WAX WITHOUT HONEY: THE LP AS POST-WWII AMERICAN

ZEITGEIST

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Liberal Arts and Sciences

by
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Fall 2013
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September 26, 2013
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Jan Anderson. Her lifelong commitment to gain and share new knowledge has been greatly inspirational not only to this thesis, but also to my broader academic, professional, and personal life.
The drama of our time is engraved on wax without honey

--René de Obaldia
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Wax Without Honey: The LP as Post-WWII American Zeitgeist
by
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Master of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences
San Diego State University, 2013

This thesis explores the importance of a sound-reproduction medium – the Long Playing phonograph disc. I place this technology within the context of the zeitgeist that led to its American popularity in the years immediately following the Second World War. I show in this thesis that it was not simply a coincidence that the LP flourished during this time, but actually inevitability. The LP was the medium that best embodied and facilitated the ideals--and perhaps most importantly, the desires—of Americans in the mid-century. Additionally, I posit that the LP was not a result of a time, place, and people, but rather an expression of that time, place, and people.

This thesis is a unique—if humble—contribution to the fields of Cultural Studies, Sound Studies, and Complexity Studies. Though I do explore some of the mechanical aspects of the LP and its network of associated technology, my thesis is not an exhaustive technical history or exploration of mid-century sound-reproduction technology. Instead, I posit that the LP was the most effective mid-century medium for representing post-war Americans, and that by examining why this is true, we can better understand another time and culture, as well as our own.

I examine hi-fi technology, music genres especially associated with the LP like exotica and space music, and social rituals surrounding these phenomena. Throughout my thesis I point to an assemblage of technology, desire, space, and humanity that constitute what we call the post-WWII era. By seeing how the assemblage works as a whole, we can locate and reflect upon past understandings of space, difference, and desire. In doing so, we can aim to find recurring patterns, and perhaps better understand what informs our own lives today. I have chosen one medium of particular importance to a time, place, and people in my thesis to achieve this.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 BIRTH OF THE LP AS MID-CENTURY AMERICAN MEDIA OF CHOICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Emergence of a Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Assemblage of War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Assemblage of the LP and Origins of Hi-Fi Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “War of the Speeds”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 DESIRE, SEXUALITY, AND SPACE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersecting Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex and Vinyl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi-Fi and Desire for the Upbeat Generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the Front to the ‘Burbs to Outer Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Spaces: The Living Room and Bedroom as Cold War Headquarters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The LP as Book and Tangible Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ubiquitous American Cocktail Generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Fidelity of the LP: Compared to What?!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Live” Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 EXOTICA IN THE SPACE AGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Expansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race as Exotica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exotica’s Motley Crew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold Wars and Warm Shores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exotica in Space: To the Moon, Alice!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi-Fi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 CONCLUSION: FROM EXPANSION TO COMPRESSION AND BEYOND</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Even centuries from now, scholars, archeologists and anyone engaging in what we now call Cultural Studies, will find a treasure trove of insight into mid-20th century America by studying “Long Play” phonograph records. I am convinced that more than any other media, the phonograph record --or “LP”-- best embodies the zeitgeist of post-WWII America. From the late 1940s to the late 1960s, the LP, and the technology necessary to play it, captured virtually all of America’s virtues and vices. The new superpower’s pride, curiosity, aspirations, politics, sexual mores, racial divides, commercialism, feelings of nostalgia, and sense of adventure would all be recorded onto twelve-inch discs that spin on turntables at a rate of $33\frac{1}{3}$ rotations per minute.

My idea of looking to sound media for insight into how a nation lived and saw itself during a particular era is not new one. Previous studies of sound-reproduction technologies have been used to research the turn of the 20th century, for instance. (Sterne, The Audible Past 6) It’s easy to see why. The expanding fields of Cultural Studies and Complexity Studies compel us to look at the larger picture as we learn more about people and how they live. Though we may start small by looking at something like the LP, this ostensibly small part of a culture leads us closer to an understanding of its whole. After all, though technology and media like the LP may at first appear to be small, they are never isolated phenomena. On the contrary, they always constitute one mechanism belonging to a larger social structure. Such technologies nearly invariably require human assistance and complementing technologies in order to work, and all of this must be understood within the context these people and technologies inhabit. Jonathan Sterne reminds us of this when he writes:

To study technologies in any meaningful sense requires a rich sense of their connection with human practice, habitat, and habit. It requires attention to the fields of combined cultural, social, and physical activity—what others have called networks or assemblages—from which technologies emerge and of which they are a part. (The Audible Past 8)
It follows then, that if we want to learn more about a people (in this case, Americans) during a particular era like the Post-WWII era, we can turn to the technologies and media that belonged to them. These technologies concretize the soul-stirrings of a people in their place and time by “embody[ing] in physical form particular dispositions and tendencies” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 8). In other words, we don’t just experience the world because of our technology and media—*our technology and media owe their existence and form to how we already experience the world at a given time and place.* Sterne reinforces this idea about sound technologies and media when he writes “…we might say that, insofar as sound technologies are ever organized into sound media, the medium—or at least, an imagined medium—precedes even the technology itself” (*The Audible Past* 214). An understanding of media and technologies like the LP and its hi-fi *assemblage* is crucial if we are trying to better understand the people and places that gave rise to them. In examining any given history of sound technologies within a cultural studies framework, Sterne posits that “[h]ad the conditions [of sound-reproduction technologies’] emergence been different, the shape of the sound media would no doubt have been different” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 184). This means that the *assemblage* of the LP and its complementing technology *had to have been when they were, how they were.* Sterne defines *assemblage* as “the fields of combined cultural, social, and physical activity” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 8), and it is this definition I will use as my point of departure throughout the thesis when I refer to the LP and its associated technology, people, and spaces.

Sterne is not alone in his assertions. Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern writes that “however transformative and innovative [new technologies] are, they work on what is already there, what already gives shape to people’s lives” (qtd. in Taylor 6). When we look at the LP, we will be looking at it within its native milieu in an effort to locate the social and cultural conditions that led to its emergence (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 2). At the risk of treading on mystical ground, Sterne even asserts that basic technologies exist prior to their actual invention (1). The crucial question when examining sound technologies becomes “why these technologies now?” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 1).

At this point I need to address to LP itself. Sterne and Strathern make a compelling argument for studying technologies and media in order to better understand the larger picture of a time and people. But how do we answer Sterne’s question, “why these technologies
now?” While strong theses could be written about TV, film, magazines, and so on as embodiment of the post-WWII American zeitgeist, I believe it is the LP more than any other media or technology which embodies this zeitgeist. Certainly the LP was situated in dialogue with those media, and in a sense took on much of their character. Throughout my thesis I will show that the LP is in fact something we don’t simply listen to, but rather something we see, touch, interact with, and even “read.” TV, Film, books and magazines helped post-WWII Americans express their longings, nostalgia, ambitions, desires, fears, and differences, but the LP synthesized these into one comprehensive sensory experience (consumers of the LP could touch, see, hear, and even smell the 12” disc and its packaging). The ritual of playing the LP, and how that related to American understandings of sexuality, family life, and leisure, was unparalleled during the post-war years. Finally, there is the phenomenon of “hi-fi” or “high fidelity”. I will initially define “high fidelity” here as sounds recorded and presented in such a way as to ostensibly eliminate the traces of the technology that made them possible. Later in my thesis I will question whether it is actually possible to “faithfully” record something (we will ask without being glib, “Fidelity to what?”). The idea of hi-fi is a rabbit hole of sorts that addresses one of the central reflections of 20th and 21st century life: what is original, and what is a copy?

It is important that as we navigate the post-war cultural landscape of remembered islands, imagined jungles, fictional spacemen, real spacemen, bustling cities and sparkling suburbs, that we steer clear of the “impact narrative” (Sterne, The Audible Past 7). Sterne’s examples of impact narratives are the claims, “the telephone changed the way we did business.” and “the phonograph changed the way we listen to music” (The Audible Past 7). One modern-day impact narrative might be something along the lines of “social media changed the way we interact”. Such thinking, however, is fundamentally flawed. The phenomena of the telephone, phonograph, and social media occurred because of changes already present in humans, not the other way around. My thesis will show that the experience of the LP didn’t change post-WWII Americans, or make them the way they were. On the contrary, post-WWII Americans created the physical forms of the LP and its associated technology because of their unique understanding of themselves and the world they inhabited. This understanding existed before the technology and media were there to express it.
To show that this idea is not purely mystical, but can also be proven in the phenomenal world of action (Spengler’s “light world” referred to throughout *Decline of the West*), Sterne points to humans helping technology work. People want their technologies to work, and use everything from other tools, to hints, to creative fudging in order to help in this endeavor (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 223). Sterne backs up his assertion by writing that “[e]arly machines suggested merely the possibility of sound reproduction…cues like rhymes, questions (‘can you hear me?’), and so on were given to be sure that the sounds were interpreted as really reproduced” (*The Audible Past* 247). Even though this is an example of human desire preceding earlier sound-reproduction technologies, the same is true as we look at the LP in the post-war years. The innovations of the LP and its hi-fi assemblage were already felt and desired by the people who invented it, experienced it, and helped it. Sterne writes about performers and audiences collaborating with machines (*The Audible Past* 251) – a phenomenon which fits perfectly with the real and imagined post-WWII world of robots, sci-fi, machines, jets, space shuttles, and UFOs.

The idea of humans helping technology helps them leads us to one more point which I will revisit in my thesis later: sound-reproductions technologies have transformed humans from pure performer to listener as performer. Already in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan noted the shift in the nature of human relationship with sound-reproduction technologies when he wrote, “The phonograph is an extension and amplification of the voice that may well have diminished individual vocal activity, much as the car had reduced pedestrian activity (241). By designating the phonograph as an “extension,” McLuhan avoids the pitfall of the “impact narrative”, showing that its invention merely builds upon an already extant human phenomenon. McLuhan’s idea here is a significant one: the phonograph replaced the piano in many homes, and we became listeners rather than performers in the strict sense. I stress “in the strict sense”, because the listener is a performer in that she helps the technology work and engages in a sort of ritual in order to do this. In addition to seeing the LP and hi-fi assemblage as an instrument we play, help, and experience, we have come to see our own bodies as instruments in the process of sound-reproduction. Hillel Schwartz succinctly illustrates this idea in his essay “The Indefensible Ear”:

> Our modern understanding of human hearing derives concomitantly from a popular technological reassessment of the ear itself as a sensitive instrument, by analogy less with the horns of gramophones or radio antennae than with recording
devices that register sounds in the first place—the ear as analogous not with the stationary horn or wire but with the moving needle, the microphone/telephone pick-up, the actively straining medium. (489)

So we too—even when “only” listening—are working parts of the *assemblage* of sound.

The idea of *assemblage* and networks taps heavily into Complexity Theory and its predecessor, cybernetics. It is no coincidence that cybernetics was born in the 1940s, contemporary with the LP and the ritual surrounding its play. Norbert Wiener, the most acclaimed proponent of cybernetics, was inspired to investigate underlying complex systems as a direct result of his work on the control of anti-aircraft guns during WWII (Mitchell 296). Humans were ready to understand themselves as parts of a whole, a network, an *assemblage*, and the LP was born to express this.

During the post-war years, the LP captured the vast and complex network of American culture: its cocktails, sci-fi narratives, bedroom desires, consumer-driven libido, racial prejudices, ingenuity, sense of space, political attitudes, and will to power. This was truly a human, historic event documented not only on the grooves of vinyl discs, but also on the gatefold covers which protected them, the words and pictures adorning those covers, the styli which gently touched their grooves in order to release the sonic information they concealed, and the hi-fi, stereophonic speakers which finally brought these sounds into bachelor bedrooms and suburban family rooms throughout a booming, proud, young America. The drama of post-WWII America is literally engraved on wax without honey.
CHAPTER 2

BIRTH OF THE LP AS MID-CENTURY AMERICAN MEDIA OF CHOICE

THE EMERGENCE OF A MEDIUM

An exhaustive history of the invention and evolution of the LP and its accompanying components is outside the scope of this work. I think it is helpful, however, for me to briefly sketch a backdrop to the LP in order to situate it in its proper context. By noting what came before—and briefly competed with—the LP, we can easier isolate the features of this technology, which so effectively encapsulated the zeitgeist of post-WWII America.

Phonographs and graphophones playing wax cylinders were available for the public to purchase and play at home starting in the late 1880s (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 203). These devices were problematic. As I mentioned earlier, sound-reproduction technologies are rarely—if ever—isolated phenomena. Music did not simply emanate from these phonographs and graphophones—these devices worked by using the wax cylinders as their medium. The cylinders were problematic because they could not be easily produced on a large scale. Cylinders could only be recorded one at a time, and performers were forced to repeat a given performance multiple times, rendering the process laborious and impractical (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 203). It was not until Emile Berliner’s gramophone’s public debut in 1888 (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 203) that the familiar rotating, flat disc that sound-reproduction technologies began their trajectory toward the mass-consumption culture that crystallized in the 1950s United States.

Between the cylinder and LP existed the 78 (so called because it rotated 78 times per minute). The 78 was the sound-reproduction medium of choice at the time of the Second World War, but we will see a series of desires which led humans—specifically Americans—away from the 78 toward the LP. The new American identity needed a sound media capable of expressing its growth, exploration, and desire for the Other, and the LP was that sound medium. The 78 was a step in the right direction for the new generation, but it would take
the entire assemblage of WWII to begin creating the perfect sound medium for the coming age.

**THE ASSEMBLAGE OF WAR**

The era upon which I reflect in my thesis is that of the post-WWII years, and it is vital to this thesis to include the war itself and some of its ramifications here. The designation “post” might deceive us into thinking that what happened over there, back then had no effect on the ensuing years, but this is of course not true. For the purposes of my thesis, “post” should be read not only as “after”, but also “related to”. Much of the technology used in post-WWII America was not simply after the war; it existed as part of the war. Without attaching value or ethical judgments to war, it is necessary to recognize the technological and cultural legacy WWII left upon the 20th century United States and entire world. We will see that much of the technology was developed for—or during— the war, and that the minds and souls of those who experienced the war deeply influenced the direction and purpose of those technologies. The assemblage of WWII—its people, technology, actions, and places—will lead us to the LP and the spirit it embodied.

Sterne revisits the idea of assemblages and networks throughout his work *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Production*. In fact, the phenomenon of sound-reproduction technologies occurring within networks and assemblages appears to be the central thesis of Sterne’s text. “Sound reproduction,” he writes,“—from its very beginnings—always implied social relationships among people, machines, practices, and sounds” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 219). Later in the text, Sterne echoes his earlier assertion using strikingly similar language: “Any medium of sound reproduction is an apparatus, a network—a whole set of relations, practices, people, and technologies. The very possibility of sound reproduction emerges from the character and connectedness of the medium” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 225). For Sterne, no sound-reproduction technology is isolated or autonomous. Devices like telephones, phonographs, and radios can only be understood as parts of a greater network and he emphasizes that such machines are merely “partial” machines that from their inception “depended on the presence or possibility of other machines” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 246-247). The network, of course, is not the cause of the spirit of the age; it is because of it. We might even say that the network itself is the spirit
of the age. Remembering the idea of the deceptive “impact narrative”, we must stop ourselves from thinking that the network shaped us—on the contrary, we shaped it. Mysteriously underlying and preceding human ingenuity is an invisible—but felt—force, which inspires invention. In the case of sound-reproduction technologies, there is an assemblage of people, their actions, and the places they inhabit, before there are the machines to express those connections. As Sterne points out, “[s]ound-reproduction technologies presumed some kind of social network” (The Audible Past 247). Media and machines are never simply stand-alone technology, causing this or that to happen. Media, according to Sterne, are “recurring relations among people, practices, institutions, and machines (rather than simply machines in and of themselves)” (The Audible Past 223).

So what exactly did the assemblage of WWII that led to the LP and its associated technology look like? An in-depth historical exploration of WWII is not the aim of this thesis, but it is worth briefly looking at some of the people, technologies, and ideas that were born during this period. Oliver Read and Leslie Welch address the cultural and technological legacy of war, particularly in regards to sound-reproduction technologies by writing:

It has often been noted that wars tend to stimulate cultural and technical progress. World War I was at least partially responsible for the development and accurate sound measuring devices which later became important in the improvement of microphones used for broadcasting and recording. (347)

We will see that this phenomenon is relevant to WWII as well. The technology during war extends into the technology that follows war.

Read and Welch make this very point, noting that war-time invention during the 1940s resulted in significant and fast improvements in the area of electronics (347). In a sense, improvements in sound-reproduction equipment were bi-products of other more pragmatic and war-oriented concerns like the radar, but the result was the same (Read and Welch 347). Additionally, superior magnetic tape, tape recorders, and microphones were brought back to the U.S. from abroad, paving the way to a revolution in sound quality.

Toward the end of the Second World War, the writing was on the proverbial wall for the comparatively short-lived 78. 78s were made of shellac, and there was an acute shellac shortage during the war. Shellac was used for ship decks and airplane wings, so record scrap drives were initiated as a way to recover the material. Dealers of the scrap drives paid two or three cents for every disc turned in (Read and Welch 345). In this way, interest in shellac—
and by extension, 78s—waned during these crucial years. The nail in the coffin of the 78 might be said to have come in March of 1949. C.G. Burke’s comparison testing of the new LP and the older 78 in the Saturday Review of Recordings proved the LP to be the considerably more durable sound-reproduction medium (Read and Welch 367).

Besides wartime ingenuity and lack of valuable supplies, a third factor in the wartime assemblage, which hinted at a coming shift in sound-reproduction technology, was the servicemen themselves. Read and Welch note that many servicemen stationed abroad were record collectors, and keen to add to their collections by purchasing in England and continental Europe (347). It was the LP, however, and not the 78, which was to become the choice of collectors. By the end of the 1940s, it would be clear that LPs were superior media for the collector for multiple reasons. First, there was the problem of storage (Gelatt, 293): Five 78 discs equaled one (thinner) LP disc. Second, there was the difference in cost: Gelatt cites the example of the Ormandy-Philadelphia Orchestra recording of Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony, which cost the collector $7.25 for five bulky 78s, but only $4.85 for one, thinner LP (Gelatt, 293). Finally, as mentioned earlier, surface scratching and record wear was considerably more prevalent in the case of 78s. Around the same time the Axis Powers conceded victory to the Allied Forces, the assemblage of the 78 was forced to do the same to the assemblage of the LP.

THE ASSEMBLAGE OF THE LP AND ORIGINS OF HI-FI CULTURE

The assemblage of the LP found its home in post-WWII, hi-fi America. As the war was winding down, the world of hi-fi was just gaining momentum. American servicemen brought back the seeds of American hi-fi culture (in the form of technology and inspiration) from England—it’s acknowledged birthplace (Read and Welch 352). I will American servicemen were surprised to find how much better English sound-reproduction equipment was compared with the American machines, and significant number of these men brought home superior components (Read and Welch 345). Additionally, they became importers of the superior pickups, turntables, amplifiers, and speakers (Read and Welch 345). I will look closer later in my thesis at just what “hi-fi,” “hi-fidelity,” and “fidelity” can mean and imply. For now, we can satisfy ourselves with a basic description like “clearer sound quality”, since the term “hi-fi” at the end of the war did not mean anything specific. It was really just an
idea—a belief—that sound quality could somehow be better, whatever that meant. This belief was held by thousands of young American men, who until the war had never left their hometown—let alone their nation. They returned home world-travelers, and this changed population of young Americans signaled the beginning of the post-war American zeitgeist.

Later in my thesis, I will look at the ideas of race, sexuality, nostalgia, imagined locations and people, and other important attitudes that characterized life abroad during the war and later at home. In this chapter, however, my aim is to show how the war years affected sound-reproduction media. I specifically want to draw attention to how the LP replaced the 78 as the sound-reproduction medium of choice, and successfully defied the 45’s bid to do the same. As we have already seen, the war’s contribution to the coming age of American hi-fi was threefold: First, young servicemen were able to build record collections aided by a steady military paycheck and state-of-the-art European releases. Second, these servicemen actually brought back and then continued to import superior European technology. Third—and perhaps most important—these same servicemen became inspired. They were exposed to a world of superior technology, but were not content to be mere consumers of technology developed elsewhere. On the contrary they brought home a sort of healthy hi-fi fever, and never looked back. This hi-fi fever led them directly to the LP, the only sound-reproduction medium capable of handling their ambition. As Gelatt writes:

An infatuation with high fidelity components began infiltrating the ranks of discerning record collectors in 1947 and 1948. LP records, with their heightened musical attractiveness and acoustical potentialities, turned the quest for high fidelity into something of a national mania. (297)

Interest in improving sound-reproduction equipment spread throughout the nation in the years immediately following the war, often starting with the men who were themselves in the war. Read and Welch cite a Herbert Brean article in a 1953 edition of Life, which credited Air Force communications sergeant Irving Greene as starting a hi-fi movement while serving in New Guinea. Greene reportedly developed surprisingly effective hi-fi equipment out of comparatively primitive materials, and taught his fellow servicemen how to get the most sonically out of their records and equipment (Read and Welch 347).

It was amateur audiophiles like Greene who proved to the American record manufacturers that the age of hi-fidelity was upon them. Read and Welch point out:

It was the export of large quantities of London Decca records to the United States and the establishment of a distributing organization in 1948 that finally brought
the American record manufactures to the realization that higher fidelity was not only salable, but was being demanded by a fair share of the American public. (348)

In fact, the LP (christened so by Columbia because of its “Long Play” capability [Gelatt 290]) is particularly American because it was a direct response to European technological dominance in the field of sound-reproduction. Read and Welch posit that “[t]he introduction of the LP record by Columbia and others in 1948 may well have been a calculated maneuver to dispose of the threat of the European invasion, rather than just a logical step forward in the domestic competition for business” (348). What is certain is that there wasn’t just an interest in improving sound-reproduction equipment, but also an interest in cultivating the idea of hi-fidelity in the United States. Starting in 1949, gatherings called “Audio Fairs” were held throughout the U.S. (Gelatt, 298), and in 1950, Read and Welch note that “stereophonic sound” was a ubiquitous topic of discussion for Americans interested in sound-reproduction technologies (350). I will address the intersections and overlaps of stereo and hi-fidelity later in this thesis, but it is important to note that the idea of “stereophonic”, or stereo, playback became popular virtually immediately after the birth of the revamped Columbia LP. We see a rapid evolution of an assemblage here, and further evidence that the zeitgeist of post-WWII America dictated the form of the media and its associated technology. Even before stereo and hi-fi concretely existed, the LP was made to facilitate those attributes.

**THE “WAR OF THE SPEEDS”**

Curiously without much notice, Columbia announced and then released its new product, the LP, in the spring of 1948 (Read and Welch 339). RCA Victor had attempted an LP in 1931 (Read and Welch 340) without success—the discs were not popular with the public, most likely owing to its limited sonic range and fuzziness of sound, especially toward the center of the disc (Read and Welch 340). The new Columbia LP had another crucial improvement over the earlier LPs, 78s, and forthcoming 45s—it contained up to 20 minutes of music on each side (Read and Welch 340). This feature would be especially conducive to the changing living spaces and leisure time of post-war Americans.

Though its success was originally not certain, the LP almost immediately usurped the position previously held by the 78. Within two years of the release of the first LP, America’s two leading record companies—Columbia and RCA—had moved on from the old medium.
The LP’s durability, comparative ease of storage, affordability, and sound quality were superior to that of the 78. It would, however, be two years until the LP emerged decisively as the medium of choice in post-WWII America. It was not the older 78, but rather the newly invented 45 (which rotated 45 times per minute) that put up a brief but unsuccessful bid for supremacy in the so-called “War of the Speeds” (Read and Welch 320). Whether the heads of RCA really believed they had a shot at winning the battle of media or not is something we may never know, but they at least ostensibly fought valiantly for their format. They didn’t have much of a choice, since Colombia had the patent for the LP (Adinolfi 162). In retrospect, we can see the battle could only end the way it did, with a convincing victory of the LP. Even if the 45 sounded better than the 78, RCA Victor’s format played no longer than the old 78 discs, and required an upsetting changer mechanism to play longer pieces of music (Gelatt 294). As we will see, such a format was destined for at least partial failure in a world that would soon be populated with bustling living rooms entertaining the family, and romantic bedroom encounters with Julie London providing the soundtrack to the evening. I call the failure “partial” since the 45 did find a home in the jukebox found in diners, bars, steak houses, coffee shops, and hamburger joints across the United States. Read and Welch assert “the juke box industry had a great deal to do with the survival of the 45-rpm record” (320). In 1950, RCA announced it would be releasing its music on LPs (Gelatt 295), and Columbia would opt to release short popular pieces via the 45 format (Read and Welch 320). Though Read and Welch call the battle an “expensive draw for both companies” (320), I don’t read this as meaning that the LP and 45 in “tied” in the larger sense. The 45 had found a niche purpose, but in the years to come, the LP would ultimately utterly dominate as medium of choice for radio, libraries—and most importantly for my thesis—the home.

Radio became a forum for music almost exactly simultaneously with the birth of the Columbia LP and RCA 45. Until that time, networks were predominantly known for large-scale radio shows (Gelatt 305). Television was blossoming at this time, however, and taking much of the sponsors associated with the live in-studio radio shows with them. Gelatt writes that the programming gaps on AM radio were filled by disc jockeys, who played pop music and provided commentary (Gelatt 305). Originally, radio was a receptive forum for the 45, since in the early years of DJ-focused radio programming featured pop singles on 45s. The trend in the coming years would successively move away from singles and the 45s that
contained them, however, in favor of extended music pieces. Gelatt explains: “Pop singles, on which AM radio subsisted, were losing out to long-playing albums. By 1960, only about twenty per cent of the total dollars spent on records went for singles” (Gelatt 326).

The decline of the single (and hence 45) is inexorably intertwined with the history of the LP and the possibilities that medium afforded the people who manufactured, recorded, purchased, and enjoyed it. Where the 45 was mainly relegated to playing only the most popular releases of the day, smaller American record companies released lesser-known classical selections on LP in an effort to carve out a niche market. American tastes and curiosities were expanding (Gelatt 300-301). If there was any doubt as to diversity and magnitude of the LP industry, by 1954 those doubts were eradicated. Reinforcing this fact, Gelatt cites the statistic that ‘[b]etween August 1949 and August 1954 the number of companies in America publishing LP recordings increased from eleven to almost two hundred” (300).

Americans were entering an age of consumerism. They were looking to buy, but they were also happy to find a bargain. Price reductions of the LP by RCA, Columbia, Capitol, and Decca greatly increased LP sales (Gelatt 306), as did mail order clubs (Gelatt 308) and so-called “rack jobbers” (street vendors) (Gelatt 310). The quality, durability, size, and affordability of the LP all contributed to its popularity. Its popularity, in turn, encouraged further price reductions and venues for its sale, promoting its status in the American market.

One final idea I would like to explore in this chapter is the trajectory of media toward the home. We have already looked at sound-reproduction media being played from other sources (radio stations) by other people (disc jockeys). We have also seen how the American public desired the ability to play extended musical selections without interruption. More and more, America was headed towards a format that we will explore in detail in the next chapter: the album. The LP is most commonly referred to as an album. Understood as an album or book, we can fully appreciate it as the inevitable concrete expression of its time. Adinolfi makes the crucial assertion that record labels, starting in the late 1940s, became increasingly more interested in the American home (127). Much of the equipment brought back by the American servicemen was not meant for commercial use, but instead repurposed by those ingenious young audiophiles. The commercial market at home was forced to take note and adapt to the changing spirit of the time. The home was clearly the aim for the
market from here on out. The LP, as I show in the next chapter, was about to become a book of sorts. This book would be seen, held, listened to, ritualized, fetishized, and read. Having sketched the backdrop to the LP, we now recognize the *assemblage* of war, technology, the American people, and their desires, actions, and institutions. We are ready to read the greatest cultural book the post-WWII era has to give us: the LP.
CHAPTER 3

DESIRE, SEXUALITY, AND SPACE

INTERSECTING MEDIA

Now that we have established the *assemblage* that led to the LP, it is time to look with greater detail how this particular medium looked, felt, and sounded to those who lived with it in their midst as the vital expression of their time. By looking some of the most common content of the medium and placing it in a larger historical and cultural context, we will see how and why it was just this medium that captured the *zeitgeist* of its time rather than TV, books, movies, or magazines. I am not looking to diminish the validity of any of those media, and this is not a “which is best” thesis. My endeavor in this thesis is merely to posit that the LP was the most effective vessel for exhibiting the spectrum of fears, ambitions, problems, ideas, rituals—and perhaps most importantly—*desires* of this particular age. I will show that those other media did have similar elements and contents, but that phenomena in the home like ritualized daily activities and sense of space in living areas, was most effectively expressed through the LP and its *assemblage* of turntable, stylus, hi-fi speakers, and designated listening room. While movies were generally an event, experienced away from the home (hence the feeling of escapism so beautifully associated with the movie and its proper viewing place—the theater), and TV was something in the home—but gathered around like a fireplace, the LP and its *assemblage* permeated the home, being heard in high-fidelity, stereophonic sound. Unlike TV, radio, and movies, the LP was tactile, and could be held. Something was necessary to express the home as the center of the post-WWII American cosmos, and the LP did the job.

SEX AND VINYL

Much of this and the next chapter will focus on records, performers, lifestyles, and esthetics commonly grouped together under the umbrella term “exotica.” Though my next chapter deals specifically with exotica, the genre’s history is so intimately woven in the fabric of post-WWII culture and technologies that we cannot escape it when looking at
matters of race, consumerism, identity, politics, space, and sexuality (nor do we want to!). The word “exotic” itself gives us a head start in our exploration of the cultural terrain of post-WWII Otherness. First, it implies the existence of norms and Otherness. Second (a small detail perhaps, but worth mentioning) is that it is only one letter away from “erotic”. The latter point is one certainly not lost on marketers within the music industry. We will see that the exotic and erotic are conflated in post-WWII America.

Even before the LP, images of women have been closely associated with communication technologies and media (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 226). Sterne suggests that women represent “emerging networks of sociability” in such imagery, and cites eroticized images of women listening to headphones to further the argument (*The Audible Past* 226). The idea, according to Sterne, is that physical distance between communicating humans can be eroticized by employing the visual of an attractive female (*The Audible Past* 226). Men appeared in images associated with sound-reproduction technologies as well, but usually a-men-of-action within the research lab (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 228). Sterne also cites John Peters, who “calls the longing connection with distant other the *Eros* of communication” (*The Audible Past* 251). Peters sees our desire to communicate and our fascination with media as an erotic impulse (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 251).

By the time of the LP, Americans were slowly becoming more comfortable with sex and nudity in general. Nudity in mainstream American films became more prevalent when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that nudity was not necessarily obscene (Adinolfi 135). In most cases it was women—rather than men—who appeared nude in movies, magazines, and album covers. Often, the female body was adorned in clothes and positioned in locales that created a projected world of sexy Otherness. Adinolfi writes that, “[d]uring the 1950s, ‘panther women’ and ‘voluptuous females’ appeared in rapidly growing number numbers on album covers, inviting the listener to embark on musical and mental voyages in search of kingdoms of wild desire” (490). We see here the continuation of the tradition of eroticizing females in communication media, as well as a new sort of visual and aural erotica that will crystallize in the next chapter with the intersection of unfamiliar sounds, travel (real and virtual), erotic magazines like *Playboy*, and publications like *National Geographic*. Adinolfi describes the typical look of the LP covers from the era:
Album covers from the period shocked the senses even before (and perhaps even more than) the music itself. Images of alluring women, South Seas dancers, billowing palm trees, and glasses of champagne overflowing with amber liquid all materialized from the thick cardboard smelling of glue—a vivid iconography, rich with bold colors that contemporary CD reissues don’t always manage to convey.

I will explore these imagined erotic landscapes and journeys in greater detail in the next chapter, but for now it is enough to note that images of women were commonplace on album covers, and that there was an implied connection between gender and Otherness.

Titillating themes weren’t just meant to appeal to the heterosexual male demographic—they were also meant to appeal to the heterosexual female set looking to attract and keep a man. Adinolfi writes:

> It was housewives who became the target favored by record labels, advising women how to behave with their own husbands, how to transform the bedroom into a storm of hormones, and above all which music to choose when performing striptease…(134)

The strip-at-home phenomenon was born with the release of these LPs. Similar to today’s DIY pole-dancing phenomenon, a sizeable group of American women were eager to bring the lurid world of the strip-club into their respectable suburban homes. In 1963, Ann Corio released an “aural instruction book” (again, the LP as book) entitled *Ann Corio Presents: How to Strip for Your Husband—Music to Make Marriage Merrier* (Adinolfi 135). The title is clear, and indicative of the time—the reason such subject matter was acceptable in the mainstream media of the day was because it was presented within the context of marriage. Such stripping music became a sensation, and Adinolfi goes so far as to posit that Les Baxter’s “stripper’s beat” laid the foundation for the beat of rock and roll (55).

Though Americans may have been more sexually liberated in the post-WWI years than earlier generations, they were still not at a point where this kind of instruction was available in mainstream movies or television. After the war, Americans found and fervently developed a new passion—leisure. Sex was a significant part of their leisure time and interest, but it couldn’t be discussed, suggested, facilitated, or celebrated nearly as openly as in other media as it could via the LP.

Finally, I would like to include the idea that some of the ideas concerning gender roles and space presented to the American record buying public may have been mythology, wishful thinking, or marketing. Keir Keightley has connected gender-related anxiety to the
marketed transcendence and escape of the hi-fi experience (Sterne, *MP3* 238). Keightley posits that the living room phonographic *assemblage* was advertised to male consumers as a rejection of the feminized, low-culture culture that was embodied by the medium of television (Sterne, *MP3* 238). While my own thesis contends that the living room *assemblage* involved the entire American family, I do think Keightley’s idea has merit. We will see that Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* provided ideals, but also a sort of escape for the American male. Whether it was the experience offered in the pages of Mr. Hefner’s publication, tinkering in the home garage workshop, or putting on headphones in the living room, the American male was sold various escape routes from the responsibilities of suburban middle-class life.

**HI-FI AND DESIRE FOR THE UPBEAT GENERATION**

The LP and the world it described found an ally in Hugh Hefner and his *Playboy* empire. Following World War II Americans were virtually immediately involved in the Cold War. Much of America’s *zeitgeist* during this period might be described as a series of passive-aggressive actions designed (consciously or unconsciously) to flagrantly oppose Communist ideals. In stark contrast to the somber, sparse, and austere Communist world, was the explosive Technicolor, stereophonic, hi-fi world of the American consumer. The American consumer populated the landscape with cocktails, *tiki* torches, station wagons, sports cars, cigars, and lavish living rooms and bedrooms designed with entertainment in mind. Defying the Soviet Union, the United States developed an *assemblage* of leisure. Consumerism and the leisure it facilitated wasn’t simply fun. It was more than that—it was, in a sense, political. As Watts writes, “The ability to choose from…an abundant array of material items set off the United States from the gray, drab, uniform existence of communist societies and defined its notion of the good life” (Watts 137). America had earned its freedom, and was actively looking for ways to express it.

Enter young entrepreneur Hugh Hefner, founder of *Playboy* magazine, and its array of associated products, media, and venues. Watts asserts that “Hefner and his magazine lay in the mainstream of Cold War corporate liberalism” (137). How can a man and magazine most famous for publishing photographs of nude women occupy such an important political and cultural place? Watts notes that “[t]he magazine positioned itself as defender of the
American Way of Life” (137). While there was indubitably commercial motivation behind *Playboy*, that very commercial motivation makes the assertion true. If diverse production and consumerism was “the essence of the modern free enterprise system (Watts 137), then *Playboy* was a celebration of that system. After all, the alluring women featured in the pages were only *part* of the American *assemblage* of leisure and liberty the publication championed. Even if the lifestyle depicted in the magazine bordered on escapism (Watts 77), it was at still presenting something completely unattainable in the Soviet Union. In 1954, Hefner explained:

> The whole focus of the magazine was the notion of living unmarried in a city with your own apartment, with a nice car, with good food and drink, where you’d actually prepare something for a romantic dinner. It was all in the first issue. (Watts 75)

Seen in this light, *Playboy* was much more than a “skin-mag”. In fact, the majority of the publication’s pages *weren’t* nude photographs. Instead, the magazine was a guide for a complete lifestyle for what Hefner himself dubbed the “Upbeat Generation” (Watts 134). Indeed, the LP and hi-fi was a major component in Hefner’s *assemblage* of post-WWII American leisure. The regular *Playboy* feature “The Stereo Scene” was a serious and professional column offering advice for purchasing hi-fi equipment, as well as detailing the latest developments in the industry (Watts 125). The yearly College Issue was a sort of swinging orientation for the young male student, offering tips and reflections on liquor, sports, what the girl of his dreams might look like, and of course— the best hi-fi equipment (Watts 79).

I explore the role of Hefner’s famed magazine here to show how other media worked in tandem with the LP. This is an American *assemblage*, and per definition, individual mechanisms of the *assemblage* can never completely be isolated. The LP is the lynchpin in this assemblage, however, and the most complete statement of the kind of American consumerism and liberty that Mr. Hefner proselytized. In fact, *Playboy* magazine is a sort of LP without music. Its glossy pages, alluring covers, and the swinging lifestyle it presented all echoed the same characteristics found in LPs, both in its form and content. Did particular LPs take a cue (especially cover images) from *Playboy*? Certainly. In the balance, however, it would appear that *Playboy* got at least as much from the LP as the sound the LP got from it. In fact, *Playboy* seems to have been aware of its status as “LP without music”, since
music journalism, music festivals, and music venues all became extensions of Hefner’s empire (Watts 93, 135). According to Watts, “Playboy’s appeal was rooted… in the broad social and cultural milieu of postwar America” (72). This was the how-to book of desire for the modern American consumer, and it is no coincidence that of all media, it was the hi-fi assemblage—rather than TV or film—that fit in best with its aim.

FROM THE FRONT TO THE ‘BURBS TO OUTER SPACE

The assemblage of WWII included new provisions for returning American soldiers. America had learned a tough social and economic lesson from the previous World War when it saw its veterans return home without the necessary resources assimilate into productive, adult lives (“Born of Controversy: The GI Bill of Rights”). Determined to avoid high unemployment of veterans, The GI Bill was put into law. The social, economic, and cultural ramifications of the GI Bill would all play a substantial part in the boom years of post-WWII America. Higher education and home ownership—once the exclusive privilege of the wealthy—became an opportunity afforded millions of middle-class Americans. In 1947, U.S. veterans constituted 49 percent of college admissions (“Born of Controversy: The GI Bill of Rights”). By the termination of the first GI Bill program on July 25, 1956, 7.8 million of the 16 million American WWII veterans had participated in either an education or training program (“Born of Controversy: The GI Bill of Rights”). No longer an army of warriors, millions of Americans were now part of another army: homeowners. A housing boom—much of it in the suburbs—promptly followed (Watts 73).

America’s middle class was an increasingly educated group. After long days of schooling and training for brighter futures, many of these young Americans retired not to a dormitory, but to the home they owned. From 1944 to 1952, the VA (Department of Veteran Affairs) backed just under 2.4 million home loans for veterans (“Born of Controversy: The GI Bill of Rights”). The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 developed the American interstate-highway system, changing where people lived and worked (Heppenheimer 178). Able to work in the city, but easily drive home via new freeways to newer, larger, more affordable living spaces, more and more Americans chose to call the suburbs home (Heppenheimer 179). In fact, between 1948 and 1958, 85% of the 13 million newly constructed homes in the U.S. were built in the suburbs (Fraterrigo 750).
For many, the war was in the rearview mirror (probably of their shiny new Studebaker Champion, Buick Roadmaster, or Pontiac Streamliner station wagon parked in the driveway of their new suburban home). The GI became the emerging bachelor—and later--family man. Adinolfi addresses the emerging upwardly mobile American bachelor, noting:

The phenomenon of the bachelor was determined by a particular series of socioeconomic events. For the first time, a vast social group that formed in college pursued careers while delaying marriage. The bachelor had plenty of disposable income, and plenty of free time to spend it. (8)

Whether it was the swinging bachelor who was resisting the lure of family life, or the women and men who were embracing domesticity, America was changing, welcoming increases in education, bankrolls, space, and time.

Though a time of expansive growth, it was also a time of unease, and continued fighting for American ideals. One war (WWII) segued into another (The Cold War). The American GI, and the greater assemblage of family, suburb, city, and nation, continued the fight for freedom in new and unexpected ways. Leisure life at home, the consumer-driven attitudes that facilitated it, and (as we will see later in my thesis) space exploration were all expressions of the new America.

**CHANGING SPACES: THE LIVING ROOM AND BEDROOM AS COLD WAR HEADQUARTERS**

Returning to the LP, we can now better situate it in its proper environment. We have already seen that many of the GIs were music collectors while stationed abroad. Sound-reproduction technology improved greatly during and after the Second World War. Now, we see the upward social mobility (note: for some. A meaningful exploration of the Civil Rights movement is outside the scope of this thesis, but I do want to acknowledge that while the opportunities describe in my thesis were available to millions of Americans, racial and gender inequality were also strong dynamics in the US. The text of the LP does give us insight into racial and sexual difference, as we will see) which found its greatest expression at home. We have also already seen how the record industry made the LP affordable by aggressively cutting prices. Additionally, I have shown in this thesis that Hugh Hefner’s brand of commercialism was a particularly American statement. This new statement of expansion, leisure, and freedom was to be headquartered in the American living room. The
move to the living room as a cultural center was in progress before WWII. Sterne has written about the “shift from the parlor to the living room for the middle class” (*The Audible Past* 204). The post-war living room emerged as a sort of social, educational, and cultural portal. Through the living room—and specifically the LP-playing hi-fi system it most likely contained—Americans allowed in and projected distant locations, and even other galaxies. Marshall McLuhan, himself a product of this time, wrote that the phonograph was a “music hall without walls” (248). Tapping into the desire of the time, the American living room combined music, architecture, fantasy, sex instruction, transportation, and more into one comprehensive statement on the 12-inch disc called the LP. Echoing Sterne’s connection between desire and communication, Karen Tongson has redefined Jennifer Terry’s concept of “remote intimacy” to address this very phenomenon (Tongson 130). For Tongson, remote intimacies “[describe] the communities for whom intimacies cohere across virtual networks of desire through the radio, music, and television, on the Internet and now online through online social networking sites” (130). Decades before the Internet, the living room LP and its *assemblage* of technology allowed Americans to explore a virtual world. As Tongson notes, radio and TV also allow for this kind of experience, though it is the LP that allowed the inhabitants of a home to actually participate. Turning a radio on and off was a simple matter, but the tactile experience of the LP made it the more encompassing experience (again, humans helping technology help them).

The living room was so much more than simply one room of the house. Indeed, the name itself provokes the question: Is it called a living room because we do our living in it, or is the room itself *living* in a sense? The living room *is* an assemblage, consisting of space, walls, entrances and exits, technologies, and the people who use all of these. Post-WWII living rooms increasingly resembled places outside the home, and Adinolfi states “records were responsible for transforming domestic spaces into dark lounges the ones in which the bachelor had linger the night before” (13). The living room took on an almost futuristic character, being able to resemble places that weren’t living rooms. In fact, it was the activities of the time that created the massively popular genre of cocktail music, rather than the other way around. Record labels invented the cocktail genre to accompany the cocktail parties middle-class Americans were already having in their living rooms, and Adinolfi describes cocktail pianists as “interior decorators” (13).
The living room (and—as we will soon see—the bedroom) facilitated so much human activity throughout the day and the night that it required an organizer of sorts. Once again, the LP came to the rescue. The LP introduced Americans to a new phenomenon: mood music. Muzak had existed since the 1920s, but mood music was more than that. While Muzak’s aim was complete sublimation, mood music had teeth, so to speak. Its rhythmic and harmonic twists and turns and suggestive nature was intended to inspire and—as the name suggests--actively set the mood (Adinolfi 127). Aimed at middle-class families, it was functional music for certain times and activities like lunch, dinner, entertaining guests, and bedtime (Adinolfi 126). There was even the “Music for Gracious Living” series, which lent “environmental comfort” (Adinolfi 127). These functional, mood-setting LPs most often had covers reinforcing the particular aim of a given disc (Adinolfi 126). Mood-setting music was common and useful in the American living room, and of course at least equally important in that other important room for post-WWII Americans: the bedroom.

The bedroom was the natural, nocturnal extension of the American living room. The living room and the bedroom, according to Steven Guarnacia and Bob Sloan, were the “two poles of a bachelor’s universe” (Adinolfi 12). Many of the mood-setting LPs (including the striptease LPs we have already looked at) were intended for play (in both senses) in the bedroom. Guarnacia and Sloan colorfully point out that “[t]he altarpiece in this cathedral of leisure was the hi-fi” (Adinolfi, 12).

**THE LP AS BOOK AND TANGIBLE EXPERIENCE**

Though just after the era I am addressing in my thesis, it is noteworthy that in 1972 Stevie Wonder released an LP titled *Talking Book*. This LP took its cue from the LPs of the post-War era, existing as a multi-media experience. Besides the music contained on the 12-inch vinyl disc, there were photographic images, liner notes, and even braille (Wonder). This is an example of the complete experience Adinolfi describes earlier in this chapter (Sex and Vinyl) where all senses are involved in the experience of the LP. When we listen to an LP, as Stevie Wonder clearly demonstrates, we are truly “reading” something. Often the LP was book-like in that it had extensive liner notes. Liner notes might be nothing more than album credits, but in many cases they were detailed narratives of fiction. American bongo player Chaino used liner notes to detail a completely fictitious biography (Adinolfi 105). Martin
Denny, the king of exotica, once said, “My music has always been fiction, just like a book” (Adinolfi 62). Other times, as in the audio-instruction books we have already seen in my thesis, the auditory content was book-like (stripping lessons, bongo lessons, and so on). Finally, Juan Suárez points out in his text *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* that “language became unhinged from its print support” (Suárez 126), meaning that language is now virtually ubiquitous in media, whether in print or not.

The book-like, tactile experience of the LP is a key element to my assertion that it embodies the *zeitgeist* of the time. I will address modern, less concrete music formats in my conclusion, but for now I will simply point out that we are in a good position to see just how tangible the LP was. McLuhan wrote that with the advent of hi-fi, the phonograph once again became tactile by creating the illusion of being in the room with the musicians and their instruments (247). The tangibility of the LP, and the *assemblage* necessary to play and experience it (cover, disc, stylus, turntable, cables, receiver, speakers, room, human) contributed to the ritualistic aspect of the LP in a ritualistic era. *Tiki* parties, family time, and bachelor/bachelorette wooing were just some of the rituals experienced throughout American homes every day, and the LP was an essential part of all of those rituals. In a time before virtual playlists, streaming services, and shuffle features descending from a virtual “cloud,” the selection and playing of the appropriate disc for the appropriate time, room, and audience constituted a learned, skilled ritual. As we have already noted, the listener was not simply a passive recipient of the information, but a willing participant in allowing the LP to be experienced in its proper context. Taylor writes about the transition from production of music to consumption of music (5), and nowhere is this more evident than the hi-fi *assemblage*. From parlor piano to player piano to hi-fi system, the transition had crystallized with the LP’s *assemblage*. But where other media like films, TV, radio, paintings, theater, and photography all more or less demanded a passive recipient of information, the LP distinguished itself by demanding more from its users, even if they weren’t musicians in the traditional sense. The LP’s *assemblage* demanded willing, active human participation for it to work. For the bachelors, families, and Upbeat Generation Swingers of the post-WWII era, participative consumerism was the order of the day, and the LP allowed this more than any other form of expression.
THE UBIQUITOUS AMERICAN COCKTAIL GENERATION

The cocktail was one of the most favored symbols of the post-War generation. Hollywood, and particularly MGM, released several films in the “bachelor and cocktail” genre (Adinolfi 9). T.S. Elliot’s *The Cocktail Party* was produced in 1950 (Adinolfi 11), and (though brandy is not strictly a cocktail) albums like Dolores Gray’s *Warm Brandy* featured a trifecta of post-War leisure imagery: an attractive and inviting young woman, a distinguished drink, and just enough of the bachelor’s hand to show he is there to enjoy this scene. The back cover reads, “Dolores Gray draws close to the microphone and sings in a manner as intoxicating as Warm Brandy” (Gray). Underneath the liner notes is a stylized drawing, showing a swinging bachelor in the passionate embrace of a sultry young beauty, and a filled brandy glass in reach. The cocktail bar was one of many virtual escape locations for the post-War American, especially after a long day in the high-powered, competitive workplace (Adinolfi 10). In fact, the US became the top alcohol consuming country in the world during this time (Adinolfi 11), and though this was reflected in films and TV, it was the LP that not only allowed—but also actually promoted—this, devoting an entire genre in its service. The Cocktail Generation, aka Upbeat Generation, aka post-War generation, etc. saw themselves as ubiquitous. The irony here is that though these Americans were ostensibly importing other cultures and locations, they were in fact exporting their own culture and location. The living room, as usual, was the hub of this new cultural import-export empire. Les Baxter, one of the biggest names in exotica, created “armchair sonic voyages” (Adinolfi 54). Themed chain restaurants like the Kon Tiki, Kona Kei, Don the Beachcomber, and Trader Vic’s supplied exotic escapism (Adinolfi 5). Similarly, Disneyland’s “Jungle Cruise” opened in 1955, providing “stay at home tourism” (Adinolfi 104). Later, in 1963, Disneyland would also feature the “Enchanted Tiki Room” (Adinolfi 5). Though one of the Cocktail Generation’s libations of choice — the “mai tai” —sounded exotic, the drink was actually invented by American Vic Bergeron at his restaurant Hinky Dink’s in Oakland, CA (Adinolfi 4). The mai tai—an imagined projection of the exotic and Other—was successfully exported to Hawaiian hotels like the Royal Hawaiian, the Surfisider, and the Mauan (Adinolfi 5), and sold to non-Hawaiians as a bit of exotic, local flavor.

But actual, expensive trips to Hawaii to imbibe Californian cocktails weren’t necessary. As Adinolfi writes, “it was enough to sit in your living room, comfortable sip a
cocktails, and travel from one end of the globe to the other with Les Baxter or Martin Denny” (Adinolfi 33). The LP’s *assemblage* didn’t just include hi-fi equipment—it also involved alcohol, images of faraway places, and a bit of imagination of the part of both composer and listener. Les Baxter responded to whether he had been to Brazil, Cuba, or Africa for inspiration by saying, “Back then I never got further than Glendale” (Adinolfi 45). So rather than importing authentic culture from other locations, America was actually *exporting* their own brand of fiction, particularly through the music on LPs. The idea echoed the spirit of expansion that existed at a time when locations as different as Hawaii, Alaska, and even the moon were all about to be adorned with an American flag. Adinolfi frames the idea within the cultural context: “The tendency on the part of musicians to Americanize sounds of African or Asian origin only reinforced the belief that the United States could exist simultaneously in all places, that its cultural model was the only one possible” (46). While it was difficult or impossible to get film crews, photographers, and other documentarians to remote locations (outer space included), the LP’s *assemblage* provided Americans with everything they needed to experience the illusion of the Other: a few unfamiliar sounds or instruments from other parts of the world, perhaps some bird calls layered over the music, a refreshing mai tai, the trusty living room chair, and the American was free to travel anywhere in the universe—even if only an imagined universe.

**HIGH FIDELITY OF THE LP: COMPARED TO WHAT?!**

The concept of “high-fidelity”, or “hi-fi” is inseparable from the LP. Though bandied around as a concept before the LP (it was first used within the sonic context in 1878 [Sterne, *The Audible Past* 222]), it took the invention of stereo sound to begin to assume a more definable character. Similarly, the word “hi-fi” may sound slightly dated in today’s ears, placing the peak of the hi-fi phenomenon clearly in the post-WWII era, and directly involved with the LP. Stepping back from sound-reproduction technologies and simply looking at the word “fidelity”, we reflect that “[f]idelity…is the quality of faithfulness to some kind of pact or agreement” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 221). The logical question becomes: *which* pact or agreement?

The question of a sound medium’s faithfulness (fidelity) to an agreement ultimately becomes a philosophical one. The phenomenon of hi-fi, according to Sterne, stems from “a
belief that media and sounds themselves [can] hold faithfully to the agreement that two sounds are the same sound” (*The Audible Past* 222). Following Sterne’s definition, if we can correctly identify a recorded snare drum as a snare drum, then there is fidelity. The “high” (improved, superior) part of “high fidelity” or “hi-fi,” is the subjective, ever-changing part of the concept. Sterne brings this to our attention by adding that “every age has its own perfect fidelity” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 222). In other words, sound fidelity is not something on a consistent path of improvement, but rather something that always fits the esthetics and ideals of a given era.

The post-War hi-fi network of the LP is particularly pertinent to my thesis since it captures the mid-century notion that the copy/original model was no longer relevant. The problem of copies and originals permeated twentieth-century discourse on communication media (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 217). The agreement Sterne writes about had become a hazy one by the time of the LP. Barry Truax and R. Murray Schafer created the word *schizophonia* to describe the “space in between” the original sound and the copy we hear via sound-reproduction technology (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 20). As recording studios and sound-reproduction technologies became more sophisticated, there was less and less a sense of mediation-- *schizophonia* seemed to be going away. We might call mid-century hi-fi the “vanishing point” between copies and originals, or as Sterne explains, “vanishing mediation, where sources and copies move ever closer together until they are identical” (*The Audible Past* 222). This vanishing point invokes Baudrillardian negations of referents. It wasn’t that the sound quality was so good that “perfect fidelity” (no loss of being between an original and its sound copy [Sterne, *The Audible Past* 218]) had been achieved, but rather that post-War Americans were no longer interested in simply capturing real-life sounds accurately. The zeitgeist of post-WWII America was moving away from an allegiance to original forms. Americans were instead using their imaginations to create environments on remote, idyllic islands (which never really existed), or colonies in outer space. Increasingly, their music was not made to sound exactly like something that really existed in another time or place, but instead always understood as its own entity (Gelatt 312).

The music on mid-century LPs captured the birth of record “producers” and record “production” since the music was being planned and understood as part of a technological network, rather than mere documentation (Gelatt 312). Echoing McLuhan’s famous mantra
“the medium is the message”, Sterne writes that “without the medium, there would be no connection, no copy, but also no original…The performance is for the medium itself…The singer sings to the microphone, to the network, not to the woman listening oat the other end” (The Audible Past 226). The LP then, unlike previous sound media, contained music that understood itself as its own phenomenon, rather than a copy of something else.

Reflecting on the idea of “performing to the network” we return to the post-War ideas in cybernetics. The words assemblage and network (the language of cybernetics and Complexity Theory [Mitchell 234]) are prominent throughout my thesis, and for good reason. As I have pointed out, the LP is nothing by itself. This is true of virtually all of 20th century communication technologies. Communication technologies--telephones, radios, TVs, or phonographs-- need systems to work (Sterne, The Audible Past 246). The very inception of the LP implied a necessary system, or network for it to work. Now as we look at the copy/original problem, we again see how the zeitgeist of post-WWII America was that of assemblages and networks, and that the LP is the best cultural key to understanding the mid-century sense of networks, systems, and assemblages. Before we can play sounds contained on an LP, those same sounds must originate in the recording studio. Though the concept of the studio is vastly different and harder to define today (a laptop, or even cellphone can now function as a studio), recording studios during the post-War years were easy to identify. Sterne places the studio in an assemblage of sound: “The studio in particular implies a configuration of bodies and sounds in space, a particular ordering of practices and attitudes. Its significance is at once technical, social, and spatial” (Sterne, The Audible Past 236). The configuration was responsible for the sounds that the LP presupposed, and these sounds were always intended for the LP. Both the medium and the place of origin presuppose each other.

**“Live” Music**

The banner hanging above the door to the local watering hole commonly reads something along the lines of “Live Music Every Friday and Saturday!” or the ambiguous “Live Entertainment.” Anyone with a decent sized record collection almost certainly has at least a couple “live” recordings. Sarah Thornton has pointed out that this concept of “live” is a post-War phenomenon “enter[ing] the ‘lexicon of music appreciation’ only in the 1950s” (Sterne, The Audible Past 221). Robots, technology, and the cooperation and tension between
humans and technology were on the brains of post-War Americans. It is no coincidence that Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot* was published for the first time in 1950 (Asimov). Sterne explains that “[‘Live’ music] soaked up the aesthetic and ethical connotations of life-versus-death, human –versus-mechanical, creative-versus-imitative” (*The Audible Past* 221). Ideas of “liveness” permeated mid-century thinking since it overlapped with post-War innovations in technology, space, and concepts of originals vs. copies. We have already seen the importance of both the living room and the recording studio during the post-War years. These two rooms, part of the LP *assemblage*, interact to display the new, interactive nature of media in the post-War years. Again, the post-War American was a participant in the *assemblage*, not simply a passive consumer of it. The unique living room of the bachelor or family member allowed for a unique sensory experience. Here we begin to see the idea of the consumer manipulating media to fit her/his own tastes, preferences, and situation. The same way an Internet surfer might copy, paste, change, resize, and caption an image produced by someone else, somewhere else, at another time, so too was the post-War American able to create a new, *unique* sensory experience at home when playing an LP. Hi-fi equipment, and especially the *listening room itself*, affected how the media was perceived. Already in a 1951 *Saturday Review of Recordings* article titled “Liveness in the Listening”, Edward Tatnall Canby asked: “What of the listening room’s own reflective power?” (Read and Welch 379). Here, Tatnall is presenting the reflective nature of the living room as the basis for a potentially poor sonic experience. Whether we think that this “liveness compounded upon liveness” (Read and Welch 379) is problematic, or simply a neutral phenomenon, we see either way that the LP-more than any other medium of the time—allowed the consumer and the consumer’s surrounding environment influence on the final product. There was no post-War victory or defeat in a sci-fi-like human vs. machine battle. The *zeitgeist* embraced the *assemblage*, in which humans eagerly helped machines help them. “Live” no longer just meant human.

I began this chapter by stating that LP was the most effective vessel for exhibiting the spectrum of fears, ambitions, problems, ideas, rituals—and desires of the post-War years. My thesis’ explorations of sexual and racial attitudes, consumerism, political stirrings, upward social mobility, living spaces, esthetic philosophies regarding originals and copies, family life, single living, and the medium as its own end all lead us back to *desire*. It was the
desire of post-WWII America that led to an artistic, commercial, and esthetic *assemblage* call the LP and its hi-fi system. This *assemblage* remains the best time capsule we have to learn more about the women and men who lived, worked, made love, explored, battled, partied, created, destroyed, succeeded, and failed right here on the same soil we now inhabit. If the LP is the *medium* which best teaches us about these people, the genre most intrinsically tied to it and the *zeitgeist* of the age is as dynamic, complex, and multi-layered as its name suggests: exotica.
CHAPTER 4

EXOTICA IN THE SPACE AGE

Although this third chapter is formally where I examine the phenomenon of the exotica genre in the context of post-WWII American culture, I have already made several references to it. This is—as Karen Pinkus points out—because “[t]here are some fundamental aspects of exotica that are tied to the materiality of recording techniques, developments in stereo technology, and to exotic images as they appear on the 12'' album cover” (Adinolfi xii). Exotica, via the LP’s platform, captured the American zeitgeist of the years following WWII. We see assemblages within assemblages here—the assemblage of the LP working within the framework of its hi-fi system, which in turn functions within the assemblages of living rooms and bedrooms of middle-class Americans, which in turn influence and reflect post-WWII American culture. Hopefully I have thus far safely navigated the waters of this cultural studies exploration without succumbing to the siren-like song of “impact narratives”. The LP did not cause or influence the culture. We cannot say “everything changed with the advent of the LP”, or “people started having swinging parties with the advent of the exotica genre”. On the contrary, the medium and ritual of the LP and its contents (often exotica or exotica-tinged multi-media works) were simply the unconscious concretizing of the already existing spirit--or zeitgeist--of the United States in the post-War years.

For millions of Americans, the years immediately following WWII were a peculiar mixture of looking backwards and forwards. When we look at exotica, we will see that the assemblage of war remained an active ingredient in American culture even after the war. It wasn’t just technology that American veterans brought back home, but also nostalgia. “Above all,” Adinolfi illuminates, “at the root of exotica music are the memories and nostalgia of the many American servicemen stationed in the Pacific during World War II” (Adinolfi 64). Though an idealized Pacific is the foundation for exotica, Adinolfi is careful to point out that exotica was from its beginning a selective, restricted parallel universe. The horrors of WWII were far too fresh in the minds, hearts, and bodies of its participants to be
remembered with hazy fondness. Post-WWII America, however, was in a state of transition from “‘war machine’ to a consumer economy” (Adinolfi 8). These ex-soldiers were not glorifying the past, but rather willfully commercializing and reimagining the remote environments in which so much wartime horror occurred and placing those reimagined environments into their present and future civilian lives at home. Adinolfi explains that they “dedicated themselves to its commercialization while disavowing their traumatic wartime memories (Adinolfi 4). In a variation on the original-copy model, Americans created a genre called exotica as a way to create a place and time that never were, but did become real as they spun on the living room turntable.

**U.S. Expansion**

Growth and exploration was on the minds of Americans in the post-WWII years. Americans saw growth in the average bank account, home size, and the nation itself. The same year that the seminal exotica album “Quiet Village” cracked the charts, Hawaii became the 50th American state (Adinolfi 62). Not insignificantly, several LPs documented Hawaii’s statehood (Adinolfi 62). The American S.S. *Nautilus* was the first submarine to cross the North Pole, and its crew chose Martin Denny’s *Exotica* LP as a favorite (Adinolfi 59). While submarine exploration was outside the sphere of everyday life in America, reading a magazine with exciting photographs of distant locales was not. In fact, reading such a publication in the living room while listening to a mood-setting LP fit the times perfectly, and between 1946 and 1957, sales of *National Geographic* doubled (Adinolfi 63). Besides imagined islands in the Pacific and real-life waters of the North Pole, there were two additional spaces that post-WWII Americans would explore during this era: outer space and the space created through stereo sound. I will address these two areas later in my thesis, but I would be remiss to omit their part in the era’s spirit of American expansion.

**Race as Exotica**

The LP, as I have posited throughout this thesis, was meant to be experienced as a multi-faceted book. Additionally, the book of the LP was generally understood as a work of fiction. Like Hefner’s *Playboy*, exotica’s elements were real, but reconfigured and commercialized in such a way that it was a phenomenon intended to be understood as its own reality and not a reference to—or copy of—something or someplace else. Karen Pinkus
thoughtfully addresses more modern, politically correct criticisms about the genre in the introduction to her translation of Adinolfi’s *Mondo Exotica*. For Pinkus, exotica must be placed “within the zeitgeist that boasted assimilation and cultural annihilation of the other as one of its distinctive traits” (Adinolfi viii). While not discounting the merit of some of what Pinkus writes here, I would like to suggest the *medium* of exotica (the LP) hints that it most likely was not so bold as to (consciously or unconsciously) seek “cultural annihilation.” As we have already seen, by the post-WWII years, recordings for the LP were not documentation, but instead performances *to the network*. Exotica records never sincerely posed as field recordings or anthropological studies. Instead, exotica was a playful and adventurous style of recorded music that was keenly aware of the technology that facilitated it.

Pinkus’s point, however, is respectfully taken. The line between artistic imagery and privileged mockery is a thin one indeed. The idea of appropriating artistic inspiration from outside one’s immediate surroundings is a tricky one to navigate. Adinolfi designates proper vs. improper behavior on this matter by creating the labels “Organic” and “Non-Organic” appropriations (61). When is this kind of appropriation ok? Here, Adinolfi cites Boulez, who deems it proper when the appropriation “avoids the temptation to represent other cultures (Adinolfi 61). Exotica giants Morton Gould and Martin Denny’s motives certainly don’t appear malicious in this regard. Gould stated that he was simply “intensely attracted to music and cultures from far-off lands” (Adinolfi 131), and Denny went on record as saying “I never asked whether or not it was ethical to use [the instruments]. My idea was that we should always have unique instruments in the group” (Adinolfi, 62). Denny’s motivation behind his lush arrangements (complete with bird calls to take the suburban listener somewhere else) was probably a combination of his esthetic music and the world of commerce. Denny—as musicians have done for thousands of years—was simply looking for a way to an audience. He himself noted, ”At that time a lot of people were fascinated by Hawaii and the South Seas and everything they represented” (Adinolfi 60). Ultimately, the organic vs. non-organic musical appropriation argument is a highly subjective one since it is nigh impossible to know whether an artist is attempting to represent—or is merely inspired by—another culture. What we do know, however, is that in the ever-expanding landscape of post-WWII America, the LP afforded room to more and more voices, styles, and faces.
EXOTICA’S MOTLEY CREW

The LP-as-book was the perfect medium for introducing a “cast” of diverse characters to American consumers eager for virtual adventure. They were indeed characters, since the biographies written on the LPs were often exaggerated, or pure fiction. Names were changed or invented, locations spiced up, and music created to accompany these embodiments of Otherness. Yma Sumac, Xavier Cugat, Carmen Miranda, and Korla Pandit are just some of these characters. Sumac’s albums were adorned with written embellishments, made-up rituals, and fudged facts (Adinolfi 106-107). Cugat’s immensely popular music represented no tradition of Latin music or region in particular, but rather a feeling of Otherness aimed at a white, middle-class, American audience (Adinolfi 31). Jack Constanzo, a.k.a. “Mister Bongo”, had great success with his albums, and they serve as wonderful examples of the LPs multi-purpose, multi-media, interactive nature. His 1960 LP Learn: Play Bongos With Mr. Bongo (Adinolfi 161) is an example of the LP as instruction manual. His 1957 album Mr. Bongo Plays in Hi-Fi (Adinolfi 161) shows the changing post-War relationship with technology, space, and identity. The bongos, much like the Chihuahua (Adinolfi 16) became synonymous with the post-war esthetic (161). Both took up little room and were easy to move around and control. Both instrument and animal were exotic accessories to post-WWI décor.

Exotica favored music from a host of places semi-real or completely imagined, and a foreign-sounding title (whether based on something extant or not) was used often. Classic songs from the genre include “Caravavan,” “Perdido,” “Hawaiian War Chant,” “Bali Hai,” “Taboo,” and “Hawaiian Wedding Song” (Adinolfi 164-165). Friedwald claims it was Carmen Miranda and Xavier Cugat’s “Cuanto le Gusta” recording which cemented Latin music’s place in American music history (Adinolfi 32). “Authentic” or not, American music, ethnic minority visibility, and America’s national demography as a whole, changed dramatically during the post-WWII years.

Finally, there is the phenomenon of Americans perceiving fellow Americans as the Other. The most obvious example is the treatment of black Americans as exotica during this time. Sammy Davis Jr., Eartha Kitt, and countless others brought a flare of exotica to otherwise normative American spaces (Adinolfi 116). Adinolfi finds exotica pioneer Les Baxter’s music guilty of racism in its association of the black/African human with animalistic
behavior (Adinolfi 47). Exotica, like post-WWII America, was in a state of transition: not only in terms of technology and the economy, but also in terms of race. Once again, the LP was there to express this transition. While predominantly black TV shows and movies were rare, LPs featuring Latin and black performers were comparatively common. For many black Americans, the entrance to post-WWII White America’s living room was through the hi-fi system.

**COLD WARS AND WARM SHORES**

The exotic sounds of the LP weren’t only commercializing a past war—they were escaping an ongoing one. “At the height of the Cold War,” Adinolfi explains, “Americans countered fears of annihilation and Soviet domination with dreams of ‘a place in the sun’…exotica came to the rescue” (Adinolfi 21). I will show later in my thesis that Americans understood developing their space program as one of the most important actions to be taken against communism. Similarly, the soothing sounds and escape exotica LPs offered were a sort of therapy during the uncertain time of the Cold War. The American appropriation of tiki especially aided in the process. Americans created an assemblage of pagan religious iconography, foreign décor, and island-inspired dress combined with American-made food, drink, and music aimed at giving the feeling of another place. Adinolfi defines American tiki as embodying “[the] American dream of escape and sexual liberation” (2). LPs during the time were created for the network of food, drink, living rooms, and Americans eager to escape for a while. Mid-century sci-fi became increasingly interested in the idea of the parallel universe, and Americans created their own parallel universe in their suburban homes. I will address the idea of alternate/parallel spaces again when examining the exotica sub-genre of Space Age music.

Once again, we find the LP at the center of the action. Music—and not TV, film, books, photographs, or magazines—was the lynchpin of the tiki party, and the medium for this music was of course the LP (playing 45s at such a party would have been unthinkable). Besides the obvious advantage of length of play, the LP provided liner notes and artwork that tuned it into a fantasy travel book. TV shows and swinging bachelor films might re-enact scenes of post-WWII American social life, but the LP was the center of the actual action. The ethics of these re-imagined universes again comes into question when our
modern-day sensibilities encounter them. Martin Denny, the king of exotica, addressed this problem in an interview, saying,

Americans couldn’t care less about the religious origins of the tiki. They welcomed it as just another novelty, and I don’t believe they wanted to demean the culture that generated it. I myself, while cutting a record, would never have thought that by extracting music from its cultural roots I would be offending someone. (Adinolfi 2)

While it is interesting to hear Denny’s account here, the interview is from 1998, decades removed from the *zeitgeist* that informed his fascinating music. We can never know for certain what the sentiment was behind such appropriations, but as I have already written earlier in this thesis, American popular media was (and remains) commercially driven, so it is safe to say that Denny and others were in fact merely reacting to a desire which already existed and had momentum within post-war America. Finally, we again see the idea of negating the original/copy model. Denny freely acknowledges that there was little—if any—interest in the original intent or proper understanding of religious and art forms foreign to Americans. American *tiki*, like exotica, and like the LP, was its own phenomenon, and meant to be experienced on its own terms. *Tiki* parties and décor—aided by the LP—were highly effective at creating alternative lives and spaces for American suburban inhabitants.

**EXOTICA IN SPACE: TO THE MOON, ALICE!**

The LP didn’t stop its exploration of exotic spaces of otherness with the South Pacific. This distinctly American genre also had its sites on a locale even more exotic and distinct—outer space. One of Jackie Gleason’s famous catchphrases from his hit TV show *The Honeymooners* was “To the moon, Alice!” Though in this context it had absolutely nothing to do with space exploration, it is worth noting that Gleason himself had another persona when not on the small screen—he himself was one of the immensely successful kings of exotica. Gleason’s anti-hero Ralph Kramden may have been making light of (never actualized) domestic violence, but “to the moon!” was in fact a serious-minded catchphrase (spoken or not) in the consciousness of Americans during the post-war years.

We can consider space-themed music during this time either a sub or parallel genre to exotica. Adinolfi explains the genre:

Artists, arrangers, and pioneers of electronic pop were…convinced that one could capture the true sound of the planets on an album, an ‘alternate/other’ universe
I showed in the preceding pages that exotica reflected both the physical expansion of the United States as well as a fantastic expansion of virtual spaces as Americans sought escape from the stress of the work place, domestic responsibility, and the Cold War. We see a similar pattern with the popular space-themed music of the LP during these years. Space exploration was both an actual desire for Americans during the Cold War as well as a fantastic setting for new ideas and technologies, and of course—escape. Furthermore, the idea of exploring new space worked perfectly with the burgeoning technology of stereo sound in the post-war hi-fi assemblage.

The glow of American victory after WWII began to wane, replaced by the unease the threat of Soviet communism posed. Consumerism bolstered the American economy, ingenuity, and identity, but it also led some to doubt the durability of a culture devoted to leisure. Heppenheimer succinctly outlines this doubt, and it is helpful to quote him at length here:

That America’s freedom and democracy might be fine in times of general peace, but would lose out to the discipline of a dictatorship in the crunch. The fear was not new; it had been very much in people’s minds amid the Nazi challenge. Now it showed up again and it took the peculiar form of viewing the nations’ consumer society of evidence of weakness. ‘The time has come,’ thundered Senator Styles Bridges, a leading Republican, ‘to be less concerned with the depth of pile on the new broadloom rung or the height of the tailfin on the new car and to be more prepared to shed blood, sweat, and tears.’ (125)

Senator Bridges’ remarks show the dark-side of American consumerism, but also show that the nation was ready to mobilize once again. Consumerism could indeed continue to operate according to the Hugh Hefner model as a way to defy communist austerity, but additional steps needed to be taken, even if that meant taking them on the moon. President John F. Kennedy wrote of the significance of “space as a tool of the Cold War” in a memo to Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson (Heppenheimer 194). Popular culture was also fully aware of the blossoming interest in space. The March 1952 issue of Collier’s read, “MAN WILL CONQUER SPACE SOON.” The cover, however, didn’t say which nation would do that. The magazine issue featured an editorial with “an urgent warning that the U.S. must immediately embark on a long-range development program to secure for the West “space superiority” (Heppenheimer 89). The Cold War had found another venue in outer space, the
coldest place of all.

Compared to their Soviet counterparts, Americans were well informed on their nation’s progress in space exploration. Hersch notes that “[r]elative openness was a design feature of the American human spaceflight program” (74). Indeed, Cape Canaveral firings were visible to the general public, and there was even a local ladies luncheon club named the “Missile Misses” who faithfully watched them from the beach. (Heppenheimer 119). On America’s west coast was California—not only home to suburban mid-century American phenomena like tiki parties, but also home to Cal Tech, which collaborated with the Department of Defense to create the regions post-war economy with their rocket experiments (Adinolfi 8). Additionally, astronauts became media celebrities because their careers depended upon positive public relations, and they had a financial stake in royalty payments generated from their published life stories (Hersch 75). There was every incentive in the mid-century space assemblage to disseminate images, stories, and sounds related to space. Hersch points out that scholars are “increasingly examining the cultural nexus between space exploration and the public will” (75). If the U.S. government wasn’t directly responsible for outer space as fodder for entertainment (Hersch 75), it was in any case receptive to it.

While there are countless American films, TV shows, and pulp novels set in outer space, I want to establish in this thesis that the LP is the favored medium of mid-century American space culture. While other media set fictional narratives in outer space, the LP used outer space as a way to explore technological and living spaces on earth. Distant and close spaces actually converged and interacted through the LP, most notably through the evolution of stereo, as I will specifically demonstrate in my section on stereo recordings. Artists like Les Baxter, Esquivel, Bobby Christian, Frank Comstock, and others all produced LPs with space-inspired themes, titles, sounds, pictures, and liner notes (Adinolfi 150).

Les Baxter, already widely known to American audiences through his successful exotica LPs, released his album Space Escapade in 1957 (Adinolfi 146). The album was a multi-media book of sorts. According to Adinolfi, its title was influenced by current news stories (Adinolfi 146), and included fanciful liner notes detailing possible space excursions (Adinolfi 146). Titles like “The Commuter,” “The City,” and “Saturday Night on Saturn” display the intersection of mid-century American suburban space with a hypothetical parallel life in outer space (Baxter). Not surprisingly (considering the mid-century context), the men
adorning the album cover are astronauts, while the exotic aliens are women (throughout the era, women retained an aura of exotic Otherness).

While Baxter was a full-fledged exotica star who additionally found success in the parallel space genre, Juan Garcia Esquivel established himself first and foremost as a contributor to this particular genre. Esquivel (rarely was he publicly referred to as anything but his first name, contributing to his exotic identity) was himself the embodiment of the exotic Other in mid-century America. Prior to arriving in the U.S. in 1958, he lived in his native Mexico, and the American press fondly referred to him as “the Mexican Duke Ellington” (Adinolfi 153). Esquivel—along with others like Enoch Light and Bert Kaempfert—created a successful career out of re-arranging and recording American pop standards with new instruments and recording technology to showcase stereo technology (note also that all three names must have sounded especially exotic to American ears). Two of Esquivel’s LPs were titled *Exploring New Sounds in Hi-Fi* and *Exploring New Sounds in Stereo* (Adinolfi 153). It is remarkable that the technology of the assemblage was so important to Esquivel, his record label, and audience that the titles of his works could refer solely to the form—and not the musical content—of the LPs. Though 3-D Hollywood films are quite popular in today’s world of entertainment, it seems unthinkable that a blockbuster might be titled something like *Exploring New Sights in 3-D*. The moviegoer expects an allusion to a character, problem, or theme within the film. As important as the 3-D element of a modern movie is to attracting audiences, we still see it as an antecedent to a title. For Esquivel and his colleagues, however, the music was often a means to display technology, rather than the other way around. This also explains the preference for older, recognizable works rather than lesser-known or original compositions. The idea was that the audience was able to hear the difference in the new recording by already having a standard, established version in their ears (Adinolfi 152).

Space music, like the space program explored space through technology. In particular, space music LPs exploited stereo. I have written in my thesis about American post-war expansion of technology, borders, and exploration of outer space. In fact, “expansion” is a key concept in understanding the zeitgeist of post-WWII America. I have also written about the importance of the mid-century American living room, and how it was a portal for Americans desiring to experience the universe (real or imagined) from the comfort
of their homes. Now it is time to explore the new technology of post-war America that allowed a reassessment of space in general, and a further departure from the copy/original model.

**Hi-Fi**

Post-war Americans weren’t just thinking up new spaces beyond the earth’s atmosphere; they were creating them in their own living rooms. As I have pointed out throughout my thesis, the mid-century LP was not a stand-alone phenomenon, but rather a lynchpin in an *assemblage*. Gelatt addresses the associated technology with the LP, noting that “[a]long with the rise of the LP in America went two related phenomena: high fidelity reproduction and tape recording” (Gelatt 297). We will see that during the post-war years, “hi-fi,” “high fidelity,” “stereophonic,” and “stereo,” were often understood as one in the same concept. The consumer-minded record industry created stereo recording to appeal to the already extant “hifinatic” market (Gelatt 316), and stereo worked in perfect tandem with the popular genres of the LP like exotica and space music that aimed at creating the feeling of space through sound. Adinolfi defines stereo as “[a] technology that made it possible to trick oneself into believing that sounds reproduced by the speakers originated from different distances and directions” (Adinolfi 145). Again we see the idea of *performing to the network* rather than simply attempting to capture or recreate a specific event that happened in another place and time. Stereo recordings were always their own originals, intended for play in the homes of millions of Americans.

Though the record industry initially only cautiously put its proverbial toe in stereophonic waters (RCA Victor recorded the Boston Symphony in both mono and on two tracks in 1954 [Adinolfi 147]), by 1957 virtually all American record labels were releasing stereo LPs. Four short years later, 25% of all turntables in the U.S. were capable of playing stereo LPs (Adinolfi 155). RCA Victor introduced its successful “Living Stereo” series in 1958 (Adinolfi 148), RCA’s “Stereo Action” series was born in 1961 (Adinolfi 155), and a host of artists like Enoch Light, Dean Elliot, Bob Thompson, and Esquivel specialized in stereo-heavy releases (Adinolfi 157). Whether motivated by artistic integrity or commercial PR ploys, Esquivel was apparently so concerned with achieving proper separation for stereo that he used a different studio for each of the two channels, and these studios were located
blocks apart from each other (Adinolfi 154).

While Esquivel’s stereo LPs created and explored hypothetical areas of outer space, Enoch Light’s immensely popular LPs explored hypothetical areas of American living spaces. Record label Command’s first release was Light’s LP titled *Persuasive Percussion* (Adinolfi 159). Light invented a space-related concept called “Phase X,” which “allowed one to pinpoint an imaginary third channel located between the two speakers” (Adinolfi 159).

Gelatt gives a backdrop the Enoch Light sensation:

> [E]verything….about the disc was new: the label (Command), the jacket (and abstract design of dots) and the stereo. Its producer, a veteran bandleader named Enoch Light, believed that the ordinary listener would take to stereo only if it were made to sound entirely different from anything he had encountered before. (318)

Gelatt’s description again highlights the LP’s multi-media character. Commerce, visual art, technology, sound, and space, all converge in this expression of the post-WWII era. And once more we find musical content taking a backseat to technology. In any case, Light’s concept resonated with the public. For over two years, his *Persuasive Percussion* and *Provocative Percussion* were the stereo albums of choice for American buyers (Gelatt 319).

Light wasn’t alone in his stereophonic forays. Bob Thompson’s *The Sound of Speed* aimed to “create a sound that would swing from one side to another, creating the sensation of movement” (Adinolfi 158). Talented popular musical prankster Spike Jones, who was influenced by André Popp’s concept of “audio space”, returned the favor by inspiring Dean Elliot, another pioneer of stereo-laden LPs (Adinolfi 157). As I mentioned when looking at the Esquivel’s arrangements, these stereo records generally contained new imaginings of standard songs. They were percussion-heavy and often given exotic, Latin-influenced treatments to best showcase the nuanced ability of the new technology (Adinolfi 122).

Finally, I think it is important to situate these LPs in the *assemblage* of the marketplace. LP, turntable, speakers, stereo technology, and tape became one, indistinguishable phenomenon known simply as a “hi-fi” system. The phenomenon of the LP was increasingly understood as both a cultural and commercial *assemblage*. As evidence of this, LPs were commonly distributed as “free gifts” with the stereos that were capable of playing them (Adinolfi 154).

Another part of the hi-fi network was tape. Gelatt observes that hi-fi sound-reproduction depended on magnetic tape, which instead of replacing the LP as the medium of choice for post-war Americans, worked with it to improve its quality, strengthening the
assemblage [Gelatt, 298]). Tape was cheap, which was good news for recording studios, allowed erasing, and facilitated the use of “echo chambers” (Gelatt 299). All of these attributes of tape made recording easier, encouraged risk-taking, and furthered the mid-century American propensity for “producing” for—and playing to—the network. Recordings on the LP—always understood as manipulations—were their own entities rather than copies or documentations. This was the zeitgeist of post-WWII Americans, after all. Everything in their new world was malleable; everything could be manipulated and adjusted to fit American ideals, settings, and people. With the invention and acceptance of the mid-century hi-fi/stereophonic assemblage, the LP came into full bloom and assumed its proper place as the medium of choice for America’s “Greatest Generation.”
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: FROM EXPANSION TO COMPRESSION AND BEYOND

Looking around at how we live in the United States today, we can see the domination of the LP did not last forever. Years went by, and the zeitgeist of a people and place changed, as they inevitably do. The hub of the living room—real or imagined—lost its importance to a world that became one increasingly on-the-go. Why go to the drive-in burger joint when you can go to the drive-thru? In this final section of my thesis, I want to explore the technologies and spaces that arose to displace the LP assemblage of technology and space, and why those technologies and spaces arose. By exploring the shift away from the LP and its associated world toward new assemblages, I finally arrive at the crucial “so what?” section of this work. My thesis—that the LP is the zeitgeist of post-WWII America, only carries significance outside the sphere of music and technological history if it tells us something about the world we live in today. The aim of this thesis has not to present an exhaustive technological history of the LP for an audience of audiophiles, but rather to make a humble contribution to the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. The technology, then, is only a means to an end here. I have repeatedly mentioned the “impact narrative” in my thesis, noting that technology is not its own phenomenon that simply arises of its own volition, and then changes the way we live. On the contrary, I hope that by exploring the life experiences of Americans, as well as the unuttered stirrings within their hearts and souls, I have shown that the technology only came into the world because they desired it to be so. These stirrings and this desire are what we mean when we speak of the zeitgeist of a time, people, and place. Hopefully by exploring this comparatively short era in one particular part of a big world, we can glean insight into our own ongoing lives, and the lives of our sisters and brothers to come.
Cassettes, 8 Tracks, and the End of an Era

It is now time to literally locate the “end of an era” – in this case the end of what I have referred to throughout my thesis as “post-WWII,” “post-war,” and “mid-century”. All three terms (especially the first two) are specific about the start of the era, but offer no exact ending. I suggest that the end of this particular era began with the dawn of the Stereo 8 cartridge (commonly known as the “8 track”) and the cassette. This is not an impact narrative, so I am not suggesting that the Stereo 8 cartridge or cassette brought about any change. These formats arose and succeeded, however, because even if Americans weren’t conscious of it, the zeitgeist of their culture had already changed.

Philips debuted its cassette recorder at the 1963 Berlin Radio Show, and it arrived on U.S. shores and shelves the following year as the Norelco Carry-Corder (Gelatt 321). The assemblage of the cassette/cassette recorder posed no immediate threat to the hi-fi assemblage of the LP. It is helpful to quote Gelatt at length here, since he succinctly outlines both the limitations of this early embodiment of the new, on-the-go zeitgeist, as well as its meteoric improvement:

Admittedly, the quality of sound left much to be desired; tape hiss and a restricted frequency range combined to make the early cassettes non-competitive with discs. But where portability counted for more than fidelity, the cassette was without rival from the very beginning. Later on, its fidelity was appreciably improved. In 1970, quality cassette players were introduced that employed a sophisticated piece of electronics known as the Dolby Noise Reduction System. The difference in performance was astonishing. ‘Dolbyized’ equipment made the cassette competitive with discs or even open-reel recorders.” (321)

Within six years, then, we see the trajectory of the cassette from novelty to challenger of the sound-reproduction media of choice for Americans. Working in tandem with the cassette was its cousin, the Stereo 8 cartridge, or “8 track”. Gelatt writes that “[t]he Stereo 8 equipment in cars and private airplanes further foreshadowed the move away from the LP in favor of portable music” (321-322). If the mention of private airplanes causes us to wonder if the Stereo 8 was strictly a niche phenomenon for the wealthiest Americans, those doubts are put to rest when confronted with the statistic that by 1975, Stereo 8 cartridges constituted 25% of all recorded music sales, totaling 583 million dollars (Gelatt 322). It is also noteworthy that the 8-track only achieved mainstream success in the United States (Gelatt 322), hinting at a dramatic shift in the spirit of the people and place who formerly
championed the LP. Future research and contemplation on just why the Stereo 8 succeeded in the U.S. (but not elsewhere), how many cars sold in the U.S during this time (and why), changing understandings of the family and its living spaces, and so on, throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s will certainly yield helpful findings in the field of cultural studies.

At this point in my thesis, we say a fond farewell to the *assemblage* of the LP. This is the end of the era populated by multi-sensory LPs, the pseudo-futuristic apparatuses that unlocked their magic in roomy suburban homes, *Playboy* magazines, Doris Day/Rock Hudson comedies, and *tiki* parties. The cassette and Stereo 8 embody a new, on-the-go *zeitgeist* that invites further research outside the scope of my thesis. I do, however, want to briefly point to some changes in the new *zeitgeist* that signaled the end of the one I examine here in this thesis.

The most obvious change is the understanding of space. Americans didn’t abandon their comfortable living rooms and bedrooms in order to listen to music on new media in planes, cars, and on Walkmans, Discmans, and the like (this would be an impact narrative). Instead, new media and sound-reproduction technologies surfaced simultaneously with new American desires and identities *out and about*. America was no longer throwing *tiki* parties at home—they were on the go. As Sterne writes in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, explaining the significance of changing sound-reproduction media, “a change in format may mark a significant cultural shift” (12). It is also important that Sterne is careful to use words like “change”, rather than “improvement” or “evolution.” These words would suggest objective betterment, and a continued, cross-generational trajectory toward something ideal. As we have already learned from Sterne, however, every age has its own hi-fidelity, its own understanding of what the ideal is. This thinking echoes the thinking of Oswald Spengler, who already in the first quarter of the 20th century was writing about ever-changing form languages in his two-volume *Decline of the West*. Throughout his work, Spengler eloquently addresses the desire I have addressed in my thesis. For Spengler, phenomena like the LP are expressions of inward understandings that constitute a language. This language, he explains “is only an expression for the world, an inward necessity springing from the longing inherent in all life to actualize itself before witnesses, to display its own presence to itself, and the language that is meant to be understood by definite beings” (Spengler, *Decline 4th ed.* 115). Spengler’s “longing” equates to the desire of which I have written, and his
“presence” is what I have described as the zeitgeist (or spirit) of women and men wanting to express that they are alive, active, and productive in the world.

So by the 1970s, what was old about the post-WWII zeitgeist, and new about the one that replaced it? Certainly the swapping of the living room for the car is a significant shift. The car was no longer the family station wagon parked in the suburban driveway. By the time of Stereo 8 cartridges and cassettes, it had become a place of action. Increasingly in the ensuing years, entertainment, conversation, and escape would happen in the car. The word and concept of “multi-tasking” has entered the mainstream American lexicon and consciousness. In fact, we are so tempted to multi-task in the car—even risking our very lives to do so—that we require laws for our preservation. These laws, as well as the law of physics that limit our action in the car (against our will) provide the last refuge for what we might call “single-tasking”. As Sterne points out,

[t]he closest many people may come to listening to music and doing nothing else is in transit, either on a portable audio player or in a car. Car audio may be the last place outside a specialized hi-fi market where high definition—specifically for music—is still part of the sales pitch. (MP3 239)

This thought of Sterne’s is significant because it shows that the on-the-go lifestyle has different priorities than the post-WWII model. The demands of portability create a new fidelity that is not a high fidelity. Future scholars certainly will contribute to our understanding of our past, present, and future by exploring the 1970s, 80s, and mid 90s phenomena of transportation, offices, living spaces, portable media, and entertainment.

 Besides the changes outside our living spaces, there have also been changes within them. The living room remained, of course, but it became a different space, understood differently. No longer did the LP fulfill the desires of mainstream America. Instead, the monitor became the centerpiece of the American living room. Sterne—who apparently posits more of a neck-and-neck battle between the TV and LP than I do in this thesis, chronicles the passing of mantle from LP assemblage to the assemblage of the monitor in MP3: The Meaning of a Format:

If the middle-class living room was the site of a pitched battle between record players and televisions in the 1950s, then sometime in the last twenty years, the television finally won. To be fair, the TV didn’t exactly win—its screen became a general-purpose display for an ever-growing field of audiovisual formats. (239)

I will address this attraction to the “general use” feature of modern technology, but for now I
will simply agree with Sterne that more and more, the *zeitgeist* of our own time is one that desires multiplicity. Sterne suggests that the direction of much of (if not all) 20th century media is headed in this direction when he writes” [o]ther iconic media of the twentieth century—newspapers, magazines, telephones, phonographs, radio, television, cinema, and now even computers, games, and wristwatches—are also melting into multiuse devices” (Sterne, *The Audible Past* 240). This, of course, brings us back to the LP, which is *multi-faceted*, but decidedly not *multi-purposed*. Though I have shown there are different inflections of the LP (music, instruction book, mood setter, romantic aid, and so on), it pales in comparison to the diverse understanding of even comparatively old technology like the iPod, which allows the experiences of radio, television, books, magazines, and music, all in one small device.

Whether Sterne would agree with me or not that the LP was the victor during the post-War media battle, it is clear that one way or another, the LP is not the reigning technology today. The key factor here is that while the LP-as-book is a multi-media technology, it suited neither the desire for portability or multi-*functionality* that the later American *zeitgeist* desired.

Again, we see the modern desire for portability, ease of storage (or—in the case of MP3, streaming, and similar technologies—the *negation* of physical storage), and desire for multi-functional technology coincide with a dramatic shift in fidelity standards. Strictly speaking, most of today’s fidelity is “worse” than that of the post-War years (Sterne, *MP3* 4). But just as we desire our TV monitors to do so much more than show TV programming, so too do we want other devices to perform several functions. Though we call our smart phones “telephones,” talking on them is often what we use them for the *least*. Instead, we use them as planners, portals to the Internet, and of course—music players. The MP3 is already considered old technology (Sterne, *MP3* 227), but remains relevant because it fits our modern desire for portable, multi-functional devices. The LP is multi-media, but alas—it can only be experienced with a turntable, and only experienced as an LP. True, it can be a book, instruction manual, photo album, and more. It can’t, however, occupy virtual storage areas, or facilitate face-to-face conversations between two individuals on opposite sides of the planet. It cannot be copied and “shared” virtually. It is—undeniably—a *thing*, and has no place in today’s modern American environment.
**HI-FI, LO-FI, GOODBYE**

The LP still exists, of course, and there is no reason to think it will become obsolete in the foreseeable future. This is because it is still superior as a sound-reproduction medium. Sterne writes that “[m]edia remain on the scene, but they are diluted. Whatever historical forces were once crystallized within them have weakened some, or migrated elsewhere” (Sterne, *MP3* 240). This is certainly true in the case of the LP. There is no longer mainstream cultural significance to be mined from it—it is quite simply one of (if not the) best way to listen to music if the listener’s aim is to experience the least mediation (or interference) of media possible while doing so. Ironically, the downfall of the LP and its assemblage of technology is the very thing that keeps it alive: a turntable can only be a turntable, and an LP can only be an LP. In 2010, more turntables sold than cd players (Sterne, *MP3* 239). Sterne explains, “so many different devices can now play a compact disc but you need a record player to play a record (for now)” (Sterne, *MP3* 239). The single-function nature of the LP assemblage keeps it unique and useful, though no longer a vital cultural force.

And just who is buying these turntables and LPs? Certainly many buyers are devoted audiophiles, wanting the traditional, focused experience of active music listening. I wonder, however, if this population of audiophiles isn’t dwindling with every day that passes. Remembering the ingenious American servicemen I wrote about earlier in my thesis who had the desire and know-how to create homemade hi-fi systems, it seems similar minds and souls in today’s world are most likely devoting their talents and energies to new smart phone apps. No doubt, audiophiles remain, but today’s LP buyers are more likely playing and experiencing hi-fi technology as lo-fi. Here we see a (conscious or unconscious) misreading—or perhaps simply re-reading—of old technology in modern times. In stark contrast to the upward mobility of post-WWII American upward mobility, we now see the expression of 21st century American hipster downward mobility. The “hi-fi” technology used in modern situations may often be inadequate to produce the sounds intended by those who produced the medium and its content.

The question of “authorial intent” arises as we see the modern listener enjoying the cozy, nostalgic experience of the snap, crackle, pop, and skips of the thrift store LP. The composers, sound engineers, musicians, producers, mixing engineers, mastering engineers, and labels never intended these flaws to be a part of the listening experience, but many LP
listeners consider them a desirable feature. We don’t want to let go of the LP (indeed, the familiar sound of the LP stylus being dragged across the disc still signals the “oops – party’s over!” moment in TV and film of today’s digital age, even though younger generations may not recognize the source), and this leads to our own modern confrontation with an older technology we no longer completely understand as it was meant to be understood.

In Spengler’s second volume of *Decline of the West*, first published in 1926, Spengler addresses a similar collision of *zeitgeists* from different times. He points to the 20th century appreciation of damaged classical statues as this type of re-reading. “[I]t is not the Classical statue, but the Classical torso we really love” (*Decline 34th ed.* 254). And so it is today, as evidenced by the labels and value judgments associated with 1990s genre categories (of 1950s and 1960s phenomena) like *lounge, bachelor-pad, cocktail* (Adinolfi viii), as well as our post-modern “appreciation” of *kitsch*. This is not to say our readings today of these phenomena are not valid or important—it is simply true that the creators of these phenomena never intended these readings.

I began my thesis with the René de Obaldia quote “The drama of our time is engraved on wax without honey”. The French poet, playwright, and WWII veteran posited in one phrase what I hope I have done in this thesis: establish that the LP embodied the desires, strengths, and foibles of a time, place, and people. Again, my intention is to learn more about this time, place, and people by studying a medium that is particularly representative of them and the world they inhabited. “The stories we tell about formats matter,” writes the esteemed Jonathan Sterne (*MP3* 12). This and other stories of other formats, times, places, and *assemblages* do matter, and not just for archiving purposes. “The history of sound”, Sterne also explains, “may well contain clues to the future of all communication” (*MP3* 240). Surely communication as individuals and as an *assemblage* is one of our grandest and most challenging experiences here on earth, and perhaps my study of the LP and the post-WWII American *zeitgeist* makes an ever-so-small contribution to that cooperative endeavor.
WORKS CITED


**WORKS CONSULTED**
