

**DAVID TOOP** is a musician, writer and sound curator based in London. The author of seven books on music, sound and listening, he is currently Professor of Audio Culture and Improvisation at London College of Communication.

### **Praise for *Ocean of Sound***

“As styles of music multiply and divide at an accelerating pace, *Ocean of Sound* challenges the way we hear, and more importantly, how we interpret what we hear around us.” *Daily Telegraph*

“*Ocean of Sound* shatters consensual reality with a cumulative force that’s both frightening and compelling. Buy it, read it and let it remix your head.” *i-D*

“Its parallels aren’t music books at all, but rather Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Michel Leiris’s *Afrique Phantôme*, William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* ... David Toop is our Calvino and our Leiris, our Gibson. *Ocean of Sound* is as alien as the twentieth century, as utterly Now as the twenty-first. An essential mix.” *The Wire*

“An extraordinary and revelatory book, *Ocean of Sound* reads like an alternative history of twentieth-century music, tracking the passage of organised sound into strange and new environments of vapour and abstraction.” Tony Herrington

“At the end of the millennium, we can see two trends in music, one proactive, the other reactive ... Toop’s *Ocean of Sound* brilliantly elaborates both these processes, like sonic fact for our sci-fi present, a Martian Chronicle from this Planet Earth.” *The Face*

“This Encyclopaedia of Heavenly Music is an heroic endeavour brought off with elegance and charm. The play of ideas is downright musical and, vitally, the author writes like a mad enthusiast rather than a snob.” *NME*

“Always the rigorous pluralist, [Toop] sees no reason *not* to expect wisdoms from rival cultures, tribal or club, nor emptiness or stupidity either. His sense of the absurd, of potential darkness and madness, is a bullshit detector never turned off.” *New Statesman & Society*

# Ocean of Sound

*Ambient sound and radical listening in the age of communication*

DAVID TOOP



This edition published in 2018

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## author's note to the new edition

*Ocean of Sound* was a case of finding the propitious moment and the right vessel for ideas that I had been developing since the late 1960s. I think of it now as a Trojan Horse, early-90s ambient music serving as a device to disguise a far more expansive narrative about twentieth-century experimental music of all persuasions. In truth, it was far less calculating than that. The book was written feverishly over a period of three or four months during a time of difficult personal circumstances. Perhaps this was one reason – a strange one – why it feels relatively optimistic. I was inspired by all the innovative new music emerging in the early 1990s, when previously tight divisions between genres seemed to be breaking down. There was a palpable feeling of social and cultural experiment in the air that connected right back to the late nineteenth century, allowing me to make connections between contemporary electronic tracks, the ambient scene and all their avant-garde antecedents. This showed me a way back into my own music making after years of working almost full time as a music critic but I also used it to counterbalance the problems of my own life.

Immediately after I delivered the manuscript these problems became dramatically worse and so I found myself in the curious position of struggling for emotional survival at exactly the moment when all my ideas of the past twenty-five years came to fruition. The book was surprisingly well received and even now I meet many people who tell me it changed their lives. This is gratifying, of course, but being hypercritical of my own work and something of a sceptic it makes me inclined to go back to the book to find out what's wrong with it. One aspect that strikes me is the utopian view of what were then, in

1995, very new developments: the emergence of the internet and all its implications for globalisation, communications and the spread of culture. It was obvious that the effect on music production and distribution would be traumatic but with hindsight my failure to foresee a much darker future for the web – dominated by corporate interests and overrun with hate speech, extreme pornography and trivia, along with its decimation of existing media – was a serious error.

The title itself – *Ocean of Sound* – was also criticised for a certain New Age tinge. I feel less bothered by this. My original title was “Aether Talk” (also a reference to the rise of the World Wide Web) but as Serpent’s Tail founder Pete Ayrton pointed out, people might not be able to spell it, let alone understand what I meant by it. I came to my senses and thought up a title that was more likely to get the book into bookshops. The question in my mind is this: was the ocean of sound an adequate metaphor to encapsulate my conception of music? What interests me is the web of relations, those labyrinthine connections that link the most unlikely subjects, regardless of genre, era, geography, social class, race, language, age, sexual preference and all the other cultural and demographic factors used to divide music (often for commercial reasons) into neat categories.

Maybe plant and animal ecologies are a better way of expressing this, I don’t know, but oceanic associations of wave forms, fluidity, transparency, depth and vastness allowed me to write about music in a different way. What I do know is that from childhood I was attracted to music, sound and acts of listening for their intrinsic qualities, rather than because they affirmed an identity or addressed themselves to a particular demographic. In the early 1980s I co-edited a magazine called *Collusion*. Our policy was to cover any music that interested us, regardless of whether it was hip, new or “relevant”. A few years later I was writing a monthly music column for *The Face* magazine, acutely aware that I could use my thousand words to play with and even undermine the magazine’s fascination for fashion tribes and their musical tastes. *Ocean of Sound* built on these

foundations but it took me a long time – until my mid-forties – to find a form that articulated this free-ranging approach over the length of a book. The writing of *Ocean of Sound* was inspired by the cut-and-paste possibilities of computer word processing, by speculations on hypertext and hyperlinks and by the experimental writers who had influenced me in my teens. In struggling to find this form I realised that I could dispense with linearity, instead building a story from short blocks of text that connected with bigger themes. It was a kind of free improvisation, a music I had been involved in since the 1960s, but it also mirrored the computer-programmed music I was making at the time and the hip-hop sampling I had written about in *Rap Attack* ten years earlier.

Over time it seems this way of thinking about music became almost the norm because of the accidental effects of technological development. Playlisting on digital devices helped to break down existing divisions between musical genres, illegal file sharing circumvented record company strategies and the rise of video sharing websites like YouTube encouraged a near-random link-and-click approach to musical discovery. Simon Reynolds wrote a very flattering essay entitled “We Are All David Toop Now”, a title he claims came to him in a flash, as a fully formed sentence. “Unpacked, what that slogan says,” he wrote, “is that any kid with a broadband connection can access the sort of dizzying diversity of listening experience that took Toop a lifetime of obsessive dedication to accumulate.”

Reynolds’ essay came with caveats about “checklist tourism” and “frenetic overload”, which I share. Speaking personally, I recall the music of the mid-1990s being exciting as a kind of science fiction, anticipating a situation that was almost upon us even though its full (and often dispiriting) implications remained just out of sight. Is that true of now? Hard to say; the beauty of writing *Ocean of Sound* when I did was that futurology could be central to a critical stance. Now, not so much, if only because we have become wary of unpredictable futures and the instability they create when they fully arrive. But looking back twenty-three years to what I wrote in a very different

time I feel proud of the book, not particularly because of the writing but because I succeeded in doing something I always assumed was impossible – to bring together all my avant-garde, arcane knowledge, ideas and theories into one volume – and communicate them to a reasonably broad audience. I may never repeat that trick, but within my particular areas of expertise, once is maybe enough.

David Toop  
*London, 2018*



## foreword

I write this foreword at a time when I'm working on my own book about music. Inevitably, I'm thinking about what makes such projects useful or useless. *Ocean of Sound* is useful.

Growing up, I read voraciously, but felt that almost all books about music were aimed at a coterie of readers who already knew or agreed with pretty much everything they would find within. Biographies of The Beatles or The Doors were like catechisms, allowing worshippers to fondle the rosary beads of the sacred myths, while more serious tomes like *The Companion to 20th-Century Music* functioned as displays of self-congratulatory taste, insinuating that the reader should emulate the immaculate record collection of the author. David Toop's *Ocean of Sound* was one of the few music books I encountered that had a more generous and open-minded agenda. Toop loved listening and wanted to help other people listen with a similar joy of exploration, whether they explored the places he'd been himself or other places unknown to him. Immensely knowledgeable, he nevertheless came across as humbly mindful of how little any one of us can know of the infinite world of beautiful noise.

Good writers are not necessarily good critics but Toop is both. Reading *Ocean of Sound* provides some of the same aesthetic pleasures – amused dislocation, a glimpse of uncanny wonder, a sense of being on an exotic journey – as we get from the music he celebrates. His sonic landscape is the “alternately disorientating and inspiring openness through which all that is solid melts into aether”. In this terrain, dub pioneer Lee Perry emits “reptilian sibilations” and jazz misfit Sun Ra is “dressed in robes and a hat which can best be described as inspired extra-terrestrial Oxfam chic”. Deliciously, he

observes that on Ronettes records, “teenage life crises were amplified by Phil Spector’s production to the scale of a major meteorological disturbance”.

*Ocean of Sound* is a wide-ranging and dilatory enterprise, as befits music that can be (literally) far-fetched. Some readers may feel that the long section near the end, where Toop details his arduous journey through the Amazon rainforests, is too digressive, a sideways drift into *Apocalypse Now* derangement. But for me, it’s actually the heart of the book, where Toop is challenged most boldly to reconcile “native” music’s visceral, intensely territorial focus with the disembodied contextlessness of Ambient. It’s an unsquarable circle: the grizzled, haunted shamans with their scars, their frenzied dances, their drooling saliva, versus our cool white dudes artificially “tinting” the environment with pleasingly abstract sounds to help frazzled consumers screen out unwanted noise. Toop’s aesthetic restlessness makes him the ideal candidate for attempting such impossible reconciliations: deeply as he appreciates what he’s hearing at any given moment, he’s equally aware of his yearning for something else, maybe even its opposite. A very twenty-first-century sage.

Crucial to Toop’s perspective is that he has travelled, and not just in his armchair. His feel for geographical place informs not just his love of “exotic” sounds from the Fourth World, but also his perceptions of music closer to home: what other critic would identify disco king Giorgio Moroder as “from the south Tyrol, crucially placed in the centre of German, Italian and Swiss culture”? Moroder thus becomes less a media superstar and more a form of wildlife that can be found only in one Alpine forest.

Written at the dawn of the internet and a decade before YouTube and Facebook, *Ocean of Sound* frequently seems prophetic, such as when Toop imagines the digital world of the future not as cyberpunk but “as a high-tech campfire, people plugging in to remind themselves of life as it was when they were plugged out, twisting their isolation into something resembling community”. Again, in 1995, he muses: “Music in the future will almost certainly hybridise hybrids

to such an extent that the idea of a traceable source will become an anachronism.”

But, as with many commentators who seem prescient, his gift is not so much for prophesy as for thinking deeply about the significance of phenomena which are already happening but ignored by pundits preoccupied with yesterday’s issues. Noting that hard labour seems to be disappearing from the Western world, he adds the disclaimer: “except for a vague awareness of distant deadening toil taking place in factories dedicated to new technology manufacture” – an aside which applies as much to iPhones as to whatever Toop had in mind in the mid-90s.

Most people who listen to music extremely attentively end up becoming philosophers, or maybe it’s their philosophical bent that makes them listen so attentively in the first place. Either way, Toop is a philosopher of the most searching kind. On one level, *Ocean of Sound* is his counsel to himself, to turn off his mind, relax and float downstream. But then, noting how ambient music hankers for meaningful rituals, he argues that this attempt to impose metaphysical structure on an apparently structureless space is “surely a response to the contemporary sense that life can drift towards death without direction or purpose”. In other words, he’s well aware that while the music he loves can sometimes seem to be the solution to life’s big questions, it can sometimes be the problem too.

I wonder if the ambivalent melancholy that hangs over *Ocean of Sound* – the tension between wanting to float bodiless and contextless beyond the egocentric specificities of one’s own life, but then wanting to touch base with home turf and humanity – is partly due to the losses Toop suffered in the year he wrote the book: the deaths of his father and wife. Dedicating *Ocean of Sound* to them, he appends the phrase “... in a green and sunny place ...”, as if wishing them into a realm that is simultaneously a verdant earthly locale and a virtual Heaven. The fact that Toop himself lies hallucinating in an Intensive Care ward at the beginning (and end) of the book is proof enough that *Ocean of Sound* is aimed at readers who are ready

to perceive sound as something hugely more important than mere entertainment.

In the decades since Toop wrote this visionary exploration of dissolved boundaries, the continued dissolution of those boundaries has led to a Biblical flood of sublime music and syrupy kitsch, bewilderingly intermingled. The information ocean has become clogged with pollution, to the point where it can be difficult to spot any beautiful fish swimming below the surface. Toop can still guide and inspire us as we gaze into the depths.

Michel Faber

## prologue: fragments and mantras

What follows is a collection of diverse views, thoughts, experiences. They trace an expansiveness, an opening out of music during the past one hundred years, examining some of the ways in which music has reflected the world back to itself and to its listeners.

This is not a book about categories of music – ambient, electronic, environmental or any of those other separations which lay claim to the creation of order and sense but actually serve business interests. What I have followed, starting with Debussy in 1889, is an erosion of categories, a peeling open of systems to make space for stimuli, new ideas, new influences, from a rapidly changing environment. Then, as now, this environment included sounds of the world – previously unheard musics and ambient sounds of all kinds, urban noise and bioacoustic signals – as well as experiments in presentation rituals, technological innovations, unfamiliar tuning systems and structuring principles, improvisation and chance.

The sound object, represented most dramatically by the romantic symphonies of the nineteenth century, has been fractured and remade into a shifting, open lattice on which new ideas can hang, or through which they can pass and interweave. This is one metaphor. Landscape is another – a conjured place through which the music moves and in which the listener can wander.

Musicians have always reflected their environments in ways which are incorporated into the music's structure and purpose. The unverifiable origins of music are located by most musicologists either in bioacoustic and meteorological sounds or language. After a subtle examination of origin theories, Anthony Storr makes the following conclusion in his *Music and the Mind*: "It will never be possible to

establish the origins of human music with any certainty; however, it seems probable that music developed from the prosodic exchanges between mother and infant which foster the bond between them.” So sounds which we would describe as ambient, functional or mysteriously alien have laid the foundations of musical creativity.

But the day when Claude Debussy heard Javanese music performed at the Paris Exposition of 1889 seems particularly symbolic. From that point – in my view the beginning of the musical twentieth century – accelerating communications and cultural confrontations became a focal point of musical expression. An ethereal culture, absorbed in perfume, light, silence and ambient sound, developed in response to the intangibility of twentieth-century communications. Sound was used to find meaning in changing circumstances, rather than imposed as a familiar model on a barely recognisable world. Inevitably, some of this music has remained in fragments; some has been moulded from fragments into mantras and other solid structures.

Much of the music I discuss could be characterised as drifting or simply existing in stasis rather than developing in any dramatic fashion. Structure emerges slowly, minimally or apparently not at all, encouraging states of reverie and receptivity in the listener that suggest (on the good side of boredom) a very positive rootlessness. At the same time, a search for meaningful rituals recurs again and again, surely a response to the contemporary sense that life can drift towards death without direction or purpose. So this is a book about journeys, some actual, some imaginary, some caught in the ambiguity between the two. Although the narrative jumps, loses itself and digresses, my central image was signals transmitted across the aether. This applies as much to the Javanese musicians and Debussy in the colonial era of the nineteenth century as it applies to music in the digital age at the turn of the millennium. This past hundred years of expansiveness in music, a predominantly fluid, non-verbal, non-linear medium, has been preparing us for the electronic ocean of the next century. As the world has moved towards becoming an

information ocean, so music has become immersive. Listeners float in that ocean; musicians have become virtual travellers, creators of sonic theatre, transmitters of all the signals received across the aether.

*August 1995*

## memory

*sound and evocation; Muzak, ambience and aethereal culture; Brian Eno and perfume; Bali, Java, Debussy*

Sitting quietly in never-never land, I am listening to summer fleas jump off my small female cat on to the polished wood floor. Outside, starlings are squabbling in the fig tree and from behind me I can hear swifts wheeling over rooftops. An ambulance siren, full panic mode, passes from behind the left centre of my head to starboard front. Next door, the neighbours are screaming – “... fuck you ... I didn't ... get out that door ...” – but I tune that out. The ambient hum of night air and low frequency motor vehicle drone merges with insect hum called back from the 1970s, a country garden somewhere, high summer in the afternoon. The snow has settled. I can smell woodsmoke. Looking for fires I open the front door, peer out into the shining dark and hear stillness. Not country stillness but urban shutdown. So tranquil.

Truthfully, I am lying in intensive care. Wired, plugged and electronically connected, I have glided from coma into a sonic simulation of past, and passed, life. As befits an altered state, the memories have been superimposed, stripped of context, conflated from seasons, times, eras, moments, even fictions, into a concentrated essence of my existence in the sound-world.

These sounds reconnect me to a world from which I had disengaged. Sound places us in the real universe. Looking ahead, I can



see a plane enlivened by visually represented objects. I can touch within a limited radius. I can smell a body, a glass of beer, burning dust. But sound comes from everywhere, unbidden. My brain seeks it out, sorts it, makes me feel the immensity of the universe even when I have no wish to look or absorb.

There are ear plugs, but then I just hear the sound of my own shell.

Not long born, still unable to control most of my own body, I stared at colour shapes and gripped objects as they came near. Far away, a dog barked. Then there were two worlds.

Now I am very old, too old. A stone-deaf baby. Who am I? These people sitting around my bed; who are they? One of them holds my hand. I press the button. Sound pictures wash them away. I am listening to a song in a school classroom: "Oh soldier, soldier ...". Somebody is carrying a radio and an old pop song is playing: "See the pyramids ...". I can hear the metal phase echoes of footsteps moving along an alleyway, wind in drainpipes, a tied-up dog howling. Enfolded in the stillness of Christmas Eve, church bells, police sirens and domestic rows. Sea sucked back over stones through the narrow rock corridor at Clodgy Point, Cornwall. A cave down on the beach; inside, I sound the echo with a bone trumpet, water dripping in a steady tattoo. Fences rattling in the wind on Dartmoor. Walking after midnight down the long tunnel of an underground station. A man walks alongside me, bright eyed with chemical joy. Australian vowels. "Hear that? Sirens. The sound of London." He looks down at my feet as we stride quickly in parallel. "Squeaky boots."

A bee trapped in a chimney flue, its buzzing amplified to room dimensions. The fizzing drone of a street light. A hotel room in Italy and close by a man and a woman are screaming their way to orgasm. Somebody shouts in the distance, drunk. Toads belch in the deep night and a motorbike whines by. I have a daughter; she is singing "Daisy, Daisy ...". Sounds that have remained mysteries for decades: walking by a railway terminal on a Saturday morning and stopped dead by the eerie lament of a train whistle choir. All those horns and

whistles blowing at once. The air buckles. Did somebody die? Paradise is so dull. I listen for a moment to the woomph of mortar fire in thick jungle, vultures tearing strips from a corpse, car alarms, fire alarms, smoke detectors, house alarms and cement mixers.

And then the comfort note of air conditioning, the slow glide of electronic curtains. My exit, probably. But I still hear the sound of fleas jumping off my small female cat on to the polished wood floor.

## soundbites

At a conference in Cairns, Australia, a scientist member of the American Rock Art Research Association claimed that prehistoric cave-painting sites were chosen by the artists for their reverberant acoustic character. Steven Waller speculated that each painting site reveals a correspondence between the animals depicted on the walls and the nature of any sound activating the echoes in that space. In caves such as Lascaux, where large animals were painted, the echoes are overwhelmingly loud, whereas in sites where felines adorn the walls, the decibel level of the reverberations is very low.

– *New Scientist*, 28 November 1992

Seals straying from the North Sea into Lincolnshire's River Glen feast on freshwater fish stocks customarily assumed to be the natural prey of local roach anglers. To drive the seal family back into the North Sea, the National Rivers Authority have been playing recordings of killer-whale songs under the surface of the Glen. "We are playing the music using hydrophones," said a spokeswoman for the NRA.

– *The Times*, 31 October 1994

"The best thing that ever happened to background music was foreground music," reported *Billboard* in a special sixtieth

anniversary advertising supplement devoted to Muzak®. “If you go into a store and you think you’re hearing Muzak, it probably isn’t Muzak,” said Bruce Funkhouser, Muzak programming and licencing VP. “There are still a couple of companies out there doing that old-style 1,001-strings, ruin-your-favorite-song kind of thing, but we dropped all that in ’87.” Since that momentous year, Muzak has switched 11 of its 12 music channels to so-called foreground music (the original hit record by the original artist). The 12th is called the Environmental Music channel. This features instrumental re-recordings of those hits. “A far cry from the ‘oceans of beautiful music’ of the past,” *Billboard* continued, “the new channels are hip, current and extensively researched.”

– *Billboard*, 29 October 1994

## pre-echoes

In his dazzling novel of Southern Californian subculture, *The Crying of Lot 49* (first published in 1966), Thomas Pynchon predicted the replacement of human musicians by digital processing. Listening to muzak in a pizzeria, a character hears one violinist playing sharp. “They could dispense with live musicians”, he suggests. “Put together all the right overtones at all the right power levels so it’d come out like a violin.”

Pynchon also foresaw a world in which people would get drunk in electronic music clubs, Stockhausen records playing on the jukebox. “We’re the only bar in the area, you know, has a strictly electronic music policy”, brags the barman of an LA outskirts bar called The Scope. “Come on around Saturdays, starting midnight we have your Sinewave Session, that’s a live get-together, fellas come in just to jam from all over the state ... We got a whole back room full of your audio oscillators, gunshot machines, contact mikes, everything man.”