The discourse of home recording: Authority of pros and the sovereignty of the big studios

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Introduction

As a musical practice, home recording has drawn more attraction and risen in popularity since computer technologies entered the domestic realm and became a "central component in daily life in the 1990s" (Williams, 2006, p. 384). The development of Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) in the same decade was the first step for the establishment of computers as the primary tools of contemporary sound recording (Théberge, 2012). Prior to the advent of such software programs and to the “diffusion of computer technology within the social context of the home” (Venkatesh, 1996, p. 49), the technology available for recording music at home was either considered too expensive for the average amateur/non-professional musician, or the sound quality too poor compared to that of recordings done in professional studios (see Williams, 2006).

Through personal computers, DAWs brought to the territory of home practices that were considered the norm in studio production (Théberge, 1997), such as multitrack recording. Technologies and techniques once reserved almost exclusively to professional studios, from pre-production to mastering and mixing, could then be performed from one's house. Therefore, while digital technology could potentially move the studio to any physical space, many music aficionados with access to a computer were given the chance to experiment with methods that were formerly kept for just a few specialists.

Making and recording music at home was accompanied by the development and the consolidation of a specialized industry that provided the means for such activity. Nowadays, software and hardware especially manufactured for home recording are considered to be generally “affordable” (Williams, 2006). The possibility of downloading cheaper, customer versions of software such as Cubase and ProTools, or nearly free models of DAWs such as the open source Audacity, Apple’s GarageBand and Cocko’s Reaper has opened up the world of recording to amateurs and even to non-musicians, while “promoting multitrack recording as a form of common practice” (Théberge, 2012, p. 10). Moreover, the attention given to the advent of computer-based home recording is often directly related to “the increasing sound quality (often rivaling that of commercial operations) of the products offered by home studios” (Théberge, 1997, p. 233).

The access to means of recording at home given to music aficionados with different levels and forms of expertise brought to the fore not only discussions about the accessibility of home recording, but also the idea of its democratization. Homer (2009), for example, discusses how home recording technologies potentially ensure a “democratization of the music making process through their affordability” (p. 90). Théberge (1997) considers “the ‘home studio’ as a particular outgrowth of the ‘democratization’ of musical technology” (p. 215).

It is intriguing, however, to think of how this idea became part of home recording, considering that, for instance, having a computer at home, access to the required physical space and proper recording software may not only be a matter of will, but more importantly a matter of resources, hence of knowledge and power. How, then, and through what kinds of negotiations has democratization become an integral part of home recording?

Driven by questions as such, this paper proposes a critical analysis of the discourse of home recording. This exploratory research aims to question home recording’s will to truth (Foucault, 1971) by analyzing some of the power/knowledge relations that have been produced and legitimized within the discourse, as well as what they enable and constrain. More specifically, this article intends to discuss the formation of certain subjects within the discourse of home recording, as well as the system of rules and the regime of truth under which they were formed and which they equally help legitimizing.
This article starts by discussing some issues related to home recording. Next, it explains how home recording can be regarded as discourse, based on the Foucauldian theory. The following point describes the methodology considered for the accomplishment of this research. After discussing the home recording “pro”, which is to say the “ideal” subjectivity of the home recordist, this article examines home recording’s resistance and counter-discourse, which walk side by side with the discourse of the “pro”. Finally, it presents its final considerations about democratization and accessibility in the discourse of home recording.

Issues About Home Recording

The use of technology, the studio, as well as specific roles and processes are central for the constitution of what we presently call “home recording”. Therefore, in order to think critically about it, it is crucial to question some of these notions, ideas and conflicts that form home recording and that, in turn, are also formed by it.

While some home recordists stick to the minimum amount of equipment, others aim to build project studios that resemble the professional recording facilities. Either way, as Théberge defends, “the average home studio is filled with musical gear” (1997, p. 244). Regardless of the intentions and budget of the home recordist, the home recording activity therefore presupposes the consumption of technology and quite often, gear upgrade (Idem). This issue brings to the fore the very idea of accessibility in home recording. What would be the basic economic conditions for someone to start home recording, considering that he/she is inevitably a consumer of technology? Also, what kind of cultural capital one would need in order to start home recording?

Moreover, the dissemination of digital recording technologies for home recording allowed musicians and non-musicians to openly explore operations that are part of the specialized work of producers and engineers. As more people – professional and non-professional musicians and music aficionados of different expertise – are given the opportunity to try out and learn “particular skills related to the specific duties associated with each position” (Williams, 2006, p. 297), the very idea of who can claim the role of musicians, producers or engineers in contemporary culture is challenged (Théberge, 2012). Certainly, the combination of the world of professional recording and the realm of private, domestic spaces plays a part in this relaxation of roles (Idem). But to what extent non-musicians can really claim the role of musicians, or home recordists can really claim the role of producers/engineers? Through this “relaxations of roles”, are the positions of musician, engineer and producer equally open as a possibility to any home recordist?

Besides, while the advent of digital computer-based technology and home recording have resulted in certain rearrangements as those mentioned above, they didn’t completely change the activities around the recording process. As “the secrets of professional studios” were made available to a larger number of music aficionados, home recordists tried to adapt this knowledge to the space of home. Consequently, “Whether located in a high-rise office building, an industrial warehouse, or a re-modeled living room, a studio is still a ‘studio’, and the practices that take place within them remain remarkably similar.” (Williams, 2006, p. 455) The professional studio and its practices aren’t ignored by home recordists; instead they are valued as a source of knowledge for their activities. In this case, one could wonder if home recording’s accessibility could ever lead this practice to new, innovative recording activities, independent from those held in professional facilities. But while home recording still seems to be overall based on what is done in big studios, to what extent do professional studios have some sort of regulatory power over domestic recordings?

In order to discuss these issues, I propose to look at home recording as a particular studio form. For this to be possible, I decided to look at home recording as a discourse, one that forms and is formed by a particular system of rules and power/knowledge relations.

Home Recording As Discourse

Being a home recordist requires at least the acquisition of technology, of knowledge and the delimitation of some space at home. Home recording is thus organized in a particular way, one that is made possible by the conditions of knowledge in a particular culture (Ysmal, 1972) at a given socio-historical moment.

As a “pratique réglée” (Idem, p. 790), home recording can be seen and treated as a discourse. By “discourse”, I don’t mean the linguistic concept of the term, but the Foucauldian concept that links discourse to “practice”. As Stuart Hall describes,

“By ‘discourse’, Foucault meant ‘a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment. … Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But … since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect.’” (as cited in Hall, 1997, p. 44)
All that “can be said” within the discourse of home recording, as well as the conduct to be followed, needs to be within home recording’s regime of truth (Foucault, 1971). These validations are possible due to discourses’ “internal rules, where discourse exercises its own control; rules concerned with the principles of classification, ordering and distribution” (Idem, p. 12).

Here, “truth” doesn’t mean only “what can be truly said” (Ibid) about something, but also what is not allowed to be said. As Foucault explains,

“Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. (…) Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned (…) the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” (1980, p. 131)

Foucault also argues that “Truth isn’t outside of power. (…) it induces regular effects of power” (Idem). Power is what regulates meanings and notions in discourses. Instead of being a centralizing, constraining force, power is “a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised” (Ibid, p. 156).

Power is intrinsically connected with knowledge. In fact, “power produces knowledge” and they “directly imply one another” (Foucault, 1977). “Foucault argued that not only is knowledge always a form of power, but power is implicated in the questions of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not” (Hall, 1997, p. 48). Hence, as possibilities of conduct are guided by exercises of power and knowledge, it is by analyzing the power/knowledge relations (Foucault, 1971) within the discourse of home recording that it will be possible to understand why certain things are accepted as “true” within the discourse.

Whereas these relations of power/knowledge regulate the conduct of others within the discourse of home recording, they allow the formation of specific subjects. Produced by the discourse, these subjects

“(…) must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge. The subject can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces. It can become the object through which power is relayed.” (Hall, 1997, p. 55)

According to Foucault (1971), specific discourses form knowing subjects to whom a certain position is granted. These subjects thus have the power/knowledge to guide the action of others, as it is the exercise of power that guides the possibility of conduct and puts in order the possible outcome (Foucault, 1982).

By investigating home recording as a discourse, I aim to find some of the power/knowledge relations that legitimize, form and are formed by home recording’s system of rules and regime of truth, as well as the subjects that are produced through power exerted within the discourse of home recording.

**Methodology**

Based on the Foucauldian theory of discourse, I chose to analyze how home recording is talked about in contemporary North American and European recording magazines (Canadian Musician, Tape Op, Sound on Sound and Recording Magazine), as well as in recording Internet discussion forums (Steinberg’s Cubase forum, Recording.org and Home Recording.com). The constitution of this work’s corpus was inspired by the principles of an archive, as described by Foucault (1972). It was organized around texts (which could have been presented in various forms such as speech, dialogue, treatise, etc.) that suggest “rules of conduct” while “offering rules, opinions and advice on how to behave as one should: ‘practical texts’, which are themselves objects of a ‘practice’ in that they were designed to be read, learned, reflected upon and tested out, and they were intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct” (Foucault, 2000, p. 366-367).

This work’s corpus was established based on these magazines’ and websites’ popularity amongst Western musicians and recordists, according to Internet research and private conversations. Moreover, knowing that “discourses are to be treated as ensembles of discursive events” and that “events (…) are to be dealt with discontinuous series” (Foucault, 1971, p. 23), I tried to look for sources of written texts that had different stated goals, backgrounds and target readers or users. Finally, I established that I would analyze articles and debates that dated from the early 1990s up to the present. My objective was not to look for the origins of home recording, but rather to see how it is being enunciated today and under what system of rules.

Following the “three decisions” suggested by Foucault – “to question our will to truth; to restore to discourse its character as an event; to abolish the sovereignty of the signifier” (Foucault, 1971, p. 21) – I embraced an anti-essentialist perspective, one that generally considers that meanings, as well as culture or identity, are produced through power relations and are historically
In addition to Foucauldian methodological demands for a discourse analysis, this article’s methodology is based on what Johnson et al. (2004) call an “interpretative critique” (p. 48). Located in the parameters of cultural studies, this method is supported by particular orientations regarding cultural research, the researching self, objectivism and claims to truth. It considers the researcher’s “positionality” (Idem, p. 48) inside her object of study, meaning that there is a constant “dialogue between the researcher’s questioning and their sources” (Ibid, p. 46).

A total of 34 articles, 5 magazine issues, 1 book chapter and multiple threads from Internet forums were analyzed through a process of non-linear detailed observation and close reading (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 51). In order to look for some of the discourse’s questions, issues, subjects and power relations, fragments from different magazines and websites were constantly being contrasted, compared and put in parallel, until it was possible to grasp what was most likely to be some of the relations and articulations present in the discourse of home recording.

I am aware that restricting a corpus to a few Internet discussion forums and music magazines is very limiting for a discourse analysis. It is however important to emphasize here that this paper is part of an exploratory – rather than exhaustive – research about the discourse of home recording. Its corpus was constituted with the intent of erecting an “initial approximation” (Foucault, 1972, p. 33) of what can be the power/knowledge relations and articulations established within and by the discourse of home recording. This means that the results presented next are to be understood only as the beginning of what can become a very rich, deep and continuous discussion.

**Becoming A Home Recording “Pro”**

The discourse of home recording seems to form and be formed by prescriptions, guides and norms for how to record music at home. It assumes that given the “accessibility” of home recording, anyone can and thus should concentrate on reaching a professional sound at home. Hence, the discourse seems to have as its main subjects the “Pros” – the ones who have reached a certain level of experience and enough know-how in the practice to be compared with institutional professionals – and the “Serious” home recordists – those who follow all the uttered steps in order to become a “Pro”. “Pros” and “serious” home recordists – terms that are often used interchangeably to refer to one single subjectivity – are acknowledged as “good” home recordists with regard to their commitment in following all the dictated rules.

The discourse seems to encourage all home recordists to aim at becoming “Pros”. It insists on the idea that anyone who follows the rules can achieve such status. The “Pro” is thus the “ideal” home recordist, the one whose work can actually be compared to that of recording professionals.

In turn, it seems that the big studios’ professionals are the ones who often guide “serious” home recordists. These professionals are regarded as the pioneers in having the experience and means to reach “good quality” recorded music – considering that before home computers and the digital revolution, coming up with such sound was a power held and exerted mostly by professional studios. They are also acknowledged for having the power/knowledge to work within the competitive music industry. According to the Foucauldian theory of discourse, they can be seen as part of the institutional supports that reinforce and accompany the will to truth and other systems of exclusions (Foucault, 1971).

While in big studios different assignments are usually performed by different professionals, it is common that all the recording steps in home setups are a “one-person job”. Whereas professional studios “generally [include] a house engineer” (Daley, 1997, para. 14), home recordists have to “be the engineer and studio designer, too” (Idem, para. 11). Therefore, a lot is expected from a “good” home recordist. She/he needs to become proficient in all the steps concerning pre-production, production, sound engineering, and sometimes mixing and mastering (see Klepko, 2007; Young, 2008; King, 2010, Gzsound 2011).

Even more critical than those required skills and know-how is the fact that the home recordist needs to gauge whether those steps are being mastered or not. Being a “pro” also means being aware your own limits, “both in terms of your budget and the ability to master the technology you choose” (Young, 2005, p. 54). Being able to do this self-evaluation properly, though, can be rather confusing for home recordists:

“One of the confounding factors is that it is your brain and imagination that tells you what you are hearing, not your ears… something sounds good because you want it to, not because it is. Another confounding factor is your ego: it’s got to be this way because that’s how I want it to be (…).” (Supercreep, 2010)

In fact, home recording ‘pros’ and recording professionals make sure to remind other home recordists about their individual properties, positions and roles within the discourse. “Pros” and professionals have the authority to function as gatekeepers,
“Sorry to be blunt. You’re really not ready for business cards. You have a lot more self education to do (…). Go intern at a regular studio or with a location engineer. You will learn more and faster.” (TheJackAttack, 2011)

For those who still cannot perform well all the necessary steps for a professional-sounding recording, collaborating with big studios or with other professionals is regarded as the wiser decision. As a home recordist explains: “I realised that I could use both environments (…). I don’t have a great tracking room at home, so I would use a studio with one for drums and guitars, then bring those tracks home for overdubs and editing.” (Daley, 1997, para. 18) The encouragement for these collaborations or hybrid recordings seems to function as a legitimation of the power of professional studios. Through such reinforcements, these facilities are accredited the higher status regarding “good” recording sound and conditions.

In order to acquire all the prescribed skills for becoming a “pro”, it is argued that home recordists need to commit to the activity. “Serious” home recordists dedicate plenty of “time and patience” to recording (Emmet, n.d., para. 3; White, 2011, p. 3). Home recordists are reminded that “the only way to get good at anything is practice” (Anderton, 2004, para. 6). If they can’t afford building a fully equipped home studio immediately, they are encouraged to work on becoming “experts on their own set-ups” (Young, 2008, p. 50), while slowly building their recording studio. In fact, having a small and simple setup is considered interesting for self-teaching, as long as the home recordist commits to master the gadgets that she/he already owns (see Rayc, 2010).

It is also argued that a valuable way to learn and gain experience in recording is to have mentors; in other words, to work with professionals and observe what they do. “Working with professionals gives you the chance to gain some valuable experience of your own. (…) There’s a number of things you can pick up from working with a top-notch producer” (Idem, p. 56). Professionals often advise home recordists to find internships in big studios as a way to learn more and faster by being fully exposed “to the rough world of the industry” (Llowther, 1999, para. 6. See also TheJackAttack, 2011). Working with experienced professionals is also regarded as the “proper education” (RemyRAD, 2011) for home recordists.

“Pros” also need to master the language used by professionals and other recordists. “Good” home recordists are expected to know how to name different gear, their function and their specifications. They are usually questioned about the technical details of their recordings, such as “What kind of multi-track did you record with? (…) What kind of computer? (…) What were you running the mics into?” (Crane, 2002, p. 52) When they don’t know such specifications, that fact is brought to the fore: “Salomon does not know what equipment Gold Dust [Studios] use” (Silverstein, 2002, p. 47). As technology has a central role in recording, it seems that the more one is literate on that matter, the more she/he is seen as an expert, which according to the discourse is one of the possible subjectivities of the “pro”.

Amongst all the skills necessary for someone to be a home recording “pro”, having a “good” pair of ears is considered as an important and essential aptitude. Before building a recording setup, the home recordist is advised to “Have a sit down in the area where you want to record – and listen. What can you hear?” (Watson, 2004, para. 6) “Critically listening” to the environment is considered fundamental for spotting incoming sounds that can depreciate the quality of the music being recorded. A “good” home recordist also needs to be critical about the “set up” and “tuning” of instruments, “mic[rophone] placement” and the quality of the sounds that are being captured by the computer: “Put on some headphones and listen to what the mic is ‘hearing’. (…) If the instrument sounds good in the headphones, likely it will sound good when it is playing in the track.” (Watson, 2006. p. 43-44). A certain listening ability is equally needed for identifying the strong and weak aspects of a song. “Neutral ears” are considered to be important for “[making] sure that you’ve got the parts of your song roughly identified.” (King, 2010, p. 50)

A “good” home recordist thus needs to aim at becoming a “listening expert”. According to the discourse, a “pro” is expected to differentiate “good” from “bad” sounds in any circumstances. This demonstrates how there seems to be a naturalized idea amongst home recordists of what a good, professional sound should be like. “Pros” should not only be able to make that distinction, but they should also be capable of making the right decisions for controlling sound in order to reach recordings that sound “professional”. “Good ears” are actually considered to be more decisive for the quality of the recording than gear and an acoustically treated room:

“Gear is nice. (…) Having a well-treated room is important, too. (…) Now for the rub: If you have a tin ear, none of this is going to help you turn around a decent product.” (Supercreep, 2010)

Whereas the discourse recognizes that “there are some ‘Lo-Fi’ recording (…) that have done very well” (Kane, 2002, para. 7) regarding sound quality, it nonetheless legitimizes the acquisition of good, professional technology for the achievement of a professional sound. It defends as a general rule that one can “definitely” hear the difference between “the ‘Professional’ and the
often published in specialized magazines and websites, home recordists can only graduate from "newbies" to "beginners" and task which requires, above all, creativity, technical knowledge and even good gear. While information on how to record at home is 7). Therefore, a home recording "pro" needs to be able to combine "great arrangement and sonic purity" (Watson, 2006, p. 43), a It is suggested that "[R]ecording is a curious blend of science, technology, business and, most importantly, art" (Shirley, n.d., para. Shirley, n.d., para. 7). Home recording thus seems to give recording artists the opportunity to fully "express [themselves] through sound" (Shirley, n.d., para. 7). As we can observe, the notions of art and creativity often walk side by side in the discourse of home recording, being even used interchangeably at certain times. Creativity is regarded as one of the essential characteristic needed of a "good" home recordist. It is argued that "In the studio it is necessary for technical knowledge, musical concept, and creativity to share equally in the experience" (Idem, para. 10). "Recording success depends on knowledge, experience, well-defined goals, critical listening skills, imagination/creativity, and patience." (Ibid, para. 50) The discourse of home recording admits that "(…) the tools are less important than the creativity, knowledge, and resourcefulness of the people involved in the building process." (Young, 2008, p. 56) It also says that "good" songs and "good" arrangements equally depend on creativity: "(…) to create a product on par with the pros, before you think about creating a great-sounding product from a technical perspective, you need to have a great-sounding product from a creative perspective, and that might be the trickier part of the two…” (King, 2010, p. 49) Being creative and talented in home recording is regarded as a “tricky” characteristic for aspiring “pros” to develop, considering that "you can’t just buy talent and creativity…” (Bdenton, 2011). However, while creativity isn’t exressively considered as something that can be bought or learned, it is regarded as something that "good" home recordists must have. Therefore, they need to look for it, and lead their work and decisions towards finding this valuable characteristic: "If keeping your old way of working is going to keep you creative, then keep your old stuff and work with it. The point is to be creative and to make music." (Young, 2008, p. 52) The discourse even argues that "The major strength of the [professional] studio is that the band can come in and concentrate on what it would like to achieve creatively rather than technically" (Young, 2008, p. 55). This reinforces once again the sovereignty of the big studios, as well as the importance of creativity for the achievement of a "good" sound. Along with creativity, magic is a similar notion produced by the discourse which also represents what home recordists need to "keep a look out for" (Young, 2009, p. 54). Magic in home recording usually refers to things or moments that aren’t easily explained or described, but that should nevertheless be chased. It is argued that "Many magical, historical musical performances are based on emotional feelings, and the ‘quality’ of the moment of capture sometimes plays into the magic and history – i.e. it wasn’t about a high quality ratio, it was about confidently and quickly facilitating a ‘vibe’" (McLaughlin, 2002, para. 10). While this "magical vibe" isn’t clearly prescribed within the discourse, it is nevertheless associated with other things home recordists should look for. Finding the magical moment at any recording set is almost considered as a guarantee for reaching a "good" sound: "Whether you choose to do so for financial or artistic reasons doesn’t matter, if the process, performances, and material create some undeniable magic, people will hear it.” (Young, 2005, p. 56) It is also argued that creating this magic depends entirely on the musician/recording artist: "If you think of it, the only thing between you and the listener is a microphone, a preamp and a piece of tape. It really does rely entirely on you to create magic.’ Being able to put that magic out of yourself and others is a talent in itself.” (Young, 2009, p. 52) Therefore, it is possible to assume that home recordists need to appropriate that sort of “talent” if they intend to become "pros".

It is suggested that "[R]ecording is a curious blend of science, technology, business and, most importantly, art" (Shirley, n.d., para. 7). Therefore, a home recording "pro" needs to be able to combine "great arrangement and sonic purity" (Watson, 2006, p. 43), a task which requires, above all, creativity, technical knowledge and even good gear. While information on how to record at home is often published in specialized magazines and websites, home recordists can only graduate from "newbies" to "beginners" and
from there to "pros" through their own hands-on experience: "The best thing someone who wants to start recording can do is, 'buy yourself some equipment, take a month and learn to use it, and then start to record your own songs.' (…) The experience will come". (Pearce, 2001, para. 16-17) Although gathering diplomas in music recording is considered a possible way to learn, it in no way guarantees greater recognition than years of practice, recording albums and/or working with other experts:

"Going to a recording school doesn't mean that it's going to be easy getting a job in the industry." (Meredith, 2002, p. 12)

"In the modern audio industry, almost everyone is self-employed, which means that you're only as good as your recent work (or, more accurately, as good as your clients say you are!). (…) The important thing is not simply 'getting qualified' but rather what you can learn." (White, 2011, p. 164; 166)

Doing It Yourself: Autonomy And Empowerment In Home Recording

One of the curious aspects of the discourse of home recording is that while it encourages recording aficionados to become "pros", it also stimulates others to enjoy the possibility of home recording as a fun, liberating and empowering activity. Whereas the discourse of home recording is very prescriptive, it also allows the formation of both resistance and a counter-discourse. While the resistance defends that "there are no rules" (Young, 2009, p. 51) in home recording, the counter-discourse supports that home recording has "no limits but your own" (Young, 2005, p. 49). The resistance mentioned above seems to be an opposition to what the main discourse is about: following the prescribed rules for reaching a "good sound" and becoming a "pro". The counter-discourse, in turn, defends that home recording should be done however the musician/non-musician/recordist, etc. pleases. Even though the discourse of home recording admits both a resistance and a counter-discourse, the distinction between these two forms of counteraction is not always a clear-cut one.

Resisting the main discourse of home recording can mean that "Just like anything involving creativity, it’s difficult to prescribe a set way of doing things, you have to find your own way” (Klepko, 2007, p. 44). According to the resistant discourse, "[recording is] supposed to be entertaining. That doesn't mean it has to fit into very tight guidelines.” (Young, 2009, p. 51) Even to set up a recording studio, “Everyone’s case is going to be different and it really depends on what you want to achieve” (McLaughlin, 2002, para. 4).

Meanwhile, home recordists seem to realize that there is a prescriptive way to perform all the steps related to the activity. Nonetheless, some choose to do things differently, claiming that preparing too much may lead them to miss the "moment":

"(…) I have the utmost respect for engineers and producers and sound guys that know the stuff really well, but the process of setting everything up seems to take a lot of time. It’s the right way to do it, but sometimes I would rather just plug the mic in and start recording. I think maybe you end up capturing the moment better that way." (Pearce, 2001, para. 18)

Within the counter-discourse of home recording, people are encouraged to record however they like with whatever they have. In forums, for instance, users often give advice to other users based on their gear and/or budget limitation: "If you don’t have the means to record a properly miked clip either due to volume sensitive neighbors, poor gear, lack of recording experience or any combination of the above, then amp direct recording can be the desired way.” (Guitarfreak, 2011)

Tight budgets may be regarded as obstacles for home recording, but not as complete obstructions in the counter-discourse (see Young, 2009). For some, the trick is to go through the “battlefield of low-fi (…) making the best of what you’ve got in your arsenal" (Visconti, 2000). It is also argued that “If you put the legwork into looking, then, it is definitely possible to kit yourself out on the cheap.” (Inglis, 2010, para. 57)

According to the counter-discourse, recording on a low budget is not solely associated with beginners or amateurs. Oftentimes, "good" musicians and engineers also find ways to take advantage of non-expensive gear. As one of them affirms: "I got a couple of little studio speakers and a couple of big ones. I was driving home and I saw these two really big speakers sitting in a dumpster, so I took ’em. They’re great.” (Silverstein, 2002, p. 47) Likewise, when asked about how he picked his vocal microphones, another "pro" musician/recordist answers: "Whatever came my way that was cheap, to be honest. They’re low budget, high-quality mics.” (Weiss, 2004, p. 26) Recording "on the cheap" is in fact considered a “testament to the power of home recording” (see Sheaffer and Lowery, 2004), regardless of the expertise level of the recordist.

Within the counter-discourse, the description of "how to home record" or "how to obtain a good sound" is not as precise as it is in the main discourse. The counter-discourse of home recording seems to be less prescriptive than the one of "pros", since it considers that factors such as the musician’s goals and music style (see Young, 2008) may bring different connotations to the
It is interesting, however, to observe that while “recording with what you have” is legitimized in this counter-discourse, it is also characterized as “low-fi”. The counter-discourse accepts, therefore, the existence of an ideal high-fidelity sound that comes out of professional studios or from “pro” home recordings. This counter-discourse is thus possible only to the extent that it acknowledges that there are rules to be followed by whoever wants to achieve the “best” home recording results.

Having the means to record at home, whatever they are, is regarded as liberating according to the counter-discourse, since having a recording setup gives the musician freedom to create and distribute her/his music as she/he pleases. Musicians are thus encouraged to invest in themselves before spending their money on professional facilities:

"Long Story Short: Save your money the next time you’re thinking about heading out to a recording studio and start investing in yourself. Not only is a home studio in reach, it also allows artists to take control of their music (...)."

(Shanecools, 2011)

The counter-discourse admits an empowering aspect of having a home recording setup. As stated about a group’s home recorded album:

"I think that was the best thing about this record: the song is written, everybody learns it, goes in the room, we press record, four minutes later, the song’s done. Whether we loved it or not was a different story, but empowering ourselves to do that was an amazing thing." (Young, 2009, p. 54)

It is also within the counter-discourse of home recording that the term guerrilla (home) recording mostly appears. The expression’s meaning is described as such:

"The American Heritage Dictionary defines a guerrilla as ‘a member of an irregular military force operating usually in small, independent groups capable of great speed and mobility.’ As unsigned musicians, we may not be military, but we are irregular, we’re independent (for now), and, if we know what we’re doing, we’re capable of recording good music at great speed. Guerrilla warfare subverts a traditionally military force in a low-budget, underhanded way: making the greatest impact with the fewest resources." (Coryat, 2005, p. 8)

Guerrilla recording is thus referred to as “doing-it-yourself” even in the most adverse situations: “If your bedroom studio is more bedroom than studio, you might think that recording bands is beyond your power. But where there’s a primary school, church hall or industrial unit, there’s a space you can use…” (Inglis, 2010, p. 1) Therefore, guerrilla home recording can be a solution for those who don’t have enough space at home, a requisite for home recording that is rarely questioned within the discourse, as if having a free or usable place at home was something natural.

"Guerrilla recording” is a good way of summarizing what the counter-discourse of home recording is about. Characterizing guerrilla recordists as an “irregular force” means accepting the existence of a “regular force”. While both have a certain power, the latter differentiates itself by following the “rules”. Hence, for the guerilla recording – and similarly for the counter-discourse of home recording – to exist and to operate differently from the discourse of “pros”, it needs to speak within the “truth” of home recording and admit to the discourse’s normative aspects.

Another key difference between these two opposite aspects of the same discourse is that while the main one is about establishing and following rules for becoming “the best” in home recording, the counter-discourse is also about having fun through the activity. According to the counter-discourse, having fun while recording at home is more important than aiming for excellence:

"(…) my point is that having fun and joy with your music is far more important than how good you are. (…) I think the only competency you need is whatever level it takes to make you happy." (Lt. Bob, 2010)

Within the counter-discourse, it is often stated that having fun by recording at home doesn’t depend on having the best or most expensive gear. In fact, it is argued that low-quality gear can provide home recordists with moments of joy: “I’ve recently stopped relying on my Pro Tools plug-ins so heavily and started to use my crappy-but-beautiful analog gear again and I’m having so much fun." (Visconti, 2000, p. 13)

As in the discourse of “pros”, creativity and magic are also part of the counter-discourse of home recording. However, these
notions are used from a slightly different perspective within the discourse presently debated. Rather than being spoken as skills to be developed and learned by home recordists, creativity and magic are mostly considered by the counter-discourse as non-prescriptive aptitudes that a home recordist may have or should seek (See Klepko, 2007, p. 44). Hence, reaching a “good” recorded sound through creative means is “in itself is a primary motivation that leads most musicians to build a home recording set-up.” (Idem)

Within the counter-discourse, creativity is what leads home recordists to reach a “good” sound regardless of the gear used, considering that “The gear we use is less important than our knowledge and creativity level.” (Shirley, n.d., para. 9) Similarly, it is argued that “Less expensive gear in the hands of a thoughtful creative musician is way more valuable than a room full of expensive stuff owned by someone who doesn’t know how to use it.” (Pearce, 2001, para. 6)

In turn, the term magic is often used as the explanation for certain unusual, “high quality” moments in recording:

“‘I sang the vocal take for the Santana song on a bus, rolling down a highway, through a pair of panties wrapped around a coat hanger as a screen, and Clive Davis wouldn’t let me change them. I wanted to, but he’s like, “nope, the vocal take is great, there’s something rhythmic about it, some magical quality to it.’” The bottom line is that sometimes you can’t replace the magic no matter how much you revisit and retry.” (Young, 2005, p. 50)

While creativity is considered a capacity that may favor home recordists who have it, magic is related to inexplicable single moments when “good” recordings simply happen: “At the end of the day it’s about trusting yourself, and it’s about an emotion. When we got into the business, we got into a room with a bunch of guys, started jamming and something happened.” (Young, 2009, p. 54)

Therefore, according to the counter-discourse, it seems that creativity is related to having singular, almost natural skills, while magic is associated with atypical moments in recording. As creative recordists have one of the considered essential aptitudes for making art out of their recordings, those who find and capture magical moments can similarly attain such a goal. Rather than highly demanded abilities that need to be learned, creativity and magic within the counter-discourse are considered as a characteristic and an accomplishment potentially accessible to any home recordist. Since it is argued that “[g]ood music comes out of surprising places these days” (Emmet, n.d., para. 50), the way these two notions are produced within the counter-discourse seems to be an additional encouragement for home recordists to “do it themselves”.

Therefore, the counter-discourse of home recording doesn’t ignore either the existence of rules for coming up with a “good” sound at home or the power exerted by those who strictly follow those rules. However, this counter-discourse accepts and allows one to get started with very little compared to a “pro” home recording setup. Differently from to the main discourse, it forms subjects who have other priorities than becoming “pros” at any cost. As encouraged by the counter-discourse, “This is guerrilla recording, so don’t let any weak points in your gear armoury [sic] prevent you from having a go. It’s meant to be fun, not perfect” (Inglis, 2010, para. 58).

Power Relations, Negotiations And Exclusion

This work’s analysis showed interesting contrasts and even contradictions within the discourse of home recording. How can the discourse be extremely prescriptive while also accepting that the same given rules don’t always have to be followed?

As discussed, “Pros” are the ones who hold the knowledge regarding what gear to buy, how to use it, as well as what is considered a “good” or a “bad” recorded sound. They have been granted this power for following the prescribed rules, which in turn seem to have their origins in the practices of the professional recording studios. Meanwhile, the discourse of home recording also seems to encourage amateurs and music aficionados of any level of expertise to enjoy and explore the activity, as long as the rules are acknowledged. While improvising is not the ideal approach to home recording, it is still a valid way to keep the activity going, to maintain the notion of democratization as part of the discourse and to keep the home recording market running, especially when considering how home recordists are necessarily consumers of technology.

Although the counter-discourse is less prescriptive, it is still within the main discourse’s regime of truth. Whereas the counter-discourse allows one to say that home recording is meant to be “fun, not perfect”, it still seems to legitimize the power exerted by big studios and home recording “pros”, since those are the ones who hold the knowledge and the financial means to reach that “perfect”, “professional” sound.

We also observed that some of the requirements for being a “pro” tend to naturalize and “instrumentalize” notions that are in fact rather abstract. Being creative, having “critical ears” and differentiating “good” from “bad” sound are demands treated as the hardest to acquire; nonetheless, it is argued that they can be achieved through continuous practice and determination. Even the
has become "openly available". The technology has become cheaper, easier to use and since knowledge regarding the recording process has become "available" through mentors, music magazines, the Internet, etc., it is said that it falls mostly on the home recordist to find, gather and apply this knowledge to his/her sonic material.

On the one hand, this instrumentalization regarding the acquisition of certain abilities seems to reinforce the idea that anyone who is willing to put effort into it can become a "good" home recordist. Considering that all the "secrets" about music recording have been made "available" through mentors, music magazines, the Internet, etc., it is said that it falls mostly on the home recordist to find, gather and apply this knowledge to his/her sonic material.

On the other hand, it seems that these naturalized value descriptors are formed by the discourse as instruments that serve to regulate the "classification, ordering and distribution" (Foucault, 1971, p. 12) of subjects in terms of the power they can exert over others. Those who manage to develop "good listening abilities", for example, seem to have a greater authority in the discourse of home recording comparatively to those who don't have such "critical hearing". This authority is not only a consequence of having the power/knowledge to put the referred abilities into practice, but it is also a result of knowing the value and boundaries of each of these abstract notions. Therefore, the prescriptions and rules to attain "pro" home recording abilities seem to be part of an extremely regulatory discourse, one that excludes many music aficionados from its "truth" by the conditions it imposes.

As the analysis has showed, home recording isn't an activity performed exclusively by professional musicians, but also by music aficionados of different levels of expertise. Interestingly, the discourse of home recording doesn't specify what defines a musician. Likewise, producers and engineers don't have their roles clearly distinguished. The discourse is mostly addressed to home recordists, who may often take up the role of musicians, producers and engineers at the same time. In this case, home recording seems to confuse these three subjectivities, while also blurring the distinction between musicians and non-musicians. Although all these subjectivities are articulated by the discourse, their boundaries are rarely discussed, making them somehow open to various interpretations.

Based on this exploratory analysis, I believe that this confusion of roles may be in fact a result of negotiations within the discourse of home recording. It is through multiple negotiations -- amongst musicians, experts, writers, producers, amateurs, etc. -- that the subjects of discourse are formed and legitimized. Subjects such as the "pro" or the "good home recordist", in turn, seem to be a hybrid of many of the blurred roles mentioned above. The discourse, therefore, seems to allow this indistinctiveness of roles so as to give place to its heterogeneous subject, the home recordist. It is possible, I suppose, that keeping these roles confused is part of the regime of truth that allows the notion of "accessibility" to be enunciated within the discourse: since having the "status" of musician, producer or engineer is not considered a prerequisite to home recording, "anyone" could "easily" get started on the activity and eventually take up the role of "home recordist".

I also observed that the subjects formed by the discourse need to have a minimum average of $500 to invest on the activity -- value often mentioned as the very least required for one to start home recording (see Watson 2004; Dave_p, 2012). It is then plausible to assume that home recordists are subjects who have a certain buying power and financial stability. In this case, the discourse excludes all music aficionados who can't have access to that spare money. Likewise, it excludes many citizens from countries where people have less buying power than, for example, Western Europeans and North Americans. Taking this factor of exclusion into account, it is possible to realize that even "lo-fi" recordings become a privilege of a few music aficionados. Therefore, statements regarding "accessibility to the medium" are only possible within an elitist discourse, one enunciated and legitimized by subjects wielding a certain economic power.

Government in home recording seems to be exerted by two main subjects: recording professionals and home recording "pros", who are in turn governed by rules established by professional studios. The rules of home recording seem in fact to be a replication and an adaptation to the home environment of the organizing principles of professional studios. This appears to be the reason why home recordists are compelled to be skilled in every step of the recording process, all of which are usually managed by specialized professionals in the big studios. Reproducing at home what is done in professional studios is thus the main rule that allows the formation of specific subjects -- the "pros" -- and that legitimizes their power over other home recordists within the discourse. While it is argued that "anyone" can record from home, it is definitely not "anyone" who has the power/knowledge to do so.

**"Democratization” Of Music Recording?**

The notion of democratization is usually articulated within the discourse as a consequence of recording technology's accessibility. This accessibility, in turn, is often considered to be a result of technological progress, as well as of a recent price reduction of recording gadgets and of home computers' popularity. Accessibility also refers to how recording at home has become an easy activity to perform, since the technology has become cheaper, easier to use and since knowledge regarding the recording process has become "openly available".
However, home recording seems to have rendered music recording democratic only for those to whom the discourse is addressed. Musicians and recording aficionados who don’t have the access to technology, knowledge and even to a private space at home are disregarded when the notion of “democratization” is enunciated within the discourse. This suggests that democracy might be intrinsically linked to and dependent on consumption, be it of gear, specialized media, the service of tutors or the rental of rooms in big studios. The term’s enunciation thus functions as a way to reinforce and legitimize the elitist, limiting and excluding aspects of the discourse, instead of carrying with it a notion of equity to home recording.

Democratization as enunciated and produced within and by the discourse of home recording articulates the discursive notion of a contemporary accessibility in terms of technology and knowledge to the exclusions that make this discourse possible. This “democracy” takes into account that the discourse of home recording is ruled by specific subjects who have the power/knowledge to guide the conduct of others, structuring their possible field of actions (Foucault, 1982). Democratization, thus, can be seen as a tool for the exercise of power within the discourse of home recording.

But how could the discourse’s notion of “democracy” be measured? Would its limitations reflect political, social, economic problems? And how influential on the discourse’s enunciations is the technology market for home recording? Hopefully the research here summarized will incite further interrogations about home recording as a discourse, driving more music aficionados to delve into the activity’s interesting particularities.

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Bibliography

Bibliography Of The Corpus


