

Loveless: An Evolution of Noise from the Futurists to Shoegaze

My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless* is one of the most acclaimed albums of the last 30 years, being consistently branded as "spiritual"¹ and "timeless"². Critics have worked over it endlessly, but often fail to trace its noise rock routes back to the ideas of artists such as Luigi Russolo, John Cage and Edgar Varèse. It seems to be the logical conclusion to a music of "shifting sound-masses"³, and "noise-sounds"⁴ as described by those composers. It is a fusion of noise and harmony; an artefact that proves the two are not mutually exclusive. I don't wish to state that the band knew of these composers, merely that their work was so influential that its premises filtered through decades of musicians, arriving in their music.

1913 – Luigi Russolo writes *The Art of Noises*

In *The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto*, Luigi Russolo states that every sound within conventional instrumentation "carries with it a tangle of sensations, already well-known and exhausted, which predispose the listener to boredom"⁵. He suggests a different way of writing music: taking the sounds of industrialisation, machines, screeching, humming and beating, letting life permeate art. He argues that the complexity of these noises is higher than any instrument's, and if we were to manipulate them past distinction they would remain more interesting. Before *Loveless* none of the sounds on the record were commonplace. Pitch-shifting and re-sampling guitar feedback, reverse reverbs and up to 20 layers of low level vocals create a huge, vague sound mass that is emotive, yet reflective of industrial, alienating earlier noise works. The textures aptly fit into Russolo's category of "noise-sounds", they have high levels of complexity and don't directly represent anything created previously. A reference point in earlier music would be Lou Reed's Metal Machine Music (MMM); a composition of guitar feedback noise without melody or harmony, that runs for a total of 64:11, and has been described as an

¹ M. McGonigal, *Loveless*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York and London, 2007, p. 112.

² Ibid., interviewing Vinita Joshi, p. 111

³ E. Varèse, Perspectives of New Music, Vol. 5, No. 1, The Liberation of Sound, Perspectives of New Music, Autumn - Winter 1966, p. 11

⁴ L. Russolo, *The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto*, in: Cox and Warner, eds. *Audio Culture. Readings in Modern Music*. Continuum, New York, London, 2004, p. 11

⁵ Ibid., p.11

“amorphous sound mass”⁶. The albums don’t initially appear similar, however on closer listening MMM can be seen to consist of long durations around which small sounds flicker, as can the noise of *Loveless*. There is another mode of listening that demands we look at noise music with the prospect of non-linearity, each album is far more interesting on a macro level than in terms of their overall form. *MMM* is formless, and *Loveless* is similar in that no songs have traditional verse – chorus structure. Listening in the moment is far more rewarding than trying to trace some memorable melody or harmony, particularly on the tracks *Loomer* and *Sometimes*. Both albums fit Russolo’s definition of futurist instrumentation and composition, focusing on new sounds and complexity of texture through demanding vertical listening processes.

1931 – Edgar Varèse premiers “Ionisation”. 1937 – Cage writes “The Future of Music”

The 1930’s saw new wave of experimental composers, most notably Edgar Varèse and John Cage. Varèse emphasises the importance of “shifting sound masses”⁷, a concept similar to Russolo’s. The spacing of these is important; sound colour is what defines one mass from another. This assertion places timbre and dynamics at the heart of any composition. My Bloody Valentine work through colouring sound and playing at extreme volumes, it fits almost perfectly with Varèse’s definition of a new music. This can be demonstrated by comparing aesthetic similarities between the sirens in Varèse’s *Ionisation* and the detuned guitars that signal the start of *Loomer*.

In both Cage and Varèse’s writings, an organisational approach to composition is emphasised, with a focus on rhythmic aspects. Cage states that a composer’s “goal [will be] the rhythmic structure of a composition”⁸ and that “the principle of form will be our only constant connection to the past”⁹. He suggests that through focusing on the rhythmic structure of the sounds themselves, the form of a piece will result. It is arguable that this a philosophy followed by Kevin Shields and a principle clearly visible in *Loveless*. In an interview with Mike McGonical, Shields talks about how subtly shifting pitch of the guitar through use of the tremolo arm creates a much ‘larger’ sound.¹⁰ He

⁶N. Spellman in: Goddard, Halligan, and Spelman, eds. *Resonances: Noise and Contemporary Music*, Bloomsbury, London, UK, 2013, p. 27

⁷ E. Varèse, op. cit., p. 11

⁸ J. Cage, *An Anthology*, edited by Richard Kostelanetz, New York, 1968, p.2

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ McGonical, op. cit., p.35

states that this happens due to creating a high level of information in ever shifting micro-tonalities that aren't normally present in Western music¹¹. It caused listeners to believe dozens of instruments were layered on top of one another, when in fact it was just one.

The crafting of huge sound through minimal technique is evident in Shields' mixing of the album, an example of internal rhythms leading to overall sound and form. Sounds are located within a virtual space that makes distinguishing their precise location in the mix intentionally difficult, however, many songs are in mono. Shields states that the illusion of depth comes from the specific mix of frequencies at play, making it a psychoacoustic issue rather than one of panning¹². Ever shifting forms of noise, that remain texturally complex due to ever-varying frequency overlap in different audio tracks. Shields states that *Loveless* has "a relationship to pink noise"¹³ with the frequency hump being, caused by the loudness of the guitar and the vocal layers. This is especially noticeable on the song *To Here Knows When*, where psychoacoustic effects cause illusions of stereo-imaging.

The ideas of Cage and Varèse are doubtlessly present in modern music, however, as the 'inventor' of electronic music Karlheinz Stockhausen states, they had a more direct influence on one of their contemporaries - "the beginnings of *musique concrète* were stimulated by Varèse and Cage"¹⁴.

1948 – Pierre Schaeffer coins the term "*musique concrète*".

The entire record sounds indistinct, the guitar at the forefront of nearly every track is barely recognisable as guitar sound. Brian Eno described My Bloody Valentine's *Soon* as "the vaguest piece of music ever to get into the charts"¹⁵, later stating that had it been written by Steve Reich, he would have been awarded by the classical establishment¹⁶.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*, pp.49 - 50

¹³ *ibid.* p.49

¹⁴ K. Stockhausen, 'Electronic and Instrumental Music', 1958

In: Cox and Warner, eds. *Audio Culture. Readings in Modern Music*. Continuum, New York, London, 2004, p. 375

¹⁵ B. Eno, from a Lecture given at MOMA in New York, 1990

¹⁶ Wikipedia contributors, *Loveless (album)*, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, accessed 10th May 2017 [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Loveless_\(album\)&oldid=779734796](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Loveless_(album)&oldid=779734796)

However, more than Reich's work, the ambiguous sounds of *Loveless* recall the ideas of Pierre Schaeffer.

As an opening to his book *In Search of a Concrete Music*, Schaeffer details frustrations he met during the conception of musique concrète. These included sounds being "too explicit"¹⁷ to be without connotations. In order to solve these problems Schaeffer employed various abstractions, including combining two sounds and simultaneously removing their attack. This is precisely the methodology used on the song *Sometimes*. The solo in the middle of the piece is not played on a synthesiser but formed of sampled, edited and pitch shifted vocals layered over an oboe. This is an extremely Schaefferian idea executed effectively, the sound source is abstracted past recognition and thus loses all connotations that would have come with a vocal.

The band's work with sampling closely resembles another of Schaeffer's experiments:

*Instead of composing a series of studies I would do well, if I were logical, to record only "samples", each one taken from an initial noise... In the Erard Hall I find an amateur orchestra... a general A is unleashed, adorned with embellishments that I record.*¹⁸

He later deconstructed the sample, using its elements to create a composition from that one note; resulting one of his most successful early works. *Loveless* contains a huge amount of sampling and resampling of guitar feedback. This is layered to create complex sounds that form foundations and accents throughout the album. *Loveless* represents one of the first popular albums where the sampler was used as "more than just a phrase machine"¹⁹. This is due to the sampling of organic material, and to the previously mentioned abstraction of their sound.

¹⁷ P. Schaeffer, *In Search of a Concrete Music*, translated by Christine North and John Dack, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles California, London England, 2012, p.4

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.15

¹⁹ McGonigal, *op. cit.*, p.55

1969 – Jimi Hendrix plays *The Star Spangled Banner* at Woodstock

The 1960's see the birth of noise as a revolutionary tool. Underpinning the agenda of creative anarchy in American counterculture, live performance starts to embrace the deconstructive nature of noise. Jimi Hendrix gave one of the decade's most poignant performances at Woodstock 1969, creating a powerful allegory from America's National Anthem. The performance still contains ideas of noise-sounds, but has much deeper societal consequence. It was a subversion of a white National Anthem, by a black man, in an era synonymous with extreme racism. Hendrix created a vision of American culture that was imploding, "screeching to an unbearable tension which must somehow burst"²⁰. It is a work of art that protests against patriotism and the Vietnam war, making it highly socially relevant, almost as much so today. It set a standard for live noise performance, yet doesn't represent any of My Bloody Valentine's output, which appears apolitical. However, the elements of Hendrix's work that are to do with psychotropic drugs can be seen in contemporaries of his who's performances highly resemble those of My Bloody Valentine.

Pink Floyd's 1967 performance of *Astronomy Domine* at the BBC bears striking resemblance to descriptions of My Bloody Valentine's performances. Floyd are stated to have played at incredible volumes, with drones that go on for extended periods of time in order to imitate the effects of LSD²¹. In reference to the live shows following *Loveless* Kevin Shields recalls "it was a constant sameness in a way, like a modern version of the psychedelic thing... But rather than trying to imitate the effects of acid, we were more trying to induce it"²². McGonigal states that My Bloody Valentine play at volumes that "must be what it would be like if I were to stick my head inside of a jet engine"²³, lasting around 20-30 minutes, which often caused audience members to leave, or feel physically sick. The premise being that as you acclimatise to the noise it induces an ethereal higher state, causing the remaining audience to hear a set of harmonic overtones. This sound is described as "heavy duty industrial barrage with bird calls atop

²⁰ B. Hicks, Potash ed., *Jimi Hendrix: A Memorial (Northwest Passage, 29th September 1970)*, in *The Jimi Hendrix Companion: Three Decades of Commentary*, Schirmer, New York, 2000, p.195

²¹ H. Keller, *Look of the Week*, BBC1, 1967

²² McGonigal, op. cit., p.86

²³ *ibid.*, p.4

it". Where Pink Floyd's performance expresses feelings of LSD, My Bloody Valentine's induces direct feelings normally associated with drug use.

1976 – Throbbing Gristle is formed.

Loveless lacks identity; from the performers to the artwork. This was one of the traits possessed by bands such as Throbbing Gristle in the years before My Bloody Valentine's conception, a trait that was present due to their stance against late-stage capitalism.

The anonymity of these bands allowed them to avoid commodification, unlike the resistance music of the 60's that idolised figureheads such as Hendrix, claiming to speak political truth. Csaba Toth states that "Noise has no such claims; it is a radical deconstruction of the status of artist, audience, and music."²⁴. My Bloody Valentine don't move on stage except to play



Figure 1: Album art.

their instruments, they aren't to be found on any of their album art, on which the band name also barely appears. *Loveless'* cover consists of a hazy image of a Fender Jaguar, with the name of the band barely legible (*fig. 1*). The band members shy away from any form of identity, leaving the music with no discernible figurehead. Toth states that the deconstruction of the audience caused by noise music equates to pleasure in the form of jouissance²⁵ meaning, according to Roland Barthes' definition, "A pre-linguistic experience... in which signification interrupts meaning." This is a quality that without doubt could be applied to the transcendent experience of My Bloody Valentine's live performances.

Barthes also offers an analysis on the deconstruction of the artist. He states "to give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause"²⁶. The same is true of imposing a voice upon music. The lack of figurehead removes any contextual associations an audience may have, forcing them to understand the music as they

²⁴ C. Toth. "Noise Theory" in: Mattin & Anthony Iles, ed. *Noise & Capitalism*. Arteleku Audiolab (Kritika saila), San Sebastian, Spain, 2009, p.27

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.28

²⁶ R. Barthes, translated by R. Howard, *The Death of the Author*, Ubuweb Papers, accessed 6th May 2017, <http://ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>, p.5

perceive it. This affirms Toth's claims of noise's deconstruction of the artist, and of music itself. In classical music there was generally a single composer attributed to each work, in popular music there are various characters who project their histories and personalities onto their music. Noise music has neither of these things and therefore not only re-writes the role of the artist, it re-writes the way in which their music must be heard. My Bloody Valentine take this anonymity, utilised politically by bands previously, and force the audience to pay attention to their art rather than artist. This heightens its emotional impact, proving that "the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination"²⁷.

To conclude, although the members of My Bloody Valentine may have been unaware of the artists mentioned heretofore, they have been affected by their work nonetheless. This is due to how art permeates society, consistently morphing, being repossessed by different people for different purposes. We see beginnings of noise in Russolo, Cage and Varèse, important developments in Schaeffer's work, and then highly charged politicisation of an idea that has left the avant-garde in Jimi Hendrix. Live performance warps our relationship with it even further, removing the boundary between artist and audience through sheer volume. Noise is a medium which is deeply instilled within many branches of music due to the work of all those mentioned. It is the most universal and affecting of mediums despite its harshness and, when properly harnessed, it has the power to change art, politics, and our own physical state of being.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p.6

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