



Perfecting Sound Forever: An Aural History of Recorded Music

Greg Milner

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In 1915, Thomas Edison proclaimed that he could record a live performance and reproduce it perfectly, shocking audiences who found themselves unable to tell whether what they were hearing was an Edison Diamond Disc or a flesh-and-blood musician. Today, the equation is reversed. Whereas Edison proposed that a real performance could be rebuilt with absolute perfection, Pro Tools and digital samplers now allow musicians and engineers to create the illusion of performances that never were. In between lies a century of sonic exploration into the balance between the real and the represented.

Tracing the contours of this history, Greg Milner takes us through the major breakthroughs and glorious failures in the art and science of recording. An American soldier monitoring Nazi radio transmissions stumbles onto the open yet revolutionary secret of magnetic tape. Japanese and Dutch researchers build a first-generation digital audio format and watch as their "compact disc" is marketed by the music industry as the second coming of Edison yet derided as heretical by analog loyalists. The music world becomes addicted to volume in the nineties and fights a self-defeating "loudness war" to get its fix.

From Les Paul to Phil Spector to King Tubby, from vinyl to pirated CDs to iPods, Milner's *Perfecting Sound Forever* pulls apart musical history to answer a crucial question: Should a recording document reality as faithfully as possible, or should it improve upon or somehow transcend the music it records? The answers he uncovers will change the very way we think about music.

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