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Stone Deaf Forever: Discourses of Loudness

by

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Abstract: High volume in the form of high sound pressure level (SPL) is ingrained in the aesthetics of many forms of popular music, most obviously in rock and its associated sub-genres, but also in many other genres and styles including various forms of dance music, hip hop, reggae and electronic music. The primary site of expression of the notion of loud-as-good is in the performance of music in public spaces or venues (live, recorded or a blend of both). The reproduction of discourses of loud-as-good is woven through popular music culture, from bands in tiny rehearsal studios to the world record for “loudest” band (Deep Purple or The Who, depending on the year of publication of the Guinness Book of Records). Loud-as-good discourse has been satirised in other media: the “mockumentary”, *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) and Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide To The Galaxy*, both of which are addressed here.

This essay identifies five discourses of loudness as they appear in music journalism, and in fiction. These are: loud-as-good, loud-as-bad; loud-as-good for the audience, but bad for the journalist; loud-as-good for the journalist, but bad for the audience; loud-as-irrational.

Key Words: *discourses – loudness/volume – journalists/critics – musical press – performance.*

Résumé : La puissance sonore fait partie de l’identité de nombreuses musiques populaires, notamment du rock et de ses sous-genres, ainsi que de la dance music, du hip hop, du reggae et des musiques électroniques. C’est d’abord dans les espaces publics ou les salles de concert qu’elle s’exprime positivement, par la performance, qu’il s’agisse de prestations live et/ou de la diffusion d’enregistrements. Les discours laudatifs sur le volume sonore irriguent la culture des musiques populaires, des groupes jouant dans de minuscules studios de répétition au record mondial du groupe le plus « puissant » (Deep Purple ou The Who, selon l’édition du Guinness des records). Ces louanges ont été tournées en dérision par d’autres formes médiatiques, telles que le « documenteur » *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) ou *Le Guide du voyageur galactique* de Douglas Adams, que nous analysons ici. Cet article identifie cinq types d’évaluations du volume sonore, tels qu’elles se manifestent dans la presse musicale ou la fiction : la puissance sonore évaluée positivement, négativement, positivement aux oreilles du public mais pas de celles des journalistes et vice-versa, et enfin la puissance sonore jugée irrationnelle.

Mots-clés : *discours – volume sonore – journalistes / critiques – presse musicale – performance / mise en scène.*

High volume or extreme loudness is ingrained in the aesthetics of many forms of amplified popular music, most obviously in rock and its associated sub-genres, but also in many other genres and styles including various forms of dance music, hip hop, reggae and electronic music. The primary site of expression of the notion of loud-as-good is in the performance of music in public spaces and the reproduction of discourses of loud-as-good is woven through popular music culture, from bands in tiny rehearsal studios to the world record for “loudest” band (Deep Purple, The Who or even Manowar depending on the year of publication of the *Guinness Book of Records*).

This essay is not about perceived volume in recorded music, audio compression and the so-called “loudness war”, where a heavily compressed recording can sound “loud” even at relatively low acoustic volumes (Deruty, 2011). Work elsewhere addresses the ways in which the human ear and brain perceive and process volume levels, and so underpin broader arguments about why loud-as-good might have become central to rock in particular (Blessner, 2007). This article is however concerned with *discourses* of loudness as they appear in music journalism and selected other texts, and the extent to which these representations reflect, reinforce, or contradict orthodox rock ideology of loud-as-good.

This article focuses on rock for 1969 to 1982, partly to make the research manageable but also because it is a period of Anglo-US popular music history when specialist music journalism had emerged as an influential mediator of rock

culture. The research presented here starts in 1969. It is a significant year in the development of rock culture, marking the end of the psychedelic rock era and the emergence of louder, heavier sounds: the release of the first two Led Zeppelin albums; the band Earth change their name to Black Sabbath in 1969 and release their first album in 1970; The Who’s *Tommy* is released; Marshall Amplification changed their amplifier front panels for the forthcoming decade from the plexiglas that had characterised their products since 1963 to the now familiar gold finished aluminium (Doyle, 1993; Doyle & Bowcott, 2013).

This essay uses 1982 as the cut off point in its discussion of discourses of loudness in music journalism, but there is also a discussion of the film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), and an acknowledgement of the potential for future research with a brief look at My Bloody Valentine, the alternative rock band that became synonymous with extreme live performance volume levels in the late 1980s and early 1990s. 1982 marked the death of legendary rock journalist Lester Bangs at the age of 33 and perhaps the symbolic passing of an era when music writers were not only the most influential mediators of rock mythology, but often directly involved in creating those myths (Jones, 2002; Lindberg *et al.*, 2002). It was also the year in which MTV (launched in the US in 1981) was becoming a cultural force that would change the ways in which live performances were understood (Shuker, 2012; Frith *et al.*, 1993; Goodwin, 1993). Not only were MTV and its imitators new and powerful channels for mediation and dissemination of popular music, they marked a shift towards an increasing

emphasis on visual spectacle and the reproduction of video performances in the live context (Frith, 1996). Key word searches of music journalism through Rock's Backpages show a significant decline in the use of the terms loud, loudness and volume in music writing in general, and live reviews in particular from 1982 onwards. It may be that with the waning of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) towards the end of 1982 (Waksman, 2009; Tucker, 2006) and the rise of the post-New Romantic pop that formed much of the so-called second British Invasion of the US pop charts (Rimmer, 1985), that many mainstream music journalists had issues other than volume to address in live concert reviews. Waksman (2009) argues that post-NWOBHM, metal diverged into more mainstream pop-metal and underground hardcore, thrash and speed sub-genres. Speculatively, the consequences of this could have been that pop and glam metal in the 1980s became less about volume and more about the spectacle of live performance. Underground metal genres were less likely to be covered by the UK music weeklies, whilst issues of high volume may simply have been taken as understood by rock and metal press specialist publications such as *Metal Hammer* and *Kerrang!*

This essay begins with an account of the context and rationale for exploring the development of discourses of loudness through music journalism and elsewhere. There is then a discussion of a discourse of loudness that might be characterised as loud-as-irrational (or even loud-as-ridiculous), appearing not only in satirical texts like *Spinal Tap* or *The Hitchhiker's Guide* but also deeper in

rock culture in the form of recordings and other media. The main section of the essay explores discourses of loudness in rock criticism, and within that primarily the live concert review in specialist music journalism from 1969 to 1982. The concluding section sums up the key issues, considers the implications of the research presented here for our understanding of the historical evolution of discourses of loudness in rock, and the potential for future work in this field.

Context

The title of this article is a reference to Motörhead's 2003 5CD box-set, *Stone Deaf Forever* which is itself a reference to an earlier Motörhead song, "Stone Dead Forever", on 1979's *Bomber* album. The 2003 box-set title alludes to both the band's longevity and the volume levels at which the band play live, and so also serves as a clear example of rock's discourse of loud-as-good. Where though might be the sites of reproduction of this discourse? In song titles and album names, certainly. More significant are the mediating texts *around* rock, which form an historical context in which evolution and circulation of particular discourses can be tracked and analysed. Whilst it is true that radio has been central to the propagation of popular sounds, styles and hits since the 1930s (Baade, 2012; Barnard 1989, 1997, 2000; Negus, 1992; Rothenbuhler & McCourt, 1992), it has been dominated by recorded music, rather than live performance since the 1950s. When radio *does* broadcast live performances there is little commonality between the sonic

experience of being present at a live rock show and that of listening on headphones or on a portable radio set, even through amplified a high quality hi-fi system. It is in other media that discourses of loudness are reproduced, notably (though not only) in music journalism. This article explores the extent to which a discourse of loud-as-good is present in the music writing that was so important to the development and propagation of rock ideology in the 1970s and 1980s (Lindberg *et al.*, 2005; Percival, 2011). The research seeks to establish how one strand of rock discourse (loud-as-good) is woven through a broader set of ideological values associated with live music performance, and to consider the implications of that discourse. As a first move towards a wider ranging consideration of discourses of volume, my focus here is on accounts of live music performance. A critical analysis of live music reviews and the ways in which volume is associated positively or negatively with the perceived aesthetic value of a specific performance affords an opportunity to explore the underpinning ideology and myth-making of one strand of late 20th century popular music culture.

The research presented here suggests that the discourse of loud-as-good was indeed present in rock writing from 1969-1982, but that there is also a competing discourse of loud-as-bad.

Loudness and meaning

Waksman (2009), in his discussion of the continuum between heavy metal and punk notes that

both genres use high volume levels in live performance, but argues there are different connotations of this volume: for metal loud means *power*, for punk loud means *noise*. The former is about solidarity and communication with an audience, the latter about disrupting aesthetic norms and intentionally causing discomfort to a perceived other (the “oppression” of rock and the perceived conservatism of mainstream popular culture). Waksman quotes Walser (1993), who attempts to explain why volume matters in heavy metal:

“Loudness mediates between the power enacted by the music and the listener’s experience of power ... The music is felt within as much as without, and the body seemingly hailed directly.” (Walser, 1993: 45, quoted in Waksman, 2009: 164)

Waksman and Walser are most interested in what volume means for genre and performance in metal but the primary concern of the research presented here is the ways in which volume is represented in terms of discourse in and around rock more generally (as opposed to metal or punk). In much of the music journalism addressed below, there are examples of a phenomenon identified by Cloonan & Johnson (2002), in relation to extreme levels of sound at live performances, when they suggest that “the negative term ‘noise’ is re-appropriated [...] and worn as a badge of pride” (34). They argue that for some fans at least, endurance of the pain or discomfort caused by very high sound levels can be central to the live music experience. They also characterise the consumption of live music at extreme volume levels as part of, “an ‘in your face’ approach to making or writing about music [which] is used

deliberately to alienate those not sharing the same musical tastes, as a means of demarcation” (34). This essay shows that music journalists deploy discourses of loudness in several different ways, often as a way of demarcating themselves from not only mainstream popular culture, but also from other members of the audience. Cloonan & Johnson (2008) return to issues of volume as part of a wider ranging discussion of music and violence. Amongst other things they also consider the gendering of loudness discourse, pointing to work by Bosma (2005)¹ which suggests that:

“As sounds came to be mediated technologically, and as technology became itself masculinised, so did loudness become increasingly associated with masculinity.” (Cloonan & Johnson, 2008: 45)

The work presented in this essay is not explicitly concerned with gender but there are clearly gender issues present. None of the music journalists here are women, and only one band mentioned in passing (in a Ted Nugent live review, no less) features any women in the line-up (X-Ray Spex, with Poly Styrene and Lora Logic). It would therefore not be difficult to situate these discourses of loudness in popular music as male-gendered, even masculinist. Arguably, it is this gendering of loudness discourse that is at least in part the target of satirical representations of rock’s interest in high volume live performance. The next section addresses some key examples of loud-as-funny or more precisely, loud-as-irrational.

Loud As Irrational

The cultural pervasiveness of loud-as-good discourse in rock music from the late-1960s and on through the 1970s, along with rock’s aura of *seriousness* made it perhaps inevitable that this particular aspect of rock ideology would be satirised. This section discusses two high profile satirical treatments of the irrationality of very high volume levels and their parallels in real-world rock culture. Perhaps the most well-known humorous treatment of loud-as-good is in Rob Reiner’s 1984 film, *This Is Spinal Tap*. At a time index of 23.00 minutes in the UK standard DVD release, Christopher Guest’s character, the volume-obsessed lead guitarist Nigel Tufnel is demonstrating to fictional onscreen director Marty Di Bergi² his customised amplifier, a Marshall Super Lead head.³ This is a slightly edited transcript of the key dialogue:

Nigel: You’re on 10 on your guitar ... where can you go from there? Where? Nowhere. Exactly. What we do is, if we need that extra push over the cliff ... you know what we do?

Marty: Put it up to 11?

Nigel: 11. Exactly. One louder.

Marty: Why don’t you just make 10 louder and make 10 be the top number, and make that a little louder?

[Long pause from Nigel while he stares at the amp, confused by the question.]

Nigel: These go to 11.”

The expression “these go to 11” (and variations thereof) has become cultural shorthand for a product or cultural experience that is excessive, as often unironically as in its original satirical intent.

Whilst this scene from the original movie is justifiably famous, it wasn't the end of Nigel Tufnel's association with British amplifier manufacturer Marshall. Tufnel appears in print advertising and in a 1990 short film, *20* as part of the promotional campaign for Marshall's then new range of amplifiers, the JCM900 series. This series of amps which had the same nominal 100W power output as their predecessors, used a volume scale of 0-20 rather than the traditional 0-10. Tufnel observes in the poster and magazine promotional campaign for the new range that the amps are therefore "9 louder" than his previous loudest amp setting of 11. In the promotional video *20*, Tufnel is interviewed by Marty Di Bergi-esque figure. "Do you", he is asked, "envision any music that you will be creating in the near future necessitating even more volume, louder than 20?". Tufnel responds:

"Yes, I do. Um, perhaps as loud as 30 actually. And I'll describe to you why. The music I am now doing on my own, solo, is purely decibel related. No more 'chord patterns', so to speak. All just bursts of noise, which for me, makes it necessary to have 20 or more, you see [...]. A lot of people who worked on the [Atom] Bomb actually work for Marshall. It's the same sort of engineering."⁴

Two years later for Spinal Tap's 1992 world tour, Marshall constructed for Tufnel/Guest a custom-designed guitar whose body was a miniature Marshall amplifier stack (Doyle, 1993). This is a reflection of the counter-intuitive way in which Spinal Tap, a fictional band, was almost immediately embraced by mainstream rock culture whose participants were apparently more than happy to be seen to be able to laugh at themselves and the more absurd aspects of music industry. In the case

of Marshall Amplification, the company and Jim Marshall himself were happy to use a fictional and dim (if hilarious) parody of a lead guitar player in their promotional campaigns. Crucially, it was not the hardware itself that was being mocked, rather it was rock culture more broadly—a culture which was happy to be seen to be capable of laughing at itself.

In the dominant high seriousness and obsession with authenticity that dominated rock culture in the 1970s it is however possible to overlook an early example of rock's self-awareness. In late-1972 Deep Purple released what is now considered to be one of the most definitive live concert albums, *Made In Japan*. At the end of the song, "Smoke on the Water" lead singer Ian Gillan, addressing the band's front-of-house sound engineer at the Tokyo Nippon Budokan show of 17 August 1972 says, "Yeah, everything up here, please. A bit more monitor, if you got it." Off-mic, guitarist Ritchie Blackmore asks, "Can I have everything louder than everything else?". Gillan, obviously amused, repeats the request for the sound engineer, "Yeah, can he have everything louder than everything else!"

Deep Purple by the time of *Made in Japan* in 1972 are demonstrating parallel discourses of unironic loud-as-good and self-aware loud-as-irrational. On the other hand, an undoubtedly serious example of loud-as-good was in lead guitarist Blackmore's stage use of Marshall's then loudest guitar amplifier series, the Marshall Major. The Majors were rated at 200 watts, though measured by one Marshall-certified repairs engineer at 240W before entering clipping/distortion, and around 400W

at maximum volume (Phillips, 2007). In other words, *very* loud indeed. Blackmore genuinely and apparently unironically did not consider these amplifiers to be loud enough for Deep Purple's stage shows and so had them customised for even greater volume (Babequ, 2007). Yet it is Blackmore that makes the original "louder than everything else" comment on the *Made In Japan* recording, suggesting his awareness of the irrationality of loud-as-good in terms of stage sound. The contradiction is really only apparent from outside of rock culture—Blackmore himself seems perfectly at ease with working in an environment where both discourses co-exist.

There is another issue raised by this Deep Purple example, that is, the contrast between onstage sound and front-of-house sound at a live performance. The sound that bands hear onstage is often very different from the sound heard by the audience, hence Ian Gillan's request for "more monitor", meaning his wish to hear either higher overall levels of sound on-stage or, as is more often the case, a relatively higher level of one part of the mix (for example lead vocals, or lead guitar). When music critics describe the loudness of a band they are probably referring to the sound levels coming from the front-of-house PA system, regardless of how impressive the Marshall speaker stacks behind the band. This isn't to say that bands like Deep Purple didn't play at high volume on-stage, just that in large venues even high stage levels are only a small part of the overall sonic experience in the hall.

Blackmore's original quote, captured on *Made In Japan*, has become so embedded in rock culture

that Motörhead used it as the title of a 1991 VHS full-length concert video recording of a Munich show from March of that year, *Motörhead Live: Everything Louder Than Everything Else* (1991), a self-aware reference to the band's reputation for extreme sound levels and simultaneously an acknowledgement of the absurdity of very high volume performance. The band evidently liked the title enough to reuse it in a slightly modified form for a 1999 double-CD live album, recorded the previous year in Hamburg, *Everything Louder Than Everyone Else*.⁵ Given Motörhead's on-going use of high sound levels both on stage and front-of-house, these references to loudness take Blackmore's original question and its implicit loud-as-irrational discourse towards a more complex and knowing "we-know-loud-is-irrational, but we still love it and the fans love it too, even though they *also* know it's ridiculous".

By the end of the 1970s, parodies of mainstream rock culture had appeared in a number of media—Spinal Tap's first appearance had been in 1979 in a broadcast US TV pilot (Wikipedia, 2014), *The T.V. Show* in which they played a satirical, original song, "Rock and Roll Nightmare" (Saunders, 2009).

In the UK, Douglas Adams' 1980 science fiction comedy novel *Restaurant At The End Of The Universe* had a subplot featuring the "plutonium rock" band, Disaster Area. The concept was developed in the 1981 BBC Television adaptation of Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide To the Galaxy*. In the television version, the narrator describes the fictional band's stage show:

“[Disaster Area are] generally held to be not only the loudest rock band in the galaxy, but in fact the loudest noise of any kind at all. Regular concert goers judge that the best sound balance is usually to be heard from within large concrete bunkers some 37 miles from the stage, while the musicians themselves play their instruments by remote control from a heavily insulated spaceship which stays in orbit around the planet, or more frequently, around a completely different planet [...]. Many worlds have now banned their act altogether, sometimes for artistic reasons, but most commonly because the band’s public address system contravenes many local strategic arms limitations treaties.”⁶

Whilst Adams elegantly exaggerates for comic effect, he also accurately captures the absurdity of the competition between bands to be “loudest” in terms of measured decibels, variously in the 1970s Deep Purple, The Who and of course Motörhead. I include this example not just because it is funny but because it is an early and sophisticated appearance of rock culture satire in other media, and probably the first to do so in the context of a science-fiction comedy. More importantly, the idea of a concert being so loud that it sounds better a very long way from the stage is one which is less ridiculous than Adams had perhaps imagined, as will become apparent shortly.

Music Journalism and Discourses of Loudness—1969 to 1982

The music journalism discussed here was retrieved through Rock’s Backpages,⁷ and whilst the intention of this research was not to do quantitative analysis, almost 100 articles were gathered, mainly live reviews.

An early example of a journalist using a discourse of loudness to frame the audience as *other* appears in Mike Jahn’s March 1969 piece on the MC5, in *Pop Scene Service*. The writing here recalls Cloonan and Johnson’s (2002) argument around the use of high volumes in live performance as a tool of demarcation, of alienating those with different music tastes. In this case however the demarcation is rather more nuanced, as Jahn seems to understand the intentionality of the volume, even if he himself is excluded by virtue of his age rather than as a consequence of his own taste in music.

“Their music is loud; “high-energy”, they call it. At first, it sounds like one big roar, with individual parts barely discernible. As a matter of fact, you might as well forget it if you are over 19 or 20. I am 25 and supposedly a specialist at this music, and I am having trouble.” (Jahn, 1969)

Jahn feels old at 25, in an audience that he characterises elsewhere in the article as “14 or 15” years old. So, several years before the argument was codified in advertising for a 1978 Ted Nugent live album (about which more later) Jahn is making an argument that extreme volume is not for older rock fans. This is part of another, well documented discourse of rock and youth (Frith, 1981; Keightley, 2001), here with an upper limit of 20. There is a clear association between a socially constructed aesthetic of “energy” and the physicality of very loud music, despite the fact that detail of sound is lost in the high volume. Another Detroit band, The Stooges is tackled by Jahn in an April 1970 *New York Times* feature:

“Musically, the image presented by the phrase “a wall of sound” is appropriate. The Stooges’ music, for all prac-

tical purposes, is one big noise that throbs. The parts are at first indistinguishable from each other.” (Jahn, 1970)

Here the phrase, “wall of sound” is used to describe a musical phenomenon somewhat different to Phil Spector’s 1960s reverberant and densely layered record productions. The Stooges’ “wall” is constructed through the overwhelming volume levels of their live show, but Jahn is again ambivalent about its aesthetic value. “One big noise that throbs” may or may not be a good thing, depending it would seem on whether an audience is interested in distinguishing one instrument from another, even if for most non-musicians this can be a problem at any volume level.

There were other bands whose association with extreme volume pre-dated the emergence of The MC5 and The Stooges, one of which was British group, The Who. The band released their fourth studio album, *Tommy* (a “Rock Opera”) in 1969, then toured in support of the album, arriving in July 1970 at New York City’s Metropolitan Opera House (often referred to by the contraction, “The Met”). Al Aronowitz, writing in *Rolling Stone*, observes that despite the progressive intentions of the *Tommy* project, the crowd were expecting more than a straight reading of the songs from the album:

“From the audience, there were calls of ‘LOUDER!. . . LOUDER!. . .’. ‘It gets louder later,’ Townshend replied. Actually, it got so loud it hurt your ears and you still couldn’t hear anything beings sung or said.” (Aronowitz, 1970)

The Met, unaccustomed to hosting heavily amplified music, had hired ushers from the Fillmore

East, NYC’s cool East Village venue to cope with the hippies and rockers. Yet in terms of volume, The Who made no concession to the venue. What seems surprising here is that an experienced *Rolling Stone* journalist, and pre-Warhol manager of The Velvet Underground, rejects the discourse of loud-as-good, alluding instead to hearing damage and suggesting that volume in itself makes no aesthetic sense if traditional markers of rock musicality (melody and lyric) can’t be discerned. Like Jahn on The MC5 and The Stooges, Aronowitz uses volume levels to distinguish himself from the paying fans at the show. Unlike Jahn however, he is more unequivocal in his critique of volume levels—he doesn’t like it at all.

In December of the following year in *Crawdaddy!*, John Swenson’s live review of The Who at New York City’s Madison Square Garden describes the *potential* for high volume with a sense both of vague threat (from his perspective) and of anticipation (the audience, as *other*):

“The crowd waits reverently, attention vaguely focused on the massive half-ton fortress of amplifiers looming in the shadows of the dimly lit stage.” (Swenson, 1971)

Swenson appears to be more ambivalent than Aronowitz about loud-as-good, but the rest of the article, part live review, part short feature, is a glowingly positive assessment of The Who. Nevertheless, in his invocation of amplification-as-monolithic-building there is a sense of the physical embodiment of loudness in amplifiers and speaker stacks which foreshadows the visceral experience of the volume to follow.

Another British band, Black Sabbath were building a reputation for playing loud, and not only in live performance. In the November 1970 issue of *Beat Instrumental*, guitarist Tony Iommi explains to an uncredited writer why loud is good:

“It’s just the way we are - heavy music like ours gains a lot of the weight from volume. There’s an old barn in Wales where sometimes we go to rehearse, actually it’s a room belonging to Future Sound Studios. We played so loud one night that a lot of the tiles on the roof cracked and fell off.” (Anonymous, 1970)

This is a rare example of the heaviness (or otherwise) of rock music being described as *weight* by a player. Music had been described by critics as heavy or light for decades before metal, but Iommi’s use of the term ‘weight’ makes an explicit link between the physicality of extreme volume and the aesthetic interpretation of that music, its heaviness. The implication here is that Sabbath’s music is good, at least in part, because it is very loud indeed. In a January 1971 issue of *Record Mirror*, Iommi develops the link between volume and aesthetics:

“We play loud because we like to build up an atmosphere in the hall—something which is almost physical and can totally involve and absorb the audience. The only people who complain about our being loud appear to be the writers but we never get any complaints from our audience.” (Altham, 1971)

Again, the physicality of Black Sabbath’s volume is understood by Iommi to be not only loud-as-good, but also focussed through the lens of the audience who are “absorbed” by the atmosphere apparently created by the high volumes. Also present here is the notion of journalist-as-other who

cannot understand music in the same way as fans. In this example though it is a *musician* making the argument that rock critics are not like fans, and for this reason it is the music writer that is wrong. The key issue though is Iommi’s objection to rock critic discourses of loud-as-bad, particularly when it is used to critique Sabbath.

Black Sabbath’s hard rock contemporaries Deep Purple were named the loudest band in the world by the *Guinness Book of Records* in 1975 (McWhirter & McWhirter, 1975), for a concert at the London Rainbow in 1972 at which three audience members were “rendered unconscious”, as consequence it is implied, of the volume. Given the likely consumption of alcohol and other drugs at the concert it may of course be that noise levels alone were not solely responsible for the fate of the fainting rock fans. This though is irrelevant—the important aspect of the World Record story is that *volume* is cited as being capable of knocking out gig-hardened rock fans, and that this says something positive about the show in question. Perhaps this might be characterised as a discourse of loud-as-good, but only if you’re tough enough to take it.

The previous year, Deep Purple bass player Roger Glover, in an interview with *Melody Maker* journalist Chris Charlesworth is clearly happy to be part of loud-as-good discourse, though nervous about the ease with which that can become loud-as-bad:

“We are a loud band and the last thing we want is to become a loud mess. There’s nothing worse than that.” (Charlesworth, 1971)

Again, it is not clear whether Glover in 1971 meant the stage sound or the front-of-house sound which as noted earlier, are often completely different. In either case though Glover demonstrates a musician's awareness of the potential problems of high volumes, at least in terms of aesthetics. Yet in 1972 the band are the "loudest in the world", and in 1973 *Creem* rock critic Robot A Hull is clearly a fan of Deep Purple's very loud stage show, whilst at the same time being apparently less impressed with the volume tolerance of a fellow audience member:

"DEEP PURPLE sure does play a godamn LOUD concert. I thought Cactus and Johnny Winter were bad, but hell Jon Lord knows how to cave in those ear-drums. One time they was playing such a vibrating set that the twerp next to me got his insides all shaken up and barfed all over my cowboy boots. I shoved his face in his own puke. However, I really dig the shit out of volume and I wanna get ill at a rock concert or I haven't had a good time." (Hull, 1973)

It is interesting here that organist Jon Lord rather than guitarist Ritchie Blackmore that is singled out as principal component of Deep Purple's front-of-house sound levels. Perhaps Lord's Hammond organ sound, overdriven through Marshall stacks and working from the lowest bass to very highest frequencies, was a more obvious part of the band's live sound, at least from a perceived volume perspective. There is also an interesting subversion of audience-as-other in this example—Hull positions himself as *more* of a fan than at least one other audience member, and his super-fan status is manifested in his ability to cope with the extreme sound levels delivered by Deep Purple. Of course it may or may not be true that events unfolded

as described here, but this is not the point—the discourse is present. There are other discourses here too, not least that one has to party so hard that throwing up is as much an objective as a by-product, though there is no evidence of which I'm aware, that rock fans pursued this any more or less than any other young person on a night out in 1973.

It wasn't only hard rock and metal acts that were represented (and represented themselves) in terms of the volume levels of live performance. Slade had a significant number of UK hit singles in the early 1970s, but despite their status as a chart band they were also very much a rock group (Roberts, 2006). In 1973, at the height of their commercial success they played Earl's Court in London and were reviewed in *Melody Maker* by Chris Charlesworth:

"IT'S MONDAY morning and my ears are still ringing [...] here they are, ladies and gentlemen, for your personal delight, we present Slade, the working class heroes of the seventies, the loudest rock group in the world." (Charlesworth, 1973)

Despite their domination of the pop charts Slade are unequivocally a rock band for Charlesworth, and very much part of a reproduction of the discourse of loud-as-good. Elsewhere there is some elaboration of the experience of high volume shows. Tony Stewart, in a very positive 1973 *New Musical Express* review of a Status Quo outdoor festival show in Switzerland observes:⁸

"I couldn't help but sympathise with the people living in the neighbourhood. Jeez, they were loud; yet paradoxically their balance was clear." (Stewart, 1973)

The implication is that Stewart had previously associated high volume with poor quality sound but is surprised here how “clear” the audio mix is. There could be any number of reasons for this unexpected clarity, though first amongst them might be that open air stages typically have no in-door hall acoustic issues. Nevertheless this is clearly loud-as-good, in this case not for metal or hard rock but for a blues-rock-boogie group. For Stewart it was surprising that the sound at the this show was good, *despite* the volume.

Max Bell in a 1976 *New Musical Express* review of one of David Bowie’s 6-night run of shows at the Empire Pool Wembley argues that high volume *improved* the music:

“The lyrics are more audible than on record and what one national referred to as a ‘public address mix’ was in fact the best sound system I’ve heard in a place as unsuited for large rock spectacles as Wembley undoubtedly is. It is also very loud without being unbearable.” (Bell, 1976 a)

The album to which Bell refers is *Station To Station*, released at the beginning of 1976. He is dismissive of an unnamed, non-specialist journalist’s assessment of the sound system, and so of course authenticates himself. It is however not clear as to whether it is the loudness or the quality of the sound system (or both) that makes it more easy for Bell to hear the words, but in this case “very loud” is good as long as sound doesn’t reach “unbearable” levels. This is the only clear example of loud-as-good in terms of sound quality, but there is also a level of ambivalence in both Stewart’s and Bell’s writing which indicates some uncertainty about whether loud really *is* good—there is a subtext

suggesting that whilst loud-is-good, maybe a little less loud would be better.

Max Bell, again in the *New Musical Express* offers a more clear critique of volume at a 1976 London Hammersmith Odeon concert by Kiss:

“Wall to wall amps and an elevated drum kit flanked by candles and police sirens loomed into view. Whoomph ... zonk ... the famous Kiss are off. They are about the loudest band I’ve ever heard. The noise is excruciating, a warped wave of wattage cascades over every inch of the hall, only trouble is the opening two songs are unintelligible [...] I’m a trifle miffed that nothing other than fractured ear drums has yet left them there boards.” (Bell, 1976 b)

Bell’s Kiss review appeared only one week after his Bowie piece, so it is possible that the accumulated high sound pressure levels were wearing him down a little. However, his writing here is one of the more poetic accounts of volume in rock criticism. Much like Swenson on The Who in 1971, the visual coding of amplification hardware as “wall to wall” is there as a prelude to a vivid description of the physical discomfort of the noise that emerged from that wall, or perhaps more accurately, the front-of-house PA system. The volume levels render the concert pointless for Bell but given that the rest of the review is largely negative in tone, the critique of the live sound is only part of his overall disappointment with the concert. It is nonetheless one of the most unambiguous examples of loud-as-bad discourse.

Cloonan & Johnson (2002) discuss highly amplified sound levels and touch on the alleged origin of one of the more well known sound-bites relating to volume in rock music:

“A certain rebel chic has been attached to the use of noise in popular music. In the 1970s, American guitar-hero Ted Nugent emphasised his macho image with advertisements for his live show which contained the declaration: ‘If it’s too loud you’re too old.’” (34)

It is unlikely that Ted Nugent’s advertising copy was the first appearance of a phrase explicitly linking tolerance for high volume to youth—as noted earlier, that connection had been made in Mike Jahn’s 1969 review of an MC5 show, and probably many times before that. Its longevity and pervasiveness is however a reflection of the depth of rock’s ideological attachment to high volume performances. To what extent then was Ted Nugent, 29 when the advertising copy to which Cloonan & Johnson refer was written, a pioneer of extreme rock noise? Mick Farren, himself no stranger to loud rock music as singer of The Deviants and active member of late-1960s UK counter-culture,⁹ in a review of Nugent’s March 1977 London Hammersmith Odeon show, tackles the myth-making head-on:

“Let’s not get involved in any ‘If it’s too loud, you’re too old’ sloganeering. In fact, contrary to all the hype, Nugent is not that loud. The Who could probably drown him out any day of the week. The only really ear bleeding segment of Saturday night’s show was actually when Nugent was off stage. Between encores, he left his guitar propped against his stacks, producing uncontrolled feedback. This was the only time that the sound got anywhere near pain threshold.” (Farren, 1977)

The Who in 1977 are still clearly understood as a loud band, but the only uncomfortably loud segment of the Nugent concert, for Farren at least, is when no-one is actually playing on stage.¹⁰

Later that year, Nugent was back in the Hammersmith Odeon and perhaps stung by Farren’s review, appeared to have turned the volume up (reviewed here by Chas de Whalley in *Sounds*):

“[...] with the possible exception of X-Ray Spex at the Man In The Moon in Chelsea, I have never heard anyone play so goddamn loud either. They say Ted and his boys wear earplugs on stage and I can well believe it. Watching the show from the photographers’ pit—with the PA speakers at stage level so most of the sound was going over the top of my head, see—I was still deafened by that big black semi acoustic Gibson and that bank of beige Fender stacks. Legend has it the high point of this guy’s act with the Amboy Dukes ten years ago was the ritualistic shattering of a cutglass vase with feedback. He doesn’t do that one now, but even so Ted Nugent ain’t just over the top ... he’s completely outtasight!! (de Whalley, 1977)

There is a interesting contrast here between X-Ray Spex playing in a punk-friendly pub, The Man in the Moon on The King’s Road, and Nugent’s unreconstructed American rock in a large, seated theatre. It is easier and cheaper to sound very loud in a very small space, but de Whalley sees the experience as essentially the same regardless of ideological differences between punk and mainstream rock. This is the only explicit example in the journalism analysed here of rock and punk bands appearing in the same piece, although for de Whalley at least there is no clear distinction between punk volume as *noise*, and rock volume as *power* (as suggested by Waksman, 2009). Again there is an account of the visual, physical presence of Nugent’s stage amplification and the invocation of an urban myth about breaking glass with sound.¹¹ What makes this review particularly significant is that it is the earliest example

in my research of a journalist explicitly linking the volume of the show to the front-of-house PA. Despite the clear sense of extreme, deafening volume and a parenthetical suggestion that the band themselves wear earplugs, this is one of the few pieces that is unequivocal in its reproduction of loud-as-good discourse.

Douglas Adams' fictional band Disaster Area was clearly a parodic extreme, demonstrating discourses of loud-as-good, loud-as-bad and loud-as-irrational. There are however clear echoes of Disaster Area only a year later than their appearance in Adams' *Hitchhiker* sequel, in Mick Farren's 1981 Motörhead feature, "Scumbags Over USA", published in the *New Musical Express*:

"In Toronto, Canada, Motörhead are headlining [...] The Canadians love them. A friend from up there calls me and tells me how it went. 'The best sound was out on the parking lot. It was more manageable. Jesus, are they loud. Everyone loved them.'" (Farren, 1981)

There may be a subtext here regarding the relationship between the USA and Canada, or between Canada and England, or that there is an undefined *something* about Canadians that means they "love" Motörhead's kinetic hard rock. Farren's un-named friend makes the pragmatic observation that the band sound better outside the venue due to their extreme volume inside.¹² Farren neatly suggests that Motörhead are extremely loud, that the fans love the band and the volume, but that it might not necessarily be a good thing. In doing so he distances himself from a straightforward discourse of loud-as-good.

In a 1981 piece by Adam Sweeting in *Trouser Press*, Motörhead's guitarist, "Fast" Eddie Clarke describes what he perceives as the band's move away from one model of loud-as-good to another:

"'In the old days our volume used to be painful because it was really toppy,' Clarke says cheerfully. 'It's not painful now; it hits you in the chest. We did a gig at the Marquee in London once, the loudest we've ever done. I got home and put on Blow by Blow by Jeff Beck, and I couldn't hear the guitar playing. All the top end was completely gone off my ears. All I could hear was the bass and the bass drum.'" (Sweeting, 1981)

In 1981 the "old days" for Clarke could have been any time since the band's formation in 1975, but his account of hearing loss due to very high stage sound levels suggests either (a) that he had already permanently lost some high frequency hearing sensitivity, or (b) that the band had remained just as loud onstage, but their stage monitoring or amplifier settings had cut back on some of the most damaging high frequencies.¹³ There is a distinction made between qualitatively different kinds of loudness: high frequency loud-as-bad ("painful"), and low-mid frequency loud-as-good ("hits you in the chest"), both however with an emphasis on the physicality of sound. It is worth stressing again that stage sound often bears little resemblance to front-of-house sound in terms of levels or mix, so what the audience hears is usually both much louder and also qualitatively different to what is heard by the musicians playing on stage. Clarke refers to not being able to hear guitar parts on a record played some hours later at (presumably) domestic sound system levels, which suggests it could well have been the very high stage sound level available from his own Marshall amplifica-

tion that were the main contributing factor for his hearing loss. If this is true, a relatively small adjustment of amplifier settings could have solved the problem, yet he implies that he had no particular agency regarding sound level (“our volume was ...”) and the stage levels were more like the weather, a natural occurring phenomenon, than a result of turning everything up to 10. When Clarke discusses the effect of high volume on his own hearing then, he is not directly addressing the sound levels heard by audiences at Motörhead live shows.

There are however contemporaneous accounts in the music press of the Motörhead audience experience. Garry Bushell’s 1982 live review of the band in *Sounds* spends some time discussing the volume levels. Having opened with “Holy migraine, Batman ...”, he continues, “The Motörhead gig is a celebration of [...] NOISE. Dirty, deadly, dangerously, delightful RACKET.” Bushell warms to his theme later in the review:

“The air is burning, my ears are splitting, yet half the crowd are calling for more, while the others keep up the chant ‘TURN IT UP, TURN IT UP, TURN IT UP’. Bloody masochists. Back come the band, in roars ‘Bomber’, up goes the volume. I think my ears are bleeding. Off go the band. Up go the cheers, back come the chants ‘TURN IT UP, TURN IT UP, TURN IT UP’. Back come the band, up goes the volume, in roars ‘Motörhead’ and I just want to plummet up the aisle holding my ears and clamouring for breath. Then off go the band to yet more cheers [...] these people must be mental.” (Bushell, 1982)

This is a more explicit statement of the position adopted by Farren, Jahn and others: loud-as-good for fans but loud-as-bad for music journalists. In

this case, Bushell distances himself from fans in both aesthetic appreciation and in his concern for the welfare of his hearing (a version of the demarcation noted by Cloonan & Johnson, 2002). Yet, the tone of this review is as much admiration for the apparently self-destructive intentionality of the audience as it is about concern for Bushell’s own ears. There is a series of oppositions: the show is “dirty, deadly”, even dangerous. It is also a “celebration” and “delightful”, and the audience appears to be enjoying the experience to the extent that they communally call for higher volume levels, a ritual Waksman (2009) observed in Motörhead live reviews going back as far as 1977. Again, there are two clear and apparently contradictory discourses here, loud-as-good and loud-as-bad, although perhaps these could be more accurately represented here as loud-as-bad-for-me-the-journalist and loud-as-good-for-you-the-fans.

Conclusion

In this essay I have considered the presence of discourses of loudness in rock journalism, focussing on live reviews, but including representations of musician discourse as mediated by rock journalists. My intention was to investigate the extent to which discourses of loud-as-good are present in rock journalism from 1969 through to 1982. This research is by no means comprehensive, nor indeed could it be. Rather it presents a flavour of the ways in which volume and loudness are represented in music journalism at the height of the music press’s power as a mediator of popular music. I had anticipated a relatively unproblematic

on-going reproduction of loud-as-good discourse, and would therefore have been able to suggest that rock journalism was complicit in reflecting and reinforcing conventional rock notions of the desirability of high volumes. What I found was an altogether more complex and often contradictory series of discourses. Broadly speaking, these might be grouped together under five headings.

1. Loud-as-good

In this discourse of loudness, high volume in live performance is absolutely a good thing; it enhances the live experience; it is central to the aesthetic of amplified rock as genre; it allows audiences, bands and journalists to perform demarcation (as suggested by Cloonan & Johnson, 2002); it may even sound “better” than a studio recording of the same songs (David Bowie at Wembley in 1976).

2. Loud-as-bad

Here, high volume is associated with a series of negative values: it can render key elements of the music (melody, lyric) unintelligible (Kiss at the Hammersmith Odeon); it can make the music sound “messy” (Roger Glover of Deep Purple); it damages hearing; it is “painful” (Eddie Clarke).

3. Loud-as-good for the audience, but bad for the journalist

This variation allows journalists to position audiences as an ill-informed “other” of poor aesthetic judgement or taste—the writer represents himself as superior to an audience that irrationally desires extreme volume (Jahn on The MC5 and The Stooges; Bushell on Motörhead).

4. Loud-as-good for the journalist, but bad for the audience

A variation of loud-as-good discourse that once again allows the author to position the audience as an inferior “other”, but in this case it is the author that embraces high volume whilst the audience, or specified individuals within the audience fail to cope with the painfully high sound levels (nausea, fainting; Hull on Deep Purple).

5. Loud-as-irrational

Fictional groups Spinal Tap and Disaster Area appear in works of satire to explicitly undermine discourses of loud-as-good, but bands and fans seem to have no problem with unironically embracing loud-as-good alongside loud-as-irrational, at least in the material discussed in this article. An over-arching trend in the research presented here is the apparent reduction over time in the number of live (rock) reviews that explicitly discuss sound levels at shows, either in good, bad or ambivalent terms. By the early 1990s only a handful of hits were returned by Rock’s Backpages for the search terms “volume”, “loud”, “loudness”, and many of those were for shows by My Bloody Valentine, a band that became legendary for the high volume of their live performances. Future research will address the post-1982 years in detail, but it seems appropriate to finish with a quote from a 1992 My Bloody Valentine feature in *Option* magazine, written by Mark Kemp. Band leader and guitarist Kevin Shields reflects on the band’s use of extreme volume:

“It seems like such an odd thing to do, you know, to make a lot of noise [...] but I think we take it way past the point of acceptedness. It takes on a meaning in itself. I don’t know exactly what it means, but it basically transcends stupidity.” (Kemp, 1992)

Perhaps Nigel Tufnel would approve ...

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Notes

1. Bosma, Hanna (2005), "Different Noises in Electroacoustic Music", ASCA Conference Sonic Interventions: Pushing the Boundaries of Cultural Analysis, Reader for Panel 2: The Sonic in the "Silent" Arts and Bring in the Noise, 2005, coordinator: Sylvia Mieszowski: 18–23, as discussed by Cloonan & Johnson, 2008: 21.
2. Played by real-life director of *This Is Spinal Tap*, Rob Reiner.
3. Likely to be the standard 100w version of the amplifier, though the 50w version of this generation of amplifier looked identical from the front. The late Jim Marshall (died, 2012), founder of the eponymous British amplifier company was often referred to as "The Father of Loud" (Maloof, 2004).
4. Transcribed from the short promotional film, *Nigel Tufnel*—"20" (c.1990). Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwuZePiQHLL>>.
5. More surprising perhaps is the 1993 Meat Loaf track that uses Blackmore's joking request as a song title. Lyrically this song has nothing to do with live performance volume—the chorus features a protagonist who claims to like his music the way he likes his life, "Everything Louder Than Everything Else" (from *Bat Out Of Hell 2: Back Into Hell*, 1993).
6. Transcribed from Episode 5 of the 1981 BBC Television adaptation of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, first broadcast 02 February 1981 (Hitchhiker Wiki, 2013).
7. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com>
8. 1973 marked the beginning of Status Quo's UK commercial breakthrough with the albums *Piledriver* (1972) and *Hello!* (1973).
9. As noted by, amongst others, Waksman (2009: 326).
10. The leaning of volume-up electric guitars against loud amplifiers and walking off stage is probably a micro-social act of rock performativity deserving of its own article, but here at least it is an explicit example of the role of the front-of-house PA system. There was probably nothing stopping the sound engineer from dropping the levels on the guitar amp microphone to ease the pain of uncontrolled feedback, and yet he apparently didn't. Over the years I have been at many shows where guitar players have left the stage empty except for howls of guitar feedback, normally after the final encore. In larger venues, when the front of house PA is powered down and the house light go up, it can actually seem almost embarrassingly quiet when the only sound coming from the stage is a feeding back 100W Marshall stack. Punishingly loud in a rehearsal room, yes. But not so impressive in a 3500 seat venue or on an open air festival stage. For me this is a slip of the rock and roll stage mask, where the cool, 'loud' stage amplification is exposed a being relatively quiet in comparison to the resolutely unsexy functionality of contemporary front-of-house sound systems.
11. While it is theoretically possible to break thin resonant glass with extreme sound pressure levels at appropriately tuned frequencies, in practice the scenario de Whalley describes is extremely unlikely.
12. I was reminded of this observation when leaving early from a 2011 Judas Priest show in Doncaster, England. They definitely sounded better from the car park too.
13. Or perhaps both (a) and (b).