

Music & Domestication

Hope lies with those musicians who resist

Ben Olson

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We need to affirm the value of music, especially undomesticated music, particularly during the social deprivations of the current pandemic. The past year has been a blur of social isolation, sheltering-in-place, and lockdowns.

The muted horrors of 2020 and beyond have led to increasingly isolated pleasures, fearful desires, little moments of secret forgetting (or seeking forgetting), private escapes that often only exacerbate the effects of being alone and afraid. In this situation, for many people, the experience of media, watching movies, reading, or listening to music, becomes a coveted refuge, a vain attempt at relaxation and respite from constant, only half-acknowledged anxiety, a survivors' kit for augmenting the effects of collectively (though unevenly) distributed, and privately suffered, cultural trauma. But the isolation of music, the intertwining of the musical experience with our increasing domestication, means that our attempts to heal may fall short.

What we need is to let the air in, not seal off our pain in airtight moments of longing. It's important, then, to affirm the value of undomesticated music—wild in its composition and/or in its listening format—for the purpose of opening ourselves up at a time when we run the risk of closing off completely.

Avant-garde and improvisational music, such as that of English avant-rock guitarists Fred Frith and Derek Bailey, or the experimental surrealistic art collective, The Residents, stretch the boundaries of what counts as musical by exploring the potential of atonality and noise.

People experience music in highly personal ways, shaped by their individual pasts and presents, beyond and above what can be expressed with language. It doesn't need to be discursive, nor must it necessarily include any kind of regularity beyond the inevitably imperfect rhythms of a living body, such as a heartbeat. Undomesticated melody has the potential to resist dominant modes of communicating, by creating a temporary, imaginary world that allows one to express oneself against what dominates, against the forces of control which seek to define the limits of what is possible.

In our society, these forces are embodied and rooted in colonial ideologies implemented most immediately by police. They normalize the capture, imprisonment and even murder of subjugated people.

Music is an effective tool for showing solidarity with those who seek to resist such control. When cities were under lockdown against the COVID-19 pandemic as well as curfews meant to

curtail the protests against police brutality, many musicians resisted the restraint put on them by joining anti-racist protesters to show their support and lend their music as a means of expression. On the internet, within the surveilled screens of social media, angered musicians posted videos of wild new songs and performances that sought to transform their world from the horrors they were witnessing. As an irrational howl against restraint, the undomesticated melody demands the impossible, a life without a master, with no authority but oneself.

Domestication is the instilling of submission into individuals or groups through physical/biological means (such as plant and animal breeding and other agricultural practices), or through ideological or broader cultural practices, such as religion and other practices that constitute truth for a society. The construction of cultural norms and the locking out of what does not submit to them can be applied to different kinds of cultural activity. But domestication occurs at the level of experience first.

The domesticator compels potential subordinates to experience themselves as docile beings, already submissive. Unruly behaviors—actions that run against this training—are said to go against their very nature. To be domesticated is to have one's experience broken into instinct and obedience. The goal of domestication is to convince the trainee that docility is instinctual.

Among critiques of civilization, domestication is usually understood as an ecological term related to agriculture. Implied in that understanding, however, is a broader conception of domestication as resignation to a dominant culture, housebreaking the human mind.

This approach is useful in understanding the limitations of the work of the musician, but does not exclude or contradict a more pointed primitivist critique which could be made simply by linking the digitization of music to the technologizing of everyday life, or, on a more anthropological level, by observing the historical links between harmony and hierarchy. Complimentary to this critique is an existential description of the experience of domestication in music.

Music and the work of the musician have undergone new stages of domestication by way of a withdrawal of the musical experience from a shared lifeworld into two immaterial realms: the internet and the exclusively mental. This constitutes a taming of the experience and work of melodic performance. Content-wise, too, songs have become ever more reliant on snap-to-grid timing to be cut-and-pasted and easily manipulated in computer software.

This affects not only the work of musicians, but the deeper rhythmic layers of the human being. While this technique makes it easier to create songs, it also makes music easier to predict, blunting the effect of anticipation, and locking out anxiety from the listener's experience, instead of allowing that anxiety to play out and resolve itself.

Music is not just a cultural activity, but an expression of the rhythms of being itself. As we restrain ourselves or allow ourselves to be restrained by submitting to dominant modes of expression in exchange for participation in culture, we lose access to these more basic rhythms of being, which need not have any necessary relationship to the culture whose participation demands such a trade-off.

By replacing the free irregularities of improvised performances that follow no steady internal time signature, with techniques that more easily conform to a synchronized rhythm, we give up an essential element of the musical process for something more compatible with cultural assumptions about a broader conception of music. This constrains the idiosyncratic rhythms of being that are integral to the freer experience of undomesticated timing. The pulsing, metronomic syncopations are brought inside us, between the ears, in a last-ditch effort to replace the lost lucidity of our more instinctual, bodily rhythms.

This headphone experience, while often thrilling, frequently both visceral and cerebral in the same note, is a powerful substitution for the lived, spatial experience of the body in a shared world, but a substitution nonetheless. It brings the rhythms inside, rather than enticing the listener to inhabit a rhythmic world. It makes the body into a world of its own, which is especially dangerous in a time when emotional injuries are incubating, growing and feeding off social deprivations, fueling what could become deep interpersonal inhibitions which may burden future generations. We must ensure that we and our descendants are not left unable to truly inhabit the world, unable to face reality in its unpredictability, to not only tolerate but inhabit and participate in the wild clutter of reality.

For various reasons, music may not be played out loud, instead pumped into either side of the listener's skull, as if it were their own private experience. This can make listening to music more exciting in some ways. Things like track panning, fading in/out, and various audio effects work to make the experience of recorded songs more interesting, as the production plays with positionality in the body. But the withdrawal of the listener from an open space wherein the performer shares spatial perceptual access to the music, or where people listen together, is a repressing of the dynamic and independent life of the song itself, in all its rhythmic finitude. It's a closing of the boundaries around the musical instinct, where the deprivation is of the human body in its open space and access to other bodies.

The other immaterial realm where music can be experienced is the internet, which can, arguably, be a place of shared unconscious. On the internet, consciousnesses regularly confront each other as though inhabiting the same open, mental space. Music can even be made together in this digital realm, between individuals in otherwise geographically separated locations. But the blunt materiality of the outside, the being-there, the inhabiting of a fully perceptual, spatial world, is lacking online.

Perception is synesthetic. Hearing, like other senses, is not separable from its wider perceptual context. Experience of the world is not reducible to separable, divided senses, but relies on an open context in which the senses comingle. The multi-sensed world is the context of music, and without it, music lives a rigid life.

Hope lies with those musicians who are attempting to break out of the withdrawal, resist the illusory collectivity of the internet, and break the monotonous regularity of machine rhythms by embracing the unpredictability and irregularity of tempo, experiencing the lucidity of being by playing outside of time signatures, or ditching them altogether, and reclaiming the rebellious and unruly in melody, and welcoming the life of music which exists on the outside.

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