

Alan Williams: Surround Sound Auteurs and the Fragmenting of Genre

Citation:

Williams, A. (2019). Surround Sound Auteurs and the Fragmenting of Genre. In Gullö, J.O., Rambarran, S., & Isakoff, K., (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 12th Art of Record Production Conference Mono: Stereo: Multi* (pp. 319-328). Stockholm: Royal College of Music (KMH) & Art of Record Production.

Abstract

Multi-channel sonic experience is derived from a myriad of technological processes, shaped by market forces, configured by creative decision makers and translated through audience taste preferences. From the failed launch of quadrophonic sound in the 1970s, through the currently limited, yet sustained niche market for 5.1 music releases, a select number of mix engineers and producers established paradigms for defining expanded sound stages. Whereas stereophonic mix practices in popular music became ever more codified during the 1970s, the relative paucity of multi-channel releases has preserved the individual sonic fingerprint of mixers working in surround sound. Moreover, market forces have constricted their work to musical genres that appeal to the audiophile community that supports the format. This study examines the work of Elliot Scheiner, Bob Clearmountain, Giles Martin, and Steven Wilson to not only analyze the sonic signatures of their mixes, but to address how their conceptions of the soundstage become associated with specific genres, and serve to establish micro-genres of their own. I conclude by arguing that auteurs such as Steven Wilson have amassed an audience for their mixes, with a catalog that crosses genre boundaries, establishing a mode of listening that in itself represents an emergent genre – surround rock.

Surround Sound Auteurs and the Fragmenting of Genre

The history of stereophonic sound... is a history of discontinuity... it is a multichannel history consisting of numerous intersecting flows of sound, music, scientific inquiry, financial investment and invention, and listening contexts and practices that lead only occasionally toward any kind of unitary movement, cohesion or success. (Théberge, Devine, and Everett 2015)

So authors Paul Théberge, Kyle Devine, and Tom Everett frame the development of stereo as both format and cultural marker. The road to surround sound is equally convoluted, with a series of loudly heralded, yet soundly rejected introductions of expanded listening formats such as Quad in the 1970s, and the competing formats of SACDs and DVD-As at the turn of the

millennium, and quite possibly incorporating the latest buzz – Dolby Atmos. Surround sound is a losing bet that won't quite go away. Despite multiple market failures, a select group of audio professionals and creative musicians still pine for a world that envelopes the listener, and though the amount of music being offered to the public in such formats is miniscule in comparison to all recorded music, there is a small, but growing segment of recorded music audiences that have embraced surround sound not only as a listening preference, but as a *cause*, a mission. This article examines some of the figures who have shaped this listening experience, who have crafted the templates, and who have authored not only specific album mixes, but the very definition of what surround sound *sounds* like. I will focus on two points – what designates someone as a surround sound auteur, and what is it that is actually being authored.

Eliott Scheiner became an early proponent of surround, and served as mixing engineer on significant number of 5.1 releases at the turn of the millennium. In most cases, these were canonic “classic rock” catalog re-issues from the 1970s, reflecting the industry model of introducing new formats via established titles that had successfully introduced the CD over a decade earlier. Scheiner had serious credits as a recording/mixing engineer from Van Morrison's *Moondance*, to Steely Dan's *Gaucha*, and his stature in the industry guaranteed that his work in the new format would be state-of-the-art, yet reliably familiar. The dictate was to maintain the basic stereo soundfield of the original mixes, just extend it somewhat into an added dimension. But Scheiner had other ideas. Recalling his initial exposure to surround sound, Scheiner said, “When I heard the whole 5.1 concept for the first time, it blew my mind... The thought of being able to create a new environment for music, a whole fresh, new approach, really energized me.” (Walsh 2001)

However, Scheiner initially opted for a partially fresh, not particularly new approach to crafting surround mixes. The standard 5.1 array of L-C-R, with L and R rear channels supplemented by a low frequency subwoofer emerged from movie theater audio experiments in the 1970s. And reflecting Théberge, Devine, and Everett's summation of stereo's complex network of progenitors, the center channel – crucial for film dialog – perplexed mixers who were expert at creating a phantom center by balancing L/R signals for stereo. Scheiner has stated that his early mixes grappled with center channel questions, though he soon developed an approach that generally ignored the center channel, and thus resembling the quadrophonic mixes briefly issued in the mid-70s.

Yet, a comparison of quad mixes and Scheiner's 5.1 mixes highlights some significantly different approaches to soundfield placement. Just as early stereo releases highlighted discrete channel separation, many early quad mixes featured a dramatic separation of channel information. Scheiner initially countered this with a more immersive approach that paralleled the

move towards a fairly codified stereo soundfield during the early 1970s, with a great deal of “phantom” center, both L/R and F/R.

But as Scheiner gained confidence, his mixes moved towards something that was certainly a new approach, with information appearing discretely in any of four channels, and occasionally moving across the entire soundscape – left to right; front to back.

When a lot of film mixers do scoring, they set up the room with ambient mics and all you hear coming out of the rear are the ambient mics. But I'm a big believer in using the rear speakers for more than that—we've got the speakers, let's use them. I think if the upcoming buyer of a DVD is going to spend some money, they want to hear more than just some reverbs out of the rear. They're paying a higher price for the piece, and I think they want to be blown away. I think they want to experience something new. So I tend to surround the listener with music. I take chances. I'll put strange things in the rear. (Scheiner, in Jackson 1999)

But though Scheiner was enthusiastic, most record companies were reluctant to commit significant investments in untested formats and experiences. Scheiner was a safe bet, and companies frequently hired him to oversee remixes without consulting the original production team or artists themselves.

Record companies are going to the original guys who mixed some classic records and saying, ‘We want to redo this, but we can't afford you’... The integrity of the original is at stake... The record might sound okay because it's in 5.1. But it might not have any bearing or resemblance to what the original record was. I think you have to maintain some kind of integrity. (Scheiner, *ibid.*)

One interesting episode reveals the tensions between insider/outsider authorship of 5.1 remixes. Following the body of work Scheiner had crafted in a few short years, he was tasked with mixing Queen's *Night at the Opera* in surround. As a label-driven initiative, Scheiner's mix was rush-released without the approval of the surviving band members, though evidently with the participation of Roy Thomas Baker, the original producer. Guitarist Brian May quickly and publicly voiced his displeasure, and demanded that Scheiner create a different 5.1 remix of the album that followed May's specifications. Though Scheiner acknowledged the right of performers to be satisfied with work issued in their own name, he also argued that his mix was more exciting, more original, and implied that an artist need not always have the final word.

Brian also had me move certain things. In 'Bohemian,' when it cuts to the opera section, I originally put the piano in the rear for those quarter notes: da da da da, da da da da. Everything went to black except there. But Brian said, 'Can we bring it out to the front a little?' So I did - and it just doesn't have the same impact for me. I thought my version was good because it drew your at-

tention, it did something different, it wasn't ordinary. But that's my opinion. Brian's the artist. His name's on that record, not mine. (Scheiner, in Richardson, 2002)

But market forces stymied his momentum. No matter how loudly he championed surround sound, even going so far as to lend his name to a 5.1, high-end car audio system briefly included as a standard feature in Acura models, a confused introduction of competing formats for surround resulted in a lack of market interest, and the initial enthusiasm for surround as the “next big thing” quickly waned. Mixes that had been prepped for release were permanently shelved, and Scheiner began to focus on performances that might still utilize surround for the home video market, rather than audio-only content, leaving the surround market to other industry peers and upstarts.

Countering Scheiner, Bob Clearmountain, one of the first superstar mix engineers ignored the potential remix market with a few exceptions – notably remixes of albums for which he was the original stereo mix engineer. His argument was that most albums of the previous decades had been *conceived* as stereo, and thus surround remixes were akin to colorizing black and white films. However, regarding his remix of Roxy Music's *Avalon*, Clearmountain expressed the notion that the many textural elements in the recording tested the limits of the stereo soundfield, and that had the 5.1 format been in existence at the time, he would have crafted a 5.1 mix as the ideal solution, grateful that the option to craft the new mix allowed the music to be heard as intended.

While (we) were working on the original stereo mixes in 1982, I can recall imagining the sound image as being more than just 'stereo.' There were so many wonderful things going on, I wished I'd had more places to put them than just two speakers. I wanted to be totally immersed in the album's soundscapes, and tried as best I could to create as much depth as possible, nothing less than such a brilliant production deserved. That is why I was thrilled ... to be involved with the 5.1 Surround mix of *Avalon* ... It is how I'd always imagined this album should be presented – the surround experience actually drawing you inside the music... (We) did our best to keep the vibe and content of the original mixes intact while literally adding a new dimension to the listening experience.... If there was ever an album that cried out for a surround mix, I believe *Avalon* would be it. (Clearmountain, 2003)

Thus, the notion of authorship is seen as an extension of the original mix, rather than a translation of another author's work. Like Scheiner, Clearmountain became a convert. But further highlighting the role of market and industry, Clearmountain, of his own accord, took the initiative of creating surround mixes simultaneously with the stereo mixes for every project he worked on since the early 2000s, only to see them *all* languish in storage (Clearmountain, 2015).

Pedigree matters, even if the connection to the original recordings is somewhat indirect. Nick Davis, engineer on later period Genesis was brought in to oversee stereo and 5.1 mixes of the entire catalog, including over a dozen albums that Davis had no original credits. Similarly, James Guthrie, the engineer for Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, and Roger Waters's solo career recordings, was commissioned to craft 5.1 mixes of *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here*, though he was not a part of the original production team.

Like Clearmountain's work on *Avalon*, Jerry Harrison's 5.1 mixes of the Talking Heads catalog were generally well-received in large part because of his status as a central participant in the making of the original recordings. More experimental placement, in some cases fairly different approaches from the stereo soundfield and element mix levels were more easily accepted than if a similar mix had been crafted by an outside engineer. And like Clearmountain, Harrison touted 5.1 as the ideal format for certain titles such as *Remain in Light* and *Speaking in Tongues* that featured complex layers of instruments and voices. At the same time, he expressed some anxiety that surround sound might not offer much more of a heightened experience for other, simpler productions in the band's catalog (Harrison, 2005).

For a brief moment, even contemporary recordings were issued in surround sound simultaneously with their stereo counterparts. As resident surround auteur, Elliot Scheiner was enlisted to oversee many of these mixes. Free from the canonical ghosts of stereo past, Scheiner employed far more drastic and experimental approaches to his mixes for Beck's *Sea Change*, and perhaps most notoriously for Flaming Lips' *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* where the soundfield was treated as something in active motion rather than as fixed position, with a great deal of panning movement throughout the soundfield. Such dramatic approaches to the mix placement met with controversy from listeners either championing the heightened effect, or lamenting the dizzying distraction of such an active soundfield. But none of these contemporary releases were able to establish the format in the marketplace, and subsequent albums were only issued in stereo. Like Quad in the 1970s, the enthusiasm that artists and producers felt having their work represented in a larger soundfield was not met by their audiences who were content to experience the music in stereo, often under headphones, and increasingly in cars and later portable devices, none of which were suited to surround listening.

One significant experiment posed the most potential for establishing a larger market for surround sound – The Beatles' *Love*. The project involved not only crafting mixes in stereo and surround, but treating the sacred musical elements preserved on a series of multitrack tapes in sometimes radically altered form, following the then-current “mash-up” approach, wherein elements of different recordings were layered on top of one another (Danger Mouse's *The Grey Album*, a melding of The Beatles' “*White Album*” and

Jay-Z's *The Black Album* being perhaps the most well-known example). A radical approach to tampering with iconic recordings might have been the source of much controversy, but as the project was helmed by original producer George Martin, the question of authorship wasn't called into play. In truth, the new mixes were created by Martin's son Giles, a team approach that allowed an authority figure to guide and approve, while a mix engineer not present for the original work could approach it from a new perspective (Wills, 2008). The pedigree of Giles Martin's indirect connection to the Beatles catalog is crucial to the amount of discretion he was given over some of the most tightly controlled audio artifacts on earth. Such radical re-workings would be unimaginable for any other potential engineer (and the relatively tame approaches to surround on both the *Yellow Submarine* and *Anthology* re-issue projects of the 1990s bear this out). The case of Giles Martin might be thought of as "author-by-proxy."

Hearing pieces of several Beatles recordings juxtaposed against one another allowed fans to experience deeply familiar music freshly anew, and Beatleologists could approach the results as forensic evidence, a lifting of the veil that allowed elements to be auditioned outside of the context of the previously released composites. And while it took over a decade, Giles Martin was later tasked with reimagining the soundfield for the 2017 re-issue of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, in both stereo and 5.1. The stereo mix is a fascinating mash-up of 1960s psychedelic musical arrangements recast within a 21st century codified stereo soundfield. Drums in pseudo-stereo, with a significantly increased amount of low end frequency information, etc. The result sounds like second and third generation Beatles-inspired pop – musically imitative, but functioning within more contemporary approaches to stereo. Highlighting the difference between influence and pastiche, consider the recordings of post-Beatles homage that replicate the oddly discrete placement of drums in one channel, guitars in the other. Such a mix recalls a soundfield experience identified as "Beatles," distinctly different from music that might be described as "Beatlesque."

Giles Martin's stereo mix retained much of the power of the original mono mixes, while tipping a hat to later period conceptions of the stereo soundfield. His 5.1 mix of *Sgt. Pepper* eschewed the more radical placement of elements in his *Love* re-conception, resulting in an experience that was more immersive than expansive. The re-issue met with critical favor, and the lavishly packaged, expensive box set sold in significant numbers that it placed in many top ten sales charts in its initial weeks of release. It is too soon to tell if the release actually expanded the audience for surround, though sales were healthy enough that rumors abound that the *White Album* and *Abbey Road* may see similar re-issue treatments. The very existence of a 5.1 mix indicates that there is a perceived audience for surround sound, an audience that has encouraged and sustained a healthy re-issue program of 60s and 70s classic progressive rock.

Steven Wilson, founder of second generation prog band, Porcupine Tree was introduced to surround sound when observing Elliot Scheiner craft a 5.1 mix of that band's 2002 release, *In Absentia*. The possibilities of surround sound as a new standard listening format greatly appealed to Wilson, who proceeded to craft 5.1 mixes of his subsequent Porcupine Tree projects. Prog musicians weaned on the catalogs of early 70s progressive rock not only maintained a tradition of musical complexity and instrumental virtuosity, but extended the fascination with studio craft, and carefully detailed mixes. It is difficult to determine the extent to which the influence of 70s progressive rock was compositional or performative, and that of the approach to recording and mixing.

As economic forces drove older bands to yet again re-package their catalogs, it was determined that new value needed to be added to the updated product. Beyond remastering decades old mixes, a brand new audio experience might appeal to jaded listeners – new mixes in high-resolution stereo, as well as 5.1 surround would afford the opportunity for old fans to hear the music anew. But who could be entrusted with reshaping soundscapes into something fresh and new, without conflicting with deeply embedded memories of the music? As a second generation prog musician with growing acclaim and stature, with a number of production credits that exhibited all the hallmarks of 70s-era studio craft, Wilson was positioned at the nexus of past and future.

Musicians such as Robert Fripp who had endured protracted legal actions in order to gain control over their master recordings were unlikely to hand over authorship to industry anointed figures such as Elliot Scheiner. But a fellow musician might approach the remixes from a fresh angle, while being deferential to the older generation reluctant to hand over their hard-won legacies. Impressed with Wilson's work as both musician and producer, Fripp asked him to create new stereo mixes of King Crimson's catalog. As an enthusiast for surround sound, Wilson suggested that 5.1 mixes might also be of interest to Crimson fans, as well as the audiophile market willing to embrace any music that came at them from all sides.

The initial release of the remixed *In the Court of the Crimson King* brought Wilson accolades from fans and reviewers, and not only was he asked to oversee the entire Crimson catalog re-issue, but was soon approached by the stakeholders in several other progressive-era bands – Yes, Jethro Tull, and Gentle Giant. Before he knew it, Wilson had a second career as the default auteur of 70s progressive rock for 21st century ears. With new audiences discovering him through his production work, Wilson's solo career as a musician also benefitted from an expanding audience, with audiophiles embracing his own catalog as if it were part of the pantheon of canonical progressive rock.

But as a second generation progressive music fan, Wilson also grew up with 80s pop music, and his sense of an exciting mix owes as much to the

more fragmented, programmed, and post-automation music as it does to the trappings of progressive rock. So while he continued to oversee re-mixed releases from 70s rock acts, he also put his stamp on stereo and surround remixes of albums such as Tears for Fears' *Songs From the Big Chair*, and the ongoing reissue program of the XTC catalog, as well as applying his perspective to contemporary prog/metal acts such as Opeth.

With a credit list of surround mixes that rivals Elliot Schiener, Steven Wilson has become a *brand* to a growing number of audiophile-oriented consumers, willing to take a chance on music that falls outside their normal musical tastes, simply to experience another iteration of a Steven Wilson soundscape. On audiophile chat threads, Wilson is frequently invoked as the ultimate authority on surround mixes, with occasional asides along the likes of, "I'm not really much of a (fill in the blank) fan, but if Steven Wilson has done the surround, I want to hear it." Wilson is quite aware of this, and has capitalized on this emerging market by approaching his own music from a surround sound perspective, noting,

There are, actually a lot of people out there now... a growing audiophile community who love things that sound great. ... And there's surround sound; there are people out there that care about that. They are a minority, but they are a *substantial* minority. And they're growing. (Wilson, 2017)

If Jerry Harrison and Bob Clearmountain claim that certain productions cry out for surround sound treatment, the reverse corollary might also be true – other productions do not warrant expanded soundfields. This distinction implies that production style differences in recordings are as crucial as musical ones in determining genre distinctions. And production approaches that are consistent across a variety of artists and a broad spectrum of musical styles might align such work under a commonly shared heading. Even if tempo, lyrical themes, instrumental and vocal styles and timbres are widely disparate, there is an attention to sonic and mix detail that unites Yes, Tears for Fears, and Opeth fans. It is for this reason that I posit that Steven Wilson represents the emergence of a new sub-genre – "surround rock."

Whereas audiophiles of the 1950s and 60s were often painted as obsessed with frequency response and conspicuous sound system consumption, current audiophiles spend as much time in chat groups praising the musical attributes of the recordings they embrace as they do citing impressive sonic replication. I argue that listeners feel that a carefully crafted mix honors their dedication to both audio *and* music, and they can be as excited by programmed percussion loops as they are by guitar arpeggios, provided the soundscape that results reflects an attention to detail in both songcraft and soundcraft. Just as genre distinctions place music in different categories and cultural spaces, surround mixes assign sounds to discrete, localized positions. Yet this fragmenting of sound can also create the sensation of an im-

mersive whole. If rock fans seek out music that provides dynamic energy, while jazz fans look for spontaneous invention, or classical fans a world of ordered precision, surround sound aficionados desire sonic immersion, whether it is Opeth, Roxy Music, or Yes. It is a *type of listening* that unites these recordings, and sets them apart from other musical experiences – a form of genre unto itself.

For many surround sound listeners, it is a history of mixing approaches that unites otherwise distinctly different musical genres. A fondness for spatially placed delays across a soundfield may be formed from an acquaintance with Pink Floyd, Lee “Scratch” Perry, or New Order, and generate a positive response when encountered in recordings in any musical genre. David Brackett, working from Mikhail Bakhtin, underscores the importance of historical practices in defining genre distinctions.

Musical texts, in the process of citing the conventions of genre, are ‘shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with’ the musical texts of others working in similar genres. Each musical text ‘is filled with echoes and reverberations of other’ musical texts ‘to which it is related by the communality of the’ musical genre. Every musical text ‘must be regarded primarily as a *response* to preceding’ musical texts of a given genre. (Brackett, 2016: 15)

Brackett goes on to posit that,

the meaning-producing relationship extends beyond what occurs between a text and a listener, and depends on a feedback loop in which ideas and assumptions about genre circulate among music producers (musicians and music-industry workers), audience members, and critics. (ibid: 16)

Steven Wilson’s statement about a growing subculture of surround sound and audiophile listeners illustrates an awareness of audience that reflects the type of “feedback loop” that Brackett describes. Listening modalities formed over a period of time, that include even a rough analysis of audio production practices result in audiences able to discuss the placement of sonic elements in a soundfield, degrees of digital limiting and compression, etc. as well as responses to musical performance and composition. Indeed, for many of these listeners, there is no distinction made between musical and sonic text.

Musical/sonic relationships are present in all forms of recorded music, but the frequent comments made by audiophile listeners that make this relationship explicit, as well as the self-identified niche audience, cult or sub-culture designation of being an “audiophile,” correlates listening practice and production technique preferences to individual identity. Indeed, it is the limited range of this subculture that highlights hi-resolution/surround sound as a genre distinct from other forms of audio recording, and further blurs the distinction between “musical” and “audio” texts for these listeners. A similar

argument could be made for fans of monaural recordings – whether as fans of Enrico Caruso, Charley Patton, Phil Spector, or Jack White. It is the preference for specific forms of audio playback that sets these audiences apart from the stereophonic normative “mainstream,” a subculture that emerges in opposition to a norm, a community framed by genre, a genre based upon the listening experience of particular audio replication techniques, established and identified by sonic auteurs such as Scheiner, Martin, Wilson and others.

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