

SO! Reads: Damon Krukowski's The New Analog

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Abstract

Analog revival has gained traction across many media in recent years, but perhaps nowhere so strikingly as in sound. The shifting formats and fortunes of a digitally reshaped music industry invite, for many, the counterposition of a bright nostalgic picture.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Book Review, Digital Media, History, Music, Noise

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Analog revival has gained traction across many media in recent years, but perhaps nowhere so strikingly as in sound. The shifting formats and fortunes of a digitally reshaped music industry invite, for many, the counterposition of a bright nostalgic picture. Yet artists and engineers whose work has spanned the transition from analog to digital sound find that the romanticization of the former can have a weird overreach. For example, when Dave Grohl produced a digital-decrying documentary on the LA studio *Sound City*, engineer Larry Crane **was bemused** that “Grohl seems to be attributing the arc of his career to the magic in a Neve console.” Recordists like Crane find themselves in between the Scylla and Charybdis of digital-era music: on one side, the embrace of new tools that are as entangled with corporate control structures as they are convenient; on the other, a skepticism that overshoots its mark, fetishizing old technologies and cementing a previous generation’s in-crowd as gatekeepers. Decades after digital media triggered one of the most momentous transitions in sound recording, the debate around their use is anything but settled. Tied up in this contest are questions of how and what pre-digital media will be preserved, but also problems like whose use of technology in music-making constitutes authentic talent and who has authority in the determination.



When Damon Krukowski steers into these waters with *The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World* (The New Press: 2017), he is quick to qualify that his memorializing of pre-digital practices “is hardly a Luddite’s call” (12). Noting the “all-or nothing response” that “dominates popular discussion of the many anxieties provoked by the digital revolution” (9), Krukowski contrasts the disruption-embracing “clean break” with life on the “technological island” (8) of confining one’s practice to outmoded materials. Addressing a reader who lives more or less contentedly in a contemporary media world, he

speaks as a kind of expatriate of the analog island. He, too, lives in the digital present, but he sees it through the lens of decades spent working with and listening through analog machines. His project of defending analog listening practices takes inspiration from the efforts of urbanist Jane Jacobs, who labored to turn back the tide of redevelopment and suburbanization by celebrating the organic functionality of city life. His central argument for preservation is that “*what we are losing in the demolition of analog media is noise*” (197, emphasis original). Noise becomes a character in *The New Analog* akin to the city block in Jacobs’s work: a wrongly maligned figure that has quietly formed the basis of experience and utility in the old mode.



<https://youtu.be/mjEg7tChDrk>

Though Krukowski’s definition of noise is flexible in some ways, he casts the digital as its uncompromising antithesis. This position precludes what could make the book more forward-looking in its aim: a consideration that noise might become a new kind of character in the digital realm rather than disappearing at its edge. Noise shows up in analog media as buzzing undercurrents and as modes of distortion when electrical signals exceed their ranges; digital media, while lacking these, are replete with moments of failure when a system is fed the wrong kind of information or pushed beyond its intended bounds. In their repetition, these moments of error become a new kind of noise that, just like analog noise, forms an unremovable layer of our experience in mediated environments. By declining to look for digital noise and instead focusing so squarely on noise as something lost to the digital transition, Krukowski misses a chance to center a more significant linkage with Jacobs: many of the problems he sees in digital-era sound are not due to the inherent nature of digital media but rather to the same motives of control and segregation underpinning the drive toward suburbanization.

Yet his original and thoughtfully cast historical route points us toward these culprits, even when the language drifts toward a more technologically deterministic stance. It is thus that his book still provides a vibrant body of historical consideration we can leverage in using noise to reshape our digital ways of listening. The moments when Krukowski lets technology stand in for the human motives that construct it give unfortunate cover to what should be the targets of such a critique. But his real concern toward the digital era arises from specific changes in the

landscape of aural awareness, and he ultimately succeeds in the task of elevating his argument above the cliché of deterministic digital-bashing by setting its true focus not on the digital but on the era.



headphones by Flickr user Chris,
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Readers might be surprised, for instance, to discover that *The New Analog*'s first chapter covers a development in sound — the transition from mono to stereo — that has nothing to do with digitization at its outset. The chapter narrates the release of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* as a critical moment in consumer audio's treatment of headphones as the ideal listening space. This movement toward individualized experience becomes a crucial part of setting the stage for the actual entrance of the digital. The design of digital media, Krukowski demonstrates, has not just carried forward this trend but absorbed it as a guiding principle, and has effected the same transformation not just in listening to music but across all kinds of daily situations. "The stream of digital information can put each of us in a different space than the others, even as we hurtle together through a tunnel on fixed tracks," (49) Krukowski observes of the changed social experience of riding a subway. The comment makes an easy metaphoric return to music: digital design is now funneling sonic experience into a small number of streaming platforms, each promoted on the appeal of moving out of a collective listening space into one of personal curation. Claiming that a dangerous disorientation can arise in the separation of such neatly personalized spaces from their messier surroundings, the chapter closes with a cautionary tone: bad things can happen when we follow along with the digital logic of turning a once noisy situation into "a stream that is *signal only*" and when we stop "*paying attention to noise*." (51, emphasis original).

Noise closes out each chapter, constituting the shared floor on which the book's arguments stand. This construction calls for scrutiny, because noise is a notoriously slippery figure. As Marie Thompson [notes](#) in her recent interview with *SO!*, subjective and objective definitions both

lay claim to noise, bringing along problems of politicized value judgment and erased context. At the same time, the term's many meanings (electrical, legal, musical, etc.) serve as useful bridges. In *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience*, Aden Evens uses noise as a primary example when he suggests a “productive ambiguity” can prompt connections that help different disciplines approach meeting points. Krukowski would, it seems, endorse this idea. He couples his formulation of noise to that of analog — an analog medium is identifiable by its noisiness, and noise is the substrate by which meaning takes hold in an analog medium.

Is it fair, though, to chain the figure of noise so tightly to analog recording that we must say it is wholly lost in the move to digital? In arguing that digitally mediated communication lacks the analog mode's quality of perceivable distance, Krukowski lists perceptual coding — the application of “psychoacoustic research to digital sound processing” (75) — as one culprit. Jonathan Sterne, in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, points to perceptual coding's advent as a moment when noise was domesticated. Where engineers had long sought to minimize noise, perceptual coding meant that “communication engineering exhibited a new attitude toward noise. Once you can use signal to hide noise, the game is up. Noise ceases to matter as a perceptual category.” This change in noise's status does not eradicate it or lessen its importance, though. According to Sterne, this domestication made noise more available as a site for artistic exploration and subversion. But if noise is a key foundation on which we find meaning through listening, as Krukowski compellingly argues, and noise has been subjected to a great domestication, what does that say about the forces at work upon our listening?



A fascinating answer emerges in a thread that pops up multiple times across Krukowski's anecdotes: the relationship between patriarchal domesticity and the shaping of digital sound. In the chapter on stereo, he includes an ad from a 1962 *Playboy* issue where a man carries a woman as if across a threshold; she, in turn, holds a stereo set in its portable case. The ad pairs the stereo and the wife as two laudable choices in the man's domestic assemblage. Both are manageable enough for him to carry home, yet both promise to extend his control — Krukowski notes that such marketing material touted stereo products as letting their owners occupy “the producer's chair” (28) by granting listeners new agency over the mix. That focus on idealized male consumers echoes still through gendered suppression in

musical exchange: as Elizabeth Newton [writes](#), “Though women have collected vinyl since the inception of the medium, female collectors, like the women musicians being collected, often lack representation in public space that is commensurate with their actual involvement.”

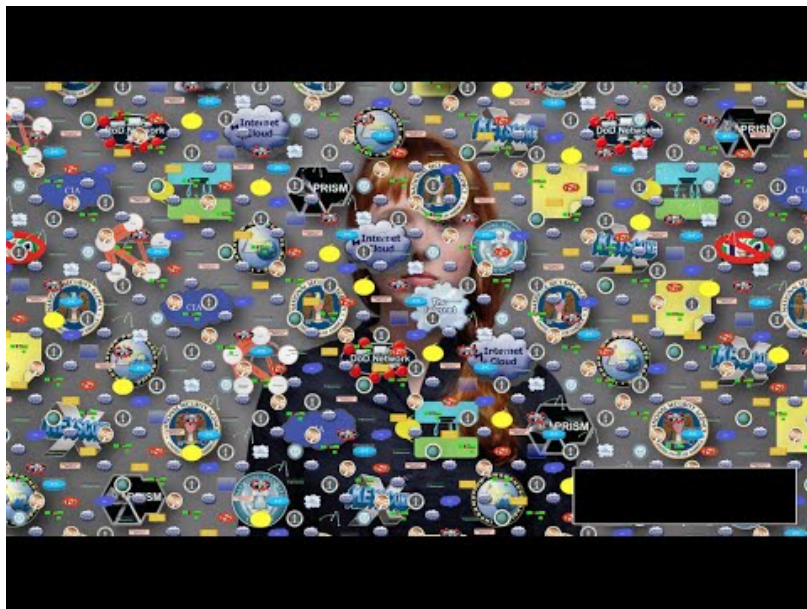
True to the analogy with Jane Jacobs's struggle against the developer Robert Moses, the patriarchal force that has ingrained itself so thoroughly in digital audio is also a suburbanizing one, keyed to a politics of racial segregation that frequently cites noise as a justification. In [“‘Just Be Quiet Pu-leeze’: The New York Amsterdam News Fights the Postwar ‘Campaign against Noise,’”](#) Jennifer Stoeber documents how “white press discourse on Puerto Rican migration firmly attached ‘noise’ to the voices, bodies, and neighborhoods of Puerto Rican migrants — portraying white flight to the suburbs as a justifiable escape to suburban refuges of peace and quiet and targeting urban areas such as Harlem in ‘antinoise’ campaigns” (PAGE). Regina Bradley traces this “connection between whiteness and quiet” through to a contemporary moment in her *SO!* post [“Fear of a Black \(in the\) Suburb.”](#) The history of racially targeted noise ordinances intersects Krukowski's narration of the proto-digital movement toward private listening. He quotes LL Cool J's “I Can't Live Without My Radio” as a noise-ordinance-defying affirmation of boombox listening, the antithesis of headphones and their sonic compartmentalization. Dwelling on the song's line “Terrorizing my neighbors with the heavy bass,” he points to the artist's intentional use of noise as a political implement, bound up jointly in his listening and his music making.

<https://youtu.be/qqw2uby0dzc>

For Krukowski, the song is noteworthy in demonstrating a practice lost to the wave of noise-eradicating digital development in sound. If we approach it with the consideration that noise might not have been *lost* but rather domesticated, however, it serves more as a guidepost. Were he looking to LL Cool J's example as one in need of a digital-era parallel, Krukowski might arrive at a different treatment of Kanye West's post-release revisions of his album *The Life of Pablo* than he gives later in the book. Rather than describing West's changes as “art severed from its own history” (169), he could instead credit the album's uniquely digital instability as a moment of usurping the corporate platform as the arbiter of a record's final version — an instance of harnessing digital noise within a digital environment to reorient its assumed parameters of authority and a prompt for listeners to consider their own role in deciding what version of the text should prevail.

Though Krukowski declines to bring it to the forefront, the involvement of a domesticating and segregating force lends further weight and precision to *The New Analog's* historical argument. Returning to his invocation of Jane Jacobs, Krukowski analogizes the dichotomy of street and home with that of analog and digital. “Noise has a value of its own—the value of shared space and time,” he writes. “The urban spaces we occupy are built on that commonality. The street is a noisy place. And *the street has value*, as Jane Jacobs pointed out” (207, emphasis original). The contrast between analog street and digital home reaches back to rescue the book from the flawed pronouncement that digital tools themselves are the problem. We are left to consider a much richer historical argument about the alarming success that efforts of domestication and power-consolidation have found in intertwining themselves with digital media.

In that light, readers looking for an actionable takeaway from *The New Analog* shouldn't just unsubscribe from streaming services and start (or resume) buying vinyl records. They should redirect their attention toward the very thing of whose existence Krukowski seems skeptical: digital noise. Even though the digital home is built to confine, there are new noisy streets outside it to be explored. Krukowski recounts how the band Can endeavored to let their recording studio “compose on its own” and to become an activating, curating conduit for the sounds of tape machines. “In Can’s studio technique,” he writes, “noise and signal are equally significant materials.... the noises in it are no less human than the signals” (138). If we look for digital noise, we will see that it bears no less potential for meaning and beauty than Can’s analog noise, as artists are already proving with techniques like glitch and sampling. We as listeners can do more to help realize that aim by celebrating digital noise, by recognizing what it reveals and critiques. For a project that with less care could have steered off into the welcoming terrain of nostalgic grievance, *The New Analog* offers a surprising amount to point our way forward.



https://youtu.be/I_3mCDJ_iWc

Holly Herndon’s “Home” uses sonic and visual sampling to turn the surveillant gaze of an intimate digital space back on itself.

Featured image: “Scenes From The Recording Studio” by Flickr user G. Dawson, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Andy Kelleher Stuhl is a writer, sound artist, and software developer focused on creative infrastructures and the politics of mediated sonic exchange. His work looks to musicians for inspiration and aims to apply musical creativity as a model for new paths in such domains as digital humanities and the critique of technology. His research has investigated the phenomenon of analog fetishism from the perspective of sound engineer communities and, more recently, the process and aspirations behind interactive musical works. He holds a master’s degree in

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