

A Brief History of Industrial Music

Although it is generally acknowledged that industrial music as a genre begins in the mid-1970s with the band Throbbing Gristle,¹ its actual roots extend further back—to *musique concrète*² movement in post-war France.³ Musicians such as Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henry, and Edgar Varèse, spurred by the commercial availability of magnetic recordable tape,⁴ inverted the notion of music: instead of creating tunes to be actualized

¹ For me, industrial music begins with New Order. My freshman year of high school, I found a copy of *Substance* in my sister's cassette tape holder—a box of hard-molded plastic, dusky gray, the size of a loaf of bread. Over the years, I'd made various discoveries there: Vietnamese "Anka" compilations that me to introduced Neil Diamond and Terry Jacks at an unnaturally young age, and the progenitors of the New Wave: Haircut 100, Yazoo, General Public. But *Substance*, with its catchy melodies, finger-snapping beats, and Bernard Sumner's strangely affectless vocals, was the first album that spoke to me. Even the liner notes were beautiful; the cover folded out to reveal chromatic blotches, dabs of watercolor against a white background, Rorschach tests that smelled faintly of ionized perfume.

² When my sister sneaked out to go clubbing, I crept into her room and listened to *Substance* over and over again, until the tape had stretched thin, its sound tinny and distorted. The tape itself curled at its edges, now tan instead of dark brown, as if repeated listens had simultaneously drained it of sound and color. One night, while rewinding to "Bizarre Love Triangle," it busted. The reels kept spinning, and I listened to the whirring, how it sounded like a dentist's drill, how it had its own distinct pitch, before finally hitting Stop.

³ I already had an appreciation for deliriously cheesy Europop, but there was something innately fey about the music. The music videos on Teletunes—Denver's public television version of MTV—featured slim, androgynous boys, eyes dark with make-up, hair crisp and shellacked, singing about loneliness and sadness. I loved it, though I knew that while being feminine might be okay for Europeans, it was not for me. Still, I sang to myself with the shower going full-blast: "Swiss boy, you're in love with that Swiss boy. You don't know what I'm going through."

⁴ Cassette tapes were the *lingua franca* of my youth. In 1988, compact discs had only begun to gain prominence. My father, however, had been a proponent of them for years. We had a state-of-the-art, programmable 5-disc changer in the corner of our living room, along with a rotating turnstile of classical music. But throughout my high school, I saw nothing but tapes being slipped into pockets like wallets. They were cheap. They were easy to copy.

in sound, the sounds themselves were the starting point.⁵ Sound recordings—of passing trains, cookware rattling on the stove, people walking along the sidewalk—were sped up, reversed, looped, and layered⁶ into tunes. Indeed, *musique concrète*'s hallmarks—“natural”⁷ sound and its manipulation⁸—would become cornerstones of industrial music.

But industrial music as a genre⁹ would not exist until late 1975, when Throbbing Gristle, an offshoot of a performance art collective, established their label, Industrial Records. Though the term “industrial music” was coined by avant-garde composer

⁵ The summer after my freshman year, my cousin Thao from Oklahoma decided not to go to college after graduating valedictorian from high school, a move that, to the elders of our Vietnamese family, was unheard of, self-destructive, unbelievable. My aunt got all her sisters, including my mother, to dissuade Thao from this course. But she had made up her mind. That summer, she lived with my aunt in Denver. She brought a collection of tapes, the likes of which I'd never heard before. A friend had made them for her, she explained. The band names alone were a foreign language: Clan of Xymox, Sigue Sigue Sputnik, Xmal Deutschland. Even if I couldn't pronounce them, I understood them. I asked Thao if her friend could make her more tapes. “Oh, sure,” she said. “Ricky has thousands of albums. He and his friends are always trading music.”

⁶ Music, for me, had always been something to wake me up in the morning. But never before had I considered it a community, a gathering place, a rallying point. That summer, my sister, Thao and I sat on the floor in front of my family's stereo at 2 in the morning, eating Oreos and smoked oysters with Ritz crackers, and I rolled the band names around in my head until I was as fluent in them as I was in English.

⁷ Back then, I was Asian, I was smart, I played the piano. My glasses—thick plastic, opaque along the edges—were rumored to be able to see into the future. What else could I have been but a nerd?

⁸ But being a nerd was easier than being gay, so I wore the title like a police officer's badge. Any gay tendencies could be chalked up to nerd-related eccentricity. For instance: singing the aria from *La Boheme* down the halls of Hinkley High? Raised on classical music. Flamboyant dramatics and a flair for hand gestures? Unspeakable lack of cool. Waiting fully-dressed in the swimming pool locker room while everyone else changed? That—that really couldn't be explained away.

⁹ Everyone else in high school also fell into their roles with ease: the clove-cigarette smoking drama kids, the regular-cigarette smoking stoners, the broad-shouldered jocks and their pretty, feather-haired girlfriends, the band kids who wore letterman's jackets adorned with gold pins the shape of musical instruments, the brainy ones like myself who tracked each other through A.P. classes and compared GPAs like penis sizes. These groups mixed with enough camaraderie to keep them from merging, a social dissonance that could be heard from down the hallways.

Monte Cazazza, the artists who recorded on Industrial Records, including Cabaret Voltaire, Clock DVA, S.P.K., and Throbbing Gristle themselves, embodied the new aesthetic of transgression,¹⁰ noise, and mechanization. In many ways, early industrial music was a metaphor: the noise of machines¹¹ was the noise of the human condition.¹²

What is commonly known as industrial music today, however, is a far cry from how it was conceived in the 1970s. While they share some of the same techniques¹³—

¹⁰ My sister, however, had started bucking the expectations that our parents had placed on her. By day, she taught middle school; in the evening, she brushed on lipstick and quietly crept out the house to the 23rd Parish, to the Aqua Lounge, to the I-Bar. My parents found out because, as her co-conspirator, it was my duty to sneak her in and out of the house. I unlocked doors, kept watch until the light in my mother's bedroom went out, and pushed her car from the driveway into the street so that the engine wouldn't wake my father. In return for my help, she asked the DJs for their playlists. When she got home, smelling of smoke, taking out her earrings and unstrapping her high heels, she whispered to me: Red Flag, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, Boxcar. She had to teach in five hours—five hours to recover from exhaustion and elation. Though I didn't understand why she had to go out every night, I did understand how alike we were, how we managed to hide the noise inside of ourselves under complacency.

¹¹ My parents regarded high school as the be-all of my being. To them, success in high school meant success in college, a good job, a safe and solid life. But consider: they had fled Vietnam on one of the last helicopters out of Saigon. With me in my father's arms, they had run across the tarmac as Communist tanks bulldozed the runway lights, as snipers took aim at the figures fleeing towards the helipad. "If I get hit," my father had told my brother, "I want you to grab Viet and keep running." They ran all the way to suburbs of Denver, to a ranch house in a residential neighborhood, to the quiet parkway where they took walks. In the evening sunlight, the field at the end of our street—beige from dried grass and scrub—took on the same color as all the houses identical to ours.

¹² My older brother had followed their example (successful petroleum engineer, traditional Vietnamese wife, beautiful house in Texas), but my sister and I had different ideas about our future. I remember the hushed, giddy excitement in her voice when she first told me that she had a white boyfriend. And I remember my parents' wrath that sent her running away. Although she returned just a few hours later, driven home by said boyfriend, I knew that if they had reacted this strongly to someone of the wrong race, how would they react to someone of the wrong gender?

¹³ Besides, I saw my future self—the future of all homosexuals—in Nicci, my sister's hairdresser. He owned a downtown salon and had salvaged her hair after our California relatives convinced her to get a

stark percussion, distorted loops, polemical lyrics¹⁴—industrial music was as much (if not more) about dancing as experimentation. But this was indicative of the split¹⁵ within industrial music itself: before breaking up, the progenitors of industrial music themselves, Throbbing Gristle, turned towards dance beats and synthesized melodies.

In some ways, industrial music is the marriage of punk and new wave¹⁶; while it shares punk's rebellious "in your face" attitude,¹⁷ it also utilizes the synthesized instruments and emotional alienation¹⁸ of new wave. One of the most influential labels

perm. Though my sister trusted him implicitly, the only image of "gay" I had was him taking fingerfuls of her hair and pulling them straight between his thumb and forefinger, as if reading Braille.

¹⁴ At what point does a shared sexuality make a community? At what point did it not matter? Though I hid one extreme aspect of my identity (my inner singing nancyboy), I had embraced another (the math-whiz poindexter). Worse, I couldn't shake a feeling of anonymity. There wasn't anything markedly different about me except my race, but that had its disadvantages. At best, I was a known quantity—the nerd—and at worst, I was completely invisible.

¹⁵ When the Wherehouse at Aurora Mall proved limited in its selection, my sister suggested Wax Trax, near downtown Denver. I had never been to this part of Denver before, and the appearance of graffiti, broken glass and bums frightened me. I'd spent too long in the suburbs.

¹⁶ The intersection of 13th and Pearl was the staging ground for Denver's counterculture. There was Imi Jimi and FashionNation, stores with mohawked mannequins in the display windows, metal buckles and eyelets glinting like moments of revelation.

¹⁷ Inside Wax Trax itself, thrash metal blared from speakers. The whole store seemed cobbled from spare parts: the shelving units were plywood 2x4s; the carpet was worn to its black rubber padding; the plastic artist cards, handwritten in black magic marker, were gray from fingertips. I felt conspicuous in my Bugle Boy khakis and Izod polo, and the counter staff seemed confounded and annoyed by my presence. Denver's alternative paper had listed Wax Trax as #4 in their Top Ten list of Places to be Treated Like Shit.

¹⁸ After a few minutes of looking through the stacks, reading the comments written on the artist cards ("Like Black Flag, except lazier"), I was unable to find what I'd been looking for. My sister had scrawled *Front 242* on a bar napkin, and the sweat from my hands had blurred it. So I asked the guy wearing a tattered black sweatshirt with a red anarchy symbol for help. He smiled, as if we'd merely gotten off on the wrong foot, and led me to the Industrial section.

of this period, Chicago's Wax Trax! Records,¹⁹ licensed many of these European artists²⁰ to the United States. Indeed, many of industrial's forefathers found a home on Wax Trax,²¹ including Clock DVA and the ex-members of Throbbing Gristle (under the guises of Coil, Chris & Cosey, and Psychic TV). Other noteworthy bands to appear on the label included the Grand Guignol theatrics of Skinny Puppy,²² the danceable cyberpunk of Front Line Assembly, and the ever-evolving Ministry.

Front 242 was particularly influential,²³ specializing in what they called "electronic body music" (EBM). Taking a darker view of the disco²⁴ machinery, Front

¹⁹ Spurred by a photocopy taped onto the glass counter at Wax Trax ("Why all industrial music sounds alike"), I was able to expand my familiarity with the bands exponentially. I could trace the lineage of Acid Horse from Cabaret Voltaire all the way to the Revolting Cocks; I could connect the dots between Test Dept. and Einsturzende Neubaten. Strangely enough, though, Ministry seemed to be the crux around which everyone else rotated.

²⁰ The early 90s were the Mesozoic age of fashion, when Z. Cavaricci and Generra Hypercolor shirts roamed the land.

²¹ Wax Trax provided a solution to my clothing issues as well. Before my sophomore year of high school, my parents had provided my wardrobe, mainly tan slacks and white short-sleeve button-up shirts. My sister, however, had been filling her closets with Norma Kamali, Christian Lacroix, and Versace. She steered me away from Z. Cavaricci ("Their zippers are made out of tin! They'll rust shut!") but not all the way to couture. But I found my own path to self-expression and differentiation: instead of describing the bands I now listened to, I could wear their names emblazoned across on my chest. Thus, rather than explaining Severed Heads and Cyberaktif to my classmates, I could simply point to my shirt and soak in the raised eyebrows and puzzled glances.

²² My favorite t-shirt featured a screaming demon head on the front and Skinny Puppy in melting letters on the back. Surely, it was all the more disturbing that an honors student was wearing it, I thought. The bizarre and grotesque imagery seemed at odds with what they thought of me. I had escaped from invisibility, and soon, I'd be sacrificing my straight-A report card atop a Satanic altar. I wondered: is being noticed because I'm scary better than not being noticed at all? And: am I really that scary or am I just distracting? And: is any of this who I really am? Whichever, nothing stays shocking for long. I wore that shirt until the demon's face cracked and flaked away, the black fading to gray.

²³ My parents taught me how to dance. When the posters for upcoming concerts (ABC! From California! Featuring Anh Huynh!) papered over the windows of Vietnamese grocery stores, they took note. These