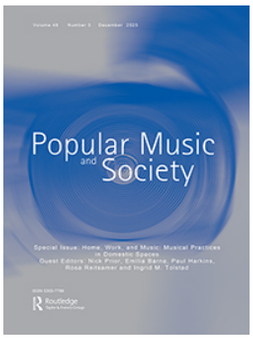

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Making and Visualizing Music in the Bedroom and Living House, Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic, with Billie Eilish and Fiona Apple

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on changes in music production which impacted multimodal aesthetics before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a shift toward bedroom production, DIY aesthetics and reflection on mental health. It addresses how home produced music by Billie Eilish and Fiona Apple foregrounded individual and collective agency while leveraging the possibilities of new digital technologies to invoke expansive imaginary worlds. This mode of address is intimate to the extent of being discomforting, offering a window onto our present historical moment, exposing both the vulnerabilities of life in the digital age as well as some potential for disruptive transformations.

KEYWORDS

bedroom production; COVID-19; DIY; Billie Eilish; Fiona Apple; music videos

Introduction

In this article, I consider how cultural and technological transformations that were already underway in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic came into sharper focus in that historical moment. While lockdown prevented physical travel and in-person meetings for many, it accelerated ongoing transformations in musical production, making the activities of those who were already home producing seem more relatable and timely. A cluster of overlapping factors contributed to these transformations at the turn of the 2020s, including the movement toward laptop and bedroom production (Prior, "New Amateurs," "New Amateurs Revisited," "OK Computer"; Kaloterakis; De Carvalho; Baron), a return to DIY aesthetics (Spencer; Kanai; Ashworth), renewed attention to issues of neurodivergency and mental health (Holmes; Riihimäki), and a new dynamic of artist-audience interaction reflecting altered music industry structures and priorities (Brusila et al; Hesmondhalgh; Pääkkölä, "Music Videos").

While the focus of this article is primarily on the years surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the changes I am discussing here are embedded within broader trends across digital culture that started some time earlier, including the partial collapse of the record label majors around the year 2010, precipitated by a shift toward streaming audio; the new affordability and usability of professional quality music production software (Polk);

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a (related) industry-wide turn toward small-scale "producer studios" and networked multisite practices; the ascent of home recording as a primary rather than secondary mode of production (De Dios Cuartas; Polk); and finally, the rise of social media and the assumption that artists (more than A&R departments) should be multitaskers responsible for their own promotion. As De Dios Cuartas writes, "the profound change produced from the COVID-19 pandemic serves to consolidate a trend towards the virtualization of recording space that had been developing for approximately a decade" (57). Arguably, these developments were set in motion following the appearance of Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) in the 1980s. Once fast internet connections became more widespread in the early 2000s, both these factors facilitated the rapid and effortless exchange of data, making projects less place and space-bound than previously. COVID-19 in these circumstances became a pressure cooker that intensified an existing trend. In lockdown, moreover, many aspiring artist-producers had more leisure time, often combined with more disposable income, as well as access to a wider range of digital resources, including self-learning resources on YouTube and channels for self-publishing music. All these factors played a part in bringing about a burgeoning culture of home production, the repercussions of which remain with us to this day.

My discussion will focus on two women singer-songwriters of different generations who occupied the media spotlight during this period, whose home-produced releases responded in different ways to a complex set of social and personal circumstances. While both are currently signed to music industry majors, they have both been called indie artists, an admittedly contested and slippery term, although this designation is reinforced by various factors, including their home production ethos, the fact both exert significant control over their production and promotional apparatuses, and in their positioning as oppositional or alternative to an assumed mainstream, corroborated in the views of fans and peers (Damon Albarn's endorsement of Eilish, for example). Apple has moved in a career spanning more than two decades progressively toward the experimental margins of her field, making the designation alternative more common in her case and achieving greater critical acclaim partly as a result, while Eilish was quickly elevated to a prominent place in the indie pop mainstream, which at the time of writing she has sustained over three albums. Home production was a prominent feature of the promotional activities surrounding both artists' releases, resonating with their critical and popular reception.

Billie Eilish's breakthrough songs were recorded at home in close collaboration with her brother, Finneas O'Connell. While it was the viral success on SoundCloud of "Ocean Eyes" (from the EP *Don't Smile at Me*) that propelled the duo to pop stardom (Cirisano), the album *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* (*WWFA*) consolidated Eilish's success and is justifiably considered a landmark in bedroom production. Here, I will focus mainly on the songs and music videos "Everything i Wanted" (dir. Billie Eilish) and "Bury a Friend" (dir. Michael Chaves), with an emphasis on the aesthetics and technologies of sound production, multimodality, and culturally and phenomenologically informed close reading. Additionally, I will discuss Fiona Apple's "Shameika" (dir. Matthias Brown), a single and music video from the critically acclaimed album *Fetch the Bolt Cutters* (*FTBC*, 2020), with a similar dual focus on sounds and corresponding visual imagery. While *WWFA* predates the COVID-19 pandemic, much of its reception and discussions surrounding it coincided with its early stages. Similarly, Apple's *FTBC* was made prior to the pandemic and

released in its early stages, with much of its impact occurring during the most strictly regulated period of lockdown. The home-production ethos and aesthetics of both artists, as well as their personal narratives, resonated with the experiences of many during lockdown, whilst also reflecting emerging structural changes in society and the music industry. Of interest here are cultural configurations of space encompassing both the material conditions of production and their extension in recorded sound and music videos. Spanning the empirical and the imaginary, this dual focus approach allows me to triangulate discussions more effectively than concentrating on either one of these aspects in isolation.

I limit my discussion to two artists partly because close reading entails detailed reflection on experiences, but also because these two case studies form a complementary pair exemplifying several closely related issues. The fact that both are women matters, as the cultural transformations discussed here have arguably had the greatest impact on the lives of women artist-producers. While I could have concentrated on the "grass roots" activities of relatively unknown artist-producers, which statistically are the most typical, the elevated prominence of these two artists on either side of the Covid-19 pandemic struck me as telling.

What Does it Mean to Record at Home?

A concern here will be to ask what kinds of spaces (related to Lefebvre's work on social space) and frames (as theorized by Goffman) are relevant to the issues at hand. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the theoretical nuances of frame analysis in detail (for more on this, see Richardson, "Ecological" 157–64, "Closer Reading" 119–26; Bal; Goffman; Auslander, *In Concert* 3–5.) Suffice it to say that a frame can be any set of social and material conditions that significantly informs the meanings, values, and affective resonances people assign to bounded objects and actions. A frame can include but is not restricted to framed visual images; actual and sonically constructed performance spaces; spatialized sound design and corresponding visual imagery that implies empirical and imaginary worlds; extending to symbolically bounded assemblages like genre, scenes, and performing personas. Although such frames are often empirically verifiable, their meanings and experiential nuances are not, as they are subject to social agreement and projections, requiring agency on the part of the artist/producer and the interpreter/perceiver (Goffman 39; Richardson, "Ecological" 120).

Theories of frames and socially constructed space overlap significantly, including the category of intimate personal space, the social spaces of performances, the virtual spaces of the Internet, and the architectural and corresponding imaginary spaces of the home, including the bedroom, the garage, the living room, all of which are salient to the present discussion. As Lefebvre writes:

> [e]veryone knows what is meant when we speak of a "room" in an apartment, the "corner" of the street … and so on. These terms of everyday discourse serve to distinguish … particular spaces, and in general to describe a social space. They correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute. (16)

By positing "the social production of social space," Lefebvre sought to expose the mediation that goes into aligning spaces with practices and, in so doing, to subject social

uses of spaces to critical scrutiny (26–27). Importantly, Lefebvre made no firm distinction between imaginary spaces and concrete physical ones, as these are co-produced and subject to the same encodings and recodings (21). His use of the word "production" is fortuitous in this context, as it is through the actions and corresponding imaginings of producer-artists that such spaces become defined. An important premise here is that the sonic and corresponding visual spaces of popular music are saturated with social significance that is integral to experiences.

The concept of bedroom production will help us to frame and unpack the aesthetic of Eilish's music, as well as what is at stake in her approach. In Apple's case, the bedroom is also relevant, although her approach is not quite so easily contained within its boundaries. A question which goes to the heart of my project is what do bedrooms and homes producing sound like? The assumption might be that they sound DIY and amateurish, but increasingly this is not the case, as software becomes more affordable and competency is more evenly distributed (Polk). For reasons that will soon become apparent, sonic and visual experiences and attendant social practices matter as these are closely intertwined with broader cultural assumptions.

When discussing home production, one is unavoidably also talking about digital spaces (De Dios Cuartas 57). Moreover, due to the architectural and often financial constraints of home recording, these are intimate spaces that are knowingly and reflexively encoded as such. They have the potential to become safe and agentic, a form of intimacy that has a critical aspect when understood in opposition to traditional industry structures and values, although the inverse qualities of isolation, social exclusion, and entrapment have also been associated with domestic spaces. De Dios Cuartas (64) employs anthropologist Edward T. Hall's theorization of proximity categories in his discussion of home recording and its potential to encode intimate experiences. I will similarly argue that the category of intimate space and proximity is salient in discussions of home recording. The home is a domain governed by powerful affective forces that is informed as much by experiences of asociality and social anxiety as by sociality and sensory connectedness. A concern here will be to zero in on how and with what cultural repercussions this is expressed in music and visual imagery.

Much of the new generation of writing on music production is relevant here, as reflected in the content of periodicals like *Journal on the Art of Record Production* and others (Prior, "OK Computer," "The Rise," "New Amateurs"; Richardson, "Televised," "An Eye"; Moore). Ironically, this field of research started to gain a foothold at the same time as traditional recording studios arrived at a major crisis, precipitated by the rise of affordable digital recording technologies. Most relevant here is research on home recording, as well as discussions of the raw and amateurish garage aesthetic (Bovey), which was resurrected in punk and post-punk and whose legacy is often considered masculine. More recently, bedroom aesthetics has risen to the forefront of discussions of music production. Traditionally, the bedroom has been regarded as a private, sometimes feminine, space associated with consumption more than production, a positioning much of the research literature has sought to challenge (McRobbie; Bell; Baker; Auslander, *In Concert* 178). However, the digital turn toward produsage—a mashup of the terms producing and using that implies participatory agency (Bruns), and the ascent of more accessible and affordable technologies is fast rebranding this domestic domain,

with traditional gender roles in some cases breaking down. While I am skeptical about some of the more overblown claims of democratization narratives (Brusila et al.; Hesmondhalgh; Prior, "The Rise"; Harkins and Prior), there is ample evidence to suggest that DIY practices have the potential to bypass or cause turbulence in the mainstream (Spencer 11; Ashworth; Kanai) 1, even if further down the production-distribution-consumption chain, music industry interests remain all too often at odds with artists' best interests.[2]

Amy Spencer argues that DIY autonomy can give hope to those belonging to marginalized groups, such as queer subcultures and women, as well as resonate with ecological, anti-capitalist, and anti-establishment agendas. More important here is the notion of the home studio as refuge or sanctuary. In this respect, it seems not entirely coincidental that the consolidation of home production coincided not only with COVID-19, but also the aftermath of the #MeToo debates and their impact across popular culture (beginning in 2017)—speaking to a climate of elevated awareness of the value of safe spaces in working environments. Paula Wolfe compellingly argues that the turn to home spaces has been significant and emancipatory for women artist producers, a view the findings below would seem to support. She notes that not only does control of recording spaces further a feminist agenda, but also that women who self-produce are advantageously positioned compared to those who do not exercise direct control over technologies and corresponding skillsets.

Along similar lines, Sheila Whiteley has shown how important it was for emerging women artists operating at the indie end of the pop spectrum, like Kate Bush, Tori Amos, and Björk, to exercise control over their creative labor, both directly through their actions in performance and production, and indirectly through teamwork with trusted family members. Britney Spears (see the documentary film *Framing Britney Spears*), Michael Jackson, Brian Wilson, Karen Carpenter, and others, are unfortunate examples of instances where close family involvement did not guarantee personal safety. Indeed, the COVID-19 lockdown reinforced the view that the home can be a hazardous environment to those trapped in abusive relationships (the so-called shadow pandemic), while at the same time demonstrating how familial proximity can offer new collaborative possibilities, including lighthearted projects like Toyah [Wilcox] and Robert's [Fripp] Sunday Lunch and David Gilmore's Von Trapped Family Home Concerts.

In Eilish's case, the involvement of her parents and brother Finneas appears to have been a factor in creating a safe domestic environment for her creative pursuits. Finneas's role as co-performer and producer is especially significant, while Eilish herself has exerted direct control over both music and image production, including issues of artistic framing when directing her own music videos. The following discussion will explore the relevance of both sonically and visually framed spaces in *WWFA*, with a close focus on the bedroom as a site of cultural negotiations and contestation.

Producing Billie Eilish's Bedroom Aesthetic

The most conspicuous marker of bedroom aesthetics in Billie Eilish's music is arguably the disarming closeness of the singing voice. This accentuation of the voice, which is typical of much of the recent indie pop, results from factors including

the singer's accomplished vocal technique, her diction, expressive nuances like vibrato, and breath control. Close micing of Eilish's timbrally distinctive voice with a Neumann TLM103 condenser microphone also contributes to the sense of detail that is perceptible in recorded performances, especially evident in high frequencies, where this microphone excels. Added to this several layers of compression, which make the quieter moments louder in relation to dynamic peaks (Savage); boosted top-end EQ (above 10 kHz, where air and breathiness reside); and the use of high-level preamps and emulation software, which in turn reinforces the voice's natural harmonics, making performances sound more embodied and spatially defined. Additional factors are the dryness of the lead vocal, which pushes the singer forward in the mix. Greater isolation and dryness are further emphasized using unconventional recording techniques, like singing under a duvet, a technique designed to kill acoustic reflections, which, paradoxically, is as clear a sonic marker of bedroom aesthetics as one is likely to find.

On bedroom aesthetics, Finneas comments: "The bedroom has a very specific sound, very tight and intimate and closed and quiet" (qtd. in Harvey.) This priority would carry across to postproduction: "I might have said to Rob [Kinelski] . . . that we don't want to use any reverb on the album . . . . A dry vocal sounds really intimate: . . . as if she's singing right in front of you . . ." (qtd. in Harvey). Mixing engineer Kinelski confirms that this was part of the game plan when working on *WWFA*: "The plan . . . was for most things to be super-dry. I added some reverb to an early mix, and they immediately said: 'Get rid of the reverb'" (qtd. in Tingen).

The fact that arrangements are sparse, comprising mainly vocals, hip-hop styled beats, and spatialized atmospheric sounds, highlights those musical elements that remain and allows greater headroom in postproduction, both mixing and mastering, for pushing toward higher levels of saturation (distortion, which makes recordings warmer and closer) and loudness-enhancing limiting (Harvey). For someone who is known as a quiet singer, it is worth mentioning that Eilish's songs on *WWFA* are unusually loud (in terms of LUFS levels, the maximum average level recording and playback technologies can handle), a factor to which all of the above factors contribute. In order to be heard, sensitive singing needs to be pushed forward.

Eilish's voice is often located against impactful grimy beats that are both conspicuously present and spatially indeterminate, the music's subby sounds and percussive rhythms being felt in the body as much as heard. Moreover, the fact that much of the music is located either in the lower register or panned to the spatial peripheries of the stereo field, leaves more space in the mix for vocals, which sound relatively louder. All of this creates a soundstage, a spatialized stereo image (Moylan; Richardson, "The Digital"; Moore 15–17) that is infused with hyperreal intimacy.

In Eilish's music, the intimate spaces of the bedroom cohabitate with the urban social spaces of hip-hop and R&B music, especially apparent in her use of subbass sounds as well as loops and samples. Equally relevant are the protected and partitioned indoor spaces of Eilish's post-baby boomer (white, middle-class, Bohemian) parents' home, which we hear snippets of in the album's sound design. Situated in Los Angeles's Highland Park district, an ethnically mixed area of the city, Eilish's family home is just a short journey from the markedly less welcoming and architecturally brutal Los Angeles downtown district. This might go some way to explaining how the quiet sanctuary of the bedroom studio is

sonically never far away from sublimated urban noise and bustle. All of this becomes the canvas onto which Eilish paints narratives that revel in dark and uncanny imagery.

Case 1: "Everything I Wanted"

In "Everything i Wanted" we encounter an oneiric space ("I had a dream") that is at the same time an intimate familial space. We see this in the music video as Eilish's and Finneas's fingers interlock during what appears to be a *Thelma & Louise*-style suicide pact. Finneas has told how he persuaded his sister to take the song's chorus in a more reparative direction than she had originally intended, describing the siblings' mutually supportive relationship rather than emphasizing the self-destructive dream imagery that had initially inspired the song (Episode 197: Billie Eilish). "As long as I'm here, no-one can hurt you," they sing in close harmony, even while it is implied that this is not an entirely safe space, as water wells up around their feet in a car that has just been driven into the ocean. Sonically, this is a combination of impactful intimacy, from conspicuously present vocals to dry basslines, and a four-to-the-floor beat punctuated by snare rimshots. Contributing to the dreaminess of the music is the slow-paced repetition of a single riff, which forms the song's backbone (D major 7, E major, C sharp minor 7, D major, an unresolved cadence: IV VII v, VI/I), which places the music in a reflective interior frame of reference. Long reverb tails on the vocals in the chorus and rhythmically synchronized delay on the piano both contribute to the overriding oneiric atmosphere. Rhythms and microrhythms in the music are reflected in the visual rhythms of the video, as shots alternate on the first and third beats, while later in the video streetlights and passing trees fall into sync with the musical rhythms, emphasizing either every beat or the one and three. The overall atmosphere of reflective interiority is brought home in the video's subdued color palette, both in the warm, dusky tones of the video's first half, which depict the car in motion, and the turquoise-filtered second half, where it is underwater. The combination of music, lyrics, and visuals suggests a nurturing, choric, and homely interior space, while simultaneously recognizing an unhomely exterior world whose presence could disrupt the homely space at any moment. It is a scenario that is likely to have resonated with experiences of many in lockdown: spending quality time at home with a close family member, but at the same time being oddly isolated from the outside world and anxiously aware of an undercurrent of existential danger that could engulf you at any moment.

Case 2: "Bury a Friend"

While the *mise-en-scene* of "Everything i Wanted" is unsettling, in "Bury a Friend" we see a more direct invocation of horror tropes as Eilish takes on the role of a spectral figure lurking initially under a bed. There is an oneiric aspect to this song, too, as intimated by the lyrics and title of the album "When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?" This is an interior space, a space of pronounced intimacy, but its audiovisual vocabulary is taken from nightmares—we are, in a sense, too close for comfort. A young man on a bed jolts himself awake from a nightmare to find himself in a nocturnal urban soundscape (which he returns to also at the end). The bedroom windows are open on a hot summer night, and the sounds of a city permeate the atmosphere. As the man falls back asleep, Eilish is seen with lifeless eyes under the bed. She sings "why aren't you scared of me . . . ," and this

fear is accentuated throughout the song by the presence of a sampled scream and assorted sine-wavey synthesizer ululations. The rhythm of the song is a grimy percussive shuffle that is heavy on the low end. Eilish moves through darkened corridors with the demeaner of a zombie, her ankles overextending and knees bending awkwardly, whereafter she is subjected to a series of sadistic actions that might—once again—have been self-imposed ("I want to end me"). As the song progresses, the singer's weirdness is accentuated: she levitates poltergeist-like, while her vocals are treated with a vocoder to produce a polyphonic monstrous quality, Lynchian light flickering predominates and the horizontal plane of the images moves restlessly (Pääkkölä, "Ecofeminist"). The bridge brings everything to a head, literally, as the singer's head revolves 360 degrees against the background. In the accompanying music, ring modulation and bandpass filtering effects are set against a ghostly harmonium and overdriven bass, culminating in a disruptive tape-stop effect that hints at the presence of the fourth wall.

Moving outwards from the frame of the video's visual narrative and the visceral impact of music and sound, it matters that Eilish adopts and adapts the persona of the possessed adolescent girl from films like *The Exorcist* and *Poltergeist*. These films articulated the anxieties of the patriarchy concerning the heightened sexual agency of adolescent girls. In "Bury a Friend," Eilish takes ownership of this historically abject space and transforms it into a site of affective power and action, mapped onto her creative sanctuary, the bedroom, the site of production where some of the most disturbing scenes in teen-girl horror are enacted (Creed; Lykke and Braidotti; Halberstam). Interestingly, Eilish seems intent on incorporating tropes from horror into her daily life, most notably her arachnophilia, which is seen in both her music videos and her documentarized life.

As Sheila Whiteley has observed, teens themselves know how to "break open," "explore," and "challenge" the boundaries of existing structures, including their relationship to bodies and sexuality. Problems only begin to surface when exploitative industry and societal forces come into play. The main question here is how Eilish occupies and frames space in the images she produces (along with other collaborative agencies). She seems to revel in occupying conventionally abject positions. Importantly, she is usually regarded as performing within her perceived age group, while nevertheless declining to sanitize her actions, which are rude and erotically tinged, largely thanks to the hyper-embodied singing voice, which, more than being a fetish object, is positioned by her as a form of self-expression that encourages identification.

Billie Eilish's Brattish Weirdness[3]

Given Eilish's predilection toward the sensory and the sonically erotic, it matters that her visual performances evade, invert, and parody gender norms, usurping the gaze or deflecting it in loose clothing (Riihimäki and Pääkkölä) and convulsive body movements, which dip into horror tropes while owning and parading markers of her disability—namely the physical tics of her Tourette syndrome, about which she has spoken openly. She adopts trappings of submission and bondage while nevertheless communicating agency (through switching), endurance, and (bratty) dominance. Her breathy vocals, catchy melodies, and striking appearance draw listeners in, but what is found there can unsettle or confound. The contradictions and anxieties of exploring identity are left in sight.

I propose theorizing this combination of the homely and the unsettling (Freud's *unheimlich*) with the help of Mark Fisher's writing on the weird and the eerie. As Fisher writes, "the weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, which cannot be reconciled with the 'homely' (even as its negation)" (10–11). This contradiction inhabits much of the imagery discussed above. The weird is the domain of the grotesque and monstrous. It is both an effect and a mode of being, which has its home in horror genres, but it gains traction in spatial settings that are close to (the) home and, dare I say it, childhood, which is invariably located in or displaced from the family home —hence the weird and the uncanny nature of home settings and childhood in horror. It is instructive that Eilish picks this setting for much of her creative work as the monstrous feminine has long been considered a feminist strategy for empowerment (Lykke & Braidotti; Halberstam; Riihimäki). More than being merely represented in the song's lyrics, this dichotomy of the homely and its darker counterpart (the unhomely) is inscribed above all in the sounds and corresponding visual images of Eilish's songs.

As the submarine car in "Everything I Wanted" and the song's lyrics both intimate, there might be a price to be paid for the level of intimacy Eilish and other artists of her generation offer onlookers, especially when she steps out of the protected bounds of her home or admits others into this sanctuary. Namely, certain scenes in R.J. Cuttler's fly-on-the-wall documentary, *The World's a Little Blurry*, give cause for concern in this regard (Ewens). One shows an exhausted Eilish feeling pressured into taking part in an after-performance meet-and-greet with fans, despite manifesting strong symptoms of TS. A second such moment occurs when two record label executives review mixes of *WWFA* in the siblings' cramped bedroom studio. Here, age differences, physical proximity, and the power dynamics of the participating parties tinge the encounter as awkward, bordering on creepy. With the support of her family, Eilish exerts an impressive level of control over the creative spaces where she produces her music. But once outsiders are admitted, or when she is required to interact in more volatile spaces, the same vulnerability that makes her performances relatable and powerful can easily transform into disconcerting instability.

From the Bedroom to the Living House: On Fiona Apple's Disruptive Aliveness

Fiona Apple's "Shameika" represents a different approach to home production, in which vulnerabilities similar to those discussed above arise, but where the artist's interactions with her domestic setting and the world beyond it are infused with a level of confidence and combativeness that comes with experience. The album on which this song appears, *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*, was co-produced with drummer/producer Amy Aileen Wood, and features guitarist David Garza and bassist Sebastian Steinberg. Apple initially attempted to record the album with her band at the Sonic Ranch residential studio complex in Texas, an experience she found both discomforting and unproductive. For the remainder of the album, she would retreat to her Los Angeles home, with occasional band sessions happening in her living room, and a large number of overdubs being recorded around the house. Numerous clips of this recording process can be found on social media.

Like Eilish, Apple hails from Los Angeles: in her case, the more affluent and bohemian district of Venice Beach, where much of *FTBC* was recorded.[4] The house in Fiona Apple's

work is very much her personal space, although it is also occupied by animals and occasional visiting musicians. A star prodigy already in the 1990s, Apple's seniority is apparent not only in her domestic circumstances, but in the rich and occasionally disturbing tapestry of anecdotes that is found on this largely autobiographical album, which draws from different points of an eventful lifecycle and more than two decades of music industry experience.

Apple's presence on the album spans piano, organ and electric piano, drums and percussion, as well as voice. Much of the music is dominated by percussion and an approach to sound that is raw and impactful throughout. Even the piano is approached as a percussive instrument. Apple's singing is eccentric and virtuosic, employing extended techniques similar to experimentalists like Meredith Monk, Diamanda Galás, Joan La Barbara, Yoko Ono, as well as indie-pop peers Regina Spektor, Karen Finley, Björk, and Kate Bush. Even Apple's singing has a quirkily percussive feel that complements her wordy and energized lyrical phrasing, which critics have compared to rap. This experimentalism is complemented in the use of found objects as percussive instruments, including the bones of Apple's deceased dog, a metal butterfly, and oil cans, as well as field recordings of everyday sounds (a feature also of Eilish's *WWFA*).

While the aesthetic ideal of *FTBC* is in some respects DIY, this does not imply that the musical results are less impactful than music that tops the charts. Indeed, as is typical in the digital age, humble surroundings and entry-level production skills (by Apple's own admission) no longer preclude top-quality sonic results, in a context where live rather than isolated studio sound is fast becoming the norm, which is a parallel trajectory to the in-the-box, predominantly electronic sounds, of Eilish's music. The sound world of *FTBC* juxtaposes acoustic and digital aesthetics through an emphasis on powerful transients (percussive peaks), the subbass sounds of organs (not dissimilar to synth sounds), uses of low percussion and sound effects, and the hyperreal sense of presence that is possible when recording with high-quality equipment. Noteworthy is the use of a high-end SE Rupert Neve RNT tube condenser microphone, which has an overdriven sound that pushes Apple's vocal forward in the mix in a somewhat different way than Eilish's breathy hyperrealism. Both sounds are dry and present, but the overdriven quality of Apple's voice, combined with ambient room aesthetics (sounds bouncing off hard surfaces) produces an edgy and impactful sound. The up-close erotics of Eilish's voice contrasts with Apple's more abrasive sound (hard walls contrasting with soft bedding), which is present in all sonic elements: the voice, the piano, and the song's clattering percussion.

While Eilish's brother Finneas worked exclusively in Logic Pro, Fiona Apple was learning the ropes of music production when working on this album using the entry-level version of Apple's (the corporation) music production software, GarageBand. Her approach involved recording long takes with what might often be considered mistakes left uncorrected, which she would then willfully incorporate as part of the ebb and flow of the music:

> I had everything set up for GarageBand and the band had been coming over to play. . . . I didn't even know how to edit it and make a take shorter, so each track is just . . . one long take. If I made a mistake . . . I better just play over it and let that mistake work itself into it. (qtd. in Chang et al.)

The resulting aura of liveness became integral to her music, with apparently flawed performances becoming documentary-like records of the creative process. Apple comments: "I was trying to learn how to be a better musician while making this record. . . . I wasn't practicing and then recording—I was recording myself while I was trying to get it right. . . . It felt like a real documentation of what was going on." (qtd, in Pelly). Just like the sound design on Eilish's album, the music in this way offered snapshots of the home environment, with the secondary effect of elevating the artist's agency—these audible traces of liveness bestowing an authenticity familiar from garage aesthetics. Apple's comments on GarageBand are telling, even though the intended referent is not identical—the software's brand name appropriates garage authenticity to challenge notions of home recording as sterile and difficult. Stereotypes of garage music as predominantly masculine are easily supported by historical evidence, but there are some important exceptions, including The Slits, Riot Grrrl, and the White Stripes.[5] Unsurprisingly, reviewers have aligned *FTBC* with garage pop, but not without caveats. As Zakhri notes, "Apple's garage is not your average garage." Perhaps, then, it is helpful to look also elsewhere to different domestic spaces.

Apple herself zooms in on the sense of rawness and spontaneity which we associate with garage aesthetics, but with reference to a different concept:

> The other word you could use for it is: "aliveness." I didn't really have a choice in not putting in messy stuff. . . . I don't know how to play my instruments very well, honestly. I'm not putting myself down. I can play my own stuff, but I'm not someone you can bring into a studio, like, "Hey, can you play on this?" (qtd. in Pelly)

While it might be true that Apple's drumming and percussion is not *instrumentally* virtuosic (she calls it "sloppy" [see Strauss]), and her timing might fluctuate in ways that would bother a session musician, such criteria miss the point, which might be to communicate experience embedded in—rather than removed from—daily life. *Aliveness* encapsulates something which is not rarified, fixed, or remote; it is spontaneous, grounded, and free-flowing. Undoubtedly, there is also a feminist subtext to these statements; women have traditionally been less inclined to "talk up" their work and or to embrace without caveats discourses of musicianly professionalism.

Apple's aliveness tells the listener something about how the music is performed and how perceived sounds communicate the performer's experience of being, or *becoming*, through the sound production, which is continuous with the performer's corporeality and the spaces she inhabits and makes resound. Aliveness connects with ideas about pop authenticity, which, in Philip Auslander's view is performative (*Liveness* 84), typically requiring either visual authentication (Richardson, "Televised" 98, 100), or the presence of audible traces of the unfolding and responsive nature of the performer's actions (Christopher Small's "musicking"). Apple's aliveness, however, goes further than this; it requires that collaboration extend beyond the human; more radically still, that the inanimate world be recast as animate and responsive. That might be why we hear as many as four dogs on *FTBC*, as well as other ambient sounds; and why we are encouraged to listen for traces of the material environments (reflections, resonances) where performances take place—or where place takes performances. In interviews, she assigns the home a collaborative function, an agency of its own, rather than being understood merely as a passive backdrop

to creative acts. This resonates with Lefebvre's (91–93) understanding of spaces as completed by the experiences of those who inhabit them, as well as the views of feminist theorists on daily life, like Rita Felski, whose approach admits the "diffuse, distracted, semiconscious perceptions, beliefs, and reactions that make up much of our daily living" (174).

Regarding Apple's views on the house as a site of personal growth and creative action, she comments: "I want to repay this house … Because it has been my mother, really; … the home of all the music … the womb where I've developed into an adult. … [I]t's an instrument in itself … the microphone, … the ambiance, … a member of the band" (qtd. in Chang et al.). The house in Apple's characterization is nurturing and responsive, an enveloping feminine space and sanctuary. The house as "womb" is in no mere receptacle, but an active collaborator whose protective walls and resonant materiality imbue the music performed within its architectural frame with a unique auditory character (for more on the potentiality of the house as a time-space affording relational and porous interactions, see Massey 43). While the garage might come into play as a site of spontaneity and rebellion, and the bedroom as a site of intimacy, it is other spaces in the home that feature most prominently in Apple's own commentary: most notably the living room, a concept that can be extended to encompass the *living house*. Through an aesthetic of transgressive aliveness, this zone of transformative actions is positioned by Apple both as a sanctuary and a distillery of lived experiences that extends beyond its immediate time-space coordinates.

Case 3: "Shameika"

The driving force of "Shameika" is a repeated left-hand riff on the piano incorporating chord tones of C major and A minor, voiced to emphasize dissonant tritones within the chords. This riff's relentless and angular character establishes the ground tone of the song, which tells of Apple's experiences of alienation at school, encounters with predatory older men, early awareness of her OCD, and the encouragement she received from the unexpected direction of an older peer, Shameika, a person of color who intervened when Apple was being bullied by other girls, expressed her approval and told her that she had "potential."[6] All of this culminates at the end of the first verse in a dynamically squashed (heavily compressed) crash cymbal, triggered by a reference in the lyrics to leaves crushed underfoot.

Apple has commented on how both the lyrics of Shameika's first verse and its cacophonous rhythmic texture were inspired largely by her childhood experiences of neurodivergency:

> I have OCD and it became an obsession with me, where I would go on these long walks and I would have to walk on beat. … [L]eaves would be falling from trees and I would be leaping so that I could step on it on the beat. And I'd literally be grinding my teeth to a little beat and it would go on all day long. (qtd. in Chang et al.)

As the song's narrator recalls counting the seconds until the end of an anxiety-filled school day, a falling chromatic line in the prechorus has its own obsessive agency, culminating in the disruptive breakdown of the rhythm in a series of stumbling

accents, which fall on consonant alternating chords, B flat major and E flat major, between which we hear the repeated hook, "Shameika said I have potential." The song eventually disintegrates into a chaotic dub-styled jam in its final moments, with instruments peeling away to leave drums, piano and abrasive delay-treated sound effects.

The official music video for "Shameika" was also home-produced and is similarly characterized by the flaunting of DIY aesthetics. In a process video documenting the making of the video, director Matthias Brown is seen in a bedroom setting, painstakingly tracing filmed footage of Fiona Apple by hand on a graphics tablet. The process is laborious to say the least, but its hand-made nature speaks to an authenticity that resembles Apple's creative process. Moreover, the hybrid means of production (analog and digital) leave traces that have consequences.

The appearance of the official music video is sensory, stark, and impactful in its two-tone design. When the minimalistic color scheme is combined with the microrhythmic disjunction caused by rotoscoping, the song's overriding energy is of enervated disjunction. In my earlier writing on the use of pixilation and claymation in Peter Gabriel's Sledgehammer ("Plasticine," 203–04, *An Eye* 75–77), I noted how the visual microrhythms of stop-animation imparts a visual liveliness that complements and directs attention toward textual details in the accompanying music. The same is true here, arguably with even more dramatic results. The convulsive movements of rotoscoped figures parallel the constant movement of the piano riff and the disjunctive drum patterns. Moreover, the video's black-and-white imagery comments on the color dynamic of the song's narrative. Rotoscoped images of both Apple and the real-life (now adult) Shameika are seen in different parts of the video: the latter's eye is framed in extreme close-up in the opening moments as she recites the mantra-like line "take a moment"; later, the video reverts to images that mimic the black-and-white keys of Apple's piano—ebony and ivory reconfigured. Moreover, the emphasis on isolated body parts, a technique familiar to the surrealists (Richardson, *An Eye* 47), ensures that visceral intensity is maintained from the beginning to the end of the video. All in all, the video captures and accentuates the "fuss and flurry" (76) of the accompanying music; its vitality, materiality, artifact; euphoria mixed with anxiety, but from the safe, reflexive distance of indie-producers' homes.

FTBC resonated with the experiences of many people when it released just as the first wave of COVID-19 lockdown policies were being introduced in many parts of the world (17 April 2020). Writing in the early days of the pandemic, Kristen Iverson comments, "*FTBC* doesn't just feel like something to listen to right now—it feels like the thing to listen to right now. It's an album for a restless audience, songs for people stuck at home, people who need to break free, people who rarely step past their front doors." Despite its uncompromising ethos, it received a Grammy for best alternative album of 2021; moreover, for some time after its release it was Metacritic's highest-rated album "of all time." Home production allowed a safe space of experimentation where Apple could relax and be outspoken. In "Shameika," she transforms experiences of sexual harassment, bullying, and neurodivergence into cathartic release, a principle that carries across the whole album. An example is "Kick Me Under the Table," where Apple takes issue with the inequities of the music industry, the main target here being a Spotify executive whose boasting at a party she found distasteful (Pelly). *FTBC* is bristling with similar examples.

Closing Reflections

The home environment offered both Eilish and Apple a reflective space where gender, mental health, and neurodivergence (Apple's OCD; Eilish's TS; both artists' experiences of depression), along with other sensitive topics and social critique, could be broached in relative safety. Moreover, recording at home had repercussions for how the music was produced and ended up sounding—the resulting sonic intimacy becoming part and parcel of the songs' meanings, making them instantly more relatable and personal.

The relationship between home production, increasingly voyeuristic consumers, and —in certain sectors and contexts—an increasingly predatory music industry is not without its problems. We want to feel close to artists, and music production in combination with social media exposure work in different ways to facilitate this desired closeness. But exposure can easily turn into overexposure, which can be witnessed in both the documentary footage on Eilish and in Apple's ardent storytelling.

A related question concerns the extent to which the so-called sad girl image romanticizes the artist's suffering and self-destructing impulses. The question is complicated because, looked at differently, reparative narratives of empowerment, ownership of depressive narratives, and overcoming life's challenges are also easily perceived in Eilish's music (Holmes 792; for a defense of multimodal artists labeled as sad girls, see Muchitsch). Moreover, the windows these artists offer onto the production process entice consumers to have a go themselves at becoming producer artists. To their credit, Finneas and Eilish have accommodated their produser fanbase by demystifying their production processes on YouTube, social media, and in printed media, where they have given an almost unprecedented amount of advice on how to achieve similar end results with relatively affordable recording equipment. Home recording success stories like theirs are also reflected in how music instrument and technology sales increased exponentially during lockdown (Rogerson; "Analysis: How COVID-19"). Sceptics might argue, in the manner of Théberge, that the main winners here are the instrument manufacturing industries and related journalism. One could additionally point to streaming media and the inverse relationship between payouts by streaming platforms and the growing number of artists releasing music digitally.

And yet, home production appears to have provided a popular counternarrative to this otherwise dystopian picture. The fairy tale of how Eilish and Finneas made their breakthrough on SoundCloud before being spotted by record industry A&R reps, going on to achieve global megastardom, while retaining—in the eyes of many—a significant degree of indie credibility, agency, and attitude, has encouraged others to attempt to do the same. It is important as well that these moves were closely (if accidentally) synchronized with a rare cultural moment when a significant part of their audience had more time and disposable income on their hands than ordinarily would have been the case. Likewise, Fiona Apple has made it clear that using relatively modest means (entry-level DAW software and found instruments), top-quality recording is possible. More importantly, by consciously not striving for perfection in her DIY approach, Apple offers a window into what everyday musicianship looks and sounds like. Something similar happened in punk and the garage movement, also in their revivals, but here the level of autonomy and artistic freedom is greater, with women exercising greater control over the machinery of musical and audiovisual production. Importantly, too,

Apple articulates the (ongoing) struggle that led her to where she is now, as does Eilish in her own way—the odds that had to be overcome in order to achieve their life goals. Moreover, Eilish's bratty self-determinism and Apple's taking issue with the music streaming industry, with patriarchy, experiences of bullying and rape, ablism, and a daunting array of other life obstacles, matters, as it increases awareness of dominant societal and industry structures, and by improving awareness, change starts to be possible.

Notes

1. Spencer writes that "DIY. . . about using anything you can get your hands on to shape your own cultural entity; whatever . . . is missing in mainstream culture" (11). She further argues that DIY forms are characterized by alienation from mainstream, skepticism of consumerism and commodities, and appreciation of off-beat cultural production. Kanai, however, is more cautious about the countercultural and anticapitalist potential of DIY practices, arguing that a polarized view of commodified versus alternative culture pigeonholes artists working in the mainstream, while overlooking how DIY proponents often exploit the same neoliberal socio-economic structures as their mainstream counterparts.
2. Some compelling data on digital formats and streaming can be found in two reports sponsored by the British Intellectual Property Office. These include Hesmondhalgh et al.'s *Music Creators' Earnings in the Digital Era* and Barr et al.'s *Funding, Authorship, and Acknowledgments*.
3. Brat was named Collins dictionary's word of the year in 2024, inspired by Charli XCX's album *Brat* (2024). "Brat" in this definition is "characterized by a confident, independent, and hedonistic attitude," and is "an aesthetic and a way of life." Rtunjya Gujral understands the "Brat summer" as a camp response, principally instigated by Gen Y and Z women, to conditions after the coronavirus pandemic and growing anxieties about the outcome of the United States general election and the rise of anti-liberal legislation.
4. Both districts mentioned in this article are familiar to me from my time working as a post-doctoral researcher at UCLA in the mid-1990s.
5. The quirky and slapdash approach of the Slits is an obvious precursor. In mentioning The White Stripes, I am mindful of the purposely amateurish and again slapdash drumming style of Meg White. Seth Bovey writes, "[w]hat qualifies the White Stripes' music as garage is its honest, homemade quality; both the guitars and the drums have an upfront presence in the mix, sounding like real instruments played by human beings" (168).
6. Shameika Stepney was an older girl at Apple's school, who at the time of the writing of the song had still had no contact with Apple.

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