

REVIEW ESSAY

Paul Hegarty. *Noise/Music: A History*. New York and London: Continuum, 2007. \$24.95 (paper).

Marc Masters. *No Wave*. London: Black Dog, n.d., 2007. \$29.95 (paper).

Thurston Moore and Byron Coley. *No Wave: Post-Punk Underground New York 1976–1980*. New York: Abrams Image, 2008. \$24.95 (paper).

New York Noise: Art and Music of the New York Underground 1978–88. Photos by Paula Court. London: Soul Jazz, 2007. \$39.95 (paper).

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Until I read Paul Hegarty's *Noise/Music*, I was reasonably certain of my own most vivid experience of noise, glorious noise: the massed guitars and thundering drums at the bone-shaking, tooth-jarring premiere of Glenn Branca's *Symphony #1*, what some people still describe as a culmination of the New York No Wave period. But what I thought was noise turns out—who knew?—to have been merely volume. Hegarty, judging from his analysis, would dismiss this experience as spuriously “noisy” on a number of grounds. Branca himself he skewers in an aside as “ostensibly noisy, but actually only loud” (123), his music, Hegarty implies, insufficiently “mindless” in its reiterations to constitute transgression. As a “culmination,” indicating the “success” of a “movement,” the concert would have exemplified not noise but its recuperation into “music,” the very title of “symphony” bespeaking not the shattering of apparatuses of artistic value but their reinscription. Even the savoring of a “noisy” memory, Hegarty seems to imply, constitutes an incorporation of disruption into established systems of value (“glorious”), an assignment of meaning that negates its noisiness.

How does one, then, write a history of noise? Hegarty's own misleadingly billed “history”—a knotty, frustrating, but ultimately suggestive volume—fails itself to do so (in fact, its very form seems to resist such a goal) yet finally implicitly offers some possible strategies, at least, for how to *read* one. Hegarty builds on Jacques Attali's reading of noise as music's constitutive excluded other, and also his dialectical model for its domestication and absorption. Noise, he argues, is an exploitation of embodiment, its elements targeting “the body as listening device so that the

mind-body dualism the modern western listener has been disciplined into [is] undone, even—perhaps especially—if only momentarily” (120). As the emphasis on the momentary signals, once “enjoyed” as a part of a musical experience, once having brought about the new modes of listening it forces, noise is no longer transgressive, no longer “noisy.”

This is the theme to which Hegarty’s volume continually recurs, tracing noise up to the moment of its inscription in meaning through thirteen overlapping thematic chapters (“Electric,” “Inept,” “Industry”). Noise here is not merely sonic, but represents all aspects of musical composition, recording and presentation that disrupt established aesthetic and commercial hierarchies and apparatuses. Although Hegarty, unsurprisingly, begins with and often recurs to John Cage’s unsettling of audience expectation and his “extension of the soundworld” (26), particularly in *4’ 33”* (and although he is concerned to recuperate Cage’s avant-gardism from critics like Douglas Kahn), he nevertheless argues that Cage is often “obsess[ed] with ‘letting noises be’ to the point where they cannot be noise” (17). Key here to Hegarty’s argument is the fact that *4’ 33”* as a piece “*cannot fail*” (italics his); and noise is all about failure, about the collapse of a moment of radical otherness, radical escape, back into structures of meaning: “The disruption is only ever temporary, fleeting, lost from the moment it begins” (146).

The ontology implicit here, the fact that “any outcome signals the end of noise” (146), signals both the political import of noise and its inevitable limitations: purposeful transgression is itself utilitarian and thus not “noisy.” “Noise cannot remain message and still be noise” (126), says Hegarty, so “other kinds of noise” become necessary; “noise is on the side of revolt rather than revolution . . . as revolution implies a new order” (125). Thus Hegarty’s volume repeatedly, even obsessively, details the continuing pursuit of a receding horizon of transgression that is also, in a sense, the pursuit of failure (suspension of mastery, “unlistenability”). His best and most coherent chapters—on 1980s industrial music, on “power,” and especially on Merzbow, who serves as ground zero for the volume—convincingly stress the perpetually self-reinventing nature of noise as Bataillean excess, its erotically disruptive effects, even as it “alters, disappears, becomes non-noise,” still carrying the “charge of having been noise” (83). Such chapters successfully wed the exploration of particular historically specific experimentation to Hegarty’s densely theoretical structure: “Transgression is always potential, or always already lost, but this does not stop Bataille, or Throbbing Gristle, acting as if it were possible, and those moments are

the moments of noise much more than the literal noise of ‘Walls of Sound’” (111).

Elsewhere, however, despite Hegarty’s philosophical rigor, his constant circling back becomes annoying, even counter-productive. Different musics seen through differing modalities yield the same conclusions, to the extent that differences between musics themselves seem oddly to disappear; positing a “shared noisiness . . . at points where ‘acceptable’ musics are broken down or are being dismantled” (94), for example, Hegarty claims that post-punk is somehow “like” free jazz (an indication, as well, of his comparatively glib and insubstantial treatment of racialized noisiness). The impression of elision of difference is bolstered, too, by the sheer number of names, songs, movements, cited in the text without the introduction or context that a “history” would seem to demand; it often seems as if Hegarty is less writing a book than jotting down notes to himself for a book he is too impatient to complete.

It would, in fact, be tempting to regard this book’s choppy and unwelcoming style as a deliberate suspension of mastery, an analogue of the noisiness that is Hegarty’s subject. But while the unfinished sentence that ends his chapter on Merzbow with a gesture to that composer’s own refusal to offer completion is clearly intentional—and while indeed one recognizes such “noisy” characteristics as repetition, self-referentiality, ugliness and ineptness in Hegarty’s production—these traits are, alas, common enough to academic writing as to render such a project both unlikely and moot.

The noise of Hegarty’s composition, however, makes it almost impossible to hear the noise he’s describing; indeed, for someone writing about sound, Hegarty seems curiously unwilling to make his readers *hear* the music from which he abstracts. For that we have to go to three recent volumes that document the New York scene at its “noisiest,” No Wave moment—a moment about which Hegarty himself is curiously reticent. Yet each of these books, intriguingly, can be read as grappling with the philosophical concerns Hegarty raises—how does one convey the moment of noise without betraying it by collapsing it into meaning?

Mark Masters’s *No Wave* confronts this problem at the outset by foregrounding the paradoxical cultural work performed by *No New York*, the most visible document of the No Wave years: recorded by Brian Eno, the 1978 album presented four songs each by the Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars, and DNA (four bands that, according to Roy Trakin of *New York Rocker*, had “little in common musically except their stubborn belief in the uncompromising stands they’ve taken” (34)). Described almost

inevitably in retrospect as “seminal,” the record could equally accurately be described as “funereal,” limiting the anarchy of the downtown music scene by defining its parameters; in Robert Palmer’s words, “naming the movement just about finished it off” (14). Eno’s record paradoxically legitimized a movement that Masters terms “predicated on negation” (15)—including the negation of the very idea of a movement. In Hegarty’s terms, the record itself denoised the music—both figuratively and literally, by, as many people thought, homogenizing the bands’ sound.

To some extent, one suspects, any recording of bands for whom audience confrontation and frustration was so central would have represented a narrowing and overcodification of their “noisiness”; and Masters makes central to his explication of the scene the differing modes of aggressive engagement. Too, his narrative is shot through with moments when he almost tangibly encapsulates the sensation of the noise-struggle inside the performances themselves: Arto Lindsay’s guitar, for instance, “seems shocked by its own presence” (58). Yet the best lines in Masters’s narrative come from his culling of contemporary reviews, such as Tim Holmes’s description in *New York Rocker* of Lydia Lunch’s *Queen of Siam*: “It’s as though Disney had animated the slaying of Snow White, her subsequent gang dwarf-rape and operation for cervical cancer” (106). This evokes a “noise” so potent that it can only be rendered metaphorically—a noise that Masters seems aware can no longer be audible in his text. Here as in the other volumes, visibility attempts to stand in for audible noise; white-on-black pages between chapters offer key moments in the hidden history of the period; handwritten scrawls from *No* magazine attest to the sophisticated ineptitude, the refusal of mastery that Hegarty sees as one characteristic mode of noisiness. Yet this mode of pastiche is now itself such an art-school staple that its noisiness has been thoroughly muted.

Masters manages, notably, to displace the received version of the period as involving an unproblematic overlapping of various experimental arts, carefully limning the various groupings within the No Wave orbit, and especially the divergences between the East Village bands recorded on *No New York* and those based in SoHo. Yet perhaps because of his determination to be even-handed in covering this history, the tensions here remain asserted rather than felt. Not so in *No Wave: Post-Punk Underground New York 1976–1980*, Thurston Moore and Byron Coley’s version of the period. Here the varied voices subsumed into Masters’s text are allowed to dominate; the narrative exists only to shape and connect large chunks of first-person reminiscences, to bring different voices into what takes on the feel of an

artifactual, communal, yearbook. This is a canny approach, allowing Moore and Coley to reproduce the atmosphere of a teeming, intense and highly self-absorbed circle even as they parse the scene for outsiders with a copious index of *dramatis personae*. If Hegarty's volume gives off the air of a man muttering into a pocket recorder about certain abstruse and idiosyncratic concerns, Moore and Coley's book *could* have felt equally impenetrable; indeed, the volume's family tree of New York bands circa 1976–1980 paradoxically inflates and specifies the interrelations among an extremely small number of musicians, a tiny neighborhood. Moore and Coley quite deliberately embrace the limitations of the *No New York* delineation of the No Wave scene in order to emphasize the scene's implosiveness, the immediacy and transitoriness of its moment. Yet its panoply of voices—including an impressively sour-grapesish condemnation by Glenn Branca of the entire Eno project—clearly conveys the tension between those bands whom the text itself deems central and the ones left out, and incorporates that tension as part of its own recreated “noise.”

This insider feeling is underscored by the photographs; shots by such downtown stalwarts as Julia Gorton, Stephanie Chernikowski, and Robert Sietsema feel less like publicity productions than snapshots, unearthed from a trunk, of bunk hi-jinks at Camp Apocalypse; they radiate what Annene Kaye calls in the volume a “renegade authenticity” (127). With an appealing insider seediness, they show the musicians hanging out on rooftops, curbs, radiators, staircases, in kitchens, and alleys—clearly not selected backdrops, but the lived-in landscape.

While both Masters's and Moore and Coley's volumes make a point of locating No Wave in its material moment, in what Lydia Lunch calls “the devil's dirty litter box” (Moore and Coley: 4), the burnt-out moonscape that was downtown New York in the late 1970s, in *New York Noise* that landscape exists only in unintentionally ironic contrast: in, say, Peter Gordon's evocation of the “broke and filthy” city of 1975 under a photo of a 1987 movie set (149). If the “scrappiness” of the No Wave moment, in Susan Seidelman's terms, later “got replaced with dollar signs” (105), *New York Noise* is itself the exemplar of that commodification. Published along with Soul Jazz's 2006 2-CD follow-up to its first 2003 *New York Noise* album, the book is a glossy, mislabeled, product “coordinated” by Karen Tate around the images of arts photographer Paula Court, which unify this varied period around a central aesthetic even as the articles emphasize the “rubbing together between disciplines” (David Byrne, 1) and “tearing down the walls of the music establishment” (Rhys Chatham, 118).

Court's version of the scene—primarily a *later* scene—stresses its ties to the art world, the high-popular dialogues delineated in Bernard Gendron's *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*. And despite the book's title, her images are profoundly unnoisy, posed and composed, without the back-channel intimacy and candid squalor of Gorton's or Chernikowski's shots. Even as the quotations—sound bites culled from full texts rendered in footnote-size type at the end of the book—cite living on a shoestring, urine and lofts, the photos show us BAM, Broadway, gallery openings, benefits, and PS 122, with a few “gritty” rehearsal shots. Many of the music shots date from the 1985 CMJ music marathon and include non-New York musicians; and most of the photos, in fact, derive from the mid-1980s—a time when, in Peter Gordon's terms, things had already become “more cumbersome, and official” (202).

This glamorized rendering of *New York Noise* is actually far more opaque than the insider chronicles offered in the other volumes. For one thing, none of the players are identified—one is supposed to recognize their importance, and confirm it with reference to the photographs. The experience is thus less like reinvoking *No* magazine or *New York Rocker* than it is like reading *Interview*; it's the difference between being self-congratulatorily elitist and subculturally inbred. The “noise” of this pretentious ossuary—or is it even noise?—exists only in the mismatch between image and text. Anything less like Hegarty's notion of perpetual revolt would be difficult to imagine.