



# Amen to That

## Sampling and Adapting the Past

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1In 1956, John Cage predicted that “in the future, records will be made from records” (Duffel, 202). Certainly, musical creativity has always involved a certain amount of appropriation and adaptation of previous works. For example, Vivaldi appropriated and adapted the “Cum sancto spiritu” fugue of Ruggieri’s *Gloria* (Burnett, 4; Forbes, 261). If stuck for a guitar solo on stage, Keith Richards admits that he’ll adapt Buddy Holly for his own purposes (Street, 135). Similarly, Nirvana adapted the opening riff from Killing Jokes’ “Eighties” for their song “Come as You Are”. Musical “quotation” is actively encouraged in jazz, and contemporary hip-hop would not exist if the genre’s pioneers and progenitors had not plundered and adapted existing recorded music. Sampling technologies, however, have taken musical adaptation a step further and realised Cage’s prediction. Hardware and software samplers have developed to the stage where any piece of audio can be appropriated and adapted to suit the creative impulses of the sampling musician (or [samplist](#)). The practice of sampling challenges established notions of creativity, with whole albums created with no original musical input as most would understand it—literally “records made from records.”

2Sample-based music is premised on adapting audio plundered from the cultural environment. This paper explores the ways in which technology is used to adapt previous recordings into new ones, and how musicians themselves have adapted to the potentials of digital technology for exploring alternative approaches to musical creativity.

3Sampling is frequently [defined](#) as “the process of converting an analog signal to a digital format.” While this definition remains true, it does not acknowledge the prevalence of digital media. The “analogue to digital” method of sampling requires a microphone or instrument to be recorded directly into a sampler. Digital media, however, simplifies the process. For example, a samplist can download a video from [YouTube](#) and rip the audio track for editing, slicing, and manipulation, all using software within the noiseless digital environment of the computer. Perhaps it is more prudent to describe sampling simply as the process of capturing sound. Regardless of the process, once a sound is loaded into a sampler (hardware or software) it can be replayed using a MIDI keyboard, trigger pad or sequencer. Use of the sampled sound, however, need not be a faithful rendition or clone of the original. At the most basic level of manipulation, the duration and pitch of sounds can be altered. The digital processes that are implemented into the [Roland VariOS Phrase Sampler](#) allow samplists to eliminate the pitch or melodic quality of a sampled phrase. The phrase can then be melodically redefined as the samplist sees fit: adapted to a new tempo, key signature, and

context or genre. Similarly, software such as Propellerhead's [ReCycle](#) slices drum beats into individual hits for use with a loop sampler such as Reason's [Dr Rex](#) module. Once loaded into Dr Rex, the individual original drum sounds can be used to program a new beat divorced from the syncopation of the original drum beat. Further, the individual slices can be subjected to pitch, envelope (a component that shapes the volume of the sound over time) and filter (a component that emphasises and suppresses certain frequencies) control, thus an existing drum beat can easily be adapted to play a new rhythm at any tempo. For example, [this rhythm](#) was created from slicing up and rearranging Clyde Stubblefield's [classic break](#) from James Brown's "Funky Drummer".

4Sonic adaptation of digital information is not necessarily confined to the auditory realm. An audio editor such as Sony's [Sound Forge](#) is able to open any file format as raw audio. For example, a Word document or a Flash file could be opened with the data interpreted as audio. Admittedly, the majority of results obtained are harsh white noise, but there is scope for serendipitous anomalies such as a glitchy beat that can be extracted and further manipulated by audio software. [Audiopaint](#) is an additive synthesis application created by Nicolas Fournel for converting digital images into audio. Each pixel position and colour is translated into information designating frequency (pitch), amplitude (volume) and pan position in the stereo image. The user can determine which one of the three RGB channels corresponds to either of the stereo channels. Further, the oscillator for the wave form can be either the default sine wave or an existing audio file such as a drum loop can be used. The oscillator shapes the end result, responding to the dynamics of the sine wave or the audio file. Although Audiopaint labours under the same *caveat* as with the use of raw audio, the software can produce some interesting results. Both approaches to sound generation present results that challenge distinctions between "musical sound" and "noise".

5Sampling is also a cultural practice, a relatively recent form of adaptation extending out of a time honoured creative aesthetic that borrows, quotes and appropriates from existing works to create new ones. Different fields of production, as well as different commentators, variously use terms such as "co-creative media", "cumulative authorship", and "derivative works" with regard to creations that to one extent or another utilise existing works in the production of new ones (Coombe; Morris; Woodmansee). The extent of the sampling may range from subtle influence to dominating significance within the new work, but the constant principle remains: an existing work is appropriated and adapted to fit the needs of the secondary creator.

6Proponents of what may be broadly referred to as the "free culture" movement argue that creativity and innovation inherently relies on the appropriation and adaptation of existing works (for example, see Lessig, *Future of Ideas*; Lessig, *Free Culture*; McLeod, *Freedom of Expression*; Vaidhyanathan). For example, Gwen Stefani's 2004 release "Rich Girl" is based on Louie Lou and Michie One's 1994 single of the same title. Lou and One's "Rich Girl", in turn, is a reggae dance hall adaptation of "If I Were a Rich Man" from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Stefani's "na na na" vocal riff shares the same melody as the "Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum" riff from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Samantha Mumba adapted David Bowie's "Ashes to Ashes" for her second single "Body II Body". Similarly, Richard X adapted Tubeway Army's "Are 'Friends' Electric?" and Adina Howard's "Freak Like Me" for a career saving single for Sugababes.

7Digital technologies enable and even promote the adaptation of existing works (Morris). The ease of appropriating and manipulating digital audio files has given rise to a form of

music known variously as mash-up, bootleg, or bastard pop. Mash-ups are the most recent stage in a history of musical appropriation and they epitomise the sampling aesthetic. Typically produced in bedroom computer-based studios, mash-up artists use software such as Acid or Cool Edit Pro to cut up digital music files and reassemble the fragments to create new songs, arbitrarily adding self-composed parts if desired. Comprised almost exclusively from sections of captured music, mash-ups have been referred to as “fictional pop music” because they conjure up scenarios where, for example, Destiny’s Child jams in a Seattle garage with Nirvana or the Spice Girls perform with Nine Inch Nails (Petridis). Once the initial humour of the novelty has passed, the results can be deeply alluring. Mash-ups extract the distinctive characteristics of songs and place them in new, innovative contexts. As Dale Lawrence writes: “the vocals are often taken from largely reviled or ignored sources—cornball acts like Aguilera or Destiny’s Child—and recast in wildly unlikely contexts ... where against all odds, they actually work”. Similarly, Crawford argues that “part of the art is to combine the greatest possible aesthetic dissonance with the maximum musical harmony. The pleasure for listeners is in discovering unlikely artistic complementarities and revisiting their musical memories in mutated forms” (36). Sometimes the adaptation works in the favour of the sampled artist: George Clinton claims that because of sampling he is more popular now than in 1976—“the sampling made us big again” (Green).

8The creative aspect of mash-ups is unlike that usually associated with musical composition and has more in common with DJing. In an effort to further clarify this aspect, we may regard DJ mixes as “mash-ups on the fly.” When Grandmaster Flash recorded his quilt-pop masterpiece, “Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel,” it was recorded while he performed live, demonstrating his precision and skill with turntables. Modern audio editing software facilitates the capture and storage of sound, allowing mash-up artists to manipulate sounds bytes outside of “real-time” and the live performance parameters within which Flash worked. Thus, the creative element is not the traditional arrangement of chords and parts, but rather “audio contexts”. If, as Riley pessimistically suggests, “there are no new chords to be played, there are no new song structures to be developed, there are no new stories to be told, and there are no new themes to explore,” then perhaps it is understandable that artists have searched for new forms of musical creativity.

9The notes and chords of mash-ups are segments of existing works sequenced together to produce inter-layered contexts rather than purely tonal patterns. The merit of mash-up culture lies in its function of deconstructing the boundaries of genre and providing new musical possibilities. The process of mashing-up genres functions to critique contemporary music culture by “pointing a finger at how stifled and obvious the current musical landscape has become. ... Suddenly rap doesn’t have to be set to predictable funk beats, pop/R&B ballads don’t have to come wrapped in cheese, garage melodies don’t have to recycle the Ramones” (Lawrence).

10According to Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School critic, popular music (of his time) was irretrievably simplistic and constructed from easily interchangeable, modular components (McLeod, “Confessions”, 86). A standardised and repetitive approach to musical composition fosters a mode of consumption dubbed by Adorno “quotation listening” and characterised by passive acceptance of, and obsession with, a song’s riffs (44-5). As noted by Em McAvan, Adorno’s analysis elevates the producer over the consumer, portraying a culture industry controlling a passive audience through standardised products (McAvan). The characteristics that Adorno observed in the popular music of his time are classic traits of contemporary popular music. Mash-up artists, however, are not representative of Adorno’s producers for a

passive audience, instead opting to wrest creative control from composers and the recording industry and adapt existing songs in pursuit of their own creative impulses. Although mash-up productions may consciously or unconsciously criticise the current state of popular music, they necessarily exist in creative symbiosis with the commercial genres: “if pop songs weren’t simple and formulaic, it would be much harder for mashup bedroom auteurs to do their job” (McLeod, “Confessions”, 86). Arguably, when creating mash-ups, some individuals are expressing their dissatisfaction with the stagnation of the pop industry and are instead working to create music that they as consumers wish to hear.

11 Sample-based music—as an exercise in adaptation—encourages a Foucauldian questioning of the composer’s authority over their musical texts. Recorded music is typically a passive medium in which the consumer receives the music in its original, unaltered form. DJ Dangermouse (Brian Burton) breached this pact to create his *Grey Album*, which is a mash-up of an *a cappella* version of Jay-Z’s *Black Album* and the Beatles’ eponymous album (also known as the *White Album*). Dangermouse [says](#) that “every kick, snare, and chord is taken from the Beatles *White Album* and is in their original recording somewhere.” In deconstructing the Beatles’ songs, Dangermouse turned the recordings into a palette for creating his own new work, adapting audio fragments to suit his creative impulses. As Joanna Demers writes, “refashioning these sounds and reorganising them into new sonic phrases and sentences, he creates acoustic mosaics that in most instances are still traceable to the Beatles source, yet are unmistakably distinct from it” (139-40). Dangermouse’s approach is symptomatic of what Schütze refers to as remix culture:

12 an open challenge to a culture predicated on exclusive ownership, authorship, and controlled distribution ... . Against ownership it upholds an ethic of creative borrowing and sharing. Against the original it holds out an open process of recombination and creative transformation. It equally calls into question the categories, rifts and borders between high and low cultures, pop and elitist art practices, as well as blurring lines between artistic disciplines.

13 Using just a laptop, an audio editor and a calculator, Gregg Gillis, a.k.a. Girl Talk, created the *Night Ripper* album using samples from 167 artists (Dombale). Although all the songs on *Night Ripper* are blatantly sampled-based, Gillis sees his creations as “original things” (Dombale). The adaptation of sampled fragments culled from the Top 40 is part of Gillis’ creative process: “It’s not about who created this source originally, it’s about recontextualising—creating new music. ... I’ve always tried to make my own songs” (Dombale). Gillis states that his music has no political message, but is a reflection of his enthusiasm for pop music: “It’s a celebration of everything Top 40, that’s the point” (Dombale). Gillis’ “celebratory” exercises in creativity echo those of various fan-fiction authors who celebrate the characters and worlds that constitute popular culture.

14 Adaptation through sampling is not always centred solely on music. Sydney-based Tom Compagnoni, a.k.a. [Wax Audio](#), adapted a variety of sound bytes from politicians and media personalities including George W. Bush, Alexander Downer, Alan Jones, Ray Hadley, and John Howard in the creation of his [Mediacracy E.P.](#). In one particular instance, Compagnoni used a myriad of samples culled from various media appearances by George W. Bush to recreate the vocals for John Lennon’s *Imagine*. Created in early 2005, the track, which features speeded-up instrumental samples from a karaoke version of Lennon’s original, is an immediate irony fuelled comment on the invasion of Iraq. The rationale underpinning the song is further emphasised when “Imagine This” reprises into “Let’s Give Peace a Chance”

interspersed with short vocal fragments of “Come Together”. Compagnoni [justifies](#) his adaptations by presenting

15appropriated media sound bytes that deliberately set out to demonstrate the way information is manipulated to present any particular point of view. Playing the media like an instrument, Wax Audio juxtaposes found sounds in a way that forces the listener to confront the bias, contradiction and sensationalism inherent in their daily intake of media information. ... Oh yeah—and it’s bloody funny hearing George W Bush sing “Imagine”.

16Notwithstanding the humorous quality of the songs, *Mediacracy* represents a creative outlet for Compagnoni’s political opinions that is emphasised by the adaptation of Lennon’s song. Through his adaptation, Compagnoni revitalises Lennon’s sentiments about the Vietnam War and superimposes them onto the US policy on Iraq.

17An interesting aspect of sampled-based music is the re-occurrence of particular samples across various productions, which demonstrates that the same fragment can be adapted for a plethora of musical contexts. For example, Clyde Stubblefield’s “Funky Drummer” break is [reputed](#) to be the most sampled break in the world. The break from 1960s soul/funk band the Winstons’ “Amen Brother” (the B-side to their 1969 release “Color Him Father”), however, is another candidate for the title of “most sampled break”. The “Amen break” was revived with the advent of the sampler. Having featured heavily in early hip-hop records such as “Words of Wisdom” by Third Base and “Straight Out of Compton” by NWA, the break “appears quite adaptable to a range of music genres and tastes” (Harrison, 9m 46s). Beginning in the early 1990s, adaptations of this break became a constant of jungle music as sampling technology developed to facilitate more complex operations (Harrison, 5m 52s). The break features on Shy FX’s “Original Nutta”, L Double & Younghead’s “New Style”, Squarepusher’s “Big Acid”, and a cover version of Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” by Jane’s Addiction front man Perry Farrell. This is to name but a few tracks that have adapted the break. Wikipedia offers [a list](#) of songs employing an adaptation of the “Amen break”. This list, however, falls short of the “hundreds of tracks” argued for by Nate Harrison, who notes that “an entire subculture based on this one drum loop ... six seconds from 1969” has developed (8m 45s).

18The “Amen break” is so ubiquitous that, much like the twelve bar blues structure, it has become a foundational element of an entire genre and has been adapted to satisfy a plethora of creative impulses. The sheer prevalence of the “Amen break” simultaneously illustrates the creative nature of music adaptation as well as the potentials for adaptation stemming from digital technology such as the sampler. The cut-up and rearrangement aspect of creative sampling technology at once suggests the original but also something new and different. Sampling in general, and the phenomenon of the “Amen break” in particular, ensures the longevity of the original sources; sampled-based music exhibits characteristics acquired from the source materials, yet the illegitimate offspring are not their parents.

19Sampling as a technology for creatively adapting existing forms of audio has encouraged alternative approaches to musical composition. Further, it has given rise to a new breed of musician that has adapted to technologies of adaptation. Mash-up artists and samplers demonstrate that recorded music is not simply a fixed or read-only product but one that can be freed from the composer’s original arrangement to be adapted and reconfigured. Many mash-up artists such as Gregg Gillis are not trained musicians, but their ears are honed from enthusiastic consumption of music. Individuals such as DJ Dangermouse, Gregg Gillis and



Tom Compagnoni appropriate, reshape and re-present the surrounding soundscape to suit diverse creative urges, thereby adapting the passive medium of recorded sound into an active production tool.

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