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University of California, Irvine

Your Own Monster:
Sampling in the Work of Nick Zammuto, Tom Waits, and Paul D. Miller

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in Music

by

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Abstract

Your Own Monster: Sampling in the Work of Nick Zammuto, Tom Waits, and Paul D. Miller
by Molly Jones

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Nick Zammuto of The Books, Tom Waits, and Paul D. Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky compose using strategies developed through their experiences of sampling. Despite their diverse artistic backgrounds and output, all three participate in sampling culture by drawing on and remixing a wide variety of sound sources into "[their] own monster." They allude to different eras and genres by drawing on historical and contemporary production techniques. Zammuto, Waits, and Miller share philosophies of sound perception, compositional processes, and live performance practices, and they use samples poetically as semantic units; these artists manipulate the complete aural history of the listener as compositional material to create personal, nonspecific meaning. This multivalent approach offers multiple entry points for listeners. They invite listeners to engage with their work with multiple senses and respect their audience as co-creators of the artistic experience.

Introduction

"It's all just data," writes Dr. Paul D. Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky (4: 6). "It's kind of clinical," agrees Tom Waits (6: 155). "Sound is vibration, first and foremost," explains Nick Zammuto, composer for The Books (8). "A poem of yourself written in synaptic reverie," Dr. Miller describes music, and Tom Waits says composing is "getting thrilled by" sound (6: 66). These three artists discuss their processes in both technical and lyrical terms. While making some of the most moving and original music acclaimed by their respective fan cults, they openly recognize the mechanical and third-party human contributions to their work; all of them use samples centrally, and all of them compose using strategies developed through their experiences of sampling.

Beyond any particular style or era, sampling of a sort has been part of all music, even preceding the advent of electronic recording. All composers include both musical and social references in their music through melodic and harmonic allusions, instrumentation, and other compositional techniques, including direct quotation. As a distinct compositional approach, "sampling culture" is predicated on the conscious manipulation by the artist of extramusical references associated with sounds, such as geographical location or typical social setting; an artist participating in sampling culture plays with the listeners' personal associations and memories as a compositional material. The way in which a given audience member understands the reference depends on their personal history, the cultures in which they participate, and how the artist has manipulated or disguised the sample, so that a sample might be widely understood or discerned only by a particular in-group of listeners. I would argue that sampling culture revolves around this approach and philosophy more than it does around any particular

technology, although 20th and 21st century technologies have served to make sampling more literal, widespread, and recognizable, especially in the art of hip hop DJing. For the purposes of this essay, I define sampling more narrowly as the inclusion of short portions of other artists' recordings as well as the use of short self-made recordings of sounds found outside the studio environment. Inclusion of collaborators on a track could be seen as a kind of sampling of their work, as could theatrical and narrative tricks clearly borrowed from other art forms. By this definition, a sample is readily discernible as a referent to a context, culture, or art form "outside" the work of art in which the sample appears.

Within the extensive world of sampling culture, Waits, Zammuto, and Miller all use samples woven through original material which interplays with those samples. All three draw samples from disparate cultural sources and genres rather than staying within a defined genre, and all three use samples of sounds not traditionally considered musical. For example, all three artists prominently sample Balinese gamelan music, and Zammuto, Miller, and Waits have sampled banging on pipes, toilet lids, and traffic noise, respectively. They also employ theatrical tricks and multimedia tools in their art, which I will discuss below. These artists stand out in the world of sampling culture because of the tremendous breadth of genres and fields from which they draw their references, and because of the resulting potential for engagement by listeners from many backgrounds.

Despite differences in how their music is categorized, all three create art in multiple media, draw on a wide variety of artistic traditions from around the world and across the history of recorded music, and create meaning by evoking and manipulating samples' rich contexts. In their perception of sound, their collection of and composition with found sources, their

commitment to multi-sensory performance experience, and their lexical approach to the creation of meaning, Zammuto, Waits, and Miller profess similar philosophies and make art that respects a multivalent experience of music.

Philosophies of Sound

Miller, Zammuto, and Waits share experiences of sound perception which impact their choice of samples; all of them insist that music is everywhere, and that composing is a matter of perceiving sound and artfully containing it. Zammuto recalls that he began to experience all sound musically when he worked as a sculptor and purchased a recorder to capture the audio from his sound sculptures. He suddenly realized that "the world is making music all the time, and all you have to do is put yourself in a position to listen to it...[T]here's just unbelievable musicality in the sounds around us," (8). Zammuto found himself in a new state of awareness that allowed him to observe the musical potential of all sound; he looks at the process of capturing samples as "creating a container" (8) for what's already there. Tom Waits comments on music, "It's really around you all the time. It's just a matter of framing it, getting thrilled by it. You have to find something to capture it in, make sure your umbrella is upside down," (6: 66). Waits' "getting thrilled by [sound]" also reflects an altered state of perception in which all sound, from scraping chairs to banging pipes, is potential music, a state which he has to maintain in order to collect sound as he would like. Miller writes metaphorically in his anthology *Sound Unbound*, "It's all rhythms, all patterns...This is a world of infinitely reflecting fragments, vibrating, manifesting a hum, making music," (4: 99). The entire digital world, Miller's artistic realm, consists of sequences of numbers that can be sonically interpreted, in addition to the millions of recordings exchanged freely by internet users. "The sampling machine can handle

any sound, and any expression. You just have to find the right edit points in the sound envelope," (4: 6). Miller sees the almost infinite data and sound of the digital world as musical material, and his job as an artist is not to create but to edit points in the music that's already there. He, along with Waits and Zammuto, describe a transcendent state of sonic perception in which all sound is a swirl of music waiting to be cut, copied, and sampled into works of art.

Carefully choosing the "edit points in the envelope," the aural events to focus on in their music, has led these artists to appreciate that sampling captures the context of a sound event. Tom Waits believes "the place itself is as much a part of the music. Because the music itself was born and nurtured in a particular environment, and came from that environment," (6: 136). From the banjo strums and rooster crow that open the track "Chocolate Jesus" on his 1999 album *Mule Variations* [7] to the Indonesian kecak that layers into the rhythm section of "Eyeball Kid," Waits brings geographical and cultural associations intentionally into his pieces. Zammuto describes his own moment of epiphany: "In that moment I realized that when you take a sound out of its original context... [pause] [W]hen you're walking down the street and you hear a sound, your brain kind of compartmentalizes it and names it in a way that it falls into the background. But when you make a recording of it, you realize that there's just unbelievable musicality in the sound," (8). That street environment can later be evoked by the sampled sound. Paul Miller summarizes the idea of capturing context, as well: "Once, every sound had a distinct source. A door slammed shut, a horn was blown, a guitar string was strummed. Audio came from a discrete event; it was tied to a discernible action...[in sampling t]he musical elements are liberated from a specific time and place, allowing them to be recontextualized in the final composition," (4: 104). Miller, Zammuto, and Waits take debris found in the physical and digital

realms and mold them into music, out of their typical context but still evoking that context for the listener.

All three of these composers draw their samples from disparate cultural sources. Because of the ubiquity of vinyl records and online music sharing, Miller, Waits, and Zammuto each draw on a tremendous breadth of musical traditions which influence and enrich their compositional processes, in addition to their own self-made recordings. Miller clips out parts of Stravinsky's catalogue, European and Japanese electronic dance albums, Jamaican dub, West African drumming, and theatrical monologues, and he layers them with each other and with his own electronic and acoustic composition; the title track from 2009's *The Secret Song* [2] presents a story told by novelist Jing Zhou in Mandarin over a sampled rock-style drum loop and a synth part created by Miller. Zammuto draws on '80's rock synths, string quartets, self-help tapes, and hip hop beats, while Waits uses field hollers, beat jazz, advertisements, circus music, and spiritual-inspired melodies. All three have prominently sampled Balinese music. A significant aspect of these artists' power and originality can be credited to their absorption and re-combination of many cultures' music and musical impulses, what Miller would call re-mixing. Until certain developments in the recording industry, their art could not have existed, and so it sounds fresher than the age of its components might suggest. Miller has said, "It's like building music out of LEGO blocks...The basic structure of 'assemblage,' the method of collage, holds sway here," (4: 103). Of himself and his influences, he reiterates "I'm a collage: many layers," (3: 2). Tom Waits has "unreconcilable influences...You know, I end up with the Cuban and the Chinese, but it never really becomes Cuban-Chinese. I just kind of accepted that, that I have the different sides to me--that I like Rachmaninoff and I also like the Contortions. So be it," (6:

223). The three are able to superimpose and juxtapose their chosen samples into complete pieces, and to compose under the influence of many cultures, without losing completely the original associations of those samples. The samples have captured the contexts of their creation, and the composers do not obscure them. As a result of this juxtaposition, as well as the unpolished display of the original media's quirks like record pops and low-fi tape crackle, the samples also refer to their own medium; they point both outward toward the contextual history of the sound and inward toward sampling culture itself.

Composition

These three composers express similarities in their perception and selection of sampled sounds. There are also commonalities in the methods they use to weave these sounds together and compose with them. They have developed their compositional processes through a mix of analog and digital technologies acting on captured sounds, recycled objects, home built instruments, and records from around the world, all of which serve as rich historical and social referents for the attuned listener. All three celebrate trial and error as central to their craftsmanship.

Tom Waits and Nick Zammuto share proclivities for finding instruments, building instruments, and processing sound with analog technology. They prefer a hands-on approach in which sound is generated and reproduced by physical processes, with their inherent possibilities for mechanical noise. Tom Waits grew up building bicycles and radios (6: 171), and in addition to reviving instruments like angklungs, broken drums, and bagpipes from pawn shops (critic Brian Bannon called him "a real pawnshop weasel" (6: 137)), he has built variations of guitars, banjos, and many percussion instruments. To alter his distinctive voice, he sings into "trumpet

mutes, jars, my hands, pipes, different environments," (6: 108) and he creates compression by pumping his recordings through differently sized rooms and re-recording it. His electronic sample instruments include the Chamberlin, Mellotron, and Optigan, early tape loop samplers from the 1940s-1960s, many of them degraded after decades of use with no alteration. He generally avoids digital equipment; "I don't want the sheen," he had decided by 1987 (6: 109). Waits' creation and use of this variety of instruments and recording techniques can be seen as an extension of his sampling process, as his choices evoke rich social and historical contexts. A woman's voice singing a spiritual, for example, as heard on tracks like "Eyeball Kid," brings with it the rich and culturally charged connotations of that genre. The same could be said of many vocal recordings, but Waits' novel juxtaposition of the voice against, for one example, an Indonesian angklung particularly highlights the distinct cultural origins of both instruments and brings them together for the listener. His analog sound processing through room compression and other homegrown techniques similarly brings with it associations related to the history of recording technology, associations which may be more subtle but which lend historical affects to the music nonetheless. On the track "Eyeball Kid," Waits' sung vocal line, Balinese kecak shouts, a rhythmic marimba line, and a background bass clarinet part form four layers of sound, each with a different set of production techniques lending differing textures of roughness. The kecak part displays the crackle of an old record, the bass clarinet has been EQ'd to bring out scratchiness in its tone, and the marimba has yet another kind of crackle superimposed on it. Tom Waits' gruff voice sounds slightly far away and distorted, as if it had been recorded too close to an early microphone. The use of these many techniques informs the listener that Waits is deliberately manipulating his production choices, layering effects and mixing them to evoke a

series of associations consciously or subconsciously familiar to the 21st century listener, who likely has much of the history of recording and film within their own experience.

Nick Zammuto, also one to avoid digital technology, points out that "if you listen to those Books records, almost everything is totally dry," (8). He generally did not use digital processing, or much processing in general, in his work with The Books, but he did, like Waits, develop a few analog ways of altering sounds, including playing them through a PVC pipe contraption (8). Rather than concealing the quirks of the tapes and cheap microphones with which the sounds were originally recorded, he views the sound of the medium as a compositional element. "We never tried to cover over the medium. So if a vinyl record was noisy, we never tried to take the noise out. The hiss of audio tape was always really important to us to maintain and use as a musical sound...[Marshall McLuhan's] idea was the medium is the message," (8). The sound of the medium is one of the details that exist "around the edges of the sound," as Zammuto puts it, and that make a sample interesting and meaningful (8). These details, cues including the quirks of the recording technology and the social cues inherent in a sound or voice (8), are Zammuto's admission to participating in sampling culture by consciously manipulating his samples' contexts. He, too, found much of the band's sound browsing through thrift stores, in this case for discarded tapes which he repurposed into The Books' audio and video library (8). Neither he nor Waits conceals the inconsistencies or eccentricities inherent to their analog media of choice, as these eccentricities form important cues for the listener to perceive the context of each sound and derive meaning from the associations.

Miller, unlike those two, cultivates his art almost exclusively in the digital realm. Nevertheless, his process resembles the others' in that he scavenges materials from recording

archives and the public environment of the internet. Most things he does are, in some way, sampling, including his many collaborations with artists and speakers from other disciplines and genres of music, whom he credits generously to inform listeners of the collaborative nature of his work. He too embraces the noise of his medium, that is, listeners' and internet users' contributions and comments. He recognizes online and social networks themselves as art, structures to aid the creation of more structure: "An intangible sculpture that exists only in the virtual space between you and the information you perceive," (4: 18). Miller, adopting the aleatoric bent of John Cage (4), considers interactive composition via networks, where the specific content of a piece may be contributed, altered, or downloaded by any given network user, to be a way of the future. He writes, "This circular experience, in which the listener is also a participant in the making of a musical work, is indicative of the direction in which the Internet is suggesting that music should go--as the distinction between 'artist' and 'audience' begins to slip away, and we find ourselves dipping into the data flow, listening to the music that it makes, and that we make with it," (4: 108). Listeners, contributors, fans, and artists alike participate in sampling culture by providing their own samples and re-mixing one another's work. Miller discusses Lee 'Scratch' Perry's notion of versioning as an inevitable fact of digital music making, as "[d]igital media is...about never saying that there's something that's finished. Once something's digital, essentially you're looking at versions," (5). Miller does not pretend his re-mixes of others' recordings and visuals are a finished product, but instead frames himself as one sculptor in a long line progressively selecting and editing the same work. His users are asked to not only understand the external referents in his samples and production techniques, but to provide more, reproduce them, alter them, and comment on them with full understanding of the

sampling culture in which they, too, are participating. For example, his 2009 album *The Secret Song* includes both an audio CD and a DVD of the 1924 Russian film *Kino Glaz*, and the liner notes encourage the buyer to remix the visuals with the audio to create her/his own version [2].

In their processes of combining samples into compositions, Waits, Miller, and Zammuto foundationally credit trial and error. "I know what works and what doesn't, strictly by trial and error," says Tom Waits (6: 47). "Most things begin as a mistake...You look forward to the brilliant mistakes," (6: 134). Nick Zammuto evokes PBS painter Bob Ross' phrase "happy accidents" to describe how his music comes about. After developing a sample library and getting familiar enough with it, he "would start a rhythmic loop...And then I'd start throwing sounds from the library against that loop to kind of see what sticks. And I was always very surprised to discover what sticks to the rhythm. I couldn't predict what would work. So I could only do it by trial and error," (8). Paul Miller sees composition as an endless path of trying things out and as "much more about questions than about answers. It's a continuous sense of asking questions," (5). Improvisation takes a critical role in his creative process (5), and combined with the control he yields to collaborators and his penchant for chance operations, that means he likely will not know how the latest version sounds until it mostly exists. His trials and errors become the work of art. For all three artists, awareness of errors as valuable musical events has guided their creativity.

Multimedia Performance

Miller, Waits, and Zammuto have all brought their inventiveness to stage performances as well as audio recordings. They create a multi-sensory experience which evokes sampling culture by the very sampling of visual and theatrical elements from diverse art forms.

Nick Zammuto and Paul Miller have both expressed an interest in synesthesia, with Miller wondering, "Why should music only enter the body through the ear? Why not through the skin, or through the eye?" (4: 100). Shows produced by these artists look different, but the common motivation for their design is to provide a show that is a dramatic and multi-sensory sampling phenomenon. Zammuto, who had never performed live prior to The Books, felt "freaked out" (8) by the prospect of fronting a band, so he and bandmate Paul DeJong agreed "to use video as the front man of the band," as they felt they lacked the charisma audiences might expect at a show (8). Compiling and editing a video library from thrift store VHS tapes, they discovered "all these common themes that emerge[d] that are kind of hilarious," (8), notably golf and kids' summer camp. Videos like those for "Take Time" and "A Cold Freezin' Night" make use of these themes. Their performances consisted of live guitar and cello with electronics and a series of projected videos sequenced from their library. This straightforward approach nonetheless provides an engaging and interactive visual focus for the audience, and it turns audio collages into audio-visual collages providing referents that build additional meaning.

Tom Waits takes a vaudevillian approach on stage, complete with props, tricks, and a colorful persona; his personality and visual image have developed alongside his music. Geoffrey Himes describes his performance practice from a show in 1975: "Using a cash register as a percussive instrument, Waits launched into an amphetamine litany of advertising slogans in 'Step Right Up.' Leaning on a battered gas pump, Waits assumed the character of a small-town mechanic... He sang 'Putnam County' as fake snow fell around him at an L.A. newsstand," (6: 57-58). Waits' performances resemble novelty stage shows, as theatrical as they are musical, complete with sets and props, and they add experiential dimensions not possible with audio

alone.

Miller maintains his own mystical stage persona, drawing on film and animation, poetry, and scholarly rhetoric from linguistics and many other fields. His performances vary widely in content; one relevant example is his 2008 *Sound Unbound* tour, in which he improvised geometric animations on a laptop while remixing and processing the sound of a live string quartet playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. His shows feature improvisation, animation, film, and live audience interaction, all of which serve to create an engaging experience that varies from show to show.

All three artists branch into other media in live performance to intentionally and impactfully fulfill the audience's expectation of a show as a complete experience; they draw on sampling culture in the selection of visual, theatrical, and instrumental elements, providing a rich environment for an audience member to experience the collage of external referents implied by the samples.

Creating Meaning

These artists create work that respects performance as total theater, the medium as the message, the validity of errors in the composition process, and the musicality of daily sounds and gestures; they also understand the range of responses their listeners may have to their work and the variations in meaning their pieces might evoke. Even as Tom Waits and Paul Miller try to tell stories (4: 12, 6: 45), they understand their art is ambiguous and may not convey a single narrative to any one listener. Dr. Miller calls sample-based music "a story you are telling yourself--one made of the world as you hear it, and the theater of sounds that you invoke with those fragments is all one story made of many," (4: 12). Each listener brings her own "Semantic

Web" (4: 15) to the experience. Zammuto intended to create thematically connected and meaningful yet semantically open works with *The Books*: "I was really interested in making spongy sounds, and by that I mean sounds that are very open to interpretation. They didn't mean one thing. They could mean very different things to different people, depending on what your own personal experience brought to it," (8). Similarly, Tom Waits enjoys a lack of specificity in his music, as "most exciting things that happen in music occur through a miscommunication between people--'I thought you said this,'" (6: 134). Samples are, in Miller's words, "'free floating signifier[s]'" (4: 104). In my interpretation, the waveform or visual form of a sample is the signifier, the context and external referents implied by the sample are the signified, and a sample is a sign. It does not communicate any one meaning precisely, but it is rich in meaning, leading art pieces created from a diverse collection of samples to be rich in many meanings, historical and personal, and open to many interpretations. Each listener takes her own path through the sequences and layers of meanings implied by an abundance of samples arranged in time.

A library of samples is a kind of nonspecific lexicon. If each sample is a semantic unit similar in scope to a word, the compositions of Zammuto, Waits, and Miller create meaning as a poet would, through the sequencing of these semantic units into phrases, verses, and eventually a complete work laid out in time, each of these levels of organization implying a layer of meaning beyond the most easily recognized. Miller calls it "a syntax of the 'what-if'" (4: 17). Throughout his essays, Miller refers to sample-based music as "hypertextual," "dialectical," "syntax," and "a poem of yourself," (4: 97, 98, 5, 9). It may not be surprising that a hip-hop artist such as Miller philosophizes at length about this way of creating meaning, which is native to DJ-ing, but

Zammuto and Waits also acknowledge this tendency in their work. "It's looking for those really unexpected connections that work in unexpected ways," (8) says Zammuto. Tom Waits, the oft-labelled poet (6: 44), believes that recordings capture their environment and carry it along for the ride, and when they are used in a composition, "[y]ou start seeing all these cross-references," (6: 137). "You fashion these things and ideas into your own monster. It's making dreams," (6: 151). "That's kind of the point....[It's] Frankenstein," (4: 16) writes Miller. Perhaps this is why these artists so often discuss their music in terms of building and sculpture; they assemble the pieces as semantic units into a complete, living work of art. This poetic collage may not result in any one, unified experience for a group of listeners, but it enriches the poetic experience of each individual listener, whose personal history can lead them to one of the many entry points in the music.

This strategy of providing opportunities for multiple, multivalent interpretations reflects a foundational compositional practice of Nick Zammuto, Tom Waits, and Paul Miller, namely, demonstrating respect for the listener as a whole person. These artists make music that assumes the audience's diverse aural history, active intellect, body, and multiple senses can be played with as possible compositional tools. Furthermore, because these composers manipulate many extramusical references as well as carefully crafting the sound of the music, their work can pique the interest of listeners familiar with any one of the layers of referents in a work or with none of them. Zammuto says that "[t]he idea was to use the music to meet people halfway...[B]ecause of that, lots of different kinds of people connected to it. That was just beautiful to see," (8). He sells analog beat-making kits so his audience can try his techniques at home, and Miller invites the listener to create and re-create using his materials (4,2). Both Zammuto and Miller

encourage listener participation and believe that electronic music is a new kind of folk music based on sharing and everyday technology (4: 101, 8). Tom Waits points out anyone could buy the instruments he uses at a pawn shop, build her own sound system from boom boxes, and join the fun (6: 179). All three composers include a diversity of influences, references, and ideas that have a strong chance of drawing in people from different backgrounds to listen and make music themselves. Their approach to music is accessible rather than exclusive, exceptionally approachable.

In their compositional processes, these artists engage their whole persons with their whole environment and deem it all relevant material. "It's just a matter of trying to find a way to fit all those things together, so you put them on a record together," (6: 268). "We are making something new in the world out of these things, taking these threads and then weaving them together in a new way. It's sort of a mirror for culture at large," (8). They both reflect and create cultural truth. Tom Waits expresses this in terms of creating one's artistic self. "Most of us are original paintings, and it's a mystery as to what is learned and what is borrowed, what is stolen and what is born, what you came in with and what you found while you were here," (6: 317). One's experience of music is a never ending process of collaborative composition. These three artists point out, embrace, and co-create the meanings of sampled sound, and they invite listeners to more completely engage with music and the sonic potential of their environments.

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