



The consecration of musical incoherence

Will Straw,
McGill University

Abstract

Meridian 1970 is a compilation gathering 20 musical pieces, that was released in 2005. These musical pieces' only shared trait is the fact that all these songs were originally produced in the year 1970. I argue that this lack of aesthetic unity is what makes this compilation—and all the others done in the same spirit—significant; the temporalization becomes the basis of the intelligibility, and hence, the legitimation of these songs and this era. The consecration is performed through the celebration of incoherence, of disorder, even confusion.

Pour le résumé de l'article en français, voir la fin de l'article

*Meridian 1970*¹ is a compact disc compilation released in 2005 on the EMI label. Compiled by Jon Savage, the well known British pop music critic and historian, *Meridian 1970* gathers up 20 pieces of Anglo-American music that were released in 1970. In this brief article, I wish to treat *Meridian 1970* as a media artefact engaged in endowing a particular historical moment with value and intelligibility. As I shall argue, as well, the meanings we may attach to *Meridian 1970* are those we may attach to the compact disc itself in a late, waning phase in its life as a material form. A compact disc compilation like this acts, I suggest, to produce a temporary pause in the otherwise multidirectional

¹ The songs presented on this record are: 1. Free, "Mouthful of Glass", 2. The Doobie Brothers, "Nobody", 3. Steve Miller Band, "Industrial Military Complex Hex", 4. Little Feat, "Hamburger Midnight", 5. Sir Douglas Quintet, "Catch Your Man on the Rise", 6. Danny O'Keefe, "3:10 Smokey Thursday", 7. The Move, "Message From the Country", 8. Dave Mason, "Shouldn't Have Taken More Than You Gave", 9. Nick Drake, "Three Hours", 10. Meic Stevens, "One Night Wonder", 11. Rod Stewart, "Man of Constant Sorrow", 12. Alexandra 'Skip' Spence, "Cripple Creek", 13. The Byrds, "Tulsa County", 14. Jesse Winchester, "Biloxi", 15. Donovan, "The Song of the Wandering Aengus", 16. Jefferson Airplane, "Good Shepherd", 17. Loudon Wainwright III, "Black Uncle Remus", 18. Leo Kottke, "Hear the Wind Howl", 19. Tommy Flanders, "The Moonstone", 20. The James Gang, "The Ashes The Rain and I". More details available at <http://www.jonsavage.com/compilations/meridian-1970/>

circulation of music in digital form. In doing so, it invites us to reflect upon the usefulness of a circumscribed historical moment (in this case, the calendar year) as the basis of cultural understanding. The *mediality* of *Meridian 1970* (its status as a cultural storage device) has something to do with the ways in which it uses the temporal limits of the compact disc as a frame or border within which 20 pieces of music are made to resonate with each other and produce a particular sense of historical time.

The idea behind *Meridian 1970*, Savage says in his liner notes, was to celebrate the year 1970 as “a particularly misunderstood musical moment.” “Contrary to received opinion,” Savage continues, “the cusp of the 60’s/70’s was not a musical wasteland.” Savage is partly offering *Meridian 1970* as a collection of forgotten gems from a particular year, but this is its least interesting operation. What is more sharply conveyed on this compilation is a widespread, retrospective sense of this particular “cusp” between decades as almost indecipherable: as marked by hazy stylistic transitions, as a moment in musical history that saw the decomposition of certain forms and failed or successful attempts at collective redirection involving others. If *Meridian 1970* is an effective historiographical project, it is in part for the ways in which it is able to absorb and recapitulate within itself the uncertainties and incomplete transitions of this moment in the history of Anglo-American popular music.

Whether or not 1970 was a good year for Anglo-American popular music need not concern us here. What interests me in relation to *Meridian 1970* is the act of gathering up (of “curating”) a collection of musical texts whose most notable characteristics are stylistic uncertainty. Georgina Born has suggested the following about the organization of musical time: “It seems to me unarguably true that, as genre theory shows us, each art or musical work constructs connections to both prior and future or prospective works; that it acts on time in this dual way and can produce temporality -- the ‘outer time’ of cultural history” (Born 2005, 63) The individual musical texts contained on *Meridian 1970* construct the connections that Born describes, reworking elements of the immediate past and evoking possible new directions for stylistic development. Each does so, however, in such a distinctive, even idiosyncratic manner that we are left with an image of cultural history wrestling with chaos, straining to find new lines of development about which there is not even the glimmer of consensus.

Some of the cleverness of *Meridian 1970* resides in the fact that it refuses to offer any principle of coherence other than the fact of these tracks all having been released in a particular 12-month period. There is no attempt to

trace trajectories of development whereby musicians or styles work their way from one period to another. There is no genealogy of influences which would set any given track within a broader project of working through musical influences or traditions. The value and meaning of each track here is seen to reside in its “1970-ness”, in the way in which it sits within a complex set of musical currents arriving from multiple directions and heading in just as many.

The literary theorist Michael North has written of the observable tendency in cultural history towards what he calls “annualization:” the recourse to the year as a unit of analysis. North is referring to books like Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s *In 1926: Living at the edge of time*, which work to find coherence in the cultural expression of a particular calendar year. In this reading of historical moments, North suggests, “the diachronic is put under such fierce pressure that it approaches synchrony” (North 2001, 408). In other words, processes of change become spatialized as a set of positions within a cultural field. In its mapping of a collective but uncoordinated effort at redirection in Western popular music, *Meridian 1970* undertakes this spatialization. The collectivity of this enterprise of redirection is less evident in individual pieces of music than in the range of options that become spatialized through the proximity of forms to each other: psychedelic rock, perhaps the key musical style here, exists in various forms of proximity to country music or medieval folk, to progressive rock, to boogie blues or to the novelty pop song. A compilation like this offers an image of multiple places within a transition; the historical moment assumes shape as one marked by a broadly dispersed incoherence.

CD compilations like *Meridian 1970* are expansive enough that they may serve to map, for a year like 1970, what literary theorist Franco Moretti has called “a system of variations” (Moretti 2000, 64). At the same time, they are sufficiently limited and circumscribed that, in a sense, the musical pieces contained within them echo back from the boundaries of the compilation and resonate with each other. This resonance compels us, on each listen, to seek out the shared features of a period style, to identify a structure of feeling that would render 1970, as a musical field, legible.

To pursue some of these issues a little further, I want to back away from *Meridian 1970* and speak, briefly, of other compact disc compilations that deal with the same historical period. I refer, here, to the seemingly endless series of compilations, most of them from the last decade, that have circled around the edges of late 1960s/early 1970s folk-psychedelic music – around these forms that are variously called psyche folk, freak folk, acid folk, strange folk, and so

on. Compilations devoted to these forms and styles have been around for two or three decades, but their release intensified in the early and mid 2000s, in tandem with the expansion of contemporary performances and recordings of psychedelic folk. As a result, there has been a two-way movement between new music that reinvents versions of psychedelic folk and the ongoing unearthing and compiling of examples from the late 1960s and early 1970s. These historical compilations bring together examples of late psychedelia, of folk music inflected with modern instrumentation, of so-called “sunshine pop,” of more acoustic instantiations of progressive rock, and so on. The compilations that collect this music have titles like *Folk is not a four-letter world*, *Strange folk*, *Gather in the Mushrooms*, *Early Morning Hush*, *Fuzzy felt folk*, *Fading Yellow*, *Ladies of the Canyon* and *Wayfaring Strangers*.

These compilations do not find their unity in the mechanicity of a single year or in the coherence of individual genres or styles. Rather, in a slightly more focused version of the historiographical arguments implicit in *Meridian 1970*, they show the unsettled character of music from this period, its constant loosening of boundaries and experiments with new kinds of stylistic synthesis. There are, of course, a great many compilation series that memorialize historical musical forms, from surf music to doo wop. What interests me about the psyche-folk compilations is in part what interests me about *Meridian 1970*: all of these pose the question of what it means to produce collections of music that constantly reassert the incoherent and transitory character of a period. The archival sensibility that manifests itself in these psyche-folk compilations is invested in a constant reenactment of the fraying and fragmentation of musical sensibilities, during years that were ones of significant transition in white Anglo-American popular music

More interestingly, in my view, the media form of the single CD is entirely appropriate to conveying this decomposition. The compilations that mine this corpus are very rarely boxed sets of multiple discs, or even double-CDs, formats typically employed in the archiving and consecration of other forms. It is as if the totality of musical practices from the years around 1970 could never be mapped in their entirety, so it is the job of each compilation to perform and repeat the fraying and fragmentation of this period’s music in a more limited fashion, and for this gesture to be constantly repeated. The single-disc compilation contains a sufficient number of tracks for a period sensibility to be grasped, but not so many that it allows this period sensibility to become fully intelligible. On single disc after single disc, the sense of a tentative

inventiveness and of failed gestures of collective redirection in popular music during a particular short period of time is restated.

One could, of course, simply fill a download site or a three-terabyte hard drive with all the music of the late 1960s and early 1970s that exemplifies any possible relationship between folk and psychedelic music. To do so would be to lose the sense of music being curated, in the sense that Jean-Michel Rey defines it. The curated art exhibition, Rey suggests, takes on ever more importance in an age in which one assumes that everything is available; the logic of the event, of the act of gathering together, then comes to supercede any logic of discovery or revelation (Rey 2007, 125). *Meridian 1970*, like the other compilations mentioned, is a particularly interesting “event” of this sort. Collecting pieces of music that are already available, within a frame which invites us to explore the possible relationships between them, *Meridian 1970* reinvents the compact disc as historiographical argument and, in doing so, offers evidence of its continued value as a cultural form.

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Biographical notice

Will Straw is Professor of Communications in the Department of Art History and Communications at McGill University and currently serves as Departmental Chair. From 1997 to 2004, he was Director of the Graduate Program in Communications. Dr. Straw was awarded the David Thomson Award for Graduate Supervision and Teaching from McGill University in 2006. Will Straw has been music correspondent for Prime Time (CBC Radio), popular culture correspondent for the Women's Television Network, and a cultural commentator for *Newswatch* (CBC Television, Montreal). Dr. Straw is the author of *Cyanide and Sin: Visualizing Crime in 1950s America* and of over 100 articles in film, popular culture and cities.

Key words

Music compilation, temporality, circulation, mediality, music curating.

Résumé

La compilation *Meridian 1970*, sortie en 2005, réunit 20 pièces musicales ayant comme seul point commun le fait qu'elles ont été produites en 1970. J'argumente que ce manque d'unité esthétique est justement ce qui rend cette compilation - et toutes les autres faites dans le même sens - significative; la temporalisation devient la base même de l'intelligibilité, et donc, de la légitimation, de ces chansons et de cette époque. La consécration s'effectue à travers la célébration de l'incohérence, du désordre, voire de la confusion.