitally records the crumbling of analog tape, famously performs this irony (Kromhout 59–61), but such accounts of the affecting power of musical content’s struggle with the sonic consequences of time’s onward march are not unique to the digital era, or even the sounds of recording technologies themselves. Around 1960 *Little Sandy Review* noted a “general air of sadness and nostalgia” about *Been Here and Gone*, a collection which aimed, as many folk revivalists did, to record Southern folksongs before they disappeared. It found that “perhaps the most poignant sound on the record is the background roar of a tractor and passing automobiles. . . . But if the context of the music is decay, the music itself—as well as the performers—speaks of a vivid life” (Nelson and Pankake). Here a recording imperfection (environmental noise) is antagonistic, but it could not be said that the reviewer found the sounds of the modern machines agreeable, nor that recording imperfections were “part of the songs,” but the reviewer nevertheless appreciated them as a noisy framing within the channel that is folksong collection. In that context they become part of a socio-historically resonant aesthetics of the recording that ultimately celebrates the presence (“vivid life”) of the music and musicians, a presence all the sweeter for its being so embattled by noise.

This drama can also play out as a struggle to express oneself creatively within the material channels of the body, sound (re)production technologies, and the social channel of musical culture with its risks of embarrassment, all of which could be represented as antagonisms pertaining to the recording process itself, with both sides audible in the resulting recordings themselves. Importantly, this can also be mirrored in the struggle listeners experience, both perceptually and affectively, as they listen (Supper; Figure 3). This aesthetics of struggle is especially notable in the reception of Daniel Johnston, whose mental illness (usually referred to as his “demons” after his song “Sorry Entertainer”), musical production, and efforts to find an audience were discussed as struggles in ways that drew or invited parallels between them (Harper 223–38). One of the most extended and detailed written accounts of a close listening to a Johnston recording can be found in Barry Shank’s ethnographic study of the rock-and-roll scene in Austin, Texas, and it amounts to an aesthetics of struggle not just for Johnston but also for the listener, who moves from a negative to a positive valence over the course of listening to Johnston’s “Walking the Cow” three times:

It made me angry. How was I supposed to listen to the song when, in addition to all the other problems, it was buried by this undisciplined, unregulated throbbing [of the chord organ]? . . . But it was the force of his desire to push beyond the structural impossibility of this body producing a singing voice and this chord organ producing music, and the strength of all these wild intentions working together within the barest precision and organization of an almost rhythm, that produced the most pure and genuine display of imaginary sincerity I had ever heard. (*Dissonant* 155, 156)

One *Sound Choice* reviewer also used the word “buried” to describe a Johnston recording, hearing “his clear angelic and hurtful voice buried in lo-fi hiss” (James). “Buried” is a common descriptor in discourse on recording imperfections for what noise can do to signal and is consistent with the common metaphor of imperfect recordings being “dirty” or “muddy” (and even somewhat with the metaphor implied by the phrase “underground music”). Pavement had “pop melodies buried beneath rumbling tape machines and distorted guitars,” but within lo-fi’s conflicted aesthetics this could be heard as a slacker’s obfuscation of pop, coinciding as it did with the band’s “ambivalence about the nature of selling out” (Strauss; see also Dolan). Similarly, Guided By Voices’ Robert Pollard remembered that “if I thought a song was too creamy or poppy, then I would fuck it up. We’d put a drone through it or drench it in feedback. Or add a track of somebody snoring” (Woodworth 32; the song with snoring is “Ex-Supermodel”). In one recurring production myth (e.g. Lips 77), Liz Phair reportedly impaired her own recording process on the *Girly Sound* tapes so that her parents would not hear her sometimes sexually explicit music, giving it a complex valence: “This is her first batch of songs and her self-consciousness shows. Being at her parents’ house she can’t possibly weigh her words with a passion that might complement her music but the result is an unbearable nervous calm that’s unsettling and beautiful” (Yu 116).

Finally, dramas of imperfection and deviation from norms will resonate with other identity distinctions besides disability. Lo-fi, noise, and home-recording have all been discussed as involving potentially gendered distinctions (Grajeda, “Feminization”; Jones, “Power”; Newton 75–110; Wolfe), with Thompson noting that “noisiness has been understood as characteristic of certain ‘bad’ femininities” and that “‘bad’ music is often feminized; and feminized music is often deemed ‘bad’” (Thompson, “Feminised Noise” 86, 90). At the same time, the use of women in imagery surrounding lo-fi old and new (see [Figures 1-3](#)) implies women as the listening subjects affected by lo-fi, whether negatively (as noise) or positively (as relaxation and focus). Recording imperfection can also be heard at the intersection of Blackness and queerness, as Elliott H. Powell does with his concept of “the unmastered.” Noting that Prince’s album *Dirty Mind* was recorded in a “cramped basement home studio” and has “low audio fidelity,” he asserts that the “deviation from a standard studio album sound quality . . . both frames and produces Prince’s deviant sexualities.” Accordingly, “to be unmastered . . . is to run counter to the teleological, and by extension straight, impulse of unfinished to finished” (28, 29); Powell then analyzes recordings by Notorious B.I.G. and Lil’ Kim.

What Will Lo-Fi Be?

Note that Powell’s study of recording imperfections in the music of Prince, Notorious B.I.G., and Lil’ Kim has taken this discussion well beyond the narrowly defined, indie-rock-associated category of lo-fi and its canonical acts. Whether such cases should be included within the category of “lo-fi” is a potential question, but, given how specifically it was historically associated with white male-led indie rock and an aesthetics of primitivism and “outsiders,” the answer is not straightforward. Though not applicable to Powell’s celebratory essay (the term “queer” names a deviation from norms after all), Sterne warns that “labeling

someone or something as impaired is also fraught and must be done with care, lest it become an exercise of power, stigmatization and marginalization” (*Diminished Faculties* 204).

Moreover, the era of “lo-fi” that this article has explored, with its historicized positions, narrative of production, and aesthetics, may be coming to an end. To the extent that there was ever a necessary relationship between poor sound quality, DIY, home-recording, amateurishness, and authenticity—the conflation that allowed lo-fi to come into being in the late twentieth century as more than a passing term for sound quality—among today’s historicized positions the relationship is even less necessary. Simple, old, or analog equipment is in many cases no longer the cheapest or most convenient form of independent music production or listening when and where digital devices are ubiquitous.⁴

Lofi hip hop represents this shift aptly. The “lofi” in its name does retain some of its meaning as an indicator of poor sound quality. Its tracks often include a light dusting of the noise, distortion, or filtering associated with analog media, which adds to the nostalgia writers have noted about the style (Winston and Saywood 44; Fintoni 345) but which only mildly suggests “imperfection.” What’s more, these sonic characteristics do not give the same guarantee of material authenticity when they can now be digitally inserted with ease (Neal). And while the producers of lofi hip hop tracks are probably “doing it themselves”—making and distributing their music digitally, outside of structures of the professional music industry as late-twentieth-century onlookers would have recognized them—they are not especially celebrated or even noted as such in the surrounding discourse, not in an era when such beat-making practices have long been commonplace (Fintoni). Although lofi hip hop bears the name of Berger’s 1980s WFMU segment, “home tapes” and “poor quality” are no longer relevant terms, and instead of a dramatic, challenging, imperfect sound brandishing a negative valence, the listener is peacefully engaged in other tasks—there is no drama of the imperfect signal here.

As a widespread cultural phenomenon, lofi hip hop has stretched the association of the term “lo-fi” with recording imperfections and particular contexts of production, perhaps to the point of breaking. And although I have used the phrase “lofi hip hop” in this article, the “hip hop” qualifier is increasingly superfluous. Steven Gamble notes that “the music has also been referred to as chillhop or . . . lofi beats . . . though lofi is far and away the most common name, sometimes as a standalone label” (Gamble, see also Fintoni, 13, 345), which puts it in competition with late-twentieth-century indie “movement” for the rights to the category-forming noun “lo-fi.” A recent article by Nic Vigilante is careful to distinguish between “low fidelity” and the relaxing streams of “lo-fi,” with the latter term referring to:

An umbrella category which encompasses not only musical practices but also visual styles, discursive norms, and practices of self-making through aesthetic curation . . . as a technology, lo-fi is defined by its uses for affective regulation and self-making as its sonic characteristics. While lo-fi is etymologically derived from “low fidelity,” it has grown far beyond the technological and hardware limitations indexed by the latter term. (64)

Two recent studies on the wellness potential of lo-fi, however, have focused on the more recent relaxation phenomenon but assumed a general continuity between it and the earlier sense of the term. The first finds that “lo-fi music listening reduces state anxiety in young adults while promoting tranquillity, relaxation, and stress relief” (Dsouza et al, “I Would

Want” 19), and the second concludes by “point[ing] to the potential of lo-fi music to increase positive affect, decrease negative affect, facilitate goal accomplishment, and indicate virtues through character strengths” (Dsouza et al, “Vibing the Young” 18). This is, of course, quite the opposite of the listening experience portrayed underneath the term “lo-fi” in Figure 3. In observing this I do not mean to suggest that these new meanings of lo-fi require correction, that they should be more in line with the “lo-fi” that has been discussed in this article. I just mean to note that lo-fi is no longer entirely what it was. It has migrated beyond its original historical and technological contexts, acquired new meanings, and can now describe a relaxing session of digital ping pong.

Notes

1. In this article the term “independent” refers to music outside major record labels and does not imply a particular style or genre, while “indie” refers to the more particular forms of rock and pop that the term has been associated with (see Hibbett, 58–59).
2. I use the word “category” throughout for what it was that the term “lo-fi” as a noun was deemed to be referring to. This avoids referring to it as a “genre,” as many writers do, since lo-fi has also been regarded as a method or context for making music.
3. The term “cassette culture” has also applied to contexts at various degrees of remove from this particular US-based independent-music discourse and its assumptions of “home-taping” (e.g. Manuel; Foster and Marshall; Monrose; Simon). These studies note the relatively or potentially poor sound quality of the cassette medium—Monrose calls it “lo-fi”—but like the independent-music discourse, they focus less on that than on its implications for cultural production.
4. Analog sound reproduction formats remain popular and desirable among many musicians and listeners, of course, and have been preferred over digital formats for their sound quality, physicality, and even their noise (see e.g. Krukowski). The extent to which an appreciation of analog sound should be called “lo-fi” or will be in the future remains to be seen, but it ought to be noted that an appreciation of analog sound does not necessarily entail a marked appreciation of “poor sound quality” or “imperfection.”

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