

Kevin Concannon, "Topsy-Turvy," in *Extended Play*, Emily Harvey Gallery, New York, February 1988. (C. Nivek, pseudonym) Exhibition curated by Christian Marclay.

## TOPSY-TURVY

### C. Nivek

Thinking back, or backwards, it seems that the Beatles were among the first to use backmastering as a recording technique. The whole thing revolved around the alleged death of Paul McCartney. For a couple of months, virtually every pop radio station in the country revealed new clues, supposedly planted within Beatle records that "proved" Paul was dead. For some reason, John, George, and Ringo didn't want to come right out and tell the world that Paul was dead; they turned it into an elaborate game. You might recall some of the evidence. The cover art for Abbey Road contained a wealth of "evidence." Paul was barefoot - an obvious reference to his status as a cadaver. He was out of step with the other three Beatles crossing the street. The license plate on the car to their right read '28 IF', indicating that IF Paul were alive, he would be 28 years old. Disc Jockeyks around the globe began playing Beatles records backwards on their shows. The best-known piece of evidence was contained (backwards) in the track "Revolution Number 9" from the album The Beatles (1968), better known as The White Album. "Number 9" is a musique concrete piece - to this day perhaps the most widely heard example of that genre. Somebody must have figured that they must have done it for some good reason - surely they couldn't have been serious about that stuff. The phrase "number nine" is repeated over and over throughtout the piece. Play it backwards and it says "turn me on dead man." Sure enough, it does. To this day, I can't figure out how three syllables forward becomes five backward, but there it is. At the end of the track "I'm So Tired" on the same album, John mumbles something unintelligible. Play it backwards and it becomes "Paul is a dead man." Honest.

The Beatles, of course, issued flat out denials that Paul was dead, or that there were any backmasked messages in the records at all. A lot of records were sold as a result of it at any rate. And a lot of people took the whole thing very seriously. As a teenager in Boston, I remember watching a television special starring the high-powered attorney, F. Lee Bailey, dedicated to determining the "truth" about Paul through a thorough examination of the evidence. The iconography was laid out for viewers who could decide for themselves.

I've always had my doubts about it. If you listen to the two bits on The White Album, the clues are there, but the mirrored voices are unnatural, distorted. On the other hand, The Beatles had used backmasking two years earlier in the song "Rain." The last section of that song features a looped and reversed background effect from the vocal lines in the first part of the song. There's no doubt about this one. As the looped parts are heard forward, it's pretty obvious that what you're hearing is

topsy-turvy. On his 1976 cover of the song on the album Faithful, Todd Rundgren - true to the album's title - duplicates the effect precisely. The "number nine"s, however, sound completely natural as "number nine" and more than a little strange as "turn me on dead man". The bit at the end of "I'm So Tired" sounds strange any which way.

After the tremendous amount of attention focused on The White Album, fans began to drive themselves crazy playing their records backwards. During my investigations for this article, several people insisted that Led Zepelin's "Stairway to Heaven" contained backmasked satanic messages. The only hidden satanic message that I could confirm however, is that when the inside illustration is held against a mirror, and thus coupled to itself, an image of the devil emerges from the rocks. Around the same time, a novelty record, "They're Coming to Take Me Away," by someone calling himself Napoleon XIV featured a b-side of the a-side played backward - from beginning to end. The song was about the singer's mental breakdown after being left by his girlfriend.

After a while, the frantic search for meaning by the 'rock and roll Panofskys' subsided. The next significant manifestation of the phenomenon came in a very up-front manner from the performance artist Laurie Anderson in the form of her tape-bow violin. Replacing the horsehair of her violin bow with a piece of prerecorded tape - and the bridge of the violin with a tape blayback head - Anderson pulled the piece of tape forward and backward across the playback head, creating different phrases in each direction from the same piece of tape. The best example of the tape-bow violin is "Juanita" (1977), from the anthology Airwaves. The various phrases that she produces with the tape-bow all refer to the idea of no-one, or no person. Anderson was inspired to create the tape-bow violin while working in her studio. "I was playing the violin and trying to edit tape at the same time and it was the same kind of rocking motion. You know, editing tape across the tape head and then quickly going in to play and record the violin. Pretty soon you start connecting them. That was all it was." Curiously, The Beatles' first use of the technique more explore the recording studio which had begun to serve as more or less another musical instrument for them. (They retired from the stage claiming that they could no longer 'reproduce' their recordings live - a major shift in the general understanding of recording as reproducing live performance.)

For Anderson, there was no intention to slip 'secret' messages into her records. This work did make plain, however, the general working process of those who had done so and would in the future. The next time major attention was focused on backmasking in its more discrete context was in 1985 when Washington's Tipper Gore formed the Parents Music Resource Center with the intention of saving America's children from the subliminal (and the obvious) satanic influences of degenerate rock recording

artists. Congressional hearings addressed the evil messages contained in rock records. "Rock stars" John Denver and Frank Zappa testified. Gore's stated intention was to mandate some form of censorship of rock records. Hardcore heavy metal bands including Adrenaline O.D., Grim Reaper, and Iron Maiden were alleged to have backmasked satanic messages in their records. Gore's organization commissioned the Institute for Bioacoustical Research to investigate the phenomenon. They came up with so little in the way of hard evidence that the P.M.R.C. no longer discusses backmasking at all. (Perhaps they should have hired F. Lee Bailey.)

While there are indeed backmasked messages contained in records of that time, the few confirmed examples that I could find are far from satanic. The band Cheap Trick backmasked "The Lord's Prayer" in the track "Heaven Tonight" on the album of the same name. Prince warns his listeners to prepare for the second coming in a backmasked message on the track "Darling Nikki" from the Purple Rain (1984) album. This one must have proved extremely troublesome for Gore. In its forward direction, the song introduces the title character "in a hotel lobby masturbating in a magazine". In Prince's backmasked message at the end of the track, he says: "Hello, how are you? I'm fine because I know the Lord is coming soon." After the fuss kicked up by the P.M.R.C., a lot of heavy metal bands, some of whom had been guilty of Satan glorification in the past, inserted backmasked messages designed to poke fun at Tipper. Many of them promoted the virtues of Jesus over Satan.

While it might seem that bands resort to backmasking to address only the afterlife and the "other side", a lot of recording artists use the technique for purely acoustic effect. David Bowie had his guitar player learn a riff backwards so that it could be played forward with a resulting "edge" on a track for Scary Monsters (1980). The band XTC, under the pseudonym Dukes of Stratosphear, use reversed guitar licks on a couple of songs on their Psonic Psunpsot album.

By way of final warning to the overly curious, be sure to use only belt-drive turntables for your research and to disconnect the belt when you spin those tracks backward. Otherwise your turntable will go straight to hell.

\*Laurie Anderson in conversation with the author, 4 January 1988

*C. Nivek welcomes any information, confirmed or not, about backmasking c/o Emily Harvey Gallery*