

PART 2

STREET SOUNDS

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Nocturnal Polyphony: Mobile Music-Making as Urban Composition

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Introduction

The music of Manchester, United Kingdom, is infamous. Successive waves of artists and bands from the city and its region have had their sounds travel around to many different parts of the world. These sonic exports have reflected the changing dynamics within the city itself (Haslam 1999). From the latter days of its industrialized boom to its post-war contribution of 1960s groups, then its angular and motoric post-punk influence through its ecstasy-fuelled ‘Madchester’ era, perhaps the peak of its provincial power, and into the diverse musical kaleidoscope of the present day. Like many cities around the globe, the grand narratives that emanate from Manchester have proved important in shaping how the city is perceived and, by extension, heard. Yet a city is much more than the officially recorded sounds it emits. The everyday soundtrack of buses, trams, pigeons, people going about the ebb and flow of urban life provides a typical backdrop against which the staccato rhythm of construction work or the shrill vignettes of emergency vehicles add their fleeting flourishes to the sonic palimpsest of the city. Beyond this urban music-making as a form of identity for the city are the diverse influences that have emerged and become interwoven across Manchester’s cultural fabric. This tonal shift is perhaps most evident in the inner-city area of Cheetham Hill.

Home to a multi-ethnic community, the identity of the district has evolved through several waves of immigration to Britain (VCH 2011). In the mid nineteenth century, it drew Irish people fleeing the Great Famine, with Jews settling in the area in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as they fled persecution in continental Europe. During the 1950s and 1960s, migrants

from the Indian subcontinent and Caribbean established new communities in Cheetham Hill. More recently, it has become home to people from Africa, Eastern Europe and the Far East. It is immigration policy as an urban landscape (Mason 1977; Bielewska 2011) and its music is vibrant, discordant and ever-mutating.

The area became heavily urbanized following the Industrial Revolution, with its southern edge bordering Angel Meadow, a place described as ‘hell on earth’ by Engels (1892). It is bisected by Cheetham Hill Road, which is lined with churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, alongside terraced houses that date back from its history as a textile processing district. Thrown into this lively mix of architectural form and function is HMP Manchester, formerly known as Strangeways. This austere, inward-facing brick colossus dominates its patch and despite the adjacency of surveillance and security services, red-light activity is evident in the shadowlands of the prison, the allure of which has been immortalized in the song ‘Cheetham Hill’ by the post-punk band The Fall (1996). This seedier side to the area, however, belies the rich cultural heritage of the wider district and the corporeal experiences it offers. Specialist supermarkets along the road trade in wares and foodstuffs from all over the world. As olfactory and gustatory encounters go, there is the potential to experience an astonishing variety of smells and tastes here. Yet, as Harries et al. (2019) have discussed, specifically in relation to Cheetham Hill, it is vital to be cognizant of how a label such as ‘diverse’ can obscure the lived experience and inequalities of ethnic difference and urban living. But what of the night? As Williams (2008: 514) reminds us, ‘[n]ight spaces are neither uniform nor homogenous. Rather they are constituted by social struggles about what should and should not happen in certain places during the dark of night’. How might we better understand the contribution that sound makes towards the shaping of an identity and experience of place? In the next section, I consider how the practice of nightwalking can support a form of mobile music-making through its capacity to both perform within and relate to the nocturnal city via the entanglements that occur between the body and urban landscape, sound and migration, presence and identity.

Nightwalking as mobile music-making

The role of the sonic arts and their capacity to powerfully inform our experiences is well documented (Crook 2011), including a recent inquiry into how sound can shape the way we perceive darkness in films (Masson 2021). However, the lived experience of being in a city is a far less controlled environment when it comes to our relationship with sound. Urban walking, meanwhile, can often feel like

a cinematic experience due to the multi-sensory engagement, the body moving through space in city encounters. I suggest that the affective dimension of this 'audio-viewing' (Chion 2009) is even more pronounced after dark when our ability to rely on visual information is typically reduced due to the lower levels of light available. In addition, long-held associations with darkness tend to recast places, even those that are very familiar to us during the daytime, as having an uncanny and unknown quality to them at night (Dunn 2016). There is also a history of those who are out and about at night as being problematic or somehow not to be acceptable in the way the daytime frames activity (Palmer 2000), so this can produce a complex interaction between bodies when they encounter one another in the nocturnal city, especially in its quieter, emptier and peripheral spaces. This is particularly relevant in relation to migration, where presences may be apparent in ways that are distinctive, or even more pronounced than, during the daytime. Since the movement of the body through space both virtually and affectively shapes place (Atkinson and Duffy 2019), then the act of nightwalking has both a performative and a relational function in being able to simultaneously contribute towards while also comprehending the soundscape after dark.

The sonic environment as Dyson (2014) has shown is essential to both sense and sensibility. I, therefore, propose that nightwalking enacts a type of mobile music that, as a form of sonority, enables the situated, relational and practised of urban environments after dark. In this manner, it seeks to better understand the phenomenal and experiential premises of night and how they might be different from those of the daytime (Handelman 2005) through direct encounters. Nightwalking here is positioned as a mobile method that can reveal empirical sensitivities and new avenues for critique (Büscher and Urry 2009) pertaining to the nocturnal city: how and why it is constituted and, crucially, by whom. By taking this approach, I am deliberately trying to include and make sense of ordinary, banal sonic worlds of the urban night alongside more unusual and specifically musical sounds as part of this process since the former can often be discredited by the normative approach of soundscape (Schafer 1993). This is because the latter aims to preserve certain sounds categorized by an expert figure which for this study is problematic for two primary reasons. First, it implies that the mundane sonic worlds that co-constitute the experience of the city are not important whereas I contend they are vital to sense- and meaning-making in urban places. Second, given this inquiry seeks to identify the various domestic sonic worlds of a multi-ethnic district within which there is considerable diversity and overlap of sound, it's these, often subtle, interactions and dissonances which are integral to the identity of place rather than distinct, pure sounds. In the wider sense, it is my intention that this approach helps represent a degree of the multiple, incommensurate perspectives that are co-present in such multi-cultural and intercultural urban places (Gidley 2013).

In this chapter, I provide an account of my experiences of nightwalking through Cheetham Hill during the third national lockdown in the United Kingdom due to the coronavirus pandemic. It is important to note that the encounters and exchanges that took place are representative of an inner-city suburb within which there was noticeably far less activity than there usually is when not under the restrictions of lockdown measures. Although reasonably familiar with this part of the city pre-pandemic, I conducted a series of 24 nightwalks in the area between 4 January and 29 March 2021. I made audio recordings and autoethnographic notes during each of these nightwalks. At the end of each nightwalk, I first wrote down from memory my experiences, then listened to the recordings to understand any resonances or dissonances between my encounters as recollections and as sonic documentations. This cumulative experience helped me to comprehend the nuances of this district at night and better understand the different rhythms and ambiances it presents, albeit ones that may sometimes be dynamic and fleeting. Building on some of my previous work which sought to capture how various interrelationships between artificial light and darkness were altering and even temporarily disappearing due to the replacement of lamps in the city's streetlighting (Dunn 2019), I have been struck by this new endeavour, by returning to a number of the same places at different times and on different nights, how some of the sounds I have heard have persisted, while others have changed or become absent. This in turn has informed my understanding of the migrations that have occurred and are ongoing in this urban district. In order to convey the embodied and embedded nature of this work and describe how the different tones and rhythms of the urban landscape appear and change by my moving through a place, I provide a detailed, reflexive account of one of these nightwalks in the following section. This particular nightwalk took place on 18 March 2021, starting from Angel Meadow at 8:30 p.m., about two hours after sunset, and lasted approximately five hours. The reason I chose this nightwalk is because it was representative of the series and in this way provides an authentic account of the district with its focus on the 'everynight' of a migrant, multi-ethnic urban landscape.

A nocturnal urban composition

Walking along from the city centre and up Cheetham Hill Road, the eerie quiet and lack of urban buzz due to the national lockdown is palpable. Cars and bike couriers move people and food around the city's circulation system. By Manchester Oratory St. Chad's, the illuminated stained-glass window melds with the late evening sky, capturing its bruised hues in its crystalline fragments. Crossing over and moving down Chatley Street, the roads here all seem to be held together by

the background drone of the city beyond. The width of the streets and the style of architecture whispers more of small-town Middle America than the urban centre of North West England. In some ways it is the frontier, still holding off the forces of gentrification and regeneration. Thanks to the bulwark of the prison, the sound here is like nowhere else in the city, huge swathes of brick and stone flank down the roads, reflecting noises in peculiar ways, the low thrum of idling cars trying to blend into the asphalt and not raise suspicion, the fast tick-tock engine of a taxi as it takes its exasperated pant uphill, the unanswered phone at the other end of the guy shouting into it. These are the soliloquies of the urban night. They tell us of its life, its times, through their utterances as they move through the air, and reflect off the city's surfaces. Human activity around this part of the city is all the more conspicuous for its general absence. This is the muffled soundtrack of furtive and illicit movements and transactions, the slow crunches under the rubber of the kerb-crawling car and the buzzes of vibrating mobile phones in hands setting up the next deal. The district around the prison is a micro-climate where many edges of urban activity overlap and co-exist. It is a composition characterized by the sustained spaces and washes of background sounds between its major notes which, when they appear, are often the sharp skronk of the brakes of heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) and careening cars hurtling through the night. There is little here tonight to speak of the city in its third lockdown, so I continue along Empire Street then Sherborne Street, edging along the railings of Cheetham Park to the main road.

An improvised performance of bass drum via a waste bin being repeatedly kicked due to a missed bus and then the scissor snip of a lighter setting a spliff aglow. Distorted percussion crackles out of a mobile phone. Washing lines flutter their wares beyond railings, dancing ghosts swaying to the sporadic traffic hum. Out here the sounds of the night wash through the streets. There is an eerie absence of people and activity in general. As a result, the soundtrack of the night slips out of open windows and doors held ajar. Music and voices intermingle, wafting out of these apertures towards the sky, their rhythms and accents dispersing in the dark. Swatches of reggae, hip hop and soukous uncoil themselves from domestic interiors and weave their way into the street beyond. Tinny ribbons of music escape into the wider world, distorted and shrill from their source, punctuating the night air with their Morse code to unknown recipients. Occasionally they overlap, forming interstitial sonic zones for the nightwalker. The babble of a family couched in the splurge of a television game show adds jingle bursts and audience appreciation to an already heated discussion. Here within the inner suburban fabric of the city, the soundscape is convivial and an open score awaiting your voice to add to its community compared with the urban melee usually found in the city centre. The low-rise housing schemes in this district offer a slower tempo to the feet, this is a landscape at a human scale, and for the body to enter the gentle surround sound

of lives behind brick and mortar. Snippets of dialogue join the found sounds of the urban landscape as brakes squeak in the next street, a wheelie bin lid clasps shut and a dog barks its warning over several garden fences. As the pattern-cut architecture gives way to a major thoroughfare, the swooshing of distant vehicles and blinking of a pedestrian crossing bring forth the memory of when this road is busy with its crawling wheels of congested traffic which need to be paused for the scramble of schoolchildren to laugh and shout their way across. Not tonight though. There are very few people around. Where figures can be seen they are usually stood alone and motionless, frozen in time by the blueish-white glaze that emits from their phone, a temporary death mask isolating them from the wider dance of the city.

Onward and upward along Waterloo Road and the low thrum of urban life seems to build. Fried chicken and other takeaway food smells drift towards me, tasty poltergeists drawing the body to their origins. At the top of the road where it is swallowed by Cheetham Hill Road, the plunge and sizzle of deep fat fryers within the brightly lit glass boxes of fast food outlets. Delivery drivers wait with their insulated cubes ready to transport these crispy wonderments across the hungry neighbourhoods. Bright colours of illuminated signage join the visual fray, a private psychedelic showreel for the nightwalker. Above one of these, a leg hangs out into the night air from a window amidst the sweet plumes of a vaping machine providing intermittent succour to the suckling owner of the limb. Urgent Arabic flourishes pinch their way into the night air from the lowered window of a private hire vehicle stopping at the traffic lights. Engine idling, its thrum adding syncopated beats to the treble waves of the music that is playing inside the car. The sounds build as the car accelerates away, streaking its mash-up melody down the road to quick fade out of sight and ear.

Down from the brow of the hill along a curve of townhouses and back into a suburb, this time Crumpsall. Many of the homes along this stretch are semi-detached, conjoined architecture keeping two families apart by a membrane of wallpaper, plaster and brick. Lives are largely muffled, noise kept firmly within domestic spaces save for the occasional one-sided chatter from a passing mobile phone user or the sporadic speech that slips through the night's cracks and crevices. Sound and place become weirdly dissonant. The general quiet envelops the area akin to a vast blanket, yet because of the cold air and the absence of sound when a noise does appear its presence somehow strikes a pertinent chord by contrast. This soundscape is one of deteriorating loops, the circadian rhythms of families' lives slowly and steadily disintegrating in pitch and timbre as the darkness grows in the night. From navy blue sky and ochre clouds to a more solidified bruise of purple-blacks. Feeling uncanny and out of sync with this muted orchestra, I stop. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

I walk into Crumpsall Park, dark velvet lawns flank each step, with the spongy shadow forms of trees that stood in attendance to line paths and perimeter. There is no one else here tonight as the obelisk, empty play area and tennis courts can attest. Gathering momentum, I stride back out of the park and into the streets again. I am an instrument. My boots pad out along the pavement in dull clomps suddenly replaced by the scritch scratch of gravel beneath my feet then back to the subdued percussion again. I re-tune, watching the trams glide away on their curvatures into the infinity of night. Two figures snap me out of my reverie, their fast patois stretching out before them as they talk excitedly in an ethnic dialect I was unable to decipher as their sound bubble passes me by and then floats down the street with them.

Moving on and upward towards Cheetham Hill Road again, the rhythmic pairings of homes abruptly stop as the landscape shifts from dwelling to commerce. Now the architecture is one of the brick boxes and car parks, the noise from the nearby main road swirling around these barren places as it reflects from blank surfaces. Too late for shopping tonight. Back onto the artery road and the hubbub of takeaway restaurants sizzle and fizz with fryers and brief chatter between cooks, couriers and customers. Grease, warmth and strongly spiced aromas jab the air, wafting from doorways and opened polystyrene takeaway boxes. Chicken and chips, kebabs, curry and rice, and hot treats provide sustenance for those who share the night. The shuttered, blank expressions of some shopfronts provide unintentional minimalist artworks of aluminium and steel, white and grey planes with the accoutrements of a sticker or a grimy edge. In contrast, those retail and other spaces that bare their glass to the street show a mirror world, my twin through the looking glass and semi-submerged amongst the things actually residing in the interior beyond. The quick staccato call and the response of a Polish couple in minor disagreement before recommencing their walk together enter my sensory field before exiting stage left down a side street. The whump and bump of heavy bass pounds its way down the road at breakneck speed, drumming its route along the asphalt – an under-lit mobile disco for one. Leaving behind the area of synagogues and threading through one with mosques, the latter bookended by Trinity Union Church and the mostly derelict St. Luke's Church.

From here the road tumbles down to the city centre again. Large retail parks bulk into view, their patchwork sheds offering discounted dreams and convenient parking. A budget bit of consumerist Americana grafted onto the skin of the city. Behind these is North Street and a long history of light industrial units stakes its way across the urban landscape. This is a micro-utopia of demand and supply: wholesale clothes retailers, garages, electronics, textiles, materials and foodstuffs. It provides the city and the region with portals to the world through its procurement and logistics of goods and services. The *musique concrète* that can

be experienced during the daytime around here is tangibly absent at night. Electric light skims along the bottom of a steel door or illuminates the odd window but whatever clandestine operations are going on inside are not disclosed beyond its walls. The ghosts of intense and poorly paid labour hang heavy around here. A formerly white plastic seat, since speckled with the patina of grit and grime, waits to receive a tired body and provide a brief respite from work. Little gatherings of cigarette butts close to façade apertures rest quietly following a flick and then the arc of their flight from fingers. They are tiny reminders of the soundscape from the day before, spectres of routine and all-too-temporary recuperation. The sleeping hulk of an HGV lies hard against the kerb, its smell of rubber and dust telling tales of highways and byways near and far. Its wide eyes and festive cabin lights sit forlorn and discharged from power. The confetti of foams packing material twitch in the light breeze but the long ribbons of sponge nearby are unwilling to join the dance tonight. The jabber of the unseen city beckons, its babble ebbing and flowing around corners and along streets in relation to my navigation across the warp and weft of the urban fabric. Arcing back again towards the main thoroughfare of Cheetham Hill Road, along which cars and trucks shift to and from the urban centre, their bright white headlights growing and blood-red rear lights dissipating into the long avenue. Hydraulics squeak, stereos pump beats, while further away some light rail transport adds metallic streaks of noise.

Turning back into the city centre, it is striking how different the soundtrack experienced in this area is compared to some of the other districts and neighbourhoods at night. These compositions, often fleeting and accidental, provide aural hints of a complex identity that despite some of its familiarity also remains obscure and can never be fully known as it rewrites and remixes itself with its people, the weather and the dynamics of urban life. Hidden in plain sight, Cheetham Hill is both a promise and a premise. It offers countless opportunities for reinvention in its environs and the ability to have encounter and exchange with a diverse and mobile set of cultures and identities. Its steadfast refusal to acquiesce to the planned power of the city and the latter's ongoing quest for an urban renaissance of renewal has led to its character as much as the forces of late capitalism have shaped its offer of cheap and counterfeit goods, shady operations, and both legitimate and illicit provisions to the wider population. With the return of LED-illuminated hues in the sky, and the very radiance of the city centre, it is time to leave the early hours of the urban landscape behind for another night. Standing and contemplating the music on-the-move and incidences of sublime composition that have been experienced tonight in the city, almost knowingly, lowers its volume and my body is briefly held still, embalmed even, in its soundscape. The veer and thrust of a Salford Van Hire van swerving around the corner then full throttle its way down the road completely shattering the ambience.

Nocturnal polyphony as shifting identities of place

To hear the city at night is to become aware of its utterances and migrations. To listen to the nocturnal polyphony of the city is to experience its mutating tones of knowledge that enable us to begin to understand the character of a place, its multitude of voices and the corporeality, temporality and movements that constitute them. Sound, as with other characteristics of a place, is integral to the formation of an urban environment's identity through its pitch, duration, intensity and timbre. It also is a form of representation in the city at night, one that gives expression to temporary, including fleeting, occupancies of place. Experienced at night, even familiar sounds are received quite differently due to the immersive, multi-sensory way in which the relationship between body and landscape oscillates. Considered in relation to the sonic attributes of urban places after dark, I contend that nightwalking is able to offer what Edensor (2017: 125) describes more broadly as, 'previously unanticipated ways of apprehension, soliciting perceptions that expand the capacities for imagining and sensing place otherwise, such approaches extend the compendium of ways of seeing'. In terms of methodology, nightwalking thus contributes to the ways we might rethink how to conduct sensory ethnography (Pink 2015). It also supports the notion of mobile music-making as a form of urban composition in cities at night, bringing together the situated, diverse and relational qualities of sound to produce an arrangement that is subject to incidental nightly variations but underpinned by the score of lived experience. Music-making here is conceived in a wider sense to account for the practice of nightwalking, where the body becomes an instrument through which the different sounds of the urban landscape are attuned at particular times and places. In this sense, the relationship with sound is both embodied and embedded. It is the shifting dynamics as the body moves in relation to the nocturnal city that enables the music-making to happen.

While this study is primarily focused on the sonic world of the 'everynight', it is important to emphasize the multi-sensory qualities of being in places after dark. In particular, the forms of synaesthesia which evolve through nightwalking as other senses such as smell, sound, taste and touch become more vivid at night, point towards new knowledge and understandings of place that are temporal, material and spatial. Crucially, such an approach puts less significance on sight in the way we comprehend places and I suggest this is valuable in those situations where and when we want or need to establish rich descriptions that may not easily share their identity if considered in visual terms alone. This is especially relevant in those contexts where migrant individuals or groups may not be in view but their presence is detectable in other ways, including sound.

Although this work afforded the opportunity to explore some of the overlapping soundtracks that occur at the in-between of multi-cultural residential

spaces at night during winter and the first week of spring, I believe further inquiry especially out of lockdown and also at different times of the year would be insightful. This would enable the different forms of domestic night (Shaw 2018) to be articulated, including migrant and immigrant lived experiences, along with how their contribution to the wider sonic world of the area changes in relation to routines, specific events, weather conditions, etc. It is also important to recognize that different groups make use of the urban night in different ways (Wilkinson and Wilkinson 2018), so another avenue of inquiry would be to engage with various groups in Cheetham Hill to understand how their mobilities shape their identity within the city and vice versa, including the music and sound that forms part of this process. A number of the people I encountered during my research were waiting, for a variety of reasons, and further research would be useful to better understand the micro-geographies and ethnographies (Janeja and Bandak 2018) of their respective versions of the nocturnal city since this lay beyond the scope of my nightwalks. The timeframe of darkness is not consistent and, of course, changes throughout the year depending on context. Through the detailed description of a nightwalk, I have sought to illustrate how being in places after dark provides rich situations for the interplay of moods, creativity and imagination (Löfgren and Ehn 2007). By paying specific attention to a district of a city that by the conventional definition may appear far from spectacular, I have also tried to show how the ‘evernight’ can be just as revealing and profound as accounts of the more dramatic events occurring in cities at night (Sandhu 2007). Yet, this has been done during a national lockdown when the ability to engage with other people was severely limited apart from very short interactions. A further path of inquiry would be to have substantial time with those who contribute to the collective sound of the city, in particular by listening to those who may be underrepresented or marginalized to understand their issues and how these are articulated (Farinati and Firth 2016).

This chapter has presented nightwalking as a method through which the soundtrack of the urban landscape can be experienced, even remixed, as the body moves through the place. It has provided an account of the ongoing entanglement that occurs at the boundaries of body and urban landscape, sound and time, identity and place. It has also sought to illustrate how relationships between night and migration are encountered through a range of multi-sensory presences, especially with regard to sound. Through this description, I have aimed to convey the phenomenon of mobile music-making at night as an act of urban production. This is of critical importance if we are to develop a wider and deeper knowledge of the situated, relational and practised nature of the city after dark, and be able to rethink and reclaim it as a time and place that gives expression to the many different forms of music-making, mobile or otherwise, it produces.

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