

In Defense of Auto-Tune

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Blog post published September 12, 2011 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/a0d3n-xeh52>

Abstract

Lil Wayne, I Am Still Music Tour, Photo by Matthew Eisman I am here today to defend auto-tune. I may be late to the party, but if you watched Lil Wayne's recent schizophrenic performance on MTV's VMAs you know that auto-tune isn't going anywhere. The thoughtful and melodic opening song "How to Love" clashed harshly with the expletive-laden guitar-rocking "John" Weezy followed with.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Article, Authenticities, Music, Recording

Recommended citation

Oyola, O. (2011, September 12). In Defense of Auto-Tune. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/a0d3n-xeh52>

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Lil Wayne, I Am Still Music Tour, Photo by Matthew Eisman

I am here today to defend auto-tune. I may be late to the party, but if you watched [Lil Wayne's recent schizophrenic performance on MTV's VMAs](#) you know that auto-tune isn't going anywhere. The thoughtful and melodic opening song "How to Love" clashed harshly with the expletive-laden guitar-rocking "John" Weezy followed with. Regardless of how [you judge that disjunction](#), what strikes me about the performance is that auto-tune made Weezy's range possible. The studio magic transposed onto the live moment dared [auto-tune's many haters](#) to revise their criticisms about the relationship between the live and the recorded. It suggested that this technology actually opens up possibilities, rather than marking a limitation.

Auto-tune is mostly synonymous with the intentionally mechanized vocal distortion effect of singers like T-Pain, but it has actually been used for clandestine pitch correction in the studio for over 15 years. Cher's voice on 1998's "[Believe](#)" is probably the earliest well-known use of the device to distort rather than correct, though at the time [her producers claimed to have used a vocoder pedal](#), probably in an attempt to hide what was then a trade secret—the Antares Auto-Tune machine is widely used to correct imperfections in studio singing. The corrective function of auto-tune is more difficult to note than the obvious distortive effect because when used as intended, auto-tuning is an inaudible process. It blends flubbed or off-key notes to the nearest true semi-tone to create the effect of perfect singing every time. The more off-key a singer is, the harder it is to hide the use of the technology. Furthermore, to make melody out of talking or rapping the sound has to be pushed to the point of sounding robotic.



Antares Auto-Tune 7 Interface

The dismissal of auto-tuned acts is usually made in terms of a comparison between the modified recording and what is possible in live performance, like indie folk singer Neko Case's [extended tongue-lashing in *Stereogum*](#). Auto-tune makes it so that *anyone* can sing whether they have talent or not, or so the criticism goes, putting determination of talent before evaluation of the outcome. This simple critique conveniently ignores how recording technology has long shaped our expectations in popular music and for live performance. Do we consider how many takes were required for Patti LaBelle to record “Lady Marmalade” when we listen? Do we speculate on whether spliced tape made up for the effects of a fatiguing day of recording? Chances are that even your favorite and most gifted singer has benefited from some form of technology in recording their work. When someone argues that auto-tune allows *anyone* to sing, what they are really complaining about is that an illusion of authenticity has been dispelled. My question in response is: So what? Why would it so bad if *anyone* could be a singer through Auto-tuning technology? What is really so threatening about its use?

As Walter Benjamin writes in [“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”](#) the threat to art presented by mechanical reproduction emerges from the inability for its authenticity to be reproduced—but authenticity is a shibboleth. He explains that what is really threatened is the authority of the original; but how do we determine what is original in a field where the influences of live performance and record artifact are so interwoven? Auto-tune represents just another step forward in undoing the illusion of art’s aura. It is not the quality of art that is endangered by mass access to its creation, but rather the authority of cultural arbiters and the ideological ends they serve.

Auto-tune supposedly obfuscates one of the indicators of authenticity, imperfections in the work of art. However, recording technology already made error less notable as a sign of authenticity to the point where the near perfection of recorded music becomes the sign of authentic talent and the standard to which live performance is compared. We expect the artist to perform the song as we have heard it in countless replays of the single, ignoring that the corrective technologies of recording shaped the contours of our understanding of the song.

In this way, we can think of the audible auto-tune effect is actually re-establishing authenticity by making itself transparent. An auto-tuned song establishes its authority by casting into doubt the ability of any art to be truly authoritative and owning up to that lack. Listen to the auto-tuned hit “Blame It” by Jaime Foxx, featuring [T-Pain](#), and note how their voices are made nearly indistinguishable by the auto-tune effect.



<https://youtu.be/2Jw24LbeV-w>

It might be the case that anyone is singing that song, but that doesn’t make it less bumping and less catchy—in fact, I’d argue the slippage makes it *catchier*. The auto-tuned voice is the sound of a democratic voice. There isn’t much [precedent for actors becoming successful singers](#), but “Blame It” provides evidence of the transcendent power of auto-tune allowing anyone to participate in art and culture making. As Benjamin reminds us, “The fact that the new mode of participation first appeared in a disreputable form must not confuse the spectator.” The fact that “anyone” can do it increases possibilities and casts all-encompassing dismissal of auto-tune as reactionary and elitist.

<https://youtu.be/mEO98qTDyPU>

Mechanical reproduction may “pry an object from its shell” and destroy its aura and authority—demonstrating the democratic possibilities in art as it is repurposed—but I contend that auto-tune goes one step further. It pries singing free from the tyranny of talent and its proscriptive aesthetics. It undermines the authority of the arbiters of talent and lets anyone potentially take part in public musical vocal expression. Even someone like Antoine Dodson, whose [rant on the local news](#), ended up a catchy internet hit thanks to the [Songify project](#).



<https://youtu.be/hMtZfW2z9dw>

Auto-tune represents a democratic impulse in music. It is another step in the increasing access to cultural production, going beyond special classes of people in social or economic position to determine what is worthy. Sure, not everyone can afford the Antares Auto-Tune machine, but recent history has demonstrated that such technologies become increasingly affordable and more widely available. Rather than cold and soulless, the mechanized voice can give direct access to the pathos of melody when used by those whose natural talent is not for singing. Listen to [Kanye West's 808s & Heartbreak](#), or (again) Lil Wayne's "How To Love." These artists aren't trying to get one over on their listeners, but just the opposite, they want to evoke an earnestness that they feel can only be expressed through the singing voice. Why would you want to resist a world where anyone could sing their hearts out?



<https://youtu.be/y8Gf4-eT3w0>

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