

SCENES OF LIVENESS AND DEADNESS

There are about forty-five people in here, bathing in the blast of Noise right now: a group of older fans, some college kids already holding CDs they've purchased from the merchandise table, a handful of foreigners (mostly Canadian and American), and a lot of familiar faces among the regulars, local performers, and store and label owners here for the show. These all-Noise concerts usually happen about once a month in Tokyo, in different venues. The livehouse, 20,000V, is set up like any small hole-in-the-wall rock club, a poorly maintained, boxy room in the basement—actually, two floors down in the subbasement—of an anonymous building on the main shopping street in Koenji. It's about a hundred square feet, and there are huge black wooden speaker enclosures chained to the ceiling on either side of the stage; flyers on the walls for both current and past hardcore, scum, punk, and Noise shows; a tiny bar in the back by the toilets selling cups of beer; and a little table near the door where recordings by the evening's performers are sold.

I stand about halfway toward the front of the room, slightly to the side of the stage, in line with one of the huge towers of speakers. MSBR is on stage now, and he is very interesting to watch. His body movements

are much more conservative than those of the energetic eighteen-year-old Long Islander Viodre, whose thrashing set preceded MSBR, but his hands are always moving: constantly adjusting pots and faders, starting and stopping sounds, changing them, pushing against pedals, and switching them off and on with the base of his hand. In comparison with tonight's other performers, MSBR's Noise is more multilayered and rhythmic, and he is almost completely still as he sits in the center of an earsplitting whirlwind of sound. He cuts in and out of an analog delay, shuttling through a spacey blur as he shifts out of one timbre and into another, never letting any texture linger for more than five or ten seconds. Everyone is rapt, falling into the steady flow of sound. No one talks; no one *could* talk if they wanted to. . . . Besides, it costs ¥4,000 (about US\$50) to get in, so you can't afford not to get it—you just listen.

Indeed, everything about this audience shows that they already know what they are doing here, as they stand scattered about the floor of the club, now watching the next band, Nord, blasting through the speakers, two huge thickets of incense burning on stage as blue light illuminates the performers from behind. The low-end vibrations are inside my chest, forcing my lungs to compress as I exhale slightly, involuntarily, along with the blasts of sound. Nord is so *heavy*, pounding deep drum sounds, droning moans with electric clatter over it all, and as the atmosphere intensifies, growing louder, the lights begin to come up—white, glaring spots in my eyes as their set crashes to an end.

Finally, the famous harsh Noise duo Incapacitants takes the stage. It's so loud I can't breathe—they vibrate the air inside my mouth, in the back of my windpipe, as the volume grows and grows. I fear for my eardrums despite the wadded-up balls of wet toilet paper I stuffed in my ears as the set began, and I retreat a few meters to the back of the tiny room where it's slightly—barely—quieter. Two or three others have done the same, but most press closer to the center as Mikawa and Kosakai crash their sounds against us. One Noise musician I recognize is right up in front, directly in front of a speaker, bouncing his head and shoulders back and forth, and occasionally thrusting his arms out in front of his body toward the musicians, vibrating tautly in place.

Mikawa is crushing a contact mic under a bent square of steel, tilting it back and forth to shift the oscillating loops of feedback emerging from his system. Kosakai shakes the mic in his hand in front of his Marshall amp, his entire body rattling and jerking as if he is holding onto part of some

powerful being that is trying to escape his grip, as a quaking stream of high-pitched noise spins out of the speakers. Mikawa leans over in front of a smaller Roland amp, each of their heads down on either side of the stage, faces to their tables now, leaning on them, shaking them—or are they being shaken? Kosakai crashes to the floor in a jumble of electronic parts as his table collapses—the lights come up harsh and bright, shining right at us. Suddenly the sound is cut, the lights switch off a second later, and we are left in a strange void of darkness and silence, soon broken by sporadic applause and shouts of approval, as the performers shut off their amps and abruptly stumble off stage, exhausted, tripping over the morass of wires on the floor.

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Noise is about liveness and deadness, both in performance and in the technologically mediated sound of recordings. Live Noise performances can produce extraordinarily powerful embodiments of sound that help audiences imagine a community of Noise listeners, both locally and as a global “scene.” How can we understand these experiences of sound as part of Noise’s circulatory context? Listeners most often encounter Noise through individual experiences with recordings, and even the liveness of Noise concerts is geared toward isolated receptions of sound. The feedback loop between liveness and deadness, then, is about the co-constitutive relationship between performance and media in the lives of listeners. But this loop runs parallel to another kind of feedback—between making sound and feeling its effects. Liveness is about the connections between performance and embodiment, which transform passing moments into repeatable encounters of listening. Deadness, in turn, helps remote listeners recognize their affective experiences with recordings as a new aesthetics of sound and listening in the reception of Noise.

In this chapter, I illustrate Noise’s liveness and deadness in several different contexts of experience. I describe liveness in the places of Noise performance, in the embodied practices of Japanese Noisicians—particularly the legendary Incapacitants—and in the affective experiences of individual listeners. Liveness is further embedded in Noise through the production and circulation of media. Noise recordings were foundational in the growth of performance networks, especially in North America. Noise is embedded in techniques of production that aestheticize its overwhelm-

ing sound into recorded qualities of loudness and harshness. Finally—although, of course, there is no end to this loop—the sonic values of deadness in Japanese “harsh” Noise recordings become a poetic resource for listeners, who reanimate the scene of live Noise performance. The density of the experiential relationship between recordings and live performance in Noise follows from the displacement of musical communities and scenes in circulation. Where is the real place of Noise? What do the sensations of liveness and deadness mean to different Noisicians and listeners? What kinds of emotions are produced in the sensational liveness of Noise? How are recordings woven into translocal receptions, especially for those far from any accessible live scene? How does recorded media help listeners connect their isolated listening to social performance?

Ethnographers often privilege live performance in narratives of musical culture. For many researchers, live music is where authentic musical experiences happen, and performances represent sites of dialogue and interactivity that stand in stark contrast to the displacements of recorded media. Thomas Turino attributes an especially heightened musical sociality to “participatory performances,” especially flexible, improvised gatherings (jam sessions, sing-alongs, etc.) where the collective “doing” of music is stressed over the “end product that results from the activity” (Turino 2008:28). Live music evokes an immediate—and apparently unmediated—experience that is musically authentic, culturally distinct, and sometimes politically resistant. Amateur performance is the foundational source of continuous, collective sociomusical knowledge, and its transmissions may contain the remnants of a traditional oral “music culture.” Recordings, on the other hand, rationalize music beyond the productive space of social relations into separate forms of “studio art” that are passively consumed.

The experiential binaries of this scenario do not offer much to redeem the participatory experience of mediated listening or justify the centrality of recordings in everyday musical life. Musical circulation becomes a mediated *kulturkreis*: live performance stands at the bull’s-eye of creative production, but its social force is gradually diffused through waves of technological mediation. At best, recordings become disembodied placeholders for authentic culture. At worst, they are a virtual dead end that dislocates people from the living realities of music. Certainly, the physically and temporally immediate context of performance gives live music a deep social presence and a sense of “here and now” in face-to-face interaction. But

social experiences of live music can be profoundly individuated and often depend on embodied knowledge acquired through personal experiences with recordings. Just as performance is not always productive of social copresence, “dead” recordings do not necessarily separate listening communities into atomized consumers.

Recordings and performances constantly overlap in perceptual space but spin out into different contexts. In his influential book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Society* (1999), Philip Auslander showed that contemporary live performance depends on the integration of technological media to create its cultural presence. Meanwhile, liveness is inscribed in studio production techniques that sonically represent the copresent space of musical communities in recordings (Meintjes 2003; Porcello 2005). Media, then, are not just the remote end product reflecting the original context of musical production. Recordings make sense of music for listeners, and constitute different socialities of performance and musical community. And just as online virtual worlds do not need to correlate to offline contexts to become real places, recordings do not have to connect “back” to performance practices to actualize musical experiences (Boellstorff 2008).

It is important to recognize that liveness is not a natural by-product of live performance. Liveness is not simply the transcendent feeling of “being there” at an exceptional concert among an appreciative audience. It is an affective relationship between embodied experiences of the “real” world and individual “virtual” encounters with technological media. As Jane Feuer (1983) argues in her work on live television, liveness cultivates a feeling of immediacy and interaction with televisual events. Liveness helps viewers actualize the extreme fragmentation of space inherent in broadcasting and allows them to share the experience of a media event even as it happens somewhere else. In this, liveness is both a technique of media production and a social habitus that naturalizes technological mediation through embodied practices of reception (Couldry 2004).

In bringing these relationships of musical place, performance, and media to the surface, the subjects of *Noise* put a great deal of stress on “the scene.” The context of the local music scene has been central to historical imaginaries of independent music and exerts a powerful hold on its publics (Bennett and Peterson 2004; Kruse 1993). For scattered listeners who do not share face-to-face interactions, the idea of the scene can evoke a “diasporic,” even “tribal” network of participants, which can bring musical sociality into a globally mediated context. The notion of the

scene was especially useful in complicating earlier notions of musical subcultures that imagined alternative social identities through art, fashion, and language (Hebdige 1979). Will Straw (1991) used the term to describe the social construction of local communities in decentralizing practices of circulation. In his useful formulation, a scene is not a physical site or network but a fluid and flexible mode of performance that helps listeners navigate the industrial contexts of music production. Yet music scenes sometimes boil down the essence of a local community to a singular authentic site, where unmediated social relations are musically enacted. This is not to deny the symbolic power of the scene. The very idea is deeply motivating for fans who imagine, listen for, seek out, read about, talk about, and poetically conjure an original space of liveness, which appears to somehow transcend its own mediated networks.

But in Noise, deadness makes the scene live. Its listeners perform musical worlds through recordings: they repeat their sonic experiences, or put them on pause; they turn sociality up or down, or shut it off; they trigger individual memories and imagine impossible continuities between disparate places and times. But they also bring a sonic imaginary into cultural circulations, which extends beyond their own private audition. They conjure places across the globe, possibilities buried in the past, and feelings beyond social representation. Listeners slowly connect their own private sensory knowledge to the broader discourses of Noise, and more—they feel these sounds and emplace them in their own lives in ways that create new worlds of experience. And, as I will show, they can use these experiences of recordings to enliven the place of performance, by feeding their isolated listening into the scene.

FEELING THE SPACE OF THE LIVEHOUSE

In Japan, a small music club is called a “livehouse” (*raibuhausu*), a Japanese neologism that describes a site in which *raibu* (“live,” meaning live musical performances) take place. In many ways, livehouses set the tone of music scenes in Japanese cities. The spatial fit between a livehouse and an audience is very important to the affect of liveness, because the feel of any performance is affected by the size of the venue. Noise is almost always performed in a relatively small livehouse, and occasionally (but rarely) in outdoor concerts or multipurpose art spaces. Because organizers take a personal risk in paying the venue for tickets in advance, attendance is im-

portant and carefully managed.¹ In several years of fieldwork, I rarely saw a local Noise “live” sell out, but neither were the tiny places much less than full: with occasional exceptions, Japanese Noise audiences vary from around twenty to fifty attendees. Most livehouses of this size are not dedicated to a single kind of music but accommodate many different fringe music audiences. As a result, Japanese livehouses become “big tents” for a diverse range of overlapping underground scenes.

The energetic, “packed” feeling of public space in Japanese cities creates a famously dense, focused ambience, and this affect follows through to the feel of its performance sites. In his study of Japanese hip-hop, Ian Condry describes the deeply social context of the *genba*, the “actual place” of live music where cultural production is “made real” in affective experience (Condry 2006). This sense of place is crucial for creating local social identifications for global genres like hip-hop, which are often constructed through recordings produced elsewhere. The focused attention of listening in an enclosed space helps construct the boundaries of a local audience as well as a separation from the general public. In Japanese cities, small livehouses sometimes occupy basements or higher floors of office buildings with little overflow into the outside world, rather than in street-level zones set aside for entertainment. The “actual place” of local performance is clearly delineated from ordinary life: you are either in or out.

Foreign performers are often impressed (and sometimes confused) by the close attention Japanese audiences give to performers. Many have commented on the intensity of livehouse spaces, despite the fact that audiences were not necessarily any larger than at home. One Chicago-based musician who frequently performs in Japanese venues described this atmosphere in terms of the density of feeling in the small rooms: “In a way, playing in Japan feels pretty good as a musician, because the place is always packed—there might only be fifteen people, but it’s packed—and you sort of feel like, ‘Wow, there’s a scene happening here!’ I mean, it’s not much when you look at how many people live in Tokyo, or when you go to see a basic rock show in a bigger livehouse. But there is a feeling of some sort of connection with a scene, even though it’s small . . . because everyone is stuffed into the same place, whether it’s a big place or a small place, people are always stuffed in.” In a Japanese livehouse, even a small audience can occupy the space in a way that feels crowded, creating the feel of the scene, just as the crowd creates the feel of the city. The liveness of these moments promises the continuity of sociality beyond the walls of the live-

house, feeding back into the everyday lives of the listeners. Liveness is created simply by being in these special spaces, where people return over and over again to embody the scene. Livehouses conjure and narrate musical worlds through this experience of repetition, which depends on the longevity of local performance spaces.

Local clubs are crucial in many histories of popular music, and are sometimes viewed as the actual source of new musical styles.² Although there have been few clubs dedicated exclusively to Noise, there are some especially significant spots. For example, since the late 1980s, the livehouse Bears has been an important site for Noise, hard-core, experimental music, and extreme rock and has almost singlehandedly enabled the survival of underground music in Osaka.³ The tiny club, located in the back streets of the Namba district, is owned and managed by Boredoms guitarist Yamamoto Seiichi, who tirelessly accommodates an endless series of extreme performances, from teenage newcomers to the classic “old school” Noise of its annual Noise May Day. Other clubs in Osaka, many of them larger and better equipped, have come and gone over the years. In the meantime, Bears has slowly become famous as a center for Japan’s experimental rock, punk, and Noise. “Even if the building got burnt down,” says Yamamoto, “we would continue it in a shack” (Yamamoto 1998). Bears’ reputation was crucial for spreading the word about Osaka’s Noise boom in the 1990s, through musicians’ stories about the club and compilation recordings (such as the Japan Overseas CD *Bears Are Not Real*).

But livehouses do not often generate this distinctive sociality by being distinctive in themselves. The music scene that travels best is produced in anonymous spaces, where liveness can be reassembled and remembered in many different environments. Many livehouses deliberately cultivate a neutral, temporary state of occupancy. Unadorned black-painted rooms situate the audience between two blocks of speakers; the PA reamplifies the onstage equipment in a sonic field that emulates a gigantic home stereo system. In Japan, when people temporarily invest their energy in a particular spot, that place is described as a *tamariba*: a “haunt” or “hangout” that is both a space of gathering and a transitional cultural formation, like a temporary social club. A *tamariba* creates a point of occupancy between place and event and between public and private sociality. This is the liminal liveness of a waiting room, the feeling of standing in the crowd at a food stall or newspaper stand, or a gathering of acquaintances on a street corner.

The sensibility of liveness can be developed only through the repeti-

tions of personal experience. Liveness helps audiences “realize” an undistinguished performance space as a chosen site of heightened activity. When people assemble in livehouses, they briefly inhabit what Hakim Bey calls a “Temporary Autonomous Zone,” which “liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere” (Bey 1991:100). Liveness is the affective context of these momentary “up-risings” that violate historical social narratives with unique moments of experience: although they cannot happen every day, over time they “give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life.” These repetitive but special encounters with music become a kind of circulatory placemaking. Liveness leads people from the heightened musical space of the livehouse to isolated moments of quotidian listening and back again.

PERFORMING LIVENESS: “YOU WON’T BE ABLE TO TELL WHAT’S WHAT”

Performers become immersed in Noise through an emotional sensibility that connects their individual performances to overwhelming experiences of sound. In thinking about the virtuosity of live Noise performance, I unwillingly drag one particular memory to the surface: the moment I attempted to scream together with the Hijokaidan vocalist Hiroshige Junko in an open session at the No Music Festival in London, Ontario. Someone had suggested that we improvise briefly as a pair; Junko agreed, but I had forgotten my instruments and gear. I foolishly decided that I would just grab a microphone, seized with the idea that it would be great just to scream along with the famous Noise screamer. But I was struck dumb a few milliseconds later, when Junko opened her mouth and emitted an amazingly earsplitting sound. Instantly overcome, I tried my best to make some kind of noise: after all, I thought, how hard can it be to just scream? But I could hardly hear myself at all. My weak, undifferentiated sounds underscored the intensity of her volume; the pure harshness of her timbral focus; the mix of constancy and deliberation with the shocking sense of being overwhelmed and out of control. In other words, I was experiencing the deep affective consciousness of Noise’s liveness, so apparent in Junko’s incredible scream. Her screaming, I knew in a sudden flash—and then with a wave of nausea and humiliation, as I became conscious that we had just begun our “collaboration”—wasn’t just screaming, and Noise wasn’t just “making noise.”

Noise performance is a spectacular mode of liveness, which seems especially extreme when contrasted with the disciplined listening of experimental music performance. Noise performance is musical experimentation writ large: the biggest, loudest, and most intense invocation of sonic immediacy imaginable. Despite the scene-like sociality of its performance contexts, Noise's liveness is embedded in distinctly individual—even if diffused and refracted—sensibilities of sound. Listeners stress the subjective embodiment of Noise's overwhelming volume. Its extreme loudness has become definitive of its special live performance (although similar aesthetic fields, as I discuss later, are common to popular music, especially heavy metal and hardcore punk music). The sensation of volume produced in Noise performances overwhelms listeners and performers alike. Although they encounter this overwhelming volume together, the separation of their emotional responses plays down the collective space of experience, instead focusing attention on internal confrontations with the sound of Noise.

The ability to produce overwhelming volume is perhaps the most obvious difference between Japanese and North American performance contexts. In North America, most Noise performances take place in nonprofessional venues, with hastily assembled and underpowered equipment. In some places, the demand to confront audiences with volume can lead to literal confrontations over the production of sound. I have attended performances that were shut down by club staff and repeatedly heard both musicians and audience members complain that the sound system was not loud enough for Noise. Sometimes performers deliberately test their equipment at a quieter volume during their soundcheck to turn up to fully distorted levels in performance. Arguments over the appropriate volume level can even lead to physical confrontations with concert staff: one performer, frustrated with the club's unwillingness to turn up the PA, simply walked over to the sound engineer and pushed him over, saying, "This is how we need to sound." In contrast, Japanese shows are conducted in livehouses where the staff is expected to create the best possible sound environment. Even the smallest clubs in Japan are equipped with absurdly powerful equipment and trained live sound engineers. This allows concerts to take place at crushing volumes, which bolsters the international reputation of Japanese Noise performance as the purest and most powerful context of Noise.

Japanese Noise is strongly identified with extreme live performance,

and groups like Incapacitants have become symbolic agents of Noise's liveness in transnational circulation. Despite the fact that many overseas listeners have never attended a Noise show in Japan, Japanese and foreigners alike regularly describe Japanese Noise as the furthest threshold of its performance style. Japanese Noisicians are particularly famous for the intensity of their live acts. It is not uncommon for sets to end with a performer collapsing on the floor, smashing a piece of equipment, or pushing over a tableful of electronics. Not all performers have such demonstrative stage acts. Many performances are conducted from a seated position, with the performer hardly moving at all beyond what is necessary—reaching out an arm to turn a knob in a minute gesture, or moving a contact microphone slowly across the surface of another object. But Japanese Noise established its reputation through its most radically physical performers, particularly Incapacitants, whose ultradynamic shows have become legendary. For most Japanese artists, overseas tours are rare, and Incapacitants have only played a handful of shows outside of Japan. But although most North American fans may never attend a show by these artists, knowledge about their performance is widespread. Stories of over-the-top shows help distant listeners connect recordings to the liveness of the *real* scene—which, for most fans, whether in Japan or North America, is always elsewhere.

Incapacitants generate an intense emotional energy (figures 1.1–1.3). Mikawa Toshiji and Kosakai Fumio react expressively to every sound, convulsing with frantic gestures as if possessed by their own Noise. Mikawa compares the group's live shows to sporting events like professional wrestling, whose performers stage a conflict that produces the feeling of violence without actually engaging in any kind of truly violent confrontation. He says that about twenty minutes into the shows—which is usually near the end of many Noise performances—he is overtaken by a rush of adrenaline akin to a runner's high. Although he says that his movement does not directly affect his sound, Mikawa claims that the sound is felt differently when he moves: "I move a lot, don't I? But it has nothing to do with the sound. Probably I would be able to produce the same sound without moving. But it would be *different*—probably to the audience, it would be *totally different*" (Mikawa 1999:25). Mikawa's performance is enfolded into his own experience of listening. Witnessing his movements, too, changes the experience of the sound. His Noise does not actually change through his gestures, but it is felt differently. Mikawa vibrates with the brute force of his own sensory overload, enacting the responses of a body out of control.

His performance is immediate, visceral, and outwardly directed, but self-consciously reactive at the same time.

In their live performances, Incapacitants embody the private sense of being overwhelmed by sound. They show the effect of Noise on their own senses, even at the very moment of its creation. This liveness short-circuits the distance between the listener and the sound, folding them back together in its affective feedback loop. Noise emerges simultaneously “out there” and “in here,” inside your body. The audience member does not simply hear this sound in space but *reacts* to its sensations within a private sensory world. Noise’s liveness is a circuit of energy that is purely internal and admits no outside space; in this, it is less like listening to music and more like the sensation of an electric shock. Liveness becomes an involuntary encounter with the *feeling* of Noise within one’s body. Incapacitants transform these profoundly individuated sensations of personal overload into an observable performance.

Mikawa’s physical reactions mirror the involuntary response of the listener, and the changes in his gestures follow an inexorable buildup in the power of the sound. Mikawa and Kosakai progressively increase their movement over the course of the performance, slowly expanding the intensity until their bodies appear out of control. Mikawa may begin trembling, stabbing pedals with sharp, violent gestures, while Kosakai starts to shake violently and begins doubling over, his body wracked with spasms, shouting into a mic that emits screeching feedback. As the Noise builds, Mikawa grips the flimsy table holding his gear and begins to shake it—or rather, the table begins to shake when his shaking body takes hold and tries to steady itself—and the pedals begin to bounce up and down and crash into one another. Finally, he pushes down on the table, and the folding legs first buckle and then slide underneath, and the table collapses. Mikawa is on top of his gear, amazingly still connected as he sprawls across his electronics, his body undulating in spasms as his hands continue to strike at pedals, now on his knees holding one up in his shaking hands, turning the knobs until the sound is at a peak, wide-open distortion at full volume. He ends the performance abruptly, perhaps by cutting off the power on his amplifier or by disconnecting a cord in his setup by collapsing across the pedals on the floor.

Incapacitants feed their internal physical reaction to sound back into the soundmaking process. Their liveness becomes an involuntary encounter with the private feeling of Noise: it is separately felt but experi-



1.1. Incapacitants. Photo by Jon Spencer.

enced by all within range, whether performers or listeners. Incapacitants perform a mode of sensory feedback that Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the “double sensations” of the body, which “catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates a kind of reflection” through which people recognize their bodies in the process of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty 1962:93). They embody the overwhelming effects of their own sound and bring their physical responses into the loop of soundmaking. Mikawa and Kosakai become immersed in this disorienting environment and are inevitably overcome by Noise. In an ideal performance, says Mikawa, “you will reach boiling point, and then when you build up sounds, you won’t be able to tell what’s what” (Mikawa 1999:25).⁴

Incapacitants’ extreme performances stand in stark contrast to their personal ordinariness (figure 1.4). Many Noise fans, even those who have never seen the group, have heard that Mikawa works a bureaucratic job in a major Japanese bank. His offstage life, they say, is exceedingly mundane. He dresses as a typical *sarariiman* (corporate worker, “salary man”); he commutes to work from a suburban home; he coaches his children’s soccer



12. Mikawa. Photo by Jon Spencer.

13. Kosakai. Photo by James Hadfield.





1.4. Incapacitants before their first appearance in New York City, May 2007.
Photo by Natasha Li Pickowicz.

league. Kosakai, who works in a government office, is equally approachable and friendly off stage, despite his possessed demeanor while performing. This knowledge about Incapacitants' workaday existence has become legendary among Noise fans. The quotidian life of a Japanese banker becomes a blank slate of social normalcy, against which the power of Noise is revealed through its transformative effects on the humble bodies of ordinary people.

The ordinariness of Incapacitants confirms that anybody—any body, no matter how unlikely—can be swept up into the power of Noise. There is something classically comical about the physicality of the duo, with tiny Mikawa spasming and collapsing on one side of the stage, flanked by the comparatively huge Kosakai flinging his arms into the air like a giant, shaking a fed-back, wailing telephone pickup, his broad stomach shaking and vibrating. These physical disparities, and the open secret of their ordinariness outside of this underground world, simply reinforce the overwhelming power of Noise's liveness. By showing their two vastly different and separate bodies producing and simultaneously being overtaken by sound, Incapacitants confirm the bodily disorientation of listeners. Even

those who generate this sound in live performance are folded into a liveness that exceeds ordinary life.

GETTING INTO IT: VOLUME, POWER, AND EMOTION IN NOISE

The sensations of Noise's liveness are amplified by the individual embodiments of its performers. But off stage, listeners, too, stress individual conditions for feeling the sound. At a Hijokaidan concert at Kyoto's Taku Taku, I witnessed a man suddenly begin to thrash around in the back of the room about twenty minutes into the performance, eventually crashing to the ground. Unsure if he was in the throes of an epileptic fit, I looked over to see local Noise performer Hayashi Naoto sitting on top of the man, holding him down so that he would not continue to strike out, apparently involuntarily, into the crowded space around him. After the performance, I learned that this man often came to Kansai Noise shows and was an old acquaintance of Hayashi and others. Hayashi brushed off the abnormality of his reaction, saying simply, "He got into it." "Getting into" the liveness of performance, of course, is a marked ritual of musical sociality. Just as the search for obscure recordings distinguishes a specialized listener, the choice to "get into" Noise performance highlights an individually embodied knowledge. Noise etches hard lines between those who inhabit its unapproachable space of sound; between those who feel it—even if that feeling is involuntary—and those who do not. In some ways, the sense of participating in a powerful musical experience is made "live" as much by those who choose not to "get into it," but to "get out of it."

Noise performance breaks down the public scene of live music audiences into their subjective encounters with extremely high volume. The only choices are to stay to feel it or to leave. At the beginning of many Noise performances, the audience splits in two: in an instant, some press closer to the stage and the speakers, and others retreat to the back of the room. Listeners must decide, almost immediately, whether they can tolerate the overwhelming volume. Those who remain must find a way to appreciate this sound—to construct some valuable framework of personal experience through it—or they are forced from its presence. Unlike the nuanced contours of a good live sound mix, which brings a crowd together in a shared public atmosphere, Noise concerts flatten the space with overwhelming loudness. Extreme volume divides the common social environment of music into individual private thresholds of sensation. A really



1.5. Masonna at Festival Beyond Innocence, Osaka, 2012.
Photo by Kumazawa Telle.

good Noise show confuses you, separates you from your acquired knowledge, and makes you wonder what's going on. It is easy to know that a Noise performance will be loud, but successful Noise performances still feel shockingly and unexpectedly so.

In 1994, I went to see Osaka Noise artist Masonna (figure 1.5) perform in a small underground club in San Francisco. Like many North American independent music fans, I was familiar with noisy bands such as Boredoms, Melt Banana, and Ruins, whose records I had listened to for years, had already seen perform live on North American tours, and like many others, believed were exemplars of Japanoise. I was expecting an over-the-top, virtuosic display of fast, loud, code-switching rock deconstruction, so I was surprised to find the stage practically empty, with no instruments anywhere to be seen. After a few minutes, the background music on the PA cut off, and a tall, thin man, with long hair and huge sunglasses prac-

tically obscuring his entire face, walked on stage, carrying a microphone on a stand. He immediately pulled the mic and stand apart and whirled the stand around in one hand, grabbing the mic in the other, then smashed the stand down to jettison his body into the air; landing on the stage on his knees, he began to shout. I had seen such onstage theatrics before, of course. But the Noise that emerged was unlike any voice I had ever heard, any sound I had ever heard. I wasn't sure I liked it, but then I never thought about liking it or not. I was witnessing it, feeling its intensity, receiving it, dealing with it. Sudden, crushing blasts of pure distortion whirled into my ears, and the Noise was just happening, sweeping into my mind.

Masonna transformed his voice into Noise, feeding the microphone back through a process of extreme distortion. His shouts became clipped bursts of overloaded sound, doubled and extended by a delay that displaced the sounds into stuttered blasts of static. These vocal sounds fused into a rattling background of harsh metallic fuzz, which was created by frantically shaking a highly amplified box filled with coins. I could not parse this sound into its constituent parts, as either the result of electronic processing, amplification, or "natural" voice—his voice was distortion, and distortion was his voice—and then it suddenly stopped, and a strange decompression and blankness seemed to rush into the room. Masonna dropped the mic and walked off stage as quickly as he had entered, and I slowly recovered myself. The entire performance had lasted only four minutes, but I felt as if I had taken a long journey, fallen asleep, or passed out, and was just coming to my senses.

Even in the crush of the crowd, this kind of loudness foregrounds individual experiences of Noise. Masonna's performance forces listeners to check themselves, to feel the limits of their physical reaction: "How long can I take this? Am I enjoying this feeling? Is this what I am supposed to feel?" I was driven within myself, paying close attention to my sensations to understand what I was experiencing. "What does this person *feel* that he needs to make this kind of Noise?" asked one friend after witnessing a Masonna performance for the first time. But questions of artistic intention quickly feed into other, more personal questions: "What do I feel, and why am I here to listen?" Years later, Yamazaki told me that he believed Noise is "a natural feeling for humans," and that any listener could understand it immediately on hearing it. But, he stressed, the feeling of Noise does not move "from inside to outside"; it is not a form of musical self-expression that communicates the inner feelings of a musician to an appreciative lis-

tener. In Masonna performances, Yamazaki said, “I create the tension by myself. The audience just submits to it.”

ON THE SENSATIONS OF NOISE

Standing in the ringing, strangely empty aftermath of a show in the backstreets of Osaka, a friend told me something of how the loudness of Noise worked. We had seen many Noise performances together, but this was one of only a handful of times that he had voluntarily addressed his experience. At the beginning of a good Noise show, he said, the volume “just sucks all the air out of the room,” leaving the listener suspended in sound: “You can feel your whole body react [he snapped his body back as if suddenly startled] when they start—the sound fills your mind completely and you can’t think. At first you’re just shrinking back, until you overcome that and let it go, and then you’re in it and you’re just being blown away.” Noise’s affective power requires this visceral embodiment of its extreme volume. When the sound begins, your body starts, instantly short-circuiting the public space of sound into internal response.

Theodore Gracyk, in his work on the sonic paradigms of rock music, describes the “noise” of loud music as a tool for overcoming the entrainment of distanced listening: “When not functioning as mere background, loud music can break us out of our sense of detached observation and replace it with a sense of immersion . . . where traditional aesthetic theories have often offered an ideal of disinterested contemplation or ‘psychical distance,’ the presence of noise can overcome the respectful, reverential aspects of distancing” (Gracyk 1996:106). The effects of extreme volume also have physiological effects on the way sound is heard. Very loud sounds are perceived as closer and clearer because they are compressed in the auditory canal under higher levels of acoustic pressure. This distance-erasing intensity of loudness is highly valued among fans of heavy metal, hardcore, and punk performance styles that exploit the effects of volume to create a powerful “in-your-face” sound (see Berger 1999; Kahn-Harris 2007; Shank 1994; Walser 1993). The association of loud sound with affective power occurs in other genres of “extreme” music in Japan as well, as Jennifer Matsue notes in her study of hardcore punk in Tokyo, where performances were described positively as *pawaa ga ippai* (full of power) (Matsue 2009:127). The liveness of loud music sometimes creates coherent subject positions within otherwise fragmented and decentralized musical

subcultures. In the words of one fan remembering the 1980s punk scene in Austin, Texas, the sensation in the crowd “felt like we were going towards this one big happy tormented family” (Shank 1994:131).

In Noise, volume flattens out the scene to foreground the idiosyncrasies of individual sensation. Noise fans and performers sometimes describe their experiences at live performances as a state of hypnosis, dreaming sleep, or trance. This immersion in volume is not a moment of social collectivity but a personal encounter with the overwhelming presence of sound. The stress on sensory immediacy does not mean there is no social “there” there. Listeners obviously make great efforts to discover the subterranean sound of Noise, and their ongoing attendance at Noise shows marks them as part of a distinct local core of fans. But most Noise listeners describe performances through their individual reactions to sound, rather than the actions of performers or general audience responses. They describe the performance with abstract superlatives that relate the force and magnitude of its effects on their own bodies. Shows are sometimes described as “brutal” and “painful.” Noise performers sometimes choose names for live projects and recordings that characterize these qualities of endurance as the involuntary suffering of pain, illness, and violence (e.g., *Sickness*, *Pain Jerk*). These are private feelings that cannot be described by ordinary terms of musical enjoyment and taste. Instead, Noise’s liveness becomes a totally individuated experience of sound that cannot be translated to others. Its modes of listening detach from normative social contexts of musical appreciation.

The terms that describe Noise, both in Japanese and English, tune into the negative beauty of sublime experiences with sound.⁵ They often connote excess and overflow of the senses, especially in words that refer to volume, such as *dekai* (enormous), *ookii* (big or loud), or *tsuyoi* (powerful). For example, another common word, *sugoi*, means “too much,” and is akin to the word *awesome* in English. *Sugoi* can simply translate to “great” or “incredible,” and in general speech is often used to modify other terms (e.g., *sugoku ookii*: “great sound/incredibly loud”). But its use among Noise listeners refers directly to the affective force of a sound and to the listener’s overwhelmed response. As a sound that is “too much,” the awe-inspiring, overflowing aesthetic of Noise stresses the individual encounter that cannot be recuperated back into social life.

At first blast, the overwhelming volume of Noise seems like a throwback to musical romanticism. The performance of Noise returns listeners

to the epiphanies of the self that are compromised by technological mediation, stressing all of the heightened moments of emotion that bring them back to the uniquely irreducible context of live musical experience. But the transcendent individual experience of Noise's liveness is conditioned by the deadness of recordings. Through techniques of sound production and mastering, Noise recordings emphasize qualities of loudness, harshness, and presence that confront the senses at any volume. How can a recording communicate these involuntary sensations of volume, since it can be turned up, turned down, and even shut off at any point? What happens to the overwhelming embodiment of Noise when it is put under the control of the listener?

Next, I turn to the way Noise producers "master" the aesthetics of recorded Noise and describe how listeners learn to talk about deadness through the reception of recordings. First I want to show that liveness, too, is a technical quality of recorded sound. Liveness is always produced in relation to deadness; a "live" sound is a sound that is "not dead." Without further intervention into the listener's experience, most modern recordings would not sound live. Instead, their liveness is the outcome of a process of technological mediation by which recordings are made "not dead."

RECORDING LIVENESS

"Live"-sounding studio recordings often evoke an original site of musical performance. But liveness is more than a technological effect; these are sounds that create a mediated "sense of place."⁶ Often, recorded liveness is created through reverberation, a kind of "soundprint" of physical space that can help listeners perceive a recording as live. Sometimes reverberations represent the resonance of a particular sounding space: a live-sounding room is one in which the reflective characteristics are audibly imprinted on the sounds recorded in that place (think, for example, of the squeak of basketball sneakers on a gymnasium floor). "Reverb" effects do not always derive from a particular acoustic environment. Electronic effects of echo and reverb evoke another kind of reproducible liveness, which is also heard by listeners as a particular aural context.⁷ Studio recordings must reconstruct the space of liveness as a technical field of sound quality. Skillful producers are capable of generating particular qualities of reverberant liveness that listeners recognize in the spatial feel of a record-

ing (Doyle 2005; Zak 2001). For example, the liveness of drum sounds recorded by noted engineer Steve Albini has led generations of bands from around the world to travel to Chicago to record in his studio. But the sound of Albini's liveness extends far beyond this particular space. Distant bands can reference this history of musical creativity by working elsewhere to reproduce the reverberant qualities of the iconic "Albini sound."

The musical place of liveness is deeply challenged by tensions around the authenticity of recorded media. Liveness helps listeners reimagine a public space of musical performance threatened by the context of technological reproduction. But this mediated liveness can obscure the particularities—of the lives, places, and cultural contexts—that recordings represent. Louise Meintjes's ethnography of South African recording studies, for example, describes the liveness of electronic reverb as part of a technologically mediated "sound of Africa" (Meintjes 2003). The interactions of Zulu musicians and outside engineers combine to create an illusion of live performance that develops sonic tropes of authenticity to represent local culture. This "African" liveness conjures for listeners a natural "space of contact with the performer" in a mediated circulation where nothing so transparent could possibly exist (Meintjes 2003:127).

Deadness, on the other hand, places the listener back into the displaced context of private audition. Instead of conflating sound with social space, deadness feeds the listener's attention back into the iconoclastic details of mechanical reproduction. The difference between "live" collectivity and "dead" immediacy, then, is not merely the difference between two distinct sound aesthetics, one connected to studio recordings and the other to performance. Deadness is a direct embodiment of technological reproduction in individual experiences of music.⁸

The rise of deadness traces back to early developments of communication technologies. The telephone initiated a demand for the reduction of noise to increase the intelligibility of sonic details, which was quickly extended to the "high-fidelity" sounds of music in broadcast and recorded media. As reverberant liveness faded as an aesthetic ideal, collective sites for listening began to appropriate the "dead" contexts of technological mediation. In the concert hall, deadness re-created the private experience of the bourgeois listener. The effect of this individuation is well illustrated in the transformation of public concert hall architectural design from the turn of the century until the early 1930s (Thompson 2002), which increas-

ingly conformed to the model of an isolated listener. Reverberation in concert halls was reduced to an optimal level through innovative acoustic design and the increased use of sound absorption materials.

Managing these relationships of liveness and deadness became equally crucial in the craft of mixing in modern recording. Most multitrack studio environments are “dead,” and the sounds recorded within must be “enlivened” in postproduction. Because each track is recorded separately, the mixing environment does not emulate the holism of collective space but creates a balance between live and dead sounds. A well-mixed record recreates the representational effects of live performance in a tightly controlled mix environment that isolates each sound and degrades the reverberant qualities of liveness by giving equal stress to the directness and clarity of individual sounds (Porcello 1998). But a truly dead-sounding recording bypasses the imprint of social space altogether in favor of direct connection to sound.

Noise recordings, almost without exception, are extremely dead. Even when they are recorded from a live performance, it is uncommon for Noise recordings to impart any sense of place that could represent the listener’s or musician’s position within a room. They are meant to sound as if the Noise was already inside your head—as close and “in your face” as possible. Deadness points attention to the environment of reproduction rather than to the original place of creation. Many Noise recordings are made by plugging the output of the electronics system directly into a recorder, without the resonance of room ambience or any other sonic attributes of the performance site. This method (sometimes called “direct injection”) bypasses the space of mixing to connect the recording media directly with the sound source. Noise recordings do not omit social space to more clearly control the production of separate musical signals; rather, they cultivate a holistic sound field of deadness, through which listeners become immersed in their internalized receptions of Noise.

In the remainder of this chapter, I describe how deadness is incorporated into Noise recordings, and how its sonic aesthetics have influenced the formation of a transnational audience. In the process of “mastering” Noise recordings, we see how the dense qualities of its liveness—its thresholds of disorientation, overwhelming volume, and internalization of sonic experience—are mediated by its aesthetics of recorded deadness. These techniques of sound production influence Noise listeners, who have developed ethnopoetic terms for deadness to describe the “harsh, “extreme,”

and “ambient” qualities of Noise. By learning to recognize and evaluate their responses to these recordings, listeners create a form of knowledge production in their reception, which eventually feeds back into the affective context of live performance.

AS LOUD AS POSSIBLE: MASTERING NOISE’S DEADNESS

In the heat of a Tokyo summer in June 2007, I crowd into Gomi Kohei’s tiny apartment along with Mikawa and Kelly Churko, a Canadian Noise artist and sound engineer who has been living in Tokyo since 1997. We are listening to the premasters for an upcoming split release by Incapacitants and Gomi’s project Pain Jerk, culled from live recordings of their performances at the 2007 No Fun Fest, a major annual Noise festival in New York City. Churko’s laptop screen is broken, and we’ve had to plug the computer into Gomi’s old Sony TV, which is so blurry that the titles of the file folders are barely readable. Somehow the process seems appropriate to Noise, to use such a low-tech system for such a highly technical process. Every now and then, Churko asks Gomi and Mikawa what they think about the frequencies represented in the stereo master:

“Can you bring it more up front [*dekai*] . . . ?”

“More high end [*takai*]? More bass [*teion*]?”

“Hm. Yeah—just turn them all up.”

“Like—*puuuuwwaaaan* [an onomatopoeic term connoting power and impact, something like “pow”].”

“As harsh as possible, right?”

“Right.”

The original live recording was made on a faulty digital audio tape (DAT) taken directly from the soundboard, and there’s a lot of crackling digital distortion. On any other recording—that is, any recording of music—this amount of distortion would render the tape unusable. But as Churko works, the recording is distorted again and again until the original distortion is overloaded into a crushing curtain of up-front treble-y harshness. The sonic fault of the live recording becomes another noise buried within the Noise. Although this additional layer of distortion was not intentionally created, this random artifact of the live recording was nonetheless fed into the chain of electronic transformations that represented the space of its liveness: the buzz of ungrounded current flowing, the sizzle and fuzz of

amp distortion, the sudden impulse of a distorted shout, all of it absorbed into the compressed, flattened deadness of Noise.

A few weeks later, Churko showed me several techniques for mastering Noise, as he worked on another recording, this one by the Kansai Noisician Guilty Connector. He expanded the effects of the existing distortion on the final mixdown by “EQ-ing” sounds to make the treble frequencies more apparent and by using compression to further flatten the dynamic range.

Churko: It’s totally maxed out. . . . you can’t even see the wave [in the stereo waveform used in Churko’s mastering program] because it’s all maxed out all the time. For [Guilty Connector], he wants it to be harsh, and that’s his only priority in the sound. . . . Just make it brutal and harsh and loud and that’s it.

DN: But it’s already really harsh and loud; how do you make it harsher?

Churko: Just by adding EQ [equalization]. It’s like on your own stereo: [If] you don’t like the sound, you change the EQ and suddenly it sounds better. You turn up the treble, you can make the sounds more pure and piercing. You’re not *actually* making it louder; you’re making it *seem* louder. You can turn the stereo down, but it will still sound loud.

Mastering is the last stage of recorded sound production, in which the final version of a recording is altered for the particular media format on which it will be released. For most music recordings, mastering a recording consists of maximizing its volume through compression, as well as affecting the balance of the existing frequencies with equalization. In many ways, mastering a recording is an inscription of creative individual listening, as a professional listener “prints” their subjective interpretation onto the recording to create the final musical result. In keeping with the aesthetics of live Noise, mastering takes the effect of this subjective listening to an extreme, so that mastering can radically alter the sound of the original recording. Although mastering typically makes all recordings louder, Noise mastering maximizes loudness to the point of overload, introducing new layers of distortion and high-frequency harmonic presence.

Mastering Noise, Churko says, is like experiencing the performance again in slow motion and then isolating and amplifying the moments of its deadness. Churko begins by distorting the entire final mix, turning up the volume to its maximum level, so that the sound “clips,” flattening the



1.6. Kelly Churko (right) setting up equipment, with Filtth the Sleep (Guilty Connector, left) and Yoshida Yasutoshi (Government Alpha, center). Photo by the author.

soundwave against the ceiling of the amplification device. The clipping of the amplifier compresses the sound by lowering the peak levels to round off the dynamic curves; all sounds, quiet or loud, then emerge at the loudest possible volume. He then begins to EQ the recording, pushing the stereo mix through filters to make it seem even louder and flatter. Mastering the deadness of Noise is not a process that emphasizes or balances certain sounds in relation to others. The objective is full frequency overload: to bring everything up at once, to make the entire sound feel as close to the listener as possible.

Noise recordings feel closer because they exaggerate high frequencies to emphasize what engineers describe as “presence.” Presence increases the perceivable effect of volume without increasing the decibel level and makes the music feel closer—more “present.” In sound engineering, *presence* usually refers to a timbral contour that creates an effect of immediacy by boosting the upper midrange frequencies (especially around the area of one kilohertz, known as the “critical band” of frequency perception).⁹ As Jeremy Wallach describes it, presence is a marker of “electrosonic excess” that orients listeners toward the materiality of sound and makes them conscious of its effects on their senses (Wallach 2003). Presence makes

listeners aware that they are listening to a recording and reorients their perception toward its particular sonic qualities, especially sensations of loudness. Studies of equal loudness contours (also known as Fletcher-Munson curves) have shown that raising the volume of a sound significantly changes the range of sensitivity of the human ear. A louder sound is heard as “flatter” across the frequency spectrum and will be perceived as closer, fuller, deeper, and “brighter” (more high frequencies).¹⁰ Because “present”-sounding recordings are equalized to mimic these changes in perception of loudness, they can seem louder than they really are, even at low volumes. Exaggerating this psychoacoustic effect can reduce the perception of distance between the sound and the listener, which makes Noise recordings feel more “immediate.”

Churko’s story of his own first experience with a Noise recording—Merzbow’s harsh Noise classic *Venereology* (1994)—highlights the shocking effects of Noise’s sonic presence:

I was astonished, because at first it was just this noise, this texture, and I thought, “Well, when’s the band going to break in?” You know, I thought it was an intro, and pretty soon there’s going to be a riff or something. But it ended up that thirty minutes later, nothing had changed; well, a lot of things had changed, but overall, it hadn’t changed at all. I was making this curry and I started to get this headache, and then it started to feel like my teeth were being wired shut, and then it felt like I was getting stabbed in the back—and I thought, “Oh, this is pretty cool!”

Churko’s inclusion of a seemingly unimportant detail—that he was cooking for himself while listening—illustrates the transcendent feeling of overwhelming immediacy for which Noise’s deadness is valued. He initially treated the CD as a musical supplement to his everyday activities and attempted to listen while simultaneously taking care of his evening chores. But the sound interrupted and overcame his senses, cutting him off from his ordinary life and from the possibility of distracted listening. Churko recalls the surprise of his initial perception of Noise (“thirty minutes later, nothing had changed”) and then immediately qualifies this with the knowledge developed through a decade of listening and performance (“Well, actually, a lot of things had changed”).

Venereology was one of the first Noise recordings to appear in the North American retail market. Although the CD contained almost no supplementary information, the deadness of its sound began to teach first-time

listeners how to appreciate Noise. It was released in 1994 by the tiny independent label Relapse, just at the moment that U.S. independent labels began to find distribution in national retail outlets. Relapse's description of *Venereology* as "extreme" reflects the emergence of Japanese Noise into a U.S.-based independent circulation in the 1990s. "Extreme" quickly became a term closely associated with Noise, and one Australian label named itself Extreme Recordings.¹¹ One North American Noise fan told me that he bought *Venereology* because "it had a sticker on it that said 'This is the most extreme CD you will ever hear'": "What shocked me was that it was so loud. It was the loudest CD I had ever heard. It produced a sensation of total panic when you put it on. You immediately reach for the [volume] knob, and for a moment, there's just sheer panic . . . but then I would get hypnotized. I had it turned up pretty loud, but I really wasn't particularly focused on it. But it just invaded my senses anyway." Relapse's claim of *Venereology*'s extremeness was backed up by the mastering techniques used on the CD. With the cooperation of a technician at the pressing plant, the CD was mastered at the highest possible level. In fact, the sound levels were so high that the release was technically illegal, violating federal limitations on the dynamic level allowed on CDs (a fact that was widely reported by the label in advertising the recording). Although the volume of playback ultimately remains under the control of the listener, *Venereology* showed a new audience how Noise was supposed to feel.

Expanding on the idea of Noise as extreme music, Noise recordings often exploit frequency ranges that test the endurance of the listener. Even when played at a fraction of the decibel level at which it would be experienced in a livehouse, a good Noise recording feels overwhelmingly loud. For example, Guilty Connector filters the sounds of highly amplified metal plates to emphasize extremely high-frequency sine waves, which create a piercing, ringing sonic contour. He calls this method *shibaki*, from the Kansai-language slang term *shibaku*, which means to beat or strike (someone). In *shibaki* Noise, high-frequency clusters are swept across the treble range, shifting the contour of the sound, like waves of shimmering tone color in an ocean of distortion. Noisicians selectively develop terms such as *shibaki* to describe their personal techniques of sound production, and listeners eventually created their own ethnopoetics for the affective qualities of Noise recordings.

The most common descriptor for Noise is *harsh*. Because "harsh Noise" represents an extreme sonic experience, this quality has become the sym-

bolic center of Noise's deadness, as well as a subgeneric term associated with Japanese Noise. Because they were first developed in North American reception, these terms are in English, but they have been widely adopted by Japanese listeners as well. Many active fans qualify their appreciation of Noise with this term, saying, "I really only go to pure harsh Noise shows," or they evaluate a recording positively by noting that its sound was "really harsh." Churko characterized "harsh" Noise as more common in Japan than in North America. Among three closely related examples—all on the Osaka-based Alchemy label—he described two as "harsh" and the third (albeit more ambivalently) as "ambient":

Churko: [Harsh Noise] is like maximum Noise all the time. Harsh Noise is not dynamic. Incapacitants is harsh, Masonna's harsh; it's so loud, all the time. Especially in Japan, people know what's harsh, and that's what they're looking for most of the time.

DN: So what's not harsh Noise?

Churko: Like . . . Aube wouldn't be, because it changes; it's almost ambient noise. It's noisy at times, but then it climaxes and comes back down.

Although certain formal differences of style are noted (ambient Noise "climaxes and comes back down"), the ability to distinguish harshness is located in embodied personal knowledge ("people know what's harsh"), rather than in identifiable structures of sound.

Although these terms were created as references to recorded sound, they also can be used to identify live sound productions. The harsh Noise artist Masonna often shakes a metal can filled with coins, which is amplified enormously and put through a series of electronic effects. To this filtered noise, he adds the "peaky" sounds of heavily distorted and delayed shouting, giving a sharp dynamic contour that adds to the overall harshness of the Noise. The "ambient" sound of Aube, on the other hand, reflects a more gradual approach to timbral and dynamic change, developing a single sound field over a long period of time. His performances are far longer than Masonna's, often lasting thirty to forty-five minutes, building and then tapering off slowly ("it climaxes and then comes back down") rather than ending abruptly.¹²

Harsh, then, might seem to distinguish a set of formal traits that could help characterize Noise through its particular qualities of sound. But more

than describing specific differences of sonic texture, listeners use these terms to relate the sensational effects of Noise. For example, Canadian Noise artist Sam McKinlay (a.k.a. The Rita) described “wall” Noise (sometimes represented by the acronym HNW, for “Harsh Noise Wall”) to me to explain how different sound aesthetics could be perceived within the larger field of harsh Noise. McKinlay considers wall Noise as the purification of “classic” Japanese harsh Noise into a more refined “crunch,” which crystallizes the tonal qualities of distortion in a slow-moving minimalistic texture. Crucially, McKinlay defines wall noise primarily through the sensory feedback it produces in the listener: a “euphoric state” of deadness that should “manipulate the listener into evaluating and finding value” in the different sounds of Noise within a Noise recording (McKinlay 2006). Wall Noise, then, is not merely a refinement of the harsh Noise sound; it describes a particular way of *feeling* sound through recordings.

This discourse of embodied listening eventually fed back to Noise’s live performance. Ethnopoetic terms for deadness helped a North American listenership imagine their experiences as part of an international “Noise scene.” One way that fans connected was through the identification of harsh Noise recordings, first in direct correspondence and in fanzines, and later in online forums like the well-known harshnoise.com discussion board, where categorizations of Noise sounds, legendary stories of Noise “stars,” and lists of “best” and “harshes” Noise releases among listeners are posted. Long-term listeners can readily identify different styles of harsh Noise and can capably distinguish between the recorded sounds of individual performers. The ability to differentiate between harsh Noise textures—and even recognize that different aural valuations are possible—is a hard-earned skill requiring many hours of isolated listening. Nonlisteners, on the other hand, might hear these same sounds as an uninterpretable static (e.g., “the signal’s gone dead”). This knowledge of recordings helped experienced listeners recognize that it was possible to appreciate and embody the sensations of Noise in a mediated form. But it also emphasized an emergent context of musical experience, in which individual responses to recordings create the interpretive conditions of liveness.

This special relationship between liveness and deadness is what gives Noise the heightened quality of “having an experience,” to invoke John Dewey’s use of this phrase. Dewey distinguishes “an experience” from the general stream of experiences in everyday life by its integral holism and self-sufficiency, which is “constituted by a single quality that pervades the

entire experience” (Dewey 1980 [1934]:37). We recognize “an experience” as “the closure of a circuit of energy” between “doing something” and “undergoing something”; between knowledge of the self and interaction with the world. As a form of sonic experience, Noise’s deadness is no more the product of recording technologies than its liveness is created solely by live performance. Both are part of the consummation of lived experience. In the feedback between recordings and live performance, musical sociality “can be crowded into a moment only in the sense that a climax of prior long enduring processes may arrive in an outstanding movement, which so sweeps everything else into it that all else is forgotten” (Dewey 1980 [1934]:56).

To close this chapter, I loop back to the scene of liveness to describe Incapacitants’ first-ever performance in North America in 2007. Connecting the trajectories of liveness and deadness shows how Noise audiences have reanimated their individual encounters with recorded media as social performances of listening; deadness feeds back into liveness again. Within this feedback loop, the affective links between recordings and performance create the foundations of modern musical subjectivity.

FROM DEADNESS TO LIVENESS

The annual No Fun Fest, a four-day Noise concert festival organized by the New York-based Noisician Carlos Giffoni, became increasingly well attended over the years since its inception in 2003, hosting some of the largest audiences for Noise performances ever assembled. The 2007 Fest was an exception by any standards. Anticipation for a roster of international Noise performers, including five from Japan (Merzbow, Haino Keiji, Incapacitants, Yoshimi P-We, and Pain Jerk) as well as artists from Europe and around the United States, has filled the remote club in Red Hook, Brooklyn, to its 600-person capacity (and then some) with Noise fans, many of whom have traveled long distances to be here. The onstage performances take place upstairs, but the basement of the Hook is an equally active site. Small labels and record stores have lined the room with tables, and the tiny space is packed with fans poring over an enormous array of recordings for sale in every format, as well as obscure fanzines and a few homemade electronic devices. For the four days of the festival, the Hook becomes the center of an unprecedented scene. If one could encircle this cramped space, it would contain within its borders not only the largest ar-

chive of Noise media in the world but also a significant proportion of the North American Noise listenership.

Although Incapacitants' recordings had become legendary among North American fans over two decades, the group had never performed in the United States before this point. The pair had scheduled a show in New York City in fall 2001, but the concert was canceled at the last minute in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. When the word got around that Incapacitants were booked for the 2007 No Fun Fest, Noise fans around the country were ecstatic, and the duo's appearance became the most talked about aspect of the upcoming concert. In fact, the festival was originally planned for March, but because Mikawa could not rearrange his work schedule at the bank, Giffoni rescheduled the whole event for May to accommodate Incapacitants. All of this added to the heightened sense of anticipation around the duo's spot on the Friday lineup, and tickets for that night were sold out weeks in advance.

On the evening of the performance, the crowd builds slowly throughout the evening, eventually filling the club beyond capacity. The excitement is palpable throughout the building, as fans press closer and closer to the stage. Incapacitants are the ninth and final band on the schedule, and by the time Mikawa and Kosakai step out onto the stage to begin setting up their gear at 1 AM, the audience is psyched up beyond belief. As the duo moves their small equipment tables out to the center of the stage and begins to plug their gear together (to the suspenseful background of Ifukube Akira's *Godzilla* soundtrack that some brilliant smartass is playing through the sound system), they shoot anxious glances out at the surging crowd. The audience is already applauding and shouting; they have begun to crush against the stage, pushing forward until they cannot move any farther. On stage, a ring of people, including most of the performers and anyone else with the nerve to jump up and squeeze onto the side of the stage, fills in every inch of the floor not occupied by Incapacitants and their gear. This is a rare moment, and everyone knows it; video cameras are everywhere. One man at the edge of the stage smashes a can into his forehead over and over, grimacing performatively as a thin stream of blood trickles down from his scalp. Another, spotting Gomi from Pain Jerk taking photographs of the crowd from behind the amps on stage, shouts "Gomikawa Fumio!" (the title of a 2002 collaborative recording that combined the names of Pain Jerk and Incapacitants members). Most of the people in the crowd stand their ground, waiting in silence, but there is an increasing wave of motion pass-

ing from the back of the room to the front, as more and more people try to push through to get closer to the stage. Some hug the edge of stage, with their heads directly in front of the PA, and others climb up to stand next to the speakers. I have found a place on the side of the stage to record video, from on top of one of the massive bass cabinets on the floor, and I have set up my tripod so I can pan back and forth between the stage and the audience (although this position will not last long).

The *Godzilla* soundtrack fades out as Incapacitants complete their setup and walk a few steps away from their tables, Kosakai reaching back to adjust one more knob. The crowd cheers and applauds. As Kosakai and Mikawa return to stand in front of their tables, lit by a plain spotlight, there is a pause of a few seconds. Someone in the crowd yells out the name of a 1993 Incapacitants album — “Quietus!” and another immediately responds with “CMPD!,” in reference to the 1996 CD *New Movements in CMPD*; someone else calls out “D.D.D.D!,” the title of a rare 1995 cassette-only release. A voice from the side — comically adding to the incongruity of shouting out Noise “song requests” — adds “George W. Bush!” and someone in the back immediately snaps back “Hitler!” Then Mikawa turns up the volume on his mixer; a crackling, static-y distortion spits out of the amps as he leans over to shout into a cheap plastic mic, and screeching feedback fills the room. The crowd lifts up a few inches, and immediately launches forward toward the stage as hands fly into the air, some clenched and shaking, others holding cell phones and cameras that unleash a flurry of flashes from all directions.

Kosakai is doubled over, rattling a mic in one hand as he twists a knob with the other; Mikawa smashes his elbow into a metal sheet on the edge of his table, then points a shaking finger at the audience, glaring directly ahead. Someone in the middle of the crowd throws themselves on top of the others, and the audience is so tightly packed together that they immediately fill the gap, pushing his convulsing body slowly toward the stage, where Chris Goudreau (a.k.a. *Sickness*) and a few other volunteers push him back until he is finally hauled back down into the crowd. There is nowhere for him to land; Incapacitants stand in a ten-foot circle, surrounded by fans on all sides. Behind them, someone pushes forward into the back of Kosakai’s amp, briefly disconnecting the power as Giffoni and another Noisician on the side of the stage rush forward to plug it back in seconds later; more and more people push forward until the crowd is like a wave, spilling out onto the stage (figure 1.7).



1.7. Incapacitants and crowd at No Fun Fest, 2007. Photo by Michael Muniak.

Mikawa puts a contact mic into his mouth and begins to shout muffled unintelligible sounds, distorted beyond recognition. A roar comes from the crowd, and now the people in the front are unable to stand up; they are leaning forward, falling on top of one another, and some begin to jump up to crouch at the edge of the stage. By about fifteen minutes into the set, the crowd is piling up onto the stage, and Goudreau and a few other volunteer stagehands are literally holding them back from falling onto Incapacitants. I have abandoned my post on top of the bass cabinet and use the folded tripod to hold my camera up over the sea of heads as more fans push forward onto the stage. Mikawa stands still, vibrating, staring out at the crowd, pouring with sweat now as Kosakai raises both fists in the air, smashing two homemade electronic boxes together over his head. He inches forward on the stage, and the crowd reciprocates, bending forward and shaking like grass in a strong wind, reaching out and almost grabbing the squalling mics out of his hands. Mikawa throws his body in circles at the edge of his table, and Kosakai staggers forward to the edge of the crowd; he spins around to face the back of the stage, raising his arms in the air. He stands there, briefly, pushing back against the crowd—as if stand-

ing in their place for a moment—before throwing his body backward into the audience, whose roar drowns out the last few seconds of Noise before Mikawa snaps off his mixer and the show is over.

After many years of mediated listening, the North American Noise audience brought the distinction of their carefully crafted deadness back into the live scene. They were ready to experience the overwhelming sound of Incapacitants' impossibly harsh Noise and to perform their knowledge of its overwhelming sensations of deadness in the context of liveness. In many ways, the response of the crowd—surely one of the largest Noise audiences ever assembled—overwhelmed the performance on stage. At points, the sound of the crowd was even louder than the Noise from the PA, colliding with the energy of Incapacitants' liveness and throwing it back with even greater force. The organizer Carlos Giffoni pointed out the irony of this reversal: "It's funny, because they started in Japan as these extreme performers who were always confronting the audience, pushing forward with this intensity—but now it's like the audience becomes the extreme characters! They were playing and the crowd was almost falling on top of them!"

The intense liveness of this instantly legendary live performance was quickly fed back into Noise's mediated circulation, both in online networks and in the production and reception of recordings. On the morning following their performance, countless video clips and photographs of the show were posted on YouTube and Flickr, shot from many different perspectives within the crowd.¹³ Even now, one could practically create a 3D reconstruction of the show from the enormous collective archive of video and still photography taken that night. Within a few days, the online discussion boards and other music blogs were full of reportage about the event, with most attendees confirming that the show was the "harshest ever." A few months later the Pain Jerk/Incapacitants split CD *Live at No Fun Fest 2007* (the mastering of which I described earlier) was released on Giffoni's No Fun Fest label. Pain Jerk's track was called "Hello America (excerpt)," and Incapacitants titled theirs "The Crowd Inched Closer & Closer."

This singular scene of Noise's liveness then spun back out again into ordinary life. I caught up with Incapacitants at their next performance in Tokyo, two weeks after the No Fun Fest, and asked Mikawa what he thought about the show. "Great, of course, the audience was great," he responded quickly, nodding his head. Then, after a brief pause, he added, "but the sound system was too weak." The crowd for this performance at

Showboat in Koenji (featuring Incapacitants headlining a bill with touring North Americans The Rita, Impregnable, Tralphaz, and Oscillating Innards) only numbered around twenty-five people. As I videotaped the performance from the back of the small livehouse, I was struck by the comparison with the overflowing audience at No Fun Fest. At Showboat, I could keep the tiny crowd entirely within the frame. The small in-group of international Noise performers and hard-core local fans were clustered between the speakers in front of Incapacitants, who vibrated and shook in the center of the tiny stage. But the audio on my recording came out completely distorted; the sound was just too much.