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Melodies, Moods, and The Zone as a Hole¹

Abstract: I traveled to Chernobyl in June 2018 with a small group of academics and artists to think about what dwelling in and passing through a zone of exclusion might entail, not in a metaphysical sense but also not *not* in a metaphysical sense. As I learned, thinking about The Zone (as I'll call it) is not a straightforward affair. On the one hand The Zone is exactly what you might think it is – a radioactive territory whose crumbling ruins and growing wildlife bear witness to the failure of the soviet nuclear dream. Yet on the other it's also not what you think it is, like a hole is not the nothing it appears to be but a something that, strictly speaking, it isn't. Because of this ontological uncertainty The Zone is not only something to wander in but something to be wondered about. And as such, it may be better dreamed than simply thought of. Drawing on my zonal meanderings and a speculative-pragmatic form of acoustic ecology, as well as employing a liberal dose of poetic licence, I develop a fabulation that takes a stroll through a forgotten cemetery, an improvised melody played beneath a secret radar array, and a daydream had in a dilapidated post office as expressive of a thought experiment whose meaningful result is more a fictional achievement than a factual reckoning. Images and sounds from my peregrinations through The Zone figure in this work as elements that advance a story about a future people displaced by climate change who evolve the ability to lure affections from environmental spaces by casting melodies into them. In this future history we learn about the costs of noise and the nature of holes; we discover that media travel backwards in time, and we sense not what The Zone is but what mood it's in.

Keywords: Chernobyl; moods; soundscape; melody-casting; acoustic ecology.

**Listening – http://strangemonk.com/MMHaudio/1_future_casting.mp3
“melody-casting”**

Capture date: April 1, 2020

Anterior date: ca. 2198

¹ This work includes images and audio excerpts.



Image 1

What you’ve just heard is a recording from the late twenty-second century of “melody casting”, a practice of throwing tunes or melodic figures into acoustic spaces with the aim of catching their form of feeling. The signal is a little weak in this example because it’s difficult to capture sounds that haven’t yet happened, and the fluctuations are due to the way time dilates when you’re just making things up. I’ll explain more about this practice shortly but I want to introduce it upfront in order to set the tone of this essay and to propose a way to think about my melodic peregrinations through The Chernobyl Zone of Exclusion – The Zone – in June 2018 as a form of mood work.

Now, why this is a meaningful way to think about The Zone isn’t entirely clear to me. In fact, nothing about The Zone is clear to me. It’s not even clear to me why I need to think about The Zone and its moods at all. Perhaps I was just so “in the zone” when I was in The Zone, so intent on the sense of being there that my self-conscious way of relating to its moods determined how it would appear self-consciously as being found in a mood. In other words, The Zone was always exactly as I found it, and I always found it with undue awareness of its possibilities of being found in a mood.

I suppose I brought this on myself. I was, after all, trying to cast my own melodies into The Zone and feel my way through what has become a placeholder of both utopian and dystopian dreams.



Image 2

Stalker (1979) Andrei Tarkovsky (fair use )

Like the “Stalker” in Tarkovsky’s film who tossed nut-weighted bandages into his Zone, I would throw melodies into mine. But where the former’s nut-tossing was a measure he took to secure safe passage for his clients, my melodies were a way for me to plant affections that would bias my cognitive processes and steer my perception towards certain appraisals rather than others. That is, I was sewing moods. Yet, nut or tune, the aim, it seems, is the same: orient to the structures of feeling determining The Zone’s relationship with the world that it can have only by having it through those who stalk it.

So, it’s no wonder that when I walked through dilapidated buildings, ambled about rusted farm machinery, gawked at the catfish in the unused cooling ponds, or marveled at the impossible structure spanning the ruins of reactor no.4, The Zone appeared *exactly* as I expected it to – attuned to its own self-conscious appraisal. But why melodies rather than nuts?

Unlike nuts, melodies are so much better at drawing moods out of hiding. No doubt, metal nuts are incredible. They’re a wonderful human invention that surely keep society as well as bridges and car parts held together. And there’s definitely something poetic about flinging them with ragged strips of cloth trailing behind into grass and sand dunes. But nuts are really not very good at binding to places or disposing us to relate to the world in some affectively limned way.

Melodies, however, are. Melodies are exceptionally good at fastening different times and places together. Even if those times and places are wholly imagined or dormant in a tea-soaked madeleine, melodies fuse a moment's passing with their own carrying on to give “shape and texture to being, feeling and doing.”² In a sense, melodies choreograph ways of relating *feelingly* with the world that contours how it's thought about and experienced. Unlike nuts, because melodies are events, and events, as Brian Massumi notes, attune us to a “qualitative-relational order”, an order of “affectively inflected, direct perception”,³ the world they disclose to those who hear them acquires (at least as long as they're listened to) a taken for granted import.

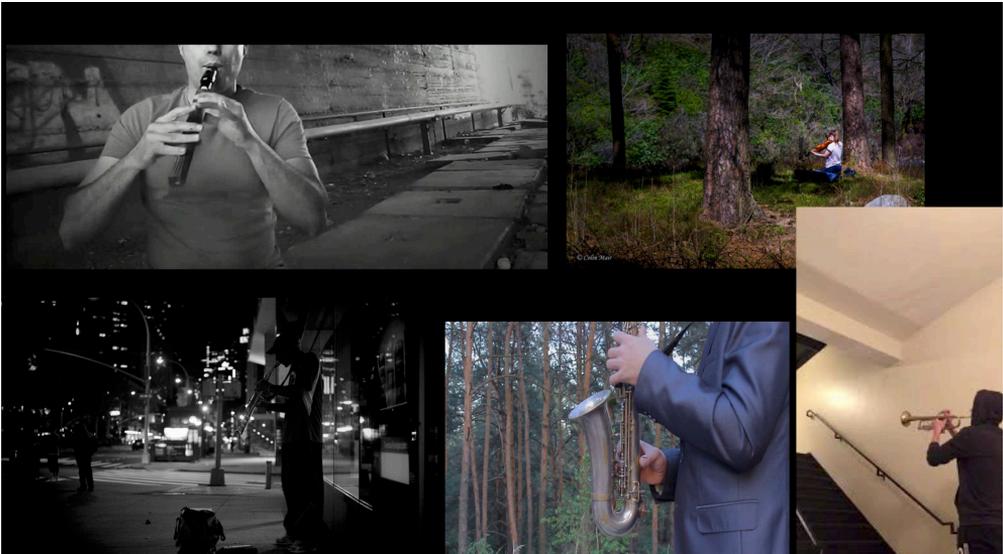


Image 3

This is something that I learned a number of years ago when studying the musical habits of the “Castr’s” a small and scattered community of people displaced from the North American west coast during the second wave of climate collapse that took place between 2170 and 2180. The Castr’s were not the only people to migrate inland and northward as coastal cities became inhospitable. They are, however, distinct for their practice of casting melodies into environments and spaces in order to draw out an affect and attune to its mood. The origins and precise aims of melody casting are obscure, but it’s generally believed to have developed in response to a radical shift in

² Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 52.

³ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 115.

the acoustic environment that followed changes in the global climate, a shift that can be described in terms developed in the late twentieth century by the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer to distinguish between “hi-fidelity” and “lo-fidelity” soundscapes.

For Schafer, a hi-fi soundscape describes a perceived environment in which sounds, because they overlap less often, can be heard discretely, critically, and with a depth of field or perspective that grants more significance to acoustic signals. Conversely, a lo-fi soundscape is overcrowded with sounds. It is an environment in which perspective is lost and distance shrinks; “there is,” as Schafer writes, “only presence”⁴.

Clearly Schafer’s elaboration of hi- and lo-fi soundscapes is a product of a particular perspective specific to the late-twentieth century North America, where the concepts of nature and culture hadn’t yet been recognized by acoustic ecologists as predicates for a certain manner, style, or “way in which reality behaves”⁵ and not as distinct domains or substances. Nevertheless, despite its implicit bias towards soundscapes marked by a colonial past that represented mythically “quieter times,”⁶ Schafer’s analytic remains effective insofar as it speculates on condition that has practical consequences with respect to how one is able to relate to one’s lived environments sonically. This capacity to discern and contrive significance in sound formations Schafer called our “sonological competence”⁷ and through his model of a soundscape’s variable fidelity developed the thesis that the expansion of generic lo-fi soundscapes of urban and industrial sprawls was diminishing this competence.

Although Schafer’s concerns were not unfounded, he did make certain assumptions about the character of lo-fi environments – namely, that masking and overcrowding of acoustic signals largely derived from the sounds of machines. But it turned out that lo-fi soundscapes were not exclusively the by-product of industry. The majority of sounds that began crowding the twenty-first century soundscape did not “follow directly from the functioning of devices or of machines”, but were added electronically to the environment by a multitude of devices in order to “help us better follow our transactions or perceive our silent gestures.”⁸ Masking in this techocultural lo-fi environment is better understood, then, not as a matter of acoustic signals overcrowding one another, but as a swarm of sound effects competing for attention.

⁴ R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 43.

⁵ Engram Knots, *Categorical Lies and their Pragmatic Use in Theoretical Fictions* (0°N 0°E: Null Island Press, 2013).

⁶ See Mitchell Akiyama, “Unsettling the World Soundscape Project: Soundscapes of Canada and the Politics of Self-Recognition,” *Sounding Out!* (blog), August 20, 2015, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2015/08/20/unsettling-the-world-soundscape-project-soundscapes-of-canada-and-the-politics-of-self-recognition>, acc. June 10, 2020.

⁷ Schafer, *Tuning of the World*, 153–55.

⁸ Michel Chion, *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise*, trans. by James A. Steintrager (Durham and London: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 146.

As such, Schafer’s appeal to “natural” soundscapes as models for an improved acoustic design and increased sonological competence was misguided. It was misguided on two counts: first, as noted, his idea of a natural soundscape relies on a colonial settler myth of nature as pristine that contradicts his own project for humans to actively intervene and design their soundscapes.⁹ And second, the acoustic world of the twenty-first century, with its beeps, whistles, and chirps that fit into district acoustic niches¹⁰ speaks in a way that supposedly only nature did. In other words, the acoustical makeup of the so-called natural soundscape that Schafer invoked also describes the soundscape of technoculture.

So rather than promote what Schafer called “clairaudience”,¹¹ the technocultural second nature acoustic world of the twenty-first century spawned a host of counter-masking strategies. Under these lo-fi conditions sound became something to block rather than listen to. And while all types of counter-masking techniques were developed, which included the wide-scale implementation of noise-canceling technologies – such as the Reichstag *Sound Curtain*¹² – the most effective counter-masking tactic turned out to be music.



Image 4: Reichstag *Sound Curtain*

⁹ It’s ironic, too, that while Schafer and The World Soundscape Project, a research group he founded at Simon Fraser University in the early in 1970s, argued the splitting of sound from source by mechanical or electro-acoustic reproduction promotes a condition they called “schizophonia,” they nevertheless relied on such means of reproduction to conserve and reconnect *people to significant sounds that they stood to lose* (Akiyama, 114).

¹⁰ See Bernie Krause, “Bioacoustics, Habitat Ambience in Ecological Balance,” *Whole Earth Review* 57 (1987).

¹¹ Schafer, *Tuning of the World*, 270.

¹² This was also known as the “Wrapped Reichstag,” a 1995 art work made by Christo Vladimirov Javacheff and Jeanne-Claude Denat de Guillebon.

There are several reasons why music was found to be a more effective than noise cancelling techniques or technologies. One reason is physiological, which suggests that because humans are endowed with a particularly robust set of neurological connections between the auditory and motor cortices, the brain is primed for beat perception and thereby rhythmic and pitch discrimination.¹³ Another reason is that music promotes social cohesion and awareness by expanding occasions for contact and synchronizing behaviours.¹⁴ But the prevailing speculation for music's counter-masking efficacy is that music creates refrains that territorialize spaces and times in ways that conjure a lived environment of rhythms, rates and regulated intervals. In other words, music cancels noise because it makes a sense of chaos.¹⁵ This means that lo-fi acoustic signals are, strictly speaking, less counter-masked by musical sounds than assimilated to their affective refrains, becoming ingredient to a semblance of vitality that humans make practical use of to modulate their imaginative faculties.¹⁶ Ironically, Schafer disparagingly referred to music used in this way as “musical drool” and lamented that “it reduced a sacred art to a slobber.”¹⁷ However, even more ironic, given his ecological sensibilities, is that Schafer overlooked the fact that song birds – creatures whose sounds often give hi-fi environments their most remarkable complexion – are some of the most prolific droolers and flood the world daily with their dribble. So perhaps rather than a “concession to lo-fi-ism”,¹⁸ as Schafer asserts, musical drool is actually an basic creaturely way of making sense of chaos that humans have abstracted and elevated to the status of culture.

¹³ See Henkjan Honing, *The Evolving Animal Orchestra*, trans. Sherry MacDonald (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2019); and Gary Tomlinson, *A Million Years of Music: The Emergence of Human Modernity* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

¹⁴ See Jay Schulkin and Greta Raglan, “The evolution of music and human social capability,” *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 8 (2014): 1–12; and Ian Cross, “Music as a Communicative Medium,” in *Prehistory of Language*, Vol. 1, ed. Rudolf Botha and Chris Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 113–44.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari propose that music is first and foremost a territorializing force that participates in the cosmic production of dynamic qualitative-relational orders, or what they call refrains. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “Of the Refrain,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Translated by Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 310–50.

¹⁶ See Eldritch Priest, “Felt as Thought (or, musical abstraction and the semblance of affect)” in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, edited by Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle, 45–63 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹⁷ Schafer, *Tuning of the World*, 98.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.



Image 5

**Listening – http://strangemonk.com/MMHaudio/3_whistling.mp3
*whistling***

Now, un-surprisingly, the increase in acoustic emissions in the twenty-first century paralleled that of carbon emissions. As the climate began to collapse so too did the soundscape. But at a certain point a curious inversion took place. The collapse in climate patterns that eroded long-standing societal and environmental systems, including the media systems responsible for channeling musical drool, in a sense, repaired the soundscape. As urban centres became less able to sustain large populations, and as the world began to lose some of its electronic definition, a much more favorable signal-to-noise ratio developed that established conditions for the emergence of hi-fi soundscapes.

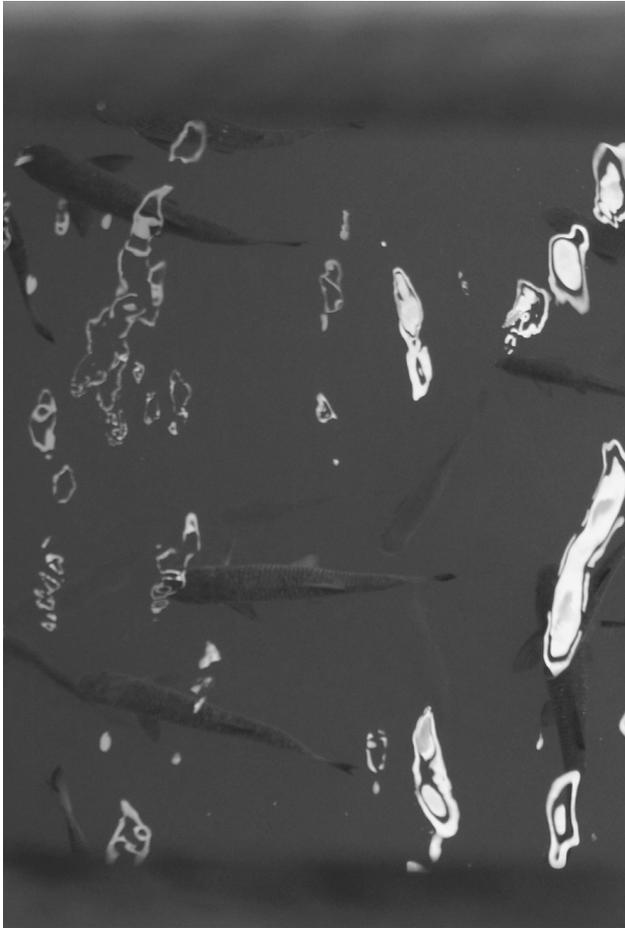


Image 6

The problem, however, was that years of using music to mask and to carve out zones of virtual sense left humankind with a reduced ability to perceive and formulate ideas about non-musical acoustic signals.

The future history of acoustic ecology becomes a little blurry at this point, but it's believed that people began to negotiate these budding hi-fi soundscapes in ways that leveraged their *musicological* competence, a competence grounded in the intuition that the musical use of sound binds internal processes of awareness with external material flows and rhythms. The speculation is that melody-casting became a way to directly probe the affective qualities of acoustic environments and to express how a given space suggests ways of developing a lived relationship with it. In other words, melody-casting is a technique for inducing moods.



Image 7

Listening – http://strangemonk.com/MMHaudio/4_duga_melody.mp3
Duga Melody

I don't claim to fully understand how melody-casting works or that I'm even doing it correctly. This is partly because there is no such thing as melody-casting (yet), so there's nothing for me to get right or wrong about it. But it's also partly because I'm making it up as I go along, both here and now in this discursive domain and then and there as I actually wandered about The Chernobyl Zone of Exclusion.

But I think I more or less got the hang of it because every time I tossed a modal arabesque into an overgrown boulevard or threw a dirge into a ramshackle cottage, I'd catch a mood. Or at least I thought I would. At some point it dawned on me that rather than catching moods I was actually seeding them and cultivating a veritable sound garden of melodic affections. And while this didn't scuttle my conceit, it did cause me to reflect on why I was carrying on this way.

I believed my intention of going to The Zone with an instrument in tow was to one day write a story about a future people who develop a practice of using musical sounds to help shape the perceived significance of the world. In taking my melodica I was, in a way, now just planting moods but planting ideas for a yarn that I would spin when it came time to recount my experiences in The Zone. But something disquieting happened that caused me to change my plans.



Image 8

During a walk through Priyapat, a small ghost town just north of Chernobyl's nuclear plants, our group heard the cries of what we thought was a dog trapped in a dilapidated apartment complex. It turned out that the dog wasn't a dog but a red fox. And it wasn't trapped in the building. The fox, it turned out, had fallen into a sewer duct through an open manhole cover. As my fellow travelers stood around the manhole fretting over how to free the fox from its predicament, I found on the floor of the forest that had grown around the apartment building, a broken record. Although we weren't supposed to remove anything from The Zone, I nevertheless liberated this object from its desuetude, taking it from its radioactive bed of pine needles back to my record collection at home in Vancouver where it sat next to my copy of Radiohead's *Moon Shaped Pool*, unlistened to until this past fall.

But finding the record isn't what confounded the telling of my story. What threw me off my is what happened as I began outlining the basic plot and developing the theoretical underpinnings that would establish just enough plausibility to give my zonal extemporizations a workable conceptual and aesthetic perch. On a lark, I decided one day to get myself in the mood to write and thought to do so by listening to the record that I found in The Zone. However, as the photograph shows, the record was in no condition to play. Taking a cue from the Czech artist Milan Knižak's work *Broken Music*, in which he glued pieces of different albums together (see below), I mended the record with a piece of vinyl I took from a Muzak album I had found at a local thrift shop years before.



Image 10
Milan Knižak *Broken Music* (1979)

Once the bonding was complete, I placed the record on the turntable and I heard this:

Listening – http://strangemonk.com/MMHaudio/2_past_casting.mp3
Past Casting

You can imagine how astonished I was to hear the performance that you heard at the beginning of this essay on a record that I found discarded on the forest floor of The Zone. I listened again and again both to the recording of a fictional future melody-caster and the recording that was pressed on the record. Even with the missing parts and the different levels noise, it was undeniably the same performance.



Image 11



Image 12
Photo by Sanem Güvenç-Salgirlı

I've given this coincidence a lot of thought and I'm still not certain what to make of it. But this is what I've been able to dream up:

The Zone took my story. It took my melodies and my moods. It took them not because it's greedy but because it's a hole. Earlier I suggested that I found The Zone in a very self-conscious mood. Much like capitalism does these days in those 80s-built malls peddling the wears of third-rate fashion shops, dollar stores, lottery kiosks and discount grocers, The Zone radiates a self-awareness of its nature not as spectacle but as kitsch, as a territory that exploits our formulas for and disposition to fabricate the feeling of meaning.



Image 13

But where the self-conscious mall can disguise its sentimentality in the affective relays provided by a concept like “retro”, The Zone’s self-tenderness is revealed over and over again by representations of its supposedly singular nature. For example: “You are dealing with something that has never occurred on this planet before”, is a line from the 2019 HBO series that stresses the accident as something that not only exceeds our ability to manage it but our ability to rationalize or comprehend its event according to the rules of representation.



Image 14

As such, The Zone’s exaggerated self-awareness penetrates everything said, shown, or thought about it. And this becomes even more intensely the case when its most enduring representation comes from a science fiction film whose Zone is utterly alien and unknowable. Hence, the idea of the Chernobyl Zone of Exclusion inheres in a presupposed context about its alien nature that relies always on its visitors’ endorsement to produce a feeling not of profundity but of incomprehension.



Image 15

This is what makes it a hole. It swallows everything. Like a hole, The Zone is a very special nothing that is hosted by a multiplicity of things: checkpoints and maps, cooling tanks, radioactive dust, radar arrays, and the stories that tell us about how it can't be entirely understood. Taken as a whole, as an aggregate of disaster, disrepair, utopian hopes and marketable hype, it points to exactly "where something isn't."¹⁹



Image 16

¹⁹ Kurt Tucholsky, *Germany? Germany!: Satirical Writings: The Kurt Tucholsky Reader*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Berlinica Publishing LLC, 2017), 123.

The Zone is, then, ontologically parasitical, for it is being wholly *in* something that is not it. This means that The Zone is a perpetual guest and can only be in the mood of its host. Or maybe another way to think about it is that The Zone *is* the mood of the host. As a hole is expressive of its host's way of finding itself composed of parts where it isn't, of, for instance, finding itself in the mood of perforation, The Zone is expressive of a nuclear meltdown's self-conscious need to be found at all – that is, to be stalked....



Image 17

Item: Personal Journal

Location found: Pripyat, June 20, 2018.

Translation: Svitlana Matviyenko

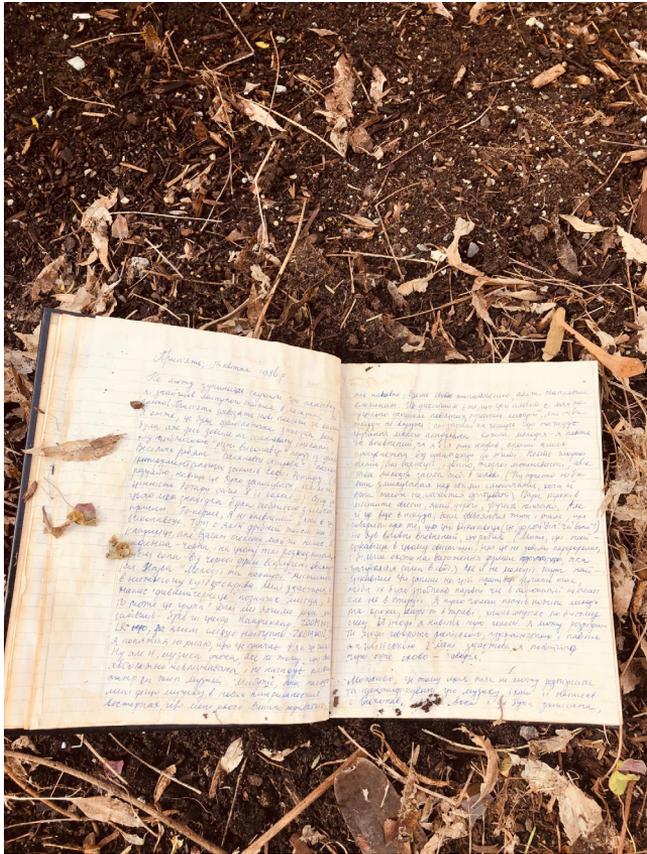


Image 18

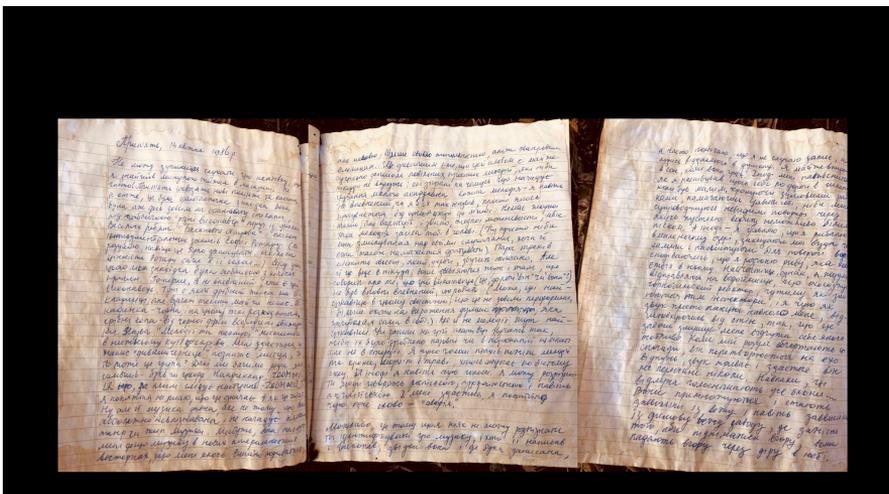


Image 19

Pripyat, April 13, 1986

I've been listening non-stop to a record that I found in the department store last week. Pripyat doesn't often get many new records or tapes, so I was thrilled to find this. It was at the back of the store in the racks filed under "various artists" along with a few other albums that included Jolly Fellows' Banana Islands and a box set of instrumental renditions of works sung by Sofia Rotaru. (I don't really understand the motivation for this box set since Rotaru's music is all about her voice...). These are peculiar albums, but my find is particularly unusual in many ways. For one thing, I'm not certain who the artist is. There's very little text on the cover, which is black with concentric silver circles radiating out from an even blacker hole placed in the centre of the cover.

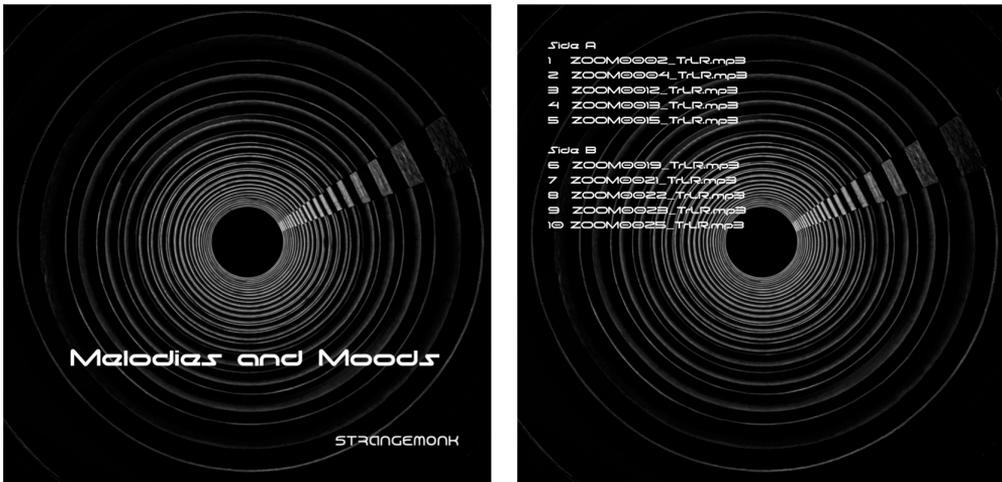


Image 20

[note: This is my rendering of the album cover.]

The title is Melodies and Moods and because it's set off in the lower right corner, I'm assuming that "strangemonk" is the artist (or maybe it's the band?). The tracks printed on the back cover, which looks just like the front, are a series of alphanumeric characters. They all begin with the same letters but end with different numbers. For example: ZOOM0004_TrLR is followed by ZOOM00012_TrLP. I have no idea what that means or what it's supposed to refer to.

Anyways, the music itself is also odd, but not because it's completely unfamiliar or lacking reference to any other kind of music. It reminds me a little of the music in the few American Western films that I've been able to watch, if more in its tone than any genre-specific elements that I can point to. Even more unusual is that the album is almost entirely recordings of slow, simple melodies that just go nowhere and are played on what sounds like a small or feeble accordion.

Every tune – I'm not sure that I would even call the works on this record "tunes" – just meanders and drifts from one phrase to the next. There's no theme, no variation, and definitely no hook to catch a "brain fish." (There's something merciful about that, if irritating its own way.) A couple of tracks feature whistling, which is actually not very good whistling. These whistling figures also go nowhere; they wander aimlessly and are made with little conviction, which suggests to me that the performer may not have been aware that he (she?) was doing it. (Maybe that's what's most interesting about whistling, that it's less a performance and more of an outward expression of thought being lost in itself.)

But it's not just the melodies that are curious. All the tracks on this record sound like they've been made outside or in empty rooms and not in a studio. Behind the melodies I can hear birds chirping and footsteps falling in tall grass or walking over what sounds like shattered glass. And sometimes, I can even hear voices. I can make out Russian and Ukrainian as well as English voices, but I can't understand much of what's being spoken. There is, however, one word that I think I keep hearing – "accident."

Maybe it's because I have such a hard time placing the music, knowing who made it, wondering where it came from, or even when it was recorded, that I often find myself not really listening to the record. Instead, I find myself daydreaming to it.

Sometimes I dream about how I used to hum to myself as child while I walked to school, alone in the frigid winter mornings trying to conjure the feeling of being escorted by invisible guides through a desert of impossibly white sand. Other times I imagine that I'm fishing in a small lake, casting my line into the reeds and whistling at the water's surface, thinking I might coax a fish from hiding.

But more frequently, I drift into reveries on the cooling tower in Chernobyl, on the way that it would catch my voice during inspection shifts, and how the sounds would dance around me, bouncing off the tapered walls in a way that would always put me in a very self-conscious mood. When my mind dwells on this memory and becomes, in a sense, an echo of echoes, the sounds seem like they will never end. Yet they always do, though they never just fade away. In fact, they grow. The echoes multiply as they scale the tower and edge towards the chimney vent, where instead of rising they fall upwards through a hole in the sky.

**Listening – http://strangemonk.com/MMHaudio/5_room.mp3 Image 22
Warehouse**



Image 20
Photo by Oleksiy Radynski

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